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RELIGIOUS THOUGHTS OF HAZRAT KHAN BAHADUR AHSANULLAH

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Abstract

Hazrat Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah was a distinguished educationist, philosopher, humanist, and spiritual personality. He worked relentlessly to reform Muslim society in the Indian subcontinent in the later half of the 19th century. One of his greatest achievements was that he reformed education to give a better life to the people belonging to the Muslim community and enlightened the human society by explaining religion in the light of education. It was believed by him that one could live a prosperous life by embracing all the Imams-Aqeedah, Shariat-Tariqat, and ideals of Islam. He identified honesty, purity and love as the prerequisites for all actions and judged all from the viewpoint of humanity. It was possible for him to transcend the boundaries of space and time and create a rare combination of religious knowledge and modern learning through his works and writings.

The objectives of the present article are to explore the spiritual thoughts of Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah; and describe the concept of God and Dhrama as envisioned by him. Through an extensive review of primary and secondary sources, it has been found that, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah had always given importance to unity, integrity, peace and friendship as the main aspects of religious thought. He believed from the core of his heart - "worship of God is service unto Creation". He accepted humanity as the base of all religions followed by human beings. The benevolent thoughts with which he viewed the world can become the driving force and ideal of our daily journey in the path of life.

Key words: Education, God, Humanity, Spirituality, Religion

Introduction

In the history of human kind we come across people who never stop moving forward towards their goals despite obstacles strewn in their path. Their aim of life is to work for the welfare of all and consequently for the welfare of the world. Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah was one such person whose striving optimism drove him forever to do something worthwhile. The history of the development of the Muslim community in the Indian sub- continent cannot be imagined without his contribution. He showed a new direction of life to the community and taught people to think anew. Through his hard work he was able bring out people immersed in prejudice and show them the light of truth. His motto of life was honesty, purity and love.

Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah studied different religious teachings meticulously with equal importance and realized the true meaning of God and religion. This culminated in his writing of numerous books and articles on religion, education and society. Through his literary works he tried to combine religious knowledge with modern education. He envisaged that it was not possible to bring out people from their superstitious and illiterate world unless he provided them an explanation of the reality of God, and made them understand the correct meaning of religion and Islam. His aim was to eliminate conflicts, doubts and differences among people.

Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah devoted 92 years of his life to the welfare of human society and educational reform. Being a senior employee of the Education Department and also a very bright student himself, he was able to understand the reasons behind the backwardness of the Muslim community. So he tried to reform people's religious consciousness by focusing on education. With the realization that people and society cannot develop without education, he established many educational institutions and also contributed to the establishment of Dhaka University in Bangladesh for higher education. Through his persistent effort and strong determination he was able to spread the highest level of modern education in the darkest of times in the history of Muslim society. His spiritual practice enabled him to fulfill his professional duties with devotion. He is a unique example of an educationist and a social worker whose service to mankind will forever be cherished by one and all.

Objectives: Through an extensive review of literature the objectives of this paper are to:

- study briefly the biography of Khan Bahadur Asulullah,
- explore the spiritual thoughts of Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah; and
- describe the concept of God and Dhrama as envisioned by Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah.

Life Sketch of Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah

Hazrat Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah was born on 26th December 1873 in the village of Nalta, formerly known as Khulna, now in the Satkhira district of Bangladesh. His father Munshi Mohammad Mofijiuddin was a pious, rich and generous man. His grandfather Munshi Mohammad Danesh was also a pious and wealthy man. He started his educational journey much before the age of five. After completion of primary school education, he was enrolled in the Middle English School at Nalta. At the fourth grade (currently equivalent to the seventh grade) he joined Taki Government High School in West Bengal. In the annual examination of Class III (equivalent to present day Class VIII) in this school, he stood first and was promoted to Class II (equivalent to present day Class IX). At the end of the year, he was admitted to the LMS Institution (London Missionary School) in Calcutta in the second grade. In 1890 he passed the Entrance Examination (equivalent to present day Madhyamik Examination) with distinction and was awarded a scholarship. He passed F.A (equivalent to present day H.S. Examination) from Hooghli College in 1892 and B.A from Presidency College, Calcutta in 1894. He received his Master of Philosophy (M.A) degree from Calcutta University in 1895.

