

CHAPTER II

BIOGRAPHY OF ABDULLAH YUSUF ALI

A. Abdullah Yusuf Ali's Biography

Abdullah Yusuf Ali was a British-Indian barrister and scholar. Ali was born in April 14th 1872 in Bombay, India.¹ His father Yusuf Ali Allahbuksh, also known as Khan Bahadur Yusuf Ali, a Shi'i in Dawoodi Bohra tradition, who turned his back on the traditional business based occupation of his community and instead became a Government Inspector of Police. On his retirement he gained the title Khan Bahadur for public service.

As a child Abdullah Yusuf Ali attended the Anjuman Himayatul Islam school and later studied at the missionary school Wilson College, both in Bombay.² He also received a religious education and memorized the entire Holy Qur'an. He spoke English and Arabic fluently. He concentrated his efforts on the Qur'an and studied the Qur'anic commentaries beginning with

¹ M. A. Sherif. *Searching for Solace: A Biography of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Interpreter of The Qur'an* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1994), 4.

² M. A. Sherif. *The Abdullah Yusuf Ali Memorial Lecture* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2008), 11.

those written in the early days of Islamic history. Ali took a first class Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature at the University of Bombay in January 1891 aged 19 and was awarded a Presidency of Bombay Scholarship to study at the University of Cambridge in England.³

Ali first went to Britain in 1891 to study Law at St John's College, Cambridge and after graduating BA and LL.B in 1895 he returned to India in the same year with a post in the Indian Civil Service (ICS), later being called to the Bar in Lincoln's Inn in 1896 in absentia. He received his MA and LL.M in 1901. He married Teresa Mary Shalders (1873–1956) at St Peter's Church in Bournemouth in 1900, and with her he had three sons and a daughter: Edris Yusuf Ali (1901–1992), Asghar Bloy Yusuf Ali (1902–1971), Alban Hyder Yusuf Ali (1904), and Leila Teresa Ali (1906). His wife and children settled variously in Tunbridge Wells, St Albans and Norwich while Ali returned to his post in India. He returned to Britain in 1905 on a two-year leave from the ICS and during this period he was elected a Fellow of the Royal

³ M. A. Sherif, *The Abdullah Yusuf Ali Memorial Lecture*, 11.

Society of Arts and the Royal Society of Literature. Ali first came to public attention in Britain after he gave a lecture at the Royal Society of Arts in London in 1906, organised by his mentor Sir George Birdwood. Another mentor was Lord James Meston, formerly Lieutenant Governor of the United Provinces, who, when he was made Finance Member of the Government of India appointed Ali to positions in various districts in India which also involved two short periods as acting Under Secretary (1907) and then Deputy Secretary (1911-12) in the Finance Department of the Government of India.

Ali divorced his wife in 1912. He married Gertrude Anne Mawbey (1895-1984) in 1920. With Mawbey he had a son, Rashid (1922), but this marriage too ended in failure. Ali was a respected intellectual in India, therefore he was recruited by Sir Muhammad Iqbal to be the Principal of Islamia College in Lahore, serving from 1925 to 1927 and again from 1935 to 1937.

In December 1938 while on tour to promote his translation, Ali helped to open the Al-Rashid Mosque, the third mosque in North America, in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. In

1947 Ali was among many Indians who returned to India after Independence to take up political posts. However, for him the move was not a success and he returned to London where he became increasingly frail in mind and body, living in isolation, ignored by both his family and the British establishment who no longer had a use for him. Of no fixed abode, Ali spent most of the last decade of his life either living in the National Liberal Club, in the Royal Commonwealth Society or wandering about the streets of London. On 9 December 1953 Ali was found destitute and in a bewildered condition in a doorway in Westminster by the police who took him to Westminster hospital. He was discharged the following day and was taken in by a London County Council home for the elderly in Dovehouse Street in Chelsea. Here he suffered a heart attack on 10 December and was rushed to St Stephen's Hospital in Fulham where he died alone the same day. No relatives claimed the body but Ali was known to the Pakistan High Commission; they arranged his funeral and burial in the Muslim section at Brookwood Cemetery near Woking, not far from the burial place of Marmaduke Pickthall.

B. Abdullah Yusuf Ali's Publications

A great number of Abdullah Yusuf Ali's research works and religious dissertations on Islamic History, *Da'wah* and *Tabligh*, education reform, literature, archaeology, sculpture, fine arts and social justice were published in many newspapers and journals of the Indian and Europe. In addition to all that, according to the Encyclopedia of Islam, he wrote 12 books in the English language which earned him the attention and praise of research scholars and readers in the international arena. Most notably however, he has secured for himself a very high position in the hearts of intellectuals all over the world for his *English Translation and Commentary of the Holy Qur'an*.

It can be asserted that *The English Translation and Commentary on the Holy Qur'an* of Abdullah Yusuf Ali is free from the faults and failings of other writers and scholars and is a more complete translation with a brief commentary. Many people have taken recourse to imagination and 'fairy tales' when dealing with Arabic words, idioms and phrases. But Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation and commentary is very appropriate and in

concord with the fundamental principles and ideals of the Holy Qur'an.

The first edition of his *Translation and Commentary of the Holy Qur'an* was published in 1934. In the preface of that edition he wrote, "It is the duty of every Muslim, man, woman or child, to read the Qur'an and understand it according to his own capacity. If any one of us attains to some knowledge or understanding of it by study, contemplation, and the test of life, both outward and inward, it is his duty, according to his capacity, to instruct others, and share with them the joy of peace which result from contact with the spiritual world. The Qur'an - indeed every religious book - has to be read, not only with the tongue and voice and eyes, but with the best light that our intellect can supply, and even more, with the truest and purest light which our heart and conscience can give us. It is in this spirit that I would have my readers approach the Qur'an."

The complete publications of Abdullah Yusuf Ali are appended below:

1. The Indian Mohammedans (1907)

2. Mestrovic and Serbian Sculpture (1916)
3. Muslim Educational Ideals (1923)
4. Islam as A World Force (1926)
5. India and Europe (1926)
6. Personality of Mohammed The Prophet (1929)
7. Medieval India (1932)
8. Translation and Commentary of The Holy Qur'an (1934)
9. Life and Literature (1936)
10. Religion and Social Equality (1936)
11. Islamic History, its Scope and Content (1936)
12. The Message of Islam (1940)