

THE ROLE OF MAWLANA ASHRAF ALI THANVI IN SOCIAL REFORM

*Muhamamd Ali Zafar**

Muslims of south Asia encountered numerous challenges in the areas of social, cultural, religious, educational and economic domains by the hands of British rule and Western educated Muslims. The traditional Islam was under the threat of degeneration due to these elements; meanwhile, the personality of Mawlana Ashraf Ali Thanvi emerged as a reformer in the different domains of religion. His academic and intellectual efforts are multi-dimensional in their nature and scope, which skirt the realms of Islamic Tasawwuf, Social etiquettes, politics, education and Tabligh (propagation of Islam). This research study will focus on the role of MawlanaThanvi in the social reform of South Asian Muslims.

Introduction:

The word 'reform' contains the meanings of 'removal of defect, correction of malfunction, rectification, and to abolish the abuse'.¹ Reform is different from 'revolution'. It aims at the improvement of system, not to overthrow the system or to bring the radical changes.² In this paper for the sake of the better understanding of the topic, the word reform is used in the sense of '*Islah*' (rectification), and '*Tajdid*' (renewal or revival); both indicate the rectification and renewal in the face of the new situation in the South Asia. Eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were characterized with the imperial ambitions of the western countries. This was the time, when South Asia encountered the colonial aspirations of the British government, which introduced radical social, religious and cultural changes in the region.³ The British rule brought with it, the western civilization, which had divorced the religious and ethical values, and had embraced the new religion of materialism and order of secularism.⁴ This epoch was a great ordeal for the Muslims of South Asia; they met with sweeping changes at the stratum of political honor, social prestige, economic prosperity and cultural dominance.⁵ The Muslims responded to these upheavals in the different ways. The response of Mawlana Ashraf Ali Thanavi was neither an absolute surrender to the modern world like modernist Muslims, nor a straight-laced rejection of modernity without its ample discernment. Rather, it was an intellectual response that used logical and philosophical arguments for the defense of traditional Islam and answered the challenges of modernity by employing the fundamental principles of

* Subject Specialist, Islamiyat, Chand Bagh School, 9km, Muriedke Sheikhupura road, Muriedke.

Islam.⁶ Mawlana Ashraf Ali Thanvi born on 5th Rabi al-Sani 1280 A.H. /1864 A.D. in ThanahBahvan.⁷ He was an eminent scholar, *Sufi* (Muslim mystic), jurist and a reformer. He authored over one thousand books on the multi-dimensional issues of Islam.⁸ The most distinguished aspect of his personality was of a reformer. His academic and pragmatic endeavors were characterized with the color of a *Mujadid* (revivalist). This study will focus on the role of Mawlana Ashraf Ali Thanvi as a social reformer.

Purification of Muslim Community:

Mawlana Thanvi was not only an Alim, but also a preacher, sermonizer and propagator of Islam; he made several visits in the far and wide corner of Indian Subcontinent with an aim to guide the Muslims towards the right path. The establishment of *the Sunnah* and the rectification of innovation in the religion were the pivotal point of his social reform. He didn't leave any stone unturned through his discourse in correcting the spiritual and social state of the Muslim masses. He was an eminent Shaykh (Spiritual guide) of his time, he performed the task of spiritual guidance in the *Khanqah* of ThanahBahavan by the order of his Shaykh Haji ImdadUllahMakki; a unique feature of his spiritual mentorship revealed by the fact that Ulama of Indian Subcontinent associated themselves in a large number with Mawlana Thanvi to seek the spiritual enlightenment, a credit only bestowed upon a few *Mashayakh* (spiritual guides) in the history of the Indian Subcontinent.⁹ He purified several upheavals of Muslims by the refutation of the innovations, and authored the corpus like *IslahRasoom*, *Islah-e-Inqalab-e-Ummat*, *Hayat-UL-Muslimeen*, *Aghlat-UL-Awwam*, et al., to bring the reform at the social and cultural level of Muslims.

Reform of non-Islamic customs:

The Muslims of the Indian Subcontinent had invented a different sort of customs for varied occasions of day to day life; which were alien to the true religious spirit, e.g., customs of marriage ceremonies, customs of the veil, of the second marriage, of leisure and pleasures, of worship, Urs of saints, Fatihah (invoking blessings for dead ones), Shab-e-Baraat (fifteenth night of the month of Shaban), death, Ramazan, Masjid, etc. The masses in Islamic community supposed their performance binding upon themselves, yet more than the religious obligations. The masses would suffer utter grief on missing any of such custom that they would not still feel such heartache on the failure of religious duties. Moreover, the situation was too much gloomful that

people would not feel slightest dislike regarding self-made customs; rather their execution was considered a noble action.¹⁰ Mawlana Thanvi observed the undue significance of these customs in the lives of Muslims, and penned a book 'Islah Rasoom'. In this book, he portrayed the true point of view of Shriah with respect to these customs. Mawlana Thanvi explains the non-Islamic customs of marriage ceremony as such:

