

# Daryabadi's Atheism and Revivalism of Islam

Aroosha Mushtaq\*  
Muhammad Sultan Shah\*\*

**Abstract:** Maulana Abdul Majid Daryabadi (1892 – 1977) was an Indian writer and exegete of the Holy Qur'an. Daryabadi was actively associated with the Khilafat Movement; Royal Asiatic Society, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh; Nadwatul Ulema, Lucknow; Shibli Academy, Azamgarh, and several other leading Islamic and literary organisations. He studied several books of Orientalists and under their influence, became sceptical of religion and called himself a "rationalist". For almost nine years, he remained away from religion but repented and became a devout Muslim. This article depicts the turning points of Daryabadi's life. Being atheist he wrote many books on philosophy and on psychology, which became leading books of that field. While being Muslim he not only refuted his early writings of atheist's period but also devoted his whole life for the service of Islam.

**Keywords:** Revivalism , Atheism , Rationalist , Commentator , Skepticism, spirituality, Pseudo-rationalism

## Introduction

Abdul Mājid Daryabadi was born and brought up in a family of Muslim scholars. Daryabadi's life is full of tragic incidents. His family was famous in the town due to religious traditions and education. He always enjoyed the company of reputed scholars and mentors. His family environment was very religious. His parents were practicing Muslim who observed all religious duties. While Daryabadi's grandfathers both

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\* Phd Scholar, Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, GC University, Lahore: arooshamushtaq@gmail.com

\*\* Professor, Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, GC University, Lahore, Pakistan: dr.sultanshah@hotmail.co.uk

paternal and maternal enjoyed their duties as Muslim religious scholars and jurists. His upbringing in Islamic connotations. His writings at young age since he was a voracious reader. The point which is food for thought that is how a young Muslim born and brought up in a traditional Muslim family lost the real way and digged into the darkness of skepticism?. Was orientalist's writings was too much powerful for filling his mind and heart with revulsion towards Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him). As Francis Fukuyama wrote:

“But families don't really work if they are based on liberal principles that is, if their members regard them as they would a joint stock company, formed for their utility rather than being based on the ties of duty and love. Raising children or making a marriage work through a lifetime requires personal sacrifices that are irrational, if looked at from a cost-benefit calculus.”<sup>1</sup>

## **2. Educational Life**

Daryabadi's family was rich in culture and traditions. His family was traditional Muslim family acclaimed for its scholarship and piety. So what was the reason due to which Daryabadi was for a decade standing against his own religion. That was the writings of western people. As Francis Fukuyama claims that the number of cultural converts and economic migrants to the west is very high among Muslims. Hence the Muslim civilization poses no threat to the dominant and deeply entrenched western civilization which winds over the mind and heart of Muslims.”<sup>2</sup>

Daryabadi's life is very significant and full of lessons. His life towards rationalism in his twenties and return to the fold of Islam illustrates both the abiding appeal of the truth of Islam and also pitfalls faced especially by the young vulnerable Muslims who may wander into error under the influence of anti-Islam western writings. Well in school life Daryabadi was an active reader. It was in 1908 after having passed his secondary school and at Canning College first time Daryabadi's faith was demented

by a western work. As Daryabadī loved reading everything. In young age of mental immaturity he started to read an author who was atheist. He started to read the work of Dr. Drysdale<sup>3</sup> entitled Elements of Social Sciences. As Daryabadī wrote in his autobiography, it strongly argued that man's sexual urge being natural should be satisfied by all means: one need not wait for marriage on the contrary suppressing sexual desires results in psychological and physiological disorder. The moral code imposed by clergy is artificial and pernicious. It is pointless to observe such moral teachings which do not let man to do what he wants. For a sixteen years old young boy of a traditional Muslim family this message was both radical and confounding.”<sup>4</sup>

### **3. Daryabadī's Period of Atheism**

When Daryabadī faced this dilemma, he did not have any mentor to guide him. His parents and other family members had no information of this new challenge. Nor anyone of them was trained to tackle this problem. Young Daryabadī was not aware of prejudice of western writings. Rationalism presented before him a new word of new challenges which rejected all his previous mental approaches. He came across such western writings. Which completely destroyed his religious connotations. The next innocuous work which Daryabadī took as treasury was multi volumes of “International Library of Famous Literature”. The section of Qur'an carried a full length photograph of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). “The photograph depicted the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) in the traditional Arab attire. Worse, it showed him as a harsh bloodthirsty warrior carrying weapons given to violence and bloodshed.”<sup>5</sup>

In short his readings of all volume of this work convinced young mind that all stories he had heard about the Prophet's mercy, love, affection and compassion were baseless. That was the starting of the period of darkness. When he thought all his previous education, culture, traditions, religious values and religious personalities are fake. Overawed by western supremacy in thought technology and power he felt that Muslim version of Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) was only propaganda.

