Abdul Jalal Zulqad Ali, *The Path of the Truth* (excerpts)

Translated by Bikash K Bhattacharya

Translator's Preface

Abdul Jalal Zulqad Ali (1796–1891) was born to a family of Persian interpreters in Sivasagar, the capital of the Ahom kingdom in the present-day Northeast Indian state of Assam. His grandfather served at the Ahom royal court as a Persian interpreter. The two principal kingdoms in the region, the Ahom and the Koch, patronized Islamicate learning in spite of their tribal kings adopting Hinduism. An Assamese Zikir song attributed to Azan Faqir, a Muslim preacher and saint from the 17th century, goes like this: "Gargāon nagarat Āhom rajār rājyat / Ārabir parā tarjamā hal asamiyā mātat // rajā hak sirajibi prajā hak dakhal / śil nupange māne lao nājāi māne tal // eghāra eśa dukuri nabisan hijiri ākou pās basar jāi / Śhāh Milāne ei jikir karile Qurān kitābat pāi" (In the city of Gargaon in the Ahom kingdom / [This Zikir] has been translated from Arabic into the Assamese tongue // May the king thrive forever and rule the subjects / as long as the stone does not float and the [dried] gourd does not sink // In the year 1125 Hijri / Shah Milan composed this Zikir based on the book of Qur'an).[1] Epigraphic evidence suggests that Ahom kings made land grants to Persian interpreters for their service at the court.[2] A Koch chronicle, *Darrang Rājvaṃsāvali*, states that under the patronage of King Naranarayan (r. 1554–87), Muslim court literati translated parts of the Qurʾan from Arabic to Persian.[3] Knowledge of Persian also became instrumental in regional courts for its increasing use in diplomatic communications with the imperial Mughal court. Within such a milieu, Ali's ancestors engaged in Persianate and Islamicate learning, often under the patronage of the royal court.

However, Ali grew up in a turbulent time when the Ahom kingdom was on its last legs, severely weakened by the popular Moamoria rebellion (1769–1805), only to be followed by years of Burmese occupation (1821–25) before the kingdom's final annexation by the

[1] Khetradhar Borgohain, "Āzān Faqirar Asamiyā Geet (2)" [Azan Faqir's Assamese songs (2)], *Abāhan* 4 (1932): 97–103.

[2] Maheswar Neog, ed., *Prāchya Śāsanavalī* [*Prāchya Śāsanavalī: An Anthology of Royal Charters*] (Assam Prakashan Parishad, 1974), 68–69.

[3] Dimbeswar Neog, *Introduction to Assam* (Vora & Co. Publishers, 1947), 96.

British in 1826. During the Burmese occupation, Ali's family relocated to Gauhati, and he went for his studies first to Dhaka and then to Jaunpur in Uttar Pradesh, where he became a disciple of Maulana Karamat Ali Jaunpuri, a Muslim social reformer and founder of the Taiyuni movement.

The manuscript of the present text, titled *Tāriq-ul-Haq-Fi-Bayān-e-Noor-ul-Haq* (*The Path of the Truth in the Description of the Light of the Truth*), an Islamic advice manual written in the Assamese language but in the Arabic script, was handed down by the author to his son Yakub Ali, who in turn left it to the custody of his son Mohammad Saleh Kazim, who rendered the text into the Assamese script, edited the text, and had it published in 1967 with the Assamese title *Satyar Path* (*The Path of the Truth*). Kazim states in his editorial note to *Satyar Path* that the text was composed by his grandfather before or around the year 1830. This dating makes the text the earliest known Islamic advice manual written in Assamese and perhaps the earliest text of this genre in northeastern India. Commenting on Ali's choice of the Arabic script for an Assamese language text, Mohammad Amin Khan, a scholar of Arabic, wrote, "Sufi Sahab [Zulqad Ali] chose the Arabic script as he found it difficult to write in the Kaitheli [Assamese] script. When I was a school student in Dhubri [a district in western Assam adjacent to Bengal], one day I found a piece of newspaper carrying Arabic letters. I was left wondering who might read an Arabic newspaper here. As I read, I realized that it was in fact a Bengali newspaper written in the Arabic script. It was published from Chottogram in Bengal. But it is astonishing that such a book has now been written in Assam."[4] Thibaut d'Hubert (2020) has shown that the use of the Arabic script to write Bangla in a range of texts from the 17th century through to the second half of the 19th century was a more common practice than has been acknowledged in the regional literary historiography. In Assam, however, we do not know of any vernacular work that has used the Arabic script other than this text by Zulqad Ali.

[4] Abdul Jalal Zulqad Ali, *Satyar Path* [*The Path of the Truth*], ed. Mohammad Saleh Kazim (Mohammad Saleh Kazim, 1967).

