

Modernist Muslim Thought in the Subcontinent: An Analytical Study in Maulvi Chiragh Ali's Rationalism

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Abstract

A careful comparison of Muslim thought in the pre-1857 era and in the post-1857 era commonly discloses many contrasting ideas. The exposure of western knowledge, rational discourses, and western civilization put Muslims in a challenging phase. It was necessary for Muslims to cope with the challenges to register themselves as a separate nation to safeguard their identity. In this regard, many orthodox and modern Muslim scholars tried to re-interpret Islam in different modes. Modern Muslim scholars gave interpretations purely on rational grounds and such rational thinking reformed or revolutionized the religious, political, and social paradigms of Muslims. It is impossible to elaborate the evolution of modernist Muslim thought in the subcontinent by ignoring the works of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Chiragh Ali. During the evolution of modernist Muslim thought, it is more important to study the rationalism of Chiragh Ali because he elaborated many ambiguous ideas of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in a candid rational way, and he provided strong foundations for modern interpretations compatible with the dynamic situation of Islam in colonial India. His radicalism paved the path towards the rationalization of Islam in the subcontinent. No doubt, Aziz Ahmad, and Kraemer had already attributed an outstanding radicalism and an incomparable spiritual freedom and courage to Chiragh Ali. But both writers did not argue about the nature of his religious ideas or thoughts as well as they did not map out his rationalistic model of thinking which he deployed to address sensitive Muslim religious issues. It is also necessary to study Chiragh Ali in perspective of socio-religious or socio-political setup of his time which might have affected his thinking process. Still, the role of Maulvi Chiragh Ali in the study of Islamic modernism in

India is unidentified. This study is aimed to explore the course of evolution of modernist Muslim thinking and to identify the role, importance, and outcomes of the rationalism of Maulvi Chiragh Ali.

Key Words: Subcontinent, Religious Tradition, Maulvi Chiragh Ali, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Rationalism, Modernist Muslim Thought

Background to the Development of Muslim Rational Thought in the Subcontinent:

The Indo-Pak Subcontinent was such a charismatic region on the map of this world which became popular due to its rivers, fertile lands, well-defined cultures, settled civilization and harmonious coexistence of different religions. It has an alluring story of cultural exchange and the evolution of a syncretic culture that had started more than a thousand years before the partition. The subcontinent observed a well-settled civilization before Christ. Aryans were the founders of the Hindu religion and social structure which was based on the caste system. The religious poetry (*Vedanta, Geeta, Mahabharata*) and its philosophical interpretations, which were promoted in ancient India, were remarkable. The interaction between Muslims and the people of India was started due to eastern trade routes. In *Gujrat* and Malabar, many Muslim families were settled to manage their trade through these harbors. The Arab traders or sailors were used to sailing towards eastern coasts and commonly they anchored their ships in these harbors and wait for favorable winds to sail towards the east (Satish Chandra, 2007). No doubt, India had a well-settled civilization and social structure before Muslim rulers but in fragmented form (Dar, 1971) It is still a difficult job to derive a solid worldview from such fragmented systems of political power, economy, religious doctrines, and philosophical interpretations.

Islam has been a strong social force in the Indo-Pak subcontinent since the times of Arab traders, followed by military expeditions in the 8th century A.D. onwards. However, Islam was spread extensively by the efforts of those religious scholars, Sufi Saints, and luminaries who came to the region, stayed over here, and started educational institutions or seminaries, especially after the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in 1206. Most of such scholars came to India due to Mongol invasions (1218-1221) in central Asia. With the passage of time, the seminaries established by such Muslim scholars or Sufis attracted many visitors including Muslims as well as Hindus. This scenario became the cause of cultural transformation among both Muslims and Hindus. To study the evolution of Muslim thought it is necessary to track back all changes which were happened in cultural, social, educational and political domains in the pre-colonial and colonial period. The cultural transformations which were happened during the Sultanate period had an impact on

complete social life especially on caste-ism, education, customs, behavior, festivals, food, and living styles of the people. Such cultural transformation created the social space from where the Bhakti movement was started (Madni, 1993). Between the 13th and mid-19th centuries, several Muslim dynasties ruled over the subcontinent, and during the time Islam spread gradually without any large-scale forcible conversion (Chand, 1922). Overall, Muslim conquerors had a very tolerant attitude (Ali, 1983). They were rulers, not the colonizers. They did not pay heed to establishing a formal Muslim society and even they did not bother about the local personal law, especially of Hindus and Muslims. On the other hand, several religious scholars made individual efforts in this connection. Many reform movements were started during Muslim rule to purify the society in compliance with Islam.