After completion of his academic education in 1896 Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah worked at the Rajshahi Collegiate School as a Supernumerary Teacher for a brief period of time. Soon he joined office as Additional Deputy Inspector of Faridpur on 1st April, 1897. Later, he joined as Deputy Inspector of the Bakherganj district on the request of the Director Mr. Martin (*Amar Jibon Dhara, P-16*). His office was in Barisal where Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah served as a Deputy Inspector for the next seven years of his career. Soon Director, Mr. Martin recommended the names of four officials to the Government of Bengal. These officials were to be promoted from the Subordinate Education Service to Provincial Education Service. Among these names was also the name of, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah. As a result, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah was the first person to be appointed from the post of Inspector to the post of teacher in the

provincial service. Consequently, in 1904, he was appointed as the headmaster of the Rajshahi Collegiate School (আমার জীবন ধারা, P-21).

During one of his inspections at the Rajshahi Collegiate School, the then Director of the Department of Education for East Bengal and Assam, Mr. H. Sharp expressed his complete satisfaction on the work carried out by Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah. As a token of recognition of his accomplishment, Mr. H. Sharp appointed Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah as the Divisional Inspector for the Chittagong region in 1907. For the next seventeen years, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah stayed in Chittagong and made considerable improvements in the field of education of Chittagong. He was the first of the officers of Education Department of that time to attain the highest rank and was the foremost among the country's employees to be selected for inclusion in the Indian Educational Service (IES). The then Education Minister A.K. Fazlul Haque Khan appointed Ahsanullah as an Assistant Director of Muslim Education in undivided Bengal in place of Mr. Taylor. Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah continued his service as Assistant Director for the next five years and retired in 1929 at the age of fifty-five.

After his retirement, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah was appointed as the Senator of the University of Calcutta. Later he was elected as a member of the Syndicate. The election was well contested but he was successful. So far, no Muslim member had been elected to the Syndicate of the University of Calcutta. As the management of the University is vested in the hands of the Syndicate, it was indeed an important responsibility for him to shoulder. Also, the responsibility of education of the Muslims in undivided Bengal was upon him. Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah was closely associated with the Department of Education and tried wholeheartedly to improve the Department. Along with Mr. H. Sharp, he was able to improve the structure of sub-divisional high schools. High schools at Feni, Chandpur, Brahmanbaria, Chittagong and Noakhali were established under his supervision. On the outskirts of the city, he bought land at Sawratali and had built a large school with the help of the government. He also had the opportunity to establish hostels for Hindu and Muslim students in many places. (আমার জীবন ধারা, P-29). Under his supervision many schools were established in the houses of Hindu landlords also. In fact he was able to spread education irrespective of caste and gain the friendship of all. Along with the establishment of the school, he also contributed to the establishment of Calcutta Islamia College. Besides, his contribution to the establishment of Makhdoomi Library, Islamia Library and Provincial Library is undeniable. (আমার জীবন ধারা, P-95-96). He established the Ahsania Mission in the year 1935 with the motto of "Worship of Creator is service to creation". He passed away in the year 1965 after a long life of 92 years.

Spiritual Thoughts of Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah

In the first half of the 20th Century, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah was one of the few thinkers who dedicated themselves to the social, financial and religious reform of the Muslim society. Possessed of clear thinking, eloquent writing skill and a generous heart, this sage was both an eminent academician and an efficient administrator on one hand and a religious and spiritual seeker of high orders on the other. The motto of his life was 'service to mankind through worship of God'. He wholeheartedly believed that service to mankind is essential to gain the blessings of the Almighty (Allah). Anyone can reach God through service to humanity. The Almighty resides in His creation. Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah always considered his devotees, followers and well-wishers as a friend. His natural humility and spiritual brilliance gave many people a new direction to lead a worthy and beautiful life. Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah's clarity of character, wisdom and humility are reflected in his philosophy of life. According to him the duty of a *pir* (()) or, a saint is to develop and nurture the spiritual strength of his followers. It is not possible for a saint to create spiritual power within his followers. He can only bring out the power given by God to every human being and give an apt explanation of that power. The secret source of power within all people, placed by God can be tapped through love and prayer.

Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah stressed on the need for spiritual education. Materialistic education cannot solve all the problems of life; it only helps us to obtain degree and academic knowledge. However, this is not all! As human being everyone should know themselves and everyone should realize their internal power that has been gifted to them by God. Devotion and love are the only ways through which one can acquire this special power. An individual's heart and mind should be pure. The heart should be able to beat with the pain of others, and the mind should always be attentive to the trouble of others. It is only through spiritual knowledge man can reach the standard of humanity, and become a true human being.

