

# SOME ASPECTS OF THE MUSLIM EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN PRE-COLONIAL INDIA

by  
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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores some of the hitherto less known aspects of the Muslim Educational System in pre-colonial India. It examines the broad contours of this system by looking at the public attitude towards knowledge, scholars and students; the various types of institutions, and the evolution of curriculum. It also looks at the depth of Indian scholars' engagement with *ḥadīth* and other sciences. Finally, it also looks at Sufis and their attitude towards the various Islamic sciences. The paper suggests that the educational system of the period under study was organic in structure and was in tune with the needs of the individual and the society. The course of study was a good balance between the temporal and the religious. Indian '*ulamā*' were fully engaged with the *ḥadīth* sciences; and lastly, the Sufis gave great importance to all Islamic sciences. This paper suggests that the historical Muslim educational system in pre-colonial India provides valuable resources for the problems faced by modern educational systems.

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to bring to light some of the hitherto less known aspects of the Muslim Educational System in pre-colonial India. By pre-colonial India, we refer to the time from the advent of Islam in India in the beginning of the eighth century CE up to the consolidation of colonial rule in the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> This short paper cannot do justice to all the details of the Muslim Educational System during this period. Therefore, we shall confine ourselves to only some aspects of it. These include the evolution of the curriculum over the centuries, and general contours of the educational system. We will also be challenging some conventional theories. These include the notion that before the coming of the press, books were in short supply in India. The other is that *ḥadīth* was little known in India until the coming of Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1762). We will be presenting individual incidents which we feel to be representative of a broader trend and from these we shall draw general conclusions.

During the period under study Muslim rule gradually extended from Sindh to include the whole of Northern India until it became one of the three major Muslim powers of that time under

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<sup>1</sup> All the dates mentioned in this paper are CE (common era) dates unless otherwise noted.

the Great Mughals,<sup>2</sup> Ottoman Turkey and Safavid Iran being the other two. Such a strong and vast empire required a strong administrative structure which in turn required an effective system of education. As we shall see later, education was sufficiently sought after, and provided for during this time, such that India at that time could favourably compare and often compete with the central lands of Islam in the field of scholarship.<sup>3</sup>

## POSITION OF KNOWLEDGE AND EDUCATION IN ISLAM

We begin our analysis with looking at the position of knowledge and education in Islam. Numerous Qur'anic verses and Prophetic traditions establish the centrality of knowledge in Islam. The verses include "Are those who know and those who do not know alike?" (39:9); the first revelation "Read in the name of your Lord who created" (96:1); and the prayer taught in the Qur'an, "Say (O Muḥammad), My Lord! Increase me in knowledge" (20:114). Similarly, the Prophetic traditions (*aḥādīth*) exhorting people to seek knowledge are also well known. Examples include the famous tradition in which the Prophet is reported to have said, "It is obligatory upon every Muslim to seek knowledge."<sup>4</sup> At another time, he said "Seek knowledge even if you have to go to China."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, al-Tirmidhī has reported a *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said, "The excellence of a scholar upon the worshipper is like my excellence over the lowest one amongst you."<sup>6</sup> This emphasis upon knowledge and education has been taken for granted in Muslim societies since the beginning of Islam.

The religious basis for the pursuit of knowledge resulted in defining the objective of education as *al-fawz bi al-sa'ādah fī al-dārayn* i.e. to succeed through bliss in this world and the hereafter.

This in turn implied that education should be acquired

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<sup>2</sup> "Great Mughals" is a term used to refer to the first six Mughal Emperors of India. These are, in chronological order, Bābar, Humāyūn, Akbar, Jahāngīr, Shāh Jahān and Awrangzeb. These are the first and the greatest of all Mughal Emperors. In all, they reigned from 1526 to 1707 with a fifteen year interregnum from 1539 till 1555. The empire reached its zenith with Awrangzeb (reigned from 1658-1707) and after his death began her decline which ended with the capture of the last Mughal emperor Bahādur Shāh Zafar at the hands of the British in 1857.

<sup>3</sup> S.M. Jaffar, *Education in Muslim India*, (Delhi: Idāra Adabiyat-e-Dillī, 1972), viii.

<sup>4</sup> Abū Bakr Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-Īmān*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1410AH), 2:253.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Mubārakpurī, *Tuḥfat al-Aḥwadhī bi Sharḥ Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad ʿUthmān, (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), 7:456.