This text is a unique instance of multilingualism in Indo-Islamic expression that involves the transposition of Qurʾanic matter into Assamese, a language loaded with Hindu baggage by centuries of use in Vaishnavism, but in a script firmly grounded in the Arabic episteme. Kazim mentions in the editorial note that he has not altered any words from the original and has provided colloquial Assamese words in brackets for the unfamiliar Arabic and Persian terms. The Muslim Assamese linguistic register, peppered with Perso-Arabic words, is somewhat different from what is often projected as standard Assamese. An Assamese Muslim poet Mosleh Uddin Ahmed poignantly captures the sense of tension associated with Assamese Muslim subjectivity vis-à-vis the inherently multilingual nature of the Islamic register of the Assamese language. He wrote, "Jātit āmi Asamiyā kintu māt he khisiri / Urdu, Fārsi, Asamiyāre purāo kathāśāri" (We are Assamese by nationality, but our tongue is a mixture of Urdu, Persian, and Assamese).[5] A section of the Assamese Hindu literati drew a filial connection between Sanskrit and Assamese given that the latter is an Indo-Aryan language.[6] Consequently, Perso-Arabic words were sometimes designated as words of *bideśi* (foreign) origin, whereas Sanskrit *tatsama* loanwords in Assamese were considered a "natural" component of the vernacular lexicon. It is often overlooked that although there are natural equivalents for a large number of words found in the Muslim Assamese register, these terms are not quite fitting to convey the concepts and events specific to Islamic religious thought and history. For example, Ali uses the word *ḥaqīqat* (حقیقة)—adopted in the Muslim Assamese linguistic register via Urdu—on multiple occasions in the text to denote a higher level of spiritual reality specific to a Sufi context rather than simply to mean reality, as in the everyday usage of the word. Had he used *satya*, the conventional word for truth or reality in Assamese, that would not have conveyed his intended meaning.

[5] Jogendra Narayan Bhuyan, "Mosleh Uddin Ahmed Āru Tekhetar Sāhitya Karma" [Mosleh Uddin Ahmed and his literary works], *Asam Sāhitya Sabhā Patrikā* 3 (1976): 17–23.

[6] Anandachandra Agarwalla, "Asam Sāhitya Sabhār Sabhāpatir Abhibhāsan" [Asam Sahitya Sabha president's speech], *Abāhan* 6 (1933): 345–64.

The Path of the Truth meanders through multiple themes ranging from Qurʾanic creation stories and instructions on how to perform Salah to the Islamic soteriological possibility of Assam's tribes. In his autobiography, Nazar Ali Pandit, an Assamese Muslim author, vividly narrates witnessing Zulqad Ali's relentless preaching campaigns in the second half of the 19th century in Assamese villages where people were only nominally Muslims, with strong syncretic and folk traditions.[7] In all likelihood, Ali used this text as an instruction manual to introduce everyday practices of Islam to his listeners during these preaching tours.

I have rendered the preface, where the author talks about the linguistic landscape of his time and what motivated him to compose the text, and two select sections that deal with the issue of linguistic representation of Allah and his messenger, Muhammad. The first section discusses the shape of some of the names used to refer to Prophet Muhammad in the Arabic script, their symbolic meanings, and calligraphic possibilities. In what seems to be an attempt to create a visual mnemonic device for his listeners, many of them neophytes, Ali ingeniously describes the appearances of two Arabic words, *Muhammad* (مُحَمَّد) and *Ahmad* (أحمد), names of the prophet, as visual representations of the human body and the various postures of mandatory Islamic prayers.

The second section is about naming and defining Allah—how to call Allah and what kind of utterances are impermissible (*haram*) for Muslims. Ali also provides a list of utterances related to metapersons of folk and Hindu beliefs and local spirits associated with places that he suggests Muslims should avoid. Notwithstanding Ali's assertion that the names of God must be established by evidence and direct reference in the Qurʾan and hadiths, later Assamese Muslim writers continued to creatively engage in naming and defining the divine. Chand Mohammad Choudhury, a 20th-century Assamese Muslim writer, for instance, introduced a transliterated neologism, *biśvapati-pākrab*, to describe Allah, which bound the Sanskrit loanword *biśvapati* (Sanskrit: विश्वपति lit. "lord of the universe"; also a name

[7] Nazar Ali Pandit, *Mor Jivanar Kisu Kathā* [*Some Vignettes of My Life*] (Sahitya Akademi, 2004).

for Vishnu) with Perso-Arabic *pak* (Arabic: پاک lit. "pure") and *rabb* (Arabic: رب lit. "lord").[8] This is just one instance of the multilingual sensibility evolved in a shared cultural space that runs deep in the vernacular expressions of Islam in Assam.