He also gave importance to love for all and believed that all things can be achieved through selfless love. Love was the only means through which God can be realized as God resides in this love. The heart should be kept clean; the mind should not be polluted. Greed and anger must be renounced. People should learn to forgive, only then will they find God and realize His grace. Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah gave equal importance to both good and bad experiences of life. According to him, things learnt from bad experiences can be enriched through the good ones. He did not forget to thank God for the ups and downs of his life because he considered that it was this education that has shown him the way of life.

In his book 'Devotee's Letters', Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah wrote, that, he has no words to describe the mercy of God. God's works are beyond the intellect of common man. His grace is always showered equally on all. We are blind so we cannot see, senseless so we do not understand. It is not possible for us to repay the grace of God that we enjoy every moment in our life. If the human society can cherish His love in their heart, then the heart will possess true happiness. It must always be remembered that our knowledge is limited and illusory and with such knowledge it is not possible for us to understand the Almighty. It is the duty of man, to consider himself inferior when he is considered superior by all in the society. In this way he will become more respectable. Energy is transmitted only when the heart is full. Therefore the heart should be filled with love, honesty and wisdom. According to Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah, one must keep God in his/her heart and mind. We can reach God by following the path shown by Him. God should be kept in speech; God should also be kept in smile. To realize his glory, the mind must be purified, and then God can be found in everything. Life will become great, beautiful, and peaceful. A little smile brings a ray of heaven to a man's heart; any hardness can be conquered by this sweet language.

Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah dedicated his life in building a society where people possessed strong and deep bond of love for humanity. In this context he said,-"I am not a candidate for your honor, I am a candidate for your well-being, for your peace, for your happiness. I want to serve you. I want to sacrifice my own interests, my glory for your welfare." (Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah Rachnabali, Volume-11, Page 575). This statement of his, showed that he was inspired by the motto " \(\frac{2813}{2813} \) \(\frac{3140}{283} \) \(\frac{737}{283} \) that means "Worship of Creator is service towards Creation". Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah founded 'Ahsania Mission' in 1935 in his own village Nalta which is now in Satkhira district. The purpose of the Mission was to 'serve the Lord through service towards Creation'. Other important objectives of the Mission were to awaken spirituality in people, to guide people in the path shown by God, and to establish spirituality in the hearts of people by removing all evil, darkness and superstitions. He laid down many rules and regulations for the practice of spirituality, which is being followed in the mission till date. These rules are enumerated in his books- 'নামাজের শিক্ষা', 'আহসানিয়া মিশনের মত ও পথ', 'তরিকত শিক্ষা', ও 'আহসানিয়া মিশনের মূলনীতি' etc. In order to bring spirituality in life and to walk on the path of spirituality, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah said that both Ultimate soul and Human soul should be illuminated with light. 'A man's soul is like a mirror, only when the taint is removed, the blessings of the Almighty can shine upon it. If a man goes to His feet with a repentant heart, the taint of his whole life is removed by God in a moment. Man should subdue his desires and uphold the desires of God. Evil desires must be discarded; higher the suppression of *Ripu*, greater is the increase of spiritual power. This leads to growth of abundance of love in the heart which in turn enables one to see God'. Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah mentioned the ways of attaining God in his book 'আহসানিয়া মিশনের মত ও পথ'. These included,-

- "১) চরিত্র গঠন-নেক আমল অর্জ্জন।
- ২) বাহ্যেন্দ্রিয়ের সংযম মুখ, চক্ষু, কর্ণ, নাসিকা, হস্ত, পদাদির অপব্যবহার হইতে বিরত এবং কাম, ক্রোধ, লোভ, মোহ, মদ, মাৎসর্য এর দমন।
- ७) অञ्चित्रित সংযম अश्मिका, আমিত্ব রিয়া, ঘৃণা, হিংসার বিসর্জ্জন।
- ৪) শরীয়ত পালন কলেমা, রোজা, নামাজ, জাকাত, হজ্জ, বেহেশত প্রাপ্তির উপকরণ।
- ৫) তরিকত (মহব্বত অর্জ্জন) এর তিন পর্য্যায় তরীকত, হাকিকত, মারেফত।"
- 1) Formation of character Accomplishment of good deeds.
- 2) Control of the external senses abstinence from abuse of the mouth, eyes, ears, nose, hands, feet and suppression of lust, anger, greed, infatuation, alcohol, greed.
- *3)* Control of the internal senses Renunciation of egotism, hatred, and violence.
- 4) Observance of Shariat Kalema, Fasting, Namaz, Zakat, Hajj- means of attaining heaven.
- 5) The three stages of Tariqat (pursuit of love) Tariqat, Haqiqat, Marefat.