1. To understand the will of God and to lead one's life according to it.
2. To inculcate Islamic values in oneself.
3. To cultivate cultured behavior in oneself.<sup>7</sup>

As can be seen from these objectives, acquiring knowledge was considered a sacred duty. It was the sole means to success. Knowledge ('ilm) and practice ('amal) were inter-linked. Instruction (ta'lim) went hand in hand with training (ta'dīb). The traditional Islamic concept of education was, thus, holistic as understood at that time. Muslim scholars had divided knowledge into two parts, the *fard 'ayn* (individually obligatory) and the *fard kifāyah* (collectively obligatory); but there was no strict separation between the religious and the secular sciences. Both formed part of an integrated whole.

### **THE GENERAL ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC ATTITUDE**

As we have seen above, Islam has placed considerable emphasis upon knowledge. Because of this we find that, historically, the general attitude of Muslims, throughout the world, towards knowledge, scholars and students had been that of reverence. In every land, there were to be found a significant number of people who had dedicated themselves to learning and/or teaching. At the same time, the general public considered it an act of worship to help the scholars and the students. This public attitude coupled with safety of the roads maintained by stable and strong Muslim governments, enabled people to move across great distances in search of knowledge. In spite of the crude means of conveyance, people were constantly on the move; students setting out to learn, teachers traveling to teach. Ghulām 'Alī Āzād Bilgirāmī (d. 1785) writes in his book *Ma'āthir al-Kirām*, which is a historical account of sixteenth/seventeenth century Mughal India, that:

Seekers of knowledge travel in multitudes from one place to another. Wherever, the situation is agreeable, they get busy in learning.... The well-to-do people of each town take care of these seekers of knowledge and consider it a great honour to serve them.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Al-Nadvi & Moinuddin, *Survey of Muslim Education: India*, (Cambridge: The Islamic Academy, 1985), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Sayyid Manāẓir Aḥsan Gilānī, *Pāk-o-Hind main Musalmānon kā Niẓām-e-Ta'lim-o-Tarbiyyat*. (Lahore: Maktaba Raḥmāniyya, n.d.) 19.

The teachers occupied a high position in society. Though their emoluments were not always great, they commanded universal respect and confidence. Gilānī mentions a number of incidents when the teachers, in spite of their poverty, refused to accept any monetary help from others; and whatever help or gift was accepted, the giver always considered it to be an honor for his gift to have been accepted.<sup>9</sup> This attitude was widespread throughout the period under review. Even absolutist monarchs showed deference to the *'ulamā* and the Sufis. Nizāmī has also mentioned several incidents of *'ulamā* and Sufis refusing royal gifts even while suffering from abject poverty.<sup>10</sup> For many, poverty was a chosen path and the royal gifts were seen as undoing years of patient hard work.

## INSTITUTIONS

The main institutions for teaching and learning during the period of Muslim rule in India were *maktabs* and *madrasahs*,<sup>11</sup> mosques and *khānqāhs* (Sufi centers), and private houses. Almost every mosque served as an elementary school. However, a large number of eminent scholars and men of letter taught independently and even supported the students who came to them to study. This then was the foundation upon which the whole system was built; the teacher and the student. The issue of budgetary allocations for school buildings and provision of other services was not the top most priority for these people. What was most important was the existence of a sincere teacher and a sincere student. If these two were obtaining, other things could be improvised. Āzād has mentioned a famous teacher of his hometown Bilgiram, Mīr Mubārak. He taught there for years but throughout this time, he was based in the verandah of a certain noble of the town. Hundreds came and studied from him but he continued to operate from that verandah.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, the state was not negligent to matters of education. Kings as well as local Nawabs and other well-to-do people considered it an act of virtue to build *maktabs*, *madrasahs* and to support teachers and students. We find a network of such institutions; one-man schools as well as larger more organized affairs; scattered throughout the length and breadth

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>10</sup> Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion & Politics in India during the 13<sup>th</sup> century*, (Bombay: Asia Publishing, 1961), 152-156.

<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that *madrasah* refers to an institute which offers a comprehensive multi-year course in Islamic studies. It is different from a *maktab* which refers to part-time schools that offer basic instruction in reading the Qur'an and basics of Islam.

<sup>12</sup> Gilānī, 21.

of India. All three levels viz. elementary, secondary, higher, were catered for. However, no one level dominated in any one institution. Private houses were being used to provide basic elementary education but at the same time could be seen to provide advanced studies to those interested. In fact, this lack of bureaucratic uniformity was this system's greatest strength. The system reflected the needs of the people. It accommodated the grassroots desires and ambitions of people regarding education. Thus, we find huge well-funded, well-organized *madrasahs* existing side by side with one man schools operating out of private houses.<sup>13</sup> The student had the liberty of choosing which teacher to study from. Problems of admissions and school discipline were rare. The focus was on the real thing: education; with very little squabbling over the means to acquire it.

