

Saif al-Bathar - The Source of Inspiration for the Freedom Fighters

Rasheed Ahammed. P

Assistant Professor, Department of Arabic, Darunnajath Arabic College, Karuvarakundu.

Abstract: The aim of this study is to unveil the role played by Mampuram Syed Alavi in his book Saif al-Bathar in the Indian freedom struggle. This book was written in the first half of the nineteenth century. This book is the reason why the Mappilas of the Malabar region were directly involved in the Indian freedom struggle. This author and the Mappilas, who were inspired by the book, led an armed war against the British. Syed Alavi's residence and his village became the centre of the freedom struggle in Malabar. This book has a significant place in the Indian freedom struggle.

Sayyid Alavi Tangal

This monumental work was penned by the great Arabian scholar and social reformer Sayyid Alavi Tangal who came all the way from Arabia and settled in Malabar in 1769. His birth took place at a small town, Thareem in Hadar Mouth in 1753 A.D (23 Dhul Hajj 1166 A.H). His parents were Muhammad ibn Sahal Mouladhavela and Fathima Jifri. He was brought up by his maternal aunt Sayyida Fameeda Beevi as he had lost his parents while he was very young. He started his education in theology and Arabic language at a very early age.

It is understood that Sayyid Alavi Tangal came to Kozhikode upon an invitation from his maternal uncle's son, Sayyid Shaykh Jifri. He set sail in a cargo-ship from the port of Al-Mukhalla in Yemen. At that time he was seventeen years old. It was Sayyid Shaykh Jifri who introduced Sayyid AlaviTangal to Qazi Jamaludheen Makhdum and other important personalities in Mampuram. In due course, Sayyid Alavi Tangal settled in Mampuram and was known as Mampuram Tangal. He then became one of the towering figures in the struggle against British colonial forces and a noted social reformer. He stood with the tenants against the exploitation of the feudal lords in Malabar. At the same time he was a icon of Hindu – Muslim unity in the Malabar region. He was revered by all people irrespective of their caste, creed and religion. His main aide was one Konthu Nayar. Sayyid Alavi Tangal, who could see through the devious plan of British took all pains to make both the Hindus and Muslims realise that their real enemy was the British. It is noteworthy that even today pilgrims from both Hindu and Muslim communities pay homage at the tomb of this great sage. This speaks volumes of in what esteem Sayyid Alavi Tangal was held by both the communities during his time and after.

This leading figure of the independence struggle of India, Sayyid Alavi Tangal led a very simple and austere life. He passed away on 29 January 1844. The daughter of his maternal uncle, Fathima Beevi, was his first wife. After her demise, he married Fathima, the daughter of the great scholar Sayyid Abubacker Madani, who hailed from Quilandi near Kozhikode. He also married Ayisha of Ponnundam when he was fifty. The famous scholar Sayyid Fazl Pookoya Tangal was his only son. The Tomb of Sayyid AlaviTangal near Mampuram Juma Masjid is one of the most popular centres of pilgrimage in Kerala today.

Saif al-Bathar

This work was authored by the great legend Sayyid AlaviTangal, in order to motivate the Muslims to fight against the British oppression and to urge them for non-cooperation with the British as part of their resistance against the colonial powers. It was circulated through Muslim *mahals*. The book, *Saif al Bathar ala man Uvalil Kuffar*, was written in Arabic and its title can be roughly translated into English as 'The Sharp Sword against Those who Take the Non-believers as Protectors'. The book explicitly opposes the British and calls for social reformation. It upholds a perennial and vivid insight of the attitude to be developed by the Muslims against the foreign government's oppression and terrorism.

This book was written against the backdrop of the British conspiracy to divide the Hindus and the Muslims in Muttiyara near Tirurangadi where communal riot had erupted. Some issues regarding the Juma Masjid led to the communal riot. The prime cause can be traced to a high caste feudal lord, Thottassery Thachu Panikkar, who committed several atrocities against his Muslim tenants. The British officers supported the feudal lord in this issue against the tenants. This led to the communal riot. As per the instructions of the British authorities, the police came to arrest Kaithothipattil Moitheen Kutty who was the caretaker of the *masjid*. Muslims offered resistance against this injustice and a riot was followed.

