

Genealogies of Maizbhandari Thoughts: Syed Delawor Hossain and his Paradigm of Sufi Perception

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Abstract

Syed Delawor Hossain is a key person to decipher the genealogies of Maizbhandari Ṭarīqa, a relatively new, often gnostic and a fast growing Sufi Order in modern Bangladesh. Its founder, Syed Ahmad Ullah, did not leave any written instructions outlining its ideologies and practices. Hossain, being his vicegerent, has been identified as the primary source for the seekers and researchers alike to understand and to travel the path of Maizbhandari Divinity. His contributions speak volumes of his genius especially when speaking of his standardization of the practice of a new ṭarīqa. However, there is still little specific or detailed study about the spiritual ethnography of this Sufi order. Drawing on his extensive contributions, this study asks: how and to what extent the Maizbhandari thoughts and practices are shaped by his very personality and writings. It further aims to explore his own Sufi epistemology, ethical ideas, his treatment of wilāyat, his quest for perfected humanity and Divine communion, his adaptation of the concept of tawḥīd-ul-adyān, waḥdatul wajūd and Sufi physiology, and his approach to the issue of sharī'ah compliance that is always at the centre of intense discourse of this ṭarīqa, both externally and internally.

Key words

Syed Delawor Hossain, Maizbhandari Ṭarīqa, Sufism, Wilāyat, Spirituality, Sufi Order.

Introduction

Maizbhandari Ṭarīqa is one of the most popular and influential Sufi orders in contemporary Bangladesh. Since its inception, it managed to attract, within a short period of time, myriad of devotees and followers

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from all walks of life, additionally, it is also gaining followers in different parts of the world, mostly through Bangladeshi migrants. This Sufi order is considered as a key contributor and a symbol of an ongoing socio-religious transformation in modern Bangladesh.

This Sufi order took its name from the name of the village ‘*Maizbhandar*’ where the founder grew up and lived his spiritual life. However, it is also known with the name ‘*Qāderia Maizbhandaria*’ and ‘*Qāderia Malāmia Ṭarīqa*’. (Hossain, *Mul Totto 1; Wilāyat 1*) Syed Delawor Hossain (1893-1982) is regarded, chronologically, as the third saint of this Sufi order. However, because of his intellectual contributions and spiritual lineage to the founder Syed Ahmad Ullah (1826-1906), his thoughts are being acknowledged as one of the most invoked manuals in the studies of this Sufi order.

Contributions and activities of a Sufi saint can be understood and analyzed from two parallel view points; temporal and spiritual, where the apparentness of the former is blurred by the abstractness of the later, making it perplexing for many to comprehend. Syed Delawor Hossain might have been qualified to be excluded from such a list, as he profoundly deliberated his thoughts and ideologies in his writings, outlining both exoteric and esoteric structures of this Sufi order he inherited from his master, and translated them into his temporal activities, thus presenting himself as a substantial precedence of this Sufi order.

In addition to his own treatise, there are two biographies by Selim Jahangir and Khairul Boshor, both of which maintained their devotional focus mainly on his temporal activities and contributions. Hans Harder dedicated some parts of his extensive field works of Maizbhandari Sufi Order to discuss about his position, contribution and, to some extent, his thoughts. Peter J. Bertocci’s article ‘A Sufi movement in Bangladesh: The *Maizbhandari Ṭarīqa* and its followers’ also allows us to have some glimpses on his personality. Sarwar Alam’s article ‘*In Search of God, In Search of Humanity: Vilayet-e-Mutlaka of Hazrat Delawor Husayn Maizbhandari*’ sketched an overview of his book ‘*Wilāyat-e-Muṭlaqa*’. Selim Jahangir’s work *Ghawthul A’zam: Shoto Borsher Aloke (Gausul*

Azam: In the Light of Hundred Years) puts him in a central position to understand Maizbhandari cosmology.

However, a lack of thorough research in his Sufi thoughts is apparent. While a primary focus of the paper is a comprehensive description of the Sufi ideologies and thoughts of Syed Delawor Hossain, a further intent is to demonstrate how his contributions reshaped the intellectual perception and projection of this Sufi order. Moreover, this article also sheds light on some elements of this Sufi order that attracted controversies and polemic engagements, and a re-examination of how he engineered its defence.

Maizbhandari Sufi Saints, Culture and the Issue of Indigenouness

Syed Ahmad Ullah was the initiator of *Maizbhandari Ṭarīqa*. He originally took initiation with Syed Abu Shahama in *Qāderiya Ṭarīqa* and later, in the course of his spiritual venture, he received *khilāfa* (deputyship) from his master. After returning to his home village 'Maizbhandar', he continued his spiritual rigor and charismatic mentorship, which, gradually, gave birth to a new *ṭarīqa*. Soon after, his spirituality attracted myriad of followers and disciples some of whom were also endowed with his deputyship.

Syed Golam Rahman (1865-1937) is considered as the second most influential saint of this Sufi order. He was said to be always absorbed into the divine attraction. There are accounts of him performing numerous miracles. Due to his spiritual absorbance he would usually not speak to anyone.

Since *Maizbhandari Ṭarīqa* is frequently discussed as the only *ṭarīqa* that originated in Bangladesh, the issue of indigenouness has always occupied a space in its discourse. Bangladesh has a rich history of Sufi culture. This Sufi order, through its message of universal love, inclusion and morality, added a renewed flavour and force to the contribution of the ancient Bengali saints, and consequently became the pilgrim centre for the people of different religion, race, creed, ethnicity and profession. Some researchers (Jahangir, *Shoto Borsher* 340) argued that *Maizbhandar*, despite being a religious platform, rose above religiosity

and presented itself as a multi-lateral platform for religious and social pluralism.

It introduced the practice of *samāʿ* in Bengali language. The founding saint did not compose any songs. But songs written by the devotees won the hearts of the populace who found spiritual shelter and religious refuge in those songs in addition to them being an alternative to conventional folklore which often consist of obscenity and carnal love. Moreover, almost all of its annual events such as ‘*urs*’ are celebrated according to local Bengali calendar unlike other Sufi orders which follow traditional *hijrī* calendar.

This *ṭarīqa* represents an excellent indigenous tradition of religious tolerance, social cohesion and communal harmony in Bangladesh. The *pīrs* and their disciples demonstrated a consistent model of religious inclusion and cohesion. Many non-Muslims regularly visit the mausoleums at Maizbhandar and the living *pīrs*.. They are usually welcomed and received with the same manner and respect without any discrimination. Ramesh Shil and Monmohon are some of the non-Muslims devotees of this *ṭarīqa* who rose to prominence. However, such unorthodox openness and inclusion did not go unchallenged. There were uproars, *fatwas* and mockery on the other side of the religious spectrum.

Maizbhandari culture is an unorthodox combination of a universal faith and local tradition, which includes traditional Sufi practices, a passionate master-disciple relationship, regular visit to the *darbar*, unique way of celebrating ‘*urs*, *samāʿ*’, *Maizbhandari* songs, the seven principles and an informal but sincere inclusion for all. The aspirants always seek permission (*ijāzat*) and blessing (*meherbani*) from their respective *pīrs* before they plan for anything—literarily anything. This culture is so naturally embedded into the lifestyle of the Maizbhandari aspirants; its presence often seems elusive.

Sufism is widely acknowledged for its openness to accommodate indigenous cultures and practices, which has been a catalyst for its rapid propagation in various regions of the world. It is, therefore, expected that *Maizbhandari Ṭarīqa* should inherently accommodate indigenous elements within its fold; nevertheless, its universal appeal and

characteristic must remain intact, should it retain its authenticity and universal applicability and acceptability. A parochial approach in its studies with an exaggerated focus on the issue of indigenouness in Bengali culture may potentially deflect its universal appeal.

Syed Delawor Hossain and Formation of His Humanist Sufi Personality

Syed Delawor Hossain was the grandson of Syed Ahmad Ullah. He lost his father in his childhood and was raised by his grandparents. At the beginning of his spiritual venture, his grandfather ordered him, along with some of his family members to take *bay'at* with Syed Aminul Hoque known as *wāṣil* (medium), a deputy and nephew of Syed Ahmad Ullah. Later, he renewed his *bay'at* with his grandfather, the original sheikh of the *ṭarīqa*.

His grandfather passed him the mantle of spiritual and temporal succession before his demise in 1906. At the age of 23, he married Syeda Sajeda Khatun, daughter of Syed Golam Rahman, chronologically the second spiritual figure of this *ṭarīqa*. The devotees portrayed this marriage as a great merger of two spiritual streams. In 1974, he bestowed *khilāfa* upon his third son Syed Emdadul Hoque and nominated him as his spiritual successor to his *gadī*. He passed away at the age of 89 on January 16th 1982. He was buried in *Bāg-e-Hossaynī* -The Garden of Hossain.

