



# **The Socio-educational Reformatory Contribution of Muslim Scholars ('Ulama and Sufis) in Medieval Indian Subcontinent: A study of some prominent Scholars**

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## **Abstract**

*Every society despite its foundational fervour organizes itself on some normative, ethico-philosophical, devotional or transcendental phrases etc of which the folk or intellectual personages like scholars reflect its pattern. Similarly while exploring the medieval society in subcontinent manifests same character in wholistic essence. However the Muslim scholars from the very inception of Muslim state distinguished themselves entirely from the previous starta beyond the respective expectations and narratives. The Ulama in various domains excelled utmost in pristal and efficient way to cater the diverse and contemporary needs or challenges. To analyse the muslim intellectual contribution in terms of social efficacy and political acumen, we need to explore the educational perspectives in chronological and analytical way. The theo-centric educational setup designed in the light of its teachings presented the civilized outlook of the scripture of knowledge both of religious and non-religious sciences. This sacred system seems to have developed around the learned men to whom disciples thronged to acquire the knowledge irrespective of denominations. The progress of learning, expansion and consolidation of the central authority, cultural influences as those of Muslim mystics (sufis) and the employment of skilled men in the royal professional life paved the way for the rise of downtrodden people to climax in the society.*

**Key Words :** Socialization, 'Ulama, intellectual contribution, social efficacy and political acumen, theo-centric approach.

## **1. Introduction**

To understand the role of scholars ('Ulama and Mystics) in the educational and at societal level during the early medieval period we have to recognize and consider many things. The first thing that must be duly recognized is the



social setup before the Muslim advancement in the subcontinent, that too with its foundation on vices in every domain especially the social demoralization in the form of :

1. Caste system.
2. The Brahmanian and its privileged position.
3. The idea of physical Contamination.

Besides the above mentioned circumstances, there were many other evils that were vogue in the society at individual level as well as at the collective level. The native folk had no idea to deal with these alarming issues, however the divine mercy came to their rescue in the form of Muslim arrival to the scene. The Muslims response to these social issues was dynamic and multifaceted.

The idea or the concept of social equality was practised in letter and spirit as directed by the scriptural injections (Qur'an and Prophetic Traditions) in the religious thought of Muslim rationale. To this replacement of social order by Muslims has been reflected by the scholars like Prof Khaliq Ahmad Nizami about the success of Muslim in place of early traditions as:

“The idea of social oneness which was deeply embedded in the religious thought of Mussalmans, was a revolutionary force...”<sup>1</sup>

The idea of equality preached by Muslim preachers ('Ulama and Mystics) and the rejection of pseudo-myths like the “Idea of superior birth or limited salvation etc changed the whole bedrock on which the entire social fabric of the medieval India stood. These wrong notions were replaced by the universally oriented concepts like equality, moderation, mutual respect and piety as the criterion as commanded by the holy scripture. The removal of disabilities and discrimination yielded new place to a new social order with uniformity in wholistic perspective. The official hierarchy or the governing class permitted no distinctive feature in the social or legal sphere. This shift from caste orientation to the cosmopolitanism marks the distinctive and the remarkable feature of pluralistic or heterogeneous society that cuts the line of social demarcation and the symbolic presentation of a new social order.

Regarding the educational paradigm in the medieval times it had dynamic character from its very basis. The educational system during those days reflected the mark of prestige and point of reference in the civilized society as the intellectuals on the part of governing class and the scholars ('Ulama and Mystics ) left no stone unturned to foster this sacred system as against the Monopoly of particular class of Hindu's (Brahmans) in comparison to other class. This privileged monopoly with its access from few to masses by Muslims changed the discourse for the all times in the subcontinent. The Theo-centric essence and approach towards education designed on the lines of scripture in conformity with the material necessities of people appears to have been emphasized. These divine sanctions and role determining norms towards education created conducive environment at imperial as well as at private level. The interaction between the educated class of Muslims and the people of conquered lands enhanced the accumulation or the blend of religious sciences with the non-religious (secular or material) sciences resulting in



the pure and the original contributions in research and enquiry. This educational system developed on the pattern of *Bayt-ul-Hikmah* of Baghdad and *Dar-ul-Hikmah* of Cairo during 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. The rulers at Gaznavid state especially Mahmud (d.1030) built educational centres, Grand Masajids (Mosques) and Madrasas throughout the nuke and corner of his empire, that manifests his virtue of patronage to the process of learning and enlightenment. Mahmud was accompanied innately by the scholars, literary and men of aesthetic taste like Firdausi, ‘Unsuri, ‘Asjadi and Farkhi.<sup>2</sup>

The scholars accompanied him on most occasions especially at his court and on the occasion of expeditions too. As ‘Usjudi comments about him on his conquest to somnath temple as:

*Taa Shah-i-Khurdah baen Safr e Somnath Krd*

*Kirdar-e-Khuwaish Raa ‘Im M‘ujazat Kard*<sup>3</sup>

These lines about the Mahmud recall his patronage to the learning as well as the learned men, as his court was rendezvous of scholars from all parts of the world.

