



Moulvi Nazeer Ahmad

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As a master of Urdu prose there is hardly any one who can rival the fame which Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad Dehlavi has achieved. His knowledge of the Urdu language, as spoken in Indian homes by ladies of the upper and middle classes, is unequalled, and he has made a good use of it in the books with which he has enriched the store of Urdu literature. He is called Dehlavi, because Delhi was his adopted home, but it was not his parental home. He belonged to a small village in Bijnaur district, in the U. P. His family was known for its learning and piety. He was born in 1836 of the Christian era. His father, Maulvi Saadat Ali Khan, was a good scholar of Persian, from whom he had his first lessons in that language and inherited a taste for it. He went to Delhi for his education in Arabic and stayed in a mosque. Students in mosques in those days were expected to perform domestic duties in the houses of their teachers and they depended for their food on the help given to them by people living in the neighbourhood of the mosques. The case of Nazeer Ahmad was no exception. It is interesting to learn in this connection that Nazeer Ahmad had to carry about in his lap a little girl, who became his wife when he grew up, as his

teacher liked his hard-working habits and his good character.

The family of Nazeer Ahmad did not like the going of any Muslim boys to institutions run on Western lines and his education would have remained within the limits of the school in the mosque, but by chance he went one day to the Delhi College and was offered a scholarship to complete his studies there. He took advantage of the offer and joined the institution and has been one of its best products.

Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad began life as a teacher in a small school at Kunjah, in Gujrat district, in the Punjab. After two years of service at Kunjah, he was appointed as Deputy Inspector of Schools at Cawnpore, but his work there was interrupted by the Mutiny of 1857. His wife and all her relatives were in Delhi. He went and joined them and shared some of the bitter experiences of that troubled year. When peace was re-established, Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad was re-employed at Allahabad as Deputy Inspector of Schools. A friend of his, with whom he was putting up there, persuaded him to learn English. He began to study English at the age of twenty three and acquired a working knowledge of it in a short period. In his leisure hours he continued to improve the knowledge thus acquired. Eventually he knew English sufficiently well to be able to translate books from English into Urdu.

The first occasion on which his capacity to translate was put to the test was when Sir William Muir, who was at that time the Lieutenant Governor of the North Western Provinces, now known

as the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, desired to have an Urdu translation of the Income Tax Act. It was successfully translated by Nazeer Ahmad. Later a Board was appointed to translate the Indian Penal Code into Urdu and Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad was appointed a member of that Board. His share in that work was greater than that of any other man. His mastery of Urdu, Persian and Arabic, combined with a good knowledge of English, stood him in good stead in performing this special duty with credit. As a recognition of his ability, Government decided to give him an appointment in the Revenue department, in which he worked at first as a Tehsildar and then as a Deputy Collector. A translation of the Criminal Procedure Code was also rendered by him, but the translation for which he deserves even greater credit than for these books of law, is the translation of an English book of Mr. Golman, called "The Heavens". The Urdu translation was called the *Samavat*. The story as to how this book carried his fame outside the N. W. P. is particularly interesting. The Government of the N. W. P. had announced a reward of Rs. 1000/- for this translation, but when Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad's translation was completed, a reward of Rs. 400/- was offered to him, as some grudging or incompetent official, who had been consulted by Government as an expert, reported that the translation was fairly good but "not upto the mark". This was not only disappointing to the talented translator, but insulting, as the merit of his work was not fully recognised. His disappointment did not, however, last long, owing to an intervention from

an unexpected quarter, duly recognising the worth of the *Samavat*, and creating for the translator the chance of being elevated to a high office in Hyderabad (Deccan).

The Administration of Hyderabad (Deccan) was then in the able hands of Sir Salar Jang I, as Prime Minister, and the well-known scholar, Syed Husain Bilgrami, was the trusted adviser of the Government of the Nizam on literary and educational questions. The book which Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad had translated was sent to Hyderabad, through the Resident, for being corrected, and was referred to Syed Husain Bilgrami (afterwards Nawab Imadul Mulk). The latter was very favourably impressed by its beautifully idiomatic language, and he declared that he did not agree with the opinion of the expert consulted by the N. W. P. Government. In his opinion the translation was excellent. This resulted in a belated recognition of the book by the N. W. P. Government. Some time after this, in 1877, a high appointment in the Revenue Department in Hyderabad was offered to Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad. He went and distinguished himself in his new sphere as he had done in his previous positions. Gradually his reputation as a scholar which had preceded him, and his mastery of the pen, began to be utilised in the Deccan in various ways.

