SHAIKH AZIZUR RAHMAN NESARABADI’S APPROACHES, METHODS AND THOUGHTS IN ENHANCING UNITY IN DIVERSITY IN BANGLADESH

BY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the contribution of Shaikh Azizur Rahman Nesabadi (1915-2008) to the development of Islamic Unity and social harmony in Bangladesh through his intellectual and socio-political activities. This research critically evaluates his discourse on *Ittehad Ma'al Ikhtelaf* (Unity in diversity) in Bangladesh which has gained tremendous acceptance among the educated and common Muslim in Bangladesh since 1990s. This study is based on the investigation of Shaikh Nesarabadi’s life, intellectual legacy, social activities and religious contributions. This research primarily applied a textual analysis method to examine the primary and secondary data. It is often stated that Muslims in Bangladesh are polarised and disunited. Even, the Islamist groups, who are supposed to be the symbol of Muslim Unity, are not out of this polarisation and disunity trend. More than hundreds Islamic groups in Bangladesh but unfortunately, there is no single platform. The research has shown that there are some seminal causes behind Muslim disunity, including fear of losing personal and group interest, party politics, questions of leadership, and a lack of proper approaches and methods. To retaliate and recalibrate these challenges and bridge the huge gaps between Islamist groups, the study found three practical solutions from Shaikh Nesarabadi’s unity theory. According to Shaikh Nesarabadi, Muslims should focus on common issues, Tawhidic unity, and moderation and mutual respect. Therefore, the study concludes that Shaikh Nesarabadi’s thought and theory on unity depend upon three elements: moderation and mutual respect focus on common interest, and finally the Tawhidic paradigm. These comprise the framework for Muslim unity, which must be adopted by Muslim political parties as well as individuals in order to fulfil the command of Allah to enable the Ummah to resume a leading role in the world as a champion of justice.
خلاصة البحث

تكشف هذه الدراسة عن إسهامات الشيخ عزيز الرحمن نصاربادي (1915-2008) في تنمية الوحدة الإسلامية والوئام الاجتماعي في بنغلاديش من خلال أنشطته الفكرية والاجتماعية والسياسية، ويقيم تقييماً نقدياً خطابه حول "اختيار مال الاتحاد" في بنغلاديش الذي حظي بقبول هائل بين المسلمين المتعلمين والعام في البلاد منذ التسعينيات. تركز هذه الدراسة وتتحقق في حياة الشيخ نصاربادي، والتراز الفكري، وأنشطة الاجتماعية والإسهامات الدينية. يطبق هذا البحث أساسًا في طريقة التحليل النصية لفحص البيانات الأولية والثانية؛ إذ كثيرا ما يقال إن المسلمين في بنغلاديش مستقطبون وغير متحيزين، حتى الجماعات الإسلامية التي تجمع بالإجماع في الخارج في دعوتها إلى الوحدة الإسلامية، مستقلة ومقسمة فيما بينها، وهناك المئات من الجماعات الإسلامية التي تنتشر في بنغلاديش لا يمكن أن تتحد على منصة واحدة. يوضح هذا البحث أن هناك بعض الأسباب الأساسية لفرقة المسلمين، ومنها إعطاء الأولوية للمصالح الشخصية والجماعية، والسياسة الحزبية، ومسائل القيادة، والانتفاضة إلى الأساليب والأساليب المناسبة. للاستجابة لهذه التحديات وإعادة ضبط الحلول الإسلامية. تحدد هذه الدراسة ثلاثة حلول عملية تمثل نظرية الوحدة للشيخ نصاربادي. وفقاً للشيخ نصاربادي؛ إذ يجب على المسلمين التركيز على القضايا المشتركة والوحدة والاعتدال والاحترام المتبادل؛ لذلك خلصت الدراسة إلى أن فكر الشيخ نصاربادي ونظريته حول الوحدة يتمتد على ثلاثة عناصر: الاعتدال والاحترام المتبادل، والتركيز على المصلحة المشتركة، وأخيراً نموذج التوحيد. وتشمل هذه على إطار الوحدة الإسلامية، والتي يجب أن تتبناها الأحزاب السياسية الإسلامية والأفراد من أجل الوفاء بأمر الله تعالى لتمكين الأمة من استئناف الدور القيادي في العالم بوصفها رائدة للعدل.

iii
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I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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This thesis is dedicated to
My loving parents Maulana Muhammad Muzzamilul Haque and Fatema Begum
whose compassion for me flow like a waterfall
That continually nourishes my soul
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

“Unity in diversity” denotes to the state of “togetherness” among elements of multifarious diversity.1 “Unity in diversity” is based on the concept that all sorts of social or individual or collective differences whether it is cultural or religious or racial practices are not looked upon as fundamental causes of conflict; rather these differences are considered as diversities and varieties that demonstrate the social and the national richness.2 Regarding this idea, the almighty Allah says in the Quran:

