

**Services of 'Ulamā' for Women Education in Colonial Punjab: A
Study of the efforts of *Mawlānā Abdul Ḥaq Abbās***

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Abstract

In the nineteenth century religious traditional system of learning was popular among Muslims. In such system there were fewer educational opportunities for Muslim girls. The only opportunity for Muslim girls was in the form of *Maktab*s to learn recitation of the Holy Quran in their childhood. After *Maktab* education there was no space of formal education of the Muslim girls. Even in the mid of nineteenth century the Muslim girls who belonged to Muslim elite class were taught to read the Holy Quran and little bit grammar. In some Muslim elite families girls were allowed to learn Arabic, Persian and Urdu languages but only at home from their father and brothers. Inevitably; one must come forward to mobilize people in favor of modern education for male as well as for female to safeguard purity of Muslim civilization and Muslim identity in emerging political paradigm of colonial India. Such rigidity was more intensive in colonial Punjab. In non-favorable circumstance for Muslim women education in colonial Punjab the

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efforts of *Mawlānā Abdul Ḥaq Abbās* (1884-1960) were remarkable and the role of *Madrasa al-Banāt* was undeniable.

Keywords: Colonial Punjab, women education, *Abdul Ḥaq Abbās*
Madrasa al-Banāt

Introduction

The traditional thinking of Muslim community in India made it difficult to even talk about the schooling of Muslim girls. It was a difficult task to convince Muslim community in favor of education of their daughters. British government policies provided a space for education of girls but the modern curriculum was not compatible with cultural, religious and social demands of the Muslim community.² So there was a need of serious and practical effort to cope with such situation. It was necessary to establish a school with suitable curriculum to attract the middle and poor class Muslim families for education of their daughters.³ Always there was a well-defined relation between language and power. Language was one of the symbols through which power consolidate itself and reconstruct the minds of masses in such way that they can accept particular justification of power.⁴ After a careful analysis of British imperialism in India it is easy to conclude that the change of language of any community is like to make them slaves because it will change each aspect of their life. The change of language is basically one of the powerful steps for the colonization of minds of the masses. For Muslims, Arabic was a language to learn religion and Persian was an official language of Muslim governments in India.

² Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, *Muslim Women, Reform and Princely Patronage: Nawab Sultan Jahan Begam of Bhopal*, (London:Routledge, 2007), 84.

³ Hurley, *Muslim Women, Reform and Princely Patronage*, 85

⁴ Tariq Rahman, *Language, Ideology and Power: Language Learning Among the Muslims of Pakistan and North India* (Karachi: Oxford University Press,2002), 231

Urdu and Persian languages were considered the symbol of Muslim political power in India. When British government changed the official language from Persian to English, it was a setback for traditional education system of Muslims. Many Muslim reformers and religious leaders considered traditional education of Arabic, Urdu and Persian important because they thought that it was necessary to highlight the symbols of Muslim power, as they were the order of the day to safeguard the Muslim politics and identity in the United India.⁵

Mawlānā Abdul Haq Abbās was one of the renowned scholars of Jalandhar in colonial Punjab. He was a keen observer, intensive reader and an excellent thinker. He analyzed dynamic situation of colonial India and concluded that it was a matter of life or death for the Muslims of India to strengthen their identity without which they could not be able to get their right status. With properly designed curriculum, education was the only way to cope with the matter. He was in favor of traditional as well as modern education. He concluded that a practical approach is required to promote education in pure Islamic traditional paradigm. It is necessary to convince Muslims in favor of religious as well as contemporary education and at that time it was only possible by removing their doubts about contemporary education. According to him Arabic was the language of Muslim *Ummah* and if efforts were made to promote Arabic language among Muslims of colonial India then it would create a strong linkage between Muslims of colonial India and Muslim *Ummah*. He also considered that the learning of Arabic language enhance the religious consciousness among Muslims which was required to be a good Muslim

⁵ Rahman, *Language, Ideology and Power* ,232-233

as well as to protect Muslim identity in such dynamic scenarios of colonial India. He established *Anjuman Madrasa al-Banāt* in *Jalandhar*. At the start of twentieth century there was no school available to educate Muslim girls. He started *Madrasa al-Banāt* in *Jalandhar* in 1926. This institution was purely to educate Muslim girls. He introduced a unique curriculum in the which was in accordance with Islamic tradition of education as well as compatible with contemporary needs. *Mawlānā's* services were remarkable for Muslim women education in colonial Punjab.

