

Original Paper

A Critical Analysis of the Unity Movement in Bangladesh:

Shaikh Azizur Rahman's "Unity in Diversity"

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Abstract

Muslims in Bangladesh are polarised and disunited, including among Islamist groups, who are supposed to be the symbol of Muslim Unity. Shaikh Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi (1915-2008) was a pioneering figure who propelled the theory and practise of uniting the people of Bangladesh. According to him, ittihad mal ikhtelaf (Unity in Diversity) is the only solution to existent disunity. This paper analyses his discourse and his role in the politics and society of Bangladesh by textual analysis of primary and secondary data. After analysing Unity in Diversity itself, we provide a short biographical sketch of Shaikh Azizur Rahman, showing his exposure to both Shariah and Sufi education, and their impacts on his thought. The paper then focuses on his ideas on four stages of unity and analyses them in light of contemporary social realities in Bangladesh and the Muslim world. This paper concludes that Shaikh Nesarabadi's thought and theory on unity depend upon three elements: moderation and mutual respect, focus on common interest, and the Tawhidic paradigm. These comprise the framework for Muslim unity whose adoption by Muslims can fulfil the command of Allah to enable the Ummah to resume a leading role in the world as a champion of justice.

Keywords

Shaikh Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi, Muslims, Bangladesh, Sharia, Sufi

1. Introduction

Unity in Diversity demonstrates a the state of “inseparableness” which manifests the togetherness among fundamentally different ingredients in that diversity (Note 1). In other words, Unity in Diversity is a concept positing that all racial, cultural, religious, social and individual practices and differences are not the core causes of conflict; rather these differences reflect the beauty and richness of the composite cultures that comprise a community, from the local to national levels (Note 2). The Quran explicitly celebrates diversity as an opportunity from God to embrace and get to know others: “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) (Note 3).

Aside from a general ethos of social cohesion, “Unity in Diversity” is also a political position advocating federalism or multiculturalism. Islam teaches us that diversity is a fact of nature, and it makes nature beautiful. Undoubtedly, 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 (Note 4). Shakib Arslan, a great historian of the early twenty century, pointed out that the greatest of weakness of the Muslim world is disunity, which is clearly a cause of the decline of Muslim civilization (Note 5). Despite Quranic injunctions, Prophetic narrations, and illustrious Islamic traditions that emphasized unity among believers, Muslims of today fail to incorporate and cultivate the very idea of unity.

Bangladesh represents a microcosm of the wider disunity of the Ummah, with Muslims in the country polarised and disunited (Note 6). Even Islamist political organizations, who are supposed to be the symbol of Muslim unity, cannot avoid this polarisation. 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 of the country and the Ummah, and is fundamentally harmful to cultural diversity and the lives of the people of South Asia.

Shaikh Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi (1915-2008) was a pioneering figure who expounded a comprehensive theory of renewal and reform by uniting the Muslims in Bangladesh. According to him, *Ittihad mal Ikhtelaf* (Unity in Diversity) is the appropriate approach to deal this issue. This paper analyses his discourse on Unity in Diversity in Bangladesh using textual analysis method to examine primary and secondary sources. The following section provides a short biographical sketch of Shaikh Azizur Rahman.

2. Life and Education

Shaikh Muhammad Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi was born in 1915 (Note 7) to a distinguished and pious traditional Muslim family in Jhalokathi, Barisal. His father, Maulavi Mofizur Rahman, was a great preacher and an ardent disciple of Pir Badshah Mian (Note 8), who was directly pledged and appointed by Haji Shariatullah (Note 9). Rofikullah claims that he was a contemporary and colleague of Munshi Meherullah (Note 10), a great Muslim preacher and orator of Bengal. According to Rahman, Shaikh Nesarabadi's ancestors were of Arab origin, and migrated to Bengal for the purpose of propagating Islam (Note 11). His mother Zinatunessa was known as a pious woman, characterised by her high moral standing and benevolence in the community.