To create learning situation and literary activity or to curb the malice of ignorance, Mahmud established the university at Ghazna. This university/Madrasah/college for higher education contained a vast collection of valuable books on all branches of knowledge and in various languages. This patronage maintained continuity after him through his successors and particular attention was given to the diffusion of learning, placing its benefits within the easy reach of the general public by establishing institutions in the several cities of his large dominion.<sup>4</sup>

Besides modern scholars like Narender.Nath.Law, and early historians like Abu Said Gardezi writes in his magnum opus as:

“ The sultan ordered the construction of Mosques and Madrasas for catering to the educational and religious needs of the people in Indian dominions...”<sup>5</sup>

The famous syllabus laid down at Madrasa Nizamiyyah Baghdad by scholars like Imam Gazali and Nizam ul Mulk Tusi and its due incorporation and transportation to Persian speaking lands of the Islamic empire enhanced the Lahore to become a centre of learning and culture.<sup>6</sup>

This system seems to have been adopted by the neighbouring countries as the transfer of capital from Ghazna to Lahore marks the definite stage at which the Muslim learning was transplanted to the Indian soil. The literary predilections of the sultans of Ghazna and the application of resources to the state promotion of learning benefitted Lahore where scholars, scientists and ‘Ulama migrated to foster creativity. These whole citations conclude the fact that the Teachers, scholars and men of excellence got attracted to serve the educational institutions ( Madrasas, Khanqahs and Masajids etc ) for providing higher education.

## 2. Ula‘ma and Rulers

Rulers like Sultan Qutb ud din Aibak received religious education and training from the distinguished scholars and towering men prominent among them was noted jurist of Nishapur Qazi Fakhr ud din Kufi also known as Abu



Hanifa Sani. The Qazi trained the Aibak in Quran and his mastery over the art of recitation of the Quran made him famous and was entitled as *Quran Khawn*.<sup>7</sup>

Aaibak's respect for the Laws of the Shariah has been observed by noted scholar shaikh sadr ud din Hasan Nizami as:

*"Hast buland barr ahyaa' e M'alim shariat wa I'laayai' I'laam e Sunnat Maqsood  
Wa Mawquf Daasht"*<sup>8</sup>

His patronage to scholars of all fields like Jurisprudence, Quran, Tasawwuf etc extended generously. Amongst the scholars who basked in the sunshine of his royal favours were Shaikh sadr ud din Hasan Nizami and Maulana Baha' ud din Ushi. Throughout the sermons of distinguished scholars like shaikh shihab ud din suhrawardi, Mu'in ud din chisti, shaikh 'Audud din Kirmani and Qazi Hamid ud din Nagauri had filled the entire atmosphere with mystical ideas and has constructed their specified hospices there.<sup>9</sup>

These scholars had close affiliation with the rulers and were accompanied by them wherever they went and heard their sermons regularly. The 'Ulema delivered daily sermons during the month of Ramadhan was attended by the mystics, preachers, saints, noble men, grantees etc participated after Friday prayers. Prof Nizami quotes as :

*Roz e Jum'ah b'ad Nimaz Akaabir wa Ashraaf o Mashaaikh ba Sultan Halqah Kardah Nashtand...*<sup>10</sup>

Due to the religious devotion and dedication of the rulers, the man like Shaikh Nizam ud din Auliya couldn't help praising the ruler of his regularity in offering prayers. The Shaikh praised out only two medieval Monarchs for their religiousity views- Iltutmish and Balban, both of whom had succeeded in winning the sympathies of the spiritual and religious class. The rulers in turn showed due respect to the scholars like Qazi sharif ud din, Maulana siraj ud din sijzi, Maulana Najm ud din Damshiqi, Maulana Burhan ud din al Balkhi, shaikh Farid ud din Mas'ud Ganjshakar of Ajodhan etc.

### 3. The 'Ulama in the Muslim society

The 'Ulama in the medieval period constituted a very strategic and influential position in the Muslim society, they were held in high esteem on account of their religious learning. The 'Ulama were generally categorized into following types:

- (a) 'Ulama-i-Aakhirat or 'Ulama-i-Rabbani.
- (b) 'Ulama-i-Duniya or 'Ulama-i-suu'.

