

THE KHAKSARS AND ITS PERCEPTION OF THE SOCIO-CULTURAL REGENERATION OF THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY OF INDIA

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Abstract:

*The British established their hegemony in different parts of India by defeating the local rulers who were in most cases Muslims. As a result, in the beginning, the Muslims had a very hostile relationship with the colonial government. However, after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, the situation began to change. Particularly the publication of W.W. Hunter's book entitled *The Indian Muslims* (1871), which proposed to give special protection to the Muslims in education and job sectors. The colonial government accepted these proposals as a part of its 'divide and rule' policy. Under this circumstance, two different reactions took place in the Muslim community. A group of Muslim elites headed by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) decided to accept Western education and became a supporter of the colonial masters. Another group headed by Deoband Seminary did not allow any change in the Muslim community. Against this backdrop, this article will examine how the socio-cultural ideas of the Khaksars, a para-military Muslim organization, introduced a third paradigm or it inclined towards traditionalism.*

Keywords:

Deoband Seminary, Unity of God, Wahabi, Islamic Society, Hijrat, masculine characteristics.

Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Received: 20.04.2025

Approved: 20.05.2025

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*RJPSSs 2025, Vol. LI,
No. 1, pp. 057-063
Article No.06*

Similarity Check: 4%

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DOI: [https://doi.org/10.31995/
rjpss.2025v51i01.06](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2025v51i01.06)

The Muslim community of India had an antagonistic outlook towards British rule at the beginning of the establishment of colonial rule. In many cases, the British established their hegemony by defeating a Muslim ruler. The outlook of the British towards them also varied from time to time from hatred to co-operation. Both the Hindus and Muslims participated in the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, but the Muslims appeared to be the main culprit in the eyes of the British. The second cooperation policy was part of the British divide-and-rule policy. The rise of nationalism in India in the middle of the nineteenth century compelled the British to manipulate the policy of divide and rule to weaken the nationalist movement in India. The publication of W.W. Hunter's book entitled *The Indian Muslims* (1871), during the aftermath of the so-called 'Wahhabi trials' (1864-1871), played a crucial role in influencing the colonial government's attitude towards the Muslims. Civil Servant Hunter had analyzed the factors responsible for Muslim grievances under British rule in India and urged the government to take care of Muslim education.¹ The changing outlook of the British government was expressed in its passing of the Resolution of 7 August 1871 which gave 'special protection' to the Muslim community in education and job sectors.² In this context, one can find two different reactions in Muslim society. The theory of inequality between the Hindu and Muslim communities highlighted by Hunter in his book laid the background of cooperation of the British Government a section of the Muslim elites headed by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898). This group proposed to bring modernity to Muslim society and culture in the light of Western education. As against this approach, another section refused to accept Western education and continued to avoid any collaboration with the colonial government. The main exponent of this outlook was the Deoband Seminary (DeobandDau-ul-Ulum), founded in 1867 by ulema Muhammad QasimNanantawi, a veteran of the Sepoy Mutiny. This group refused to bring any change to Muslim society. In this backdrop, we shall try to examine how far the ideas upheld by the Khaksars, a para-military Muslim organization which was founded by Inayatullah Khan (25 August 1888 - 27 August 1963) popularly known as AllamaMashriqi or Wiseman of the East in 1931 in his village Ichhra five or six miles distant from Lahore, introduced a third path or its ideas were replete with traditionalism.

The Khaksar Movement was essentially a military movement. Initially founded in Lahore, the movement spread its branches in different parts of India including the United Provinces and Bengal. This movement had a strong socio-cultural outlook. Apparently, it preached general toleration towards other communities in India, in reality it was hostile to the Hindus. It believed in Muslim domination over India and was communal in character.³ The main aims and objectives

of the organization were to Islamic brotherhood and unity among the Muslims and to enable them to protect themselves from any assault by the Hindu communal groups within the country.⁴ The Khaksar organization did not allow any kind of distinction on the basis of economic status, class or creed among its volunteers. In it, workers, capitalists, shopkeepers, lawyers, doctors and students united under a single leader and they were expected to pay the same homage to their leaders. It visualized restoring the Islamic society of India to a classless society that existed in primitive Arabia whereby economic or other distinctions did not come between human beings.⁵

