

**Book Review: *Hadith Scholarship in the Indian Subcontinent: Aḥmad ‘Alī Sahāranpūrī and the Canonical Hadith Literature* by Muftī Muntasir Zaman, published by Qurtuba Books.**

Review published at [ribat.org](http://ribat.org).

Muftī Muntaṣir Zamān texted me not too long ago asking for my address, as he wanted to send me a book of his. We have had a cordial relationship over the years, it having been quite apparent to me from the first time we met that despite his humility, respect for me due to my being older than him, and his fine manners, he was a person of piercing intelligence and someone to watch keenly for good things. The book arrived about a week ago and sat on my desk until two nights ago. When I cracked it open at about 23:45.

The table of contents of this 60-page booklet is deceptively simple: It lists only five chapters, aside from prefaces, bibliographies, and the like. However, any lover of the study of *ḥadīth*, Islāmic intellectual history, the history of the Indian Subcontinent, or general Muslim bibliophile will find a mesmerizing attraction in the wealth of information Muftī Muntaṣir arranges masterfully, which will help augment one’s knowledge of how and why the texts and study of *ḥadīth* in the Subcontinent are the way they are and how they have reached us, as well as how they compare to similar efforts exerted in the preparation and proliferation of *ḥadīth* knowledge and texts in the other lands of Islām, yielding particular insights into this process in the colonial and post-colonial eras and both coping with and thriving in modernity.

The first chapter is on the history of *ḥadīth* sciences in the Indian subcontinent, then one containing concise biography of Mawlānā Aḥmad Alī Sahāranpūrī, a detailed look at his critical edition of *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* and how he prepared it, a similar treatment of his edition of the *Sunān* and *Jāmi‘* of Imām Tirmidhī, and finally, a discussion of why 45 more *ḥadīths* appear in Shaykh Aḥmad Shākir’s

edition of Tirmidhī than in Mawlānā Aḥmad ‘Alī’s, which reaches back into the early transmission of the work and the transmitters and manuscripts that issued forth from that era to that of both scholars.

As for the history of *ḥadīth* sciences in the subcontinent, Muftī Muntaṣir’s discussion begins with mention of the entrance of *ḥadīth* into the first lands of conquest by Banū Umayyah, with mention of prominent figures like Isrā’īl b. Mūsā al-Baṣrī and Rabī‘ b. Ṣabīḥ, who passed away in 150 AH and 160 AH respectively, living well within the era of the foundation of the four canonical legal schools and very much in the formative years of the intellectual tradition of Islāmic learning; *ḥadīth* came to the Subcontinent well before before the crystallization of *ḥadīth* canon.

Muftī Muntaṣir continues by making mention of the era inaugurated by the conquest of Lahore by Maḥmūd al-Ghaznawī of Raḍiyy al-Dīn Ṣāghānī (d. 650 AH) the compiler of *Mashāriq al-Anwār*, the book which held the position in the syllabus of the students of knowledge currently held by the *Miskhāt al-Maṣābīḥ* in the *Dars Niẓāmī* until it was displaced by the latter, in part due to the breadth of sources it drew upon; the *Mashāriq* is focused on the *Ṣaḥīḥayn*, which will be important to remember in a discussion later in the book.

Muftī Muntaṣir mentions Ṣāghānī’s ties to Lahore and his proliferation of *ḥadīth* studies therein. Having myself studied *ḥadīth* in Lahore, I decided to look Ṣāghānī up in Ḥāfiẓ Shams al-Dīn Dhahabī’s (d. 748 AH) *Siyar A‘lām al-Nubalā*, and found a generous entry both in its size and the loftiness of its praise, mentioning that Ṣāghānī was actually born in Lahore and served as a caliphial envoy to the ruler of Lahore several times, having travelled extensively in ‘Irāq and Ḥijāz. Dhahabī describes Ṣāghānī as an Imām in the sciences of the Arabic language and, relevant to this discussion, *ḥadīth*, which is not a light praise coming from one who is himself from the most elite of ranks in the field. Dhahabī even mentions that Ḥāfiẓ Dimyāṭī (d. 705 AH) attended Ṣāghānī’s *janāzah* in Baghdād.

Muftī Muntaṣir continues to describe the rich patronage and renaissance of *ḥadīth* studies in Gujarat starting in the ninth Hijrī century, and how it received life through the personal interest and royal patronage of the Muẓaffarid court. In the period, he makes mention of two very fascinating figures, a teacher and student: ‘Alī al-Muttaqī and Tāhir al-Pattanī, both of whom remain important figures in the field of *ḥadīth*, the former having authored the seminal work, *Kanz al-‘Ummāl*, which Muftī Muntaṣir claims is the largest extant *ḥadīth* collection, amongst over 100 works to his name. The latter authored the indispensable *ḥadīth* lexicon *Majma‘ Biḥār al-Anwār*.

