

**Examine Mawlānā Ahmad Razā Khan's (1856-1921) use of poetry to
defend the Ahl-e-Sunnat movement's belief in the Prophet
Muhammad's ﷺ knowledge of the unseen (*'ilm al-ghayb*) in response
to opposition from other reform movements in British India**

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Introduction

The centuries-old dominance of Muslims in India deteriorated and gave way to the rise of other indigenous religious groups and European colonisers over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With this backdrop, Muslims in colonial India experienced a schism that saw the emergence of a number of religious movements. From the Sunnīs, the Ahl-e-Sunnat (also known as Barelwī), Ahl-e-Hadīth and Deobandī, all to varying extents saw themselves as pioneers of reform needed to rejuvenate Islam and return it to a prior golden age. The Ahl-e-Hadīth and Deobandīs believed the central cause for Muslim weakness and loss of power was the influence of degenerate and non-Islamic ideas on how India's Muslims observed their religion. Therefore, they challenged a multitude of common Islamic beliefs and practices and argued for their reform. This included even beliefs traditionally held in the Sunnī tradition on Allāh ﷻ and the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ of which one belief was *'ilm al-ghayb* - the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ possessing knowledge of the unseen.

For the Ahl-e-Sunnat however, attempts by other movements to redefine these beliefs was unacceptable. From amongst the Ahl-e-Sunnat, the scholar, mystic, and poet, Mawlānā Ahmad Razā Khān al-Qādirī (1856-1921) of Bareilly emerged as a “central figure,”¹ as Usha Sanyal describes, to defend against the contentions of the other movements. The Ahl-e-Sunnat particularly held the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ to high veneration.² Reform of traditional beliefs as well as statements in the books of the other movements to prove their theological positions were seen as severe disrespect of the Prophet. Mawlānā Ahmad Razā is reputed amongst his devotees as a defender of traditional beliefs of Sunnī Islām through a number of mediums including issuing *fatāwā* (sing. *fatwā* - legal verdicts), authoring a multitude of notable books and the composition of devotional poetry.

Mawlānā Ahmad Razā's poetry, found in the collection *Hadāiq-e-Bakhshish*, was an instrumental tool in launching his theological defence and disseminating what he considered as the true beliefs of Islam. This essay examines Mawlānā Ahmad Razā's use of poetry to defend

¹ Usha Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India*, (Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 1996), p. 2.

² Patrick Eisenlohr, “Na‘at: Media Contexts and Transnational Dimensions of a Devotional Practice,” in Barbara Metcalf (ed.), *Islam in South Asia: In Practice*, (Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 2009), p. 101.

against the contentions of other religious movements in British India on the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ's knowledge of the unseen.

The Role of Poetry in South Asian Islam

Ali Asani quotes Constance Padwick to argue, “a true understanding of Islam as a religion is impossible without an appreciation of the immense love at the heart of the tradition for Muhammad.”³ Expressions of love for the Prophet ﷺ have been common practice through the composition and public recitation of poetry throughout Islamic history across places inhabited by Muslims. In South Asian Muslim settings, ‘*na‘at*’ is the form of devotional poetry encountered in many of the region’s vernacular languages, although it is most abundantly in Urdu. It is specifically categorised as poems written in praise and devotion to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and is a means through which Muslims from South Asia try to connect to the Prophet ﷺ and increase their love for him. Especially since the early modern period, *na‘at* is a popular practice closely associated with the Ahl-e-Sunnat due to the significant role the movement gives to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in devotional practice. Also, many of the theological and devotional themes found in *na‘at* are in alignment to the beliefs of the Ahl-e-Sunnat.