He led a very simple life, an embodiment of *uṣūl-e-sab'a* or the *seven principles*. The devotees and the aspirants used to see him as a reflection of his master. (Jahangir, *Maizbhandari Tariqar* 29) He used to introduce himself as '*khādemul fuqarā*'- the servant of the *faqirs*. As a competent organizer, he also actively engaged in various social activities. His life profoundly substantiates that it is possible for a Sufi to influence the temporal course of the society in addition to his spiritual venture.

His thirst for knowledge and study was well reported (Boshor 33). He is considered as 'the most intellectual of the Maizbhandari *pīrs*, he is remembered for his scholarly bent and known especially for his written works developing Syed Ahmad Ullah's ideas and expounding the

movement's theosophy'(Bertocci 9); thus instigating himself as the architect of the Maizbhandari Sufism.

It can be observed from his treatise that his Sufi perception was greatly influenced, if not shaped, by Rumi (1207-1273), Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) and Imam Ghazali (1058-1111). He used to frequently recite '*Mathnawī of Rumi*' and explain it to the devotees (Boshor 33).

He was born and grew up in the British colonial period of Bengal. He witnessed the struggle, poverty, conflicts and division Muslim society faced during the course of their religious, social and economic life. He witnessed the fall of the last Islamic *khilāfat* (Ottoman Caliphate). He experienced the bitterness of two World Wars. This period is also notable for constant riot between two faith groups of Indian sub-continent: Hindu and Muslim. Muslim society of this sub-continent also witnessed a rise of reformist *Wahhabī* movements that permanently changed the dialect and discourse of Islamic theology in this area. There was a systemic scheme in some fractions of this *ṭarīqa* to deprive him of his spiritual and temporal authority bequeathed from his grandfather and spiritual master Syed Ahmad Ullah. His vocal opposition to religious exploitation incurred enmity both inside and outside, and he faced many challenges including provocations, lawsuits and mockery.

A simple glimpse into his life suggests that the struggle and challenges he faced in the early days of his life played a crucial role into making him what he became known for in later days, and into formation of his humanist Sufi personality that manifested in his works. In a devotee's eulogy (Boshor 27), 'as if his master was training him since his childhood as the future leader and reformer of this *ṭarīqa*'.

Syed Delawor Hossain's Methodology and Contribution in Sufi Studies

Syed Delawor Hossain approaches Sufism as an interdisciplinary subject using diverse theories and methods. His analysis of the subject contextualizes the theme from a perspective that can be shared and understood by all. In his study, he employs different modes of investigation to study Sufism and Maizbhandari Sufi order in terms of

their theological, methodological, literary, historical, cultural, sociological, and anthropological background.

At the early phase of this *ṭarīqa*, the need for an elaborate discourse of its philosophical foundations or codification of its methodological aspects was not realized. However, a rapid proliferation of its adherents from diverse background and regions, along with the presentation of intra-contradictory images of this Sufi order by some internal fractions made it necessary to investigate those unexplored areas.

He took the initiatives and wrote at least ten books outlining its temporal, theological, spiritual, philosophical, methodological vicinity. He championed, through his treatise, the creation of an intellectual infrastructure to support it, ensuring that his demise will not fundamentally alter the course and discourse of this Sufi order. Much of what he left behind became the basis for future intellectual progress for later generations. He managed to instate himself through his extensive research works as a primary source at the centre of Maizbhandari discourse among the devotees and critics alike. It was his idea and literacy that changed forever the landscape of Maizbhandari thoughts.

He always grounded his thoughts and arguments by Quran and Ḥadīth, with taking into consideration about their duality (*ẓāhir*-apparent and *bāṭin*-concealed) in terms of meaning and application. The influence of Rumi's eclectic love, Ibn Arabi's subtlety and Ghazali's methodological counter argument is apparent throughout his writings, which indeed render his works more interesting and versatile.

The main objective of his research centred at introducing and outlining the philosophy and methodology of the *ṭarīqa* and establishing its correlation with other concurrent spiritual flows, with an apparent subjectivity of glorifying his master as the great helper (*Gawthul A'ẓam*). In this regard, He established his master as a historical figure through employing different modes of instruments such as his miracles, spiritual tenure, teachings, ethics and prophecies of ancient saints; and thus 'constructed the sainthood of the saint Ahmad Ullah a living memory and a collective representation' (Alam 21).

Authenticity and legitimacy play a crucial role for a Sufi master to be venerated both for spiritual leadership and its interpretation. He established his own authority and legitimacy as the only successor and trustee (*waṣī*) of the main and founding saint to interpret this spirituality (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 73). His biography mentioned an occasion when Syed Ahmad Ullah dismissed the plea of the devotees to nominate his elder grandson Mir Hasan as his heir. Instead, he nominated Hossain as his heir to his *gadī* (throne-symbolizes his spiritual and temporal authority). Mir Hasan died 40 days after the demise of Syed Ahmad Ullah, marking another of his miracles (Bhuiya 198).

Most of the miracles and anecdotes of Syed Ahmad Ullah were preserved through oral traditions. As such, these narrations were susceptible to fabrication and distortion. Hossain accepts oral traditions as a source of his investigation. Nevertheless, his utmost effort to authenticate them is observable. He mentions the narrators with their addresses, time and place of incidents as well as name of any witnesses for the particular situation.

He also explored different issues from comparative religious perspective. He compared, for instance, ‘the seven principles of Maizbhandari Sufi order with ‘*noble eightfold path*’ of Buddhism, concluding that the former is easier than the later.

When dealing with any controversies or conflicts, he usually employed the methodology of analyzing the issue from the full range of disciplines and perspectives, and then attempting to reconcile the conflicts through arriving at a comprehensive synthesized principle with underlying diverse phenomena. His analysis of the concepts of *waḥdatul wajūd*, *waḥdatul shuhūd*, *ittiḥād* and *wilāyat* is an example of such synthetic overview.

Hossain is not an apologist. He engaged in a critical, and yet constructive, discussion with various fractions of the Muslim society and Sufis. He often excuses the commoners for their misconceptions and criticism about this Sufi order as it is being too Gnostic. On the other hand, his intellectual brutality is apparent in his methodical criticism for the religious extremists, Sufi imposters and spirituality traders who

‘cause division in the society’ and ‘exploit people’s veneration for the saints’ (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 70 & 127).

As a general observation, he seeks, throughout his Sufi studies, to provide an elaborated discourse about Sufism, comprehensible for all, and underlines how Sufism needs to be interpreted in humanistic terms that incorporate the bond between a human being and his Lord.

Origins of Sufism and Maizbhandari Tariqa in the View of Syed Delawor Hossain

Since the term ‘*taṣawwuf*’ was not used during the time of the Prophet (pbuh), its origin and adherence to Islam have remained a subject of contentious debate among the Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. However, Muslim Sufi theologians (Ahmad Zarruq, *Principles of Sufism*), (Muhammad Siddiq Al Ghumari, *Al Intiṣār li ṭarīq as Sūfiyya*), (*Kashf al Ḥunūn*) strongly maintained that the essence of Sufism was present during the time of the Prophet (pbuh).

Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) devoted a long section of his monumental work, *Al-Muqaddimah*, to discuss the science of Sufism, in which he emphasized the originality of Sufism in Islam, and confirmed its presence during the time of the Prophet (pbuh). ‘These things (Sufi practice) were general among the men around Muhammad (pbuh) and the early Muslims and then when worldly aspirations increased, the special name of ‘Sufis’ was given to those who aspired to Divine worship’ (Ibn Khaldun 611). Following the tradition of early Sufi theologians, Hossain reiterated the existence of Sufi essence and practice during the time of the Prophet (pbuh) and that it is a naturally integrated part of the creation. He argued that ‘the discourse whether Sufism is Islamic or non-Islamic is irrelevant. Because, ‘Islam’ literary means submission and obedience. It refers to the obedience of Allah. Every single creation is obliged to obey Him. They habitually follow the Divine instructions and wills’ (Hossain, *Manab* 14).

By the passage of time, the Muslim society witnessed the emergence of Sufi orders or *ṭarīqa*, every one of which had their own exclusive spiritual practices and doctrines. A Sufi order must have a ‘*silsila*’ or a ‘chain of transmission’ through which the spiritual teachings and

practices are transmitted from master to disciple, and a strong and unbroken lineage have to be traced back to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), as he is believed to be the main source of all spirituality and devotion.

Mirroring the conventional discourse about the formation of *ṭarīqa* and *silsila*, he traced *Maizbhandari Ṭarīqa* back to the Prophet (pbuh), but, in an elaborative way. He explains that during the time of the Prophet (pbuh), people used to receive his spiritual effulgence in any of the three ways. (1) *Ṭarīqa-e-Abrār-e-Mujāhidīn*, (the path of holy fighters) who fought with him (pbuh) for his cause. (2) *Ṭarīqa-e-Akhyār-e-Ṣālihīn*, (the path of the best pious) who followed him (pbuh) in his good cause. (3) *Ṭarīqa-e-Shuhadā-e-ʿAshiqīn*, (the path of the sacrificed lovers) who sacrificed themselves for his (pbuh) love.