At college philosophy, psychology and logic were main subjects. He was influenced by philosophical writings of Hume Spencer Mill and Bradley.

Daryabadi mentioned two more books in his autobiography which played a main role in destroying Daryabadi's faith.

Maudsley's text books (i) *The Psychology of Mind* (1876) (ii) *The Pathology of Mind* (1879)<sup>6</sup>

While discussing the fit of epilepsy as disorder. Maudsley referred to the experience of receiving divine revelation, as claimed by the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) as an illustration, though adding that an epileptic person may accomplish something outstanding.”<sup>7</sup>

Daryabadi also learnt about the inexpensive publications brought out by Rationalist press Association London. All these publications attacked faith, rituals and supported strongly rationalism and western approach. That was the reason “in his senior secondary examination from Daryabadi put “Rationalist” rather than Muslim in the column identifying his faith.”<sup>8</sup> For Daryabadi the writings of Maudsley were not less than gospels. The author wrote about different diseases as:

“During certain phases of his malady, the patient is much addicted to reading his Bible, and prone to develop a delusion that he is some great personage, perhaps a god or Christ, or that he has received the Holy Ghost, or that he is direct channel of divine inspiration in some other special way... transports of exaltation rising up to states of ecstasy, frantic enthusiasm and intrepid energy, vivid imaginations translating themselves into hallucinations, inflamed conceit with alternation of melancholy self-distrust, what are these but the factors and characteristics of the inspired Prophet, who being epileptic used one to be thought to have a divine disease and to see visions and hear voices from heaven.”<sup>9</sup>

According to the analogy of young Daryabadi in this book author used the word “inspired Prophet” for Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). Because most of the orientalist used epileptic term for Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). Daryabadi's atheism came out in papers in 1920 on Allama Shibli's al-Kalam in the Urdu periodical al-Nazir.”<sup>10</sup> Daryabadi wrote series of articles against Shibli's work. Being a rationalist he was not reading to grant any space to any religion. On that time God's existence was a big doubt in front of young Daryabadi. In the same phase of darkness he wrote his first book, “Psychology of Leadership” which was published by leading British Publisher. The translation of this book published in Urdu entitled “Falsafa i Ijtima”. This work was reviewed in many magazines and prestigious research papers.

#### **4. Criticism on Daryabadi**

Mawalan Ahmad Raza Khan Barelwi took a strong stance against Daryabadi and gave the title of unbeliever. But many prominent religious scholars refuted Mawlana Ahmad Raza Khan. In the reality Mawalan Abdul Bari Firangi Mahali, Allama Syed Suleman Nadvi and Abdul Mājid Firangi Mahali were creating the way for Daryabadi's revivalism. While in subcontinent his first work took as pearls of wisdom. These were prescribed as textbook that was the peak of atheism. The darkness of skepticism occupied Daryabadi's mind for almost a decade. In this period too Daryabadi was active reader and very social. For from isolating himself completely with fellow Muslims, he attached himself as an enlightened member of the Muslim community.

#### **5. Daryabadi as a Neutral Reader**

In the reality only these social relations went a long way in facilitating his gradual return to the fold of Islam. No doubt he did not have any mentor to allay his doubts. On that time Ulema were not equipped at all to tackle this darkness as a result of which they failed to provide any proper answer to Daryabadi. That was the result of piety blood and strong family tie due to which by the grace of Allah Daryabadi's own study of certain books forced him to rethink about the truth of life. He had studied just the words of orientalist, rationalist and atheist. At college most of teachers were

British. While his family members were pious and scholars had no clue about the divesting contents of modern western writings.

At last due to his keen interest in philosophy. Daryabadi read the writings of Aurther Schopenhauer (1788-1860). His ethical doctrines are influenced by Buddhism. So Daryabadi studied Buddhism. His interest in spirituality was developed and refined by his in-depth study of the Chinese sage, Confucius's moral and spiritual teachings.

For spiritual teachings he studied the works of Mrs. Anne Besant and Dr. Bhagwan Das, who has elucidated Hindu mysticism. Gandhi's wirings, Bhagwat Gita and writings of Tilak presented before him a new phase of spirituality. For he had come to point that the western rationalists do not interpret the real mysteries of nature.

By comparison he concluded that the views of Buddha and Krishna were not inferior to those of Mill and Spencer. So, this created a phase of Daryabadi's life of total rejection of pseudo-rationalism.