Shaikh Nesarabadi acquired elementary knowledge and Islamic values from family traditions. He obtained his primary education in his own village under the supervision of Maulavi Muhsinuddin Faridpuri (Note 12). After getting his primary education, Shaikh Nesarabadi went for further study to Bhola Alia Madrasah, where he spent around five years from 1930-1935, until completing the fourth grade (Note 13). In 1935 he moved to Sarsina Alia Madrasah for further education, and he received his *fazil* degree (equivalent to a modern honours degree) in 1940, with an excellent grade. Rofikullah notes that he scored the "Third" position under the Central Calcutta Madrasah Board (Note 14). Upon completion of his undergraduate studies at the Sarsina Madrasah, Shaikh Nesarabadi moved to Calcutta Alia Madrasah for higher study in 1941. All the biographers of Shaikh Nesarabadi elucidate that he achieved his postgraduate degree in 1942. During his study in Calcutta Alia Madrasah, Shaikh Nesarabadi met and learned different branches of knowledge and spiritual teaching from great scholars of his era, which later influenced his thoughts and actions.

It is pertinent to point out that, beside conventional education, Shaikh Nesarabadi got his spiritual training from the great Islamic thinker, mystic, spiritual leader, and social reformer of an undivided Bengal, Hazrat Maulana Nesaruddin Ahmed, and Pir Shahab Sarsina. Maulana Nesaruddin Ahmed was a direct disciple and representative of Maulana Abu Bakr Siddiqui, Pir of Furfura in West Bengal (Note 15). During his spiritual journey, Shaikh Nesarabadi learned four Sunni Sufi traditions, Chistia, Naqshbandiah, Mujaddidiah, and Muhammadiyah, and later Qadriyah from his Shaikh Nesaruddin.

Soon after finishing his formal academic journey, Shaikh Nesarabadi joined as a senior lecturer at Sarsina Madrasah in 1942 (Note 16). Jami narrates that he was a wonderful orator and skilful tutor, and students loved his teaching methodology. Beside regular lessons, he used to teach spiritual and moral teachings to students so that they become true Muslims. Alongside his teaching, his pastoral role included providing homeopathic and biomedical care, and he treated many patients during his lifespan (Note 17).

By discussing his brief life sketch, it is crystal clear that Shaikh Nesarabadi represented a polymath who had experience of many thoughts and paths. This is why his diverse educational and career background inspired him to propel the idea of Unity in Diversity. The impending section will talk about his thoughts on Unity in Diversity.

3. Shaikh Nesarabadi's Thought on Unity

Shaikh Nesarabadi was a profound and inquisitive reader of the age. He knew the inner dimensions of the fractured world. In sketching the scenario of the planet, Shaikh Nesarabadi appropriately observed that:

“If we look at the world today, the ideologies of the people around the world in a variety of religions, philosophies, and geographical boundaries, have been divided into pieces. Even people of the same religion have become prisoners, and several captives. The Muslim world is divided into different schools of thoughts and political ideologies.” (Note 18)

In his first unity conference, Shaikh Nesarabadi very explicitly illustrated that we should not focus on minor issues, rather we should concentrate on major and pertinent tasks. More importantly, he castigated the prevalent inappropriate approaches seeking to deal with the issue of disunity. He held that both total atomization and overall “consistency” (i.e., homogeneity and social conformity to a universal identity) were incompatible with Islamic teachings, and he went on to explain the essentiality of unity:

“Many of us feel that we need the overall “consistency”. On the other hand, and some want the overall “isolation”. I think both groups are inaccurate in terms of their thoughts and methods...

“Liberty is essential in individual life, and rights and liberty of opinions are essential in social lives. Again, as national unity is essential for national independence and distinct national identity, unity among the nations is essential for international peace. As the Muslims need unity for upholding their religion (Islam), all patriotic people should be united for the interest of the state and nation.” (Note 19)

According to his view, the only path to cement the gap and create unity is *Al-ittihad ma al-Ikhtelaf* (Unity in Diversity). While being freely disunited in minor issues, people should be united on major and collective issues for the betterment of humanity, which is the only sophisticated and realistic form of unity (Note 20). Shaikh Nesarabadi's approach to solve the greatest problems facing humanity was pragmatic and achievable. To make this world peaceful and harmonious, he proposed four different stages or levels of his unity theory, as covered in the following sections.

