

Dr. Zafar Islam

# Of jihadis turning moderates —

ON HIS RETURN TO INDIA, THANESARI channelled his religious zeal into writing and publishing books on the life and ideas of Syed Ahmed Barelvi, leader of India's Wahhabi movement, who founded a short-lived Islamic state on the northern fringe bordering Afghanistan in 1831, and died fighting the Sikhs shortly thereafter.

In his writings, Thanesari argued that Barelvi's jihad movement was launched not so much against the British and Christians, as it was against the oppressive Sikh rule in the Punjab that had alienated Muslims. Indeed, contesting the standpoint of militant Wahhabis espousing *jihad* against the British, Thanesari went back to the original texts of Syed Ahmed Barelvi's corpus, mainly his letters in Persian to men of power and influence. Thanesari translated these letters into Urdu<sup>1</sup>, with the sole purpose of presenting Barelvi's 'true ideas' (*sahih khiyalat*) and 'real' writings (*waqai tehriraat*) to a larger readership. Thanesari notes that while translating these letters, he came across 'twenty instances' where Barelvi had "openly asked his followers on the basis of the Islamic *sharia* not to oppose the British authorities".

Intellectual activism, then, became the new face of Thanesari's *jihad* in India. His critical reappraisal of the *jihadi* movement to which he himself had belonged was especially directed "against some ignorant and bigoted Muslims" who, he believed, were not familiar with "the true thoughts" of Syed Ahmed Barelvi, and consequently were confronting the British government in a reactive "self-defensiveness" — the implication being that such self-defensiveness (Thanesari's words) was a psychological, rather than religious need. It arose from an informed analysis of the Indian situation (here, Thanesari's insights about 'defence mechanisms' seems to predate Freud). Through such critical activism, Thanesari was planting the seeds of a discursive practice that, had his supporters and detractors followed his example,

## HISTORY



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might well have led to the flowering of a vibrant intellectual culture in India.

Aibak's transformation from *jihadi* to 'moderate', too, involved assimilation of various contexts and seems equally dramatic. This is reflected in the diversity of his lived experiences across multiple fronts of identity (Indian Muslim, Afghan *jihadi*, Kemalist army officer) and politics (pan-Islamism, socialism, Turkish secularism).

Thanesari and Aibak are remarkable examples of bold, and often painful, breaking of traditional casts of behaviour to relate to others in new ways. The disembedding trajectory of Thanesari's life entails new openings in thought and action on a faraway island. For the first time he confronted a vibrant multicultural world, which he noted, was throbbing with "over forty nationalities... a place of diversity unmatched in the world". He was astounded by this world, where "Arabs and Persians, Chinese and Malayan, Afghans and Kashmiris, French and Portuguese, British and Americans, and Indians of all hues, from Bengal to Madras, from Nicobar to Punjab, all spoke Hindustani (Urdu)" and lived in peace. In this world, where natives went about naked in their enclaves and gender relations were relaxed, Thanesari got acquainted with a Hindu woman, a fellow prisoner of some charm, whom he married after she converted to Islam.

The learning of English opened fresh vistas and opportunities for Thanesari, making him a much sought after tutor of Urdu and Persian for the British 'Sahibs'. Moreover, his knowledge of English triggered something of an intellectual revolution, following his discovery that the "English language was the house of arts and sciences, anyone who did not know English undoubtedly lacked a grasp of world affairs". Consequently, his earlier rejection of English and western knowledge gave way to an acceptance of the English language, and a guarded

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# f jihadis turning moderates — II

## HISTORY



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accommodation with western science and philosophy. Accepting 'the other's' language and finding deep reasons for admiring it, also led to a humanisation of 'the other' - in this case, the colonial deputy commissioner in Port Blair whose trusted secretary Thanesari became, and whom Thanesari assisted in the writing of a constitutional document for the island, which he himself translated into Urdu.

Clearly, as is borne out by Thanesari and Aibak's narratives, the disembedding acts of an earlier phase of life result in reconnecting in other ways. As with Thanesari's banishment, Aibak's self-exile from India became an occasion for more freedom and more choices. His 'success' in reinventing himself in Turkey and Afghanistan also gave him the confidence for self-representation in his life-narrative, an undertaking in which Aibak was emulating the *jihadi* hero of his childhood dreams, Maulana Thanesari.

The life trajectories of Thanesari and Aibak seem to suggest that a 'moderate' Muslim individuality, at home with elements of intellectual modernity (a generalised critical impulse) and an inclusive Islamism may indeed arise from the lived experiences of a *jihadi*.

Even so, Thanesari's attempt to salvage the spiritual eclecticism of an Indo-Persian culture by translating the original Persian letters of Syed Barelvi's *Maktubat* into Urdu, could not prevent the eventual eclipse of a spiritual eclecticism that had historically underpinned the politics and culture of Muslim rule in India. Indeed, the spiritual eclecticism of the Indian Wahhabi movement exemplified by Barelvi and Thanesari seems far removed from the militant Saudi Wahhabi movement, with Mullah Omer and Osama bin Laden as its heroes, that has become a linchpin in the sectarian landscape of Pakistan.

Clearly, while the transformation of Thanesari and Aibak from *jihadi* to 'moderate' remains of crucial significance in terms of a history of the subcontinent's Muslim consciousness, its importance seems all but lost

in a Talibanising Pakistani society today. Indeed, one wonders whether Aibak and Thanesari's narratives — had they become part of Pakistan's literate and popular culture — could have prevented the slide of Talibanic Pakistanis into a self-destructive *jihad* — when thousands of Pakistanis crossed the border and threw in their lot with the Taliban in post-9/11 Afghanistan.

After all, there are graphic details in Aibak's story of the self-destruction Indian Muslims inflicted upon themselves during an earlier avatar of an Afghan *jihad* that he was a part of: when thousands of 'simpleton Indian Muslims' were lost in the Afghan wilderness, after they left their hearths and homes following the *jihadi ulema's* call to destabilise India by migrating from 'un-Islamic' British India to 'Islamic' Afghanistan. Despite its disturbing insights into self-delusory Muslim fantasies thriving in the name of *jihad*, Aibak's *Khateraah* has drawn a virtual blank in post-9/11 Pakistan.

To be sure, the example of *jihadis* like Thanesai and Aibak who ended up as moderates, failed to bring about a corresponding change in attitudes and ways of thinking among sections of their coreligionists in the subcontinent. Consequently, a fusion of Islam and intellectual modernity that *jihadi* individuals like Thanesari and Aibak signified, failed to become generalised in the society, and the lived experiences of these Muslim revolutionaries never became part of the country's intellectual culture. Even so, it is vital for the cultural watchdogs of Pakistan to draw on the life narratives of our obscure and forgotten heroes as figures who offer alternative notions of Islamism and *jihad*.

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