

Note

Fazle Haq Khayrabadi: An Extraordinary Personality

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This is an account of the life and works of Fazle Haq Khayrabadi, a great but forgotten Indian Muslim religious scholar and thinker of the 19th century is presented. Coming from a family of great distinction, Fazle Haq Khayrabadi was an author, poet and philosopher who expressed himself in Arabic, Persian and Urdu. Especially relevant is the dedication and fervor with which Khayrabadi participated in all stages of the First Indian War of Independence of 1857 [also termed the Great Mutiny], for which he was exiled to the Andaman Islands by the British rulers of India, where he died in 1862.

The remarkable personality of Fazle Haq Khayrabadi [1787-1862] has been forgotten by an ungrateful nation that does not honour its heroes but instead buries them under the debris of history. A great scholar, familiar with the diverse disciplines in the Islamic sciences, and the Imam of the Khayrabadi school of logic and philosophy, he, also a son the great Fazle Imam Khayrabadi, distinguished himself early for his intellectual prowess and strength of genius. Amazingly, such a scholar, devoted to academics, was also a fighter and participant in the War of Independence of 1857, and a member of the revolutionary council that directed its strategy. For this, he suffered imprisonment at the hands of the vengeful British, who sentenced him to hard labour in the distant Andaman Islands – where he died ‘across the black water’.

Fazle Haq was of a distinguished lineage, being the son of Allama Fazle Imam Khayrabadi known as ‘the ocean of knowledge’ [*bahr al-ulum*], who schooled him in the advanced sciences of which he himself was master. He grew up amid comfort and affluence, and his teachers were all the outstanding scholars of their time. As a boy, he was put under the tutelage of Shah Abdul Qadir and Shah Abdul Aziz – sons of the great polymath Shah WaliAllah. These scholars dominated the religio-social life of Delhi for over 50 years. Many a time, as a boy, he

earned the praise of Shah Abdul Aziz for exhibiting remarkable knowledge in the abstruse areas of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and polemical disputations with the Twelver Shia.¹

Fazle Haq was also a poet of no mean distinction and has an Arabic *diwan* that was recently published.² This is an untapped historical source for the events of 1857, which has not been utilized so far. His prose writing was also in Arabic – the *lingua franca* of Islam – consisting of the account of the so-called Mutiny of 1857 and his own imprisonment – titled ‘*Al Thawrah al-Hindiyyah*’ [the Indian revolution or upsurge] - which he wrote in the Andamans.³ This Arabic source has also been neglected in histories of the time, especially by Indian writers. His English jailers were so impressed by his scholarship that they exempted him from hard labour, and sent a plea to the Viceroy for his release. This was granted and when his son, Shamsul Haq, rushed to the Andamans with the parole, he saw from the port the great procession of the funeral of his father. With the Elect in the Heavens!

His son, Abdul Haq Khayrabadi, devoted his whole life to Islamic scholarship and the headship of the Khayrabadi school. One of Abdul Haq’s great pupils was Allama Syed Barkat Ahmad of subcontinental fame both as a physician of Eastern medicine and as an Islamic scholar and philosopher. Abdul Haq was appointed ‘*shams-ul-ulema*’ [the sun of scholars] by the Viceroy Lord Dufferin as ‘a personal distinction’.⁴

Fazle Haq’s reputation as an Islamic scholar was widespread and preceded him wherever he went. Many notable nawabs pleaded with him to stay in residence at their courts and he was able to establish Islamic courts in those states that had Muslim rulers, such as Jhajjar, Lucknow, Alwar and Tonk. He even was a *serishtadar* [judge] in the service of the East India Company but later resigned as he felt that such positions were meant to keep the masses in servitude.

From the 1830s onwards there was a movement on the part of Shah Ismail and Syed Ahmad Brelvi to wage jihad against the Sikhs, who then ruled the Punjab. In this movement, Shah Ismail wrote a book ‘*Taqwiyat al-Iman*’ [Strengthening of the Faith] that triggered off the controversy of ‘Imkan al-nadhir’ – whether Allah could create a person

¹ Essay by Abdul Hakim Sharaf Qadiri in *Al Aaqib*, Fazle Haq Number 1857, 88.

² Fazle Haq Khayrabadi, *Divan* [Arabic] ed. Salma Sehul, Lahore, 2016.

³ Dufferin note given in facsimile in M.A.S.K. Sherwani, *Baghi Hindustan*, 187-88. This was the translation of *Al Thawrah Al-Hindiyyah*.

