

Vakkom Maulavi-

The man who led Islamic Renaissance in Kerala

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The author is a nephew of Vakkom Maulavi. He had served on the editorial staff of Dawn, Delhi (1942-44) under the editorship of Pothan Joseph. Later he was Assistant Editor, Morning News, Calcutta (1944-45) and Sub editor, The Statesman, Calcutta (1945-46); Chief Sub editor The Pakistan Times, Lahore (1947). Later, he served first as Chief Sub editor and then as senior most Assistant Editor of Dawn, Karachi (1947-54). He also worked as the London Correspondent of the Pakistan Times (1955-59) until it was taken over by the Government.

In 1939 when I joined the Aligarh Muslim University as a postgraduate student, my friends and hostel mates, who had mostly come from the U.P. were shocked to learn that I did not know Urdu. "What sort of a Muslim are you?!" some of them asked me with a naive sense of surprise. This was typical and reflected the general level of ignorance among the Muslims of Northern India at that time about the Muslims of Kerala. Most of my North Indian friends didn't know that Islam had reached the Kerala coast during the lifetime of Prophet Mohammed. North India had to wait for more than another century for the arrival of Islam. Kerala had its introduction to Islam direct from Arabia in the same way as it had its first contact with the Arabic language directly through Arab merchant sailors trading with Kerala before and after the advent of Islam. Kerala has produced many eminent scholars of Arabic unknown to North India. Islam had had a warm reception in Kerala. Its egalitarian principles and message of human brotherhood had a great impact on the caste ridden siesta of the land. After fourteen centuries the Muslims of Kerala still maintain an identity and a cultural ethos of their own, although they retain several features of the common Malayali mode of life. However, over the centuries, like almost all Muslim communities the world over, the muslim society of Kerala had been contaminated by unhealthy accretions reactionary ideas, superstitions and practices often irreconcilable with the basics principles of Islam. This deviation from the rational, progressive path marked out by Islam had several causes positive and negative. No the posts positive side the greatest harm had been done by the obscurantist Mullahs who gradually assumed the status and powers of a kind of pseudo priestly class in a religion which had totally abolished priesthood in any shape right from the start. over the years they established their vested interests in collusion with the powerful rich and used religion as a means to exploit the ignorant masses for the benefit of both. on the negative side. The absence of a courageous, enlightened and progressive leadership to fight these exploiters i~ left the field free for their harmful activities. And the lack of modern education among the masses provided these obscurantist's a fertile soil where superstition could flourish. In this situation it was not surprising that decay from inside and contagion from outside led to so much social decadence. At the dawn of the twentieth century, reformist and educational movements had already made considerable progress in various parts

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of North India. Muslims, too, had awakened to this need and made a belated start. Nevertheless the Muslims of Kerala were still in deep slumber, steeped in ignorance and superstition. They were educationally very backward and counted for nothing politically and economically. It was Maulavi Mohammed Abdul Qadir of Vakkom who had sounded the clarion call to awaken them.

“VAKKOM MAULAVI”

