Abused Rationality? — On the Role of ma‘qūlī -Scholars in the Events of 1857/8

In recent years a theory was brought forth according to which rationalist methods and contents, incorporated in the structure of Islamic learning in India, inherit essentially an integrative potential. This idea revolves about the elaboration of an increasingly formalized way of studying at the *Farangī Mahall* in 18th century’s Lucknow. This way, known by the eponymous derivative “dars-i nizāmī”, is said to have considerably abridged the duration of studying by imparting a standard canon of very concise works on logic (*manṭiq*), mathematics (*riyāḍiyāt*), Arabic grammar (*ṣarf wa-naḥw*), philosophy (*ḥikma*), rhetorics (*‘ilm al-balāgha*), and dialectical theology (*‘ilm al-kalām*). It is the period of study, but even more these subjects—indeed occasionally labelled “secular”—which are held responsible for the integrative potential of this branch of Islamic learning. Integration, in this regard, was conceived as enabling graduates to see things from the point of practical demands rather than from a confessional angle, a fact that made them attractive for civil service in any given polity, regardless the religious creed of their respective overlords. Especially the massive employment of Muslim scholars, trained along these lines, in the administrative structure of the EIC seems to support this theory, at least at a first glance.

As may be imagined from this prolegomenon, I am of a slightly different opinion. In order to elaborate on the validity of my view, I will argue along two interrelated lines. First, I will justify my hypothesis that the content of the *dars-i nizāmī*—allegedly the first standardised *madrasa*-syllabus in South Asia, a fact that I think is still highly disputable—was not at all beyond confession but, moreover, absolutely within the traditional scope of Muslim scholarship. If so, this way of learning was initially not intended to enable graduates to finding employment in an administration other than a Muslim one, at least not programmatically. Moreover, the divide into two distinct branches of learning, on which the entire “Integration-theory” is based, has neither a proper correspondence with reality, nor any analytical value whatsoever.

Second, I will enunciate the hypothesis that especially an emphasis of the very subjects in the *dars-i nizāmī*, which are charged with being essentially integrative, bore an equally strong *dis*integrative potential. There are certain incidents around the uprising of 1857/8 which are perhaps more than anything else designed to provide plastic evidence for this.
What remains to be answered, though, is the question of what drove the agents of the EIC, as well as non-Muslim heads of princely states, to nevertheless employ such Muslim religious scholars, thus nourishing potential serpents on their own bosom.

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I will now outline my argument regarding the first point, i.e. the evaluation of the dars-i nizāmī and the critical examination of its content and objective. In this regard, one needs first to investigate into the confusing divide of Indo-Muslim scholarship in a camp that advocates the “traditional positive religious sciences” (manqūlāt wa’diya), and another one that emphasises the “rational religious sciences” (ma’qūlāt). The scope of the latter has already been outlined above. Contrary to this, the “traditional positive religious sciences” consist of Qur’ānic exegesis (ʿilm at-tafsīr), the study of the Prophetic tradition (ʿulām al-ḥadīth), the biographies of the Prophets (siyar al-anbiyāʾ), and, last but not least, Islamic law (fiqh). After all, it is this latter academic discipline that has developed into the branch of Islamic learning most relevant for the elaboration of an Islamic polity and was thus at the core of higher religious education from a very early stage. However, even in this field we do not know at all of a fixed list of books to be taught, neither in the medieval, nor in the Early Modern period. The most narrow confinement was the designation for a particular madhhab al-fiqh which, if one follows the convincing argument of Baber Johansen, would imply an emphasis on a particular “school” of kalām. As can easily be see, already here there is a confluence of “traditional” and “rational religious sciences” and it is thus to be asked whether this divide makes, at least from an analytical point of view, any sense at all. This is of even greater importance if it is kept in mind two more things: Firstly, even fiqh, the prime discipline of the “traditional positive religious sciences”, is, as it were, unthinkable without a solid basis of logic, in turn prime discipline of the “rational religious sciences”. Secondly, the Islamic concept of knowledge was ideally a holistic one, which is why one finds at least up to Sayyid Ahmad Khān’s Āthār al-sanādīd eulogistic formulations such as ‘He had full command (mahārat-i tamām) over all kinds of arts and sciences, be it the rational or traditional ones’.

