

An approach to study Dr. Fazl-ur-Rehman's works

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Fazl-ur-Rehman (1919-1989) was one of the prominent scholars of twentieth century who were very much concerned with the intellectual status of the Muslim world and a lack of proper understanding of the Quran. He believed that the Quran should be understood as a coherent system but he thought that unfortunately the underlying unity of Quranic text has never been realized fully in the history of Muslims. In addition to this, we see an insistence upon fixing on the words of various verses in isolation. He, therefore, has proposed an adequate hermeneutical method of interpreting the Quran. He has discussed his theory in various works including *Islam, Islam and modernity* and *themes of the Quran* etc. Many scholars of present day have attempted to analyze his method of interpreting Quran which he laid down in his works. This article suggests a possible approach with which we could understand his thoughts better. For example, to start such an analysis first we have to find whether such a model was ever given before in the Muslim history. If so, what were the conditions then and why we need to rethink about it now? Secondly, we have to find that if such an *ijtihad* is done, who will decide its credibility? And which issues are worth taking to begin with? These are certain issues which would be considered and discussed in this article.

Iqbal said in his presidential address of All India Muslim League in 1930, while accounting for the dynamism in Islam, "At any critical moment in their history it is Islam that has saved Muslims and not vice versa."¹ It is a crucial question now, more than ever, i.e. to decide how it can be possible in modern times? For while we badly need to refresh and rethink the basic principles of Islam according to changed scenario of our own time, what we have in the name of Islam are the conservative ideas and forces who want to revive, rather relive, the classical era and not ready to move from the fixed body of principles and practices, and the world history has covered a long way from that era and brought a totally new horizon in its sweep. Now it seems difficult and even ridiculous to a conscious man to ignore it altogether. He has to go along with the mainstream of history anyway and this is the true Islamic spirit. The Quran itself indicates that the 'ayat' or the signs of Allah will continue to be unveiled through the passage of time: "We shall show them Our portents on the horizons and within themselves until it will be manifest unto them that it is the Truth."²

How then, could a new meaning be obtained if all the possible meanings had been exhausted in the past? Compared to the past, the future is full of unpredictable possibilities by which our understanding of the Quran should interact. Since both the natural world and the Quran have come from the same source and both complement one another, therefore the more one learns about human history and the natural world, the better one grasps the meaning of the Quran.³ Today most of the Muslim countries are free and the growth of Muslim population has been increasing rapidly. But it seems that in incorporating Islam in our society, we would be left behind as powerless insignificants in the face of modern powers of the world, mostly secular. Now that it seems difficult to save our Islam and yet live prosperously, can Islam save us? i.e. Is there any potential in Islam to cope with the changing times?

Many scholars have attempted to see the potential in Islamic principles in a new light of changing circumstances and

Dr. Fazl-ur-Rehman(1919-1988) is one such name of twentieth century.

He believed that the Quran should be understood as a coherent system and the underlying unity of Quranic text should be realized fully. He condemned the attitude of taking the verses in isolation and fixing their meanings, which has been the common practice of the majority of Muslims and the main reason of the stagnation of thought process in the Muslim world, instead, their actual spirit should be taken. Dr. Fazl-ur-Rehman emphasized that the social evolution in each and every field of the society, eg. status of women and slaves, and moral values in general etc., and everything ordered in Islam is for this end. It must be kept in mind while making laws.⁴ Hence for changing the rigid attitude, he proposed an adequate hermeneutical method of interpreting the Quran. This involves a double movement, from present situation to the Quranic times and then back to the present, i.e., first to understand the meanings of the Quranic under specific situations of the time of revelation and drawing general laws from them, and secondly to see these general laws in the light of our present situation. This logical method involves a deep study of the historical context of the Quranic verses as well as a deep insight into our present situation.⁵

No doubt it is a very reasonable theory of interpretation for the Quran but we have to analyse it with certain considerations which we feel necessary to discuss. To start such an analysis, first we have to find whether such a model was ever given before in the Muslim history. If so, what were the conditions then and why we need to rethink about it now? Secondly, we have to find that if such an ijtihad is done, who will decide its credibility? And lastly, which issues are worth taking to begin with? This thesis, therefore, will be started with these questions and then an analysis of Dr. Fazl-ur-Rehman's works in general to find out how successful he has been, to enlighten the modern minds by his efforts.

