

Review Article

S.A.A. Rizvi: Sufi and Scholar

An appreciation of his work on the occasion of his retirement from the faculty of the Australian National University

Dr. S.A.A. Rizvi, a fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, a former Head of the History Department of Jammu and Kashmir University, India, a Secretary of the History of the Freedom Movement Committee, Government of Uttar Pradesh, India, a Research Associate and later a Fellow in the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, a historian *par excellence* of Medieval and Modern Islam, has recently retired from the Australian National University, Canberra. He was a Reader in South Asian History in the Faculty of Asian Civilisation. Dr. Rizvi has an impressive and enviable record of publication and scholarly attainment. He is a leading authority on Indian, particularly Medieval, Islam. The late Professor A.L. Basham once wrote: "I believe that Dr. Rizvi has an unrivalled knowledge of the sources of medieval India." There is little controversy about this statement.

Dr. Rizvi was born in the historical city of Jaunpur, India in 1921. His ancestors came with the invading army of Nadir Shah from Iran to India in 1738 and settled down in Oudh (present Uttar Pradesh) and entered into the services of the Nawabs of Oudh. They must have done quite well under the Nawabs. In recognition of their services they were granted land around Lucknow, the capital of Oudh. Dr. Rizvi grew up in Jaunpur which is renowned for its pre-Mughal magnificent Islamic architecture and high cultural attainments. Jaunpur was once known as the Shiraz of India.

Dr. Rizvi received his tertiary education in the Mughal historical city of Agra, renowned for the Taj Mahal and other architectural wonders. He obtained his Masters, Ph.D. and D.Litt. degrees from Agra University. He started his teaching career as a lecturer in *Islamic Religious*

Movements in Aligarh Muslim University in 1949. Since then it has been a rich and rewarding career of teaching and scholarship. Even in his early career of teaching he must have impressed his colleagues and senior scholars. Dr. Zakir Hussain, the President of India, noticed his talent and picked him for the over all supervision and writing of the History of the Freedom Movement of Uttar Pradesh. Remembering Dr. Rizvi as a young scholar and teacher, Dr. Zakir Hussain, when a Vice-Chancellor in Aligarh Muslim University, paid his tribute in these words: "I came to look upon him as one of the most promising young academicians it was my privilege to be associated with as a Vice-Chancellor."

Since 1949 Dr. Rizvi's involvement in teaching, research and writing has been phenomenal. His works include some books in Medieval Indian History in the Hindi language (thirteen volumes) and source material of the *Freedom Struggle in Uttar Pradesh 1857-59* (eight volumes) again in Hindi. He has recently been judged among the ten best writers in Hindi.

Work in Australia

Dr. Rizvi came to Australia in the beginning of 1966 and till his retirement in December 1986 he had been relentlessly and continuously working on the subjects of Islam, Sufism and the intellectual history of Muslims in India and Iran. Even after his retirement his work has not stopped. After his magnum opus, *A Socio-Intellectual History of the Isna Ashari Shi'is in India* (2 volumes 1986), he is now working on *Islamic Proselytization in India* and *Aurangzeb Alamgir: A Reappraisal*. Dr. Rizvi's lifetime research on the themes of Islamic history and religion has given rich dividends to his readers. In the last twelve years or so he has published a number of

significant works on Islam in South Asia and Iran. These works are distinctive, authoritative and readable. It is not easy to discuss all his works in this short review. I have selected some of his recent works which have been published since 1978. Not discussed is his *The Wonder that was India, Vol II*, just published as a sequel to Professor A.L. Basham's classic, *The Wonder That Was India*.

Rizvi's commitment to Islam, Sufism and Shi'ism is not only a scholarly pursuit. It is his conviction too. His personal beliefs and ideas are reflected in his writings. This is not to say that he loses objectivity in putting across his ideas to his readers. He remains clinical and scientific in his approach and treatment of his themes. Personally he leads a life of a Sufi, completely oblivious of his surroundings, engrossed in his religion, research and work.