During Mughal rule, especially in the reign of Emperor Humayun (1531-1540), there was an increase in the gravity of situation due to the start of Shia Sunni polemics. Such polemics affected intellectuals, scholars and commoner Muslims as well but on the other hand, its impact on political paradigm was not significant. However, it was the Akbar the great (1556-1605) who brought religion and politics into practice and subsequently caused the division in the ranks of *Ulama* (Ahmad, 1988). He went so far as to proclaim a new faith '*Deen-i-Ilahi*' which combined the best of the Vedic and the Quranic tenants. The hidden purpose was to strengthen the political grip on India but this projected was failed to deliver its expected outcomes because many religious scholars did not tolerate this doctrine and they publicly denounced it. From Emperor Akbar to Emperor Aurangzeb (1618-1707) the impact of '*Deen-i-Ilahi*' gradually vanished. Emperor Aurangzeb was truly orthodox and he tried to implement the law in compliance with Islamic *Shariah*. He was a promoter of orthodox thinking of *Sunni Hanafi* school of thought (Ahmad, 1967). After Emperor Aurangzeb, Mughal Empire rapidly deteriorated. Institutional interaction of Muslim scholars or *Ulama* with Christian missionaries gradually promoted rational thinking among Muslims. In the 19th century, the complexity in intellectual domain increased due to Muslim Christian polemics. On the other hand, *Shah Waliullah* school of thought registered itself as the promoter of rationalism in the sphere of religion (Ahmad, 2011). They denounced the colonial rule and tried to defend declined Mughal rule in the intellectual and political sphere.

Islamic modernist and rationalist thought in the subcontinent revolves around the following postulates:

1. It, first, asserts its definition, delimitation, and development in both traditional and modernist Muslim domains of thought or rationalism
2. the evolution of modernist Muslim discourse in the subcontinent as a historical process
3. Exploration of the rational ideas of Maulvi Chiragh Ali in religious, social, and political paradigms
4. Moreover, an attempt has been made to estimate the outcomes and impacts of the rationalism of Maulvi Chiragh Ali in the perspective of the evolution of modernist Muslim thought

As far as the nature of the study is concerned, it is a descriptive and explanatory piece of research in which the derivation of arguments has been based on techniques of qualitative research. The whole study has been done in compliance with the following methodological ethos:

1. The study is based on qualitative but careful evaluation of the primary and secondary sources available.
2. The information about the evolution of modernist Islamic thoughts in the subcontinent has been obtained from secondary sources and the information has been used to identify traditional and modernist thoughts. First of all, different streams or schools of thought in the paradigm of Muslim thinking in the subcontinent have adroitly been identified leading to the careful evaluation of socio-political changes and dialectics or dialogue between different Muslim schools of thought in order to map out a clear picture about the evolution of modernist or rationalist thinking.
3. Information about the works and ideas of Maulvi Chiragh Ali has been obtained from primary as well as secondary sources. This information, in the third place, has been used to identify the services of Maulvi Chiragh Ali as well as to map out the rationalism, impact, and signification of the rationalism of Maulvi Chiragh Ali has been studied to in the following prominent domains in both roles and profile:
 - Brief introduction of personality and literary works
 - His religious, Social, and Political Ideas in terms of his modernist discourse
 - His religious credo in the light of his religious reforms devised
 - Study of Maulvi Chiragh Ali with respect to modern Muslim political worldview

- Evaluation of Mualvi Chiragh Ali's rationalism in prominent domains of modernist thought, religious demeanor, social facet, and political countenance