4. Different Stages of Unity

To discern Shaikh Nesarabadi's epoch-making theory on unity with disagreement in depth, it is necessary to go through his entire comprehensive life and works, which makes his propositions on unity quite clear. Throughout Islamic history, very few major intellectuals have been able to save themselves from controversies and sectarian involvement, but Shaikh Nesarabadi managed this. As Rahman rightly pointed out:

“I like to refer some of the outstanding personalities for example Jamal Uddin Afghani (Note 21), Allama Dr. Muhammad Iqbal (Note 22) and many others who sacrificed their intellect, energy for the cause of Islam and Muslim world. They were not involved in the controversies of Sunni-Shia dilemma, or any school of thoughts or regional politics, Shaikh Nesarabadi was in that group (Note 23).”

From his speeches, statements and writings we can discern four stages: comprehensive unity theory, and theories for harmonious society, country, and world. Shaikh Nesarabadi firmly believed that his theory of unity with disagreement was the only solution to bring all people under one umbrella. As he addressed in a meeting, the easiest way to solve disunity is “unity with differences”, therefore he suggested four different levels of unity necessary for a united, peaceful world:

- 1) Unity of Muslims for the sake of Islam and Muslims.
- 2) Patriotic unity or national unity against corruption and injustice.
- 3) Unity of Believers or theists (including Hindus) against atheists.
- 4) Unity of nations, or international unity for the sake of humanity or world peace (Note 24).

We may visualize these four types of unity in a radial circle, as shown in Figure 1.

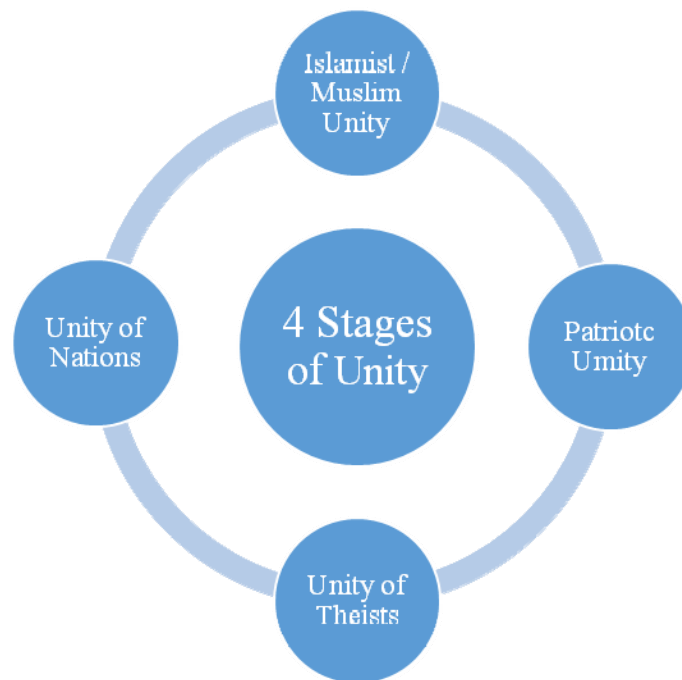


Figure 1. Radial Circle of Unity

Shaikh Nesarabadi advanced his four-level theory of unity to promote peace. The following section illustrates details on four stages and how the vision could be successfully implemented in practice.

5. Unity of Muslims

According to the majority of Islamic scholars, unity among Muslims is *wajib* (obligatory), and while different interpretations and opinions are generally allowed, the people must submit to a common government, except in egregious circumstances offending against Muslims' fundamental rights (particularly to pray), as civil conflicts are abhorred for the troubles they cause. Conversely, Muslims ought to be united in worshipping Allah, including by creating a more just and human world. Shaikh Nesarabadi realized the core values of Islam and the importance of unity among Muslims, and spent his entire life attempting to unite Muslims and Islamic parties on one platform. As he recalled, "I was fighting to combine Scholars and *Masayekh* since my student life. So if I stated any individual rules that would be my intention to create obstacles in the way of achievement (Note 25)."