Although the companions received this effulgence, He (pbuh) authorised Ali (r) to pass it to the later generation. Ali (r.) was considered among the Sufis as the source of concealed knowledge. He passed the mantle of '*Ṭarīqa-e-Abrār-e-Mujāhidīn*' to his son Imam Hasan (r), the mantle of '*Ṭarīqa-e-Akhyār-e-Ṣālihīn*' to Hasan Basri and the mantle of '*Ṭarīqa-e-Shuhadā-e-ʿAshiqīn*' to Wais al Qarni.

These three spiritual streams spread across the globe through saints and sages. Many sub-branches known as *ṭarīqa* sprang from their growth including specific orders for individual region or nation. All Sufi orders belong to one of these three spiritual streams. During the era of *Wilāyat-e-Aḥmadī*, these three spiritual streams accumulated in the personality of Syed Ahmad Ullah. This *wilāyat* or the unrestricted spiritual stream became known as *Maizbhandari Ṭarīqa* in the society. (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 114-115)

He also noted that *Maizbhandari Ṭarīqa* originated in these three spiritual streams, coupled with the teaching of *nabuwwat*. It is a combination of *sharīʿa* -jurisprudence, *ṭarīqa*-path, *haqiqat*-reality and *maʿrifat*--divine knowledge. (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 119)

The founder, Syed Ahmad Ullah, liberally drew elements of other Sufi orders and integrated them into his order, making it a melting pot for others. Hossain describes it as a spiritual ocean and a confluence of

other Sufi orders, which manifested as an essential reformation to the conventional Sufism (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 119).

Syed Delawor Hossain's Theory of Sainthood and Its Classification

Understanding *wilāyat* or sainthood is a gateway for the discourse of spiritual personification. Syed Delawor Hossain started his masterpiece '*Wilāyat-e-Muṭlaqa*' with the discussion of *nabuwwat*- prophethood and *wilāyat*- sainthood. While discussing the correlation between sainthood and prophethood, and related classifications, he deduced that the disposition of *nūr-e-muḥammadī* (the light of Muhammad -pbuh) as the pinnacle and main source of all spirituality and perfection. The nature of prophethood and sainthood diversifies according to the various state and exposure of this primordial *nūr* (light) symbolized into two names of the Prophet (pbuh); '*Muhammad*' and '*Ahmad*'.

Although Ibn Arabi is credited for formulizing the concept of *nūr-e-muḥammadī*, it has its ground in the Quran and Hadith of the Prophet (pbuh). In three verses, the holy Quran explicitly referred to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as 'the light',

'the lamp inside a niche' and 'a lamp spreading light'. 'From Allah has come to you a Light and a Book manifest' (5:15). 'O Prophet! Truly We have sent you as a Witness, a Bearer of glad tidings, and a Warner, and as one who invites to Allah by His leave, and as a Lamp spreading Light.' (33:45-46). "The likeness of His light is as a niche wherein is a Lamp (the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star) kindled from a Blessed Tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil well-nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it; Light upon Light." (24:35)

The Sufi commentators (*mufasssirūn*) and theologians [Al Suyuti (1445-1505), Fairuzabadi (1329-1414), Fakhruddin, Baydawi (d.1286), Sanaullah Panipathi (1730-1810)] have maintained that the light in these verses refers to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

nūr-e-muḥammadī, as Hossain maintained, is primordial and the pre-eternal source of prophethood and sainthood. Allah brought it into

existence from His divine radiance, in pursuance of exposing His divine love and infinite authority; it was concealed in His protected domain. The first creation kept saying ‘*aḥmadu*’ (I am praising) till it itself became ‘*muḥammadu*’ (the praised one); thus, the divine attributive luminescent (*nūranī*) and the essence of perfected humanity manifested (Hossain, *Wilāyat*, 19).

The Prophet’s (pbuh) two attributive names; ‘*Muhammad*’ and ‘*Aḥmad*’ represent the dual facets of this primeval light. ‘*aḥmad*’, related with ‘*wilāyat*’, existed in the concealed realm as the nexus of Divine creation, and ‘*muḥammad*’, on the other hand, was sent as the final prophet to this apparent world as the merciful rescuer and to convey His commands and majesty to the creation. Allah blessed the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) with the gift of *nabuwwat* and *wilāyat*, through which he attained the highest status and was endowed unlimited Divine communion during *mi‘rāj* (night journey). Because of this, prophethood is viewed as descending (from Allah to mankind) and sainthood is ascending (from creation to the Creator). (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 1 & 4; Bhuiya 7)

Hossain’s discussion about sainthood evolved around the concept of ‘*mashrab*-temperament’. The Prophet’s attributive holy names ‘*aḥmad*’ and ‘*muḥammad*’ symbolize two concurrent distinctive divine effulges of *ḥaqīqat-e-muḥammadī* (pbuh). All the prophets since Adam to Jesus and all saints drew their divine grace and inspiration from either of these two divine streams, which shape their spiritual personification and resultant endeavour. Prophets and saints, who drew inspiration from a particular stream of *ḥaqīqat-e-muḥammadī*, might perform exercises of concentration on the spiritual centre connected with it. This influence is sometimes referred to as a *mashrab* or source of inspiration.

The Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) did not have any ‘*mashrab*’ as he was the source and was referred as ‘*marajal baḥrayn*’-the confluence of both ‘*aḥmadi*’ and ‘*muḥammadī*’ streams. Hossain further mentioned that because of the condition of these *mashrab*, prophethood, in general, is related with circumstantial rules and regulations, and was sealed with his (pbuh) prophecy, while *wilāyat* is a consistent and perpetual divine

power invoked to maintain discipline and peace in the apparent and invisible worlds. It quests for knowledge and prefers Divine wills. (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 4 & 10; Bhuiya 12)

The Prophet's authority of *nabuwwat* was exclusive to him whereas his *Wilāyat* was inherited by his companions and the saints thereafter. According to Sufi understanding, Allah chooses great saints to guide the humanity to the right path and to reform his religion and strengthen the bond between Him and His slaves. From this perspective the saints are regarded as the inheritors of the *nūr-e-muḥammadī*.

He followed the traditional explanation of prophethood and sainthood. *nabuwwat*, etymologically, is derived from the word 'naba' (نبا) - 'to inform'. It is a special quality related with Allah's command and is bestowed upon whomever Allah wills, as it is unattainable through ascetic struggle. The word *wilāyat* (ولاية) is derived from the Arabic word 'walā'. 'Walā' means nearness; a relation of love and intimacy. Hossain defined sainthood as the close relation with Allah. (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 1 & 2; Bhuiya 11)

His first classification involved a general perspective of sainthood. In general, there are two types of sainthood. First: *wilāyat-e-imān* is a relation with Allah based on faith that is attainable by any believer. *wilāyat-e-iḥsān* is a special divine relation and authority of Allah that can only be attained by the prophets or the saints. (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 2; Bhuiya 12)

Hossain further mentioned that sainthood can be attained in any of four methods. First- *wilāyat bil aṣālat*: It is attained naturally or by birth without any ascetic struggle as a result of Divine predetermination. The saint of this kind is called 'madarjat-born-saint or *ajlī walī* -pre-eternity saint. Second- *wilāyat bil warāthat*: It is a kind of spiritual inheritance and is also termed as *bi-walāyat*. Third-*walāyat bid dirāsāt*: This sainthood attained through study and spiritual mentorship. The story of the Prophet Musa with *Khidr* is of this kind. Fourth- *wilāyat bil malāmat*: This sainthood is attained through self-blaming and continuous resistance to its aptitude. It is also called as '*ḥuṣūl-e-mukhālafāt-e-naḥs* or attaining the resistance of ego'. (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 2; Bhuiya 12)

Hossain then proceeded to explain the three levels of sainthood. First-*al wilāyat al ṣughrā*: It is the lowest level of *wilāyat-e-iḥsān* and higher than the general believer. Second-*al wilāyat al wustā*: This is the middle level and higher than the status of the angels. Third-*al wilāyat al ‘uẓmā or kubrā*: The saint of this level has the highest authority and to exert spiritual power over the creation. (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 2)

There is another encompassing classification of the sainthood into two major categories based on ‘*mashrab*’ (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 4). First-*ghawthiyyat* is a kind of rescuing sainthood related to the ‘*muḥammadī mashrab*’. The highest rank in this *mashrab* is ‘*Ghawthul A‘ẓam*’. Second-*qutubiyyat* is a type of exertive spiritual authority to maintain discipline in the creation. The highest rank of this *mashrab* is ‘*Qutubul Aqtāb*’. It is related to ‘*aḥmadī mashrab*’.