Among these customs; there are many that people who are indulging in them; they too hold them a matter of sin, one of such is a custom of dance at marriage functions. It contains many vices. The attendants would see the women that is a *zina* (adultery) of the eye, listen the speech and melody of the singing woman that is the *zina* of the ear, talk to her that is the *zina* of the tongue, the heart attracts towards her that is the *zina* of the heart, and some who are more unblushing touch her that is the *zina* of hand.¹¹

The time passing and pleasure seeking sports, e.g. chess, pigeon racing, cock fighting, and kite flying are common among the young people, Mawlana Thanvi depicts the foible of such games that the way Almighty Allah has made wine and gambling unlawful, and expounded its *Illah* (underlying cause) that they are the means of devil to create the rift and animosity among the people, similarly, these sports and games take the young people away from the remembrance of Allah. Even sometimes they become the source of disturbance; therefore, there is no doubt that such sports are unlawful.¹²

The social intercourse with the Hindus and the love for property transformed the second marriage of the widow a vice among the Muslims of Indian Subcontinent. Mawlana Thanvi says that there is no dispute between the first marriage and the second marriage, neither *Shriah* nor the reason considers any difference between them. Therefore, the way of reform is not to think it a fault, and practical application in the Muslim community is essential to root out this evil tradition.¹³

Reform of Social Etiquettes:

There are five basic branches of Islamic Shariah: (i) Aqaid (beliefs), (ii) Ibadaat (worship), (iii) Muamlaat (mutual dealings and financial transactions), (iv) Akhlaq (ethics), and (v) Muashrat (social etiquettes). The Shariah is the combination of all the five branches. It is mandatory for Muslims to act upon all of them. But, the situation has degenerated to such an extent that Muslims in general have taken up a short cut by confining the religion in *Kalima* (declaration of Tauheed) such people

are unmindful towards worship, some offer daily prayers and fast the month of Ramazan, but are negligent towards dealings and financial transactions, some are those who have corrected their dealings and financial transactions but are unmindful towards ethics. There are few who have rectified their ethics, but are ignorant regarding social etiquettes. Instead, the bulk of the Muslim assumes the social etiquettes are not the part of the religion. A glimpse on the Quranic verses and the hadith literature signifies the importance of social etiquettes, since the Holy Prophet (S.A.W) was very much conscious about the minor issues, as he was for the major things. Thus, it is proved that social etiquettes are the part and parcel of Shariah, and a perfect Muslim is the one who follows all the branches of religion.¹⁴ The teachings of Islam portray the beauty of social etiquettes. Islamic Shariah carries a peculiar savor, which wants to see a Muslim inwardly and outwardly pure from all sorts of social and ethical defilement. Islam aims at a Muslim, who should not be a source of pain for others in any way. Some social etiquettes of Islam are: shaking the hand, offering salutation (*Salam*), gathering (Majlis), speech, meeting one another, guest, host, service to others, gift, intercession, training children, correspondence, Masjid, visiting the sick, consolation, eating, clothing, food and drink, etc. Mawlana Thanvi says about the etiquettes of offering salutation (*Salam*) as such:

If a meeting is in progress and a debate is carried on some special issue, then a newbie should not interrupt the people by saying *Salam*, the proper course of action for him is to sit there silently, and must wait till the debate is over.¹⁵

The manners of speech demands that a man should speak clearly. Some people hold the formal phrasing and implications as the part of etiquettes of speech, while it creates the confusion for the hearer.¹⁶ Similarly, it is included in the manners of speech that one must not be addressed from his back; the address must be from the front side. The talk must not be incomplete, no words should be uttered without proper investigation, and an adequate contemplation is must before ask a question.¹⁷

This indicates the approach of Mawlana Thanvi in the field of social etiquettes. He made a significant effort to invoke the conscience of Muslims in the matter of social manners. He elucidated emphatically that social etiquettes are the integral part of Islam, and they demand the equal attention of Muslims as of beliefs and worship.