“O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).’” (Quran 49: 13)3

In addition to this, “unity in diversity” is a political motto advocating federalism or multiculturalism. Islam teaches us that diversity is a fact of nature, and it makes nature beautiful. The crisis of unity among Muslims nowadays is a great trial, and many of the problems faced by the global Muslim community (i.e. the Ummah) are attributable to a lack of unity.4 It is well known to all that the success of any nation is predicated on the unity and harmony of its own members. A strongly united nation can create an invincible force that may overcome all types of hindrances and obstacles

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to success. The Holy Quran enjoins Muslims to be united and to protect themselves against their enemies by unity (among other conditions subsidiary to trust in Allah). Unity entails open-mindedness, respecting the opinions or views of others and avoiding types of sectional exclusivity and isolation. Throughout Islamic history Muslims have had different ways of understanding Islamic rulings, including the Companions in the presence of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ but they respected each other and united in the interests of the Ummah, particularly in defending it from its enemies.⁵

In modern times, Bangladesh is a living model for Unitarian or Unity in Diversity. Bangladesh is one of the overpopulated countries in the world with limited natural resources, and the third-largest Muslim population, alongside people of many faiths and creeds who generally dwell in peace and harmony.⁶ This arose from the intrinsic munificence of the people and from dedicated spiritual training. One of the greatest protagonists of the latter was Allama Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi, may Allah bless him. He was born into an educated and pious Muslim family in 1915 at Basonda (Nesarabad) village, Jhalokathi District, in Bangladesh. His father Maulavi Mofizur Rahman was a famous Arabic teacher and his mother’s name was Zinatunessa. He was a very devout and diligent Muslim and a proficient scholar from his earliest years. Shaikh Nesarabadi was known to the people of his society as a spiritual leader. The intensity of his spirituality was outstanding, and his charisma attracted many followers desiring to build up their spirituality under his guidance. Consequently, the influence of his teachings, thinking, ideology, and spirituality spread across the whole of Bengal.

⁵ Taha Jabir Al Alwani, Ethics of disagreement, (Virginia: III, 2013). P.10
His early education started from Bhola Alia Madrasah, where his teachers and peers noted his sharp memory and generosity. After finishing his higher secondary education, Shaikh Nesarabadi was admitted to Sarsina Alia Madrasah for higher education and obtained a *Fazil* (Bachelor’s degree) under Calcutta Madrasah Education Board in 1940. He subsequently went to Calcutta Alia Madrasah for further postgraduate studies, where he achieved a gold medal for his academic excellence. During his students’ life, Shaikh Nesarabadi established a student welfare association called *Anjumane Al Islah* in 1942.

After accomplishing his institutional studies, his attention turned to the reformation and unification of the Muslims of Bengal, whom he saw were disunited and fragmented into many sects and doctrines, each intolerant towards the ideas and ideologies of others. There were no serious efforts being undertaken to address this situation and to unite the Muslims; everyone was happy with his own doctrine and faction. This moribund and destructive condition of the Muslim community of Bangladesh affected him immensely due to his deep concern for the Muslim Ummah, thus he began to focus his energies on the call for unity in diversity.

He arranged several conferences and seminars and invited the great scholars of the country to share his ideas on unity in diversity. Some people welcomed his project and joined him enthusiastically, while others refused to participate in the Unity Movement due to the very sectionalism he sought to combat; in short, abstainers failed to overcome their narrow sectional interests and prejudices. Nesarabadi persevered in demonstrating how the Muslim community should gain unity, and showed how they could be united despite their many differences in thinking and belief.

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After his death his legacy was esteemed and well regarded for its seminal contribution to the cause of unity among the Muslim (and national) community of Bangladesh. Shaikh Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi’s strategy focused on three dimensions, with associated methodologies: social, national, and religious. He saw these as essential to affect social-human natural bonding, which flows from century to century, without barrier. All Muslims are equal and can live in any country of the world, and human beings are created for the whole universe, and for humanity. Shaikh Nesarabadi also analysed human nature and ethnic values which formulate unity in diversity. Therefore, this study examines Shaikh Nesarabadi’s discourse on unity in diversity in Bangladesh as a humble effort to uncover its nature and to explore Shaikh Nesarabadi’s thought to reconcile the different sections of the Muslim community in Bangladeshi society. The roots of causes of disunity in Bangladesh and its solutions are discussed, with clear contemporary relevance.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Bangladesh is the third-largest Muslim-majority country in the world, with an illustrious history of intellectual achievement, and an innovative and industrious population; if Bangladeshi intellects were utilised for the common good, Bangladesh could be a role model for the Muslim Ummah and the world. Population can contribute to the development of a society or a country when it works in harmony. Diversity in culture and differences in practices are natural, as all human organisations comprise a collection of unique individuals. If such diversity and differences create clashes and conflicts among different groups of people this is an unfortunate obstacle to development, peace, and stability for any country. It is true that the people of
Bangladesh are divided into different political, cultural, and religious groups, and there is a grave need for unity among these various sections of Bangladeshi society.