When we look at the history of Sub-Continent, we find that the three questions, mentioned above, were tackled by Shah

Waliullah (1703-1762), Sir Syed (1817-1898) and Iqbal (1877-1938), respectively.

The solution which Shah Waliullah gave was simple: an independent interpretation of the Quran. In an atmosphere where vigorous campaigns against innovations were going on, and superstitions were prevailing, we can suppose how difficult it had been for him to initiate this. But so strong was his determination that the fresh air he blew through the environment of Sub-Continent, prevails since then.

He was the first person who, after a long time in the Sub-Continent, insisted upon turning towards the Quran and only the Quran for all ills. This is the only book which could stand the tests of all times and an ultimate source of guidance. With this purpose in mind he translated it into Persian as it was then the official language spoken and understood everywhere in India. 'He took this bold and courageous step at the risk of his life, but he did not care for that.'⁶ He strongly held that the Quran should be read independent of commentaries, not only to cope with the differences among the schools by thinking ourselves, but more than that, it enables us to bring forth new meanings and ideas. When we read commentaries we understand the Quran but through the age old and sometimes outdated perspectives. But when we read it ourselves, we think about the meaning with our fresh perspective in a much more developed and changed environment, social and intellectual, and hence bring forth new meanings and ideas and this is the only way to break the stagnation.⁷

Hence he found that the free interpretation of the Quran by individuals becomes the first thing needed to move on. He made the Quran his basis so firmly that he showed the traditions also as deducible from the Quran.⁸ He believed that there is nothing in the Quran that is beyond human understanding. So everyone should study it with meditation on his own. But so many preliminaries are regarded as the requisites of studying the Quran that the real teaching is difficult to be imparted in our institutions. Shah Waliullah, therefore, wanted to treat them as mere preliminaries and not to give them equal importance, as they tend to take the

place of the study of the Quran itself. In this way his strict fundamentalism, as Dr. Aziz Ahmed calls it,⁹ reduced the rigidity of the four schools of Fiqh, as Muslims had started thinking independently and therefore the strict boundaries were started to vanish.

He also found that although religious scholars had regarded the Quran as the primary source of Fiqh, but practically they kept their focus only on the Quranic do's and don'ts, rather than discussing it as a whole. The result was that people in general kept their focus only on halal and haram, and not took it as a source of moral grooming of their whole personality.

For instance, it was agreed by majority of scholars though, that if a certain verse of the Quran is revealed in general meaning then even if the interpreters refer to some special event in its background, it would be considered general in its meanings. But when we see the interpretations, we find that they have given such events with almost every verse and not only this, they have restricted every individual verse to some particular person or event and therefore made it a trend to meditate over those particular events more than the actual verse.¹⁰

Keeping the Quran as a book of do's and don'ts, and restricting its meanings to particular events, resulted in creating an atmosphere where the Quran practically became ineffective in people's life. It was left to recitation only. In Al-Fozulkabir, Shah Waliullah pointed out this grave fault and emphasized that instead of any particular events, those qualities and behaviors, in general, should be taken as the proper background of the verses that were mere exemplified by the particular persons and events. They were revealed for all men, whether Arabs or non-Arabs, till the end of times, so that whenever and wherever such things happen, these verses will be applied and they are actually meant for those situations. For in this way only, the Quran could be workable for every new generation, all over the world, and we know that it is so as it is the last message revealed to a Prophet. Shah Waliullah said: "It is confirmed that whenever evils and oppressions exist, it would be supposed to be the back ground of these verses."¹¹

Now, to read the Quran as a whole and in a proper way, he gave some simple principles in his book Al-Fozulkabir. He divided the meanings and content of the Quran in five categories and emphasized that nothing in the Quran is beyond these five. Among them is, first of all, Ilm-ul-ehkam (the study of imperatives) _it explains the dos and don'ts in our daily life and in the life of states etc. Then comes Ilm-e-behsomubahisa (the study of discussions and comparisons). In it, the Quran argues with four wayward nations, i.e. Jews, Christians, Mushrikin and Munafiqin. But Shah Waliullah believed that these four are taken as examples of those nations who deviate from their right path, anywhere and whenever. We should not consider them as addressed to those four only, but it speaks to all the nations till the end.