It is important to understand how these poems discuss the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ to fully appreciate their value in reflecting the beliefs of the Ahl-e-Sunnat. Asani correctly describes that “whether these are sophisticated compositions of the literati or the folk songs sung by villagers, the poems are equally filled with warm human emotions towards the Prophet.”⁴ *Na‘at* often touches on themes relating to praise of the Prophet Muhammad’s ﷺ attributes as well as remembrance of significant events and miracles taking place in his life. The recitation of *na‘at* by eulogising the Prophet ﷺ, asking for blessings to be bestowed on him and often attempting to connect the listener to the city of Madinah, is one of the most important ways in which performers establish a special relationship with the Prophet ﷺ and invoke his media-

³ Ali S. Asani and Kamal Abdel-Malik, *Celebrating Muhammad: Images of the Prophet in Popular Muslim Poetry*, (University of South Carolina Press: Columbia, 1995), p. 23.

⁴ Ibid.

tory presence. Patrick Eisenlohr observes that the recitation of these devotional poems addressed to the Prophet ﷺ “enacts a special relationship between Muslims and the Prophet, and is tied to a notion of the Prophet having a continuing spiritual presence of his own.”⁵ With the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as the focus of *na‘at*, reciters and listeners draw on the Prophet ﷺ for *tawassul*, as an intercessor to Allāh ﷻ and a source of help. This is informed by their belief that the Prophet ﷺ is witnessing and observing the actions of Muslims (*hād-hir wa nāzir*). These are hallmark and distinguishing beliefs of the Ahl-e-Sunnat challenged by other movements. Therefore, a textual analysis of *na‘at* is invaluable for understanding the beliefs of the Ahl-e-Sunnat, in particular surrounding the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and comparing how doctrinal differences with other movements have historically crystallised.

The Significance of Mawlānā Ahmad Razā’s Poetry

The early modern period in India saw the emergence of many notable poets engaging in the composition of *na‘at*. This included the likes of Mirzā Asadullāh Baig Khān (1797-1869), better known by his *takhallus* (pen name) of Ghālib, who wrote a large part of his poetry as *na‘at* and also, Muhammad Iqbāl (1877-1938), the notable ‘Poet of the East.’ However, Mawlānā Ahmad Razā arguably towers over these giants as a specialist in the discipline of *na‘at*. His poetry was particularly unique because as an Islamic scholar he was able to draw in depth references to sources such as the Qurān and Hadīth embedded as part of his poetry. Also, despite poetry not being a discipline he was formally trained in, we find mastery of language in his poems. For instance, he wrote one *na‘at*, *Sayyid-e-Konayn Sultan-e-Jahān* (The Master of the two realms, The King of the World) consisting of twelve stanzas where he only included letters throughout the poem where in phonetic pronunciation the lips do not touch. Another example of his poetic genius is the *na‘at*, *Lam Yāti Nazīruka Fī Nazarin* (No eyes have ever seen your likeness). In this *na‘at*, Mawlānā Ahmad Razā effortlessly employs his expertise in Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Hindi by composing each *ruba‘i* (quatrain) with a line from each of these languages without any change in *beher* (meter) or an obvious change in language to the listener.

⁵ Patrick Eisenlohr, “Na‘at: Media Contexts and Transnational Dimensions of a Devotional Practice,” p. 101.

By consensus, Mawlānā Ahmad Razā's contemporaries and followers regarded him as a *mu-jaddid* – a reviver of Islam that emerges each century to purify the religion and preserve it against heresies. His poetry plays a significant role in laying out the defence of his beliefs against the contentions of other movements in British India. The public recitation of *na'at* in gatherings historically, and still to an extent in South Asia today, was an accessible way of proselytising to a significantly illiterate population. Even for many South Asian Muslim communities in the diaspora, Urdu has been highly regarded as the medium through which their respective cultural and religious traditions have been preserved and transmitted to subsequent generations living outside the subcontinent. The recitation of Mawlānā Ahmad Razā's poetry in many mosques across Britain affiliated with the Barelwī movement still continues to this day. Therefore, the poetry of Mawlānā Ahmad Razā has tremendous historical and spiritual value in understanding his thought and position as a leading figure of the Ahl-e-Sunnat movement.

