

Fratricidal War within the Muslim World: Islam's Existential Crisis

- Nadeem Hasnain

Abstract

There have been a number of points of view or interpretations in Islam signifying internal divisions. By and large, these were of academic interest and did not touch the everyday life of Muslims. During the last 5-6 decades, the situation has changed radically. Now Islam is facing its gravest existential crisis since the Crusades. Crusades were led by Islam's external enemies; it is always easier to unite against a common threat from outside. Today the threat is from within. Muslims are Islam's biggest enemy. The conflict is no longer between Muslims and 'infidels'; devout Muslims and 'heretic' Muslims or even Sunnis and Shias. It has now come down to Sunnis versus Sunnis; Shias versus Shias or one Muslim against another Muslim."

Of all these divisions and 'fratricidal' tendencies the gravest one is between the radical (Salafi) Islam on the one hand and Sufis-Shias-Barelvis etc. on the other. This had affected the Muslims of virtually the entire world and resulting in bitter polemics and violence.

Key words: *Sufism, Salafi/Takfiri, Lived Islam*

(This short paper is based on the field research done in Central Uttar Pradesh/Awadh region as part of a larger research project).

Like the Hindu philosophy, there is also an inward dimension of Islam popularly known as *Sufism/Tasawwuf*, the Arabic word used for Islamic 'mysticism'. It includes doctrines, values, ritual practices, etc. that began during the earliest years of Islam, evolved and spread throughout the Muslim world and wherever Muslims lived. The overwhelming majority of the Sufis have been adherents of Sunni Islam. Though some people believe that some of the Sufi saints of India were the Shias practicing *Taqiyya* (willful concealment of one's identity for fear of loss of life or honour) during the Medieval/Muslim period, the Shias themselves usually do not visit the shrines of the Sufi saints. Here, the Sufi saint's reverence for Ali and Fatima (daughter and son-in-law of Muhammad) and their progeny and indifference towards the caliphs prompt them to think so. All Sufi *silsilah*/orders derive inspiration from Muhammad through Ali, with the only exception of the Naqshbandi order and its followers claim their origin from Muhammad through the first caliph Abu Bakr. Sufi saints are supposed to lead an ascetic life with minimal requirements of material wealth. Sufism in India has a history of over one thousand years. Of all the orders or *silsilah* of Sufism, the Chistiya order has been most popular. Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti of Ajmer and Nizamuddin Aulia of Delhi enjoy a pan-Indian popularity stretching to the entire South Asia while the landscape of whole of India is dotted with thousands of *mazaars/durgahs* of Sufi saints, some enjoying local, some regional popularity. This is largely due to what may be described as a case of 'syncretic mysticism.'

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There have been a number of points of view or interpretations in Islam signifying internal divisions. By and large, these were of academic interest and did not touch the everyday life of Muslims. During the last 5-6 decades, the situation has changed radically. Hasan Suroor (2016), in a ruthlessly frank observation, writes that “Islam is facing its gravest existential crisis since the Crusades. Crusades were led by Islam’s external enemies; it is always easier to unite against a common threat from outside. Today the threat is from within. Muslims are Islam’s biggest enemy. The conflict is no longer between Muslims and ‘infidels’; devout Muslims and ‘heretic’ Muslims or even Sunnis and Shias. It has now come down to Sunnis versus Sunnis; Shias versus Shias or one Muslim against another Muslim.”

Of all these divisions and ‘fratricidal’ tendencies the gravest one is between the radical (*Salafi*) Islam on the one hand and Sufis-Shias-Barelvis etc. on the other. This had affected the Muslims of virtually the entire world and resulting in bitter polemics and violence. Salafism or Wahabism is referred to by many as cult of *Ahle-Hadis* which is directly opposed to both. “The Salafis strongly condemn Sufi Islam as corrupt and destructive of all that Islam stands for: to visit Sufi mausoleums and to pray and invoke intercession (*Shafa’at*) is totally against Quran and Islamic teachings. Only Allah’s name could be invoked not even of the Prophet, let alone of any Sufi Saint” (AA Engineer, 2010). The supporters of Sufi Islam disagree with these views and argue that invoking the blessings of the Sufi Saints does not make him a deity or God. Moreover, millions of Hindus too regard Sufism as a great healer. Not going into the polemics the fact remains that Sufism and sufi saints have played great part in uniting the people and promoting national integration.