In his inaugural speech at the Unity Conference in 1997, Shaikh Nesarabadi quite extensively demonstrated the importance of unity among the Muslims and Islamists (Note 26). He emphasized the need for a "united movement" free from segregation for the sake of Islam:

"So, like our individual and familial life, we have to establish Islam in socio-economical and state life as well, and we have to take this as a mandatory duty upon us. Islam is the religion of peace. If we can have established Islam in our personal, familial, social, and state life, then there is the possibility of getting salvation, prosperity, and real peace. In order to establish Islamic ideology in individual and familial life; the endless efforts and united movement of Islamists is the most essential matter." (Note 27)

From the above quotation, it is clear that his underlying goal was to obey Allah and create a prosperous, peaceful society, and he saw Islamic political activity as the essential factor required to realise this. Furthermore, to validate his cry for Muslim unity, Shaikh Nesarabadi advanced his discussion from a Quranic perspective, noting that the Quran enjoins Muslims to be united and not divided. If Muslims do not follow the commandment of the Quran, and get divided, they will fall into the worst situations and lose their power in the world. He particularly cited the following two verses from the Holy Quran to support his propositions on unity: "Hold fast to the rope of Allah altogether and do not become divided" (Note 28) (Al Quran 3: 103); and "And obey God and His messenger, and do not dispute, lest you falter and lose your courage. And be steadfast. God is with the steadfast" (Note 29) (Al Quran 8: 46).

Both of these verses demonstrate the importance of unity among the Muslims. In conformity with the Quran and Sunnah, all Islamic scholars, leaders, and religious Muslims admit the theoretical necessity of unity, but practical achievement of this has been elusive. To identify why, Shaikh Nesarabadi adumbrated the challenges to cementing unity among the Muslims, as detailed in the following section.

6. Challenges to Muslim Unity

From his practical life experiences Shaikh Nesarabadi observed some of the major challenges or reasons behind the disunity among the Muslim groups, particularly in Bangladesh. According to his analysis, the main barriers to uniting Islamists under one banner were the fear of losing personal and group interests to those of a larger collective (i.e., the Unity Movement itself), and the related issue of party politics. The plethora of Islamic political parties in Bangladesh precludes the possibility of a united national Islamic front and prevents building unity. The third and the most pivotal reasons behind disunity is the question of leadership, and the desire to lead movements was characterized as *Godi* by the Shaikh (Note 30). In addition to these underlying reasons, the lack of a proper approaches and methods hampers progress among Muslim political parties in general. The following section outlines the Shaikh's proposed solutions to this impasse.

7. Practical Aspects of His Theory

Shaikh Nesarabadi outlined a comprehensive programme to reduce the gap among the Islamist groups, which can be categorised into three main areas of focus: common issues, *Tawhidic* unity, and modernism and mutual respect.

7.1 Focus on Common Issues

Focusing on common interest or issue is a fundamental rationale for the development of unity. Shaikh Nesarabadi firmly propagated that focusing universal/common issues or unity with differences of opinions can cement Islamic parties: "to implement unity theory and get united the first thing that needs to be inculcated is Unity in Diversity and avoiding personal, party interest, party politics and giving up the controversial issues, being united based on universal/common issues." (Note 31)

He further explained that this is not a utopian fantasy, but something pragmatic and possible, as exhibited by historical experiences, including the creation of Pakistan by a united movement based on the three policies of *Iman*, unity, and discipline. The "Twenty-Two-Point Principles" for Pakistan was achieved by a joint Sunni-Shia convention in Karachi in 1951; and the independent Bangladesh was founded in accordance with the unity of the Six-Point Movement (Note 32).

The crux of this approach was to focus on common or universal values as the driving factor in the Unity Movement, and to put aside petty differences. It was also clear that personal interests would have to be sacrificed by political leaders to improve Muslim unity in Bangladesh and the Muslim world in general. More importantly, in the process of unity *Tawhid* or oneness of God has a tonic power, as the central source of Muslim life and worldview. The following section illustrates the role of *Tawhid* in the process of Muslim unity.

7.2 Focus on Tawhidic Unity

Islam affirms that the Holy Quran is the solution for human problems, comprising *Shifa* (remedy) for Believers. In other words, Quran has a power to cure the troubles of the mind, soul, and heart. As one scholar rightly pointed out:

“It also contains many kinds of solutions which will provide peace and tranquillity to man in the exterior world. In this context, just as the Qur’an opens up the dead-end ways of a society full of savagery and crudeness, returning them to safety and sanity with the illuminated remedies that it has brought within itself, it has also revived and rebuilt the social life with its principles of unity and solidarity.” (Note 33)

The most pertinent factor in the process of Muslim unity and solidarity is *Tawhidic* unity. *Kalema Tayyebah* or *Tawhid* (Oneness of God) is the central component in the Islamic faith paradigm, with far-reaching implications for social cohesion:

“The principle of ‘*Tawhid*’ (oneness, unity), demands the unity and togetherness of hearts. Also, the unity in the creed entails unity and integration in social life. Hearts which had been hardened in the age of ignorance as a result of losing basic moral principles were softened by the effect of this illumination, and they became united and got along with each other.” (Note 34)

Although Muslims have disagreed upon many issues throughout history, their universal consensus on *Tawhid* is axiomatic; in other words, there is no disagreement on the necessity and importance of *Tawhidic* unity. Shaikh Nesarabadi said in his public gatherings that we should follow the teachings of the *Kalema* (declaration of faith) to achieve Muslim unity. He derived three main guiding principles of *Tawhid* as the cornerstone of Muslim unity, derived from the *Kalema*:

- a. *Tawhid* and ideological unity.
- b. Equality irrespective of nation and religion.
- c. The implementation of the ideology of the Prophet Mohammad (Note 35).

Tawhidic unity is a powerful intellectual concept to merge all sects into one *Tawhid*-based community. Despite different practices and even beliefs, Muslims can live together under the banner of Islam’s absolute monotheism. However, this necessitates an accommodative approach to achieve Muslim unity. The following section describes Shaikh Nesarabadi’s third, practical part of his unity theory.

7.3 Focus on Moderation and Mutual Respect

The third important practical point we may discern from Shaikh Nesarabadi’s Unity in Diversity theory is his moderate approach. He was a man of moderation, who never supported any form of extremism. He believed that the middle path or moderate approach was the essence of Islam, and the best way to unite Muslims. Because of his accommodative approach he was able to inspire a significant number of Muslim communities in Bangladesh. He explained his accommodative approach regarding the practices of different *tariqas*:

“I have called followers of different *tariqas* to come back to the original ideology of Islam, with their minor controversial issues to be united. Due to controversies in Zikr the followers will accomplish Zikr according to their own Pir’s provided methodology.” (Note 36)

Shaikh Nesarabadi further expounded his accommodative approach:

“We have to remember that in terms of faith and creeds, we are the followers of Ahle Sunnah and Jamaat, and in terms of tariqa, we are the followers of Sunnah. It means we follow the Sunnah Tariqa. It should be kept in mind that the Pir of Jaunpuri, Bahadurpuri, Furfura, Sarsina... in the demand of time, all have to come forward together in order to establish Islamic society.” (Note 37)

He believed in togetherness or collective efforts, not isolated endeavours in Islamic or Muslim progress and development. He narrated that Islamic ideology promotes individual, social, and political life in the country, to establish operations in different stages and levels. There is no doubt that the value of this service is manifest at the personal and team levels. To achieve meaningful change, efforts at all levels must be directed toward common goals, with mutual respect (Note 38). His solution can be represented by the pillars of Muslim unity shown in Figure 2.

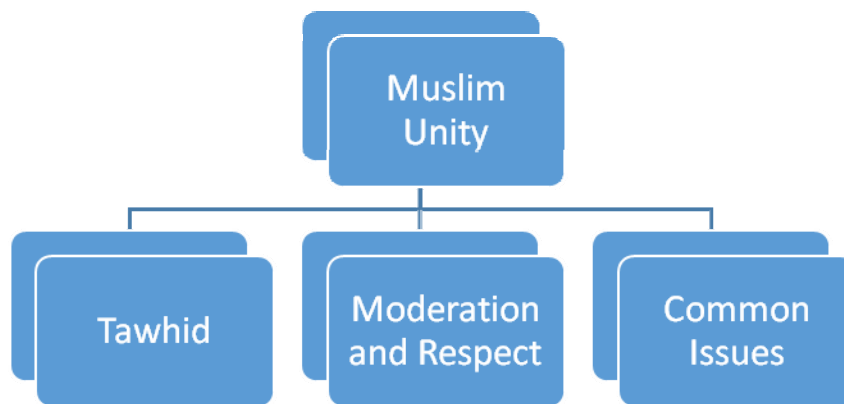


Figure 2. Pillars of Muslim Unity

8. Implementing Al-Ittihad Maa’l Ikhtelaf Policy

Based on the three practical points explained above, it is obvious that the “unity with differences” theory is the only comprehensive solution to cement bridges among the Muslims. From practical point of view, we can see Western political configurations, particularly the case of the European Union (EU) (Note 39), as a reflection of the operationalization of unity with differences. In Europe at present total number of EU countries is 27, with different national cultures, languages, religious denominations, political systems, and economies, but they are generally united under the EU, with most of them sharing the same currency and a having freedom of movement and labour among themselves. How is this possible? The answer is they are (unknowingly) implementing the Shaikh’s philosophy of unity with differences, unlike the Muslim world and Bangladesh.