The writing of story books on which the fame of Nazeer Ahmad as a writer chiefly rests, had begun when he was a Deputy Collector in the N. W. P., several years before he went to Hyderabad. The first book which brought him honour and recognition is the *Miratul Urus* (or the

Bride's Mirror). This story gives an account of two imaginary characters, Asghari and Akbari, the former a girl of well-regulated ideas and habits and the latter a wayward and undisciplined daughter of the same family. Asghari's good manners won for her great popularity in the house of her parents-in-law, when she was married, while her sister Akbari had to suffer for her shortcomings when she went to her husband's house. The aim of the author was to guide girls in learning good manners, without making the book an obtrusive book of advice.

The way in which the writing of the *Miratul Urus* started deserves special mention. Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad felt that there were no good books specially suited to the requirements of girls. For his own daughters, who were reading Urdu with him, he began to write a story. His daughters found his descriptions of the house of the family described by him and the talks between the members of the family, so interesting and true to life that they used frequently to ask him to tell them a little more of the story. Chapters of the book were thus being written, one after another, under the pressing demand of the daughters of the author. Many neighbours heard of the interest thus aroused in the minds of the girls and they asked them to lend them the manuscript, so that other girls may make copies of it and read it at their own homes. The book was thus known and appreciated in a small circle, before it attracted the notice of the N. W. P. Government and fetched a prize of one thousand rupees,

and became a very popular book when it was published.¹

The story of how this book came to the notice of the Government is also worth relating. Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad was serving at Jhansi when the then Director of Public Instruction came on tour. He was camping outside the town. The Maulvi's son, Bashiruddin Ahmad, who was a little boy at the time, was passing by the camp, when the Director asked him if he was a student and if so what book he was studying. The boy said he was reading a book called *Chand Pand*. The Director said he had not heard of any book of that name. The boy replied that it was a small book of advices which his father had written for him. The Director expressed a desire to see the book. Bashiruddin Ahmad went to his house and fetched the book, but as he felt that the manuscript of the *Miratul Urus* would be even more interesting, he took it with him along with the *Chand Pand*. The officer was so struck with the excellence of the book that he asked Maluvi Nazeer Ahmad to get a fair copy of it prepared for him and to send it to him. This was done. The Director laid the manuscript before the Lieutenant Governor, Sir William Muir, who already knew Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad. Sir William Muir found it very readable and useful. About two months after the visit of the Director to Jhansi, the author got a letter from him to the effect that the book was the first of its kind and had been awarded a prize of one thousand rupees.

1. For this detail and for the information in the paragraph that follows, I am indebted to the *Havat un Nazeer*, a readable biography of Maulana Nazeer Ahmad, written by Syed Itikhar Alam.

Later on the Lieutenant Governor publicly praised this book in a Darbar held at Agra in 1869, and gave the author a clock as a personal present from himself with the author's name inscribed on it. The *Miratul Urus* has since passed through numerous editions and hundreds of thousands of copies of this book have been sold throughout the length and breadth of India. It has been translated into English. It has also been translated into many Indian languages.

The popularity of Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad's first story book led to the writing of the *Binat un Naash*, which is almost a continuation of the first story. Asghari, who was the chief character in the first book, appears again in the role of a teacher of girls. This book has also been published many times and is popular, but it cannot be considered equal to the "Bride's Mirror." It appears that the author intended to make it suitable for students of a standard more advanced than that of the readers of his first book.