On Shah Wali'ullah and his son Shah Abd'al Aziz

The intellectual and religious history of the Muslims in modern India could not be understood without understanding the life and times of Shah Wali'ullah. The death of Aurangzeb, the last great emperor of the Mughal empire, in 1707 saw the beginning of the end of the Mughal empire. The ascendancy of the British, particularly after the battle of Plassey in 1757 created a sense of complete frustration, pessimism and defeat among the Muslims of India. Shah Wali'ullah, who was born 21 February 1703, and died in 1762, five years after the battle of Plassey, saw and experienced the trauma of the decline and fall of the Muslim power in India. For many it was a baffling experience and the answer at that time was not easy to find. Shah Wali'ullah was a person of great vitality and scholarship. He was a Sufi and one who was concerned and worried about the downfall of Muslim power. He along with other Muslim scholars and intellectuals were convinced that the main reason for such a set back was the degeneration of Muslims,

moving away from Islam and not adhering to the true faith. They were trying to find the reasons for their decline in the realm of religion. Return to true Islam was the only solution for their salvation. Shah Wali'ullah was a member of four leading Sufi orders which mellowed his orthodoxy. His solution was to revitalise the Islamic Society; create a Muslim Society true to the spirit of the early Caliphate. But being a shrewd observer of the Indian political scene he was also aware that such dreams could not be translated into reality. In order to restore some resemblance of authority to Muslim power in India and to counter the rise of Maratha power, he invited Ahmad Shah Abdali to rescue Delhi and enforce Islamic law in India — with disastrous results.

Shah Wali'ullah's life long mission was to bridge the gap between the Muslim groups. A solution had to be found that was both Islamic as well as Indian. To find answers to all these problems he started to preach, write and enter into dialogue with other scholars and Sufis. In the course of these activities he produced a large number of very significant works. Dr. Rizvi has cited 41 books written by Shah Wali'ullah and innumerable letters written to his disciples and friends all over India on matters of religion, Sufism and the state of Islam in India. After his death his work was carried on by his three sons. Shah Abd'al Aziz (1746-1824), his more illustrious son, saw further erosion of Muslim culture and traditions in India. The debate over whether in India the British role was a *dar ul Islam* (An abode of Islam) or *dar ul harb* (An abode of War) took a more intensive turn. The Muslims were divided in their views about modernity and orthodoxy. The times of Shah Abd'al Aziz saw Muslim power and social norms going through crisis after crisis. The defeat and death of the last great Muslim military leader, Tipu Sultan in Seringapatam (1799), increased activities of Christian missionaries, the fear of losing the Islamic Educational

system and Islamic (*Shariah*) courts were matters of great concern to Muslims. Shah Abd'al Aziz issued a *fatwa* (decree) in 1803 proclaiming India to be a *dar ul harb*, the land of enemy. As British power increased and solidified, the Ulema agreed more and more with Shah Abd'al Aziz.

However, another group of liberal Islamic leaders and intellectuals were willing to accept western education and ideas. This group particularly became more influential after the rebellion of 1857 under the leadership of Sayyid Ahmad Khan.

Dr. Rizvi's *Shah Wali'ullah and His Times* and *Shah Abd'al Aziz: Puritanism, Sectarian Polemics and Jihad* are studies of great distinction of the intellectual and religious history of Indian Muslims in the 18th and early 19th Centuries: the period which determined the intellectual and political future and attitude of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. India saw the emergence of an alien political power, and also encountered the challenges of new ideas and thoughts from the west — including evangelical Christianity. Indian society, both Hindu and Muslim, felt the pressure of this challenge but reacted differently. The Muslims particularly were going through a psychological trauma because of political and religious crises in their society. Not only India, but the whole Islamic world was feeling the pressure of "advancing Christianity" and the helplessness of Islamic political power to check this advance. Abdal Wahab (1703-1787), a contemporary of Shah Wali'ullah was another example.

Dr. Rizvi has given an exhaustive, authentic and balanced account of this time in these books. Not only the personalities but the events and issues of the time have been analysed with great depth of understanding. He has captured the mood of the time in these books. Shah Abd'al Aziz's controversial book *Tuhfa-i Ithna Ashariyya*, has also been discussed exhaustively in Chapter V and Rizvi gives the Shii refutation of it in the following chapter. These two books will remain for

some time the most authentic and rich source of the period and will remain valuable in understanding the crisis, conflict and ideals of Muslim society of India of that time. Its exhaustive bibliography and indexes would be of further help for future scholars working on the same period.