The Islamic renaissance in Kerala, in the real sense, began with Maulavi Abdul Qadir. His was essentially a Muslim socioreligious movement. He had not only initiated it, but provided it inspiration, dynamism and correct leadership. During the first three decades of this century, which were the last three of his life, he devoted all his time and energy as well as most of his considerable inherited wealth to the movement. His name became synonymous with the movement he had founded and led. The obscure village of Vakkom in Travancore State, which was his family settle where his movement had taken birth, became a place of renown and he himself was known as “Vakkom Maulavi”. Maulavi Abdul Qadir was born in 1873. There were neither colleges nor many schools at that time in Travancore. As a boy he was of a studious nature. His enlightened and wealthy father, who was a prominent merchant and influential leader, engaged a number of scholars from distant places, including an itinerant Arab savant, to teach him every subject he wished to learn. Spurred by his thirst for knowledge and helped in manner his own selfstudy the boy made such rapid progress that some of his teachers soon found that their stock of knowledge was exhausted and at least one of them admitted that had learnt from his student more than he could teach him. Maulavi Abdul Qadir in a short time mastered the Arabic language and acquired profound knowledge of the Quran, Sunnah, logic and Islamic jurisprudence as well as Islamic history. He studied the Malayalam language, in which he became an elegant and powerful writer and eloquent speaker. He had learnt Tamil, Sanskrit, Persian and Urdu and acquired a working knowledge of English and German. Early in his career he had started subscribing to Arabic language daily newspapers and periodicals from Cairo, Damascus and Mecca. He was greatly influenced by the radical reformist journal of Cairo, “AlManaar”, which was edited by the eminent writer and savant, Rashid Rida, and which reflected the views and ideals of the nineteenth century liberal thinker and religious reformer, shaikh Mohammad Abduh. Maulavi Abdul Qadir had preserved in his library the beautifully bound volumes of AlManaar and he was in correspondence with Rashid Rida. He was greatly influenced by Mohammad Abduh’s ideas. Maulavi Abdul Qadir had devotedly studied Al Ghazzali’s works, one of which (AlKimia alSaadah) he had translated into Malayalam. Although AlGhazzali’s philosophical thinking had some early fascination for him he had steered clear of his Sufistic path. He never accepted nor approved of the PirMureed system. In his burning zeal to rid the decadent Muslim society of his day of all un-Islamic accretions and to rescue it from the evil influence of the reactionary Mullahs he had drawn great inspiration from the life and teachings of the early nineteenth century Arabian reformer, Mohammad ibn Abdul Wahhab and his thirteenth century ideological preceptor, Ibn Taymiya. Early in his career Maulavi Abdul

Qadir had intelligently analysed the problems and correctly diagnosed the malady afflicting his community. Although the Muslim masses of Kerala were intensely religious their idea of Islam was distorted and corrupted over the years by the obscurantist Mullahs who seemed to be still living in the medieval times unaware that the world had entered the twentieth century. A form of hagiolatry, the very antithesis of monotheistic Islam, was promoted and patronized by the Mullahs among the ignorant masses. Many superstitions and empty rituals associated with grave worship were sedulously fostered by the Mullahs mainly for their own gains. These were, however, no special features of the Muslim society of Kerala, but were perhaps even more rampant in other parts of India. The Mullahs performed exorcisms and sometimes even usurped the functions of doctors on the ground that Muslim females could not be seen by male doctors, particularly if they happened to be “infidels”! Their worst crime was that they made Islam appear to be an enemy of progress by preaching to the ignorant masses that it was a “sin” to send children, particularly girls, to school, whereas Islam had made education (acquisition of Knowledge) “obligatory on every Muslim man and woman”. The Mullahs even declared that learning ~ English was “haram” or forbidden. There were many other evil practices in the Muslim community of the time, such as the dowry system, extravagant expenditure on weddings, celebration of annual “urs” and Moharrum with bizarre unIslamic features bordering on idolatrous rituals, visiting shrines in fulfillment of religious’ vows and making votive ‘offerings. Maulavi Abdul Qadir launched his campaign against all these evils and unIslamic practices with the help of his devoted disciples and with the cooperation of other learned men who shared his views and ideals. A frail thin man in a plain muslin “kurta” and turban, he traveled up and down the country addressing meetings and exhorting people to seek education and to discard un Islamic practices. He was no demagogue. He did not play on the emotions and sentiments of the people, but only appealed to reason. His gentle voice and measured words had great power of persuasion, and his learned addresses carried conviction and authority. His audiences listened to him with rapt attention. In a few years the unIslamic festivals associated with ‘dargas’ and “saints” ceased to exist everywhere except at two places where the vested interests were too entrenched and the financial profits too massive to be easily swept away. Similarly the Moharrum “festival” with its unIslamic rituals was stopped throughout Kerala except in one city where one solitary committed family kept it going, but there the whole thing degenerated into a bizarre carnallike event in which the Hindu scavenger class joined for the petty financial gain it brought.

