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India
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Wahhabi or National Hero? Siddiq Hasan Khan

Hardly is any historical Indian Muslim figure of the 19th century as controversial as Sayyid Siddiq Hasan Khan al-Qannauji al-Bukhari (1832–1890). The reason for all the contrasting assessments of his personality was his astonishing career: he rose from an impoverished scholar to the son-in-law of the Prime Minister at the court of Bhopal.[1] In 1871, the widowed ruler of this principality, Shah Jahan Begum (r. 1868–1901) chose him as her second husband. After his marriage, Siddiq Hasan Khan established the reformist movement Ahl-e Hadith (people of the prophetic traditions), which soon became a dominant Muslim group in Bhopal. But as soon as Siddiq Hasan's career had started, it came to a sudden end.

Siddiq Hasan Khan

In 1885, Siddiq Hasan was deprived of all his posts and titles by the British, thus forcing him into privacy. For a period of more than one year, he had to retire in his own palace, Nur Mahall, completely isolated from his wife and his supporters. Due to this sudden end of his career, in the Indian nationalist views prevalent since 1918 Siddiq Hasan is described as one of the first heroes of the anti-colonial struggle.

This nationalist paradigm is overshadowed by another perspective about the historical figure of Siddiq Hasan: several Muslim sources describe him as a puritan and a Wahhabi, closely linked to the reformist movement of Muhammad ʿAbd al-Wahhab (d. 1762) in today's Saudi Arabia. Besides these contrasting views, the sources lack an assessment of the 'real' Siddiq Hasan. As a consequence, it is necessary to apply changing research methods in order 'to avoid common pitfalls of historiography, like projecting modern nationalist paradigms … back into the past'.[2] Consequently, the social network analysis, originally developed by the Manchester school of anthropologists in the 1950s, seems to be a suitable research method. Taken the premise that every individual (ego) is embedded into a network of personal relationships, it is interesting to observe which parts of his/her ego-network a person activates in order to achieve his/her aims. Hence, it may be interesting to show which personal relations were really important in Siddiq Hasan's career – and which connections became crucial only to the eyes of posterity. The following gives an analysis of Siddiq Hasan's personal networks, trying to avoid the categories of 'Wahhabi' or 'nationalist hero', which have determined the characterization of Siddiq Hasan for more than 100 years.

Born into a Sayyid family, strongly connected to the Tariqa-ye Muhammadiya reform movement of Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi (d. 1832), Siddiq Hasan made the first steps of his personal career as the secretary of the Prime Minister at the court of the Islamic principality of Bhopal. Since 1818 this Central Indian princely state was ruled by strong female rulers, the Begums. Sikander Begum (r. 1844–1868) followed her mother Qudsiya Begum (r. 1818–1837) to the throne (*masnad*) and secured the succession of her daughter, Shah Jahan Begum (r. 1868–1901). Sikander Begum, on the one hand, needed support from the British to protect Bhopal's territory from the invasions of the Marathas and Pindaris. On the other hand, she wanted to have her reign legitimated by a group of Islamic scholars. Thus, she invited several ulama of reformist background to Bhopal. Among them was Sayyid Jamal ud-Din Dihlawi (d. 1881) who had been, like Siddiq Hasan's father, an active member of the Tariqa-ye Muhammadiya.

The 'Yemen connection'

When young Siddiq Hasan approached Bhopal, Jamal ud-Din took him under his wing. Due to the fact that from now on he lived in financially secure conditions, he could continue his personal studies, which he had had to interrupt before. In Bhopal he came to know two Yemenite brothers who had been living in Bhopal for several years, namely the brothers Zain al-ʿAbidin (d. 1880) and Husain b. Muhsin al-Hudaidi (d. 1910). Sikander Begum had met the Yeminite family in Hudaida during her pilgrimage to Mecca in 1863. She invited Zain al-ʿAbidin to Bhopal, because she was looking for a new *qadi al-qudat* (chief judge) for her state.