For thousands of years people of diverse cultures have lived together in harmony (for the most part) in the area of modern Bangladesh, but at the current juncture the national community is riven with internal divisions and mutual rapaciousness, corruption, and oppression among groups and individuals; latent divisions can periodically flare up in egregious intercommunal violence. Many Ulama are preoccupied with petty sectarian concerns and are failing to serve the community and to provide much needed spiritual solace and guidance.

The disunity among Bangladeshis creates a bad image and is harmful to cultural diversity. In the age of globalization, the people of Bangladesh have large diaspora communities all over the world, whereby their attitudes and behaviours can affect Muslims and non-Muslims, doing a disservice to the religion of Islam, which fundamentally calls for peace among all humans. Bangladeshis, Muslims, and humanity are called to unity and cooperation, particularly given the global environmental crises facing us as a species. National socio-economic development for Bangladesh and the world will be impossible without unified, sustainable, and compassionate societies.

In the case of Bangladesh, only religion can hope to inspire the necessary ethical orientation, which was the basis of Nesarabadi’s call to unity in diversity. The philosophy and ideas of Nesarabadi are highly amenable to modern Bangladesh and the world due to their solid foundation in peaceful and unifying activities wholly conducive to the public good. The purpose of the study is to recognize the methods and unique styles of Shaikh Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi’s approach towards reconstructing Muslim society with the vision of unity in diversity. The study also
provides a solid and workable framework for unity in diversity in Bangladesh based on Shaikh Nesabadi’s thoughts.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

There are many studies on unity in diversity in different parts of the world. Although the concept of unity in diversity is accepted by world leaders and scholars alike, there is a serious gap of research on this important field in Bangladesh. This unity in diversity concept is greatly required for national development in many developing countries in Asia and Africa, including Bangladesh. With common efforts, unity can contribute to the development of Bangladesh, helping decrease clashes and conflicts among different groups. It can help to build the culture of tolerance and coexistence that will bring peace and stability to the nation and the broader global community.

In creating more awareness and disseminating the teachings of Nesabadi, this English-language research brings his guidance concerning unity in diversity to a broader, global audience, addressing the lack of such academic material. The majority of studies in this field to date have been conducted in Bangla language. This work also provides opportunities for academics to conduct further research on this area, as well as facilitating Bangladeshi inter-religious and cultural development and defining the advancement of the country. The contribution of Nesabadi can help eliminate disunity issues and establish the unity in diversity among the people of Bangladesh. It will also reconstruct people’s minds by formulating the unity method of Nesabadi. The methods and achievement of Nesabadi, consisting of an articulation of Islamic principles and wisdom, are indispensable for the advancement of the Ummah. Through this research, unity in diversity is possible, as will be shown, which can be a milestone for the attainment of unity in diversity for Bangladeshi Muslims, which can
also be a role model for other Muslim countries of the globe, turning around the current morass of division and hate, and inspiring the world with a vision of a just and equitable society in which people are free to express their identities in a spirit of love.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the works, views, and intellectual contributions of Shaikh Azizur Rahman Nesrabadi to unity in diversity in Bangladesh?

2. What are the seminal causes of religious differences in Bangladesh?

3. How did Azizur Rahman Nesrabadi’s role enhance social harmony in Bangladesh?

1.5 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyse the contribution of Shaikh Azizur Rahman Nesrabadi to unite the people of Bangladesh.

2. To identify the causes of religious differences in Bangladesh.

3. To figure out Shaikh Azizur Rahman Nesrabadi’s role towards enhancing harmony in Bangladesh.

1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW

“Unity in diversity” refers to the state of intimacy or agreement in spite of existence of enormous diversity. “Unity in diversity” supports the idea of reconciliation or harmonization of social or individual differences in physical appears for instances skin colour, caste, and religio-cultural practices in which there is no latent criticism or
However, it is pertinent to bear in mind that the central approach of the research is to show a detailed sketch of the concept of unity and diversity in Bangladesh, and Shaikh Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi’s contribution to this discourse. In order to get a clear picture of this matter, relevant books, articles, and magazines have been reviewed. Shaikh Nesarabadi contributed a number of works to the field of Islamic theology and metaphysics as well as the related subject of unity in the Muslim Ummah. This study analyzes them and other scholars’ contributions in the area of unity in diversity.