Efforts of Mawlānā Abbās for Women Education in Colonial Punjab

Maulana Abdul Haq Abbas was the founder of *Madrasat-ul-Banat* which was one of the finest institutes of the Sub-Continent for the education of Muslim girls. He was such an ambitious person who had strong desire from the core of his heart to serve Muslims of the Sub-continent. He was a true Muslim and a genuine scholar. He was a keen observer, excellent reader and outstanding thinker. He belonged to a renowned, elite and dominant family of *Bastī Dānish-Mandān* in *Jalandhar*, colonial Punjab.⁶ His father Abbās 'Ali was a doctor and in-charge of government hospital in *Jalandhar*. His father was died when he was of few years old. After the death of his father, his maternal uncle Khān Ghulām Jillānī took his responsibility and grown him up. Jillānī was a well-known religious scholar and Sufī saint of his time.⁷ At home he learnt the Holy Quran, Hadith, Tafsīr, Arabic, Persian and Urdu languages from his maternal uncle. When he was in class five his command on Arabic and Persian

⁶ Ubaid ul Haq Nadvi, "Mubaligh o Muslih Abdul Haq Abbas" in Monthly *Muslimah*, Lahore: MTB Press, June 2007), 12

⁷ Ubaid ul Haq Nadvi, *Bāni-e-Madrasah Abdul Haq Abbās kī Zindagī aur Madrasat-ul-Banāt kī Tārīkh par Ek Nazar* (Lahore: Maktaba tul Ilmia, 1976), 31-32

language was outstanding. After observing his skills, his class teacher Shair Muhammad Khan recommended to promote him in class six. Headmaster Mr. Brown himself interviewed Abdul Ḥaq Abbās and was impressed due to his outstanding Arabic and Persian language skill. He allowed him to sit in class six. Abdul Ḥaq requested headmaster to allow him to continue his study in class five.⁸

Abbās had deep interest in intellectual discussions and debates (Munāzarah). He was inspired from *Mawlānā Sanāullāh Amritsarī*. In his teenage he joined the study circle of *Mawlānā Sanāullāh Amritsarī*. He started public discussions and debates with Christian missionaries under the guidance of Amritsarī. His deep interest in such discussions and debates lead him away from school's formal education. He started study about different religions. For this purpose he learned Hindi and Sanskrit from a Hindu Pandit. Soon he got expertise in Hindi and Sanskrit, so that he could easily translate and explain Hindu manuscripts. He deeply studied Hinduism and used this knowledge in public debates with Ārya Samāj followers.⁹ In 1905 plague was broke out in Punjab. Due to large number of causalities, people were so afraid that they left their homes and took shelter in tents outside the residential areas. At that time there were many helpless patients in deserted houses and no one was agree to help them due to threat of plague. In such situation Abdul Ḥaq did not take care of himself and served such patients with food and medicine. He and his friends managed many burials of those who died due to plague.¹⁰

⁸ Nadvi, *Bāni-e-Madrasah Abdul Ḥaq Abbās kī Zindagī*, 32-33

⁹ Yoginder Sikand, "Women in Islam: Muslim Women's Education and Social Reform-IV", in *Monthly Islamic Voice*, Vol.12-05, No.137,(Lahore: MTB Press, May 1998), 1

¹⁰ Yoginder Sikand, *Bastions of Believers: Madrassah and Islamic Education in India*

