

THE REVIVALIST MOVEMENT OF IMAM SHAMIL —A BRILLIANT BUT FORGOTTEN CHAPTER OF ISLAMIC HISTORY—AN INTRODUCTION

Imam Shamil (commonly known as Sheikh Shamil in Turkey) was the leader of *Muridiyat*, a Naqshbandiya order¹ in the nineteenth century Daghestan. Born in the same year, when Tipu Sultan fell martyr in Mysore, he was destined to lead the movement for a quarter century (1834-1854) and wage Jihad against the Tsarist forces. A Russian General Valmeenov, while describing the heavy losses incurred in these encounters wrote:

“The Russian troops destroyed in fighting against Shamil, could have won the areas between Japan and Turkey for us.”²

The forces of Imam Shamil withheld the whole military might of the Tsarist Russia and the utter destruction of the Russian forces in the mountains of Daghestan resulted in the abandonment of the Russian plans to reach the warm waters. It seems strange that a few thousand, ill trained and ill equipped troops could force defeats after defeats to the Russian armies, several lacs in number. Nineteenth century was on the whole a dark period for the whole world of Islam. The British, the Russians, as well as the other European colonial powers were capturing one Muslim territory after another. The vast expanse of Muslim World from Dakar to Timor was in chains of slavery. And yet it was the same period when various revivalist movements rose to liberate the Muslim people. Abdul Qader of Algeria, Imam Bonjol of Indonesia, Sayyad Ahmed Shaheed of Muslim India, Mahdi and Osman Daqna of Sudan and Titu Mian of Bengal are a few of the brilliant names which appear in the annals of history. Imam Shamil was a chapter of the same story besmeared with blood of *mujahideen*.

Naqshbandiya Movement. Islam does not concern itself with mere theological and spiritual problems, it is a complete code of life. There is no diversity of matter and spirit in Islam. The Naqshbandi movement founded by Hazrat Muhammad Bahauddin al-Bukhari (717-791 A.H./

1317-1389 C.E.)³ aimed at the revival of the real spirit of Islam. The fall of Baghdad (1258 C.E.) and the subsequent defeatist mental outlook of seeking refuge in the *Khanqahs* had taken away the vigour and vitality out of the social fabric of Muslim society. Khwaja Naqshband stressed that the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) be followed and guidance be sought from that eternal light-house. The movement spread in far off corners of the Muslim World and had its great impact on the Central Asia, South, and South West Asia.

Imam Shamil belonged to the same movement, which is also known as *Muridist* movement. In 1813, the whole area of Daghestan was annexed by Russia and the Treaty of Gulistan between Persia and Russia gave legality to this annexation. *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* refers to it in these words, "The colonial policy of the Tsars brought about spontaneous uprisings by the mountaineers. At the beginning of 1830's an anti-colonial liberation movement sprang up among the mountaineers under the banner of Muridism, it was directed by Ghazi Muhammad (1828-32), Hamzat Bey (1832-34) and Shamil (1834-54) who proclaimed themselves as Imams of Daghestan and Chechen".⁴

Shamil's movement was inspired by the Naqshbandiyyas. The purity of heart attained by the various spiritual practices was not an aim in itself. It was a means to an end. It is for the same reason that we find that whereas the *Khanqahs* or the circles of Naqshbandiyyas emphasised on God's Consciousness and the purity of heart, they did not neglect the call of *Jihad*. The circles where various practices of *Zikar* were resorted to, were also the places, which acted as centres for the preparation for wars of liberation. There was no point attaining the spiritual height, when the bayonets of the Russians were narrowing their circle every day. It was for this very reason that they rose up from the seats of learning and spiritual training and jumped into the battlefield carrying arms against the Russians.

Since blood feuds and drinking were very common among the local population⁵ no effective resistance against external enemy could be built up till such things were put to an end. Thanks to the great energy and zest of the Imam and his predecessor Qazi Mulla, the society was purged of all these evils. Now the Imam turned his attention to the creation of a nucleus around which the movement could be built. His *naibs* or junior commanders were so capable and extraordinary men that they were able to muster the support of the whole of Daghestan for the Imam. Though never more than one hundred and twenty⁶, these were the people who had dedicated their lives for the cause. The Russians

with all their efforts could not capture a single *naib* alive. Once a Russian officer was given the highest gallantry award for capturing a *naib*, but later on it was found out that it was a mere hoax. Haji Murad one of the illustrious *naibs* was so much feared by the Russian troops that once a full battalion took to their heels when the *mujahideen* raised the slogans of 'Haji Murad, Haji Murad'. The Russian writers were much impressed by the heroic deeds of the *mujahideen* who fought against them. Leo Tolstoy⁷ who fought against the forces of Shamil, wrote a novel about the life of Haji Murad. Even Ruskin wrote poems and stories about them. The heroic deeds of these people are still sung in the villages of Daghestan and form a part of the folk lore of the area. Any traveller in that area would feel as if Shamil was still alive. People talk about him in their daily conversations. Wherever they meet, they mention of him. Iqbal noticed a similar attitude of the people of Deccan towards Tipu Sultan.⁸ The extra-ordinary love of the masses of Daghestan and Deccan towards Shamil and Tipu only depicts the truism of the words of Holy Quran which says:

'Don't call those who fall in the way of Allah as dead.

They are alive, however, you can't perceive.'

NOTES

1. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. IV, E.G. Brill, Leiden, 1934, p. 306.
2. Capt. Muhammad Hamid, *Imam Shamil*, Ferozsons, Lahore, 1974, p. 7.
3. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. III, op. cit., p. 841.
4. *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*, Macmillan, New York 1975, p. 71.
5. Hamid, op. cit., p. 15.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
7. See Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych and Haji Murad*, Oxford, 1935.
8. Shaikh Attaullah, (ed.) *Iqbal Nama*, Vol. I, p. 201.