

BIOGRAPHY OF SAYYID ABUL HASAN ALI NADWI

Exemplar of Islamic Living, Exponent of Islam, Defender of Islamic Identity (1914 - 31 December, 1999)

During the twentieth century, Muslim India has produced great Islamic theologians, interpreters of the Quran, scholars of Hadith, Islamic jurists, historians, propagators of the faith, social reformers and educationists, but one cannot name another Islamic scholar whose concerns covered the entire spectrum of the collective existence of the Muslim Indians as a living community in the national and international context, who, for decades, enjoyed universal respect, and who was accepted by the non-Muslims, at the highest level, as the legitimate spokesman for the concerns and aspirations of the entire community.

Maulana Sayyid Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi was indisputably one of the greatest exponents of Islam in the second half of the twentieth century and because of his command over Arabic, through his writings and speeches, he had a wide area of influence extending far beyond the Sub-continent, particularly in the Arab World.

His exposition of Islam was marked by moderation. He was not a fanatic in any sense of the term but he believed in Islam as a blessing for mankind and as a positive and creative factor in human history. In a sense Islam was perceived by him as a civilization force which retained its relevance in the modern age as a viable counterpoint to the Western civilization with all its excesses.

The Maulana's forte was his extraordinary grasp of Islamic history. It is this historic sense of the rise and fall of Islam in different ages and regions, which prompted him ever to take a long-term rather than a short-term, a broad rather than a narrow, view of the problems the contemporary community faced.

The Maulana was the very anti-thesis of the media image of the fire-eating, narrow-minded Mullah. Orthodox as he was, he was far from being conservative in his approach. Umma-conscious as he was, his love for the motherland knew no bounds. He never preached 'Jihad' to restore Muslim dominance; He stood for mutual respect, for peaceful coexistence, for human values, for establishing a social ambience based on tolerance and harmony in India and in the world at large.

The Maulana understood the spirit of the age. He appreciated the role of Democracy and Nationalism. With his deep insight into the Quran and his understanding of the personality of the Holy Prophet, he understood the implications of a multi-religious world, a global village divided into multi-religious States.

Scion of an illustrious family which has produced scholars and spiritual preceptors like Shah Alamullah Naqshbandi and Sayyid Ahmad Shaheed, the Maulana's father, Hakim Sayyid AbulHai, was an eminent scholar of his time, immortalized by his encyclopedic work, Nuzhatul Khawatir, (in eight volumes) containing about 5,000 biographical notes on Muslim scholars, theologians, jurists, etc. of India, apart from other notable works.

Sayyid Abul Hasan Ali was born in 1333 A.H. (1914 A.D.). Having lost his father at the age of nine, he was brought up by his elder brother, Dr. Sayyid Abul Ali Hasani who practiced

medicine at Lucknow. He specialized in Arabic literature at Nadwatul Ulama, Lucknow, studied Hadith under Sheikh Husain Ahmed Madni at Darul Uloom, Deoband and Tafseer under Maulana Ahmad Ali of Lahore where he came in touch with Iqbal whose poetry left an abiding impression on him. Besides literary and theological studies, Maulana developed keen interest in Islamic history and also learnt English in order to keep himself abreast of contemporary thought. He taught Arabic literature and Tafsir at the Nadwatul Ulama for ten years.

After the demise of his elder brother, he became the Secretary of Nadwatul Ulama and subsequently as Rector he supervised both its academic and administrative management.

In 1947, the Maulana could have followed his mentor Sayyid Suleiman Nadwi and migrated to Pakistan but he did not.

In his formative years, the Maulana was associated with the Jamaat-e-Islami for a few years after its establishment by Maulana Abul Ala Maudoodi. Then he turned to the Tablighi Jamaat founded by Maulana Ilyasi's. But the Maulana's genius demanded a wider horizon for its unfolding.

Spiritually disciple of Maulana Abdul Qadir Raipuri, the Maulana belonged to the Sufi Silsila Qadiriya Naqshbandia.

Apart from his long association with Nadwa (as student, teacher, Secretary and Nazim), he served on the Shura of the Darul Uloom, Deoband, chaired the Managing Committee of Darul Musannefin, Azamgarh and established the Academy of Islamic Research and Publications at Lucknow.

A prolific writer his works have been prescribed in the courses of study in a number of Arab Universities. His notable Arabic work Maza Khasera al-Alamb'inhitah-il-Muslimeen was not only widely acclaimed but also carved out a place for him in the literary circles of the Arab world. Several of his works have since been translated into Arabic, English, Turkish, Bhasha Indonesia, Persian, Tamil and some other languages.

Karvaan-e-Zindagi, his autobiography in 8 volumes, and Purane-Chiragh (life sketches of contemporary personalities), his biography of Sayyid Ahmad Shaheed, his biography of Hazrat Ali (KW) and his Tarikh-e-Dawat-o-Azimat are his permanent contribution to Urdu literature.

He was an Honorary Member of the Academy of Arts and Letters, Damascus and Academy of Arabic Language, Amman and served as Visiting Professor in a number of Arab universities.