Campaign gathers momentum

Many organizations were set up at local levels and many schools were founded at his instance, some of which developed into higher educational institutions . At every meeting he tried to awaken the people to the danger of social stagnation and falling a prey to unIslamic practices. As the campaign developed into a powerful movement strong opposition was mounted by the Mullahs supported by vested interests. As they lacked the depth of authentic learning and the intellectual caliber to meet him on the intellectual as a first resort. Some issued “fatwas” that

he was a “kafir”. Some others branded him as a “Wahhabi”. In their dictionaries the two words perhaps had the same meaning. Although Maulavi Abdul Qadir was greatly influenced by the principles enunciated by Mohammad ibn Abdul Wahhab and by the reformist movement led by him, he never regarded himself as anything but a Muslim. After all, the name “Wahhabi” itself was coined by the orthodox religious adversaries of Mohammad ibn Abdul Wahhab as a pejorative term to be derisively used against him and his followers. These medieval minded old Arabian Mullahs of the time, not much dissimilar to our own indigenous species, were hard put to it in their search for an apt nickname. Had they chosen as their label the word “Mohammadi” as directly derived from Mohammad ibn Abdul Wahhab’s own name, they would have failed in their object. So they had to content themselves with his father’s name from which they forged the counterfeit “Wahhabi”. Neither Mohammad ibn Abdul Wahhab nor his followers (who include the ruling dynasty of Saudi Arabia) had ever acknowledged this title. It is true that Maulavi Abdul Qadir had drawn inspiration from Mohammad ibn Abdul Wahhab’s movement, but he never regarded himself as a “Wahhabi”. He was at one with Mohammad ibn Abdul Wahhab on his basic approach such as rigorous adherence to Islam’s uncompromising monotheism, which completely excludes the doctrine of intercession, visiting of tombs in fulfillment of religious vows, invoking the aid or blessings of saints or making votive offerings to them, grave worship and priesthood. Maulavi Abdul Qadir did not accept the puritanical excesses, petty intolerance and the violent methods of enforcement often associated with Mohammad ibn Abdul Wahhab and his movement. The central idea of Maulavi Abdul Qadir’s movement was restoring Islam to its pristine purity and utter simplicity and interpreting the Quranic principles in the light of companions in one single sitting has now been rendered so complex that fifteen years’ continuous study can hardly complete it.

Fight against corruption

No doubt it was the lamentable condition of his own community that had kindled in Maulavi Abdul Qadir the reformist flame and brought him into the field of action. But for a man of his moral courage, democratic convictions and burning patriotism, it was possible to confine his attention to the needs of his own small community and shut his eyes to the wider problems affecting the coterie as a whole. At the best of times Travancore was no better than an autocratic Princely State, it compared favorably with other States elsewhere in India. At this particular time, under the authoritarian rule of Sir P. Rajagopalachari, a lecherous and perverse power rampant bribery and corruption in the administration, the scandalous debaucheries that went on at the top and the palace intrigues of the 0 courtiers, which had brought the Government and the “Royal Court” to disrepute, called for a courageous champion to take up the suffering people’s cause. Although there were a few periodicals of a sort, which made their appearance here and there, none of them never dared even to make a reference to these sordid goings on. Maulavi Abdul Qadir was the first, and the only one, to answer this popular call and the first to suffer its inevitable consequences.

“SWADESHABHIMANI”

He gave priority of attention to this problem. He managed to import, directly from England, an automatic flatbed printing press, the latest type available then, in 1905. He then launched a weekly journal under the title SWADESHABHIMANI of 8~bexpa~xio~ THE Patriot”, to spear head the fight against corruption and to struggle for the democratic rights of the people. Right from the start, “THE Patriot” became a powerful organ of public opinion. However, the dual task of running “The Patriot” and leading the Muslim reformist movement at the same time soon proved an unmanageable and Maulavi Abdul Qadir looked for an editor for “The Patriot” who would measure up to the high standard of integrity, courage and political principles he had set for his journal. He was lucky to have found such a man in a young graduate called Ramakrishna Pillai who had just then been sacked by his own uncle from the editorship of his weekly journal because of his views and uncompromising adherence to principles. A personal interview and discussion of matters of principle convinced Maulavi Abdul Qadir that he had found just the man he wanted. Ramakrishna Pillai was equally lucky to have found just the right man to work with. Maulavi Abdul Qadir placed implicit faith in Ramakrishna Pillai’s integrity, patriotism, and political ideals, which were identical of his own. Not once throughout the stormy life of the journal did Maulavi Abdul Qadir find the need to interfere in the editorial policy of his journal to keep it on course he had charted for it. This political collaboration which began in 1906 between two young radical democrats forms a glorious chapter in the political history of Kerala. The saga of Maulavi Abdul Qadir, “SWADESHABHIMANI” and Ramakrishna Pillai still remains to be told in full.