Syed Delawor Hossain’s Articulation of *Wilāyat-e-Muṭlaqa*

One of the most significant themes of Hossain’s Sufi studies is his classification of *wilāyat* era into two segments: *wilāyat-e-muqayyada* (conditioned spirituality) and *wilāyat-e-muṭlaqa* (unconditioned spirituality). He insisted that during the time of the Prophet (pbuh) spirituality existed in the name of *sunnat-e- muṣtafā*. After his demise, this spirituality continued to be practiced in the activities of the Sufi masters.

Around five hundred years after the demise of the Prophet (pbuh), Muslims fall prey to the temporal temptation and religious confusion due to sectarian and ideological conflicts among the Muslim intellectuals. People were turning away from spirituality. At such juncture of time, Allah sent Syed Abdul Qader Jilani (titled as *Ghawthul A‘ẓam*) to reform the religion and restore spirituality. This was the first circle of *wilāyat*. During this time, the state supported and supervised the Muslim society in their religious and spiritual activities; the Jurists and Muslim rulers, therefore, had leverage over religious life of the masses including Sufi practices. This period is termed as *wilāyat-e-muqayyada*, which worked within the framework of *sharī‘a* and heavily relied upon the government support for its implementation.

Around six hundred years after the demise of the first *Ghawthul A'zam*, the condition of the Muslim society changed dramatically. With the collapse of Islamic Caliphate, the formal religious structure became weaker; consequently, in the absence of a proper religious authority, spirituality started fading away from the society.

Hossain maintained that such transformation needed a new reformed *wilāyat* that prefers morality and inner purification, rather than focusing on external rituals and formality. This reformed spirituality is termed as *Wilāyat-e-Muṭlaqa* which was introduced with the advent of Syed Ahmad Ullah. This *wilāyat* is the essence of Islam and creates a spiritual echo system where an individual can easily combine his religiosity with its temporal counterparts, and equips him for constant spiritual evolvment in the face of challenges. Furthermore, it combines spiritual ecstasy and *sulūk*, and guides an aspirant to the path of Allah in the easiest way. (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 55-57)

Attribution of ‘*Ghawthul A'zam*’ to Syed Ahmad Ullah

Syed Ahmad Ullah and his spiritual pinnacle is the centre, around which Syed Delawor Hossain's Sufi perception and studies revolved and evolved. In order to attribute the highest rank of spirituality and the title of ‘*ghawthul a'zam*’ (The great helper) to his master, he resorted to various evidences: prophecies of the ancient saints; acknowledgement of the contemporary saints and miracles.

He relied on the works of Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Arabi to refer to the concept of a circle of about five/six hundred years, at the beginning of each circle a new spiritual era starts its journey. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was born around six hundred years after the Prophet Isa, and Abdul Qader Jilani was born around five hundred years after his (pbuh) demise. Syed Ahmad Ullah was born around five hundred years after the first *ghawthul a'zam*.

Ibn Arabi and his prophecy constitute an important evidence to articulate his spiritual status. He said in his prophecy that ‘It is in the footsteps of Sheth that the last of this human species will be born, and he will carry his secrets. There will be none of this species born after him, so he will be the Seal of the Begotten. A sister will be born with him, and

she will emerge before him, and he will follow her with his head at her feet. He will be born in China, and he will speak the language of his country. Sterility will spread in men and women, so there will be much cohabitation without conception. He will call people to Allah, but will not be answered. When Allah takes him and the believers of his time, those who remain will be like beasts, not knowing what lawful (*ḥalāl*) is from what is unlawful (*ḥarām*). They will act according to their natural instincts with lust, devoid of reason and law. Upon them the last Hour will occur'. (Arabi 15)

Hossain listed the signs mentioned in the prophecy that matched the personality of Syed Ahmad Ullah: (1) Both the Prophet Seth (a) and Ahmad Ullah belong to '*aḥmadī mashrab*'. (2.) He had a sister born before him. (3) He used to speak the local language. (4) During his time, birth-control prevailed. (5) He called upon the mankind toward the way of Allah, regardless of their race or faith. (6) People could not fully comprehend and respond to his message. (7) After his demise, people forgot the message of Allah and living a life devoid of justice and morality. (8) Chittagong was referred as China, because, during Ibn Arabi's time this area was under the rule of the Chinese. (9) He never spoke against any religions as he acknowledged that goals and ethics of all religions are the same.

He also substantiated the recognition of the contemporary Sufi saints who experienced the highest spiritual status of Syed Ahmad Ullah through their unveiling and divine inspiration, and realized that he was the *Ghawthul A'zam*. Among those Sufi saints were Mawlana Julfiqar Ali, Sufi Safi Ullah, Mawlana Abdul Gani, Mawlana Azizul Hoque Qaderi, all of whom addressed him as the '*Ghawthul A'zam*' (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 37-52). He also mentioned about ninety seven miracles performed by his master, and concluded that such extra ordinary miracles can only be performed by a saint of the highest rank, which is the rank of *Ghawthul A'zam*. He deduced that it is necessary for this type of saint to exert his power so that the commons can realize his status and importance.

Standardization of Spiritual Practices of *Maizbhandari Tariqa*

Different Sufi orders use various techniques and processes to awaken the spiritual faculties and to transform the ‘*nafs*’ to its perfected disposition. In *Maizbhandari Tariqa*, the founder used diverse methods and procedures to advance his aspirants to the path. Syed Delawor Hossain attempted to standardize the practices of this *tariqa*, such as the relation between master and his aspirants, *bay‘at*, *dhikr*, contemplation, the seven principles, *tilawat-e-wajūd* -self accountability etc.

The relation between a *pīr* and his aspirants makes the first step of the spiritual journey. In Hossain’s world of Sufism, *pīr*-dom is a top-down totalitarian spiritual system, where a *pīr* must receive *khilāfa* (authorisation) from his master to be connected to the Prophet (pbuh) through a *silsila* (chain of transmission). Without *khilāfa* and *silsila*, a *pīr* is to be considered a charlatan (Hossain, *Manob* 28 & 31). A perfected *pīr*, in *Maizbhandari* perspective, is not considered separate from the Lord and His prophet (pbuh); rather, he is seen ‘as annihilated and permanent into them’. Inasmuch as ‘words and meaning are inseparable’, the perfected *pīrs* are also inseparable from the Higher Entity and drowned in the ocean of divinity (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 115 & 134). The first step in the path of divine communion is to love the master eclectically and to be annihilated into him.

Bay‘at, in Sufi terminology, denotes giving an oath of allegiance to a saint who will guide him to the path of Allah. There is a very little information about the procedure followed by Syed Ahmad Ullah in giving *bay‘at*. However, it is evident that *Qāderiyya Tariqa* (the origin of the *Maizbhandari*) was solely followed in the procedure of *bay‘at* and in its related rituals. (Hossain, *Mul Totto* 9). Hossain recorded the procedure of oath, which consists of proclamation of faith in Allah, His prophet (pbuh), holy books etc., a promise to abstain from committing polytheism and sin, and to follow the path showed by Syed Ahmad Ullah as well as a firm pledge to observe the fundamentals of Islamic *Sharī‘a* such as, prayer, fasting, almsgiving and pilgrims. (Hossain, *Mul Totto* 10). The incumbent *pīr* of *Maizbhandar Darbar Sharif*, Syed Emdadul

Hoque, also suggested that the *pīr* has the authority to amend the wording of the pledge according to the situation (Hoque's interview).

Hossain asserted that it is imperative for an aspirant to adhere to the Islamic *Sharī'a* with sincerity, as it is revealed for the people of *nāsūt*. *dhikr* (remembrance) and *fikr* (meditation) are the two ways to advance towards Allah (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 97; *Mul Totto* 20)

Dhikr (remembrance) is the most important practices commonly shared by almost all Sufi orders. In Maizbhandari Sufi order, the beginner chants the *dhikr* (*lā ilāha illallāhu*) of negation (*naḥī*) and affirmation (*ithbāt*); preferably after every prayer or at least after one prayer. It involves with four subtle faculties; *naḥī*, *rūḥ*, *akhfā* and *qalb*. After activating these four subtle faculties, he advances to the next phase where he connects remaining two subtle faculties: *Sirr* and *khafī* (Hossain, *Mul Totto* 11). *Dhikr* can be practiced aloud or silent depending on the taste and quality of the aspirant. (Hoque's interview).

Taṣawwur-e-Shaykh or visualizing the face of the perfected *pīr* during meditation (*murāqaba*) is also recommended for the aspirants. An alternative way of meditation is to visualize the Arabic word '*Allāh*' on the face and to see himself as illuminated with the divine radiance (Hossain, *Mul Totto* 11). However, among the Maizbhandari aspirants the former is more popular than the later. It also became a standard practice to combine *dhikr* with *taṣawwur-e-shaykh* and perform them together. Many aspirants confirmed that such combination is more effective to awaken the subtle faculties and to advance to the next level.

