A STUDY OF THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS REFORMS OF MAULANA ASHRAF ALI THANVI

Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi is one of the most towering personalities among the religious reformers in Islamic history. He was born at Thana Bhawan (UP), India and lived during the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. This period was a period of turmoil for the Muslims of India as they had been reduced from the ruling class to the subject class with the fall of the Muslim rule due to the occupation of India by the British. The Mutiny of 1857 spelled devastation for the Muslim upper classes which included the landlords and the petty rulers. The structure of the society had crumbled and the centuries old religious and social traditions and customs were being challenged. Muslims were dumb founded as to what catastrophe had befallen them. With the fall of the Mughal rule in 1857 they were left headless and directionless. They could not look forward for any or for any guidance. It is in this scenario that the thesis begins.

The current thesis comprises of seven chapters including the conclusions. The first chapter, which forms the introductory part, is a detailed description of the social and religious condition of Indian Muslims in the nineteenth century and so it is entitled. In this chapter a detailed description of the main events of the nineteenth century are discussed. The gradual occupation of India by the
British culminated in the complete annexation and establishment of their rule at Delhi sounding the death bell of the Mughal rule.

It was not without resistance that the Britishers were able to occupy such a large country. The advantage that the Britishers had was of the political disunity among the petty Muslim rulers right from their entry point from the Bay of Bengal and across upto the Punjab and added to this was the weak and misrule of the Mughal rulers. Taking full advantage of the disunity of the Indian rulers the Britishers used deception and sometimes shear force to subdue the petty rulers. Their superior military hardware was another plus point for them. They also made full use of the tactics of creating division among the population which was already divided on the lines of not only religion but also on the basis of sects and classes within religion and society.

The Mutiny of 1857 pitted the Muslims directly against the British. In the mayhem that followed the failed mutiny the British realised that any threat to their power was from the Muslims and to crush them and suppress them forever a general massacre followed. The leaders were either hanged or exiled and their properties were forfeited. The whole lot of the Muslim leadership was wiped out. The stunned Muslims were unaware of what had befallen them and had nowhere to go. Their society was uprooted; their education system was not in the tune with the time and circumstances. All their systems were being replaced by the British. Once the rulers were now turned into paupers.
At this time the Muslim thinkers were confused and unable to figure out a definite strategy for their survival. The people of other religion had adapted themselves to the British system as for them only the rulers had changed they still remained the subjects but the status of the Muslims had taken a downward trend. They were hesitant in adapting to the British system.

At this juncture some liberal Muslim thinkers who could read the situation and realised that there is no way out other than to accept what is in practice and being offered, as the only way out for the Muslims for their survival. At the forefront of this group was Sir Syed with his mission of imparting modern education to the Muslims offered by the British which included modern science and technology along with the traditional Muslim education. Sir Syed made all efforts that the Muslims compromise with the Britishers and gain their confidence in order that they no more remain suspect before them.

The Muslims religious thinkers had assessed the situation differently and blamed their religious degradation for their pitiable condition. Muslim religious seminaries were opened one at Deoband - the Darul-Uloom and another, at Lucknow - the Nadwat-al-Ulama. These two centres later developed to become the leading Muslim institutions for religious learning and scholars of these centres thronged to every nook and corner of India guiding the Muslims in their religious matters. The Darul-Uloom, Deoband gained the reputation of being more strict and uncompromising in matters of religion. It was the former institution
where Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi studied and trained and later on himself became a teacher.

The second chapter is devoted fully to the life of Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi right from his childhood, family background, early and basic education and higher education at Darul-Uloom. It was while he was still a student at Darul-Uloom that he got introduced and developed interest in Sufism. Here only he learned about Haji Imdadullah Mahajir Makki (RA) and became interested in becoming his disciple. It was finally on his trip to Haj with his father that he first met his mentor who saw in this young boy god gifted traits and he immediately knew that he will, in the future, carry forward his mission in India. On his second pilgrimage Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi stayed with his Shaikh for six months. It was on his advice that later on he left his teaching job in Kanpur and decided to settle down at the deserted Khanqah of Haji Imdadullah (RA) at Thana Bhawan. Very true to the faith put in him by his Shaikh his missionary work gained momentum. People from all walks of - civil servants, traders, farmers, labourers all were attracted towards him. In the true sense of the term Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi proved to be the renovator of the real Sufism and the reviver of all the four established sufi orders namely Chishtiyyas, Qadriyya, Naqshbandiyya and Suharawardiyya. He accepted the authenticity of all four orders and took bayt from his disciple in all four orders. The success of Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi’s mission did not go unnoticed from his adversaries who began to lose their business everyday as his movement grew. But Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi did not care much for his opponents and concentrated more towards his mission.
Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi carried out his work through lectures, speeches, meetings, discourses and writings. He was a prolific writer and authored about a thousand books and booklets. His writings are so vast that a full chapter three is devoted to it. Of his more popular contributions is the Tafsir of the Qur'an entitled *Bayan al-Quran* in twelve volumes. Another work *Bihishti Zewar* comprising of several parts and written especially with the intention of educating the Muslim women with the essentials of religions alongwith the guidelines for their social and economic welfare. This book still is so popular that it has become a natural gift that every father presents to his daughter at her marriage. But the best contribution as accepted by Maulana Thanvi himself is the *Hayat al-Muslimeen* – a book in simple language with citings from the *Qur’an* and *Hadith* for the guidance of the common Muslim. Similarly, other popular books include *Adab al-Ma’ashrat, Ashraf al-Jawab, Taleem al - Deen, Islah ul - Rusoom, Intibat-e -Mufeeda, Furu-ul-Iman, Islah-ul-Khayal, Islam-e-Haqeeqi, Mohasin-e-Islam, Daulat-ul-Haq* etc.

Chapter four and five that follow are devoted to highlighting the social and religious reforms of Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi. As has been discussed in chapter one the society and religion of the Muslims had been in a bad state and these were the two areas which were a challenge for Maulana Thanvi. He had very minutely observed that the socio-religious conditions of the Muslims and from his insight he knew exactly what, when, and where to strike in order that the matters are again set right. It was massive task with many obstacles in between. Maulana Thanvi was well equipped to handle his opponents too the methods to convince the common
man. The various diseases and their prescriptions were ready with him. All the major reforms that Maulana Thanvi adopted in these fields are listed in these two chapters. Chapter six is devoted to the followers of Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi under the title of 'Influences'. He had left behind him a well equipped and well trained team of his Khulafah who after him took up his mission effortlessly and continued to spread the message not only in the India sub-continent but also to places in other continents such as the America and Africa, Europe, Australia, etc. The last of his Khulafah lived up to the beginning of the twenty first century. The second generation of his followers is continuing his mission in the modern age and even has put up their websites on the internet and most of Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi's books are freely available and even translated into different languages. This chapter is followed by my own conclusions.