Muslim rulers also patronized scholars. Amongst the earliest examples is that of the famous theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209). He was also a great philosopher and expert in many Islamic sciences. He was patronized by many rulers. Among these was Shihāb al-Dīn Ghaurī (1206), the founder of Muslim rule in India proper. It is reported about him that he had al-Rāzī stay in his camp wherever he went. Al-Rāzī was the official prayer leader and delivered sermons and lectures in the camp.<sup>14</sup>

## COURSE OF STUDY

Muslims first reached India as conquerors in the beginning of the eighth century. The intellectual climate of their Arab homeland was extended to Sindh, the portion of India that had been conquered. At this stage we find an active participation of Sindh based scholars in the field of *ḥadīth*. Their names appear in the chains of transmission of *aḥādīth* that were later on recorded by other *ḥadīth* masters. Some of their names and works have also been mentioned by 'Abd al-Ḥayy al-Ḥasanī in his *al-Thaqāfah al-Islāmiyyah fi al-Hind*.<sup>15</sup>

However, this period lasted for only four centuries and Muslim rule was confined to Sindh and Multan (southern Punjab). Beginning towards the end of the tenth century, Muslims began to enter India from the North-West in successive waves, each time extending their territories even further towards North and Central India. Along with each invading army, and on

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Muḥammad Shafī', *Futūḥ al-Hind*, (Karachi: Idārat al-Ma'ārif, 2002), 60-61.

<sup>15</sup> 'Abd al-Ḥayy al-Ḥasanī, *al-Thaqāfah al-Islāmiyyah fi al-Hind*, (Damascus: Mujamma' al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah bi Dimashq, 1983), 135.

their own as well, came *'ulamā* and Sufis. Both had a role to play in the spread of Islamic knowledge in India. Major cities in the newly acquired territories quickly turned into centers of learning. Initially, Multan, then Lahore and finally Delhi became the pre-eminent centre of learning in North India.<sup>16</sup>

This second period starting from the end of the tenth century lasted until the last quarter of the fifteenth century. During this time, India benefited enormously from an otherwise unmitigated disaster. The Mongol hordes that ravaged Central Asia, Afghanistan and Khorasan forced many of the scholarly families based there to migrate to other countries. India was the top destination for them. Not a day passed but a noteworthy scholar would arrive in Delhi with camel loads of books. The Indian rulers were fully aware of the worth of the newcomers. They made them feel extremely welcome. Every newcomer was given a post or a stipend or an estate to support himself and his family. Thus, the nascent Muslim community of North India benefitted from a continuous supply of scholars and books.

During this period, the education system in North India consisted of three stages:

At the first stage, as has been the practice throughout Muslim history in all Islamic lands, a child's education began with the Qur'an. Each locality had teachers who specialized in *tajwīd*, the art of recitation of the Qur'an. It is mentioned about Niẓām al-Dīn Awliyā (d. 1325), the great Chishti Sufi saint of Delhi, that he started his education in his hometown, Badaun. This began with learning how to read the Qur'an. His teacher was a freed slave who had converted from Hinduism to Islam and knew the seven major recitations of the Qur'an.<sup>17</sup> After Qur'an, students would normally move on to Persian, the official language of the country. Most of the major works of Persian prose and poetry were studied. These included the works of major writers such as Sa'dī, Ḥāfiẓ, Salmān Saojī, Anwarī, and others.<sup>18</sup> The education of the general population normally stopped at this level. However, it seems reasonable to assume that some elementary Arabic was also taught at this stage because the students were expected to understand the Arabic phrases that were often used in Persian books and regular conversation. We also find

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>17</sup> Gīlānī, 139. Also cited by Nizami in Khalīq Aḥmad Niẓāmī, *Islāmī Tehzīb kā Asar Hindustān par*, (Lucknow, Majlis Tehqīqāt-o-Nashriāt-e-Islām, 1982), 42.