Mawlānā Ahmad Razā and the Ahl-e-Sunnat Movement's belief in '*Ilm al-Ghayb*

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ has been described as being granted knowledge of the unseen (*'ilm al-ghayb*) in several instances within the Qurān and Hadīth literature. In one instance the Qurān says, "And (Allāh ﷻ) taught you that knowledge of the unseen which you could not have known yourself and Allāh's ﷻ grace on you is very great."⁶ Similarly in a Hadith narrated by Umar Ibn al-Khattab, "once the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ stood up and delivered a sermon in which he revealed everything which has happened or will happen from the inception of time until the hereafter where who will be admitted to heaven and who will be sentenced to hell. Those who remembered, remembered and those who forgot, forgot."⁷

However, the Qurān also says regarding matters of the unseen "And with Him (Allāh ﷻ) are the keys of the unseen, none knows them but He"⁸ which appears to suggest only Allāh ﷻ possesses knowledge of the unseen. To reconcile these verses and to understand what is

⁶ Qurān 4:113

⁷ Sahih al-Bukhari Vol. 11. Page no. 331, Hadith No. 3192.

⁸ Qurān 6:59

meant regarding *‘ilm al-ghayb*, it is important to understand the intricacy of the word *ghayb* in classical lexicons of the Qurān.

A review of al-Rāghib al-Asfahānī's (d. 1108)⁹ *al-Mufradāt* and Qādī Nāsir al-Dīn al-Bay-dāwī's (d. 1319)¹⁰ *Anwār al-Tanzīl* gives us the following upshot understanding of *ghayb*:

- 1 - Human beings can not understand the unseen through their senses or intellectual reasoning independently and must know them through the Prophets;
- 2 - Unseen matters that do not have proof belong solely to Allāh ﷻ and passages of the Qurān which negate knowledge of the unseen of creation refer to these matters;
- 3 - Certain unseen matters that are proven by scripture (*dalīl naqlī*) or rationally (*dalīl ‘aqlī*) are those that Allāh ﷻ reveals to His creation.¹¹

In view of classical understandings of *ghayb* presented here, Prophets have been granted some knowledge of the unseen by Allāh ﷻ and every matter of the unseen is not held by Allāh ﷻ alone. However, in the context of our discussion on differing viewpoints between the Ahl-e-Sunnat and other movements on this theological belief, disagreements still persisted on whether anyone other than Allāh ﷻ can possess knowledge of the unseen despite classical understandings. Also, if any creation can possess knowledge of the unseen, what was the amount and nature of knowledge bestowed to the Prophet ﷺ?

In Mawlānā Ahmad Razā and the Ahl-e-Sunnat's perspective, there was no doubt the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ had vast and matchless knowledge of the unseen. Mawlānā Ahmad Razā's view on the topic of Prophetic knowledge is demonstrated through at least eight books of which *al-Dawlat al-Makkīyya* (The Makkan Treasure) and *Khālīs al-I'tiqād* (Sincere Belief) are arguably his most acclaimed to prove his and the Ahl-e-Sunnat's position.

⁹ Date of birth is unknown.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mohammad Monawwar Ateeq, *Arguments on the Scope of Prophetic Knowledge: In the writings of al-Sayyid Muhammad Ibn Ja'far al-Kattani, Imam Ahmad Raza Khan & Major Scholars at Madrasah Deoband*, p.5, Available at: https://scholar-sink.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/knowledge_of_the_unseen_theology1.pdf, last accessed 25 Sep 2021.