⁴ In Biodata of Fazle Haq in *Al Aaqib*. Fazle Haq Number, *op.cit.*, 53.

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who would surpass the Prophet Muhammad [PBUH] in greatness. This was advocated by Shah Ismail in order to enforce Tawhid [the unity of God]. But Fazle Haq, seeing the dangers that such a position would have for Islam and weaken it, wrote a most learned and detailed refutation of it in Persian called '*Imti'na' al-Nadhir*'⁵ [Impossibility of the proposition of a greater creation than Prophet Muhammad PBUH] which destroyed the futile and false arguments of a band of unruly warriors. The book is the standard textbook on the subject and has never been superseded. Fazle Haq asked the poet Ghalib to put the concept in verse for the public –which he did.⁶ His other remarkable work is on the concept of time in physics, titled *Al Itqan al-Irfan fi mahiyya al-zaman*.⁷ His erudite work on '*Wahdat al- Wujud*' is also a classic in its field titled *Al- Rawd - al- Majud*.⁸

Fazle Haq Khayrabadi was one of the ulema who signed the fatwa of the declaration of jihad against the British, which led to a national uprising against them. He later participated in the jihad and organized its operations. In his trial, he openly confessed to the 'crime' he was accused of, viz., inciting rebellion against the colonialists and he refused to take advantage of legal loopholes that would have secured his release. The Indian scholar, Malik Ram, stated that Fazle Haq's signature on the declaration of jihad was forged, but his objection was refuted by the Pakistani scholar, Mahmud Ahmad Barkati and later Malik Ram withdrew his objection.⁹ He is also the author of glosses on important Arabic works dealing with Islamic philosophy that were taught in the *madressahs* in S. Asia till recently, along with those of his father, Allama Fazle Imam Khayrabadi. The latter's elegy was written by Ghalib thus:¹⁰

*ay daregha qibla-i-arbab fazl
kard su-i-jannatul mava khiram
guftam andar saya-i-lutf-i-nabi
ba aramish gah-i-fazle imam*

⁵ Fazle Haq Khayrabadi, *Imtina'a al-Nadhr*, Lahore, n.d.

⁶ In *Al Aaqib* Fazle Haq Number, *op.cit.*, 285.

⁷ Fazle Haq Khayrabadi, *Atqan al-irfan fi mahiyyath al-zaman* [tr.] Mahmud Ahmad Barkati, Lahore, 1967.

⁸ Fazle Haq Khayrabadi, *Al Rawd al Majud*, [tr.] Mahmud Ahmad Barkati, Lahore, n.d.

⁹ Mahmud Ahmad Barkati, *Fazle Haq Khayrabadi aur San Satawan*, Karachi, 2005, 23.

¹⁰ Ghalib's elegy on Fazle Imam in *Al Aaqib*, Fazle Haq Number, *op.cit.*, 285.

Translation:

Alas, that the qibla of the men of greatness

Went towards the paradise with a sprightly gait

I said [regarding the chronogram] that in the shade of the Prophet's favour

He [Fazle Imam] sped towards the abode of heavenly rest.

In conclusion, we observe the personality of Fazle Haq Khayrabadi as a totality, being basically a scholar of the Islamic sciences and skilled in the diverse disciplines that constitute this erudite edifice. He was also conscious of the alien presence of the British who sought to exercise total control over the subcontinent and reduce the Indians to state of subjugation and slavery. Hence his agreement to and signature on the fatwa of jihad on the document issued by the ulema. His scholarship and his writings, his pupils who took his message and spread it everywhere, and his lonely life in the Andamans which he faced with the resolution and resilience of a true Muslim, exhibit the heroic qualities that have been the distinguishing features of all great persons and patriots who have, over the centuries, added lustre to the glorious history of Islam.¹¹

¹¹ There has been an abundance of material on Fazle Haq Khayrabadi especially during the 150th anniversary of the War of 1857 [in 2007] both in India and Pakistan. The journal *Al Aaqib* [cf.] put together some 80 essays and research pieces on Fazle Haq. In India, seminars were held in Khayrabad and other places and two books containing valuable information appeared. These are *Allama Fazle Haq Khayrabadi: Chand Unwanat* by Khushtar Noorani with rubrics giving separate areas of study, [2011] and *Khayrabadiyat* [2011] by Usayd al – Haq, also following the same pattern. These have an introduction by Dr Moinuddin Aqeel and dedication to Pakistani scholars. The journal *Jaam-i-Nur* of Delhi published essays, interviews and research pieces on Fazle Haq Khayrabadi throughout the year.