Reform of the wrong notions of general Muslims:

Many incorrect notions have taken their roots among Muslim masses and educated people, which have no authenticity in the *Shariah*. The Muslims in general don't bother to seek the advice of *Ulama* about the validity of such notions; most of them have acquired the status of superstition. These notions are present in the realm of beliefs, worship, purity and impurity, menstruation and postnatal period of women, marriage and divorce, supplication, and *Zikr* (remembrance of Allah). Mawlana Thanvi compiled a book '*Aghlat al-Awwam*' (mistaken notions of people) on the incorrect notions of people, and expounded religious standpoint about them. For instance, it is generally accepted among the people that the act of abusing deprives the abuser from the faith (*Iman*) for forty days, and if he would die within such period, his death will be considered the death of an infidel. This is a wrong opinion and has no standing in *Shariah*, yet the sin of abusing is a dissimilar matter. Some ignorant people conceive the death of a woman in the state of delivering a baby, would transform her into a demon, this is absolutely wrong, since *Shariah* considers it as a death of a martyr (*Shaheed*). Similarly, another mistaken notion is widespread among the people that the husband and wife should not drink the milk in the same glass, otherwise their relation would be converted into the relation of a brother and a sister, and it's perfectly incorrect.¹⁸

Some incorrect notions can be seen about purity and impurity among the masses. For instance; some people think, if nail of the finger would be dunked in the water, it would become impure, it's incorrect and must be rectified. Hence, the presence of filth or dirt would be counted against the principles of hygiene and cleanliness. It is a popular notion of the multitude in general that the oil of a lamp is impure; it is merely a wrong belief, some people take it unlawful to talk in the washroom, this notion too has no validity in *Shariah*, nevertheless it is not desirable to talk there without any need.¹⁹

These are few examples of generally accepted incorrect notions among the people; the source of these wrong notions can be trace back to the social interactions of Muslims with the Hindus of Indian Subcontinent. Mawlana Thanvi addressed them in minute details, and did a great service to a subject that seems trivial in its origin, but affects the conduct of the people to a great extent in their everyday affairs. Sometimes, these incorrect notions become a source of trouble, malaise and frustration for the people.

Reform of the upheavals of Muslims (*Islah-e-Inqلاب*):

MawlanaThanvi examines the upheaval (Inqlab) in all the ramifications of religion in his book ‘Islah-e-Inqlaab-e-Ummat’ and suggested the remedies to reform these upheavals. He pointed out the derogatory attitude of Modernists Muslims towards the teachings of Islam. The modernists Muslims exceeded the boundaries of ‘denial’ and stepped in the field of ‘mockery’ of the beliefs of Ulama in general. He called attention towards the three ingredients of Islam, i.e., dealings, ethics and social etiquettes. The upheaval took place in this realm is more severe than the upheaval of beliefs and worship. The common people and modernist refused to include these ingredients as the intact parts of the religion, the causes of their denial are ignorance of the genuine teachings of *Shariah*, and the meaner desires of human-self.²⁰ MawlanaThanvi describes the modes of reform for men, women and Ulama. He suggests the mode of reform for Muslim women, that they should be taught by a lady teacher of good character, who should teach them Quran and basic books of religion, particularly the education of ‘*BahistiZiwar*’²¹; is more than enough for them, if a lady teacher is not available than a male (*Mahram*) member of the family should recite the fundamental Islamic books at a fixed time at home, moreover, off-and-on an authentic *Alim* may be called at home for a sermon.²²

MawlanaThanvi discusses the upheaval of *Mahr* (dower), the Muslims are negligent about the right position of *Mahr* in Islamic *Shariah*, he states that many people don’t make the intention to pay the amount of *Mahr*; according to *Shariah* such a man would earn the major sin. It is also recommended that the amount of dower should be determined according to the financial capacity of the man.²³

MawlanaThanvi described the upheavals of Muslim society in detail and recommended a course of action to rectify them. It sheds light on his grasp of the issue, and illuminates his endeavors to get the social reform in the Muslim society of South Asia. His discourse on the said topic contains a logical refutation of all the twisted beliefs of common people and modernist Muslims.

Paradigm of MawlanaThanvi’s Reform:

MawlanaThanvi was not only an *alimaz-Zahir* (exoteric scholar), but a spiritual mentor as well. He possessed a rich discernment of the temporal affairs of Muslims; beside it, he minutely observed the radical changes of Muslim society of Indian Subcontinent. Muslim society was undergoing the basic changes in the social, cultural and educational fields. MawlanaThanvi’s reform and revival of social arena

was equipped with the logical and philosophical arguments, it was his personality that” knowledge, education, religious and spiritual teachings” of Islam worked quite well, when all the other sources of religion had been subdued.²⁴MawlanaThanvi aptly diagnosed the remedy to overthrow the effects of western civilization and British educated Muslims through the reform of ‘heart and action’ of Muslims. Instead of consuming his energies to re-establish a political power for Muslims in the Indian Subcontinent; he concentrated all of his energies in the realm of social, cultural, and spiritual reform and revival of Muslims.²⁵MawlanaThanvi’s paradigm of reform of Muslim society is even valid today, and can be used by Muslim scholars of the current era.

