

MAULANA 'ABD AL-BARI FARANGI MAHALLI: SCHOLAR AND POLITICAL ACTIVIST

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The Farangi Mahalli school of traditionalist Sunni '*Ulama*' flourished in eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth century India. They obtained their sobriquet from the spacious mansion called 'Farangi Mahall' in Lucknow.¹

Fluent in classical Persian and Arabic, and educated in a broad spectrum, of the Islamic disciplines, the scholars associated with Farangi Mahall, besides being familiar with the heritage of medieval philosophy and rationalism, had a leaning towards *Sufism*. Consequently, the traditional demarcations between an '*Alim*' and a *Sufi* was blurred in this case.²

During their heyday in the Indian Subcontinent, these scholarly and largely apolitical Farangi Mahallis³ educated Sunnis and Shi'ahs for careers in religion and in education and as advisers to local rulers. Muslim princes patronized the Farangi Mahallis because they placed great emphasis on cultural attainments among which religious learning held a prominent place. In its zenith, the Pathan kingdom of Rohilkhand under Hafiz al-Mulk, supported five thousand '*ulama*'. The Shi'ah *Nawwab* of Lucknow not only patronized the Farangi Mahallis but also required immigrant Shi'ahs to present a certificate from the Farangi Mahallis before receiving court patronage.⁴

Large numbers of devout Muslims flocked from various parts of India and overseas to study with the Farangi Mahallis. Special dormitories were provided for out of town students at the Tila Mosque which could house upto seven hundred people. Since there were no classrooms, students studied in an '*alim*'s apartment. On conclusion of study with one '*alim*', a student would receive a *sanad* (certificate), listing books that had been covered to the tutor's satisfaction. The student could then proceed to study with other tutors or return home.⁵

The Farangi Mahallis were not only highly qualified '*alims*', but also prominent mystics. Some of their best works were in spiritual philosophy and mysticism. *Pirs* (Spiritual guides) from various parts of India sent their sons to study with them. Their venerated role-model was Prophet Muhammad. Maulana 'Abd al-Bari provides insight into this Farangi Mahalli tradition in the introduction of his last book, a biography of a saint of Bansa:

To follow the Prophet is the way to come near to God . . . To follow the Prophet truly is this: to follow his habits, his behaviour, his manners, his instructions so that life of the Muslim becomes like the life of the Holy Prophet . . . This is called the true *Khilafat*, to lose one's identity in the being of the Prophet.⁶

The Farangi Mahallis revered a pantheon of saints including several of their ancestors, and they visited their tombs to offer prayers and thanks often.⁷

The primary and most lasting contribution of the Farangi Mahallis, however was their formulation and systematization of the famous *Nizamīyah* syllabus. Named after Mulla Nizam al-Din, who initially wrote it, the syllabus with improvements came to be subsequently known as *Dars-i Nizamīyah* or *Dars-i-Nizami*. This syllabus comprised Arabic and Persian; Islamic theology and jurisprudence, which entailed the study of the Quran, *Hadith* (Sayings of Prophet Muhammad) and *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence); and, the study of some rational sciences, like logic, arithmetic and medicine. With minor revisions, this syllabus, because of its scope and comprehensiveness, still forms the basis of traditional religious education in the madrasahs (Islamic schools) of South Asia.⁸

One of the most prominent and politically active Farangi Mahalli scholars was Maulana Qayam al-Din Muhammad 'Abd al-Bari. Through his ceaseless political activity, he, more than any other traditionalist 'alim, contributed towards the Islamic revivalism in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

A descendent of Mulla Nizam al-Din, the founder of the Farangi Mahall institution 'Abd al-Bari received his traditional Islamic education at Farangi Mahall and furthered his Islamic education in Istanbul and in the Hejaz.⁹ In 1908, at the age of thirty, he established the *Madrasah-i Nizamīyah* in Lucknow. A year later, he became involved in the Muslim agitation for separate electorates. In 1910, he became President of the newly founded *Majlis-i Mu'yyad al-Islam* (Association to Strengthen Islam), the immediate aim of which was to help the Ottoman Empire in her war against Russia.¹⁰

Concerned over the Balkan War in which non-Muslims were proceeding to carve up the Ottoman Empire, accompanied with the danger that the British would gain control over Islam's holiest shrines in Makkah and Madinah, he was a prime mover in a major Islamic Conference in Lucknow in December 1913 to discuss ways to protect Islam, the holy shrines and the *Ummah* (universal Islamic brotherhood) from European colonialism. An outcome of this conference was the establishment of the *Anjuman-i Khuddam-i Ka'abah* (Organization to Protect the Ka'abah) in Delhi of which he became President. However, due to harassment and imprisonment of the organization's office-bearers by the British Government in India, the organization was dissolved in 1916.¹¹