While in that phase of life Daryabadi met Bhagwan Das and wrote:

“In June 1931, I stayed for a day in Benaras and met Dr. Bhagwan Das there. I had been enthralled by his philosophical work. He appeared as a saint, with luster in his eyes... Throughout my discussion with him he talked about truth and its numerous manifestations and higher reality. My atheism was considerably shaken by his spirituality. Had I not met him during that period I would have been steeped in error for a longer time and might have been hardened in my atheism.”<sup>11</sup>

Early religious education, religious environment at home, affiliations with pious elders and ethics taught by mentors play positive role even in the period of Daryabadi's atheism. As Daryabadi quoted one incident of the period of rationalism in these such words:

“When in October 1911, the infamous Islam-basher orientalist and missionary S.M. Zwemer

arrived in Lucknow for his presentation at a Conference, Daryabadī called on him alongwith his friend, Maulwi Abdul Bari Nadvi. In this formal meeting too Zwemer criticized Islam on several counts. On each occasion both Daryabadī in English and Nadvi in Arabic refuted his objects.”<sup>12</sup>

Well one big gain of the whole story was the stay of mysticism. That convinced him that real truth is behind the scene. Daryabadī's mind return to the fold of Islam is equally instructive may be that was due to the everlasting prayers of Daryabadī's father. Who died at Makkh in November, 1912 during Hajj. As Daryabadī wrote:

“On my period atheism he was very offensive and oppressive. Poor man according to his mental capability, tries his level best for my correction. His fellow told during Hajj he prayed for my revivalism by holding Kabbh.”<sup>13</sup>

## **6. Daryabadi's Quest for the Truth**

So, Daryabadī's attention turned to the writings of Muslim authors which gradually persuaded him. In 1918, the first volume of Shibli's “Sirat al-Nabi” came out since his childhood he was great admirer of Allama Shibli's stylistic charms and his chaste idiomatic Urdu prose. However, on studying it he eventually realized the greatness, nobility and perfection of Prophet Muhammad's character. It will be correct to say that Shibli's writing helped him dispel the misconceptions he had based on Orientalist's writings on Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). Now the false negative image of Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) as picturized by westerners was exposed and Daryabadī's hostility was replaced.

Within such readings many pious religious scholars were indirectly teaching the values of Islam to Daryabadī's through different resources. In his autobiography he mentioned the names of Akhbar Allabadi, Allama

Syed Suleman Nadvi, Mawlana Abdul Mājid Firangi Mahali and many others reputed personalities. Daryabadī taught about Islam through conversation of mentors as well.

As famous poet Akbar Allahabadi wrote many letters to Daryabadī. In 11<sup>th</sup> February, 1916, in his letter to Daryabadī he wrote:

“Look at the Holy Qur'an with happiness.  
Look as much as you can. Read the Qur'an  
as much that you can be able to get the real  
meaning of it.”<sup>14</sup>

Daryabadī was an exceptionally generous. His realization that certain things and experiences do exit beyond the realm of man's sense. Daryabadī's spiritual experience helped him return sooner to Islam. There was a big difference in mental approach of Daryabadī. The study of “International Library of Famous Literature” and “Sirat al-Nabi” by Shibli were two changing points of Daryabadī's life. The second point enabled him to free himself from pseudo-rationalism. In 1919, Rumi's Mathnavi helped him in shedding his rationalism. Another great work by Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi's popularly known as Mujaddid Alf Thani's Maktubal brought Daryabadī closer to message of Islam. It is true, he studied other Muslim mystical work such as Jami's Nafahat al-Unz and Farid al-Din al Attar's Mantiq al-Tayr.

As Daryabadī was good reader of English stuff and literature. In October 1920, Hyderabad, he came across Muhammad ‘Alī's English Translation of the Qur'an (1917). When he finished reading his Qur'an translation, he had no mental reservation or any doubt about Islam. By Allah's grace he returned to the fold of Islam.

“Daryabadī then brushed up his Arabic and embarked upon his extensive study of tafasir.”<sup>15</sup>

As it is written in “wafiyat e Mājidī”, at the time of marriage he was atheist, so when he returned to the fold of Islam. A ceremony conducted for his nikkah.”<sup>16</sup>

## 7. Daryabadi and Period of Revivalism

The turning point of Daryabadi was very attractive. After that he has spent his whole life for the service of Islam. It is also true he was emblazed being rationalist on his work entitled "The Psychology of Leadership". But when he returned to the fold of Islam Daryabadi ensured that these books of his were withdrawn from syllabus and were not re-issued. And presently this famous book of subcontinent is now hard to find even a single copy of these books either in Pakistan or in India.

Daryabadi dedicated his whole life for promoting the Islamic way of life through his numerous writings in both English and Urdu Language.

