Part two

A Life Sketch
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Coming from a respectable puthan family of Qaimgunj, U.P., Zakir Husain was born on February 8, 1897 at Hyderabad where his father Fida Husain Khan had settled and earned the fame as a lawyer.

The young Zakir received his early education at home under the benign influence of his parents. This was cut short by the untimely death of his father when Zakir was barely nine. This misfortune led his family to shift from Hyderabad to their ancestral home in Qaimgunj.

The responsibility of Zakir Husain's upbringing devolved on his mother who, despite her meagre resources, gave him the best possible education. However, what proved to be of abiding importance was her personal influence on young Zakir. Later in life he admitted that his mother's sublime influence made him conscious of his duties towards his fellow-countrymen, irrespective of any consideration of caste, creed or religion.

After finishing his elementary education Zakir Husain sought admission to the Islamia High School, Etawah, U.P. and came in close contact with several nationalist teachers who awakened in him a sense of social awareness which helped him in moulding his future course of life and created in him a lasting interest in national and international problems.

He developed the habit of reading newspapers which kept him
abreast of events at home and abroad. This inculcated in him sympathy towards the Turks who had been forcibly dragged into the Tripoli war. He was so much upset and anguished by the event that even as a school-boy he organised a fund-raising campaign to help the Turkish cause.

His was a typical manifestation of righteous indignation of an Indian Muslim against a treacherous act committed on Turkey.

His patriotic fervour was further aroused by the writings of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Maulana Muhammad Ali who had launched a regular campaign among the Muslims through their respective journals—Al Hilal and Comrade.

Zakir Husain was hardly fourteen when he lost his mother and several other members of the family in the plague epidemic that had ravaged the country in 1911. The blow would have shattered the spirits of any one but the young Zakir braved it calmly.

As a good pathan, he maintained his poise and pursued his studies vigorously.

In 1913, when he was sixteen he passed the Matriculation Examination creditably with distinctions in classical subjects. The catholicity of suf saint, Hasan Shah, left indelible impression on young Zakir Husain’s mind particularly in regard to the humanistic principles of communal harmony and universal brotherhood.

After completing his studies at Etawah, Zakir Husain joined the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College, Aligarh, wherefrom he passed the Intermediate Examination in the Science group. When he was an undergraduate student he was married to Begum Shahjehan Bano who as a life partner shared with him the joys and sorrows of life.

Zakir Husain studied Science group with a view to enter into medical profession, for which he had a great regard. For accomplishing this objective he moved to Lucknow. But while preparing for the preliminary examination he fell ill and he had to discontinue his studies for full one year. This set back left him with no other alternative but to join the M.A.O. College Aligarh again.

In Aligarh he came in contact with two of the future luminaries of Urdu literature namely, Rasheed Ahmad Siddiqi and Iqbal Suhail. They became his life-long friends. He impressed them so much that they addressed him as murshid (mentor).
Becoming a popular leader of the student community Zakir Saheb, during the period, held several responsible positions and won laurels for his speeches at debating contests.

Graduating in 1918- with Philosophy, English Literature and Economics he—as a post-graduate student, took up Law and Economics. Meanwhile he was also appointed as a Junior Lecturer in the college.

Soon after the end of the World War I, there was a storm on the political scene of the country. The victory of the Allies in the war was followed by the Khilafat movement and the Raj’s atrocities in Punjab agitated and moved the whole country. Mahatma Gandhi, called upon his countrymen to non-cooperate with the British Government.

Spelling out his seven point non-violent, non-cooperation programme, he asked the students of the country to come out of such institutions which were owned, aided or controlled by the Government, and help establishing national institutions instead.

The Mahatma accompanied by Ali Brothers, toured the whole country including Aligarh. He made an appeal to the students of the M.A.O. College to leave the institution and join the national movement. While others hesitated, Zakir Saheb responded to the call. The College Principal made a vain effort to dissuade him and offered him the post of a Deputy Collector if he did not participate in the movement. But to young Zakir the call of his country was stronger attraction than the temptation of a prized government job.

In his own words:

"It was the first conscious decision of my life. Perhaps the only one I have ever taken. The rest of my life has but flowed from it."

When he left the college nearly three hundred students followed him. Zakir Saheb was eager that these students should receive proper education. With this objective in view he helped in building the Jamia Millia Islamia.

It brought him in close touch with the national leaders like Hakim Ajmal Khan and Maulana Muhammad Ali who rendered unique service to the Jamia as Amir-e-Jamia and Shaikh-ul-Jamia respectively. Zakir Saheb, on his part, agreed to act as a Lecturer in Economics in which capacity he worked till he left for Germany in 1922 for higher studies.
In Germany Zakir Saheb met M. Mujeeb and Abid Husain and sought their consent for the life-long service to the Jamia on their return to India. Later, when he was informed that as a result of the financial crisis the Jamia was on the brink of closure, Zakir Saheb immediately sent a telegraphic note urging its organisers not to allow the unique institution to go out of existence.