It is, however, well conceivable that especially those educational institutions funded by members of the political elite were, albeit not exclusively, designed to produce religious functionaries for the civil service, especially in the field of jurisprudence.
An emphasis on *fiqh* is thus easily comprehensible; all other subjects have, under this pretext, to be considered auxiliary sciences. This, in turn, is of utmost importance because it gives us the picture of a clear hierarchy, with Islamic jurisprudence at the top. Those, who have set up the above mentioned theory on the integrative potential of the “rational religious sciences”, assigns to *fiqh*, the embodiment of the “traditional positive religious sciences”, a rather negative connoted image, labelling it mere “legalism”; this “legalism” is flexible, if at all, only within the confines of the revealed texts. The “rational religious sciences”, on the other hand, encourage anthropocentric free thinking, thus making it fit into European thinking post-Enlightenment. This view, however, cannot be followed, because it distorts the elementary fundamentals of scope and objective of Islamic learning: Namely, to acquire as much knowledge of the Qur’ānic revelation as possible, in order to draw “guidance” (*hidāya*) from it that, finally, leads to salvation on the Day of Judgement. The codified expression of this guidance, in turn, is *fiqh*, rightly the “Queen of Sciences”, to employ the famous Hegelian dictum.

After having established Islamic jurisprudence at the top of the Islamic sciences, it appears clear that the distinction between *fiqh*-oriented “traditional positive religious sciences” and “rational religious sciences” has not much analytical value. Since legal decision-making is always an act which involves a high degree of reasoning, the above mentioned disciplines attributed to the “rational religious sciences”, i.e. logic, mathematics, grammar, philosophy, rhetorics, and dialectical theology, contribute to it as much as the disciplines attributed to the “traditional positive religious sciences”, over and above Qur’ānic exegesis and the study of the Prophetic tradition. Honesty demands, however, to admit that the weight of each auxiliary science may differ from time to time and place to place, depending mainly on the stipulations outlined for an educational institution, as well as on the individual preferences of the respective teachers.

The career of the scholars of the *Farangī Mahall* itself provide sufficient evidence for what has been said so far. Even before this family was forced to move to Lucknow numerous of it’s members have served as religious functionaries, and they will have been expected to continue these services in exchange for the new premise assigned to them by the Mughal emperor Awrangzib.

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It is therefore not surprising that again a large number of Farangī Maḥallīs could be found in the judiciary of the increasingly autonomous principality of Awadh, either as jurists or judges. This tradition continued, at least as long as their services were requested, i.e. until the anchoring of a Twelver Shi‘ī jurisdiction in the state became definite. The massive employment of Farangī Maḥallīs in the — however ineffective — judiciary of Awadh, in turn, explains a pragmatic emphasis on *fiqh* in their teaching, whereas their indulgence on “auxiliary sciences”, such as philosophy and logic, seems rather a matter of taste and family tradition way back to the 16th century.

It is true that the syllabi for the British-sponsored so-called “Oriental Colleges” all over the Raj, modelled after the “Calcutta Madrasa”, established in 1781 on initiative of that-time Governor-General Warren Hastings (d. 1818), followed the pattern of instruction employed at the Farangī Maḥall in Lucknow. Moreover, even though a Minute written by Hastings in 1785 states that the main purpose of the “Calcutta Madrasa” lies in the preparation of Muslims for their employment in the administration of the judiciary, in some branches of the police, and the revenue departments, this does not imply an essential link to the pattern and content of instruction employed at the Farangī Maḥall. The latter remained—regardless the proportion of philosophy and logic—Islamic in it’s core and did not at all meet the expectations of the British regarding the training of local elites for administrative services. This is vividly expressed by the statement of E. A. Phillips, Director of Education of the *nawwāb* of Rampur, in his annual Administration Reports, repeatedly complaining about the fact that the syllabus contained, in his eyes, ‘some branches of abstruse science, such as Logic and Metaphysics’.