The *Taubatun Nasuh*, was the third book of this series. It is an instructive story, and is considered as one of the best specimens of the style of writing introduced by Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad. The success of these three stories created a great demand for other books from the pen of the same author and the *Ibnul Waqt*, the *Muhsinat* and *Ayama* followed in swift succession. They are all stories with a purpose. The *Ibnul Waqt* describes the difficulties of a man, who was born and bred in an old fashioned home, but who adopted the Western style of living and proved a misfit. The *Muhsinat*.

also known as the *Fisana-i-Mubtila*, was a story of an unfortunate man who married two wives and had constant worries and friction in his home life. The author wrote on the front page of the book the adage: "There is only one heart in human breast. It cannot be given to two persons". In the writing of this book, Maulvi Bashir-ud-din Ahmad, the only son of Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad, who was a well-educated young man by then, collaborated with his father. The *Ayama* laid stress on the re-marriage of widows.

There are many other writings of Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad, which could be mentioned, but in the interests of brevity only one more may be referred to. It is named *Mauiza-i-Hasana*. It is a collection of the letters which the author wrote to his son, from time to time, giving him advice and guidance in educational and cultural matters. It has benefited numerous youths besides the author's son.

In addition to the distinction attained by Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad in literature, the credit of producing a translation of the Quran in pure and idiomatic Urdu, belongs to him. The older translations were too literal to be easily understood by those who did not know Arabic. Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad took the bold step of rendering the Holy book into idiomatic Urdu, to enable Urdu knowing people to understand its meaning. He introduced parenthetical clauses here and there, to elucidate the meaning of the text. This work brought him even greater popularity than that acquired by him through his other books, but it

also aroused opposition from some theologians, who regarded any translation besides a strictly literal one as an unjustified interference with the Quran". The opposition of some theologians to Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad was further accentuated towards the end of his life, when he wrote the *Ummahat-ul-Ummah*, that is "the mothers of the faithful". This book was written to refute the criticism of a non-Muslim on the number of matrimonial relations contracted by the Prophet of Islam in the concluding years of his life. The author explained the reasons for those marriages and showed that they were not promoted by love of pleasure. Exception was taken by some Maulvis to a quotation in this book, which was considered disrespectful to the wives of the Prophet. An agitation was started against this publication, which forced the author to do away with all the copies of the book.

Apart from his writings, Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad had the unique distinction of being the greatest orator in Urdu. A volume of the lectures delivered by the Maulvi from time to time, in public meetings, has been published. Till his return to Delhi from Hyderabad, Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad had not discovered that he had the gift of oratory. At the annual meeting of the Tibbia College at Delhi he probably made his first public speech. He found that his tongue could wield even a greater influence than his pen, in moving the hearts of people. After that he was in demand at various places throughout the country. At Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, he made eloquent speeches. Aligarh and Lahore had more frequent

opportunities of benefiting by his oratory. Immense crowds used to gather at Lahore to hear him. He addressed large audiences, in a voice which could be clearly heard in every corner of the hall. Most of his speeches were made at the annual gatherings of the Moslem Educational Conference. The Anjuman-i-Hamayati-Islam of Lahore also used to invite him every year for its anniversary meetings and his lectures were a specially attractive feature of its annual functions. He used to hold his audiences spell bound for two or three hours at a stretch.

Though Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad has made his mark as a master of prose, it must be mentioned that he had a fairly good capacity for writing verse. He does not appear to have written any *ghazals* or other popular poems, but he has written many lengthy pieces of verse, as preludes to his Urdu lectures or as supplements to them. The trend of the poems used to be the same as those of the lectures. In one of these poems he made all the points which he wanted to make, and added: "*Abhi hai nasr men Kehne ko asl-i-mudaa baqi*" (The real purpose of my address has still to be explained in prose). From matter of fact compositions of this kind much of real poetry cannot be expected, but there were occasional sparks of Maulvi Nazeer Ahmad's exceptionally sharp wit in his poems, which showed that he could have shone in poetry, if he had liked to do so.

As a man he led a quiet and simple life. He preferred the old fashioned life of Indian families to the modern style of living, which had come

into vogue in his time. He spent about twenty years after his retirement from Hyderabad in devoted voluntary service to the cause of literature. He departed from this life in 1912, full of years and honours, and his loss was mourned by hundreds of thousands of his grateful countrymen.