The seven principles (*Uṣūl-e-Sab'a*) were incorporated into the Maizbhandari Sufi order as a comprehensive training program for the aspirants to help them slowly break the snares of the world to start their spiritual journey to the Divine Communion, and to attain the highest attributes of humanity. It has two levels '*fanā-e-salāsa*' (three dissolutions) and '*mawt-e-arba'a*' (four deaths) (Hoque et al. 21).

Fanā 'anil khalq is to dissolve the expectation from the creation. *Fanā 'anil hawā* is the dissolution of one's desire. *Fanā 'anil irāda* is the dissolution of one's own choice and to prefer Allah's wills.

The second layer consists of four deaths. According to Sufi literacy, death implies the obliteration of some human instincts which are considered as a temporal barrier in his perseverance of spiritual journey. They die so that they may die no more. Life to them is death and death to them is a new life.

The four deaths are as follow: (1) White Death is to develop self-restrain through fasting or experiencing hunger to protect him from all forms of religious and moral imperfections that may pose as an obstacle in his journey towards the Ultimate Truth. (2) Black Death is attained through the experience of criticism. 'Subjection of self to criticism helps self-correction' (Bertocci 19). (3) Red Death is attained by liberating the 'self' from greed and sexual craving. Hossain considered this 'death as the last frontier of the realm of *'nafs'*, after which the gate of spirituality opens up. (4) Green Death is attained by being accustomed to frugal lifestyle. (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 71-72)

Tilāwat-e-Wajūd implies that an aspirant should, every day, affix a certain short period of time for solitude, when he will withdraw himself from all sort of worldly associations to take account of his own actions.

All the rituals and rigorous practices in this Sufi order are meant to make piety an intrinsic habitual element of human existence, as 'performing good deeds itself is not the ultimate objective; rather, it is to accompany them to the afterlife' (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 99).

These principles and practices derived from the Holy Quran and *Sunnah* of the Prophet (pbuh), are designed to guide a seeker accumulate sublime characters of Islam as well as spiritual wisdom and moral perfection. An aspirant's temporal and spiritual life after completing these stages is more active, meaningful and real as he has now managed to subdue his ego. His heart is now ready to reflect the light of Eternal Divine Love.

Sufi Physiology of Syed Delawor Hossain, and his theory of Spiritual Faculties

Human body is thought of a medium between temporal and spiritual world in Sufi literature. Iconoclastic Sufi notions and practices such as

annihilation, *dhikr*, *murāqaba*, *tazkiyah*-purification have evolved around human physiology. Human body represents the cosmos and reflects in miniature the whole universe. Syed Delawor Hossain developed his Sufi physiology contingent upon the concept of primordial *nūr-e-muḥammadī* (light of Muhammad-pbuh) and *ṣūrat-e-muḥammadī* (structure of Muhammad-pbuh). He further explained how matter and spirit overlap each other in the course of the spiritual journey, be it downward or upward.

Body of Adam was created in the shape of *ṣūrat-e-muḥammadī*. Because of its intrinsic manifestation of primordial ‘the light of Muhammad’, this mould is regarded as the best mould. The Quran referred it as the best shape:

“We have indeed created man in the best shape” (95:3).

Human body is made of four ingredients (clay, water, air and fire) which have their own distinctive characteristics. The combination of these intra-contradictory materials caused seven ambivalent *naḥs* (state) in human nature. They are ‘*ammārah*’- the inciting state, ‘*lawwāmāh*’- the self-blaming state, ‘*mulhamāh*’- the inspired state, ‘*muṭmainnah*’- the tranquil state, ‘*rāḍiyah*’- the pleased state, ‘*marḍiyyah*’- the pleasing state and ‘*kāmilah*’- the perfected state. (Hossain, *Mul Totto* 18; Bhuiya 09) The verse of the Quran (The spirit is from the command of my Lord. 17:85) is indicative of a theory that the spirit, according to Sufi understanding, comes from an immaterial timeless realm of Divine Command (*amr*). At the creation of Adam, Allah emanated the ideal human form with three major spiritual centres: the heart, intelligence, and the *naḥs* (lower soul), and then blew the ‘spirit’ into it and mirrored some of His power and wisdom within this shape. Furthermore, He combines in this structure qualities which are scattered among other creation. Thus, He created the human body from the earth and the spirit comes from the Highest Entity. This is how the incorporeal eternal soul can become attached to a material body.

Hossain asserted that an individual is composed of a system of physical components, spiritual centres and moral predispositions, and that ‘individualism’ is a key contributor to success in spiritual endeavour

(Hossain, *Wilāyat* 26). While constructing his theory of subtle spiritual faculties (*laṭā'if*) and human states (*nafs*), individual personality, the aspects of which constitute a person, and the variations among individuals, all were considered diligently in his thought.

Laṭīfa, (subtle faculty) in Sufi terminology, refers to a nonmaterial component of the person which can be influenced or awakened through spiritual practices. They act as a mediator between the matter and spirit.

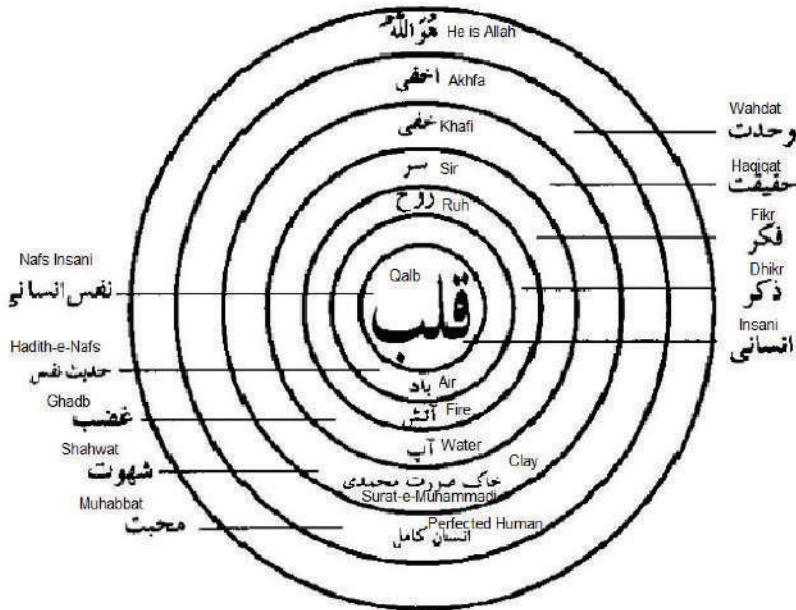
In Mazibhandari Sufi order, there are six *laṭīfa* or subtle faculties. *laṭīfa-e-nafs* is located below the navel and it is a lower, egotistical and passionate human nature which comprises vegetative and animal aspects of human. The initial aim of Sufism is to transform *nafs* (*tazkiya-e-nafs*) from its deplorable state of ego-centeredness to the purity. *Laṭīfa-e-qalb* is located on the left side of the chest. *Qalb* is the space for divine love and nourishment. *Laṭīfa-e-rūḥ* is located on the right side of the chest. *Laṭīfa-e-akhfā* is located in the centre of the head. *Laṭīfa-e-sirr* is located in the middle of the chest. *Laṭīfa-e-khafī* is located just above the 'akhfā'. (Hossain, *Mul Totto* 10-11)

The Nafs, in its unrefined state, is the animalistic egoistic side of human being that has the potential to evolve and to elevate to the higher levels through purification. There are seven stages of its transformation (Hossain, *Mul Totto* 18-23).

(1) *Ammārah* provokes worldly temptation in the heart of its owner. *Sharia* is his remedy as it resides in the realm of *nasut*. (2) *Lawwāmah* is a transitory state that blames and regrets itself on its action. *Tariqa* is its religion and it belongs to the heart. (3) *Mulhamah* receives unveiling and divine inspiration due to its closer relation with Allah. Its abode is the realm of *ruh* and follows the path of divine knowledge (*ma'rifa*). (4) *Muṭmainnah* is the peaceful *nafs*, that becomes a manifestation of *ḥaqīqat-e-muḥammadī*; hence, its religion is 'realizing the reality' (*ḥaqīqat*). (5) *Rāḍiah* is the satisfied *nafs* that does not have its own will other than Allah's. Its station is *lāhūt* and its religion is the perfected divine knowledge (*ma'rifa kāmila*). (6) *Mardīyyah* is a *nafs* with which Allah Himself is happy. It follows the essence of *sharī'a* (*ḥaqīqat-e-sharī'at*). It resides in the realm of divine witnessing and is inspired by

only Divine inspiration. (7) *Kāmilah* is the highest level of perfection and its station is the station of ‘unity’ (*waḥdat*). It is a manifestation of Divine attributes and mercy.

An **onion model** of spiritual elevation was developed by Hossain to portray the affinity and hierarchy of matter and *laṭāif*, and at the same time, to indicate the process of spiritual ascension to the Divinity.