Mappilas massacred both the prime hand behind all the issues, Thottassery Thachu Panikkar, and the *kolkaran* of the Taluk because they had obstructed the functioning of the mosque and desecrated the sanctity of the place. The police who came to arrest were made to flee by the natives.

Thereafter, the government, on the request of the District Judge, employed forty soldiers from the Native Elementary Ninth Regiment at Muttiyara. The battle that followed resulted in the martyrdom of eleven Muslims. The British ill-treated the dead bodies of the martyrs and buried them with animals.

Saif al-Bathar was a reaction to this riot and consequent events, and through which Sayyid Alavi Tangal appealed to the Muslims to fight against the British tyranny unflinchingly. In all its sense, the book greatly inspired the Muslims and filled them with self-respect and patriotism.

It is after the propagation of *Saif al-Bathar* through the Muslim *mahals* that the famous Cherur Riot took place in 1843. Drawing inspiration and energy from *Saif al-Bathar* several organizations were formed to offer resistance to and fight against the British oppression. Cherur Riot is one of the solid examples of this.

The riot started on 19 October 1843. The areas mainly affected by this riot were Tirurangadi, Venniyur and Cherur. The encounter was between seven Muslims and seventy British soldiers led by captain Leader. In this historical battle, one *subedar* and three soldiers were killed and one English man, five soldiers and seven Taluk *sepoys* were injured. All the seven Muslims became martyrs. The graves of these heroes are located in Manthaniparambu in Tirurangadi.

Some historians strongly believe that Sayyid Alavi Tangal had personally participated in the Cherur battle and was wounded on the right thigh with a bullet. It is also understood that this wound deepened and had led to his death. Hence it is recorded in the history that Sayyid Alavi Tangal is also a martyr who sacrificed his life for the cause of the independence of our land.¹ The prime emphasis in *Saif al-Bathar* was given to make Muslims offer non-cooperation to the British government. The content of the book is presented in the form of questions followed by answers to them. The book contains eight questions and the answers to them. The British police confiscated and destroyed this work which was being sent to the Muslim *mahals* secretly by Sayyid Alavi Tangal and his disciples. The British Government strictly banned its publication, distribution and possession. The book was republished from Egypt in 1856 by Fazl Pookoya Tangal who was sent there on exile.² This was done by making *Saif al-Bathar* as the second chapter of *Uddat al-Umara val Hukkaam*, written by Sayyid Fazl Pookoya Tangal..

The thrust of the book is on the approach Muslims should adopt towards the foreign invaders who came to India with the evil intention of conquering the land and establishing their empire. Throughout the book, Sayyid Alavi Tangal uses nouns like Islam, Muslim, etc. as opposite to terms such as *Nazrani* (Christian). It is in fact the British government who is targeted by the term *Nazrani*.

In the preface to this book, Sayyid Alavi Tangal states that a few questions (eight in number, to be precise) were posed to him which were to be answered because of their significance. He says that the book is a response to these eight questions raised.³ It is obvious that the author is a staunch patriot who considers the British an inveterate enemy. Hence he has adopted a rigid attitude against the imperial powers in the book. He goes on to stress the point that any Muslim who forges an alliance with the British colonial powers or keeps friendship with them, or be satisfied with the laws of the colonial government will go out of the Islamic faith. This sentiment of the author is repeated throughout the book.