The Khaksar and its leader Allama Mashriqi wanted a socio-cultural regeneration of the Muslims. Mashriqi's outstanding work *Al-Tazkirah*, which was published in 1924, tried to interpret the Holy Quran in a new light. Here he emphasized the unity of God. Before the publication of this work, the Muslims in India believed to have verbal faith in the unity of God. Faith in unity in God would create a society whereby corruption and nepotism would not be able to take root. Mashriqi wanted to replace this verbal faith of the Muslims with an active faith in the unity of God.⁶ His new interpretation made a conflict with the maulavis inevitable. Mashriqi held that the Khaksar set the goal of removing the alleged 'wrong religion' and restoring Islam to its original tenets as preached by Prophet Muhammad. In this case, his main target was the maulavis. He wanted the young Muslims to develop themselves as soldiers and this would help them to become 'a true Muslims' as per the teachings of the Quran. He condemned paying reverence to maulavis as ridiculous as, according to him, they would not teach the Muslims how to handle a sword. On the contrary, the Khaksar intended to transform the Muslim nation into a 'fighting nation'.⁷ He was a great admirer of Mustafa Kamal Pasha (1881-1938) of Turkey, Ibn Saud (1880-1953) of Saudi Arabia (1880-1953), Raza Shah Pahlavi (1878-1944) of Iran, Ghazi Amanullah Khan (1892-1960) of Afghanistan as these men saved Islam from conservative elements that supposed to erode fundamental tenets of Islam.⁸

The Khaksars not only attacked the orthodox religious authority of the maulavis and ulemas, but they also attacked other orthodox sections of Islamic society like Hanafi, Shafi, Deobandi, Barelvi, Wahabi, *Muqalid* and *Ghair Muqalid*. Mashriqi opined that these groups did not bring any good to the Islamic society, rather they prepared the road leading to hell for the Muslims.⁹ He was a great admirer of European society, materialism and philosophy. He particularly believed in Darwin's theory of evolution which was based on the principle of struggle for existence. Religion for him was another means of making a strong nation and gaining worldly power. His interpretation of the Quran was also influenced by the principles of Social Darwinism

which also went against the Islamic orthodoxy. Sadia Sumbal has commented in this regard:

“Mashriqi’s “scientific” understanding of Islam called into question the religious morals that transcended the boundaries of Reformist thinking. He emphasized upon the ethical aspect of Islam for spiritual development which reduced the mundane practices like neglect of prayer, drinking alcohol, and adultery, as insignificant and no more sinful. Mashriqi’s scientific interpretation of Islam undermined Prophetic conduct (the sunnat) as a source of Islamic law and guidance for the Muslim community. Although Mashriqi refrained himself from denying the divine model of Prophetic authority both in *al-Tazkirah* itself and later publications. He tried to combine the “scientific” interpretation of history and divine guidance. *Al-Tazkirah* was not just a “modern” commentary on the Quran; it was an attempt to unfold the dissemination of Islamic message wholistically (*sic*).”¹⁰

Not only that, the Khaksars considered it insignificant to perform Hijrat or leave home, belongings and all other luxuries and travel to the direction of God, sacrificing one’s love for children and near ones. On the contrary, they wanted that one should undertake these sacrifices for the sake of their nation and community. True Islam, according to Mashriqi, preached good manners, mutual help, benevolence, justice, keeping promises, promotion of brotherhood, kindness and love. He even found nothing wrong in the scientific study of nature and acquiring knowledge of other creations of God. He pointed out that people would offer real service to god by exploring the hidden truth of nature. Even the Quran, according to him, permitted a man to study the archaeological remains of earlier civilizations to acquire knowledge about the causes of the downfall of the nations. These lessons would ensure the durability of a nation.¹¹

His fascination with the Social Darwinism also led him to believe that non-violence was ‘un-Islamic’. It has been already mentioned that he wanted Islamic domination over the whole of India and to make Muslims a fighting nation. In connection with this he also despised Gandhian philosophy of non-violence. In his own words:

‘...Speak the truth, what else does the loin-cloth-clad nude Mahatma teach you? That poor fellow finding his community incapable of any other work introduced such ludicrous principles of satyagrah, Ahimsa, non-violence, boycott of foreign goods, civil disobedience etc, in the name of “Hindu philosophy” that the world was astonished. Even America was surprised and bewildered. It began to consider the existence of Mahatma as the existence of Christ and his teachings the teachings of Christ. He was considered as the greatest man in the world. So much prestige and dignity of Hindu philosophy was maintained for a time that the Musalmans

forgot the Quran for 13 centuries practiced and the Islam which was the result of millions of years of experiments. The Mahatma blinded the eyes of the entire world. The world thought the possession of the sword by man was wrong. The possession of weapons by the weak is wrong... In short the whole philosophy of the sword is wrong... The religion of nature is wrong. Islam is wrong. This was the reason that for the full ten years the domination of Hindu philosophy was responsible for strange acts on the part of Muslims...'¹²

He equated Gandhian philosophy with Hindu philosophy and held the belief that the Muslim leaders of the Congress under the influence of Hindu philosophy (read as Gandhian philosophy) adopted some Hindu customs such as besmeared their forehead with *tilak* (an ornamental mark worn on the forehead mainly by the Hindus as a sectarian mark), adopted the ascetic lives of the Hindus by living in *ashramas* (hermitage) and adopting the dress codes of the Hindus. He considered these practices as dangerous and an insult to Islam. These practices made them weak and forget the manly traditions of the Muslim nation. Therefore, he wanted the Muslims of India not to draw their inspiration from Hindu Congress leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920, Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866-1915) or Gandhi, rather they should draw inspiration from Mustafa Kamal Pasha and Ibn Saud. Then only the Muslims would be able to maintain their masculine and fighting characteristics.¹³

In this regard, one crucial point needs to be mentioned. The Khaksar movement although emphasized maintaining masculine, fighting characteristics of the Muslims, admitted the important role of women in society. Mashriqi was born into an educated and enlightened Muslim family. In his family, apart from the male members, his mother and sisters also received education. His family tradition influenced him to empower the women. He considered it essential not only for the progress of society but also important for liberating India from the bondage of the British. It has been found that Mashriqi's wife Wilayat Begum also played a crucial role in the foundation of the Khaksar movement. Despite the opposition from the opposition of the orthodox section of society, Mashriqi took a great step in 1935 towards women's emancipation by launching the feminist movement of the Khaksars through his revolutionary work *Quol-e-Faisal*. This marked a significant break from the prevailing social norms of the Muslim society that women should remain inside the four-fold walls of the household and their primary duty was to serve their family. As a consequence, wives, sisters, daughters and other relatives of the male Khaksar volunteers joined in maximum numbers. Even Mashriqi's daughters also joined the movement. These women wore the Khaksar Khaki uniform, carried spades on their shoulders and they equally underwent military training, drills and parades like their

male members. It is important to note that during the 1930s even in the United States of America activities of the women were restricted to nursing and clerical work. The Khaksar women, in contrast to that, took part in military training, street marches and political activities. Moreover, some of the women like SaedaBano held prominent positions and titles within the movement for their extraordinary role in community service and political movement. They delivered public speeches, actively recruited female members for the movement and participated in community services. Their role towards the community was particularly noticeable during the Bengal Famine of 1943 where they were instrumental in saving lives, providing essential aid, and rehabilitation of thousands of people alongside the male Khaksars. Besides, they also took part in anti-British activities. They were instrumental in distributing Khaksar literature, organizing women's meetings to spread Mashriqi's message and holding protest marches. Their activities reshaped Muslim women's role in Indian society and politics.¹⁴

After analyzing the ideas and approaches of the Khaksar Movement and its leader AllamaMashriqi, it can be said that the Khaksar Movement introduced a third path between the modernist and traditionalist. The movement rejected the authority of maulavis and ulemas and propagated service to the community and nation instead of performing *Hijrat* and unity of Godhead. The movement wanted a scientific basis for the Islamic religion. Further, it admitted the important role of women in society and politics and accommodated them in their movement. It can be argued that this movement was very close to the ideas of the modernists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In particular, it has been seen in the course of our discussion that Mashriqi was influenced by European society, philosophy and Social Darwinism. Despite that, it may be argued that in some cases The Khaksar's outlook was to some extent different from the modernists. For example, the modernists mainly concentrated on the rich and middle class of the Muslim society for bringing modernization. On the contrary, the Khaksar propagated universal brotherhood among the Muslims. It admitted no difference between the Muslims based on wealth, education or class. It wanted the regeneration of the Muslim society and culture and to restore Islam to its pristine glory where there was no difference between the Muslims. It also wanted to militarize the Muslim nation.

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