Internationally recognized, he was one of the Founder Members of the Rabita at-Alam-al-Islami, Makkah, (1963), and served on the Higher Council of the Islamic University, Madinah, the Executive Committee of the Federation of Islamic Universities, Rabat, and as the Chairman of the Board for the Centre of Islamic Studies of the Oxford University. The lectures he delivered at Indian, Arab and Western Universities have been highly appreciated as original contribution to the study of Islam and on Islam's relevance to the modern age.

In 1980, he received the Faisal International Award, followed by the Brunei Award and the UAE Award in 1999.

A great scholar, the Maulana was not confined to the cloister. Not involved in active politics, he never participated in party or electoral politics. He did not even join the All India Muslim Majlis, established by his protégé Dr. A.J. Faridi in 1967, as it took to electoral politics.

The Maulana was one of the founders of the All India Muslim Majlis-e-Mushawarat (1964), the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (1972) and the All India Dini Talimi Council. He presided over the Milli Convention in 1979. He also extended his patronage to the Islamic Fiqh Academy and the All India Milli Council when they were established.

To promote communal harmony, the Maulana became one of the founders of FOCUS which was later transformed into Society for Communal Harmony. He also established a movement 'Pyam-e-Insaniyat' to preach the gospel of universal love and brotherhood.

The Maulana valued the Constitution and the secular order as a guarantor of the Islamic identity of the Muslim community and of non-discrimination against the min various spheres of life. But he clearly saw the historic process of assimilation at work in India and the long-term objective of Hindu Nationalism to absorb the Muslim Indians into the Hindu fold. That explains his firm stand on the question of Muslim Personal Law against any interference through legislation or through judicial pronouncement and on introduction of Saraswati Vandana in Schools in UP.

The great political battles of the Muslim community during the last decades of the century were fought under his guidance. The A.I. Muslim Personal Law Board launched in 1985 the movement for legislative nullification of the Supreme Court judgment in the Shah Bano Case which the Muslim Indians saw as the thin end of the wedge for interference with the Shariah and for distorting the Islamic identity of the community. The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorcees) Act, 1986 was its fruit; though it had several inbuilt flaws which has landed the community subsequently in endless litigation.

With the Maulana's consent in 1986, the AIMMM and the AIMPLB took up the question of restoration of the Babri Masjid when the unlocking of its doors in January 1986 for regular darshan and puja converted it into a de-facto temple. Though he did not directly involve himself in the Babri Masjid Movement (whose Coordination Committee was later split to form the A.I. Babri Masjid Action Committees), he guided it at all critical points and participated in negotiations with the government as well as Hindu representatives. Subsequent to the Demolition, the AIMPLB, under his presidentship took the question in its own hands including the direction of the proceedings in the title suit, the criminal case and the inquiry.

In the last decade of his life the Maulana served as the final arbiter, the last word, the Marja', the ultimate point of reference, on any intra-communal differences, even if he did not play any active role in resolving them. He counseled commitment with patience and wisdom, movement within the framework of democracy and rule of law, and dignity and not rhetoric in utterances.

With his off-repeated commitment to the principles of Democracy, Secularism and Non-violence as the only viable foundation for the Indian polity, his constant endeavour for inter-religious dialogue and for reconciliation and harmony, he commanded universal respect for his moderation, learning and integrity, for his influence in the Muslim community and for his outreach in the Islamic world,

Assiduously sought by eminent political personalities from Indira Gandhi to Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the Maulana acted as the bridge between the government and the national parties, on one hand, and Muslim community, on the other.

The Maulana, it has been correctly observed, stood for social reform, religious revival and political awakening but not for Islamic Revolution. He was realistic enough not to chase mirages or instant solutions. He saw clearly that the destiny of Muslim Indians was intertwined with that of the Indian people as a whole and that, in the age of democratic pluralism, an Islamic Revolution or the restoration of Islamic power was out of the realm of possibility but it was possible for the Muslim Indians to lead an Islamic life and at the same time participate in managing the affairs of the country and contribute to its progress and development. This was the basis of his efforts to reduce the distance between the Muslims and the Hindus, to demolish the wall of distrust between them and to create bonds of understanding and cooperation in rebuilding relations on the terms of common moral values of the society which he saw as being engulfed by dark forces of hatred and violence.

All his active life, with Lucknow as his base, he wandered ceaselessly, not only within the country but in the Arab-Islamic world and the West, in a constant search; it seems to me, for reconciliation between Islam and the West, between rival ideologies in the Arab-Islamic world, between India and Pakistan and between the Hindu and Muslim Indians. Cautious in taking positions, he always looked beyond the turbulence of the time, through the flames of the current controversy. Even when he took part, his role was that of a mediator, of counseling patience, of avoiding confrontation, of appealing to reason.

A man who personified Islamic values, soft-spoken, cultured and courteous to the core, humility and modesty, patience and tolerance, moderation and balance, generosity and compassion – all Islamic values – marked his personality. Neither a politician, nor a publicist, essentially a scholar, a man of religion, a spiritual person, a modern Dervish, a Mard-e-Momin who combined in himself the highest values of the Shariah and the Tariqat, of orthodoxy and Sufism and who commanded respect for his transparent sincerity, for his simple living and for his selfless devotion to the common cause of the Community and the Nation, a man who lived for Allah alone and who wanted nothing but the good of all is no more.

His demise is the end of an era in the history of the Muslim India and has created a void impossible to fill in the foreseeable future.

May his soul rest in eternal peace, Ameen!