Although Zain al-ʿAbidin did not know Persian or Urdu, nor did he belong to the Hanafi school of law prevailing among the Indian Muslims (he was a Shafiʿi), he soon became acquainted with the situation in Bhopal. After a short time, he knew all relevant manuals of Hanafi law in India and wrote his legal decrees (*fatawa*) according to that school. Later, he invited his younger brother Husain to join him in Bhopal. Husain decided to undertake the long journey to Bhopal, where the Begum cordially welcomed him. She employed him as a teacher of the local *dar ul-hadith* (house of the teaching of the prophetic traditions). It was around 1856, that Husain taught *hadith* to Siddiq Hasan. This close teacher-pupil relation made a deep impression on Siddiq Hasan and caused a significant change in his intellectual orientation. The reason for this change can be seen in his studies of various famous books by the reputed Yemenite scholar and *qadi* Muhammad b. ʿAli ash-Shaukani (d. 1834), who gained fame mainly for his legal theories of rejecting the *taqlid*, i.e. the strict adherence to one school of law. Shaukani insisted on the *ijtihad*, i.e. to find the proof (*dalil*, pl. *adilla*) of a legal opinion in the Qur'an and *sunna*. Shaukani applied the method of *ijtihad* in his own *fatawa*, collected in his voluminous *Nail al-autar*. Shaukani's works, all of them containing heavy criticism on *taqlid*, spread all over India starting from the late 1850s. The Yemenite brothers in Bhopal as well as Siddiq Hasan were responsible for this 'Shaukani boom'. Siddiq Hasan, formerly influenced by the teachings of Shah Waliullah (d. 1762) and Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi, shifted to the Yemenite tradition of Shaukani and Husain b. Muhsin. Husain wrote several *ijazat* (teaching permissions) to him, which allowed him to teach several works of this Yemenite tradition (e.g. by the Ahdal family, the Mizjajis, and mainly Shaukani).

At this time, around 1857, Siddiq Hasan was a young scholar with limited influence. He even lost his job as a secretary to the Prime Minister and had to leave Bhopal. Later on, in 1859, he was allowed to return to Bhopal and was appointed Head of the Bhopal State Archives by Sikander Begum. His career gained further impetus when he married the widowed daughter of the Prime Minister Jamal ud-Din Khan. From that time onwards, Siddiq Hasan was one of the most influential scholars in Bhopal. His career reached its climax when the widowed ruler Shah Jahan Begum made him her Nawwab-consort in 1871. Siddiq Hasan started extensive propagation of the theories of Shaukani, Ibn Taimiya, and to a lesser extent the opinions of Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi. This mixture of Indian and Yemenite religious reformist teachings became fundamental to the Ahl-e Hadith movement, of which Siddiq Hasan was one of the most active members. He wrote almost 300 works in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu dealing with the elimination of unlawful innovations (*bidʿa*), the upcoming approach of the Day of Judgement (*yaum al-qiyama*) and the need for reform of the Indian society according to the model of the early Islamic community in Medina. It was mainly the insistence on *ijtihad* that caused conflicts among all Indian Muslim groups of that time, e.g. the Deobandis and the movement of Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi (d. 1921), who were all strict followers of the Hanafiya.

Siddiq Hasan's enemies in Bhopal's as well as in other Muslim circles chose the easy way to get rid of him: they denounced him as a 'Wahhabi', which was synonymous with 'anti-British', 'fanatic', and 'puritan'. At first, the British did not believe these rumours, mainly because the Begums proved to be loyal supporters of the British in several critical situations. Later, the British began to examine Siddiq Hasan's books critically and discovered some writings in which the theory of jihad was explained at length. When the British further detected that 17 'Wahhabi' scholars from Najd had come to study in Bhopal, they began to think of an international network of anti-British agitators, reaching from Bhopal to Egypt, Istanbul, and the Mahdist Sudan. The British Resident Lepel Griffin immediately reacted and deposed Siddiq Hasan. Other prominent leaders of the Ahl-e Hadith like Husain b. Muhsin and Muhammad Bashir Sahsawani (d. 1908) further propagated the objectives of the movement. This points to the fact that some people at the court of Bhopal only wanted to eradicate Siddiq Hasan's dominant influence on the Begum. Nationalist circles, however, had labelled their hero as 'a victim of the British imperialism'. At first, the British were proud to have caught 'one of the leading figures of the Indian Wahhabis'. Later they had to admit that they had overreacted to intrigues and rumours circulating at the court.

Every group mentioned above neglected completely that Siddiq Hasan in his works had always denied Muhammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhab's influence on the Indian reformists. Rather, he had accused the Najdi of religious fanaticism and bloodshed among fellow Muslims. Siddiq Hasan himself was far away from being an anti-British agitator: he did not support the Mahdist revolt in Sudan and did not even justify Islamic jihad against the British in India. He opted for a close cooperation of Muslim rulers and the British authorities within the framework of Islamic *shariʿa*.

All in all, Siddiq Hasan was a reformer who gained most of his religious knowledge from his Yemenite teachers. His link to Yemenite scholarship even overshadowed his connection to Indian reformist circles into which he was born. The combination of the analysis of Siddiq Hasan's oeuvre and that of his social network is the objective of the further research concerning this subject.

Notes

1. Claudia Preckel, *The Begums of Bhopal* (New Delhi, 2000); Shaharyar Muhammad Khan, *The Begums of Bhopal* (London, 2000).
2. Thomas Eich, 'Quest for a Phantom: Investigating Abu l-Huda al-Sayyadi', *ISIMNewsletter* 7 (2001): 24.

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