In sum, we know from *Dawlat al-Makkīyya* that Mawlānā Ahmad Razā's position was grounded in the logic that Allāh ﷻ ultimately knows all, no knowledge can be known without Him granting it (he is the '*ālīm bil-zāt*') and the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ has been granted special knowledge which is '*atā'i*' (bestowed). He says, "One leaves the parameters of Islam if one rejects the Knowledge of the Unseen of the glorious Messenger, Our Master Muhammad (saw) which is bestowed ('*atā'i*') to him by his compassionate Lord ﷻ." ¹² However, there can be "no similarity or association whatsoever between the Knowledge of the Creator and creation." ¹³ He also believed that through the gradual course of the Qurān's revelation, the Prophet ﷺ was given knowledge that encompassed all spiritual matters ¹⁴ including the inner meanings of the Qurān, all of creation and every essence that Allāh ﷻ has created including all past and future events (*mā kāna wa mā yakūn*) recorded on the Protected Tablet (*Lawh-e-Mahfūz*). Not a single entity of creation from pre-eternity till hereafter is excluded from prophetic knowledge. ¹⁵ The Prophet ﷺ knows whatever is above, below and between the Divine Throne and the earth. As for the *zāt* (essence) of Allāh ﷻ, His divine names and attributes, the Prophet ﷺ acquired knowledge about these of a measure that none amongst creation possessed besides him. However, the reality of Allāh's ﷻ essence and knowledge encompassing it or that pertaining to it is not possessed by anyone except for Allāh ﷻ as there is no share for creation in such knowledge. ^{16 17}

Mawlānā Ahmad Razā's contentions with other reform movements on the topic of '*Ilm al-Ghayb*'

The Ahl-e-Sunnat and Mawlānā Ahmad Razā's contentions with the other reform movements were of two main types: primary and secondary theological disputes. The differences be-

¹² Mawlānā Ahmad Razā Khān, *al-Dawlat al-Makkīyya bil-Mādat al-Ghaybīyya (The Makkan Treasure on the Subject of the Unseen, trans. Mawlānā 'Abdul Hadī Al-Qadirī)*, (Sufi Pages: Delhi, 2012), p. 56.

¹³ Ibid, p. 60.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 82.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 63.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 15.

¹⁷ Mohammad Monawwar Ateeq, *Arguments on the Scope of Prophetic Knowledge*, p.9.

tween the Ahl-e-Sunnat and the other movements on *'ilm al-ghayb* were of a primary nature. Whilst secondary disputes were on beliefs the Ahl-e-Sunnat considered to be necessary for a person to be deemed a Sunnī,¹⁸ primary disputes between the Ahl-e-Sunnat and the other movements can be broken down into two sub-categories.

The first were differences which were in contradiction to the *zarūrīyāt-e-dīn* (necessities of faith). The Ahl-e-Sunnat believed this included the main creed of Islam and all that must be embraced for one to be considered a Muslim. These were based on *nusūs* evidences from the Qurān and Hadīth which are absolutely clear, being of a single meaning, about which there is no ambiguity whatsoever.¹⁹ Failure to believe in any one of these *zarūrīyāt* made one fall outside Islam and become a *kāfir* (non-Muslim) and *murtad* (apostate).²⁰

The second sub-category of primary disputes relates to areas in which the Ahl-e-Sunnat believed leaders of the other movements had committed blasphemy and disrespect of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ (*ghustākhī* or *tawhīn*). The Ahl-e-Sunnat and Mawlānā Ahmad Razā believed there is no limit to how much the Prophet ﷺ can be praised so long as divinity is not ascribed to him. However, the Ahl-e-Hadīth and Deobandī leaders believed the Ahl-e-Sunnat praised the Prophet ﷺ to a status that was too high and equated him with Allāh ﷻ. They saw the Ahl-e-Sunnat's beliefs as *shirk* (associating partners with Allāh ﷻ) and *bid'ah* (innovations) and therefore looked to reform these beliefs. In Mawlānā Ahmad Razā's view, it was not befitting of a Muslim to try and limit the praise of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ since his praise was ordained by Allāh ﷻ in the Qurān.²¹ He viewed the other movements' opposition to these beliefs on the Prophet ﷺ as their reluctance to praise and respect him as he should be and therefore disrespectful of the significant rank the Prophet ﷺ possessed. Mawlānā Ahmad Razā addresses his stance through one particular couplet:

¹⁸ Denial of these beliefs would make one a *bid'ati* (someone who innovates in the religion) and considered to be *bad mazhab* (people with 'bad beliefs') and *gumrah* (astray).

¹⁹ Usha Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India*, p. 207.

²⁰ Usha Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India*, p. 202.

