

## REACTION OF BENGAL'S TRADITIONAL SOCIETY TO ISLAMIC REFORM

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It was Shah Isma'il Shahid who enumerated almost all superstitious beliefs and practices of the Muslims of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent in his *Taqwiyat al-Iman* and denounced them as polytheism (*Shirk*) or sinful innovation (*Bid'ah*). It is interesting to note that Maulvi Mukhlis al-Rahman of Chittagong published a refutation of this work in Persian language, which he called *Sharh al-Sudur fi Daf'i al-Shurur az Radd-i-Taqwiyat al-Iman*, which means "a clearance of doubts from the hearts (of men), in self-defence against evils and in refutation of *Taqwiyat al-Iman*".

*Taqwiyat al-Iman* was published, probably in 1820s. In 1829, one Maulvi Muhammad 'Ali of Madras had seriously questioned the propriety of the reforms advocated by its author Shah Isma'il Shahid and his co-author Sayyid Ahmad Shahid. He advanced eighteen points against Shah Isma'il's reform movement. A lengthy reply to these questions was published by Maulvi Irtada 'Ali Khan (which consisted of 124 pages in Persian) about the end of the same year (i.e. H. 1245/1829CE).<sup>79</sup> Garcin de Tassy mentioned another refutation of *Taqwiyat al-Iman*, namely *Ibtal-i-Taqwiyat al-Iman* written by an anonymous author. Thus, the traditional Muslim society of Indo-Pakistan subcontinent reacted sharply against the puritanical revivalism of the nineteenth century, and in this respect, Bengal was not lagging behind.

The theologians, who supported the customs of the traditional society, especially those who were deeply read in the sciences of the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition were, however, in a dilemma. For, it was not possible to vindicate the propriety of the rites and ceremonies, which were in vogue among the Muslims on the basis of strict Unitarianism of Islam. In an *istifta* (a formal way of seeking legal opinion from the jurists), addressed to the traditional theologians, it was asked, whether or not the *Fatiha* as practised by the Muslims in general, was to be regarded as unlawful on account of its certain resemblances with the *Prasad* of the Hindu deities? The theologians in question wrote a *Fatwa* (legal opinion) allaying the fears. Gradually, however, the traditional theologians took their stand on three points, viz., the justification of (i) *Fatihah*, (ii) 'Urs and (iii) *Milad*, which occupied most important places in the structure of their socio-religious system, and numerous pamphlets, *Fatwa* and many books were published by the traditional theologians of Bengal on these subjects.

The rites of *Fatiha* and '*Urs*, as practised in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent down to the present day, and the procedure observed therein, had no basis in the tradition of the Prophet or of the first three generations of the Muslims (i.e. the good ancestors or *Salf-i-Salihin*). Consequently, the promoters of the revivalism (i.e. the followers of Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab of Arabia as well as the *Fara'idi*, the partisans of the Patna School and *Ahl-i-Hadith*) regarded these rites as sinful innovations (*Bid'ah*). In the opinion of the traditional theologians, on the other hand, all innovations are not necessarily evil. They make a distinction between two types of innovations, one being "good innovatoin" (*Bid'at-i-Hasnah*) and the other "sinful innovation" (*Bid'at-i-Saiyiah*). *Fatiha* and '*Urs*, in their opinion, are good innovations.

The traditional theologians explained that the term *Fatiha* is derived from the title of the first chapter of the Qur'an (i.e., *Sura Fatiha*). This is because the recitation or repetition of the *Sura Fatiha* forms the most prominent part in the procedure of the *Fatiha*. It may be noted that the rite of *Fatiha* were observed (which has now become rare) on the third, fourth, tenth, twentieth, and fortieth days after the death of a person and thereafter observed annually. Maulvi Karamat Ali described six types of *Fatiha* including the one just mentioned which are not, however, important for our purpose. The procedure of its observance had three parts, viz., (i) recitation of the first chapter of the Qur'an, and its repetition for several times, which is generally followed by recitation or repetition of some other portion of the Qur'an. This part is known as (i) *Suwar*, (ii) entertainment of the guests generally by a square meal, for which one or more fowl or even a goat is slaughtered. (iii) Lastly, prayer to Allah for bestowing the reward of the recitation and of the feast to the departed soul of the person or persons in whose remembrance the *Fatiha* was held. This last part is called "bestowing of the reward" (*Isal-i-Thawab*).<sup>85</sup>

In the *fatwa* of Maulvi Faid Ahmad, the author stated that although *Fatiha* in the composite form, as detailed above, had not been found in the tradition of the Prophet and of his companions, yet the practice of the parts thereof separately is found, directly or indirectly, in their tradition. He, therefore, justified the propriety of the rite of *Fatiha* on this latter basis. In *Haq al-Yaqin*, Maulvi Karamat Ali also maintained that *Fatiha* is lawful if it conforms strictly to the above description though it is unlawful to observe on fixed days, such as the third, fourth or tenth day, and so on and so forth.

'*Urs* is the death anniversary of the *Pir* (or guide in the path of mysticism). In every detail, it is a *Fatiha*; but it generally attracted a large gathering. On the occasion of '*Urs*, the disciples of a deceased *Pir* congregated preferably at the residence of his successor and passed a few days in mystic exercise and pious contemplation. They brought with them their provision, including animals for sacrifice, and present of *Nazranah* in cash to be offered to the successors of the *Pir*.