Then, thirdly, there is the study of nature and the signs of Allah. It requires a scientific knowledge of course to discuss it. Fourthly, Ilm-e-Tazkir bi ayyam Allah (study of history), the Quran narrates historical events. Shah Waliullah believed that these should be taken as examples and could be imposed in any similar event.

Lastly, there is Ilm-e-tazkir bilmot-o-baaduhu (study of death and here after).¹²

Taking all the five studies or topics of the Quran, we could groom our whole personality into a morally sound one and no corner of our life would be left untouched. He said that the Quran describes the events of history and the good or bad results of those events, as well as the references of life after death; all these are to point towards good and bad attitudes in our lives and to train us. That is why these events are not described wholly in a story like manner, but only secondarily as required for a particular injunction stated in a particular verse. He made the understanding of the Quran so simple and easy for anyone who wants to read it. As well as the concept of the Quran as a universal book for all times and people was revived, which was practically forgotten in the sub-continent.¹³

Then, after almost a century, we see that Sir Syed raised this issue once again and also the question that who decides its

credibility. He believed that the answer lay in a consensus of the whole Muslim Community of India, for he regarded it an un-transferable right of every individual Muslim and he totally rejected the idea of restricting it to the religious scholars only and to keep the masses away from the decisions about religious matters. Every Muslim has to study Arabic as well English sciences in order to think maturely and to develop a mutual understanding.

Sir Syed was facing a very different situation from Shah Waliullah. After the decline of Mughal Empire, under the rule of the British government, the atmosphere completely changed. Sir Syed appreciated the change and clearly perceived the political realities in the new context. We lost the strength not because of our political weakness but because of our moral laxity and intellectual bareness.¹⁴ A flood of new inventions and scientific progress was pouring in while the Muslims were left behind, partly because of the prejudice which the British had as they thought of them as their adversaries, and partly because of the unwillingness of the Muslims to learn new language and studies. In such a crucial time, the enlightened people like Sir Syed were sensing the miseries of the Muslims in that time as well as in the time to come. They regarded the lack of modern knowledge as the biggest cause. Sir Syed was worried about the gap between the facts about the experiences of the modern sciences and the prevailing facts about the revealed religion,¹⁵ out of which the latter was a result of a lack of Quranic understanding. The strength of the west appeared to him to be lying in its liberalistic rationalism. The attempted reconstruction of the society thus involved interpreting Islamic concepts in rational terms. Sir Syed laid down the principles of his interpretations of the Quran on the apriori identity of reason and revelation. He took 'Wahy' (revelation) and 'natural laws' to be identical.¹⁶ In such a situation, he suggested, either we should refute the modern philosophy with logic and reason, or show that our religion is not against the modern science, for this has always been done in the Muslim history whenever they face a situation when foreign literature seems to dominate their own culture. It seems difficult though, but it would become easy if we sit together

and develop a mutual understanding.¹⁷ He therefore emphasized on interpreting the primary sources of Islam according to the modern thought independent of the early legists. It involved the problems of evaluating the western civilization, rationalization of basic data of faith and recasting it on the model of early rationalists of Islam. His pragmatic approach assumed a deeper significance. He strongly denied that Islamic principles are in any way against or incompatible with Victorian values and ideals.¹⁸ But his innovative thoughts are traced back to Shah Waliullah, rather than western rationalism. Almost unlimited ijihad as the 'in-alienable right' of every individual Muslim; rejected the concept of ijma confined to the Ulama only.¹⁹ Now, the problem was how to do that, for the Muslims were totally indifferent and ignorant of each other's condition in India, although all of them were experiencing the same plight.

Sir Syed developed this through his philosophy of love. He believed that love is the basis of a community, which starts with a feeling of oneness with our own community, and gradually grows out to feel oneness with the whole mankind, and then a love for the whole universe, for then, it becomes clear that the whole universe is a creation of One God.²⁰ 'I am the soul of the whole mankind', the bride in the dream of the old man in, in Sir Syed's symbolic short story "Guzra hua Zamana"²¹, and it was insisted that to get this bride should be our aim. That stage of love should be our ultimate destination, but if that was too far at the moment, what they could do at the least was to be one with their own community.

