



Moulvi Zaka Ullah

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Among the literary men who have contributed during the second half of the 19th century to the advancement of Urdu literature, the late Maulvi Mohammad Zaka Ullah must occupy a high rank. It cannot be said that he was distinguished for great originality or was particularly remarkable for the beauty of his style, but his contribution to the stock of Urdu literature was none the less valuable. His works consisted mainly of translations and adaptations from English books on a variety of subjects. He began by writing text books for schools, on Physical Science, Economics, Geography and History, all of which were liked when they appeared and served a useful purpose. The work, however, by which he will be chiefly remembered was *Tarikh-i-Hindustan*, a history of India in 14 volumes, which is the most exhaustive compilation on the history of India in the Urdu language and may be regarded as his *magnum opus*. He has taken great pains over this book, which is the result of vast study and research, the learned author having tapped all valuable sources of information, English as well as Indian. His work illustrates the debt which Urdu literature owes to English, so far as the present

stage of its development is concerned. Maulvi Zaka Ullah wrote nothing but prose, and even in prose he always aimed at simplicity of style and never went in for flights of imagination or artificial means of producing effect.

For the brief biographical sketch of the life of Maulvi Zaka Ullah, which is given below, I am indebted to my esteemed friend Maulvi Mohd Inayat Ullah,<sup>1</sup> the eldest son of the author, who is himself a well-known literary man. M. Zaka Ullah sprang from a respectable and scholarly family which traced its origin to Ghazni in Afghanistan. His ancestors came from Ghazni to the Punjab and after living in Lahore for some time, his great grandfather went to Delhi and settled there, in the time of Shah Alam. He was appointed a tutor to one of the Mughal Princes and this position the descendants of the first tutor occupied after him, so that the father of Maulvi Zaka Ullah was employed in that capacity upto 1857. Born in 1832, Zaka Ullah, in his childhood, commenced his studies with his grandfather Hafiz Mohammad Baka Ullah. He showed signs of intelligence from his infancy and began to read the Gulistan of Saadi when he was only six years old. It is related that during his childhood his mother complained to his grandfather one day that he had been a very naughty boy and had broken some utensils. She suggested that he should be punished. The grandfather smiled and said he would not punish

1. M. Mohammad Inayat Ullah was alive when this lecture was delivered. His untimely death has deprived Urdu literature of one of its best authors.

him that day, even if he had set fire to the house, because he was pleased very much with the way in which Zaka Ullah had got up his lesson.

A College had been established at Delhi in those days. Zaka Ullah joined the Oriental branch of that institution. He had not been there many months before he won a scholarship and also a prize in the form of some books and a few rupees. He was quite a little boy at the time and was so pleased with his prize that he ran breathless from his school to his house, and presented what he had got to his mother, who was very much delighted with the success of her child, as in sending him to school she had been mainly instrumental. As a student he showed special aptitude for Mathematics and was a favourite pupil of the late. Mr. Ram Chandra, who was a distinguished mathematical teacher. This taste for mathematics Maulvi Zaka Ullah retained throughout his life. He translated in Urdu well-known text books on Arithmetic, Algebra and Euclid, and thereby rendered great service to the cause of education through the medium of the vernacular. His inclination towards mathematics also indicated, what proved afterwards a characteristic feature of Maulvi Mohammad Zaka Ullah's life, namely, his practical and matter of fact genius, which led him to have a distinct liking for prose. He passed his High Proficiency examination when he was 16 or 17 and got two silver medals and was soon afterwards appointed a teacher in the institution where he had been educated. The first

book that he wrote was on Indian games, such as cards, chess, etc. It was published before the Mutiny and was liked very much by English men, as it gave them an opportunity of knowing how those games, which were familiar to them as well, were played in India. His next publication was a little book on Arithmetic, which was sold out in three days in Delhi, and was the talk of the town when it appeared, as people thought it was remarkable that a youth still in his teens should write such a book. This publication brought him a profit of Rs. 32/- which sum he presented to his sister in the shape of an article of jewellery which he purchased with it. The small beginning thus made by him as a writer and a compiler of books proved so encouraging and his desire to serve his country by means of his writing was so intense, that it is estimated that he wrote about seventy thousand pages of printed matter, which appeared in about hundred volumes. This estimate covers only such of his writings as were published in book form. Besides these, I understand, he contributed about 10,000 pages to numerous newspapers, magazines and periodicals, for which he wrote from time to time. I am informed that there were several thousand pages of manuscript still lying in his boxes, when he departed from this world.

Having started in service as a teacher at Delhi, Maulvi Zaka Ullah continued to serve in the Education Department till he was 55. He was transferred from Delhi, to Agra, was re-transferred to Delhi, and was for some time the