In creating an English translation of a text written in unstandardized grammar and syntax, often riddled with repetitions, I have added punctuation marks, separated paragraphs into sentences, and, On occasion. Inserted words within square brackets for clarity. Footnotes are added where the meaning of a sentence is unclear, and the suggestions made in footnotes are my interpretation.

[8] Chand Mohammad Choudhury, "Sātri Banām Abhibhāvak" [Schoolgirl versus guardian], *Asam Sāhitya Sabhā Patrikā* 3 (1932): 86–91.

The Path of the Truth

by Abdul Jalal Zulqad Ali

Preface

O believers, what led to the composition of this book? The average person in this country does not understand Arabic, Farsi, or Hindi, and they do not even understand Bengali. So they cannot grasp the essence of Sharīʿah. And they are not familiar with the book *Moulood Shareef* that guides one like a Pir guides his disciples; therefore, by translating [works] from Arabic, Farsi, and Hindi, this book has been composed in the native tongue of the Assamese. Now those who do not listen [to the message in this book], they will become sinners. Because only evil beings run away from acts of spiritual merit and good deeds. Running away from acts of spiritual merit without any valid reason is a sin. It is like not attending to a call from the judge or the governor. Hazrat Nabī is the owner of the two worlds. We are his slaves, servants of servants. If we do not attend to him, we are guilty. Know full well!

The Shape of the Words "Muhammad" and "Ahmad" Written in Arabic

From the four letters that make the name of Hazrat (Sallallahu Alaihi Wasallam), the four rightly guided friends were created as the owners of Muhammad's house of religion.[9] The holy and pure word that is || Muhammad || all the beings are created [in its likeness]: [the Arabic letter] Mim is the head, Ḥā is the torso, the other Mim is the waist, and the Dal is the pair of legs. In this world, believers and disbelievers all get the physique of [the shape of the word] Muhammad. After death, the disbelievers are transformed into the shape of a pig and thrown into hell. Believers, although they are sinners and die without performing repentance, may be forgiven and saved by

[9] This is a word-to-word translation. The author, however, may mean that the four Arabic letters in the word *Muhammad* refer to the four Rashiduns—or, just like there are four letters in the word, there are four Rashiduns—rather than them being "created" from the four letters.

Allah. Because, for the believers, Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (Sallallahu Alaihi Wasallam) has the right to decide, and only his name is brought forth by the word || Ahmad ||.[10] Alif represents the act of standing facing toward Mecca; Ḥā stands for the act of bending the body at the waist, placing the hands on the knees in performing rukūʿ; the Mim denotes kneeling and bowing in front of Allah until the forehead and nose, along with two hands on the two knees, touch the ground in performing sajdah; Dal signifies the act of qadah by placing the two hands on the knees, sitting on the two feet pointing toward Mecca. (p. 7)

The Description of Utterances That Make a Muslim a Disbeliever (Kafir)

A Muslim becomes a kafir (disbeliever) if he utters phrases meant for Allah in the language of Hindu disbelievers. For example, if [a Muslim] seeks blessings of wealth, protection, and liberation by uttering the names of Bhagavān, Rāmkrishna, Isvar, Bhagavati, Maa Lakshmi, he turns into a kafir.[11] While crossing the river with a Hindu kafir, if you say [following your companion], "O Brahmaputra baba, Bhagirathi maa, please safeguard us," you will become a kafir. "The healer saved me;" "when one catches pox, it is not cured if offerings and prayers are not made to the goddess of smallpox;" "this man has been killed by a spirit, not by Allah's will"—saying these will certainly turn a Muslim into a kafir. If someone says "Barmai Bisahari, Baliyā Bābā and Samun Devatā can bless one with wealth, can take and give life," one will become a kafir.[12] If someone

[10] The awkward structure of the sentence makes it difficult to retrieve a clear meaning. But taking cue from the sentences that follow, one might assume that the author wanted to underscore how the visual form of the word represents acts of Salah, one of the five pillars of Islam.

[11] Nazar Ali Pandit writes in his autobiography that until the early 20th century not only did many Assamese Muslims actively partake in Assamese Hindu and folk practices that worship various deities, some Muslims themselves organized such worships and acted in the role of priests and performers, especially in the worship of Manasa, the snake goddess. Pandit, *Mor Jivanar Kisu Kathā*.

[12] These folk spirits are appeased by rural communities across Assam. Notwithstanding injunctions by Islamic preachers such as Zulqad Ali, these practices continue, albeit to a lesser extent, among the Assamese Muslim communities even today.

says “Allah is above and you are down here,” “only your efforts will help in the fruition of an action and earn wealth,” “how can Allah give you wealth?” he will also become a kafir. (pp. 65–67)

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