Rise of Muslim Rationalism in Post-1857 Milieu and Role of Maulvi Chiragh Ali in Its Development

The Muslim rule lasted for many centuries until the British occupation of India in 1857, which in turn manipulated the resources of the region for the next ninety years or so. After the failure of the war of independence in 1857, the political hegemony of the British was established. The British government considered Muslims as responsible for mutiny and charged the Muslim community (Metcalf, 2009). It was a critical time for the Muslim community in colonial India. In such a situation, the followers of *Shah Waliullah* school of thought declared colonial India as 'Dar-ul-Harb' (Dar, 1971). After such declaration from the religious school of thought, there were two options for Muslims; either they had to migrate from colonial India, or they had to fight against the British. On the other hand, the British targeted the Muslim community. British were the colonizers and they used modern education as a tool for reconstruction of the native mind or to colonize the native mind. The rapid changes in the socio-political domain made many Muslim setups irrelevant, especially the Muslim education system (Clinton, 2005). The Muslim community was reluctant to acquire modern education. Many modern enlightened Muslim scholars gave interpretations about the religious declaration to avoid any confrontation with British imperialism as well as they tried to find an avenue in such radical circumstances which lead the Muslim community towards a safe future (Pletcher, 2010). Most prominent among modern Muslim scholars was Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. He motivated the Muslim community to acquire a modern education because he considered it the only way for the dignified survival of Muslims in colonial India. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his companions established Aligarh Institute as an opportunity for Muslims to get modern education (Khan, 1990). The impact of the Aligarh Institute was significant in the polarization of the Muslim community. At the start of the 20th century, there were two different schools of thought among Muslims. One was equipped with modern education and the other was orthodox or religious. Modern education, learning of modern discourses such as rational sciences, and Muslim Christian polemics promoted rational thinking (Troll, 1986).

The modern educated Muslim scholars tried to answer all questions on rational grounds. It formed a cloud of rational opinions which influenced all Muslim scholars. The person who

provided Sir Syed Ahmad Khan with foundational rational arguments for his works was Maulvi Chiragh Ali. He was an expert in many languages like Urdu, Persian, English, Hebrew, and Arabic. He had a great interest in acquiring deep religious knowledge. He was not the follower of any madhhab. He was also against sectarianism in Islam. He kept himself away from politics and he never joined a political party. His intellectual writing includes '*Taliqat*', '*Daf-i-Ilzamaz Ghuzuwat-i-Islam*', '*Kashf al-Ibham an Tariyat-al-Islam*', '*Dhabb-i-Harim al-Nabi an al-Serari*', '*Muhammad: The True Prophet*', '*Qadim Qawmun ki Mukhtasar Tarikh*', '*Majmuah-i-Rasail-i-Chiragh Ali*', '*Tahdib-al-Akhlaq*', '*The proposed political, legal and social reforms under the Ottoman Empire and other Muslim states*' and '*A critical exposition of the popular Jihad*'.

Maulvi Chiragh Ali's views about the interpretation of the Holy Quran, Hadith, Ijma, and *Qiyas* were rational. He helped Sir Syed to synthesize the dialect between the '*Dar-ul-Salam*' as thesis and '*Dar-ul-Harb*' as anti-thesis. He declared that colonial India was neither '*Dar-ul-Salam*' nor '*Dar-ul-Harb*'. Instead, it is simply British India, '*Dar-ul-Aman*' or '*Dar-ul-Dhimma*' because Muslims were living peacefully under the protection of British rulers in India. On the foundations provided by Chiragh Ali, Sir Syed declared that the *Fatawa* of '*Dar-ul-Harb*' does not imply Jihad against British rulers in India because the British are not restricting the performance of religious duties of Muslims. As per Chiragh Ali, these two *fatwas* had nothing to do with religious rebellion or Jihad because India has no Muslim law courts, the question is not to be raised and discussed at all. He alone single-handedly revolutionized the political worldview of Muslims in India. He decorated the Muslim community in the subcontinent with such a political worldview which opened new avenues for them towards a prosperous future (Khan, 1918).