Conclusion:

MawlanaThanvi’s was a traditional Muslim Alim, a philosopher, and a Sufi, his teachings are the combination of external and internal aspect of Islamic precepts. In the backdrop of contemporary socio-political situation in South Asia, he focused his reform in the areas of social and ethical aspects of Muslims’ life. He refuted the modernism and the perspectives of Western-trained Muslims in the light of first-hand knowledge. He was the spiritual master of hundreds of thousands Muslims among them were included the notable Muslim Ulama, e.g., MawlanaSayyidSulaimanNadvi, MawlanaShabir Ahmad Usmani, MualanaZafar Ahmad Usmani, Mufti Muhammad Shafi, Maulana Muhammad IdreesKandhalvi, QariTayyab, etc. He aimed at providing the rational basis to the Muslims to understand the Islamic teachings at the face of new situations. He made every possible endeavor to remove all the intellectual obstacles from the course of the Muslims, who wanted to lead a chaste life.²⁶His social reform comprises all the possible social dimensions of Muslim society. He restored the position of social etiquettes as the integral part of Islamic *Shariah*. SulaimanNadvi states about his reform and revival as such:

Modern western education had polluted every sphere of religious beliefs and actions, wherever, remotest conception of religion had some vitality that too had blurred with the abundance of suspicions and incertitude. In such state of affairs, a visionary saint, dwelling in an old town, and in an old Masjid, was diligent in analyzing all the affairs and entire faculties of Muslims’ life. He was drawing a line of demarcation between truth and falsehood, vice and virtue, right and wrong. He was employing the exact paradigm of religion to rectify the mistakes from the life of contemporary Muslims. He spent his whole

life to portray the picture of Muslims' life according to the pristine teachings of Islam.²⁷

The social reform of Mawlana Thanvi holds a substantial place in the history of revivalism of Islam in the South Asia. The academic and intellectual grounds provided by him to bulwark the faith, still hold the pertinence in this modern time, which can be employed to cope with the challenges of post-modern age.

NOTES & REFERENCES

¹ Retrieved from World Wide Web on, Monday, December 29, 2014 <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/reform>

² Retrieved from World Wide Web on, Monday, December 29, 2014 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reform>

³ See Hussain, Iqbal S, Islam and Western Civilization, Humanity International, Lahore, 1997, p.196.

⁴ Ibid, p. 209.

⁵ See, Qureshi, I.H, A Short History of Pakistan, Books one to four, University of Karachi, reprinted, 2000, p.787.

⁶ See, Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of tradition, revised and expanded, Edited by

Lumbard, Joseph E. B., Chapter III, Naeem, Fuad S, a traditional Islamic response to the rise of modernism, World Wisdom Inc., Bloomington, Indiana, 2009, p.79-81.

⁷ See, Al-Hassan, Aziz Khawajah, Abdul Haq, Ashraf As-Swanah, Idara Talifat e Ashrafiah, Multan, 1427 A.H., p.45.

⁸ See, Hermansen, Marcia, Rewriting Sufi Identity in the 20th Century: The Biographical Approaches of Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi and Khawajah Hassan Nizami, Occasional papers 79, Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad, 2007, p.1-5.

⁹ See, Ahmad, Noor, Sawanah e Hayat, Mujadid al-Millat Hakim al-Ummat Mawlana Ashraf Ali Thanavi, Idara-tul-Quran wa Uloom-e-Islamiyah, Karachi, Ramazan 1411 A.H., p.38-40.

¹⁰ See, Thanvi, Ashraf Ali, Islah Rasoom, Daral-Ishaat, Karachi, p.5.

¹¹ Ibid, p.7, translation is my own.

¹² See, ibid, p.14

¹³ See, ibid, p. 103-104

¹⁴ See, Thanvi, Ashraf Ali, Adab al-Muashrat, Idara Islamiyat, Lahore, 1408 A.H., p.32-34

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 43-44, translation from the text is my own.

¹⁶ See, ibid, p. 80.

¹⁷ See, ibid, p. 95-105.

¹⁸ See, Thanvi, Ashraf Ali, Aghlat al-Awwam, Idara-tul-Ma'arif, Karachi, December, 2003, p.11-13.

¹⁹ See, ibid, p. 24-27.

²⁰ See, p. Islah-e-Inqlaab-e-Ummat, Idara-tul-Ma'arif, Karachi, 16-19.

²¹ A book of Mawlana Thanvi, composed especially for women.

²² See, ibid, p. 22

²³ For detail see, ibid, p. 126-143.

²⁴ See, Naeem, Fuad S., Sufism and Revivalism in South Asia: Mawlana Ashraf Ali Thanvi of Deoband and Mawlana Ahmad Raza Khan of Bareilly and their Paradigm of Islamic revivalism, Published by Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, UK and, Malden, USA, 2009 Hartford Seminary, p.444

²⁵ See, ibid, 441.

²⁶ See, notes 6.

²⁷ Nadvi, Abdul Bari, Jami-ul-Mujadideen Tajdid Deen-e-Kamil, al-Maktabah-tul-Ashrafiah, Lahore, P.30-31, translation from the text is my own.