Mawlānā Abbas got married with the elder daughter of Khān Attā Muhammad Khān on 29 January 1907 which, in turn proved watershed in his life as after marriage he decided to establish a school for Muslim boys and girls. The purpose of this school was to educate Muslims children in pure Islamic and traditional framework so that they emerge as a true Muslim with religious, cultural and social consciousness. When he announced to establish a school some people from Khāwaja community joined him for the cause. He started Anjuman Khādemān-e. He started Islamia High School in a rented building in Bastī sheikh darvaish, Jalandhar. After the hard work of three years the school was established up to class two. The number of students gradually increased. School was in a small building and a spacious building was required to accommodate the increasing number of students.¹¹ This school was shifted to another rented building in Pathān Bastī Ghaza and after some years it was again shifted in another rented building in Bazār Bānsānwālā, Jalandhar. In 1913, a landlord Khādim Hussain Khān of Bastī-mitthoo donated a plot for the building of school. People supported Abbās for the construction of new building and he also consumed his family income for the purpose. After a year school was finally shifted in its own campus. Islamia High School got middle status in 1915-16 and secondary status in 1919. He designed and proposed a new curriculum which contains many Islamic subjects but governing body refused to implement it. Governing body approved a modern curriculum instead of it. This made Abdul Haq Abbas unhappy and due to his heartfelt feelings he fell ill. Due to his illness he excused

(New Delhi: Penguin, 2005), 14

¹¹ Mawlānā Anwār ul Hassan Shairkotī, "Aqaa-e-Abdul Haq Abbās" in *Monthly Muslimah*, (Lahore: MTB Press, June 2007), 39-41

from the management responsibilities and requested to relieve him from the responsibility of the school. During his illness he spent his time at home. He started teaching of Arabic, Holy Quran, Hadith and Tafsīr to his wife, daughters and other female family members. When these ladies completed their studies he informally started a madrasah in *Bastī Dānishmandān* near his house ordained for education and training of girls coming from Muslim community. In the madrasah mainly Arabic, Holy Quran, Tafsīr and Ḥadīth were taught by him. From this madrasah many girls got religious education and successfully orientated themselves and their family life with the teachings of Islam.¹²

In 1929 Mawlānā Abdul Ḥaq Abbās and Mawlānā Abdullah Qasoorī started Anjuman Ishāt-e-Islam. From this platform he started public debates with Hindus, Sikhs and Christians. He was popular debater and people were inspired from his speeches. Many non-Muslims embraced Islam on his hand. He started Dars-e-Quran in 1921 in a building near Addah Bastiāt, Jullundur. A large number of people were joined Dars-e-Quran on regular basis. He started Dār al-Quran in a new building in Jalandhar. He also started a fortnightly magazine 'Alfalāh' from Dār al-Quran. He was well aware of the role of journalism. He observed that it was an effective medium to deliver the message of Islam to the masses. He started an Urdu Journal Piyām-e-Islam in 1930.¹³ A part of Piyām-e-Islam was dedicated for the promotion of teachings of the Holy Quran. In this part verses from the Holy Quran were presented with their translation, meaning and short tafsīr. He also started another Urdu journal purely for

¹² Maulana Anwar ul Hassan Shairkoti, "Aqaa-e-Abdul Haq Abbas."., 43

¹³ Ubaid ul Haq Nadvi, "Muballigh-o-Muslih Abdul Ḥaq Abbās" in Monthly *Muslimah*, Lahore: MTB Press, June 2007), 13

Muslim women with the name of Muslimah. It contained such writings which were for motivation and awareness of Muslim women about their education and rights. Through Muslimah Mawlānā Abbās tried to realize the Muslim women about their duties and role in family as well as in social life. Abbās, being a true Muslim, criticized the biased attitude of English government towards Muslims. He was convinced that English government was consciously destroying Muslims by using different means like law, governance and education policy etc. He was against the colonial rule from the core of his heart. He helped different anti English Government movements and always ready to actively participate in such movements. In his teenage he learnt the use of sword and stick and he continuously taught such skill to others and motivated them to participate in such movements. In 1911, a job as Tehsildar was offered to him but he refused to join¹⁴ but he did not show any interest in it. In 1926 he took a bold decision. He shifted his family from his Haveli Irshrāt Manzil in Bastī Dānishmandān to Jalandhar in a small rented house where he started Madrasa al-Banāt in his Haveli in November, 1926.¹⁵