The first question raised in the book can be read as follows: “A Muslim populated land is conquered by the Christians who are against the former and make the land the latter’s colony. Then they form laws which are against Islam. Suppose a Muslim is forced to live in such a situation and out of love for his native land he gets involved in the constructive activities, participate in the act of economic progress of the land, and also give a hand to the overall development of that land. What is your opinion about such a person?”⁴ To this question Sayyid Alavi Tangal’s response is as follows: “Though the land has been conquered by the colonial powers, it is a land of Muslim population. Hence it becomes the obligation of the Muslims to reclaim their land from the hands of the foreign powers.” Sayyid Alavi

¹ K.K. Muhammad Abdul Karim, *Mampuram Sayyid Alavi Tangal*, p. 68

² Dr. HussainRandathani, *Mappila Malabar*, p. 67

³ Sayyid Fazl, *Uddat al-Umara*, p. 24

⁴ Sayyid Fazl, *Uddat al-Umara*, pp. 25-29

Tangal goes on to say, “One who shifts his residence to such a land is a sinner and one who gets satisfied with the laws made by them is a non-believer.” He further says that one who gets involved in trade or constructive activities and helps to increase the economic growth of such a land is a sinner and one who denies the truth.

The second question is about the Muslims who proudly argue that they are subjects of British Empire and in order to prove their stand they wear signs associated with the Empire on their body. Sayyid Alavi Tangal’s reply to this question is that if what is said in the question was done with full conscience or wilfully, such a person would go out of the Islamic faith.⁵

The third question is about the people who praise the British authorities as just rulers and spread insult over the Muslim rulers. The reply given by Sayyid Alavi Tangal to this question is that such people are stupid and are committing severe sins.⁶

Is it permissible to obstruct the way through which goods are taken for trade from a Christian country and rob them of these goods? The fourth question raises such an issue. The answer given by Sayyid Alavi Tangal is as follows: “If the country is a Christian country since ancient times, they have the right to proceed with the trade. On the other hand, if the country was conquered by the Christians from some others, then the passage of goods can be obstructed but they should not be robbed.”⁷ The next question is about following the laws of the colonial government. Should a Muslim who is forced to live in a British colony obey the laws passed by that government? This is the fifth question and to which the author responds that incase a Muslim is forced to live in such a situation, it is not an offence. However, if there is no such compelling situation, following their laws freely will be an offence.⁸

What about a Muslim who is unwilling to flee from a land that has been conquered by the colonial powers? This comes as the seventh question. The reply given by Sayyid Alavi Tangal is that if the unwillingness shown is due to the fear of loss of wealth, then it is not right.⁹

The eighth question is about Islamic judgment in a issue. A Muslim who lives under the colonial government seeks Islamic judgment in a matter and he is told that he has to follow the existing colonial government’s law. What is the opinion of Sayyid Alavi Tangal in this regard? The reply given is that in case the Muslim hates Islamic laws and considers that the laws made by the colonial government are better or more permissible and follow the latter, then that individual goes out of Islamic faith.¹⁰

From the answers given in the book, it is very clear that the author’s intention was to urge the Muslims to offer non-cooperation to the British government and to resist the laws formed by the colonial government. The role played by Sayyid Alavi Tangal in inspiring the Muslim population in Malabar against the imperial forces can be clearly seen in the report of the then Malabar collector Mr. William Logan. He describes Sayyid Alavi Tangal thus: “The Arab Tangal or High priest who was generally credited with having incited the Mappilas to commit these outrages. The Tangal died shortly afterwards

⁵ Sayyid Fazl, *Uddat al-Umara*, p. 29

⁶ Sayyid Fazl, *Uddat al-Umara*, pp. 31-33

⁷ Sayyid Fazl, *Uddat al-Umara*, p. 34.

⁸ Sayyid Fazl, *Uddat al-Umara*, p. 36-37.

⁹ Sayyid Fazl, *Uddat al-Umara*, p. 37

¹⁰ Sayyid Fazl, *Uddat al-Umara*, pp. 37-38

and was buried at the Mampuram mosque, which is on the banks of the river opposite to Tirurangadi. The religious fanatics who intend to commit outrages and those who committed them do as a rule, even now, proceed to the mosque to pray at the Tangal's shrine".¹¹

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¹¹ William Logan, *Malabar Manual*, mal. Trans. T.V. Krishnan, p. 355