

The Qur'anic Vision of Mawlana Azad

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مثل خورشید سحر فکر کی تابانی میں بات میں سادہ و آزاہ معانی میں دقیق
اس کا انداز نظر اپنے زمانے سے جدا اس کے احوال سے محرم نہیں پیران طریق!

Like to the dawn's first sun in effulgence;
In word lucid and free, in meaning profound and deep.
His vision and view distinct from the run of time;
His states unknown even to the Guides on the Way.

Mawlana Abul Kalam Azad's services in translating and interpreting the Qur'an and disseminating its teachings marks a very significant milestone in the history of the Qur'anic studies. Indeed it constitutes his most outstanding achievement in the area of scholarship and the related programme of reform which he so enthusiastically espoused in the first phase of his chequered career. For comprehensive crystallisation of the basic premises and principles of the Qur'an his achievement is so revolutionary and pioneering that one can find no previous parallel to it in the history of the subcontinent except in the work of Hazrat Shah Wali Allah (RA) and his illustrious sons¹. Early in his life he had himself outlined the plan of his work in this most absorbing scholarly pursuit of his. It was to consist of three main works:

- i) A lucid and clear translation of the Qur'an for the common reader, the *Tarjuman al-Qur'an*
- ii) A comprehensive exegesis (*tafsir*) of the Qur'an to be entitled *Tafsir al-Bayan*
- iii) An all-important prolegomena (*Muqaddimah*) to be

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known as *Al-Basa'ir* (Enlightening Insights)

Considerable work had been accomplished in all the three components of the projected grand plan when the Mawlana was arrested by the then British Indian Government for his role in India's freedom struggle. During frequent arrests and detentions all his works in manuscript form, some of them ready for publication, were confiscated by the government. In official custody all these materials were destroyed and whatever little he got back in the end was in a shambles and practically of no use to him. For a time the Mawlana lost all heart to redo the work but later a major part of *Tarjuman al-Qur'an* was rewritten. The rest – a priceless treasure-house of knowledge, was lost for good. However, what in the end has survived leaves us spell-bound by its charm. We can only imagine the extraordinary richness, depth and excellence of what the world has been deprived of by the cruel hands of a callous colonial order. About the *Muqaddimah*, Azad had himself told Mawlana Ghulam Rasool Mehr that it was a book of fundamental importance for Muslims all over the world and hence he had written it in Arabic, to be also rendered into Urdu later. It was a comprehensive work consisting of twenty-four chapters covering all principal subjects and thematic issues essential to a proper understanding of the Qur'an.² A glimpse of the impressive sweep of *Tafsir al-Bayan* can be had from the Mawlana's exegesis of surah *al-Fatihah* which forms a part of the first volume of *Tarjuman al-Qur'an*.

Thus we are left with very little of his immensely significant work on the Qur'an, but it is little only in terms of the quantity as we compare it with what the total output would have been; in quality it is as extraordinary as the other published books of the Mawlana like the *Tazkirah*, his occasional writings on *Sirah* and his scintillating literary masterpiece, *Ghubar-i Khatir*. In importance his Qur'anic work certainly stands supreme in all that he wrote.

Two features stand out as most pioneering and

revolutionary in Azad's Qur'anic scholarship. First he tried to salvage the Qur'an from the heap of unnatural and unnecessary sophistications and artificialities. This was an encumbrance that was loaded on to the Qur'anic interpretations after the first and pristine phase of early Islam. The first recipients of the Qur'an received its teachings in a natural way unconditioned by alien philosophical concepts and theological hair-splittings that entered the Qur'anic scholarship later and befogged its simplicity and natural appeal. It is only when this fog is removed by a masterly hand like that of Mawlana Azad that the organic unity and harmony of the Qur'an begins to dawn on our minds.

Mawlana Azad lays stress on the fact that the basic appeal of the Qur'an is to the unspoilt natural human being. It addresses unadulterated human nature which has not been warped by alien influences and distortions:

The nature framed by Allah upon which He created mankind.³

From this point of view, man is an organic unity in whose constitution reason is wedded to the deeper intuitive aspects. An appeal to reason is at once an appeal to intuitive impulses as well. The Qur'an addresses this whole and balanced human being. It calls upon man to study and contemplate the phenomenal world as well as his own self and consider the intimate relationship between him and nature. Such contemplation would reveal to him that everything has been arranged in a way as to nurse and rear him. Instead of advancing arguments like a logician or philosopher the Qur'an knocks at the door of man's mind and heart and leads him to the path of affirming the existence of a caring, overseeing, ubiquitous Presence. Denial and negation is absolutely out of tune with the temperament of the universe of existence. How can it be, asks Mawlana Azad, that:

Nursing and care is there but there is no Nourisher;
mercy is there without the Merciful One; wisdom is there

but not the All-wise; everything is there but no Real Existence. Action without actor, order without an organiser, sustenance without the sustainer, building without the builder, image without the painter – all without the Ever-existing. No, man's nature cannot digest it; his intuition rises in revolt and declares it impossible; his constitution is cast in a mould in which faith and affirmation alone can fit, not doubt and negation.⁴

The Qur'an asks man to relate meaningfully to this Caring Omnipresent Creator and shape his conduct in accord with this relationship. This in the Qur'anic language is *iman* (faith) and '*amal al-salih* (right and virtuous conduct):

The straight path illuminatd by the Qur'an is so clear, so easy and so simply brief that the whole range of convictions and corresponding deeds can be summed up in two words, *iman* and *amil-i salih*.⁵

With the passage of time these teachings, as simple as virgin nature itself, got entangled with alien elements. As the Islamic empire expanded Muslims came into contact with other cultures and borrowed freely from the treasure-houses of their knowledge. This was quite in accord with the Qur'anic exhortation of learning more and more and the Prophetic command that all knowledge and wisdom is the lost property of a believer and he should seize it wherever he comes by it.⁶ But in the process appropriate discretion and discrimination could not always be observed. Gradually minds became surcharged with alien philosophies. On the one hand Biblical and Talmudic lore, whose authenticity for the most part is questionable, was freely resorted to. On the other hand works of Greek philosophy and science as well as books hailing from other cultures were translated into Arabic. These included mystical works originally from ancient Greece, India and Persia of which the neo-Platonic teachings proved to be the most influential. In consequence new concepts and terminologies surcharged the minds of people. When minds like these

approached the Qur'an they began to read in it that which was not there and charged its simple words and expressions with terminological significations alien to its spirit. As theological thought evolved absorption in *Kalami* hair-splittings and impractical logical discussions increased and with it also increased the distance between the genuine spirit of the Qur'an and its conditioned readers. From this angle the story of the interpretation of the Qur'an is a story of gradual fall from the natural to the artificial. In Mawlana's view Iman Fakh al-Din Razi's *Tafsir al-Kabir* is a classic instance of this decay.

Mawlana Azad's translation and interpretation of the Qur'an pierces through this thick veil of mist which had gathered in layers over so many centuries in order to reach the Qur'an's pristine purity which was so readily available to the first Muslims with Allah's messenger around them to guide them. This achievement of the Mawlana was of far-reaching significance in an age when Muslim seminaries were content to follow the beaten track and look no further.

Equally path-breaking was the Mawlana's second achievement bringing into the limelight the Qur'an's universal teachings which had receded into the background as a result of the shifting of emphasis to the peripheral issues. These timeless and universal teachings make the Qur'an a book of universal guidance and establish its continuity with other revelations. Mawlana Azad laid repeated emphasis on the broad framework of the Qur'anic principles of guidance which guarantees unhampered human evolution.

The first and most important of these principles is that of *tawheed*. It means that the universe revolves around a single pivot which gives it its unity, harmony and beauty and converts it from a chaos into a cosmos. This pivot is Allah (*subhanahu wa ta'ala*) who is in every sense Unique and Incomparable. His most prominent attribute is His boundless Mercy. The Qur'an introduces Him at the very outset as *al-Rahman*, *al-Rahim* and *Rabb al-'aalamin*. That is to say that as the

Nourisher of all the worlds He nurses all creation in the lap of Mercy. One prominent manifestation of this Mercy is the Messenger who is designated as *Rahmatan li al- 'Aalamin* (mercy unto mankind).

The Qur'an wants to bring human life absolutely in line with the universe and thus heal all ruptures between man and nature and fill human life with real peace and serenity. As Azad writes:

The Qur'an does not regard man's spiritual life as distinct from the universe of existence; in its view it is organically and inseparably related to it.⁷

In a touching analogy the Mawlana says that just as a fish cannot exist outside water, man cannot maintain his spiritual existence outside the law of nature ordained by God in the form of Islam (surrender to Allah).

The Qur'an also emphasises that apart from Grace and Mercy, Justice too is a fundamental principle in the scheme of Universe. Justice does not in any way contradict the principle of mercy but is actually a facet of it. Without it balance and beauty – so essential to Mercy – cannot be maintained.