²¹ Qurān 94:4.

شرک ٹھہرے جس میں تعظیم حبیب
اس بُرے مذہب پہ لعنت کیجیے

Shirk Tehre Jis Mai T'azīm-e-Habīb,

*Us Bure Mazhab Pe La'anat Kijiye.*²²

That (religion) which considers revering the Beloved as *shirk*,

Send curses upon that putrid religion.

In this couplet, Mawlānā Ahmad Razā explains the importance of reverence for the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as an essential part of belief and addresses directly those opposed to the Ahl-e-Sunnat's view. Referring to the Ahl-e-Hadīth and the Deobandīs, he says whoever considers the reverence of the Prophet ﷺ as *shirk* and *bid'ah* is part of a corrupt religion and is deserving of being cursed. Commenting on this couplet, Mawlānā Sanbhalī likens the Ahl-e-Sunnat's reverence for the Prophet ﷺ as a practice of the angels whereas the Ahl-e-Hadīth and the Deobandī's apprehension for fear of *shirk* and *bid'ah* is likened to *Shaytān* (Satan). His comparison is based on the Qurānic narrative where the angels prostrated in reverence to the Prophet Adam عليه السلام but, in his arrogance, *Shaytān* refused despite God's commandment. Mawlānā Ahmad Razā asserts in this couplet that in the same way *Shaytān* refused to revere the Prophet Adam عليه السلام and became cursed for eternity, the Ahl-e-Hadīth and the Deobandīs are also cursed for their lack of reverence for the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.²³ In fact, Mawlānā Ahmad Razā viewed these movements as attempting to denigrate the Prophet's ﷺ status. In particular, he saw the choice of language used by the leaders of the Ahl-e-Hadīth and Deobandīs, in trying to make their points in relation to the Prophet ﷺ, as highly disrespectful and blasphemy that would take them out of Islam.

For instance, Shāh Ismāīl Dehlwī (1781-1831), revered by the Ahl-e-Hadīth and Deobandīs, dismissed entirely the possibility of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ possessing '*ilm al-ghayb*. Sanyal explains how Shāh Ismāīl devoted an entire chapter in his *Taqwīyat al-Imān* (circa.

²² Mawlānā Ahmad Razā Khān, "Dushman-e-Ahmad Pe Shiddat Kijīye" in *Hadāiq-e-Bakhshish*, (Maktabat-ul-Madina Dawat-e-Islami: Karachi, 2012), p. 200.

²³ Mawlānā Sufi Muhammad Awal Sanbhalī, *Sukhn-e-Razā*, (Farooqia Book Depot: Delhi: 1991), p. 227.

1824) to stress the importance of not associating others with Allāh's ﷻ knowledge because for him this was *shirk*.²⁴ Shāh Ismā'īl propagated it is only Allāh ﷻ who possesses '*ilm al-ghayb*'. He wrote that "one should not say 'Allāh ﷻ and His Messenger ﷺ know' because only Allāh ﷻ knows the unseen, what does the Messenger know?"²⁵ Also, to assert his point on the limitations of the Prophet's ﷺ knowledge compared to Allāh ﷻ, he even suggested that "the kind of treatment Allāh ﷻ is going to mete out to his slaves in this world, in their graves, or in the hereafter is neither known by a Prophet, nor a sage. They neither know about themselves nor about others."²⁶ This suggests Shāh Ismā'īl believed the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself did not have knowledge of whether he would die as a Muslim and go to heaven let alone be able know other matters of the unseen.