Madrasa al-Banāt and Muslim girls' education and training

At that time, the education of girls was considered odd even in Muslims. It was a mandatory for every Muslim girl or woman to be veiled and it was a common thought that education of girls would gradually distort the veil tradition which would impure the Muslim civilization in sub-continent. At start people of Bastī Dānishmandān negatively criticized the Madrasa al-Banāt because of its stance for the education of Muslim girls

¹⁴ Nadvi, "Mubaligh-o-Muslih Abdul Haq Abbās.", 14.

¹⁵ Gail Minault, *Secluded scholars: Women's education and Muslim social reform in colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 251.

but with the passage of time and due to hard work and dedication of Mawlānā Abbās the Madrasa got suitable favor from society. Muslim girls from other areas were also got admission in the Madrasa due to its hostel facility. The number of girl students increased rapidly and within few years it reached to round about one hundred and fifty.¹⁶ Mawlānā Abdul Ḥaq Abbās and his family was committed with their cause and he worked at his level best to persuade the Muslim community in favor of education by his writings or speeches because he thought that today's educated girl would be a good mother in future.¹⁷ When Madrasa al-Banāt was in his Haveli, two girls from Hindu Achhoot community embraced Islam. Abbās sheltered those girls. People from Hindu Achhoot community were the employee of Madrasa al-Banāt for its cleanliness. After the event they started strike against Madrasa al-Banāt and refused to clean it. Abbās refused himself with his wife cleaned the complete building of Madrasa in the evening on daily basis. He endured the pain of such hard duty but did not agree to return those girls to Hindu Achhoot community. He was a man of courage and his mission was to preach about the blessings of Islam.¹⁸

Abbās was also a good player of sword and stick. In 1947, there was a threat that Hindus or Sikhs would attack on his Madrasa. Due to such threat he trained the girls to use the sword and stick. In 1947, after partition he decided to migrate to Pakistan. He migrated to Pakistan with those hostel girls which were unable to go to their homes due to Hindu Muslim riots. He arrived in Lahore without any accessory of life even he

¹⁶ Gail Minault, *Secluded scholars: Women's education and Muslim social reform in colonial India*, 252-253

¹⁷ I Gail Minault, *Secluded scholars: Women's education and Muslim social reform in colonial India*, 254

¹⁸Nadvi, "Mubaligh-o-Muslih Abdul Ḥaq Abbās", 12

failed to bring books of his library which he always considered his only asset. In Lahore, he did not claim any property from Government of Pakistan for his own use. He helped people in refugee camps of Lahore. He organized those girls and advised them to help refugees who got shelter in the same building which afterward was allotted by Government of Pakistan for Madrasa al-Banāt in Lahore. He managed the safe return of the girl students, who were with him, to their homes after the end of riots.

Conclusion

After 1857, Muslims of colonial India have to make their way in new dynamic circumstances. In such situation means for the progress of Muslim community were limited because Muslims lost their political power. The only way for Muslim community to get suitable status and to secure their identity was education. But majority of Muslim families were not in favor of Modern education even for their boys. Many Muslim scholars made their efforts to convince Muslim community in favor of Modern education but only for boys. Even sir Syed Ahmed Khan a renowned Muslim scholar who was a staunch supporter of Modern education thought that only traditional and apprentice type education was enough for Muslim women. At that time it was difficult to even talk about women education because of biased stance of Muslim community in this regard. In such situation brave efforts of *Mawlānā Abdul Haq Abbās* were remarkable for Muslim women education. He practically proved that it was possible to create space for Muslim women education which was in accordance with Muslim tradition and contemporary world.