On Sufism

Rizvi's earlier book *A History of Sufism in India Vol I*, 1978 and a second volume published in 1983 will probably remain a standard source book on Sufism in India for some time. Though there are a number of significant books on Indian Sufism, including Annemarie Schimmel's *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Rizvi's work is exhaustive and its encyclopaedic nature makes it indeed separate from other works.

The first volume takes the reader up to 1600 AD as Rizvi traces the history of early Sufism in India and its impact on Indian society. *Chisti, Suharwardi* and *Firdausi Silsilas* (orders) have been discussed in great depth and the interaction of Hindu mystical tradition with that of Islamic ideas is narrated and analysed with understanding and care. The second volume takes the discussion further and includes *Shattari, Naqshbandi* and further analysis of *Chisti* orders. There are chapters on the "Sufi conception of Kingship and Government" and "the Sufi Response to Hinduism." Though some chapters seem unusually long, they do not hamper the narration of the theme. Sufism is a complex subject and controversy about some views and conclusions will remain. What makes the work unique among the books on similar subjects is its comprehensive nature, meticulous research based on primary sources of Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Hindi and a careful presentation of facts. The book has made a significant contribution to an understanding of the interaction of Hindu and Muslim communities of Sufi preaching.

On Iran

A book of topical interest and importance is his *Iran: Royalty, Religion and Revolutions*. The book was published in 1980, soon after Iran's Islamic revolution. Iran is the only country where Shiism is a State religion, and this gives a new dimension to its politics and society. In the Ithna (or Isna) Ashari Shi'i Islam, the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, plays an important part. His death and the tragedy of Karbala is ever present in the minds of Shi'i Muslims. To emulate his example, to sacrifice life for the right cause against all odds, to establish a just Islamic society are the ideals of a Shi'i Muslim. The twelfth Imam, who is in occultation, will return and redeem the oppressed from their miseries. In the absence of the *Imam*, the *mujtahid* is the guide and spiritual leader of the Muslim community. The temporal ruler of the Shi'i community must submit to the authoritative guidance of a *mujtahid*. The *mujtahid* is usually chosen for his learning, piety and unblemished character — sometimes known as *mujtahid masum* a term that signifies "a man pure in manners who has acquired all the sciences to such a perfect degree that he can respond immediately and without prompting to all questions that are posed to him on religion and civil law." (Quoted from *Voyages de Monsieur Le Chevalier Chardin en Perse*, Vol. II (Amsterdam 1711) pp. 206-8, in Nikkie R. Keddie, *Scholars, Saints and Sufis*, 1972 p.222). Thus the relation between the Ulema, the mosque and the bazaar is very important in Iranian Society. Rizvi has unravelled in this book all the complexities of Shi'i Islam and Iranian society in a lucid and interesting way. He has tried to explain the reasons for the Islamic revolution in Iran, highlighting its indigenous roots. It was a revolution embedded in the Islamic ethos, values, and tradition — a total rejection of Western ideas of revolution. A revolution for *mustad'fin* (the weak and oppressed) which has its roots in the Qur'an was the

ideal of Imam Khomeini. A verse in the Qur'an says:

How should ye not fight for the cause of Allah and of the feeble (*mustad'afin*) among men and of the women and the children who are crying: Our Lord! Bring us forth from out this town of which people are oppressors! Oh, give us from thy presence some protecting friends! Oh, give us from thy presence some defender!
Qur'an IV: 75

It was a revolution to protect Iranians from the oppression of the Shah and his SAVAK. To be sure, the revolution became sour because of Iraq's attack on Iran. The changes which were promised did not eventuate because of war. But that is another story!!

Dr. Rizvi's book on *Iran: Royalty, Religion and Revolution* will be of immense help to the students of modern Iran to understand its religion, its revolution, the role of Ulema, the mosque and the bazaar. This reader would like to have seen some of his sections elaborated a bit further. A section "Modern Leadership" stimulates the curiosity of the reader but there is little beyond a brief discussion of Ali Shariati. The book nonetheless remains extremely useful for an understanding of Iran's history and the roots of the revolution and its impact on Islamic as well as other Third World Countries.