Headmaster of the Normal School and afterwards a Deputy Inspector of Schools. He was then transferred to the Muir College, Allahabad, to teach Western science through the medium of Urdu, as at that time there was an idea of having an Oriental Department in connection with that College, but that scheme fell through and the Maulvi had to work there as a Professor of Arabic and Persian. It was in 1872 that he went to Allahabad and served there till 1887, when he retired on pension. Shortly before his retirement, he was granted the title of Khan Bahadur and Shams-ul-Ulama, both in one year. After his retirement he spent sometime at Aligarh, in the company of his friend Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and then came to Delhi and settled down there for a fresh period of literary activity. In fact the more valuable part of his work was done after his retirement. He lived for 23 years after giving up service, and the whole of that period, barring the last one year or so of his life, when he suffered from a protracted illness, was devoted to useful literary pursuits. He was not a very strong man physically, but he appears to have regulated his life so well and was a man of such abstemious habits that he always kept good health till he broke down right at the end, which was due to natural exhaustion after the tremendous amount of work done by him. It is worth mentioning that during his 37 years of service he never took leave except for 16 days in all. It is said that during his last illness he used to remark that as he had no illness for the greater part of his life he was

having a long illness at the end. It was the opinion of doctors that there was nothing wrong, even then, with his vital organs, but the real trouble was a decline of strength owing to natural decay. He died at the ripe age of 78, on the 7th November 1910, at Delhi, and his loss was mourned by all true lovers of learning and by his numerous admirers in Delhi and in other parts of India.

Maulvi Mohammad Zaka Ullah had so charming a personality that those who knew him and came in contact with him became very fond of him. I had the privilege of coming into a fairly intimate touch with him in 1907 and 1908, which years I spent at Delhi. He was extremely unassuming and obliging. Whenever I made a request to him for some contribution to the Urdu magazine I was then publishing, he never said 'No'. He was a great friend of learning and believed in the propagation of knowledge in every possible way. He took a deep and lively interest in all literary efforts. There was a great friendship between him and Maulvi Nazir Ahmad and other scholarly men of his day. There was a literary society, which was founded by a number of men who had received their education in the old Delhi College, and that society was kept up by them till the cruel hand of death took them all away, one by one, from our midst. The late Rai Bahadur Peare Lal, the late Maulvi Nazir Ahmad and Maulvi Mohammad Zaka Ullah were prominent members of that society. The society was not very formal or regular, but these distinguished men used to meet very frequently

in rooms in the upper storey of the Delhi Institute and to discuss literary and scientific matters, thus deriving inspiration from one another for the work to which they devoted their lives.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the life of Maulvi Zaka Ullah was the great love and reverence he had for his mother. When he got an offer for an appointment at Allahabad he received a simultaneous offer for service at Lahore. He himself liked to go to Lahore, but his mother advised him to go to Allahabad, and he decided to do as she desired, at the sacrifice of his personal inclination. It seems she was a lady of a very strong character and was regular and methodical in her habits. This appears to have kept an abiding impression on her son and to have contributed, in no small degree, to the son's success in life. She used to get up at about 3-30 a.m., to offer her *tahajjud*<sup>1</sup> prayers, which were followed by the morning prayers, after which her daily routine of house hold life started. She used to have a nap for half an hour between 8-30 and 9 a.m., after finishing the important part of her morning's work, but she seldom slept during the rest of the day. She made a point of doing some spinning every day and kept a strict discipline in the house, so that no one in the household dared disobey her. Even her husband showed great deference to her wishes. Maulvi Zaka Ullah used to say

1. This is a prayer which is not included in the five obligatory prayers prescribed for Muslims. It is a matter of option, but its merit is believed to be great. The time for it is between 3 and 4 in the morning.

that he owed to his mother's regular habits his regularity and the methodical nature of his work. Though a devoutly religious man in his own way, he was absolutely free from racial and religious prejudice. He had as good friends among Hindus and Christians as among Muslims. All classes of his friends liked him equally. He was a strong supporter of the educational movement started by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan at Aligarh and was a prominent member of his party, yet he had some very intimate friends among those who opposed the Aligarh movement. He always took a great interest in students. A student never approached him in vain for help or assistance. If any one asked him to throw some light on any question or problem, he was quite willing to give freely of the knowledge he possessed. If a student asked him for any kind of help for pursuing his studies, he was ready to render assistance. The morning time was usually the time devoted by him to his literary work, and he did not like to receive visitors at that time, but for student visitors even that time was not held to be sacred. If it was announced to him that a student wanted to see him for some purpose, he used to spare a few minutes to give him an interview.

Maulvi Zaka Ullah was a great believer in thrift and economy and adopted these as the guiding principles of his life. Whenever he saw young men or students, he was never tired of preaching to them to adopt simplicity of life as their aim and to live as frugally as possible. In his dress and manner of living he was old fashion-

ed and he stuck to that style, but he was quite progressive in his ideas. His desire for learning was so intense that he was eager to learn from every possible source, and if on any particular day he did not learn anything new, he used to remark that that day of his life was wasted. His conversation was never personal and was mostly on literary subjects. He had a genuine respect for every body who could accomplish something in any department of life, so that it was not only learned men to whom he was ready to show respect, but every one who had distinguished himself in any art or craft, or had won name as an administrator or had succeeded in life by acquiring wealth by legitimate means, got from him his due share of respect. So far as his own work is concerned he never cared for praise. The kind of work he had chosen was such as would not ordinarily elicit great praise from the press or the public, but it was fortunate for him that he was indifferent to praise. He believed in doing literary work for its own sake, and went on writing because his nature prompted him to do so. He felt it was by means of writing that he could place knowledge within reach of those, who would not have otherwise obtained it. Throughout his life he performed his great task as if he was an untiring labourer in the field of letters, possessed of a giant's strength, so that he has beaten the record among his contemporaries in the volume of his work, though as a purely literary performance, his books cannot claim the more polished style of men like Maulvi Nazir Ahmad and Maulvi Mohammad Husain Azad.