Muftī Muntaṣir continues to describe the eras of ‘abd al-Ḥaqq, Shāh Waliyyullāh and his illustrious family and their connection to Mawlānā Aḥmad ‘Alī Sahāranpūrī.

It bears mentioning that, in an age that many of us are completely disconnected from Islām in any way other than the most stern and sanitized textuality, in which we have a collective amnesia for anything in between the text of a *ḥadīth*, the author of the book in which it is included, and the website we read it from, coupled with an uberfixation on text driven to acontextual literalism, it is all the more important that we read works like this, which contextualize and humanize the very real struggles, triumphs, and processes through which the *sunnah* was passionately preserved and propagated, so that we can taste the flavor of Allāh’s *raḥmah* on this *ummah*. May Allāh renew that *raḥmah* and increase it in our moments. I will return to this sentiment in my comments at the end of this review.

Mawlānā Aḥmad ‘Alī Sahāranpūrī is a very interesting figure. Muftī Muntaṣir charts out his early education, recounting how it was derailed by personal struggles exacerbated by the death of Mawlānā Aḥmad ‘Alī’s father and later brought back on track for the intermediate part of his studies. Mawlānā Aḥmad ‘Alī was married at 21 and set out to engage in business, when his love of learning

again pulled him back, until he eventually went to Delhī to seek out Shāh Ishāq, the most prolific narrator from the grandsons of Shāh Waliyyullāh and through whom *Dars Nizāmī* graduates and many others can trace their chains of narration, reaching the principal figures of Deoband primarily through three: Mawlānā Mamlūk ‘Alī Nanotawī, Mawlānā Shāh ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Mujaddidī and Mawlānā Aḥmad ‘Alī Sahāranpūrī, who Muftī Muntaṣir says later on literally laid the first brick of the *Dār al-‘Ulūm* in Deoband. Shāh Ishāq, upon meeting him, however, informed him of his imminent intention to make hijrah to Makkah Mukarramah, so Mawlānā Aḥmad ‘Alī, in a move that can only truly be appreciated by a lover of knowledge, decided to go with him. In the sacred lands the teacher, gave his student special attention for over a year, with Mawlānā Aḥmad ‘Alī preparing texts and reading them to the Shaykh for verification, preparing him for the important tasks he was to fulfill later in life.

After his return to Dehlī, Mawlānā Aḥmad Alī began his work preparing critical editions of *ḥadīth* works for print. The events of 1857, described by the usurper as the Indian Mutiny, derailed those plans, forcing him to work for 10 years in Calcutta as a manager in a family business, occupying most of his time. Interestingly, he still would teach *ḥadīth* in the Masjid Jamāl al-Dīn for an hour daily before going to work.

After this period, he meets a student of his while on Ḥajj, who encourages and ultimately persuades him to dedicate his full efforts to the teaching and service of the *ḥadīth* of the messenger of Allāh ﷺ; that student was none other than the Shaykh al-Mashāyikh, Ḥajjī Imdād-Allāh al-Muhājir al-Makkī. Upon his return to India Mawlānā Aḥmad ‘Alī takes up the leadership of the fledgling *Madrasah Mazāhir al-‘Ulūm*, where a number of latter prominent important students will study from him, including Pīr Mehr Alī Shāh, whose handwritten *ijazah* from Mawlānā Aḥmad ‘Alī is actually included by Muftī Muntaṣir in his book, and which also graces the cover. Mawlānā Aḥmad ‘Alī’s *dars* is described as

intellectually open, welcoming debate and discussion, from the entire ambit of lived Islām, from Pīrjī's pure representation of the traditional Subcontinental *Khānqāhī* system to the number of non-conformist students who might today self-identify as *salafī*, all of whom were allowed to study, ask, discuss, debate, and learn. Mawlānā Aḥmad 'Alī managed the *madrasah*, taught without pay, often sponsoring students' meals, as well as working on the publication of *ḥadīth* works, until his passing from this world. Allāh immerse him in His mercy and make him the pride of our *salaf* on the Day of Resurrection.

The printing house from which Mawlānā Aḥmad 'Alī publishes, interestingly enough, is called the Matba' Aḥmadī, named not after himself, but after Sayyid Aḥmad Shahīd, a figure who I often mention as the most important figure in late Subcontinent Muslim history that few today ever hear about ([you can listen to my lecture about him here](#)).