8.1 Muslim World

Unfortunately, the Muslim world is divided into many fractions and segments. While ethnic and sectarian tensions are deliberately fomented by imperialists, the Muslims have their own base desires to blame for their current moribund impasse, including the desire for leadership among political entrepreneurs. West Asia is the heart of the Muslim Ummah, and here we see the absurd scenario of Sunni-Shia sectarianism being used as camouflage for the geopolitical power struggle between the US and Russia (and their allies), manifest in the Shia Crescent of Iran and the Arab fiefdoms of the GCC. In other areas, racial and linguistic nationalism is used to corrode any prospect of national unity in Muslim-majority states (e.g., the sudden humanitarianism of France in patronizing the Berber cultural renaissance, after centuries of looting, rape, and slaughter of Berbers and others throughout North Africa). Despite the deeply entrenched hatreds that fragment the Muslim world, Shaikh Nesarabadi's philosophy *al ittihad ma'al Ikhtelaf* can move toward unity based on the following points (Note 40):

- 1) Israel should be driven from the West Bank, and an independent Palestinian sovereign state should be created as per UN resolutions in Gaza and the West Bank immediately.
- 2) No foreign power should enter into Middle East, and no foreign soldier should remain there. The Arabs should solve their own problems themselves, through the OIC or Arab League.
- 3) The Sunni-Shia dilemma must be handled by dialogue, not political and military conflict. If Europe can be united, with their myriad sources of difference, the Muslims with similar languages, religious faith, and cultural heritage should find it easier.

8.2 Bangladesh

Bangladesh has the potential to be a major country within the Muslim Ummah, and efforts for the reinvigoration of Muslim civilization and Muslim unity. The question arises of how the principles of Shaikh Nesarabadi's philosophy can be implemented in his native land of Bangladesh. Based on the preceding analysis of his approach, the following points requiring agreement on common issues can be identified:

- 1) A real, fair national general election is necessary in the coming years. Acceptance and cooperation is incumbent on the losers, who must acquiesce to whoever wins power in a free and open contest.
- 2) Strikes should cease, and alternative forms of organised protest should be introduced. Strikes are by nature disruptive, which has disproportionately negative impacts in developing countries with poor infrastructure.
- 3) Natural wealth should be utilized as per national decisions, and not be expropriated or embezzled.
- 4) There should be universal education for all to improve the country's performance in science, technology, engineering, and information technology, etc.

- 5) Regardless of political affiliation or ideology, all Bangladeshis must agree a modern transportation system is urgently needed, with organised bus stops, etc., and appropriate pedestrian pavements and crossings, and they should work toward this (Note 41).

Shaikh Nesarabadi's simple but profound philosophy can change the equation of Muslim unity as well as world unity, and drastically improve the quality of life in Bangladesh. Although he advocated a fundamental and complete alternation of the current situation, he did not encourage revolutionary violence or destructive activism in politics.

8.3 Patriotic or National Unity

Shaikh Nesarabadi advocated patriotic unity to eradicate corruption and injustice from the state level and the national arena. He strongly believed that without eliminating corruption from society it would be impossible to achieve prosperity and social harmony; he identified the main reasons for the downfall of a nation as corruption and injustice, which is why he urged patriotic people to unite under one banner and fight against these evils, as he stated: "similarly for the interest of country and nation, all patriotic brothers need to be united irrespective of party and doctrine (Note 42)." He spoke about the sources of corruption at a speech in 1990: "albeit Government and political parties have taken some (insufficient) steps to eradicate corruptions and nepotism, the corruption still continues to rise (Note 43)."