The Sufi Islam attained widespread popularity throughout the world and attracted many to Islam because of its message of love. As has been repeatedly said in the preceding pages the majority of local people embraced Islam attracted by Sufism. The entire Awadh region is dotted with a number of *mazars* of Sufi Saints, the most popular being Shah Meena in Lucknow, Waris Shah of Dewa Sharif, Makhdoom Shah’s durgah in Rudauli, Barabanki and Kachaucha Sharif in Faizabad. These are still centre’s of devotion to millions of people-Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and others. The annual *Urs* of these and other Sufi Saints attract large crowds of devotees. Many of the respondents are of the view that no amount of material wealth can buy this inner solace they get for the troubled souls. Since many Sufi Saints came from Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asian region they initially wrote in Persian but took to the local languages and dialects later. They wrote in Urdu, Awadhi, Khari Boli and elsewhere, in Marathi, Bengali etc. As Engineer (ibid) points out, the Sufis, through assimilation of local cultural symbols and rituals, made it easy for the local masses not only to flock to them but also embrace Islam which became much nearer to their way of life. A number of rituals around Sufi durgahs bear close resemblance to those of a Hindu shrine. Poetry (*Qawwali*), music and, in some cases, even dancing in trance-*mehfil-e-sama*, the divine musical session, became an important institution in the Sufi Islam.

In the wake of onslaught of western colonialism, Sufism lost its original thrust and vigour and at many places degenerated into a number of superstitious practices. Faith healing, amulets, charms etc. deprived it of its high spiritual stature. The caretakers and *Sajjadahnasheens* (one who inherits the mantle of his ancestor Sufi Saints) at several *durgahs* started behaving like the *pandas*/priests of wealthy temples and their main motive became earning money through any means, fair or unfair. This, along with other religio-political factors, provided space to the Wahabi/Salafi version of Islam to attack Sufism more vigorously and aggressively. It seems that DarulUloomDeoband and its followers, popularly described as Wahabis, are not opposed to Sufis as such and recognize those values of Sufism which, according to them, are ‘*Sharia* friendly’. They are bitterly opposed to grave worship and traditions of the Barelvi version of Islam especially related with *dargahs*. The response of one of my respondents during the fieldwork is worth mentioning when he sarcastically says that “*hameqabron par naachneganewalon se Islam naheeseekhnahai*” (we don’t have to learn Islam from those singing and dancing around graves).

The author is not competent, neither concerned with the issue, to pass a judgment as to how much Sufism is ‘Islamic’ or ‘unIslamic’ but there may not be much debate when it is said that Wahabism/Salafism is ‘political Islam’ while Sufism represents ‘spiritual Islam’ and humane face of it. The ideological purity of Salafism is in conflict with the tolerance and inclusiveness of Sufi Islam. A A Engineer (ibid) rightly comments that “we live in a multi-religious, multi cultural world and exclusiveness leads to extremism. Accommodation of the ‘other’ leads to peace and harmony” and that is what Sufism has been doing in India and elsewhere.

Deobandschool is popularly perceived as representing Wahabism in India and hence it is important to know their approach to social issues because it deeply impacts the day to day life of the adherents of this school of thought. On the basis of their authorized pronouncements in recent years, some of the important ones may be summarized as below:

- The practice of triple *talaqis* bad but it should not be banned.
- Women may contest elections but they must also observe *Purdah*.
- Taking interest even from banks is forbidden.
- It is not good for women to work in government or private institutions where men and women work together and they are not supposed to talk to men frankly, without veil.

Deoband’s influence has been growing rapidly through around 2000 madaras spread all over India. The problem with the Deobandis and their followers is the lack of willingness to integrate with the larger non-Muslim society perhaps because this movement was founded in colonial India to protect Muslim identity from the British (Western) influence. Deobandiulema also took part actively in freedom movement and opposed Muslim League’s demand for the creation of Pakistan. Though the followers of the Deobandi school are still in minority among the Indian Muslims, yet during the last 3-4 decades they have got a major

boost in terms of infrastructural development and propaganda networks. Many of those Muslims who are bitterly opposed to the Wahabi-Saudi combine express the view that Islamic faith has been ‘vandalized’ largely because of the control of Saudis over the holiest places of Muslims.

