

A Tribute to Shri A.J. Zaidi



Bal Anand

Bal Anand was born in 1943, in a village about 20 km south of Ludhiana, in a family of saint-scholars who practised Ayurveda. Graduated from DAV College, Jalandhar, and did Master in English Literature from Govt. College, Ludhiana. After a stint for a few years as lecturer, joined the Indian Foreign Service. Served in nine different countries and retired as India's High commissioner to New Zealand. Now reading, reflecting and writing in nest in Delhi, on the East Bank of Yamuna.

Having spent my childhood years in a village and later growing up in a town, both located in the closer vicinity of Malerkotla, the only princely state in the East Punjab ruled for centuries by the Muslim Nawabs, I had started wondering and pondering since long over the harmonies and divides between the Hindus and Muslims.

The small state of Malerkotla had remained comparatively immune from the mindless violence during the Partition of the country. I have a vivid memory of an inscription, intact in 1951 but decimated soon after, of the name of Nawab Iftikhar Ali Khan on the front wall of the Gurudwara in Ahmedgarh for his donation of Rs. 500.00 – it must have been a princely sum in those days! I had instinctively developed a faith in the mutual accommodation among faiths long before I was destined to be an Indian diplomat in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Maldives!



Syed Ali Jawad Zaidi

This is a prologue to my tribute to late [Syed Ali Jawad Zaidi](#) (1916-2004), who embodied for me the highest virtues of all the faiths of mankind. It was during my posting to Iran in 1975-78 that I had opportunities of extended interaction with Shri S.A.J. Zaidi, who had been posted as a Special Correspondent of All India Radio based in Tehran, covering other countries of the Gulf also. It was my first diplomatic posting, while it was the swan song assignment for Shri Zaidi.

I discovered in Shri Zaidi a thorough gentleman steeped in the composite culture of Awadhi Lucknow. He was soon able to gather around him many talented persons among the recently arrived doctors, engineers and other professionals interested in literature. A regular routine of literary meetings emerged attended by Indians and Pakistanis. Shri Zaidi made extra efforts to engage the Punjabi Sahitya Mandal also. It was his magnetic personality which brought people together for livelier literary sessions, particularly of Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi poetry. All this indeed provided me a rare learning opportunity to witness in action the strength of the composite culture of the sub-continent, notwithstanding the under currents of suspicions and rivalries of the Indo-Pak kind.

Never a person to talk about himself, I could some time engage Shri Zaidi to share some of his first hand experiences during the freedom struggle as a student leader and a poet. He had worked along with other youthful activists for the election in 1939 of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose as President of the Congress against Pattabhi Sitaramayya, the candidate proposed by Mahatma Gandhi. He told me about the touching experience when Subhas Babu, as the President of the Congress, had himself come to meet the group of students putting up in an ordinary *dharamshala* in Calcutta for a mid-night session of discussions!

On being pressed to tell if he had ever met Mahatma Gandhi, Zaidi narrated how he and his two other student friends had got late for an appointment with the Mahatma – and received a severe reprimand from Sarojini Naidu. He, nevertheless, could meet the Mahatma during the same week, but did not touch

Mahatma's feet like his the two friends accompanying him. After the brief meeting, however, according to Zaidi, his hands unconsciously were at the feet of the Mahatma!

Ali Jawad Zaidi had started with the themes of patriotism and national unity in his early poetry. He had the distinct advantage of knowing Hindi and Sanskrit. He was soon to excel as a scholar and critic also. It was in the fitness of the things that after Independence, he was inducted into the Indian Information Service. He was deputed as Adviser to Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad, the "Prime Minister" of Jammu & Kashmir – he distinguished himself in this position beyond the call of duty by producing admirable works on the literature and culture of Kashmir. He served as the Secretary of the High Powered Committee on Urdu headed by Shri I.K. Gujral. He was also the convenor of the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of the All India Students' Conference held in Lucknow in August 1986.

Shri Zaidi did not rest on his laurels after retirement. Apart from his multifarious responsibilities as Chairperson of the UP Urdu Academy and later as Advisor to the State Govt on National Integration, he wrote, in English, the monumental History of Urdu Literature, published by the Sahitya Academy in 1993. During the sunset years with failing eyesight, he was intensely occupied with the editing of the various versions of Ramayana written in Urdu. It is indeed noteworthy that four scholars have already obtained their PhD degrees for research on the literary works of Shri A. J. Zaidi. It is only appropriate that the Zaidi Foundation has been recently established to propagate literary and philosophical legacy of Zaidi Sahib. A large quantity of manuscripts left behind by him awaits scholarly scrutiny and publishing.

In a solemn function on 15th July 2008 the Vice President of India, Shri M. Hamid Ansari released late Shri A.J. Zaidi's *Islami Taraqqi Pasandi*, i.e., "Progressivism in Islam". Professor Ilyas Shauqui, the book's editor, highlighted the features of this highly researched and timely book. The former Vice-Chancellor of the Jamia Milia, Shri Shahid Mahadi, recalled his long personal association with Shri Zaidi. He quoted Shri Zaidi's lines:

*Yeh To Sach Hai Kar Guzarta Hai, Jo Dil Mein Than Le
Kya Ghalat Hai, Log 'Gar Zaidi Ko Diwana Kahein.*

It is indeed true that he does accomplish, whatever he determines to
The people are not wrong if they call Zaidi a crazy fellow!

Shri M. Hamid Ansari, in his thoughtful remarks, observed that the book was a commendable effort in putting the tenets of Islam in proper perspectives. He said that Shri Zaidi has demonstrated a rare capability to explain complex issues. He welcomed the publication of this book of great contemporary relevance.

Dr. A.S. Brar, the Vice-Chancellor of Lucknow University, proposing Vote of Thanks, dwelt on the role of Lucknow University in institutionalizing the memory of its great alumni. He said that there are opportunities in terms of an annual memorial lecture; a chair of national integration in his name; seminars on his seminal literary output etc. He remarked that a healthy competition with other relevant institutions to propagate the invaluable literary legacy of Zaidi Sahib would indeed be welcome.

While enjoying the wonderful company of many friends and admirers of late Zaidi Sahib during the tea following the Function, I was lost in the myriad memories of Shri Zaidi who became a kind of Murshid or a Guru as well as the most admired elderly friend for me. I quote the lines from his poem, *Ajeeb Tanhaee* (A Strange Loneliness), penned during his sojourn in Iran:

*Raasta Naapne Wale To Bahut Hain, Lekin
Inmein, Dekhein To Zara, Aabla Paa Kitnein Hain!*

The surveyors of the path are many, but
let's check how many of them have blisters under their feet! ❖