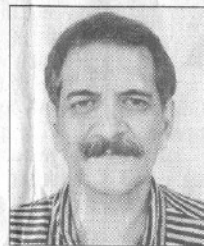


Dr. Islam
20.07.04

Of jihadis turning moderates — I

HISTORY



SUROOSH IRFANI

While Thanesari and Aibak, each in his turn, symbolised the jihadi ideal of his time, each one of them moved on from the militancy of a youthful notion of jihad towards a more inclusive connotation of jihad as socio-political, and intellectual-moral struggle

The transformation from militancy to moderation that marks Thanesari's lived experiences is also reflected in the autobiography of Zafar Hasan Aibak (d. 1987), a third generation offspring of the jihadi track that Thanesari once also belonged to. Entitled *Khataraat* (Memoirs, Sang-e-Meel, 1990), Aibak's is the story of a jihadist's struggle which takes him from India, through Afghanistan and Russia, and finally to Turkey, where he lives for the rest of his life with his Turkish wife. For Aibak, it all started in 1915, when the Ottoman Caliph Sultan, issued a *fatwa* calling on

Indian Muslims to rise against British rule. The *fatwa* spurred Aibak and a dozen Muslim students of the Punjab to cross over into Afghanistan, with the aim of joining forces with the Turkish army that was fighting the Allies during the First World War. However, after reaching Afghanistan, Aibak and his group, including their mentor, the radical dissident Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi, virtually ended up as pawns in the hands of the Afghans. It was not until 1919 that Aibak saw action against the British as a trusted lieutenant of Nadir Khan, commander-in-chief of the Afghan army who later became king.

However, with the normalisation of relations between Britain and Afghanistan in 1922, Aibak and Sindhi left for Moscow, where Aibak joined the Eastern university as a student of history, even as he remained the secretary of the Congress Committee of Kabul, the first overseas branch of the Indian National Congress. However, Moscow was no more than a way station. Two years later, in 1924, after Sindhi had negotiated a deal with the Soviet foreign minister underwriting Moscow's financial support for India's largest political party, the Indian National Congress, Sindhi and Aibak left for Istanbul, ostensibly to work out the details of such cooperation with the Indian dissidents there.

Once in Turkey, Aibak was granted Turkish nationality. This enabled him to realise his dream of becoming an officer of the Turkish army — seventeen years after his flight from India. Following a brief posting in Konya, home to the 13th century sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi, Aibak was posted as an instructor in the military academy in Kabul. A high point of his new assignment was to cut an arms deal for the Afghan army in Europe as a member of a Turko-Afghan military delegation. Aibak visited Pakistan as a member of a Turkish military delegation in 1958, interviewed Pakistan's president Ayub Khan as a correspondent of the Turkish daily *Hurriyet* in 1967, and even advised the beleaguered Ayub Khan during the crisis that ousted him from power a year later.

Aibak's narrative gives some rare insights into a

decline after he was banished from India, the disease-infested Port Blair in Andaman islands virtually bloomed into a paradise (it became "the envy of Kashmir") soon after his arrival there. In fact, Thanesari seems eager to convince readers that his banishment amounted to something of a divine boon, not least because of his two marriages on the island:

"I left my wife in India, but two wives were granted to me (in exile), I left behind two children, and was later graced with eight children. I was compensated in money and material for everything I had lost because of my imprisonment. All that (I had lost) was restored to me, as was the case with Prophet Ayub (Job in the Bible) that God speaks of in the Holy Quran." Having drawn the comparison with the Prophet Ayub, Thanesari quotes a Quranic verse that says Ayub's story was a mercy and guidance for believers, and then goes on to argue that this Quranic verse "applied to me in all its truth. My story is a great luminous verse from among Divine verses. Only the righteous and believers may gain guidance from it, and not the deniers (of faith) and hypocrites".

As he draws the memoirs to a close, Thanesari calls his story "a great sign from among the signs of God", and exhorts people to read his book "over and over" because it is an unalloyed product of "struggle and hardship of imprisonment" (p.101). Ironically, this highlighting of hardship in the closing lines of the book overturns his sustained attempt to portray his banishment as an idyllic state of exile and a sign of divine favour.