As for his preparation of *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, Mawlānā Aḥmad 'Alī depended on a number of different manuscripts, including access to the aforementioned Ṣāghānī's manuscript, as well as a quality copy of Qastallānī's *Irshād al-Sārī*, which Muftī Muntaṣir writes was based on a high quality secondary copy of Yunīnī's celebrated premodern critical edition of the text. This is all very important given the absolute dearth of quality critical work, much less complete editions in print of important works in the Islāmic traditions. Most printed works are not so methodically prepared based on forensic scrutiny of different manuscripts, and even more are never printed at all. Mawlānā Aḥmad 'Alī's edition of the *Ṣaḥīḥ* is printed decades before the Amīriyyah edition relied upon in the Ottoman lands, and includes a critical apparatus and annotation not present in the latter, described by Muftī Muntaṣir in detail.

For the rest of his work Muftī Muntaṣir describes Mawlānā Aḥmad 'Alī's edition of Tirmidhī, which, although lacking a prolegomenon like the thorough one written for his edition of *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, or the same level of annotation, was based

on at least seven distinct quality manuscripts and served as the basis for subsequent Subcontinental scholarship on the work. It was also published well before any other printed edition of Tirmidhī and was an important contribution to the field of *ḥadīth*.

The last chapter of Muftī Muntaṣir's book serves as a testament to the thoughtfulness with which he prepared the edition and how his scholarship was exacting and second to none.

This work was a joy to read, and 23:45 was the wrong time to open it, as I could not put it down until I had read it cover to cover, stopping to reread portions. I didn't sleep until after Fajr, and felt a renewed excitement for the study of the *ḥadīth* of our beloved intercessor and benefactor ﷺ, which left me walking into *jumu'ah*, intoxicated with a high that can only be described as an ecstatic sleep deprivation.

With the recent passing of Mawlānā Tāhā Karān -- Allāh Ta'ālā immerse him in mercy and elevate his rank-- thoughts about his irreplaceable brilliance haunt me to the point of distress. I have received a number of communications from likewise affected scholars, seeking consolation from me, and I have no idea what to tell them. In this manner, Muftī Muntaṣir's work was truly a gift to me from the higher realm; on top of its contents being a reminder that there are still intelligent, bright, hard-working young people who have penetrating insight and a sincere love for knowledge, in spite of the Tik-tokian buffoonery of our age, the book came to me at the right time, a time when I needed this special *madad* from Allāh, Who never ignores the needs of those who ask Him. It is our responsibility as Muslims to support such young and hardworking scholars with our resources, respect, and time, by reading their works, rather than letting them pass like the splendor of the rising sun in front of a blind man asleep in a brick house without windows.

Finally, to continue with a sentiment expressed regarding the need for us to orient ourselves within the history of the *ummah*, I would like to make a few comments in the service and for the benefit for my fellow students of knowledge, especially *Dars Nizāmī* graduates. Such exhortation increases in the direness of its need for us, in the sense that we have read a syllabus, which, as long as it may be, is insufficient in the way of scholarly training for anything but preparing a student to be able to read further in the tradition on our own.

At graduation, having acquired the tools to evaluate ideas in every major branch of Islāmīc learning on their own merit and being well-oriented within the discussions of those fields, even the best of us are far from being scholars, many others who ironically crow about “following hadees” may be much further. There is much in the way of learning which is not even touched upon in the six, eight or 12 years in *Dār al-‘Ulūm*, not due to their lack of importance, but because they do not require a teacher to acquire. The expectation is that graduates will research them on their own.

What then could describe how important it is that the *nisbah* of their reading of *ḥadīth* came from should be understood? The *dawrat al-Ḥadīth* (the origins of which are discussed in the book) is the crowning achievement and pride of every *Dars Nizāmī* student.

The chain of narration doesn’t end with Bukhārī. If we do not know the names and the stories of those from whom we narrate, and even more devastatingly, if we have no idea where the very physical book from which we read those *mubārak* words through which Allāh gave us this precious gift came from, to understate the problem, it is not right. Allāh Ta‘ālā perfect the connection of all those who seek Him with Him and make us from them.

Ḥamzah wald Maqbūl

06/13/2021

*Hadith Scholarship in  
the Indian Subcontinent:  
Aḥmad ‘Alī Sahāranpūrī  
and the Canonical  
Hadith Literature* by  
Muftī Muntasir  
Zaman, 2021,  
published by Qurtuba  
Books. Soft Cover.

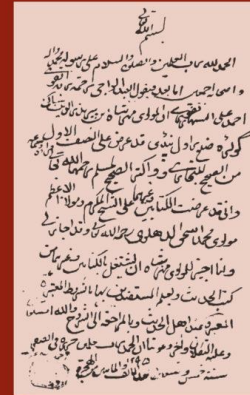
ISBN 978-1-9160232-4-

6

You can follow [Muftī  
Muntaṣir’s work here.](#)

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MUNTASIR ZAMAN

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