Changing Religious Communication and New Technology

Making the journey from oral to textual, audio, audio-visual, satellite television and internet, the reach of Wahabi Islam has astronomically increased. The medium and message both have changed. The Cyber Islamic Environment has produced and coined new terms- ‘E Jihad’, ‘Online Fatwa’, ‘Digital Sword’, to mention a few. Like others, these Islamic groups are also using television channels and internet. The Deoband seminary maintains an elaborate website of its own and upload all the *fatwas* sought by the followers spread all over the world. Thus, for the first time in history we have ‘Islam online’ and through thousands of websites they and other Islamic groups have waged war among themselves as well as against ‘others’ in cyber space.

A typical feature of Islamists or Islamic missionaries has been *Daawaa* (*Daawat*/invitation to Islam) because they strongly believe that it is enjoined upon them to invite people into Islam’s fold. In order to invite and attract the non-Muslims to Islam, they not only present their point of view/ interpretation as the ‘true’ and ‘authentic Islam’ but condemn and malign others as fake and distorted. Thus, rhetoric and polemics degenerate into mud-slinging and vulgarity. Wahabis and several radical Sunni groups describe the Sufis, Shias and Muslim liberals as *Kafir* (infidel), ‘deviants’ and ‘internal saboteurs’. In retaliation, the targeted groups accuse them as *Takfiri* (one who believes that only he/she is true Muslim while the others are worthy to be condemned and annihilated). The rapidly growing popularity of the Bombay based televangelist ZakirNaik(who has fled from India and taken refuge in Malaysia) is the most glaring example. He is highly respected by many Muslims and also intensely hated by a larger section of the Muslims. Gary Bunt (2009) makes a very relevant observation when he says that “the internet has profound contemporary impact on how Muslims perceive Islam and how Islamic societies and networks are evolving and shifting in the twenty first century”. Private TV Channels and internet are also pouring venom on the Sufis, Barelvis, Liberal Sunnis and the Shias. On a very popular internet portal such as YouTube one may find thousands of videos with the title ‘Sufi Kafir’ and ‘Shia Kafir’. With the phenomenal reach of television and internet an educated section of the Muslims is getting influenced and self radicalized without any external agency or intervention.

During the present study a number of respondents expressed apprehensions about the future of their mosques, madrasas and durgahs as these are being taken over by the Wahabi sponsored agencies. Since, in the changed socio-political environment, it has become difficult to construct new mosques in most parts of India the Wahabis, supported by the Saudi petrodollars and donations by the wealthy persons subscribing to this school of thought, are taking

over the several existing mosques and madaras in this region and elsewhere in the country. In a long term planning they are also increasing their influence in Wakf Boards under which a number of these sacred places and shrines come. After achieving control of the management they appoint their teachers and imams and through them this version of Islam is being popularized. Getting alarmed by this development the followers of *Barelvimask* are insulating themselves. Some of the non-Wahabi Muslim organizations are also raising the demand that the government should set up separate Wakf Boards for the Wahabi Muslims so that this faction stops getting into their shrines and durgahs. The moderate Muslims are of the view that the spread of the Wahabi ideal of radicalism needs to be checked for the good of the community and the country. Moreover, taking over the durgahs of the Sufi saints may be seen in the light of RSS people taking over the Gandhian institutes one after the other to distort and ultimately destroy the Gandhian teachings and ideals.

Though unlike in Pakistan, Afghanistan and elsewhere the Sufi and Shia shrines have not been bomb blasted or demolished (except in Kashmir where some radical groups have blasted and vandalized some *mazaars* of the Sufi Saints), if this radicalization is not checked the same may be repeated throughout India. It should be the responsibility of the moderate and liberal Ulema of all the sects to educate their followers and help in the process of de-radicalization. Let them tell their followers that divisions and differences have always been there in the Muslim world all through the Post-Muhammad period but this type of hatred and violence will shatter the Muslim society and in the true spirit of religion, let Allah take care of the 'Sinners'.