When Hakim Ajmal Khan and Dr. M.A. Ansari visited Europe in 1925, Zakir Saheb assured them of his and his friends' determined wish to dedicate their lives to the cause of the Jamia. Encouraged by such offers the Indian leaders decided not to close down the institution and shifted it from Aligarh to Delhi.

While abroad Zakir Saheb developed contacts with several renowned figures in the educational and literary world. He met the famous Turkish litterateur Halide Edib and the well-known philanthropist Miss Gerda Philipsborn who offered to serve the Jamia in any capacity she might be considered suitable.

After obtaining Ph. D. degree in Economics from Berlin University in 1928, Zakir Saheb, returned to India with two of his trusted lieutenants Mohammad Mujeeb and Dr. Abid Husain. He was shocked to find that the Jamia was without funds, without any public support and so without any future. But true to his words, he took up its affairs as a challenge and set to work to tide over its crises. From then onward the history of the Jamia Millia could aptly be defined as the life-story of Zakir Husain.

With a view to overcome the financial difficulties, Zakir Saheb formed a society called the Anjuman-e-Talim-e-Milli with Dr. M.A. Ansari and Jamnalal Bajaj as its President and Treasurer, respectively. Himself becoming the Secretary of the society, Zakir Saheb alongwith several of his colleagues committed himself to the service of the Jamia for two decades at a meagre salary of not more than Rs. 150/- per month.

He also founded another association called the Hamdardan-e-Jamia comprising the patrons and sympathisers of the institution. Thus flourished the Jamia under the stewardship of Zakir Saheb, who evinced a remarkable tenacity of purpose despite the paucity of funds and other resources.

In 1935 when the institution was shifted from its Karol Bagh site to the Okhla estate where it now exists, Zakir Saheb regardless of the
presence of several VIPs significantly asked the youngest child of the institution to lay its foundation.

As an educationist, Zakir Saheb was well-aware of the limitations of the traditional education. He, therefore, tried, through the agency of the Jamia, a new pattern of education deriving its strength from the cultural heritage of the nation.

Delivering the convocation address at the Kashi Vidyapeeth in 1935, he made it clear that while encouraging the development of every distinct culture in the country, the national educational system should inculcate among the students their love of the nation as a whole. It was due to his efforts that the Jamia could become an ideal educational institution symbolising the composite and secular culture of India.

During the Civil Disobedience days he converted Jamia into a centre of training soldiers for the work of Indian independence. Zakir Saheb’s successful experiments in the sphere of education, and his fame as an educationist prompted Mahatma Gandhi to appoint him as the Chairman of the All India Educational Conference at Wardha in 1937 to look into the various aspects of Basic Education. Zakir Saheb and his committee performed their duty creditably and so well that they were asked to formulate a scheme which was later adopted by all the Congress governments in their respective provinces.

His eminence as an educationist rose so high that he was considered as one who should be included in the Interim Government in June 1946. But Zakir Saheb expressed his inability to serve in the government unless his name was jointly sponsored by the Congress as well as the Muslim League.

It was a coincidence that the Silver Jubilee of the Jamia was celebrated in the year 1946 when the country witnessed the worst of communal holocausts. Zakir Saheb contributed his mite in bringing about some understanding between the two major communities of India.

He invited the foremost leaders of the Congress and the League and made a fervent appeal to them to do their best to see that the barbarism was brought to an end and the communal harmony was restored.

Addressing them he said;

“You are all stars of the political firmament. There is love and respect for you not only in thousands but in millions of hearts. I wish to make use of your presence here to convey to
you with the deepest sorrow the sentiments of those engaged in educational work. The fire of mutual hatred which is ablaze in this country makes our work of laying out and tending gardens appear as sheer madness. This fire is scorching the very earth in which nobility and humanity are bred; how can the flowers of virtuous and balanced personalities be made to grow on it? How can we provide adornment for the moral nature of man when the level of conduct is lower than that of beasts? How shall we save culture when barbarism holds sway everywhere, how shall we train men for its service? How shall we safeguard human values in a world of wild beasts? These words might appear harsh to you, but the harshest words would be too mild to describe the conditions that prevail around us. We are obliged by the demands of our own vocation to cultivate reverence for children; how shall I tell you of the anguish we suffer when we hear that in this upsurge of bestiality even innocent children are not spared? An Indian poet has said that every child that is born brings with it the message that God has not altogether despaired of mankind, but has human nature in our country so lost hope in itself that it wants to crush these blossoms even before they have opened? For God's sake, put your heads together and extinguish this fire! This is not the time to investigate and determine as to who lighted this fire, how it was lighted. The fire is blazing; it has to be put out. It is not a question of survival of this nation or that nation, it is a question of choosing between civilised human life and the savagery of wild beasts. For God's sake do not allow the very foundation of civilised life in this country to be destroyed as they are being destroyed now."