Muhammad Rafiqullah Nesarabadi’s *Nasihat and Wasiyat*9 (‘Suggestions’) describe the important events and permanent basis of Islamic unity, in terms of its principles and methodology, encouragement, and reminders according to his model. This book analyses and emphasizes the Nesarabadi’s unity in diversity theory to investigate the national crisis, whether in Bangladesh or internationally. To unify diverse nations there must be some common ideological commitments between them, as in the international *Ahle Sunnah wa Al Jama’at*, which should be affirmed as a national ideology. “Details about public issues, including differences being united, are the easiest way for Unity.”10 The easiest way for the unity is *Al Ittehad Mayal Ikhtelaf* (‘unity with disagreement’),11 and the only way to be united is to be united in big issues.12 “For the lack of unity, it is needed to evaluate the mutual communication, respect, and recognition can create a combined way of unity.”13 The main focus of this

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9 Muhammad Rafikullah Nesarabadi, *Nasihat and osiyot*, (Bird Com-print and publication, 2006),137.
10 Muhammad Lutfur Rahman, *Dishari, Speech No: 6, No more Isolation*, (Create National Unity 29.05.1993),8 & 9.
13 Ibid. pp.81-84.
book is to define principles and encourage people, but the author offers little in the way of practical solutions for national or international unity.

Maulana Muhammad Khalilur Rahman Nesarabadi’s *Kalemago Musalman EK Hou* (‘Be United Muslim Ummah’) emphasizes unity with regard to the perspective of Nesarabadi, categorizing the unity formula and finally exploring Nesarabadi’s views of disunity.  

Firstly, self and party interest is fundamental agent of disunity among the whole nation. Secondly, extremism is a central root of disunity, and the backbiting habits of people erode unity among people, especially in Muslim nations. Thirdly, political party interest is considered a source of disunity among the Muslim population. Fourthly, empowerment and populist tendencies among political parties increase enmity between members of the Ummah. Fifthly, breaking true *Aqayed* (‘Belief’) leads to disunity throughout the Muslim world. Sixthly, Islamist people are unable to find the solutions to social, economic, political and developmental problems of the country. Finally, the authors pray to Allah for unity among the Muslim Ummah.

This book presents a wide critique of the failures and faults among the Muslims of this generation, but it is not clear from this analysis what methodology of solutions can be applied to achieve the aim of uniting the Muslim Ummah.

Mohibullah Jami’s *Haqiqate I’lme Din* (‘Knowledge of Religion’) describes the practical utility of religious knowledge for society, exploring ways in which people can achieve closeness to Allah by peacefully following Islamic knowledge, including uniting for the sake of Islam. It analyses the relationship between divine and worldly knowledge. The description implies the knowledge of Quran, hadith and knowledge of Islamic law, and acquiescence with authority (beginning with the

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respect of teachers), and pursuing socially beneficent knowledge (avoiding harmful knowledge whose effect is detrimental to society). Indeed, the concept of a knowledge society is proposed, predicated on unity. This book is a masterpiece in elucidating the social impact of knowledge in Islamic societies, but it does not consider Nesarabadi’s unity formula. It does however extensively explore the practical and theoretical aspects of unity in diversity.

Lutfur Rahman’s Dishari (‘Light’) an impressive resource that highlights some fundamental dimensions of unity. The author demonstrates the efforts of Shaikh Nesarabadi for unity and evidence of rare sacrifice. Islam has declared unity as wajib; Nesarabadi attempting to fulfil this obligatory commitment throughout his life. Despite being the Caliph of Kutube Bangla, Nesaruddin Ahmed (RA) did not take anyone as his murid (follower) until the age of 80/82; near the end of his life he adopted some followers for the sake of continuing unity. This book presents a thorough theoretical analysis of the intellectual phenomena related to Muslim unity, but offers little practical observation, which is conversely offered by the guidance of the Nesarabadi’s formula of unity in diversity.

Rabaj Ali in Tarika-e-Sunniya (‘Ways of Sunnah’) is another important source that outlines Nesarabadi’s efforts from 1952 to promote unity, including Islamic conferences from 1970-1988, and he quotes the Shaikh’s rationale for adopting disciples in later life:

“As I have been struggling to unite the scholars and Masayekh since my student life, if I stated any individual rules that would be my intention to create obstacles in the way of achievement. Thinking about this I was afraid to appoint any follower. Now I see that there are some people who want to be followers. If I don’t appoint them as followers, they will never go to anyone to be a follower, and these types of people are

16 Lutfur Rahman, Dishari Speech 2, 3, 8, 10. (Bird computer & publication.), 4-8.