(Ahsaniya Missoner Mot O Poth, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah, P-16).

By following these simple rules in daily life and living one can easily be close to the Almighty.

Concept of God

Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah's philosophy of life, evolved from his compassion towards the living world. Through the removal of injustice, untruth and oppression, he dreamed of constructing a path towards liberation and welfare of his oppressed nation. Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah was a great follower of Hazrat Muhammad Mustafa, one of the great Islam prophets who cherished the establishment of a humane society. Muhammad Mustafa vowed to remove all darkness of the world and bind entire mankind in the bonds of unity, equality and brotherhood thereby establishing world peace. Idealizing these beliefs, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah started his life's journey. He wanted one and all to follow the path of the Prophet Mohhamad and it was his firm belief that, if one can follow this path he can come nearer to God. Irrespective of caste and religion, one can be close to God only by being bound with love, loving the creation and above all preserving the creation.

At the root of creation lies eternal love for the beloved Creator. Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah believed that religion can be explained only by exploring the deep meaning of the loving relationship between the Creator and His creation. He explained that at the root of all creation is God, who is the formless, the primal power, and the primary source of all power. In his words –

"বায়ুর আকার নাই, তবুও তাহার বিদ্যমানতা উপলব্ধি করি, তাপের আকার নাই তবুও তাহার বিদ্যমানতা উপলব্ধি করি। সেইরূপ নিরাকার হইলেও স্রষ্টা হলেন পুর্নসত্ত্বা, সকল জ্ঞান, সকল শক্তি, সকল দয়া, সকল প্রেমের অচিন্ত্য অসীম ভাশুর।"

Air has no form, yet we perceive its existence, heat has no form yet we perceive its existence. Similarly He is formless, yet the Creator is the infinite source of all knowledge, all power, all kindness and all love. (Srishti Tattva, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah, Page-20).

Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah spoke of the omnipresence of God, and called for the pursuit of God through service unto creation. According to him, God is the creator. All His creations follow an inviolable law from which there can be no deviation. God the creator of all planets enable them to rotate smoothly in their respective orbits. The progress of science has helped in uncovering of the mysteries of creation. This has been done by Man- who is a wonderful creation of the Creator. The omnipresence of the Creator can be felt in every nook and corner of his creation, contrary to the belief that He is present only in temple, mosque or church; He is present in all His creations, He dwells in every living being. Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah quoted from the Holy Quran, -

"আছেয়া কুরছি হুছ ছামাওয়াতে অয়াল আরদে"

All the earth, all the heavens are the seats (কুরছি) of God. (Sufi, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah, Page-71).

In his exposition on the importance of Human Beings on Earth he wrote- "During the ancient period, the sun, the moon and the stars were deemed as deities and were worshipped. The Quran explained to people that the entire universe is created only for the welfare of human beings. Planets and satellites in the firmament are not to be worshipped by men; rather those are to serve human being. It is only human beings, who are the best of creation of God. All the cosmic reaction is for the service of humanity". (Sufi, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah, Page-72).

Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah believed that service to creation should be the basic religion (Dharma) of all. The Creator is present everywhere, He is present in every atoms of His creation. In his book 'আমার জীবন ধারা' he opined that, -

"স্রষ্টার করুণা সর্বত্র বিস্তৃত, অন্ধ আমরা, তাই তাহার গুপ্ত রহস্য ভেদ করতে অক্ষম। মানবের জন্যই প্রকৃতির সৃষ্টি: পশু, পক্ষী, মৎস্য, উদ্ভিদ সবই মানুষের খেদমতের জন্য অভিপ্রেত। সূর্য, চন্দ্র, নক্ষত্রও মানুষের সেবায় নিয়োজিত। দয়াময় খোদা মানুষকে সৃষ্টির সেবা করিয়া তাঁহারই সেবার জন্য সারা দুনিয়াকে কি অদ্ভূত উপায়ে নিয়ন্ত্রিত করিতেছেন"।

The mercy of God is all-pervading; we are blind, so we are unable to divulge into His secret mysteries. Nature has created for man: animals, birds, fish, plants- are all meant for service to man. Sun, moon, stars are also engaged in the service of man. In what a strange way God, the Merciful, controls the whole world for His own service by making man serve the creation. (আমার জীবনধারা, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah, Page- 45).

Thus the fact that creation originates from the essence of the Great Creator is very clearly revealed in his books. According to him, human creation in this world is one of the best gifts of God. God has provided water, soil, mountains, animal and plant life and also the solar system for the service of human beings. Man in turn must look after His creation in order to serve Him.