His speech deeply moved the audience. However, with the passage of time the events took their own course.

With the partition of the country in 1947 came the national independence. For over two decades Zakir Saheb had guided the affairs of the Jamia so efficiently against odds of all sorts that it acquired the reputation of a national institution of learning.

It was aptly remarked that whereas the Jamia created an image, the Aligarh University lost its lustre. At this point the discerning eyes of Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Azad fell on Zakir Saheb who requested him to reorganise and reorient his alma mater.
Zakir Saheb, as usual, agreed to be its Vice-Chancellor on the condition that he would not go to the Aligarh Muslim University as a Government nominee but only as a unanimous choice of the University Court. Consequently in November 1948, the Aligarh University Court elected him unanimously as its Vice-Chancellor.

Considering it an opportunity to serve another great cause he took up the challenge of supervising the University suffering for long from chaos and confusion. He succeeded to a great extent in restoring to the University its lost glory and glamour.

He allayed fears and suspicion among the members of the University and infused in them a feeling of confidence. He brought eminent and distinguished scholars to the various faculties of the University and always stood by his students. Aligarh blossomed again into a centre of intellectual pursuits and scientific researches. On Zakir Sahib’s success Professor Rasheed Ahmad Siddiqi said, “the man who inspired a new Jamia helped also to preserve the Aligarh of old.” While as Vice-Chancellor he also served as a member of the Education and Press Commissions. In 1952 Zakir Saheb was nominated a memere of the Rajya Sabha where he evinced interest in the educational and economic affairs of the country.

During this period he also remained associated with the International Students Service, World University Service and the UNESCO.

In 1957 he occupied the Raj Bhawan at Patna as the Governor of Bihar. As Governor he persuaded the Cabinet to make a change in the Bihar Universities (Amendment) Bill—The draft had reduced the Universities to minor government departments. In 1962 Zakir Saheb was considered as the fittest person to hold the office of the Vice-President of Indian Republic and the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha.

On his election as Vice-President he said:

“...I was considered worthy of this honour on account of my close involvement in educational work and the significance that our people rightly appear to attach to education in their life.”

In this position Zakir Saheb’s ideal was to promote mutual understanding and trust between India and other countries.

When the Presidential election fell due in 1967 Zakir Saheb was the candidate of the Indian National Congress. On the previous occasions the election of the President of India was a mere formal affair as the
Congress commanded absolute majority in the Parliament and State Legislatures. This time it was going to be a tough affair as all the combined Opposition parties proposed former Chief Justice K. Subba Rao as their candidate.

Despite all efforts of the Opposition to defeat him, Zakir Saheb came out triumphant in the election with a convincing majority, securing 471,244 first preference votes as against 363,071 obtained by his principal Opponent.

On his election to the august office of the Indian Presidency he said:

"It is a great honour indeed, that the nation has bestowed on a mere teacher who, some forty seven years ago, resolved to devote the best years of his life to nation’s education. It appears to me to be an unequivocal recognition by my people of the fact that education is inextricably involved in the quality of a nation’s life, that it is, indeed, a prime instrument of national purpose."

Essentially an educationist Zakir Saheb was at his best in the midst of students and books. He always stressed the need for a thorough reappraisal of the educational system and its reorientation to meet the requirements of national objectives.

An author of repute, Zakir Saheb’s Urdu translation of Plato’s Republic, List’s National System of Economy and Cannans’ Elementary Political Economy have been acknowledged as best.

Next to books, gardening was his favourite pastime. As President he improved the Mughal Gardens in the Rashtrapati Bhawan. Fond of pet animals, Zakir Saheb also collected paintings and fossils from different parts of the world.

An embodiment of what is noble, good and abiding in our tradition of universal brotherhood and democracy, Zakir Saheb ceaselessly worked for national integration. He was a born teacher and stood for the ideal of simple living and high thinking.

Dedicating his life to the task of the betterment of the common people of the country, Zakir Saheb loved his people without caring for any inconvenience to himself.

A few days before his demise, the present Union Minister of Health & Family Planning Dr. Karan Singh, hearing that the President was going on a tour of Assam, Nagaland and NEFA, expressed his concern at the risk being undertaken by him in such a strenuous
journey. Zakir Saheb smilingly said: "My people are expecting me there".

On his return from the tour when a board of physicians waited on him for a medical check-up on May 3, 1969 Zakir Saheb suddenly collapsed and breathed his last.

The tributes paid by the Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi summarises some of the traits of Zakir Saheb's personality. She said:

"Combining in his person the richness of the composite culture of India, he raised the standard of our public life by his words and actions. The ventures he cherished, the constructive work he did as educationist and social worker, the distinction he brought to every position he held in the national and international fields will guide generations to come".