<sup>18</sup> Gīlānī, 141.

people with only basic education being able to freely quote from the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions.<sup>19</sup>

The second stage was dedicated to an intensive study of the Arabic language as well as *fiqh*. Some of the books taught at this stage included: *Kāfiyah* and *Mufaṣṣal* for Arabic grammar; and *Mukhtaṣar al-Qudūrī* and *Majma' al-Baḥrayn* for Hanafī *fiqh* (Jurisprudence). Later on, *Mufaṣṣal* gave way to *Sharḥ Jāmī* and *Sharḥ Wiqāyah* replaced *Majma' al-Baḥrayn*.<sup>20</sup> Education up to this level was considered sufficient for those wanting to engage in teaching, preaching, etc. and entitled one to be called a *dānishmand* (wise man) or a *mawlawī*. Studies at this level would correspond to the fourth year of study in the present-day eight year *Dars-e-Nizāmī*.

In the third stage, also called *faḍīlat*, advanced books of each science were studied. These included *al-Kashshāf* and *Madārik al-Tanzīl* for *tafsīr* (Qur'anic Exegesis), *Mishkāt al-Maṣābīḥ* and *Mashāriq al-Anwār* for *ḥadīth*, *al-Hidāyah* for Hanafī *fiqh*, and *Uṣūl al-Bazdawī* for *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence). Along with these, major works in the various branches of *balāghah* (rhetoric) were also studied. The one who completed this stage was called a *fāḍil*.

As can be seen from this brief outline, rational sciences and *kalām* (dialectics) were not paid much attention in the regular curriculum. Only a few basic texts of logic and *kalām* such as *al-Qūṭbī* and *Sharḥ al-Ṣaḥā'if* were studied.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the general attitude amongst the 'ulamā towards these is best summed up in this statement of *Fatāwā al-Tātārkhāniyah*, a *fatwā* collection compiled during the fourteenth century:

The issues of 'ilm al-kalām lead to new dissensions (*fitnahs*) and innovations and cause deterioration of faith; (and) the ones who normally engage in it are either less-intelligent or are seeking to dominate rather than seeking the truth.<sup>22</sup>

This all changed towards the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century. During this third period which lasted until the beginning of the eighteenth century, logic, philosophy, and *kalām* got new impetus. At this time, many students of Sharīf Jurjānī and Sa'd al-Dīn Taftāzānī moved to India and brought with them new books on grammar,

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<sup>19</sup> Al-Nadvi & Moinuddin, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>21</sup> Gīlānī, 151.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 155.

rhetoric, *kalām* and *fiqh*.<sup>23</sup> Later, Faṭḥullāh Shīrāzī came to India from Iran and brought with him works of Dawwānī, Mullā Ṣadrā and Mirzā Jān. These works were readily accepted by Indians and before long these became part and parcel of the curriculum.<sup>24</sup> Again during this period, purpose built institutions existed side by side with individualized private instruction.

The fourth period can be said to have begun from the early part of eighteenth century lasting until the founding of Dār al-‘Ulūm at Deoband in 1866. This period is characterized by the presence of two very important personalities. Each of them contributed to education in his own way. One is Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi and the other is Nizām al-Dīn Sihālvī of Lucknow (d. 1748). Walī Allāh focused on the teaching of *ḥadīth* especially the *Ṣiḥāḥ Sittah* (the six major collections of *ḥadīth* viz. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī*, *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*, *Sunan al-Nisā‘ī* and *Sunan Ibn Mājah*) and *al-Muwaṭṭā* of Mālik ibn Anas. Later on, Walī Allāh’s son Shāh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, operating from his base in Delhi, helped to popularize it throughout India.

Sihālvī, based at Farangī Mahal in Lucknow, focused on developing a comprehensive curriculum which came to be called *Dars-e-Nizāmī*, after him. Sihālvī focused more on the *ma‘qūlāt* (rational sciences) and *fiqh* than on the *manqūlāt* (transmitted sciences). In fact, an examination of this curriculum shows that it included ten books on logic, five on dialectics and three on philosophy while only a portion from two works of *tafsīr* and one book of *ḥadīth* were studied.<sup>25</sup> This curriculum proved extremely popular because of its ability to prepare students for independent study. Even the Shī‘ites of Lucknow came to the Sunni school of Farangī Mahal to study because of the reputation of this curriculum at producing well-rounded and rational, educated individuals.