“Sedation” CASE”

Heroic men of history who dared to challenge and fight the iniquities of autocrats and powerful vested interests often went down fighting. History tell of many such instances. The fate of “SWADESHABHIMANI” is another example not far removed from contemporary history. Its undaunted assaults on the citadels of corruption and its relentless campaign against the misdeeds of men at the top invited the wrath of the Dewan. Rajagopalachari was a ruthless man and more so when his own position was involved. He tried, and failed, to buy Maulavi Abdul Qadir over. His blandishments and threats having failed, he used his ultimate weapon. In less than five years Ramakrishna Pillai was arrested on a charge of sedition. Maulavi Abdul Qadir gave him fullest backing, moral and material. After a show trial he was sentenced to transportation for life and the Swadeshabhmani Press belonging to Maulavi Abdul Qadir was confiscated. Ramakrishna Pillai died in exile and press lay rusting in the Trivandrum Central Jail. All attempts in to subsequent years to , recover the press invariably failed. It took more than half a century and the formation of a democratically elected Communist Government in Kerala to erect a statue of Rama Krishna Pillai at Trivandrum to perpetuate his hallowed memory and to restore the confiscated Swadeshabhmani Press to its rightful owners. It undoubtedly goes to the credit of the first Communist Government of Kerala and its Chief Minister,

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E.M.S.Namboodiripad, that on 26 January, 1968, at a public meeting held for that purpose, he presented a new press and equipment to the legal heirs of Maulavi Abdul Qadir, 36 years after his death.

25 years a reformist campaign

In 1906, having ensured and editorial integrity of the Swadeshabhimani Maulavi Abdul Qadir concentrated his energy and attention on his main task. The same year he set up the Muslim Printing House at Vakkom, which brought out a cultural journal, "MUSLIM", first as a monthly and later as a weekly. This was followed by "ALISLAM", a monthly journal in Arabic-Malayalam, that is, Malayalam written in Arabic script, mainly devoted to the cultural and religious education of Muslim women, who were familiar with the Arabic script. Through the pages of the Muslim he carried on his reformist campaign. Religious tracts and booklets followed. As a result of the continuous campaign throughout the State, the Maharaja's Government introduced the teaching of Arabic in all State schools where there were Muslim pupils and offered them fee concession and scholarships, girls being totally exempted from payment of fees. Maulavi Abdul Qadir wrote text books for children to learn Arabic and a manual for training Arabic instructors for primary schools. At the instance of Maulavi Abdul Qadir the State Government soon instituted qualifying examinations for Arabic teachers of which he was made the chief examiner. Most of his younger ; disciples who flocked to his home to learn Arabic and Islamic religion. eventually became Arabic teachers and carried his reformist ideas far and wide. In the midst of all this work the reformist movement went on with undiminished vigour, the "Muslim" and 'Al Islam` serving as his mouthpiece. As his manysided activities began to claim more and more of his time, Maulavi Abdul Qadir entrusted the editorial responsibility for the "Muslim" to my father, Maulavi Mohammad Kunju, who was his brotherinlaw as well as his righthand man and devoted disciple. Although there were ups and downs, the movement made steady headway. In the early 1920s Maulavi Abdul Qadir took a leading part in setting up an organization called the Kerala Muslim Aikya sangham the United organization of the Muslims of Kerala. About this time he also gave guidance, and full backing for the establishment of the first Muslim bank in Kerala, which however, did not prove a great success.