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So far, I have given a slightly different image of the rational religious sciences that, in my eyes, does more justice to the complexity of the issue than the one-dimensional and, moreover, teleological picture drawn by the advocates of the 'integration'-theory. This, however, can be further backed up by some incidents, surrounding the events of 1857/8. It will be shown that these incidents are perfectly suitable to illustrate, on the one hand, the continuance of the cleaving of the upholders of the rational elements in the *dars-i nizāmi* to the Islamic legacy, on the other hand and related to this, the *dišintegrative* potential of the “rational religious sciences”.
This is the story of two scholars in the direct tradition of the Farangī Maḥall, who both held prestigious administrative offices under the suzerainty of the EIC at around the time of the uprising: Mawlānā Muḥammad Šadr al-Dīn Dihlawī (d. 1258/1868), better known by his penname “Āzurda”, and Mawlāwī Faḍl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī (d. 1278/1861). It seems quite appropriate to first give a rough outline of their intellectual heritage.

Both scholars have been students of Faḍl-i Imām Khayrābādī (1244/1829), the first Indian Muslim who accepted the posts of Imperial ṣadr al-ṣudūr and muftī-yi aʿzam by the grace of the EIC. He belongs, moreover, to the fourth generation of scholars in a direct line of Nizām al-Dīn Sihalawī (d. 1161/1748), founder of the Farangī Maḥall-tradition and “patron saint” of the dars-i niẓāmī. By such a legacy it is not surprising that Faḍl-i Imām is especially known for his commentaries and glosses on works of philosophy and logic. Whatever the circumstances that led to his appointment, as well as to his relieve in around 1827, I do not have sufficient information. However, it is established fact that the imperial offices conferred upon Faḍl-i Imām were the highest the EIC could ever confer on natives at that particular point in time. As ṣadr al-ṣudūr, in turn, the scholar was in charge of suggesting suitable candidates for the office of judge (qāḍī) to his employers, as well as scrutinizing requests for aid of subsistence (maddad-i maʿāsh) by way of land grant or pension. This, finally, proves again the employment of scholars of the maʿqūlāt tradition in the wider judiciary. In the office of ṣadr al-ṣudūr Faḍl-i Imām was succeeded by Šadr al-Dīn Āzurda, one of his foremost pupils in Delhi, who, at the same time, was the last one to hold it.

It seems as if the British agents attempted to ensure a continuation of loyal service to them by advocating the appointment of persons from the immediate circles of Faḍl-i Imām, because the positions of ṣadr al-ṣudūr and muftī-yi aʿzam belonged, at least formally, to the administration of the Mughal emperors, as the nominal sovereigns of Delhi. Already two years before the uprising Šadr al-Dīn Āzurda openly declared his allegiance to the Mughal emperor. This fact is of quite some importance, because it serves, in my eyes, as an explanation for his activities during the siege of Delhi in spring 1857, which finally led to his conviction on the charge of treason to the British crown, and the confiscation of his entire property in Delhi. What crimes did he commit in the eyes of the British authorities? The communication between the Commissioner of Delhi, the Governor of the Punjab and its Dependencies as superior to the former, and the Foreign Department of the Government of India at Fort Williams, Calcutta,
in early 1859, shows that the conviction of Šadr al-Dīn Dīlawī was based on a number of points which today appear rather far-fetched.

This communication, which states ‘that the Moulvie did not behave in a loyal manner towards the British Government, in whose service he had risen to a position of responsibility and high emolument’, reveals at least five points of incrimination: He regularly attended the Royal court as it was his duty as a high-ranking official in the Mughal administration.

The actual reason for making this a part of the charge was simply the fact that during these official and protocol-observing meetings the leaders of the rebellious troops were present, too. Compared to this, a much more serious charge was that—after the killing of Simon Fraser, Agent to the Lieutenant Governor of the North-Western Province—Šadr al-Dīn Dīlawī accepted the title of a Governor of Delhi conferred upon him by the emperor Bahādur Shāh II “Zafar” (d. 1279/1862). Moreover, to safeguard his dwelling place in the old city of Delhi, he was given an extraordinarily large guard of ‘Jehadeesh or Crusaders, half of them from the Kafilah of Abdool Rehman of Loodiana, under the command of Seiful-Rehman, son of the latter, & half from that of Mahomed Moneer.’

