



‘ABD-AL-‘AZĪZ MOḤADDEṬ DEHLAVĪ

‘ABD-AL-‘AZĪZ MOḤADDEṬ DEHLAVĪ, SHAH, celebrated Sunni theologian and mystic. Born in Delhi on 25 Ramaẓān 1159/11 October 1746, he claimed Arab ancestry traceable to the second caliph ‘Omar (Shah Valiāllāh, *al-Emdād fī ma‘āṭer al-aǰdād*, Delhi, n.d., p. 1). Fifteen generations of his family had lived in India, holding respectable military and academic positions throughout the Mughal period. His paternal grandfather, Shah ‘Abd-al-Raḥīm, had been among the important theologians and mystics of his time.

Shah ‘Abd-al-‘Azīz had been principally educated by two eminent disciples of his father, K̄vāja Amīn and ‘Ašeq Foltī. His father, Shah Valiāllāh, died in 1176/1762, and though only sixteen years of age, Shah ‘Abd-al-‘Azīz was elected his successor and head of the famous seat of learning in Delhi known after his grandfather as Madrasa Raḥīmīya. There he lectured regularly on subjects of Islamic theology and philosophy for over sixty years till his death in 1239/1824.

As a youth, Shah ‘Abd-al-‘Azīz suffered various illnesses, yet he is said to have continued his schedule of theological lectures. At the same time he produced more than fifty books on topics of diverse interest, the most important being his commentary on the Qur’ān in Persian known as *Tafsīr fath al-‘Azīz*, his monumental work on Shi’a-Sunni differences entitled *Toḥfa-ye eṭnā ‘ašarīya*, a collection of his *fatāvā* in two volumes called *Fatāvā-ye ‘Azīzī*, and two important books on Hadith, *‘Oǰāla-ye nāfe‘a* and *Bostān al-moḥaddeṭīn*.



The religious ideas of Shah ‘Abd-al-‘Azīz had a remarkable impact on the theological outlook of his times. Indeed, no one stirred the Muslim intelligentsia of late 18th-early 19th century north India more deeply than did Shah ‘Abd-al-‘Azīz. That he occupied the pivotal position among the Indo-Persian elite of Delhi is attested by the fact that almost all the important theologians and mystics of British India were either his disciples or admirers (Sayyid ‘Abd-al-Ḥayy Nadwī, *Nozhat al-kawāter*, Hyderabad, 1951, VII, p. 270). Moreover, most of the Indian schools of Hadith learning which exist to the present day have the name of Shah ‘Abd-al-‘Azīz at the head of their educational pedigree (Muhammad Ishaq, *India’s Contribution to Hadith Literature*, Dacca, 1955, pp. 180-81).

The Mughal emperor Shah ‘Ālam II had a high regard for him and granted him three villages in the Muzaffar Nagar district of U. P. as *ḵājīrs* for his and his family’s maintenance (‘Abd-al-Raḥīm Zīā, *Maqālāt-e ṭarīqat*, Hyderabad, 1874, p. 26). On his death at the age of 78 on 5 June 1824, Shah ‘Abd-al-‘Azīz was buried in the family graveyard behind present-day Mawlānā Āzād Medical College, Delhi.

He is considered the most controversial figure in Shi’a-Sunni relations during the period of British hegemony. He allegedly opposed Shi’ite beliefs and practices so strongly that he wrote his most important work in Persian, *Toḥfa-ye eṭnā ‘aṣarīya*, in order to refute their religious ideas. This book is still viewed as the most elaborate Indian Sunni reaction to the theologian postulates and ritual observances of the Eṭnā ‘Aṣarīya. It has evoked a bitter controversy among scholars of both sects, and Shi’a authors have written various books in response to it. Yet later writers’ allegations that Shah ‘Abd-al-‘Azīz was persecuted on account of the *Toḥfa*, by Najaf Khan, the Shi’a vizier of the Mughal emperor, and then banished from Delhi at the instance of the Shi’as and still later administered poison by them—all are unfounded (see Azduddin Khan in *Borhān*, November, 1964, pp. 293-302, and May, 1967, pp. 261-73).