QURAN IN MALAYALAM

By 1930 Maulavi Abdul Qadir was advanced in age and a lifetime of tireless hard work had begun to tell upon his health. The substantial wealth he had inherited from his father had dwindled away in the process of his long and selfless work for his community and he was fast sinking in debt, making it increasingly difficult to maintain his large family. Nevertheless his zeal for the cause to which he had devoted his life suffered no diminution. In 1931 he founded the "Islamia Publishing House" without much capital. Allama shibli's famous biography of Omar Farooq was translated into Malayalam under the supervision of Maulavi Abdul Qadir by his eldest son Abdussalam and published in two volumes under the title "AlFarooq". While this

work was in hand he started his last monthly journal called “DEEPIKA” or “The Torch”. This journal which provided articles and comments of a high standard on religious, cultural, political and literary subjects had a wider appeal. Its outstanding feature was the serialization of the Malayalam translation of the Quran together with his brief commentary and the original text written in elegant and superb calligraphic style by Maulavi Abdul Qadir himself. It was his life’s ambition to produce a translation of the Quran in Malayalam With his own commentary, but he was not destined to complete the work. He passed away on 31 October, 1932, barely 21 months after the first issue of the “Deepika” had appeared. With his death the entire project collapsed and in the financial crisis that followed his family itself suffered a great deal.

“Islahi Movement”

It is difficult to stick on him any of the familiar labels religious, political or ideological. He could not be called a revolutionary at least in the sense in which it is often used in the common political parlance. He was not a reformer, in the religious sense, as he never sought to “reform” any religious doctrine. He could not be called a “fundamentalist”, at least in the latter day sense, because he did not share their formalist approach nor their narrow minded orthodoxy, nor their Phariseelike preference for the literal sense rather than the spirit of the Quranic exhortations. He could not be classed as a “revivalist”, because the aim of his movement was not just reviving the relics of the dead past, but the recapture of the real spirit of pristine Islam and its adaptation to modern times. His disciples preferred to call his movement the “Islahi Movement”, or the Movement for Restoration” How far this correctly reflects its spirit may be debatable. Notwithstanding his profound erudition and understanding of Islamic history, philosophy, jurisprudence and logic, and his deep study of the Quran and to found his own individual school of thought. In fact he held the rather unorthodox view that one could be a perfect Muslim without having to proclaim adherence to any of the four traditionally recognized schools of thought or “madhabs” named after their respective Imams or founders. He disapproved of all schisms and sectarian names. His natural humility was such that he never used the title “Maulavi” with his own name, although many of his contemporaries did. Six decades have gone by since Maulavi Abdul Qadir had passed away. When one looks at his life and work from this distance in time against the backdrop of the momentous changes that have taken place in the economic, social and political life in Kerala, as elsewhere, his achievements may seem less significant than they were in his own day. It would be incorrect, as it would be unfair, to try to evaluate the contribution of a social reformer without reference to the age in which he had lived. The historical approach is, therefore, not merely relevant, but necessary, for a correct assessment of his place in history and in his contemporary society, as well as his contribution towards the reawakening of the Muslim community.

TRAILBLAZER

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Maulavi Abdul Qadir had had his achievements as well as his failures. His failures may be accounted for by his choice of means and methods as well as the lack of adequate financial resources when they were most needed. His achievements were limited by his own objectives and the inherent weaknesses of his movement. Nevertheless it can be stated without any exaggeration that it is to him, more than to any one else, that 'the Muslim community of Kerala owes its sense of identity and the renaissance that brought cultural regeneration and educational progress as well as emancipation from exploitation by reactionary Mullahs. No less important was his role as a pioneer and a trailblazer in political journalism of fearless, principled, radical, progressive type. Maulavi Abdul Qadir was a man of character and a paragon of many rare qualities. He was equally respected by Muslims, Hindus and Christians who knew him. Whenever he happened to walk into a room or a meeting hall full of people a sort of magnetic effect of his personality was instantly felt there. His piety, humility and sincerity were transparent. Quiet and gentle, he personified an indomitable will and inflexible determination. He was kindhearted and generous to a fault. His faith and fortitude carried him through his last years of adversity. He was too proud and self respecting to appeal for any help. An ungrateful community to whose service he had devoted his life and wealth looked on with indifference as he slowly sank in indigence and ill health with advancing age. Men like Maulavi Mohammad Abdul Qadir never served their country and people for any selfish gains or personal rewards