Although, our period of research ends here, however, let us state this much. Walī Allāh’s curriculum and Sihālvī’s curriculum represented two extremes in their emphasis upon the transmitted and the rational sciences, respectively. Quite a number of people took advantage of both the curricula but there was still no single unified curriculum. That came about with the founding of the Dār al-‘Ulūm at Deoband in 1866. The curriculum adopted at Dār al-‘Ulūm, although still referred to as *Dars-e-Nizāmī*, was a combination of the two. On the one hand, rational sciences were studied in almost as much detail as Sihālvī had envisaged; and on the

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<sup>23</sup> Al-Nadvi, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Nadvi & Moinuddin, 10.

other hand, Walī Allāh's emphasis on *ḥadīth* was also incorporated so that during the last year of study, the *Ṣiḥāḥ Sittah*, as well as the *Sharḥ Ma'ānī al-Āthār* of al-Ṭaḥāwī, and the *al-Muwaṭṭā's* of Mālik and Muḥammad al-Shaybānī were studied in their totality.

### **INDIAN 'ULAMĀ AND ḤADĪTH**

The prevalent idea among the vast majority of Indo-Pakistani 'ulamā is that *ḥadīth* was historically a neglected science in India. It was only with the coming of Walī Allāh that this changed. The unique position that Walī Allāh occupies in Indian Muslim intellectual history has meant that his supporters tend to sideline the important contributions made by others before him and during his time.

Regarding the contributions of Indian 'ulamā to *ḥadīth*, we have to keep Indian history in perspective. Muslims came to regard India proper (Sindh & Multan being the exception) as their home only after the coming to power of Quṭb al-Dīn Aybak in 1206. Indian Muslims' contributions should be examined keeping this in mind. By this time, all the major works of *ḥadīth* had already been compiled. It was too late for Indians to form part of al-Bukhārī's chain of transmitters. They could not have taken part in the formative period of the *ḥadīth* sciences. Sindh, which was Islamized earlier on, did take part in these activities and was the exception. Later Indians, however, engaged in those pursuits that were still possible. They compiled newer collections based upon the original collections. They learned the *ḥadīth* sciences, memorized texts with their chains and taught these to others.

In this regard, a prominent example is that of Ḥasan al-Ṣaghānī al-Hindī (d. 1252). He was the Indian ambassador to the Abbasid court in Baghdad. Upon orders of the then Abbasid caliph al-Mustaṣir Billāh, he compiled *Mashāriq al-Anwār*, a collection of 2246 *aḥādīth* from the two *Ṣaḥīḥs* of *Bukhārī* and *Muslim*. The caliph himself studied this book from him. For many centuries after that, this book was an integral part of the curriculum of Islamic *madrāsahs*. Numerous commentaries were written on it by 'ulamā in Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Hijaz. It was held in such high esteem that Sultan Muḥammad ibn Tughlaq is reported to have placed it side by side with the Qur'an while taking oath of allegiance from his officers.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Muhammad Ishaq, *India's Contribution to the Study of Hadith Literature*, (Dhaka, University of Dacca, 1976), 218-221.

There are many other examples from each of the succeeding centuries as well as some from the previous ones which show that learning *ḥadīth* and teaching it to others was very much a part of the educational system. There was Ismā‘īl Muḥaddith (d. 1056) who was based in Lahore and had dedicated himself to teaching the various Islamic sciences including *ḥadīth*.<sup>27</sup> Then there were Shaykh Bahlūl of Delhi and Muftī Muḥammad of Lahore, both from the time of Akbar (c. sixteenth century). Both were well-known for their expertise in *ḥadīth*.<sup>28</sup> Muftī Muḥammad used to teach *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* and *Mishkāt al-Maṣābīḥ*.

Also from the sixteenth century is Mīr Murtazā Sharīfī, the grandson of Sharīf Jurjānī. He left Shiraz to go to Makkah and learned *ḥadīth* from ibn Ḥajar al-Makkī and got *ijāzah* (permission/license) from him to teach it to others. He came to settle down in Agra and passed away during the reign of Akbar.<sup>29</sup> Then there was Ḥāfiẓ Darāz Peshāwarī who had learned *ḥadīth* from his mother. This lady had written a commentary on *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* in Persian.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, it is mentioned about Muḥammad Farrukh, the grandson of Aḥmad Sirhindi, that he had memorized 70,000 *aḥādīth* along with their chains and texts and their strengths and weaknesses.<sup>31</sup>

This devotion to *ḥadīth* was not confined to North India alone. Gujarat in western India is situated opposite the Arabian Peninsula and therefore, has enjoyed a closer relationship with the Arab peninsula from the beginning. Prominent ‘ulamā such as ‘Alī Muttaqī (d. c. 1568) and his students Muḥammad ibn Ṭāhir Patnī (d. 1578) and ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Muttaqī (d. 1592) were in the forefront in the science of *ḥadīth*. They flourished in Gujarat and Makkah and from there, their influence extended to various parts of the world. In Delhi, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s student ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq (d. 1642) was active in disseminating *ḥadīth*. He wrote important commentaries on the major works of *ḥadīth*. He was followed by his son Nūr al-Ḥaqq, who similarly, was quite active in serving the *ḥadīth* sciences.