"From meeting each other, and discussing different issues related to religions education and national progress, we will necessarily get a better way to solve them".²²

Hence exchange of views and consensus will decide in the matters of dispute. The most crucial disputed matter was that the Muslims were showing hatred and indifference towards modern sciences and regarded them as against their religion. Sir Syed regarded it as a misunderstanding in grasping the real spirit of our religion. In order to develop a proper understanding of religion, thus, and to prepare them to meet the challenges of modern

philosophy and culture, he regarded education and only education as a means to progress.¹³

He took practical steps in both the directions, i.e. to collect the Muslims together, and to educate them. He invited the representatives from all over India, and laid the foundation of Scientific Society in Ghazipur, on Jan 9, 1864, which was aimed at translating English and French works into Urdu. But this was not enough, and he laid the foundation of a Madrassah in Ghazipur where Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit and Urdu along with English were taught. This Madrassah soon turned to be a College and then University.

The crux of his thoughts, therefore, is:

1. Love is the basis of a community, which is a starting point and gradually turned into the love of the whole mankind and then all living beings and ultimately of the whole universe.
2. Muslims should learn English Sciences without abandoning Arabic and Persian. For there is nothing in the Quran that is incorrect or contradictory to natural science.
3. Islam is not against Christianity but the modern philosophy. This set the trend of literary works, political discourses, religious ijtilah and education and morals, for the next few centuries.²⁴

Finally, the diverse currents of ideas agitating the minds of modern Muslims found their expression in Iqbal's thought. We find Iqbal as the culmination of the intellectual quest, of the British India's Muslim Community, for interpreting the Quran with fresh perspectives and to see the deeper and vaster aim of Islam to reconcile the tension and antagonism between the natural world and Islamic laws, and to reconstruct a new world if the older one is not doing well, according to the Will of God.²⁵ He explains and emphasized on rational thinking in his poetry as well as his prose. In his famous lectures, "The Reconstruction of Religious Thoughts in Islam", while explaining that the Scientific knowledge i.e. given by sense-perception is not essentially distinct from intuition i.e. the dictates of heart, he says that through sense-perception we acquire knowledge of those external forces so that we can tame them, but

when those forces thwart us we need a capacity "to build a much vaster world in the depths of [our] inner being",²⁶ which could save us from pessimism. Also, it will prevent us from using our power to unfair ends.²⁷ He also dreamt for the emancipation of Muslims as well as the whole humanity from all sorts of bounds, whether cultural or traditional. He says, "As a cultural movement Islam rejects the old static view of the universe, and reaches a dynamic view. As an emotional system of unification it recognizes the worth of the individual, as such, and rejects blood-relationship as a basis of human unity."²⁸ He also saw the decline of rational thinking, which is encouraged in the form of Ijtihad in Islam and which Iqbal calls the principle of movement in the structure of Islam, as the basic reason of the decline of the Muslims as a whole. May it be as a conservative reaction against Rationalism; ascetic Sufism, which absorbed the best minds of the Muslim society and left the legal discussions in the hands of "intellectual mediocrity and the unthinking masses",²⁹ or as a fear of disintegration in the time of decline. He saw only two distinctions as to revive ijtihad in the later Muslim history i.e. Ibn-e-Taimiyyah's revolt against the finality of the earlier schools (resulting in the Wahabi's movement in Arabia), and the religious reform movement in Turkey which upholds the transfer of the Caliphate from an individual to an assembly.³⁰ He admitted that the conservative public in modern India may not be prepared for a critical discussion on fiqh, but it must be remembered that there was no written Islamic law up to the rise of the Abbasids, and the early theologians also passed from deductive to inductive methods in their efforts to answer the questions of their times. Moreover, we must see that the possibility of further evolution of the Islamic law becomes evident when we carefully look at its four sources: (a) Quran, which is not a legal code but rather aims to "awaken in man the higher consciousness of his relation with God and the universe.",³¹ (b) Hadith, which mainly demonstrates examples of how the Prophet applied the broader principle to a specific socio-cultural context; (c) Ijma (the consensus), which may be imparted to a democratically elected assembly in a modern Muslim state; and (d) Qiyas (analogical

reasoning), which is just another word for *ijtihad*.³² Hence, even if some later doctors have even favored the myth of 'closing the door of *ijtihad*', "modern Islam is not bound by this volunteer surrender of intellectual independence."³³