For all its limitations, however, *Kala Pani* remains something of a groundbreaking testament of an Islamist from nineteenth century India, not least because of a strain of self-critique and a radical transformation from a jihadi to a moderate committed to non-violence. An example of this is Thanesari's comment about a bloody riot by the Hindus of the island on Eid-e-Qurban, the Islamic feast of sacrifice. Chastened by the wisdom of hindsight, Thanesari believes it could have been avoided, had he not provoked it in his youthful zeal on Eid by slaughtering a cow, sacred to the Hindus.

ONE OF THE FIRST PUBLISHED MEMOIRS OF A jihadi in modern history was Maulana Jafar Thanesari's *Kala Pani: Tarikh e Ajeeb* (Banishment: A Strange History). First published in 1884 (reprinted by Sang-e-Meel, Lahore). The slim volume spans Thanesari's life from the early 1860's when he was arrested as a leader of the anti-British mujahideen movement that linked itself to the revivalist Islamist Syed Ahmed Shaheed Bareilvi (d.1832). Thanesari was first sentenced to death. After a dramatic commutation of the sentence to life imprisonment, he was banished in 1865 to the Andaman Islands, where he lived until 1883, the year he was pardoned and allowed to return to India.

In his narrative, Thanesari comes across as something of a charismatic figure whom exile opened to a whole range of new experiences — including new marriages, new jobs and a knowledge of the English language that he learned during the initial years of his confinement. He was probably the first radical Indian maulana whose access to the English language led him to the forbidden fruit of western learning. His ecstatic discovery of a new intellectual world through voracious readings of English books in the libraries virtually estranged Thanesari from his own religious traditions for sometime — a development that seemed to have caused him acute distress. He recounts that exposure to modern knowledge opened him to inner doubts about his faith — so much so that he became lax in his prayers and was pushed to the edge of 'infidelity'. Eventually, however, he came through his intellectual adventures with a renewed sense of faith, even though he remained ambivalent about the wisdom of exposing Muslims to the lure of western knowledge fearing that any Muslim who approached western learning without first studying the Quran and the Prophet's Traditions, was bound to be 'destroyed' by such knowledge.

Given that Thanesari's *Kala Pani* was the first memoir of a dissident Muslim who survived the Raj's gallows and lived to tell his tale, the self glorifying rhetoric of spiritual upmanship may seem rather odd to readers today. He breezily notes for example that whereas his hometown of Thanesar fell into a state of

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OF A decline after he was banished from India, the disease-infested Port Blair in Andaman islands virtually bloomed into a paradise (it became “the envy of Kashmir”) soon after his arrival there. In fact, Thanesari seems eager to convince readers that his banishment amounted to something of a divine boon, not least because of his two marriages on the island:

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Aibak’s narrative gives some rare insights into a

young Islamist’s burning passion for jihad, the frustration of his ideals and his remarkable capacity for reinventing himself, even as he aligned himself with shifting networks of power for shaping India’s future that entailed a convergence of Russian, Turkish and Afghan interests with the Congress party and the Indian left. Of particular interest are the details Aibak gives of Sindhi’s abortive movement that had hitched itself to the above powers in a grandiose vision of a confederation of Turkey, Afghanistan and India: where the Turkish Sultan would be the *caliph*, and Maharaja Partap Singh, a Hindu dissident and comrade of Sindhi, the president of India. After Kemal Ataturk abolished the Ottoman Caliphate and founded a modern Turkish Republic in 1923, Sindhi’s vision assumed a secular slant as an Asiatic federation of independent states aligned with Russia.

Even so, while Aibak’s turbulent experiences transformed him from a pan-Islamist Indian jihadi to a Muslim internationalist at home with communists, socialists and Kemalist Turks, his references to Maulana Sindhi and a Quranic hermeneutics of spiritual humanism reflect a subjectivity steeped in Islamic faith creatively relating to variants of secularism, such as Kemalism and socialism. Indeed, such eclecticism was central to Sindhi’s liberation theology that Aibak also shared and thought as being central to a notion of an egalitarian Islamic universalism.

To be sure, while Thanesari and Aibak, each in his turn, symbolised the jihadi ideal of his time, each one of them moved on from the militancy of a youthful notion of jihad towards a more inclusive connotation of jihad as socio-political, and intellectual-moral struggle. This is profoundly reflected in Thanesari’s intellectual activism after he returned to India, and his espousal of peaceful coexistence with India’s Christian rulers who were People of the Book.

Suroosh Irfani is co-director of the Graduate Programme in Communication and Cultural Studies at National College of Arts, Lahore. This is the first of a two part series.