In South India, we find the sixteenth century scholar Bhikārī Kākōrvī who wrote a book on the principles of *ḥadīth*, titled *al-Minhāj*.<sup>32</sup> In Zaidpur in eastern India, Mawlānā ‘Abd al-

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<sup>27</sup> Ishaq, 45-46.

<sup>28</sup> Gīlānī, 129.

<sup>29</sup> Ishaq, 99.

<sup>30</sup> Gīlānī, 130. For more information about women *muḥaddithāt* (traditionists) throughout Muslim history, see Akram Nadvi’s up-coming 40 volume work *al-Muḥaddithat: Women Scholars in Islam*. Its one volume introduction (*muqaddimah*) has recently been published by Interfaith Publications, UK.

<sup>31</sup> Gīlānī, 128.

<sup>32</sup> Ishaq, 124.

Awwal (d. 1560) had written a commentary on *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, titled *Fayḍ al-Bārī*.<sup>33</sup> Even Āzād, more famous for the historical works that he wrote, had written a commentary on *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, titled *Daw' al-Ḍarārī*.<sup>34</sup> In Kashmir, there was Mullā Ināyat Allāh Kashmīrī (d. 1713). He had taught *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* thirty six times.<sup>35</sup> And then in the nineteenth century, we find Raḥmat Allāh Ilāhabādī who had memorized the six books of *ḥadīth* (*Ṣiḥāḥ Sittah*).<sup>36</sup>

The rulers also took active part in patronizing *ḥadīth* sciences. It is mentioned about Sultan Maḥmūd Shāh (d. 1397) of the South Indian Bahmani kingdom that he had set aside special stipends for the scholars of *ḥadīth* so that they could stay engaged in their scholarly pursuits without having to worry about earning their living.<sup>37</sup>

### **Sufis and Knowledge**

Sufis enjoy perhaps the worst reputation in Islamic scholarly circles. Much of this stems from the behavior and statements of ignorant Sufis. This then leads to a blanket condemnation of all Sufis including the classical giants of *taṣawwuf*. Historical evidence points in a different direction. It would be helpful to consider here the case of some Sufis and their attitudes towards education. In fact, in the second half of the thirteenth century, Delhi saw the founding of the *khānqāh* of the famous Chishti saint, Niẓām al-Dīn Awliyā. Not only had Niẓām al-Dīn studied the above-mentioned *Mashāriq al-Anwār* from cover to cover but also knew the entire collection by heart.<sup>38</sup> The best source of information about him is his utterances (*malḥūẓāt*) that were recorded by his disciple Amīr Ḥasan Sijzī (d. 1336) in his famous work *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād*.<sup>39</sup> Even a cursory glance at this collection will show that Niẓām al-Dīn had a thorough understanding of *ḥadīth* and *fiqh*. And this in spite of the fact that he was busy training his Sufi disciples and did not have time to be actively involved in the intellectual life of Delhi.

Another incident is worth considering. It is mentioned about a certain Akhī Sirāj who had moved at a young age from his native Lakhnauti to Delhi to benefit from Niẓām al-Dīn. He lived in Niẓām al-Dīn's *khānqāh* for many years. Once, someone recommended his name to

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>35</sup> Ishaq, 160 and Gīlānī, 128.

<sup>36</sup> Gīlānī, 128.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 134 and Ishaq, 103.

<sup>38</sup> Gīlānī, 119. See Nizami, *Some Aspects...*, 347 for the *ijāzat nāmāh* (license to teach) that Niẓām al-Dīn received from his teacher after completing *Mashāriq al-Anwār*.

<sup>39</sup> Amīr Ḥasan Sijzī, *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād*, translated from Persian into Urdu by Ziyā-ul-Ḥasan Fārūqī, (New Delhi: DK Printworld, 1996).

Nizām al-Dīn for successorship. Nizām al-Dīn replied that Sirāj was not educated and therefore, not qualified to be a successor. Upon this, one of the scholar disciples of Nizām al-Dīn, Mawlānā Fakhr al-Dīn Zarrādī volunteered to teach Sirāj and fulfill this important condition for him. He accomplished this in six months.<sup>40</sup> This shows the erudition and skill of Zarrādī as well as the acumen of Sirāj to learn. Above all, this incident shows the central importance that Sufis gave to education.