We see a blend of Shah Waliullah and Sir Syed's thoughts in Iqbal. He was living in a time period when India was about to be independent, and he was thinking about the issues which were the most crucial for the Muslims to decide and to have a consensus upon. First of all, they must decide what they mean by the Muslim Community, does it mean the whole Muslim world, or a nation-state of dominant Muslim majority? In his sixth lecture in the "Reconstruction of Religious Thoughts in Islam", he has pointed out this by giving example of Turkish *Ijtihad* over the issue of *Khilafat*. Should the Caliphate (or the government) be vested in a single person? (What should be the form of government in modern time?). The Turks have found the solution that it can be vested in a body of persons or elected assembly. However, "The religious doctors of Islam in Egypt and India, as far as I know, have not yet expressed themselves on this point."³⁴ Iqbal felt that the Turkish solution is the best for us today, for they believed the concept of *Khilafat* was rooted in its workability. It was workable when the Empire of Islam was intact, but it is now failed. Hence, Iqbal concluded, workability should be the basis of our solutions.

Another issue Iqbal regarded as crucial to be settled and redefined immediately was the issue of Family Laws. He said that the Quran lays down legal rules on social and family matters while it is not a book of Laws, just because contrary to Christianity, which forgot the State, Society, and Family relations in search of acquiring other worldiness, the Quran considers it necessary to unite religion and state, ethics and politics in a single revelation.³⁵ Iqbal did not mention particular issues but being an advocate, he was fully aware what difficulties the Muslims faced when the family disputes were solved according to old Hanafi laws. His deep concern could be sensed when he says: "Does the working of the rule relating to apostasy, as laid down in the *Hidaya*, tend to protect the interests of the Faith in this country?"³⁶ Dr. Khalid

Masud has given some examples in this regard. Only one is sufficient to be quoted here:

"In theory Islamic law regards marriage a contract and an agreement between the two parties. Yet the historical and social environment which informed the Islamic Law did not allow equal legal rights to a husband and wife as are usually allowed to the two partners of a contract. This point is particularly evident in the case of the dissolution of the contract of marriage. Not that the Hanafi fiqh does not allow a wife the right of divorce, but also that a husband is not even obliged to notify his wife about the divorce. The British followed Hanafi Law quite literally, particularly in matters of relating to marriage and divorce... Those women who were victim of the cruelty of their husbands had no legal remedy and hence [as a last resort] they adopted apostasy as a legal device to get rid of their husbands immediately. The device was derived from the stipulations of the Hanafi legal texts that declared a marriage dissolved on the renunciation of Islam by a Muslim wife. Numerous cases are reported in the nineteenth and twentieth century's when Muslim women applied to the British courts for the dissolution of marriage by declaring apostasy."³⁷

Hence reinterpretation of the Quran should be done on Family Laws, especially on women's right and inheritance.

Another important issue he mentioned is the use of Traditions as the primary source of Islamic law. He said that in using the traditions as guide, we must question how far they embody the pre-Islamic usages of Arabia,³⁸ hence we should decide how much we could rely on them in solving the issues of our present time, in a very different scenario than Arabia.

Further, he stressed that the time has come to use Ijma (Consensus) as a source of solving our problems. Here he mentioned another problem which we might face in a society of diverse religions. Whether a non-Muslim legislative assembly can exercise the power of Ijtihad?³⁹ i.e., the legislative activity of a modern Muslim assembly which consists of the people with no proper understanding of Islamic laws. How their decisions would be rendered as abiding? For this point he suggested that the ulama

might be a part of such a legislative assembly instead of a separate assembly of Religious Ulama which would be dangerous. What the modern world needs is: (1) Spiritual interpretation of the universe; (2) Spiritual emancipation of the individual; and (3) Universal principle to guide the evolution of human society on a spiritual basis. Thought alone cannot have a lasting impact and the responsibility falls upon the Muslims, who must appreciate their position, reconstruct their social life, and, "evolve, out of hitherto partially revealed purpose of Islam, that spiritual democracy which is the ultimate aim of Islam."⁴⁰

An attempt is needed to see Dr. Fazl-ur-Rehman's proposed model of interpreting the Quran with this back ground, i.e. how he has developed his ideas and how much successful he has been in moving forward from the point Shah Waliullah, Sir Syed and Iqbal reached. In finding out the hindrances in the process of reinterpretation and suggesting the solution.

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