This model is based on the idea that human being is a composite of matter, spirit and subtle faculties. Each of these spaces between the circles symbolically (like an onion) marks a transition point in the schema of spiritual evolvement and concurrent ascendance, while the heart, which is not associated with any particular matter, remains as the central space and ambience for all spiritual scheme and Divine grace. However, it is the ‘*nafs*’ that is the subject of transformation and at the realm of ‘*nāsūt*’, it veils the heart.

Human body is created from four materials (air and fire, water and clay), which are considered as lower levels and cause of temporal entanglement, while the higher levels consisted of subtle faculties (*rūḥ*-spirit, *sirr*-mystery, *khafī*-arcane and *akhfā*- super arcane, *qalb*-heart,

naḥs-lower soul). The four ingredients have their own ambivalent nature. At each level, a combination of matter and activated *laṭīfa* triggers certain divine inspirations that are listed on the right side. This mediation also results in creating some distinct characteristics listed on the left side. The process of transformation continues until he arrives (*wuṣūl-waṣlat*) at the station of *insān-e-kāmil* or *ḥaqīqat-e-muḥammadī*. In this station he attains unity (*waḥdat*) and love (*muḥabbat*). Beyond this station, there is, without time and space, only the Highest Entity and Divinity enveloping a lover's whole existence.

Each *laṭīfa* is intimately connected to each successive *laṭīfa* and is progressively more subtle and refined than the one preceding it. These subtle faculties, super arcane in particular, are the gateways through which Divine radiance enters and mirrors in the heart of the seeker.

Syed Delawor Hossain's Postulate of Spiritual Quest, Divine Communion and Love

Hossain divided spiritual endeavour and progression into three major levels. (1) *Sayr ila Allah* (journey towards Allah) is an individual's progression towards Allah. (2) *Sayr fī Allah* (journey in Allah) is a state of annihilation in the oneness of Allah. (3) *Sayr ma'a Allah* (journey with Allah) is the station of permanency with Allah which consequences in attaining authority to exert divine power. He also asserted that his master Syed Ahmad Ullah accomplished all those levels; and hence, is considered as the great saint of the era (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 15)

The ranks, temperament (*mashrab*) and persona of a Sufi individual are determined, throughout his spiritual endeavour, according to the quantity, kind, intensity and method of effusion (*fayḍ*) received from his master. Function of divine effusion corresponds to the capacity (*qābiliyya*) of the receiver more than the giver. Hossain further classified such effusions into four categories with everyone having their own contingencies. (1) *Fayḍ-e-In'ikāsī* (reflective effusion) is the kind of spiritual reflection that the master mirrored upon the aspirants during their physical proximity. (2) *Fayḍ-e-Iṣlāhī* (rehabilitative effusion) is the divine quality that resists the temptation of 'ego' and is received through the mentorship of the master for his aspirants. (3) *Fayḍ-e-Ilqāī*

(inspirational effusion) is the source of ‘inspirational knowledge’-‘*ilmul ‘ilmul ladunni*’, which the master casts upon the heart of his aspirants. (4) *Fayḍ-e-Itteḥādī* (effusion of union) is the effusion through which an aspirant attains the station of spiritual annihilation and comes out of his ‘duality’. (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 63)

Allah created human being in the best mould (*ṣūrat-e-muḥammadi*) incorporating two intra-contradictory characters; angelic (*malakuti*) and devilish (*nāsūtī*) (Hossain, *Mul Totto* 2). According to the Hadith (Allah created Adam in His shape- *ṣūrat*), he is enlightened with the Divine radiance, and has potential to become a semblance of divinity and to be attributed with divine attributions. An aspirant must see himself as the container of the divine, annihilated in divinity, united in the witness and permanent with the divine, in order to advance to the path of spiritual perseverance. Thus, Sufism objectivises the experience of Oneness of Allah.

However, formulation of such divine experience and feeling was complex mostly due to extreme diversity among the Sufi masters, in terms of their knowledge, temperament, experience and propriety. Consequently, the Sufi world witnessed emergences of the theory of *wahdatul wajūd* (unity of being) and *wahadat shuhūd* (unity of witness).

Wahdatul-wajūd (unity of being) implies that the created is not permanent; henceforth, the illusion of empirical existence must obliterate itself (*fanā*) in the only existence, which is the existence of Allah. ‘All is He’ (*hama ust*).

Wahdat shuhūd, which was a reaction to the concept of ‘unity of being’, implies that the union of Allah is only experimental (spiritual) and not existential (unreal). A created being can have the experience of being united with Allah, but limited to a subjective perception only. The existence of the created being (relative existence) is incompatible with the existence of Allah (absolute existence). Allah is not and cannot be One with everything: ‘all is from Him’ (*hama az ust*). Consistent with his methodology in Sufi studies, Syed Delawor Hossain favoured to mediate between these disparate metaphysical orientations and synthesized them into one string.

He discussed it in different sections of his writings. There is a stark distinction between being worthy of receiving guidance and the quality of utilizing that guidance to accomplish the mission. The former relates with prophethood while the later sits within the domain of *wilāyat* of the Prophet (pbuh) (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 95).

An individual's predisposition to accept divine guidance relates with prophethood (a combination of commands and observation) and is concerned about the exteriority. Based on a verse from the Quran ('Verily, when He intends a thing, His command is, "be", and it is'. 36:81), Hossain argues (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 95) that the creator brings everything into existence through '*kun*'-'be'. Everything came into existence from Him (*hama az ust*). 'Every day in (new) splendour doth He (shine)'(55:29).

On the other hand, a wayfarer's capacity to incorporate the guidance to reach the destination is related with the inspirational *wilāyat* of the Prophet (pbuh). Nothing has real existence except Allah ('*lā ilāha illallāhu - lā mawjūda illallāh*'). Everything is Him (*hama ust*). External rituals cannot limit this comprehensive Sufi realization.

It appears that, Hossain considered that the stage of 'unity of witness' is inferior to that of 'unity of being', as the former is to meditate with the unseen truth; whereas the latter is to exist through the Existence of Lord (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 114)

Divine love, as Hossain deduced, materializes from the submission and complete obedience of the '*nūr-e-muḥammadī*'. It is said in the Quran, 'If ye do love Allah, follow me: Allah will love you and forgive you your sins' (3:30). Accordingly, the Sufis prefer submission and obedience over rituals and regulations. Furthermore, One's spiritual realization of the creator requires loving His creation. He grounded his ideation of universality of divine love on a Hadith where he (pbuh) said that on the day of judgement there will be some special people who will be envied by the prophets and martyrs for their ranks and nearness to Allah. They are 'people who love one another in Allah'. (*Mishakātul Maṣābiḥ*)

Meeting with Allah is brought about by an eclectic love, which establishes a dialogue between the heart and Him. Allah created because of love as it is said in a Hadith, ‘I was concealed, then wanted to be known’.

The Quran also articulated the idea of inter-exchangeable divine love where Allah and the aspirant love each other; (He loves them and they love Him. (5:54). The concept of divine love is so central in Maizbhandari sphere that this *darbar* is described as ‘*premer bazar*’- ‘Market of Love’.

Syed Delawor Hossain’s view on *Tawhīd-e-Adyān*

Tawhīd-e-Adyān (the transcendental unity of religions) is one of the most complex and divergent concepts from the perspective of inter-religious relationship, especially, in Islamic milieu. The paradoxical crisis does not emerge at socio-cultural level; rather, at the theological level, in particular, in the context of afterlife salvation.

There are some verses in the Quran that urges for an inclusive peaceful coexistence of religions, whereas some other might apparently be seemed as provocative and exclusive. It, therefore, requires a perfect contextualisation of the scriptures for correct understanding of such dual faces of the subject. Opinions of the Muslim theologians, let alone the Sufis, are also varied to such an extreme extent, as it happens, that it is unlikely to find a standard or unified view on this subject.

Hallaj (858-922) was one the ancient Sufis to have conceptualised the theory of ‘unity of religion’, concluding that the origin and destiny of all religions is the single Divine Entity. Religions are varied in names and forms, but they are essentially the same. This theory underlines the fact that religious difference is the will of the Creator; people have very little authority and preference in this issue.

Consistent with its inherent ambiguity, the concept of *tawhīd-e-adyān* caused much complex debate in Maizbhandari sphere, both externally and internally. Syed Delowar Hossain Maizbhandari did not discuss this issue in one chapter; instead, his ideas on this concept are scattered throughout his writings. Moreover, he translated the term ‘*tawhīd-e-*

adyān’ in various ways: ‘religious equality’ - *‘dharma shamma’*; ‘religious unity’ - *‘dharma oikka’*).