The British dominance in India exposed Muslims to new ideas of liberalism and representative democracy. Many Muslim thinkers were convinced to re-interpret the medieval Islamic precepts to cope with the challenges which were raised for Muslims by western civilization. Chiragh Ali was a supporter of the ideas of Sir Syed to separate the religious precepts of Islam from its socio-political systems. He declared that Islam is a religion, and it is not necessary that it introduce a social system. Per him, religion never dealt in detail with the general rules of social and political systems. He was in favor to avoid a mix of spiritual and worldly interface because such a mix would become a barrier in the cultural development of the Muslims. The theory of Sir Syed

about Hadith criticism was later more elaborately developed by Maulvi Chiragh Ali. He also reinterpreted the religious stance about Slavery, Polygamy, Divorce, Holy wars, Jihad, and *Riba* and eliminated the confusion successfully by giving a set of rational arguments. Chiragh Ali was convinced that Islam is a misunderstood religion and neither orthodox Muslims nor western orientalis had understood the real teachings and spirit of Islam. He based his arguments purely on verses of the Holy Quran and their rational interpretations because he was not a follower of any *Fiqah*. He rejected both *Ijma* and *Qiyas* as sources of *Sharia*. He only considered the Holy Quran and Hadith as a source for *Sharia* (Ali, 1910). It is a challenging task to comprehend all ideas of *Chiragh Ali*. No doubt his position in the promotion of modernist Muslim thoughts is very strong and his rational arguments are not easy to deny. In many cases, he had elaborated the ambiguous ideas of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in candid and rationally strong form. His major contribution was to identify the sources for *Sharia*. He accepted Quran and Hadith but rejected *Ijma* and *Qiyas*. His social and political ideas provided Muslims with foundations to justify their identity politics in the colonial period. No doubt the modern interpretations of Islam in the subcontinent are still confined in the sphere which had been drawn by *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan* and Maulvi Chiragh Ali. It is not possible to describe the evolution of modernist Islamic thoughts or the development of the modern political worldview of Muslims in the subcontinent by ignoring the rationalism of Chiragh Ali.

Critique on the Maulvi Chiragh Ali's Rationalism:

Many Muslim modernist scholars and reformers tried to bridge the gap between traditional religious thinking and modern rational discourses which were introduced by the British. One such modernist was Maulvi Chiragh Ali. The writings of Maulvi Chiragh Ali are available in English and Urdu translation to evaluate and analyze his contribution to the development of modernist thinking among Muslims. His writings were in Persian, Urdu, Arabic, and English language. The original manuscripts are not available. Only the English and Urdu translations are available and his translated works in both languages gave a little bit different picture of his political worldview. It is due to lacking Urdu in the terminology of modern discourses (Khan, 1918).

Maulvi Chiragh Ali was a contemporary of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and an active partner of his Aligarh movement. He was one of those Muslim scholars in India who was exposed to the literature of Islam in western languages. His impact on the religious ideas of Sir Syed is

undeniable. As compared to Sir Syed Ahmad Khan he was more radical in his religious speculation, and he exercised spiritual freedom in his ideas. He was born in 1844 and died in 1895. His father Muhammad Baksh died when Chiragh Ali was twelve years old. He was educated under the guidance of his mother at home. He never received any formal education from any school, college, or Madrasah. He himself acquired knowledge of many languages like Urdu, Persian, Arabic, English, French, Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. He was an expert on modern Quranic studies which were made in the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe (Mohomed, 2015).

He started his career from the job as '*Munshi*' in *Gorakhpur*. After working for many years at many places and posts he transferred to Sitapur near Aligarh where he met Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. In 1876 he went to Aligarh on the invitation of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan to join him in his project of translation which was in process under the patronage of the state of *Hyderabad*. His first writing was '*Taliqat*' which was a reply to '*Tarik-i-Muhammadi*' written by *Imad Al-Din*. He also wrote for '*Mukhbir-i-Sadiq*' and '*Manshur-i-Muhammadi*'. He also started his contributions to '*Tehzib-ul-Akhlaq*' in 1873. Sir Syed was impressed by his writings and cited his writings many times in '*Khutbat*' in which Sir Syed adopted the interpretation of Chiragh Ali about the meaning of a term (Ali, 1910). In 1877, Chiragh Ali went to *Hyderabad* on the proposal of Sir Syed and occupied the post of Assistant Revenue Secretary. Afterward, he was promoted to the post of Revenue Secretary and then to Financial Secretary. As a worker, his honesty, dedication, commitment, dutifulness, and hard work were remarkable.