The '*ulema*' of Deoband also echoed Shāh Ismā'īl's view and were influenced by his thought. Mawlāna Rashīd Ahmad Gangohī (1829-1905) in numerous *fatāwā*, now found in the compilation *Fatāwā Rashīdīyya*, propagated that belief in '*ilm al-ghayb*' was *shirk* and would take one out of Islam. He claimed, "the belief of every scholar concerning knowledge of the unseen is that no one besides Allāh ﷻ holds it... hence establishing knowledge for anyone besides Allāh ﷻ is explicit *shirk*."²⁷ Metcalf also portrays how strongly Mawlānā Gangohī held the opinion against the Prophet's ﷺ '*ilm al-ghayb*' by narrating the instructions he gave to his followers which forbade them from praying behind an *imām* who believed the Prophet ﷺ possessed this attribute.²⁸

Likewise, Mawlāna Khalīl Ahmad Sahāranpūrī (1852-1927) also published a book in 1886 called *Barāhīn-e-Qāti'ah* in which he summarised Deoband's view, in particular by representing the opinion of Mawlānā Gangohī. In it, Mawlānā Sahāranpūrī said attributing '*ilm al-*

²⁴ Usha Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India*, pp. 250-251.

²⁵ Mohammad Monawwar Ateeq, *Arguments on the Scope of Prophetic Knowledge*, p.20.

²⁶ Shāh Ismā'īl Dehlwī, *Taqwiyat-ul-Iman (Strengthening of the Faith)*, (Dar us-Salam Publications: Riyadh, 1995) p.78.

²⁷ Mohammad Monawwar Ateeq, *Arguments on the Scope of Prophetic Knowledge*, p.21.

²⁸ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband 1860-1900*, (Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2002) p. 150.

ghayb for the Prophet ﷺ and anyone else besides Allāh ﷻ was *shirk* and not a correct Islamic belief and he attempted to disprove the Prophet's ﷺ knowledge of the unseen by comparing the knowledge of the Prophet ﷺ against Shaytān's. He argued that Shaytān has knowledge of the unseen proven by scripture whereas this is not the case for the Prophet ﷺ. But in arguing for Shaytān's knowledge, Mawlānā Sahāranpūrī contradicted his own argument that '*ilm al-ghayb* for anyone else besides Allāh ﷻ is *shirk*. On the other hand, Mawlāna Ashraf 'Alī Thānwī (1863-1943) in his book *Hifẓ al-Imān* (1901) wrote that the Prophet ﷺ did not possess all-inclusive knowledge but possessed only partial knowledge. Whilst he accepted that the Prophet ﷺ possessed some knowledge of the unseen, he wrote that all human beings possessed some knowledge of the unseen so the Prophet ﷺ was not distinctively special. In arguing his point he went to the extent to say, "how is the Prophet uniquely special, when such knowledge of the unseen is possessed by Zayd and Amr (i.e. anyone), indeed, by every child and madman, and even by all animals and beasts?"²⁹

For Mawlānā Ahmad Razā, these attempts to disprove the Prophet's ﷺ knowledge of the unseen ventured into blasphemy for which he issued a *fatwā* of *kufṛ* on the Deobandī leaders in *Husām al-Haramayn* (1906). He believed debating the extent and all-inclusiveness of the Prophet's ﷺ knowledge was a matter of scholarly discussion where valid differences of opinion could take place. For instance, Mawlānā Ahmad Razā believed there could be differences of opinion on whether the Prophet had been granted knowledge of the *ulūm-e-khamsa* (the five secret things),³⁰ the reality of the soul, ambiguous verses of the Qurān and full knowledge of the contents of the *Lawh-e-Mahfūz*.³¹ However, the comparisons the Deobandī leaders made to Shaytān, madmen, animals and beasts to disprove the Prophet's knowledge were deemed by Mawlānā Ahmad Razā to be highly disrespectful to the Prophet's rank and therefore deserving of the *fatwā* he gave in *Husām al-Haramayn*.

²⁹ Mawlānā Ashraf 'Alī Thānwī, *Hifẓ al-Imān*, (Kutub Khana Uloom-e-Mashriqi: Lahore, 1943), p. 7.

³⁰ The *ulūm-e-khamsa* refers to 'five secret things' referred to in Quran 31:34: "Allāh ﷻ! With him is knowledge of the Hour. He sends down the rain and knows that which is in the wombs. No soul knows what it will earn tomorrow and no soul knows in what land it will die. Allāh ﷻ is Knower, Aware"

³¹ Khaalis al-I'tiqād in *Fatawa Rizwiyyah*, vol. 29 p. 411-483.