The religious views of Shah ‘Abd-al-‘Azīz played a significant role in Muslim opposition to British rule. His judicial pronouncement that British India was the land of infidels was at once radical and decisive (*Fatāwā-ye ‘Azīzī* I, p. 116). It was the first bold note of dissent voiced by an Indian against British rule in India, and on the basis of it, Shah ‘Abd-al-‘Azīz has been rightly viewed as a precursor of the Indian freedom movement.



Yet Shah ‘Abd-al-‘Azīz was of the view that Muslims should not fail to benefit from the scientific and technical achievements of the British: Instead of advocating total boycott, he decreed that it was permissible for Muslims to acquire a knowledge of English (*Fatāvā-ye ‘Azīzī* I, p. 195). Moreover, he accepted a certain degree of collaboration with the British as not only inevitable but advisable; in another decree he pronounced it permissible for Muslims to seek employment in any civilian capacity under the British which would not lead them to commit capital sins (*Fatāvā-ye ‘Azīzī* I, pp. 195-96).

His ideas about Hindus were also radical. He considered Hinduism to be on a par with Judaism and Christianity, referring to Hindus as *ahl-e ketāb* (people of the Book). He maintained that they had both prophets and divine revelations, though, as with members of all true religions, their mode of revelation and category of prophecy was distinctive to them. For instance, the Hindu concept of avatar was, in his view, comparable to but not the same as Muslim belief in the stick (*‘aṣā*) of Moses or the she-camel (*nāqah*) of the prophet Ṣāleḥ. Yet he pointed out that the general public could not differentiate between the manifester and his manifestation, with the result that they deviated from the right path (*Fatāvā-ye ‘Azīzī* I, pp. 140-41). In several other respects, also, he declared that Hindu belief had become subject to perversion and innovation.

One recurrent aspect of Shah ‘Abd-al-‘Azīz’s teaching was his emphasis on restoring the pristine purity of Islam in which, according to him, lay the solution to all evils. He criticized all un-Islamic accretions into the socio-religious fabric of Indian Islam. Like his father, he also tried to go back to the original sources of Islam, the Qur’ān and the Sunna of the Prophet, to arrive at an independent interpretation of, and often an original solution for, major problems. Whenever possible, he avoided blind acceptance of what had been said or thought by later jurists. Some of his “primitive” solutions are of theological relevance even today. For example, his views on the legalization of abortion under certain circumstances and the permissibility of using birth control devices and medicines seem to anticipate one of the most complex and highly debated issues of modern society. He argued as follows: Aborting the child after four months of conception was tantamount to burying it alive. To abort it before four months, however, when the embryo had not yet taken final shape, was permissible under certain circumstances, e.g., *‘osr-e valādat* (difficulty of giving birth), *kaṭrat-e ‘ayāl* (too many children), *qellat-e māl* (poverty), or *safar* (travel); in the case of maidservants, fear of the loss of service was also an acceptable attenuating circumstance. He further



advocated the permissibility of *‘azl* (interrupted intercourse), going so far as to condone the use of medicine before or after the intercourse (*Tafsīr fath al-‘Azīz* III, pp. 77-78). In all these opinions, he cited examples from the Companions of the Prophet as well as from the caliphs ‘Omar and ‘Alī.

Despite his radical views on the various problems that confronted Muslim society in his day, Shah ‘Abd-al-‘Azīz, unlike many modernists, did not try to make an apologetic defense of religion. Nor did he, like the traditionalist *‘ulamā’*, provide only rigid, impractical guidelines on pressing issues. Instead, he exercised a genuine openness to all possible solutions that were suggested within the purview of Qur’ān and Hadith. He never claimed to be a social or religious reformer as did his renowned father, Shah Valīallāh (q.v.), or the celebrated 17th century mystic, [Shaikh Aḥmad Serhendī](#). Yet his bold and rational ideas stirred the spirit of his fellow Muslims as deeply, if not as widely, as had pronouncements of his two predecessors in their respective ages.

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