The rite of '*Urs* is justified by the traditional theologians on the same grounds as *Fatiha*. The *Fara'idis* and the followers of Patna school and *Ahl-i-Hadith*, however, regarded *Fatiha* and '*Urs* as sinful innovations. But curiously enough, Maulvi Karamat 'Ali strongly detested '*Urs* in spite of his approval of the *Fatiha*. He stated

that “the rite of ‘*Urs* has neither been found in the tradition of the Prophet or in the tradition of the two generations of the Muslims that followed him nor is there any basis for it in the writing of the four Imams.” It is, therefore, decidedly a sinful innovation. It is true that some of the ancestors practised it “by way of error or negligence.” But that should not be a reason for the continuation of this rite, for, according to Maulvi Karamat ‘Ali, they admitted their fault whenever questioned on this point.

*Milad-al-Nabi* means “birth anniversary of the Prophet”. It is also known as *Milad Sharif* or *Mawlad Sharif*. In principle, it is regarded by all section of Muslims as a commendable ceremony. But the revivalists differ with the followers of the traditional customs regarding certain aspects of the procedure observed by the latter.

The traditional form of its observation consisted of three parts, *viz.* (i) the narration of events immediately preceding the birth of the Prophet. (ii) the description of the occasion of birth, which is known as *Tawwallud Sharif*, and (iii) the exposition of his teachings. The second part or the *Tawwallud Sharif* is accompanied by a chorus in Arabic, Persian and Urdu. Recently Bengali chorus has also been introduced. According to the traditional theologians, it is desirable to stand up when the occasion of the Prophet’s birth is described, and to sing the chorus loudly together while standing. For, it is believed that the soul of the Prphet visited the function at this stage. This act of standing up is called *Qiyam*. The *Fara’idis*, the followers of Patna school and *Ahl-i-Hadith* regarded such *Qiyam* as not only superstitious but as resembling to polytheism (*Shirk*). For, they believe that such *Qiyam* involved “extreme form of reverence,” which is not permissible for anyone beside Allah.

The institutions of *Fatiha*, ‘*Urs* and *Milad*, as pointed out above, occupied very important place in the socio-religious system of the Muslims of the subcontinent and also elsewhere in the Muslim world. Although the history of their origin is obscure and their procedure is not found in the tradition of the early Muslims, yet their celebration was permitted by pious motive and through long practice they came to be regarded as the prototype of Islamic festivity. Moreover, the Islamic orientation that they had received in the course of time, made it possible to justify their propriety on the basis of Prophetic tradition at least in piecemeal. The case of *Muharram*, *Bhera* and such other local customs were, on the other hand, of a different nature. Their proximity and resemblance to local Hindu *Pujas* (*i.e.* worship of gods and goddesses), had rendered their defence on Islamic grounds almost impossible. Besides, there were many details in the local customs which unmistakably pointed to the survival of pre-Islamic local custom. *Fatiha*, ‘*Urs* and *Milad* were imported by the Muslim immigrants of Central and Western Asia, and their obscure origin provided with a greater opportunity for their defence.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, the Islamic revivalism of the nineteenth century represented a supreme attempt on the part of the Muslim society to rehabilitate its lost glory; and this was sought through remodelling the Muslim ways and thoughts in accordance with the original teachings of Islam. In this endeavor, although the reformed schools succeeded considerably in reawakening the political as well as spiritual consciousness of the masses of the people, yet they were far from realising the real significance of the impact of Western science and rationalism which the European nations brought to bear upon the East. In spite of the tangle fight between the revivalists and the traditional society, as well as amongst the reformed schools themselves, which followed the preachings of the new doctrines, the reformists were able to rouse great enthusiasm among the masses, who pinned their hopes for the recovery of their past glory with the success of the revivalism. Thus, it is significant to note that until the failure of the Muslim arms and strategy in the great Rebellion of 1857-58, which falsified the hope of success on the old footing, Muslim modernist movement, led by Nawab Abd al-Latif, could not take firm root in the Muslim society of Bengal.

It may, therefore, be suggested that the social awakening effected by this revivalism amongst the Muslims of Bengal, directly or indirectly paved the way for the tradition of the Muslim society from the old system to the new social order after the Western model, which is observed to gain predominance during the later half of the nineteenth century. Hence, the need of making a systematic study of the revivalism in relation to the Muslim society of Bengal, as suggested above, is important, not only for the understanding of the social history of Bengal but also for a proper estimate of the background of the contemporary society. The importance of such a study, therefore, needs no emphasis.

With regard to the methodology, one important point remains to be mentioned. In view of the characteristic diversity of the Bengali society, a student should always try to avoid over-generalisation in his estimation of local customs, rites, ceremonies, usages and socio-religious values. The different strata of the society and the size of the geographical unit often played a significant role in the ways and thoughts of the people, especially in the rural areas of Bengal which needs to be taken into account. Hence, any judgment of a general nature must be based on concrete data. In this respect, greater attention may be paid to the religious literature found in abundance in Urdu and Persian languages.

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