However, there were two other allegations that, finally, became decisive for the trial of the scholar. According to the first he had decided at least one civil suit during that period. Last but not least, he was accused of having signed and sealed the legendary *fatwā* that declared the uprising a legitimate *jihād* and, ostensibly, the killing of British to be legitimate and a duty for every Muslim (*fard ‘ayn*).

What becomes obvious is that Šadr al-Dīn Āzurda’s activities during the uprising have only little to do with his intellectual descent and, thus, his advocacy of *maqūlāt*. Even the mentioned *fatwā* was neither drawn up by Āzurda alone, nor did he exclusively sign and seal it. In fact, among the 33 seals on the document the one of the muftī-yi *a’zam* appears rather small and marginal. It was perhaps because of such a rather weak body of evidence that the case of Āzurda was favourably reconsidered in the course of the amnesty to mutineers proclaimed by Queen Victoria on November 1, 1858: Half of his property in Delhi—including all those ‘books belonging to the family remaining unsold’—was restored to him and he was permitted to return to Delhi.
The case of Faḍl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī, son of Faḍl-i Imām, was more serious indeed. Here, too, the textual basis for a reconstruction of his biography appears rather weak, leaving alone the numerous and more recent hagiographies. As financial administrator (pīshkār) to Richard Cavendish (d. 1873), that-time Commissioner of Delhi, he was much more obvious a civil servant of the EIC than Āzurda. After all, the latter has held a primarily religious/legal office. Besides his official duties, which he loyally carried out for 16 years until his resignation on occasion of the EIC’s annexation of Awadh in 1856, he built up an increasing reputation as teacher of logic and philosophy, thus following in the footsteps of his father.

Contrary to the latter, however, Faḍl-i Ḥaqq is said to have had quite an ego, which, along with choleric tendencies, seems to have predestined him as troublemaker. This became obvious for the first time in the 1820s, in the course of his prolonged argument with scholars around Shāh Ismā’īl Dihlawī over the theological issue of the possibility of a peer of the Prophet. Of importance in this case is that, at least in the beginning, both sides argued along their preferred lines of religious scholarship, i.e. *manqūlāt* versus *ma’qūlāt*. Faḍl-i Ḥaqq, as one might have already guessed, appeared as an ardent advocate of the rational sciences, arguing in a philosophical manner against the possibility of a peer, whereas Shāh Ismā’īl strongly emphasized the omnipotence of God and, thus, His general ability to create a peer to the Prophet Muḥammad. As the latter’s reply was somewhat smart and, thus, convincing, whereas the sophisticated argument brought forth by Faḍl-i Ḥaqq was even hard to comprehend, it all looked as if the *maqūlī* faction succeeded. Now, instead of refining his arguments, Faḍl-i Ḥaqq abused his official position and had his adversary finally banned from preaching in Delhi’s *Jāmī* masjid, a fact that contributed to Shāh Ismā’īl leaving Delhi only a little later. Even the famed poet Mīrzā Asadallāh “Ghālib” (d. 1285/1869) was compelled to write a poem in defence of Faḍl-i Ḥaqq’s position. Already from this episode it appears clear that the *ma’qūlī*-scholar Faḍl-i Ḥaqq did not quite act in an integrative manner, as imputed to the “rational religious sciences”.