On the Isna Ashari Shi'is in India

Dr. Rizvi's commitment to Islam, Sufism and Shiism is also reflected in his works. His magnum opus, *A Socio-Intellectual History of the Isna Ashari Shi'is in India* in two volumes (1986) is a significant example of this. The book is a labour of love and devotion and a commitment to serious scholarship. Based on primary Arabic, Persian and Urdu sources, and a critical appraisal of previous works, the book gives an in-depth picture of Isna Ashari Shi'is in India. Dr. Rizvi's Shi'i background and his commitment to its causes have not coloured his scholarship. It remains an objective study of the subject.

It is difficult to say exactly when the Shi'i Muslims came to India. There is some evidence of Zaydiyyas and Ismailiyyas settlements in Sind, Gujarat and Delhi as early as ninth or tenth centuries A.D. The Isna Ashari Shi'is seem to have migrated to India in and about the late thirteenth and the fourteenth Centuries A.D.

Dr. Rizvi devotes a long chapter to tracing the history and origin of early Shi'ism. Not all the information is new, and a shorter version of the chapter would have been appropriate. But for a person being introduced to the subject this is quite informative. The next two chapters deal with "Shi'ism in Northern India" and "Shi'ism in the Deccan" (south), and a long chapter on the work and contribution of Shi'i intellectual Qazi Nuru'llah Shustari, who migrated to India from Iran in 1587, during the reign of great Mughal emperor Akbar (1542-1605). He was introduced to the emperor and was appointed the chief Qazi (Judge) of Lahore. He was a scholar of some vigour and wrote a number of books on Islamic religion and traditions. He was an expert in the traditional sciences (*naqli maqal*) and, as Dr. Rizvi has rightly commented, he was in fact an expert in both *manqul* (traditional) and *maqul* (the rational) sciences. He also wrote on mathematics, grammar, rhetoric and theories of poetic style. This sketch is a help to an understanding of the intellectual and religious discourses of the time between Shi'is and Sunnis in India. His Shi'i bias was discovered in the time of the emperor Jahangir (1605-1627) and his enemies flogged him to death in 1610.

The second volume, which expands on the themes of the first and takes us to nineteenth century, gives us further insight into the growth of Shi'is ideas and thoughts. "Shi'is contributions to philosophy, science and literature in India" have found a comprehensive and lucid treatment. Shi'is response to modernism in India is also a subject of considerable interest. Names like Ameer Ali, Karamat Ali and Maulana Siraj Hussain are the

household names of educated Muslim families in India. In the field of intellectual awakening and acceptance of modern ideas the contributions of Shi'is is great and this has very aptly been dealt with in his chapter, "The Shi'is and Modernism".

For an understanding of the growth of Shi'ism and the contribution of Shi'is in the intellectual life of India, Dr. Rizvi's book will remain indispensable to the students of Islam and Shi'ism for some time.

In this brief review of Dr. Rizvi's work, I have confined myself to his writings since 1978. His latest work *The Wonder that was India, Vol II* was not available to me. Neither has it been possible to discuss his significant works which form part of *The Cambridge History of Islam Vol II, The Cultural History of India* (Oxford), and his close to 50 journal articles on Islamic history, culture and religion which have been published in the last twenty years or so.

Dr. Rizvi is one of those rare individuals whose life is devoted to scholarship and learning without caring for fame and wealth. (The royalty and profit of most of his books go to various charitable institutions and orphanages of India.) He leads the life of a Sufi, and though retired, he still works untiringly, and helps his former students in their research and teachings.

Selected recent works of S.A.A. Rizvi discussed in this review:

A History of Sufism in India Vol I, Delhi, 1978.

A History of Sufism in India Vol II, Delhi, 1983.

Shah Wali Ullah and His Times, Canberra: Ma'rifat Publishing House, 1980.

Shah Abd'al Aziz: Puritanism, Sectarian Polemics and Jihad, Canberra: Ma'rifat Publishing House, 1982.

Iran: Royalty, Religion and Revolution, Canberra: Ma'rifat Publishing House, 1980.

A Socio-Intellectual History of the Isna Ashari Shiis in India, Vol I & II, Canberra: Ma'rifat Publishing House, 1986.

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