Maulana Bari also played a significant role in launching the post-World War I *Khilafat* Movement to protest the British attempts to carve up the Ottoman Empire and undermine the influence of the Turkish Sultan. In December 1918 he convened a conference under the auspices of the All-India Muslim League in which the leading 'Ulama' of India participated. He then

cultivated a friendly relationship with M.K. Gandhi and prodded him to get involved in the *Khilafat* Movement. In September 1919, he was elected leader of a radical group of 'Ulama' at the Lucknow All-India *Khilafat* Conference. At the conference, Maulana Bari produced a plan for the Central *Khilafat* Committee and followed it by dominating the Delhi *Khilafat* Conference of November 1919. He was elected President of a newly created organization of Indian 'Ulama', the *Jami'at-i 'Ulama-i Hind* (Association of India 'Ulama').¹²

The influence of the Farangi Mahallis waned with the entry of the more numerous and politically assertive Deobandis into the *Khilafat* Movement. Maulana Bari's importance decreased with the rise of the charismatic, learned and politically astute Maulana Abu al-Kalam Azad. Consequently, in 1921 and 1922 Maulana Bari and his traditionalist followers drifted away from the cutting edge of political agitation. Subsequently, the differences with the Deobandis became wider as a result of increasing communalism and accompanying violence.¹³

When Ibn Sa'ud and his army of puritanical Wahhabi warriors overran Makkah and Madinah in 1924, Maulana Bari formed yet another pan-Islamic organization called the *Anjuman-i Khuddam-i Haramayn* (Guardians of Islam's holiest shrines) and led peaceful demonstrations against the conquest of Islam's holiest cities. Around the same time he also resisted the growing Hindu revival that Gandhi had ushered in with his use of Hindu rhetoric and symbolism.¹⁴

Despite his political and educational commitments, Maulana Bari wrote about one hundred books. He founded the Madrasah-i Nizamiyyah, where he taught till his death; he executed his duties as a *pir* to a substantial following; he served on the board of management of the shrine of Mu'in al-Din Chishti at Ajmer and *Nadwat al-'Ulama'* seminary at Lucknow; and above all, he mobilized the 'Ulama' and established a number of influential Islamic organizations.¹⁵ Consequently, he has been considered as one of the most influential Muslim personalities in the Indian subcontinent.

NOTES

1. It has been noted by Francis Robinson that the family that came to be known as the "Farangi Mahallis" were supported by the Mughul Court from the time of Emperor Akbar who made a generous grant to a member of that family in 1559 A.D. Mullah Qutb al-Din, the great great grandson of Mulla Hafiz (who first got the grant from Akbar) retained close ties with the Mughul Court in Delhi and even helped Emperor Aurangzib collect material for his famous *Fatawa-i 'Alamgiri* (Aurangzib's Islamic edicts). When Qutb al-Din was killed and his library burnt by his enemies, Aurangzib compensated his sons - two of whom had served in his military campaigns against the Marhattas in the Deccan. One such grant by Aurangzib, was the Farangi Mahall mansion that a French indigo merchant had built (Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India, 1860-1900*, Princeton, 1982, pp. 29-30; Francis Robinson, *The Ulama of Farangi Mahall and their Adab, Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, ed. Barbara Daly Metcalf, Berkeley, California, 1984, p. 153.

2. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India, op. cit.* pp. 29-34; Aziz Ahmad *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan, 1857-1964*, London, 1967, pp. 103, 107, 113.
3. Until Maulana Bari energized them in the first quarter of the twentieth century to actively participate in political arena.
4. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India, op. cit.*, p. 30.
5. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India, op. cit.*, pp. 34, 94; Robinson, *The Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Their Adab, op. cit.*, p. 153.
6. 'Abd al-Bari, *Malfuz-i-Razzaqi*, pp. 2, 4, which is quoted in Robinson, *The Ulama of Farangi Mahall, op. cit.*, p. 165.
7. Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-156, 160-161; 164-170.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 31; Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism, op. cit.*, p. 113; Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-155.
9. Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims, 1860-1923*, London, 1974, p. 419.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 419-420; M. Naeem Qureshi, *The Ulama of British India and the Hijrat of 1920, Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1979, p. 47.
11. Pran Chopra, ed., *Role of the Indian Muslims in the Struggle for Freedom*, New Delhi, 1979, p. 92.
12. *Ibid.*, Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims, op. cit.*, p. 420, also see Robinson, *The Ulama of Farangi Mahall, op. cit.*, pp. 157-158.
13. Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims, op. cit.*, p. 420.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*