While explaining the nature of God, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah highlighted the true nature of 'Islam'. In order to become a true follower of Islam one must believe that.-

"ইসলাম ছিলম' ধাতু হইতে উৎপন্ন। ইহার অর্থ আত্মত্যাগ, অপর অর্থ শান্তি। উভয়ের মধ্যে পারস্পরিক সম্বন্ধ। মানুষ যতই আত্মত্যাগ করিয়া খোদার আনুগত্য স্বীকার করে ততই সৃষ্ট জীবের সহিত শান্তি সৃষ্টি করিতে সক্ষম হয়। যিনি যতই খোদার পেয়ারা হন, তিনি ততই সৃষ্টির সেবায় নিজেকে নিয়োজিত করেন। প্রকৃত মোছলেম তিনি, যিনি বিশ্বস্রষ্টার অনুরক্ত ও বিশ্ব শান্তির প্রয়াসী'।

Islam is derived from the root verb 'chilam'. It means self-sacrifice; its other meaning is peace. There is interrelation between the two. The more man sacrifices himself and accepts obedience to God, the more he is able to create peace with created beings. The more one becomes a devotee of God, the more he devotes himself to the service of creation. He is a true Muslim, who is a follower of the creator of the world and a seeker of world peace. (ইসলামের মহতা শিক্ষা, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah, Page-11).

It is clear from the above quote that Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah believed that the way to become a true Muslim is by devoting oneself to the service of God's creation and obeying the Creator of the world. Khan Bahadur Ahsanullahin in his book 'Sristitotto' said that,-

"স্রষ্টা যিনি অনন্ত শক্তি, অনন্ত জ্ঞান, অনন্ত প্রেমের অনন্ত ভাল্ডার - সর্বভূতে সর্বসময়ে বিদ্যামান, যিনি বিশ্বের অন্তর্গত ও বহির্ভূত, তাহার বিদ্যমানতা ইন্দ্রিযয়ের অগ্রাহ্য বা অলভ্য হইলেও মানবের অনুভূতির অতীত নহে।" The Creator who is the repertoire of infinite power, infinite knowledge, infinite love – is omniscient and omnipresent. He is within and beyond the world, His existence is imperceptible or inaccessible by our senses, but He is not beyond the feelings of man. (Srishti Tattva, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah, Page-8)

Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah said there is no substance in which God's power, greatness, or qualities do not exist. He described matter as finite i.e. having an end, and explained the attributes of God as infinite i.e. having no end. He said, -

"সসীম বিশ্ব অসীম জাত-পাক হইতে উদ্ভূত, সুতরাং কোটি কোটি বিশ্ব সৃষ্টি হলেও আল্লাহর জাত-পাক সদা সম্পূর্ণ থাকিবে, যেহেতু, Infinity minus any finite quantity is infinity."

The finite world is derived from infinite forms, so even if billions of worlds are created, God's forms will always be complete, since, infinity subtracted from any finite quantity is infinity. (Srishti Tattva, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah, Page- 12).

Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah is of the view that, the only reason behind the innumerable names of God is the innumerable attributes of God. In his book 'Srishti Tattva', he said that out of the numerous names of God, the scribes have given preference to 99 names. All attributes of God are hidden in the secret of love, love is at the root of all creation and love exists in all beings. It is because of this love that the soul created will finally meet in loving being that is God. God is alone; no one is a part of Him: He is unique and has no equal. He is eternal, original, and independent - His existence does not depend on any other being. Rather, the existence of all matter depends on Him. He is the cause of all state and form. He is not limited by any material and is free. Everything is His creation and all creatures and inanimate objects of His creation are being constantly governed by His grace.

Conclusion

Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah's explanation of religion and God shows that he deeply believed that the universe has only one Creator. Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah chose the path of spirituality, service to creation, and love thereby dedicating himself to the service of God. He taught that love, honesty and holiness are the only ways to realize the grace of God. Thus he tried to infuse goodness in mankind through his interpretation of Service to God. These teachings of the great man are priceless in today's world torn apart by violence, communalism, unrest and other negativities. In such times the thoughts expressed in the books and articles of Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah call for maximum circulation among all. World peace can be established if we divulge deep into his writings and philosophy. The path shown by him is simple and attainable to a great extent. Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah will always be remembered by all countrymen for his service to mankind. His contribution to education and religious development shall always be the guiding star for mankind in the path to progress of human civilization.

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