One could argue that the sources for all such incidents are hagiographical accounts whose sole purpose is to glorify the personality of the person being written about. Even if we were to accept this charge, although there is enough reason not to, even then, the fact that the biographers considered acquisition of knowledge to be praiseworthy shows the status of knowledge and education in the Muslim society of that time.

## AVAILABILITY OF BOOKS

The scarcity of books in India before the coming of the press has been made quite an issue of. Some historians, as evidence of this claim, have cited an incident involving Walī Allāh's son, Shāh 'Abd al-'Azīz. It is reported that when 'Abd al-'Azīz began writing his Persian commentary on the Qur'an (*Fath al-'Azīz*), he could not even find *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* of al-Rāzī.<sup>41</sup> After a desperate search, he finally found it in the library at the Royal Palace in Delhi. This is hard to believe. All of 'Abd al-'Azīz works have come down to us. We find him referring directly to classical works of Shāfi'ī, Abū Yūsuf (the main student of Abū Ḥanīfah), al-Ghazzālī, Ibn Ḥazm, Ibn Taymiyyah, etc. Some of these works were hard to find even after coming of the press. It is reasonable to assume that someone who had access to such rare works would also have had access to al-Rāzī's work. Even if the incident was to be considered true, it cannot be taken to be representative of a general trend. It appears as an exception rather than the rule.

Moreover, Gīlānī has cited an incident involving Āzād's teacher, Mīr Tufayl. Āzād writes that once Mīr Tufayl went to see the Nawab of Agra. There, a debate ensued about certain linguistic aspects of the Qur'anic verse "and for those who have the power" (2:184). According to Āzād even for this relatively minor issue, most major works of *tafsīr*, including al-Rāzī's *al-*

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<sup>40</sup> Nizāmī, *Islāmī Tehzīb...*, 43.

<sup>41</sup> Gīlānī, 38.

*Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, *al-Kashshāf*, *Bayḍāwī*, and other books of language and rhetoric were consulted.<sup>42</sup>

Mullā Muḥib Allāh Bihārī (d. 1707) is a prominent scholar who flourished during Awrangzeb's (d. 1707) reign. He is the author of *Musallam al-Thubūt*, a famous work on the principles of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*). A manuscript of the author's marginalia on this work is available online.<sup>43</sup> In this, he mentions the books that he consulted while writing this book. The list includes all the major works of *uṣūl* of each of the Sunni schools viz. *Uṣūl al-Bazdawī*, *Uṣūl al-Sarkhasī*, *Kashf al-Bazdawī*, *Kashf al-Manār*, *al-Badī'* along with its commentaries, *al-Tawḍīḥ wa al-Talwīḥ*, *al-Taḥrīr* along with its commentaries *al-Taqrīr* and *al-Taysīr*, *al-Maḥṣūl* of al-Rāzī, *al-Iḥkām* of al-Āmidī, Qaḍī's *Mukhtaṣar* along with its various glosses, *Sharḥ* of al-Abharī, *Sharḥ* of Taftāzānī, gloss of Fāzil Mirzā Jān, *al-Rudūd*, *al-'Unqūd*, *al-Minhāj* of al-Bayḍāwī along with its commentary, *Mukhtaṣar* of ibn al-Ḥājj and *Muntaha al-Uṣūl*. This is an exhaustive list. If these books were available to someone working in Bihar, it is quite reasonable to assume that they would have been available in the capital Delhi as well.

In fact, not only were books easily available during the period under study, rather it was not such a major issue. There are two important reasons for that. Firstly, there was always a professional group of copyists in each locality who were called *warrāq* (scribe) or *nussākh* (copyist). They kept track of all the books available in their area as well as other cities and upon demand they could quickly make copies of the desired book.<sup>44</sup> Secondly, amongst the general educated public most people could write quite fast. About the first contention, the following incident is quite telling.