He had a great interest in acquiring deep religious knowledge. He collected rare materials from far and wide by sending men and money. He was not the follower of any *madhhab*. He also disliked sectarianism in Islam. He kept himself away from politics and he never joined a political party. His views about the interpretation of the Holy Quran, Hadith, Ijma, and *Qiyas* were rational, and he provided solid foundations for the development of arguments of Sir Syed about socio-political and religious circumstances of the Muslims of colonial India. Chiragh Ali helped Sir Syed to synthesize the dialect between the '*Dar-ul-Salam*' as thesis and '*Dar-ul-Harb*' as anti-thesis. He followed Sir Syed and declared that under British rule India was neither '*Dar-ul-Salam*' nor '*Dar-ul-Harb*'. Instead, it is simply British India, '*Dar-ul-Aman*' or '*Dar-ul-Dhimma*' because Muslims were living peacefully under the protection of British rulers in India. Sir Syed considered that the *Fatawa* of '*Dar-ul-Harb*' does not imply Jihad against British rulers in India because the British are not restricting the performance of religious duties of Muslims

(David, 2003). As per Chiragh Ali, these two fatwas have nothing to do with religious rebellion or Jihad because India has no Muslim law courts, the question is not to be raised and discussed at all (Belmekki, 2010). He alone single-handedly revolutionized the political worldview of Muslims in India. He decorated the Muslim community in the subcontinent with such a political worldview which opened new avenues for them towards a prosperous future (Khan, 1918).

Conclusion:

The British dominance in India exposed Muslims to new ideas of rationalism, liberalism, and representative democracy. Many Muslim thinkers were convinced to re-interpret the medieval Islamic precepts to cope with the challenges which were raised for Muslims by western civilization. Chiragh Ali was a supporter of the ideas of Sir Syed to separate the religious precepts of Islam from its socio-political systems. He declared that Islam is a religion, and it is not necessary that it introduce a social system. Per him, religion never dealt in detail with the general rules of social and political systems. He was in favor to avoid a mix of spiritual and worldly interface because such a mix would become a barrier in the cultural development of the Muslims. The theory of Sir Syed about Hadith criticism was later more elaborately developed by Maulvi Chiragh Ali. He also reinterpreted the religious stance about Slavery, Polygamy, Divorce, Holy wars, Jihad, and *Riba* and eliminated the confusion successfully by giving a set of rational arguments. Chiragh Ali was convinced that Islam is a misunderstood religion and neither orthodox Muslims nor western orientalis had understood the real teachings and spirit of Islam. He based his arguments purely on verses of the Holy Quran and their rational interpretations because he was not a follower of any *Fiqah*. He rejected both *Ijma* and *Qiyas* as sources of Sharia. He only considered the Holy Quran and Hadith as a source for Sharia. It is a challenging task to comprehend all ideas of Chiragh Ali. No doubt his position in the promotion of modernist Muslim thoughts is very strong and his rational arguments are not easy to deny. In many cases, he had elaborated the ambiguous ideas of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in candid and rationally strong form. His major contribution was to identify the sources for Sharia. He accepted Quran and Hadith but rejected *Ijma* and *Qiyas*. His social and political ideas provided Muslims with foundations to justify their identity politics in the colonial period. No doubt the modern interpretations of Islam in the subcontinent are still confined in the sphere which had been drawn by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Maulvi Chiragh Ali. It is not possible to describe the evolution of

modernist Islamic thoughts or the development of the modern political worldview of Muslims in the subcontinent by ignoring the services and ideas of Chiragh Ali.

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