His activities during the events of 1857/8 corroborate this perspective; leading to his assessment as ‘a most dangerous character one who may at any time do infinite harm’ and, finally, to the sentence of ‘detention as a State Prisoner in Transportation beyond Seas for the term of his natural Life, and to confiscation of the whole of his property’. What were the charges that led to such a harsh sentence which immediately became effective?
After all, the widely spread allegation that Faḍl-ī Ḩaqq, too, has signed the above mentioned “jihād-fatwā” appears completely untenable. From the *Thawra al-hindiya*, Faḍl-ī Ḩaqq’s retrospective account written during his years of detention on the Andamans, it appears as if he only came to besieged Delhi in 1857 to counsel with his family members there, but gives no hint at whether he was consulted by the dignitaries of the court, including the emperor. After the fall of the once imperial capital and the trial, disposition, and exile of the emperor and his family, Faḍl-ī Ḩaqq meticulously describes the rage of the British in the city, the massive confiscation of private properties as well as the humiliation and execution of the city’s notables, their families, and, almost at random, even civilians. Interestingly, the British administrative material does not tell us that at the time Delhi was sacked, the scholar was still in town.

He himself writes that he decided to retreat with his family to his native place where they still owned some property. Here, however, he was confronted with a similar situation, owing to the disposition of the *nawwāb* of Awadh in late January 1856, but also with the fact that a large part of the mutineering troops had moved from Delhi and joined the forces of Bēgam Ḥaḍrat Maḥall (d. 1296/1879), wife of the last *nawwāb* (or rather “king”) of Awadh, and of the Chief Justice of her “revolutionary government”, *nawwāb* Aḥmad ‘Alī Khān, a.k.a. “Mammū Khān” (executed 1274/1858).

It were his activities in Awadh that led to the perhaps most severe point of accusation during the trial of Faḍl-ī Ḩaqq, namely that ‘at Bondee, during the Month of May 1858, [he had] been an instigator to murder in the instance of one Abool Hukeem, a Government Servant’, and that

the Court considered it proven that the Prisoner did, on that occasion, very distinctly and officiously propound doctrines which had a direct tendency to encourage murder on many cases. He quoted and perverted leads from the Koran, insisted that the persons who served the English were apostates, and that their death was required by the law, and even went as far as to tell the rebel Chief that if he spared them, he was himself a criminal in the eye of God.

In *al-Thawra al-hindiya* Faḍl-ī Ḩaqq explicitly referred, albeit without further comment, to this point during his trial, saying that ‘the tribunal ruled out that from turning towards the Christians one becomes a Christian, and that from their being taken over they desert [Islam] and replace belief with unbelief’.


Earlier, however, he reveals that he had indeed joined the forces of resistance as learned counsellor on the rebels’ request and that, in the case of the mentioned revenue collector (‘āmil) Abū ʿI-Hakīm, he indeed turned towards the disputable practice of takfīr by interpreting—even though he does not mention it explicitly—the Qur’ānic verse 5 (al-Mā’ida):51:

Oh ye who believe! Do not take the Jews and the Christians for friends, they are but friends to each other. And he amongst you who taketh them for friends is one of them.

Verily! God guideth not a people unjust.

Faḍl-i Ḥaqq’s individual reasoning over an āya of the Qur’ānic revelation for the deduction of a legal judgment (ijtihād), presumably because of his self-perceived perfection in logic as the basis of legal methodology (uṣūl al-fiqh), clearly shows the limits of an integrative potential of the maʿqūlāt, be it politically or in terms of different systems of knowledge. Besides, his fatal interpretation of the above given āya was by no means the first incident of this kind, as could be seen earlier by his controversy with Shāh ʿIsmaʿīl Dihlawī and his followers in the late 1820s.

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Under consideration of this two given episodes I would tend to say that an attitude towards social and political integration, as been alleged for the advocates of the “rational religious sciences”, is hard to be seen at least in the case of Faḍl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī. In his case it appears much more that his rather questionable actions were, on the contrary, designed to serve his repeatedly reported opinionated attitude and intellectual smugness which did not tolerate any position other than his own. This problematic attitude, however, did only add to the increasingly difficult political circumstances, culminating in 1857/8. After all, the argument with Shāh ʿIsmaʿīl provides evidence for the fact that this outlook did not only appear in the context of the uprising of 1857/8, but did moreover exist well before that and refers not exclusively to the British. On the other hand, it is the incidents around the uprising and the reference to non-Muslims that show the Janus-face of the “rational religious sciences” most bluntly.
Literature