In this chapter, it will be argued that Hossain’s concept of *‘tawḥīd-e-adyān’* is consistent with that of the holy Quran, and that his concept is a combination of monotheism, morality, ethics, religious equality, religious unity, peaceful co-existence, tolerance and religious pluralism. His ideation of *‘tawḥīd-e-adyān’* creates an inclusive universal middle ground between the conservative exclusivist perception and the extreme liberalism that advocates for a transcendental religious unity that crosses religious boundaries. In addition, he recognises the importance of individuality for exercising humanity as well.

To lay the foundation for understanding Hossain’s arguments that are scattered in various places, several facts need to be acknowledged. Ideological and ritualistic differences are multi-dimensional, and existed in different contexts. They can be in the form of any of the followings: different rituals of Sufi orders; different explanations and rituals among the theologians (madhhab); different *sharī‘a* for different prophets; different faiths and rituals among the monotheistic religions, paganism, polytheism and atheism. Hossain’s treatment of these differences varied according to their orientation.

The holy Quran proclaims that Islam, as a monotheistic religion, has been the religion of all prophets since Adam and that it took its final form with the prophethood of Muhammad (pbuh). It recognises all prophets and sacred books, with a constant rebuke to both Jews and Christians (*‘ahlul kitāb’* - ‘people of book’) for their failure to uphold the concept of *‘tawḥīd’* - ‘oneness of God’ and for their intervention into their scriptures. It also vehemently proclaims that no other religion will be accepted.

Whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted from him and in the Hereafter he will be one of the losers.’(3:85). ‘The (true) religion in the sight of Allah is Islam’ (3:19). ‘Today, I have perfected your religion for you, completed my grace on you and approved Islam as a religion for you. (5:3).

The holy Quran projects the concept of religious inclusiveness, or in another word ‘religious unity’ on the common ground of ‘monotheism’.

‘Say: O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah’ (3:64).

What Islam rejects from theological perspective and after life salvation is polytheism and atheism.

The Quran urges about the peaceful coexistence among the followers of faith.

Let him who will believe, let him who will reject’ (18:29). ‘To you your religion, and to me my religion (109:6).

Hossain (*Wilāyat* 114) unequivocally advocated the idea that the goal of the different Sufi orders is same despite their differences in terms of their methods and practices. All of them aim to uphold the sublime human character and lead the aspirants to the Divine communion. He quoted Rumi’s poem:

‘They are holding each other’s hand in the land of inspiration.

All of whom support religious equality and *wahdatul wajud*.’
(Hossain, *Wilāyat* 3 & 58)

He also argued that the differences between the *sharī‘a* of the prophets are circumstantial. The essence of their faith was monotheism and all of them worked for the same ethical goal.

Hossain’s theory of ‘*tawhīd-e-adyān*’ is to bring people to the common ground of monotheism. He argued that monotheism is closer to the truth than polytheism and atheism (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 62). He grounded his ideation on the verse of the Quran;

‘But say: I believe in the book which Allah has sent down; and I am commanded to judge justly between you. Allah is our Lord and your Lord: for us (is the responsibility for) our deeds, and for you are your deeds (42:15). ‘Those who believe (in the Quran), and those who follow the Jewish and Christians and the *Sābians*,-

any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve (2:62). ‘Then is it only a part of the book that ye believe in, and do ye reject the rest? 2:85).

To add more flesh to his argument, he maintained that because of the contribution of the Sufi saints in Indian sub-continent, many Hindu scholars like Shwami Bibakananda, Ramananda, Loknath, Raja Ram Mohon, believed in monotheism, even if they did not formally accept Islam as a religion.

In addition to monotheism, he also proposed another common ground- ‘ethical perfection’ for inter-faith unity. He concluded (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 98) that although all faiths are different in their rituals and practices, they are, indeed, indifferent in setting up their goal to nurture human morality and to enrich ethics. He further deduced that the Prophet (pbuh) was the perfect embodiment of sublime character and ethical practice, as the Prophet (pbuh) himself declared, ‘I was sent down only to perfect the human character.’

In several places (*Wilāyat* 87 & 97), he proclaimed the supremacy of Islam as a code of life, and that Islam is the final edition of religions. Having been preserved from errors and interjections, the greatness of the Holy Quran lies in its ability to provide a progressive, sustainable and accommodative religion suitable for all in every era.

However, three ‘isms’, in particular, seemed to fall from his grace in his concept of ‘*tawhīd-e-adyān*’; polytheism and atheism and religious extremism. He contended (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 62; *Manob* 31) that ‘*Wilāyat*’ is a divine wisdom to save people from the fold of polytheism, atheism and religious radicalism. Furthermore, he argued (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 135) that even if the atheists have been able to invent many things, they were unable to provide any solution for any human crisis; rather, they are causing more problems.

Nevertheless, he advocated passionately about religious freedom and peaceful co-existence of different religions, proclaiming that everyone has the right to choose his faith according to his taste without being

subjected to any prejudice or hatred. He also advocated for the notion that no one should consider his version of understanding as the ultimate truth and let him engage with another faith or practice in an intimidating way. It also implies that the notion of religious supremacy and any subtle marginalization of someone's faith, race, and rituals are the opening crack that will eventually destroy the foundation of a society and civilisation (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 80 & 148).

Furthermore, he maintained that every being has its own way of survival. The survival and sustainability of human civilization lies in its humanistic nature, which is sourced in the ideation of Sufism or 'Ethical Humanism', whose universality cannot be constrained within the boundaries of place or race (Hossain, *Manob*, Introduction).

There are some traits, such as; slaying, oppression, lies, cruelty and adultery that are abhorred unanimously by all religions; whereas some traits, such as; honesty, benevolence, love, compassion and truthfulness are upheld and praised in every religion. This 'ethical humanism' is the common ground where followers of different religions find their commonality and a drive for working together to stop degeneration of ethical aspects of a human being. (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 87; Hoque's interview).

The proponents of the 'Maizbhandari version' of the concept of '*tawḥīd-e-adyān*' argue that '*wilāyat-e-muṭlaqa*' is 'capable of eradicating religious conflicts' through its engagement of 'every faith and their respective law'. It further unites all religions to create a human race with ideal character and uphold the idea that 'no religion is inferior to other'. It treats everyone according to their final destination and acknowledges religious, cultural, ritualistic diversity as a reality. (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 91; Alam, *In Search* 2, 11 & 14; Jahangir, *Shoto Borsho* 330-338).

Hossain also asserts that his master *Ghawthul A'zam* Syed Ahmad Ullah has the spiritual authority and power to bring people from different background to the common ground of monotheism without hindering their rituals and practices; thus, building bridges among the faith communities and championing peaceful co-existence, by dissipating faith

related enmity, arrogance, hatred and religious supremacy. (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 60 & 87)

Syed Delawor Hossain's Effort to Harmonize between *Sharī'a* and *Maizbhandari Tarīqa*

There has been a consistent historical argument that Sufism refers to the esoteric aspect of Islam, whereas *sharī'a* represents its exoteric half. In every era of Islamic history, there were innumerable prominent Muslim theologians, who were Sufi as well. In spite of that fact, relationship between Sufism and *sharī'a* usually projects an asymmetrical discourse and an inter-conflicting image. Many Sufi theologians, in the past and present, attempted to reconcile and re-harmonize the bond between the two; nonetheless, the asymmetric trajectory continues.

Maizbhandari Tarīqa, as a Sufi order, naturally inherited Sufism's victimhood of slanderous disparaging vilification. Additionally, it miraculously managed to attract much more criticism and opposition than its local siblings. It is quite astonishing, as many of the first generation Maizbhandari Sufis, if not all of them, were prominent theologians graduated from the traditional *madrashas*. The controversies usually centred into one of these three issues: compliance with *sharī'a*, practice of *samā'* and *sajda ta'zīmī*.

An abecedarian cannot be reprimanded for expecting Maizbhandar Darbar Sharif, as a Sufi centre, to be under a single unified administration. In contrast, it is a densely populated village, mushroomed with shrines, houses and *manzils*, with each having their own independent administration spearheaded by a *pīr*. Some understanding and practices 'can be appropriated by some *manzils* and rejected by others' (Harder 72).

Existence of varied practices and different ideologies is a key element not to be missed in Maizbhandari studies. It is, therefore, a matter of fact that any attempt to generalize a practice or concept as '*maizbhandari*', or to apply fixed notions of what are the core ideologies of *Maizbhandari Tarīqa* will be deemed to be quixotic and will eventually meet resistance and opposition, to an unidentified extent, not only from outside of its

spectrum, but from within as well. Its openness and liberalism, ironically, might have contributed into developing a variety of ideologies and practices within its fold.

Compliance with Islamic *Sharīʿa* has been at the heart of the external and internal debate since its inception. There is an understanding, be it wrong or right, that this *ṭarīqa* transcends, to some extent, the boundary of the religion it claims to be at its centre.