Justice also demands that the law of recompense and retribution should always be in place particularly in respect of a being like man who is gifted with reason and has been granted a limited freedom of choice and action. This is what is known in the Qur'anic language as the principle of *al-din* (the law of recompense) which will be fully implemented on the day of recompense (*yawm al-din*). Thus *Mu'aad* or *Akhirah* (the next life) rises naturally from the world as it exists now. The belief in justice and the Day of Judgement forms the second basic principle of the system of Islam.

Both the all-pervading Mercy of Allah and Justice, which is an integral component of this Mercy, demand that man should not be left without explicit guidance in spiritual and moral matters. This arrangement of guidance is inherent in the scheme of creation. Commenting on the opening of surah al-A'ala,

Mawlana Azad identifies four distinct stages of the process of creation and the fulfilment of a creature's destiny and purpose of existence. These are *takhliq*, (coming into existence), *tasviah* (being shaped and designed), *taqdir* (being cast into a mould suited to the fulfilment of destiny) and *hidayah* (process of guidance). The chain of guidance whose initial link is the instinctive guidance as found in ants, bees, the fish or the human child (whose hand goes automatically to the mother's breast immediately after its birth) culminates in respect of a rational and partially free being, man, in guidance through prophethood and revelation:

خلق و تقدیر و هدايت ابتداست
رحمة للعالمين انتہاست!

Creation, designing, guidance – the beginning;

Mercifulness to mankind through prophethood – the climax.⁸

This is Risalah, the third basic tenet of Islam. All prophets are human beings because only a human being can set an ideal pattern of action for other human beings. That is why Islam's basic declaration of faith lays it down that the Prophet is a slave and messenger of Allah ('*abduhu wa rasuluhu*). As Allah's messengers the basic teachings of all the prophets are the same. In matters of detail such as legislation in respect of day-to-day problems and codes of conduct there may be variations but the basic framework of fundamental principles remains always the same; their *din* is the same although the *shari`ah* emanating from it may vary from prophet to prophet according to the requirements of time and space. This is the premise on which Islam raises its grand fabric of humanism, universality and tolerance. It enjoins on its followers to believe in and revere all the messengers of Allah and avow:

We make no distinction between any of his messengers.⁹

Salvation depends upon faith and the virtuous conduct proceeding from it not on clinging to a particular denomination

or grouping:

Verily those who believe and those who are Jews, and Christians and the Sabaeans, whoever believes in Allah and the Last day and does the right, their reward lies with their Lord and no fear shall come upon them nor shall they grieve.¹⁰

Notes and References

1. Shah Wali Allah was a distinguished 18th century Islamic scholar of the Indian Subcontinent. Besides translating the Qur'an into the Persian known as *Fath-ur Rahman*, he devoted many of his scholarly works to the study of Qur'an such as, *Al-Muqqadimah fi Qawanin al Tarjumah*, *Al Fauzul Kabir fi Usul al-Tafsir* and *Tawil al Hadith*. His sons, Shah Rafi-ud-Din and Shah Abdul Qadir are renowned for their pioneering Urdu translations of the *Qur'an*. Shah Wali-u Allah's contribution to the Qur'anic studies has been studied by Maulana M. Sa'ud Alam Qasimi in his *Hazrat Shah Wali-u Allah ki Qur'ani Fikr* (Delhi), while his *Al Fauzul Kabir fi Usul al-Tafsir* is being studied at S.H. Institute of Islamic Studies, K.U. Srinagar by Burhan Rashid for his M.Phil programme (Editor).
2. Mawlana Ghulam Rasool Mehr, *Baqiyat-i Tarjuman al-Quran* (Delhi: Bijnore offset Press, 1962), pp. 15-16.
3. Al-Qur'an, 30:30
4. *Tarjuman al-Qur'an* vol.I (Karachi: Maktaba Sa'eed Nazimabad-2, undated), P.81.
5. Ibid., P.249.
6. *Al-hikmat-u dualat-ul-mumin fahith-u wajadaha fahuwa ahaqq-u biha* (Tirmidhi reporting Abu Hurairah)
7. *Tarjuman* I, P.129.
8. Mohammad Iqbal, *Javid Nameh* in *Kuliyat-i Iqbal: Farsi* (Lahore:Shaikh Ghulam Ali and Sons Publishers, 1973), P.715.
9. Al-Qur'an, 2:282.
10. Ibid., 2:62.