'Abd al-Qādir Badāyūnī (d. 1625) was an accomplished scholar and man of letters who was attached to Akbar's court. Although working under Akbar, he had become thoroughly disgusted with Akbar's eclecticism. Even though an officially approved history of Akbar's reign had been written by Abul Fazl titled *Akbar Nāmah*, Badāyūnī felt that the record needed to be set

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>43</sup> Muḥib Allāh Bihārī, *Ḥāshiyat Musallam al-Thubūt*, MS. Or. 350, p. 1, University of Leipzig Library, downloaded from "Uṣūl al-Fiqh wa al-Qawā'id al-Fiqhiyyah," al-Muṣṭafā min al-Makḥūṭāt al-'Arabiyyah wa al-Islāmiyyah, <<http://mostafamakhtot.blogspot.com/search/label/16%20الفقهية20%القواعد20%الفقه20%اصول>> (accessed 16 August, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> During the period under study, copyrights violation was not an issue. There was no legal hindrance to making copies of other people's books. Today, the opinion is divided among traditional scholars regarding copyrights. Some insist that they have no basis in Islamic law. Others approve of them. For a sampling, see Nūh Ḥā Mīm Keller, "Copyrights in Islam," Shadhili Teachings, <<http://www.shadhiliteachings.com/tariq/?act=article&id=6>> (accessed 17 August, 2010).

right. So, in secret, he wrote his historical work titled *Muntakhab at-Tawārīkh*, in which he showed the darker side of Akbar's reign. He could not make it public during his own lifetime for fear of severe official reaction. After his death, some copyists got hold of it and before long its copies were to be found all over the country. By this time, Jahāngīr, the son of Akbar, had ascended the throne. He tried to ban the book. However, in spite of his absolutist powers, Jahāngīr could not take this book out of circulation. Every now and then, a report would be received that this book was seen in this town or that city.<sup>45</sup> This can be reasonably attributed to the easy availability of copyists who made sure that they had access to books that people wanted. In fact, this also explains the slow spread of the press in India. The effective system of copyists had relieved people of the need for a printing press.

About the second contention, i.e., the writing speed of educated people, let us present some incidents.

Āzād has mentioned about a certain scholar Shaykh Kamāl:

Text books of *ṣarf* (morphology), *naḥw* (syntax), *manṭiq* (logic), *ḥikmah* (philosophy), *ma'ānī*, *bayān*, *fiqh*, *uṣūl*, and *tafsīr*, all of these, he copied with his own hand. And for every book, he wrote its gloss in such a way that the text did not require the commentary anymore and the commentary did not require the text anymore.<sup>46</sup>

Regarding Shaykh Nāgaurī, the father of Abul Fazl and Fayzī, Āzād writes, "He wrote 500 volumes with his own hands."<sup>47</sup> Similarly, it is mentioned in the account of a certain Shaykh Junayd Ḥisārī that he could copy the whole Qur'an in three days and that too with the diacritical marks.<sup>48</sup>

To close this topic, let us mention what 'Abd al-Wahhāb Muttaqī has mentioned regarding his teacher 'Alī Muttaqī. This has been quoted by 'Abd al-Wahhāb's student 'Abd al-Ḥaq Dehlavī in his *Akḥbār al-Akhyār*. 'Alī Muttaqī had moved to Makkah and was the foremost scholar of that city. 'Abd al-Wahhāb mentions about him that he had a habit of copying

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<sup>45</sup> Gīlānī, 59.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 63.

important books and sending them out to all those regions where such books were unlikely to be found and people would need them. Writing books was a religious vocation for him.<sup>49</sup>

## CONCLUSION

A systematic study of Islamic intellectual heritage (of India as well as the rest of the Muslim world) is essential for a better understanding of Islamic Civilization. In the preceding account, we have tried to give a glimpse of the educational system of historical Muslim India. This is just a preliminary study. The abundance of historical evidence seems to suggest a very well-organized and organic system of education. *Madrasahs, maktabas*, mosques, private houses, all kinds of institutions existed in harmony. The options available to any sincere seeker of knowledge were many. Seeking knowledge and imparting it was a sacred exercise and not a commercial enterprise. The general attitude of the public towards knowledge and those who engaged in it was fundamental to the flourishing of this system. General interest in the various Islamic sciences meant that all segments of the population participated in the cultivation and dissemination of Islamic sciences. Sufis thus placed high value on seeking a proper Islamic education. Similarly, Indian scholars paid close attention to the *ḥadīth* sciences. Many of them rose to become pre-eminent *ḥadīth* scholars known for their erudition throughout the Muslim world. Moreover, the curriculum that had evolved over the years maintained a healthy balance between the secular and the religious. There were differences in terms of emphasis on the rational vs. the transmitted sciences. However, the overall curriculum was still relatively holistic. In short, Muslim India matched the central lands of Islam in terms of its educational advancement and achievements.

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<sup>49</sup> See ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq Dehlavī, *Akḥbār al-Akhyār*, translated from Persian into Urdu by Subḥān Maḥmūd and Muḥammad Fāzil, (Karachi: Madīnah Publishing Company, n.d.), 529.

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