Hossain, classified the *sharīʿa* into two major tiers: Reality of *sharīʿa* (*ḥaqīqat-e-sharīʿa*) and outward *sharīʿa* (*baijjik sharīʿa*). He grounded his argument on the story of the Prophet Musa (a) and Khidr (a), where the holy Quran vindicated the actions of Khidr. In this incident, representing the exterior of the *sharīʿa*, Musa (a) was unable to comprehend the essence and compatibility of the actions conducted by Khidr (a.), who was said to be directed by divine inspirations or the reality of *sharīʿa*.

He argued that Sufi saints of higher status, inspired by divine knowledge and revelation, often conduct actions that apparently are not in compliance with the outer structure of the *sharīʿa*; nevertheless, their actions are in full compliance with the wisdom and reality of *sharīʿa*. They always follow divine instructions and knowledge; rather than following dead rituals.

By explaining the *sharīʿa* in this two-tiered way, Hossain was able to reconcile Maizbhandari thoughts and practices with traditional theological opinions. He further affirmed the affinity between the two, stating that the conducts of the Sufis and their civilization are in fact Quranic civilization, and are completely in harmony with the orthodox Islam (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 99, 117 & 120).

An aspirant at the station of *naḥs-e-ammārah* must be restricted by the *sharīʿa*; because, this is the station of lust, anger, greed and temptation which are the cause of deviation. He is instructed to observe ‘*ibādāt-e-mutanāfiyah*’ (preventative rituals) such as prayer, fasting and almsgiving, whose outward aspects will restrain him within his limit, while his inward evolvment gradually uplift him to the higher station. (Hossain, *Mul Totto* 10; *Wilāyat* 14, 135).

‘*Samāʿ*’ (musical performance) has a long history in the practice of Sufism. The Sufi saints used emotions and passions of the people to induce fire of love in their heart, enabling them to advance easily in their spiritual quest. Having a profound insight in the human nature and psyche of the people and the challenges of modern music, the Maizbhandari masters did not strive to curb or suppress the emotions and passions of the people, instead, attempted to channel the dominant emotion to his spiritual journey. Hossain argues, (*Wilāyat*, 150-151) that introduction of ‘*samāʿ*’ within the Maizbhandari practices was part of ‘the religious wisdom (*hikmat*)’, and one of its benefits was to replace the obscene songs in local culture.

Although the founder did not consider *samāʿ* as an intrinsic obligatory practice of the *ṭarīqa*, but an optional element subject to individual taste and inclination, it managed to become a symbolic practice of the *ṭarīqa*. It is reported that he would occasionally advise some random individuals, not all devotees, to join *samāʿ mahfil* conducted by one of his deputies and nephews Syed Aminul Hoque (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 152).

Maizbhandari followers are most often distinguished by their intense eclecticism which is articulated in the circle of *samāʿ*. Some argued (Jahangir, *Shoto Borsho* 84) that it is impossible to experience the true taste of Maizbhandari songs without being in the Sufi ambience. Additionally, it has also been suggested ‘*samāʿ*’ or musical performance with its broader application has been a ‘major factor in the movement’s appeal’ (Bertocci 15).

In the perception of Syed Delawor Hossain, there is a significant distinction between a *samāʿ mahfil*, whose sole purpose is spiritual endurance, and performance of the songs for mere entertainment and recreation. He imposed some formulaic rules and procedures for the *samāʿ mahfil*, while the general presentation is exempt from this formality. Maizbhandari *samāʿ* culture also faced opposition in regards to its permissibility in Islamic *Sharīʿa*. In addition to Sufism’s original adversaries, the opposition on this issue includes, surprisingly, many adherents and Islamic scholars of local Sufi orders. However, at the

wake of such polemic engagements from two fronts, the followers of *Maizbhandari Tarīqa* have not given away this practice; conversely, their attachment and practice have ever been increasing. As a result, a process of normalisation was eminent. To survive the competition in Islamic cultural arena, some Islamic cultural groups are also found to resort to using musical instruments (such as ‘*daff*’) to some extent.

Sajda ta‘zīmī (prostration of respect) is the most controversial element attached to *Maizbhandari Tarīqa*. This discourse started with the angels prostrating to Adam (*ghayr* Allah-an entity other than Allah) to show their respect, and continued with the Prophet Yaqub and his sons prostrating for the Prophet Yusuf Both incidents are mentioned in the holy Quran (12:99 and 2:34). Although majority of the Sufi Masters deemed this practice as impermissible, some Sufi saints indeed were inclined to stick to such practice as a token of respect and annihilation into their masters.

The question-how and why this practice penetrated into Maizbhandari culture- seems to have no definite answers. The founding saint was reported to answer positively about this subject, referring to the book ‘*Fatawā-e-Qāḍī Khān.*’ He treated it as a mere subject of Islamic Jurisprudence; whether it is permissible or not (Bhuiya 185). But the followers, at least a large number of them, appeared to make it an essential part of spiritual journey and a symbol of annihilation into the *pīr* (Jahangir, *Shoto Borsho* 321). However, among the devotees, there are many, if not the majority, who always preferred not to follow this custom, and are often looked down by the practitioners as a veiled one unable to attain the station of annihilation into his *pīr*.

Hossain attempted to explore its jurisprudential and spiritual background. ‘*Sejda*’, an Arabic word, etymologically means ‘putting forehead on the ground’ or ‘to submit’. According to *sharī‘a*, it is to put the forehead on the ground with the intention of worshipping Allah. Prostration is of two kinds: prostration for worship (which is done to worship Allah) and prostration for respect (which is done to show respect). He grounded his argument on the verse of the Quran:

‘We said to the angels: ‘Bow down to Adam’ (2:34). ‘And they fell down in prostration’ (12:100).

Moreover, Hossain maintained that ‘*sejda*’ not only refers to putting forehead on the ground, it also implies to submission and obedience. The holy Quran confirms that the sky, the earth and the sun prostrate for Allah, although they do not have foreheads. Therefore, humbleness and obedience are the heart of prostration (Hossain, *Wilāyat* 74-78).

However, in terms of practicality, Syed Delawor Hossain was reported to have never performed this type of prostration. He even never allowed anyone to prostrate for him. He would hold the hands of anyone trying to prostrate for him and would tell him to say ‘*assalāmu ‘alaykum*’ (Boshor 94-95). It can be concluded that although he preferred its permissibility from the juristic view point, he actively encouraged not performing it as a copycat. It is also mentioned that the founding saint Syed Ahmad Ullah also would not like it when it was done as a blind culture without understanding its reality. He would adjure to say ‘*assalāmu ‘alaykum*’ (Bhuiya 185).

Given the chronology of *sajda ta‘zīmī* in Maizbhandari culture, it is apparent that the level of its practice and understanding has always been fluctuating widely throughout different generation, various branches and fractions.

Moreover, many prominent Maizbhandari *pīrs* are said to have formally and actively instructed their followers not to practice it. The door of speculation remains open; whether this action is to return to the origin or a deviation from it.

Conclusion

Syed Delawor Hossain’s creative, conscious, restructuring and reconstructing of the spiritual and temporal infrastructure of *Maizbhandari Tarīqa* speaks volumes of his skill, talent and knowledge. His works are also an indicator, to a large extent, for the kind of transformation his era went through in terms of its social, spiritual, economic, political and sectarian aspects.

Hossain's efforts to understand and articulate *Maizbhandari Tariqa* as a total spiritual system, through the dialect of the Quran and Hadith, and his attempt to re-harmonize it with Islamic *shari'a*, is one of his most original contributions. He effectively translated the individual spiritual personification into community action, and brought the abstract and out-of-reach Sufi inspirations in line with the conventional interpretations of revelation. It is that dynamic feature in his study being acknowledged and adduced as a precedent by the scholars of later generation.

As an exemplary faithful spiritual and temporal heir apparent to Syed Ahmad Ullah, he devoted his life and work to build his master's spiritual legacy, and to propagate his teaching and message. Moreover, before his demise, he authorised his third son Syed Emdadul Hoque as his spiritual heir apparent to continue with his master's spiritual legacy. Syed Delowar Hossain deliberated the philosophy, methods and culture of *Maizbhandari Tariqa* with such authority and manner that it cemented his thoughts as an essential ingredient of Maizbhandari studies. His literary contributions along with other practical activities are an effective answer to the ethical threats posed by polytheism, atheism, religious radicalism and materialism.

It is evident from his study that this Sufi order is a nucleus of universal love and devotion that prefers obedience and submission over exoteric rituals. Human beings are the best of creation (*ashrāful makhluqāt*) and no discrepancies based on someone's faith, race, colour or anything else should be allowed to marginalize this honour.

The goal of Sufism exists into two-folds; spiritual transformation of the people through renovating their bond with Allah and enrich their ethics and ethos. Imbalance and disorientation between rituals and reality of a faith causes erosion within its structure; and eventually leads to both ideological and structural distortion, either in a liberal or an extreme way; consequently, opens the door for religious exploitation and spiritual deterioration.

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