Many incidents played vital role in shaping his life. While Daryabadi's mentors Mawlana Muhammad 'Alī Jawhar, Allama Shibli, Akbar Allahabadi, and Mawlana Ashraf 'Alī Thānwī were the main personalities. Who changed Daryabadi's rationalistic approach. As Akbar Allahabadi was friend of Daryabadi's father. During the peak period of Daryabadi's atheism Akbar Allahabadi believed that he would one day realize the truth of Islam and will turn into a devout Muslim. In many places Daryabadi has cited several instances of Akbar's tactful handling of his stance on Islam. For example, Akbar's letter of 19 February, 1916 to Daryabadi as:

"Try to follow the Qur'an in original Arabic. This you can achieve by studying amazingly diverse in their approaches. Do not study the Qur'an for the sake of earning some divine reward. Read it for its literary hallmarks. I am sure some of its verses will leave their imprint on your's mind."<sup>17</sup>

In "Muasirin" Daryabadi reported a conversation in such pleasant word: "Daryabadi seems obsessed with Henri Bergson, as he talks all the time about his philosophy." To this Akbar replied: "Inshallah soon there will be a time when he would overwhelm Henri Bergson."<sup>18</sup>

In Daryabadi's revivalism Muhammad 'Alī also played a vital role. While Daryabadi's love for Muhammad 'Alī is reflected in Daryabadi's

biography of Muhammad 'Alī in Urdu entitled "Muhammad 'Alī: Zati Diary Ke Chand Waraq". As Daryabadi wrote about Muhammad 'Alī and Mawlana Thānwī in his book in such words:

"In all religious and spiritual sphere I was attached most of Mawlana Thānwī. No other religious scholar commanded from me much respect which I always had for Mawlana Thānwī. However as to my love and devotion it was always reserved only for Mawlana Muhammad 'Alī. Thānwī was my mentor and Muhammad 'Alī my ideal."<sup>19</sup>

Apart from mentors some others contributed to Daryabadi's reverting to Islam. As Mehdi Afadi, and Urdu writers known more for liberal strain in his work than for his religious connotation. Mostly he admired Daryabadi's philosophy and rationalism. But he censured Daryabadi for his anti-religious stance. Daryabadi also mentioned his gratitude in this way:

"In my book 'Psychology of Leadership' I had derided the messengers, equating them with this worldly, nationalistic political leaders. As an atheist I felt no qualms in heaping derision upon them had anyone criticized this stance of mine, I would have dismissed it as the emotional outburst of some religious bigot, unable to fathom my critique. Mehdi was a great admirer, rather a lover of my writings when he visited Lucknow next, he called on me and told me: "Look who can be a bigger fan of your book Psychology of Leadership than me? Since you

are much junior to me, let me tell you sincerely that you have belittled the messengers, especially Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). Leaving the issue of faith aside, such derogatory attitude does not befit a scholar.” He spoke these words with such sincerity and force that I was instantly convinced that notwithstanding my disbelief in them I must henceforth speak of them with respect befitting their exalted stature.”<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusion

It is true, Mehdi continued performing his role of a sincere advisor. In same way Syed Suleman Nadvi, Daryabadī's friend advised him. In his letter of 3 December, 1915 Suleman Nadvi wrote to Daryabadī: “Please do go ahead with your plan of writing on the Qur'ānic psychology. However it should be for bringing out the excellence of Qur'an, not for finding fault with it. If you seek to strengthen the cause of Islam, do write this book at the earliest if you have any other motive, please have mercy on us. The Muslim community already has too many woes to attend to.”<sup>21</sup> As in the book “Journey of Faith( Maulana Abdul Majid Daryabadi)” author writes ,Daryabadi’s unsupervised study proved to be his bane .Out of His mercy Allah directed him a little later to such a study which enabled him to appreciate and cherish the truth and supremacy of Islam throughout his later life”<sup>22</sup>

While Dr. Tehsin Feraqi gave a very valid approach regarding the turning point of Abdul Majid Daryabadi in his book , as he writes “ In 1920 when Daryabadi got the light of Islam again then he decided to spend his whole life for the services of Islam by writing on Qur'an and related subjects of Qur'an . In that period he started to write on Qur'an , mysticism and on the ethical topics He produced a large material on Islam during the period of 1921 to 1940”<sup>23</sup>

Soon after his return to the fold of Islam. Daryabadī grew fond of Mawlana Thānwī's writings. It was his self-study and influence of Akbar

Allahabadi, Muhammad 'Alī Jauhar, Syed Suleman Nadvi, who contributed to the change of his heart. Daryabadi's re-entry into the fold of Islam is his devotion to serving the cause of Islam. He reserved his self for the cause of spreading the Islam. After 1918, whatever he wrote it was just for Islam. He recanted all of his earlier predilection for western philosophy and psychology. Which did not have any nexus with Islam. It will be right to conclude that Daryabadi's career epitomizes a living example of the self-sacrificing pursuit of a mission with at any lucrative interest.

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### References and endnotes

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