This categorization was based upon the difference of their outlook and attitude towards worldly affairs or their divine sensation. The 'Ulama-i-Aakhirat led the abstemious and pious life devoted to the religious learning and preferred to pass their days in disseminating knowledge and strive for the moral upliftment of their society. As against 'Ulama-i-duniya, 'Ulama-i-Rabbani were regarded and revered by common masses. The other category of



‘Ulama were held responsible for all the vices and misfortunes in the Muslim community and were regarded as ‘Ulama-i-suu’. That is why many scholars opine about them as :

“ There are no worse than ‘Ulama-i- duniya...”

And shaikh ahmad sirhindi in his letters ( Maktubat-i-Imam Rubbani ) has criticized them heavily and held them responsible for the degeneration of Muslim society as well.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. Role of ‘Ulama

The heavy influx of scholars as a result of Mongol invasion from the neighbouring countries persuaded the rulers to extend their patronage and maintain grants. These consolidatory efforts catered to the educational requisites and needs of the expanding population by founding Madrasas like *Madrasa-i-Mu’izzi*, *Madrasa-i-Nassiria* after the deceased crown prince Nasir ud din Mahmud. Rich endowments were made for its maintenance and other prominent ones as mentioned by the medieval historians in their historical works.<sup>12</sup>

After accomplishing the task of formal education, these ‘Ulama dedicated themselves to teaching in Mosque or in thatched roof of their respective houses. These scholars refused to draw themselves into the vortex of politics. The prominent ‘Ulama of the medieval Indian subcontinent can be summarised as:

##### 4.1 Maulana Razi-u’d-din Hasan Saghani ( d.650 A.H )

One of the early and towering intellectual figures of the medieval period. His excellence in Islamic scholarship can be depicted from the fact that Sultan Qutub ud din Aibak offered him the Justiceship ( Quza’ ) of Lahore but he preferred to pursue for higher education at Central Asia and Arabian peninsula. His contribution can be viewed from his fabulous literary work on Prophetic Traditions for the Abbassid Caliph Mustansir Billah “ Mashariq al Anwar ” that Caliph sent him as an ambassador to the Razia Sultana. His mastery over the lexicography, jurisprudence, Prophetic Traditions and all the rational or revealed sciences is well established. Renowned Scholar of the modern Islamic world, Allamah ‘Abdul Hayy reveals about him as :

“ *Kaanah Faqihann Muhaddithan Lughviyyan za Masharikati Taamati fi Jamee’ ul ‘Ulum...* ”<sup>13</sup>

*He was jurist, traditionalist, lexicon and above all had the complete mastery over all the sciences...*

Similarly renowned scholar and Mystic Shaikh Nizam ud din Aauliya mentions him as :

“ *Darr ayyam darr hazrat dehli ‘ulama-i- kubbar buwand baa hama ( Saghani ) dar ‘uloom e masaawi’ buwad ama darr ‘Ilm e Hadith azz hama mumtaaz o haitech kas muqaabil o nabud...* ”

( In those days Delhi had glamorous scholars and in sciences they stood between Saghani but in the science of Hadith Saghani was above all and had no parallel)<sup>14</sup>

Also in another place Saghani is reported to have said:

“ *Agar hadith e barad mushkil shuday Rasool (S.A.W) raa darr khwaab deedai wa sahih karday...* ”

whenever saghani came across any controversial *Hadis* he saw the Prophet (S.A.W) his dream and corrected the *Hadis* from Him...”<sup>15</sup>



His prestige and impact on the socio-educational thought can be depicted from the fact that it was his preference to the profession of learning and teaching in comparison to state service because Saghani equated this noble profession with the worship.

#### 4.2 Khwaja Mu‘in ud din Chisti ( d.633 )<sup>16</sup>

Prominent mystical figure and founder of *Chisti* order in subcontinent. It was his moral and spiritual qualities that attracted thousands of people to his fold and many eminent mystics benefitted from his company. His determination to work at Ajmer to work out the principles of Islamic mysticism at a place of such political and religious importance shows his great confidence. His thought according to Amir khurd (disciple of Nizam ud din Auliya) laments huge records of his religious and social ideology that reveal him as the man of wide sympathies, catholic views and deep humanism. The entire structure of his thought stood on the bedrock of the following three principles:

##### (1) Views on the Universe:

Regarding the nature of universe, Shaikh said:

*“chuu maa azz poast biruu aamad yam wa nigah kard yam aashiq o ma’shuq wa ‘ishq yaki deedam y’ani darr ‘aalam e tawhid hamma yaksit...”*

*When we transcended the externals and looked around, we found the lover, the beloved and the love itself to be one, I, e in the sphere of oneness all is one...*<sup>17</sup>

To the above cited quotation, renowned historian Prof. K.A. Nizami analyses as:

“ This pantheistic approach brought Chisti very close to the treasures of ancient Hindu religious thought, particularly the Upanishads and created an atmosphere conducive for the exchange of ideas at the higher level.”<sup>18</sup>

##### (2) Defining the highest form of Devotion to God (ta‘at) :

Regarding the Principle of Devotion, Chisti said:

*“ Darr mandgaan ra faryaad raseedan wa hajat bay chaar gaan rawa kardan wa kar salgan ra si’r karda neiran..”*

*To redress the misery of those in distress; to fulfill the needs of helpless and to feed the hungry...*<sup>19</sup>

Thus according to him religion is not merely raised above rituals and ecclesiastical formalities but the ‘service of humanity’ is made its *raison d’être*.

##### (3) Describing qualities which endear a man to God: Chisti said to this principle as,

*“Awwal sakhawati chuu sakhawat daryaa..*

*Dwum shafqati chuu shafqat aafatb.*



*Swum tawaz'ee chuu tawaz'a zamin..."*

First river like generosity, second sun like affection and third earth like hospitality....<sup>20</sup>

This mystic morality saved human sympathy from running into narrow grooves and struck at the very root of parochialism, casteism and religious exclusiveness. These three principles reveal Chisti's attitude towards some of the basic problems of religion and morality, supplied the motive power to his organization. However Chisti is believed and remembered by the time of his pious and pristine life, preaching, of his rejuvenating efforts and above all his spiritual highness, propagation of Islam at mass level and human welfare.<sup>21</sup>

Regarding his death, it is said that he had written on his forehead following words:

*"Habib Allah I maata fi hubb u Allah "*

*The lover of the Allah died on the love of Allah.*<sup>22</sup>

#### 4.3 Shaikh 'Ali bin Usman al Hujwiri (d. 1072 C.E)

Revered as generous was the famous mystic of early sultanate period. He commanded equally both on intrinsic as well as on extrinsic sciences. He is known for his preaching sermons in lahore touching the hearts, due to his dedication and sincerity it is said:

*"Hazaar mardam darr majlis w'az dey mushraf ba Islam shud nad.."*

*That thousands of men accepted Islam due to his sermons in his congregation.*

He is known for the contribution in mysticism due to two things:

- (1) Refutation of those heresies that had been incorporated in tasawwuf like the concepts preached by Mansur Hallaj and Abu sulaiman :

*"Hujwiri said, I don't know what Mansur and Abu Sulayman did and said, but the one who draws himself against the monotheism (Tawhid) yields nothing. And when the religion (Din, which is fundamental) is not strong, then the Mysticism (Tasawwuf, which is part of din) how can it be beneficial to such..."*<sup>23</sup>

- (2) The foremost thing about Al Hujwiri can be assessed from his magnum opus titled as

*"Kashful Mahjub or Revelation of the Mystery. Oldest treatise on mysticism in subcontinent. This book although written in persian guides the seeker to the spiritual upliftment through different sufi stations. Besides explains true meaning or path of sufism, mystical allegories, hints love of Allah, perception of reality by intellect, proximity of soul (Nafs), clarifying doctrines, sayings and the practical aspects of mysticism. The book end with the rules concerning audition (Sama')."*<sup>24</sup>

#### 5. Impact of reform on subcontinent

To sum up with the impact of process of socio-educational reform on the part of various elements and entities we can clearly propound as :



1. Better relations fostered between the subjects and the governing body.
2. Continuity and excellence in projecting Classical legacy to its higher levels.
3. Cultural interaction and mutual or common heritage flourished.
4. Mystical school of thought ensured the process of islamization within the pagan majority.
5. Individual as well as the collective life of people got transformed through the efforts of devoted and dedicated preachers.
6. Social reformation resulted into the reduction of vices.
7. Human welfare, simple living and higher ideals concluded to the arena.
8. Educational excellence undermined the ignorance as had been in the forefront.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude with the words of worthy historian, *Zai' ud din Barni* about the reign of Sultan 'Alauddin he says as: The world got enlightened through the pious souls like Shaikh ul Islam Nizam ud din Auliya, Shaikh ul Islam 'Alauddin, Shaikh ul Islam Rukn ud din and others etc... Through them thousands of sinners repented, thousands adulterers turned towards piety and goodness. Through these (Auliya's) the people attained and reached to truthfulness, adopted good moral, meditation and turned into worthy..."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Muhaddis, ‘Abdul Haq Dehlavi, *Akhbar al- Akhyar*, tr. Ml. Subhan Mahmud & Ml. Muhammad Fazl, Akbar Book Sellers, Lahore, Pakistan, 2004, pp. 32-33.

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 152.

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