Alongside his books and *fatāwa* on this topic, Mawlānā Ahmad Razā attempts to dispel doubts presented by other movements on ‘ilm al-ghayb through a number of stanzas found in several *na‘at* of which one is:

اور کوئی غیب کیا تم سے نہاں ہو بھلا
جب نہ خدا ہی چھپا تم پہ کرو روں درود
Aur Koī Ghayb Kyā Tum Se Nihā Ho Bhalā,
*Jab Nah Khudā Hī Chupā Tum Pe Karoro Durūd.*³²

What of the unseen is concealed from you,
When not even God is hidden, millions of prayers upon you.

In this particular stanza, Mawlānā Ahmad Razā refers to the events narrated to have taken place on the night journey the Prophet ﷺ took from Makkah to Jerusalem and subsequently the heavens (*al-Isra’ wa al-Mi‘rāj*). It is believed by the Ahl-e-Sunnat that on this night, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was given the miracle of seeing Allāh ﷻ - an honour not granted to anyone else - as part of a physical journey the Prophet ﷺ was taken on in a wakeful state by the angel Jibrīl عليه السلام. According to Mawlānā Sanbhalī and Mawlānā Ghulām Hasan Qadrī’s commentaries, Mawlānā Ahmad Razā argues here that there is no greater matter of the unseen than Allāh ﷻ and His existence. If on this night journey, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was granted an audience with Allāh ﷻ and saw him physically with his eyes, Mawlānā Ahmad Razā addressed the other movements who doubted the Prophet’s ﷺ knowledge of the unseen and its extensiveness by asking them, what else is left of the unseen to be revealed to the Prophet ﷺ when Allāh ﷻ has revealed Himself to the Prophet ﷺ?^{33 34} This stanza affirms the Ahl-e-Sunnat’s belief that the Prophet ﷺ was granted special knowledge of the unseen that was extensive to include all matters from pre-eternity till hereafter, Allāh ﷻ Himself and all of His creation.

³²Mawlānā Ahmad Razā Khān, “Ka‘be Ke Badr al-Dujā Tum Pe Karoro Durūd,” in *Hadāiq-e-Bakhshish*, p. 264.

³³ Mawlānā Sufī Muhammad Awal Sanbhalī, *Sukhn-e-Razā*, p. 294.

³⁴ Mawlānā Ghulām Hassan Qadrī, *Sharh Kalām-e-Razā*, (Mushtaq Publications: Lahore, undated), p. 944.

Again referring to the events of *al-Isra' wa al-Mi'raj*, Mawlānā Ahmad Razā writes in another *na'at*:

سر عرش پر ہے تری گزردل فرش پر ہے تری نظر
ملکوت و ملک میں کوئی شے نہیں وہ جو تجھ پہ عیاں نہیں

Sar-e- 'Arsh Par He Terī Ghuzar Dil-e-Farsh Par He Terī Nazar;

*Malakūt-o-Mulk Mai Koī Shay Nahī Woh Jo Tujh Pe 'Ayā Nahī.*³⁵

You traverse the Divine Throne, your sight is upon every heart of the earth,
Neither in the heavens or in Allāh ﷻ's kingdom is there anything not included in your
knowledge.

In this stanza, he once again emphasises knowledge of the unseen as a characteristic of the Prophet ﷺ that can not be doubted since the greatest proof is that he had seen Allāh ﷻ. However, in this stanza he goes further to say that although the Prophet ﷺ freely traversed the heavens and the divine throne, his sight is not only on the heavens but also he has knowledge of the '*Dil-e-Farsh*' i.e. the hearts of every person on earth. This implies the Prophet ﷺ is made aware of such knowledge of the unseen to include thoughts and matters of the heart that another person may be thinking. This particular point of belief Mawlānā Ahmad Razā highlights is a direct inference to a Hadīth found in al-Bukhārī in which the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ told his companions, "By Allāh ﷻ, neither the state of your heart for Allāh ﷻ in prayer (*khushū*) nor your bowing is hidden from me, surely I see you from my back."³⁶ This Hadīth suggests the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ has the ability to know what is in people's minds and hearts but also that he is shown events and matters beyond what his eyesight is rationally able to see. The significance of this belief has a direct connection to two other beliefs of the Ahl-e-Sunnat - the belief that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ witnesses and is made aware of all affairs of the world (*hādhir wa nāzir*) and that in knowing the needs of his followers he can act as an intercessor to Allāh ﷻ and be a source of help (*wasīlah*). Which is why Mawlānā Ahmad Razā in another *na'at* writes:

³⁵Mawlānā Ahmad Razā Khān, "Woh Kamāl-e-Husn-e-Huzūr He," in *Hadāiq-e-Bakhshish*, p. 109.

³⁶ Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 8, Hadith 68.

فریاد اُمتی جو کرے حالِ زار میں
ممکن نہیں کہ خیر بشر کو خبر نہ ہو

Faryād Ummatī Jo Kare Hāl-e-Zār Mai,

*Mumkin Nahī Ke Khayr-e-Bashar Ko Khabar Na Ho.*³⁷

The cry for help a follower does in his state of anguish,

It is not possible that the Best of Mankind does not know of it.

Referring to the Prophet ﷺ with his title as ‘*Khayr-e-Bashar*’ (the Best of Mankind), Mawlānā Ahmad Razā demonstrates here the extent of the Prophet’s ﷺ knowledge by saying that even when an *ummatī* (follower of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ) in his state of distress and anguish calls upon the Prophet ﷺ for help whether from close or far, the Prophet ﷺ is aware of it. This is because, as Mawlānā Sanbhalī comments on this stanza, the Ahl-e-Sunnat believe that the Prophet ﷺ is presented with the actions of his followers even in his grave.³⁸

Conclusion

For Mawlānā Ahmad Razā, defending ‘*ilm al-ghayb*’ of the Prophet ﷺ was an essential duty. He saw this belief as a key component of the theological framework surrounding the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ that laid the foundation, as one of the *zarūrīyāt-e-dīn*, for the truthfulness of Islam itself. How could a Prophet, who promoted belief in the unseen such as God, angels, heaven and hell, not have vast knowledge of these matters? Defending this belief was also essential for protecting other beliefs of the Ahl-e-Sunnat such as *hādhir wa nāzir* and *wasīlah* since how could a Prophet who does not have knowledge of the unseen observe all affairs and also know to intercede for people whilst not physically present? Furthermore, in their attempt to prove their opposition, other movements were deemed by Mawlānā Ahmad Razā to have disrespected the Prophet ﷺ and this needed a strong condemnation.

His detailed works defending ‘*ilm al-ghayb*’, which include *fatāwā* and books such as *al-Dawlat al-Makkīyya* (The Makkan Treasure) and *Khālis al-I’tiqad*, were largely written in

³⁷Mawlānā Ahmad Razā Khān, “Pul Se Utāro Rāh Ghuzar Ko Khabar Na Ho,” in *Hadāiq-e-Bakhshish*, p. 130.

³⁸ Mawlānā Sufī Muhammad Awal Sanbhalī, *Sukhn-e-Razā*, p. 136.

Arabic and contain detailed discussions that include primary sources (Qurān and Hadīth) and difficult secondary works of scholars. This suggests that they were intended to teach scholarly audiences in-depth knowledge on the topic. On the other hand, Mawlānā Ahmad Razā's poetry was intended for all audiences. For the general masses, who were largely illiterate in British India, his *na'at* were an accessible way of proselytising Islamic beliefs and for differentiating the Ahl-e-Sunnat from other movements. At the same time, it was valuable for scholars because it contained inferred references to primary sources which they could decipher for in-depth references to compliment detailed works when refuting other movements. It is valuable even today for scholars of the Ahl-e-Sunnat when debates between scholars from the different movements occur in South Asia and the diaspora.

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