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) reported that Bangladesh was the second-most corrupt country in the world in 2010 (Note 44). Clearly this would be impossible for any state implementing the ideals of Islam, and it is more egregious when one considers that the majority of inhabitants live in poverty, and can ill afford to bear corrupt activities to achieve their fundamental rights. Shaikh Nesarabadi emphasized the following two contributory factors in corruption in Bangladesh:

- **Lack of ideals:** Not constituting life according to Islamic ideals was the main reason for the proliferation of corruption (Note 45). A creative, Islamic, patriotic generation is necessary to establish Islam in every section of the state.
- **Poverty:** Corruption is caused by poverty, due to unemployment, luxury, and pride (Note 46). Muslims should refrain from such attributes and actions. Hard work, honesty, and necessary expenses can solve this problem.

The following section demonstrates his suggestions to eliminate corruption from Bangladesh.

9. How to Eradicate Corruption

Shaikh Nesarabadi critically analysed the methods and techniques of the government and opposition parties to combat corruption and manipulation. He noticed that the primary reason of their failure was misdiagnosing the problems (Note 47). He stated that:

“The Anti-Corruption Department Office must have a just and incorrupt minister. But if the anti-corruption office is led by a corrupted minister, then it is sure that the country will fall into danger, and national development will not be possible.” (Note 48)

Shaikh Nesarabadi suggested that the Government undertake some pragmatic and actionable advices to eradicate corruption:

- 1) Decentralise the ministries and make sub-ministries to annihilate corruption, with a special ministry for anti-corruption projects.
- 2) Appoint an honest person as head of the anti-corruption department.
- 3) The government must appoint an honest district commissioner and police superintendent in every district.
- 4) The Chief of Police (IGP) should be appointed honest officer.
- 5) Key ranks of police officers (C.O (DEV), C.O (REV), O.C, and Sub-Inspector) should be honest and corruption-free.
- 6) Government must be fair and credible for selecting any peoples’ representatives.
- 7) Democratic processes must be maintained.
- 8) Finally, in order to establish a corruption-free, harmonious society, there must be an organized training for imams, UP chairmen, members, and village chiefs. On top of that, three important things need to inculcated in all workers in the anti-corruption movement:
 - a. Strong faith in Allah.
 - b. Fear of Allah.
 - c. Hardworking mentality (Note 49).

He believed that 100 quality workers would be adequate to exile corruption from Bangladesh: “I believe that one hundred honest workers or employees are sufficient to prevent corruption. I am ready to help the government to curb the corruption. I hope, their combined efforts will soon free the Jhalokathi District from corruption.” (Note 50)

However, Shaikh Nesarabadi, as a strong believer in religion, also urged all the theists to be united for making this world peaceful and harmonious as the core driver of reform from the bottom-up. The following section describes his concept of the unity of theists.

10. Unity of Theists (Believers)

Shaikh Nesarabadi understood godlessness to be the root problem of the modern age, underlying every problem in society. Rooting out godlessness would save humanity from greater destructions, moral degradation, and anti-societal activities. He was keenly interested in the prospect of all theists or believers of faith coming together in one platform to safeguard humanity: “Many problems have arisen in our social and international life which has been disseminated everywhere by the atheists. They are working against the followers of all religions, like corruption, criminality, usury, drugs, lack of loyalty, terrorism, etc.” (Note 51)

He noted the particularly grave challenges facing humans around the world in terms of insecurity and uncertainty because of evil powers and criminal activities who drove peace from the earth. Therefore, he viewed it as necessary and sensible to unite all believers of faiths to fight against this tide: “For the welfare of the whole of humanity, I call upon my brothers -Muslim, Hindu, Christian- to fight against atheism and godlessness (Note 52).” Consequently, in 1990 he formed the “Ideal Society Implementation Council” with people of all religions, opinions, and party affiliations (Note 53).

From the above description, any independent scholar can easily see that Shaikh Nesarabadi was a true philosopher of humanity. He not only thought and worked for Islamic community, but for all believers and humanity in general. He believed that unity of theists was essential for the betterment of humanity.

11. Unity of Nations or International Unity

The paradox of the modern global order is that we live in an increasingly integrated and homogenized global economy and culture, with fewer substantive barriers between peoples, while the main unit of political administration is the nation state, which foments division and sectionalism to justify the existence of political entrepreneurs within states. When conflicts arise between nations, the opportunist and unscrupulous leaders of nations cannot be trusted to act unilaterally, and the international community must handle such cases; this was the vision behind the formation of the United Nations in the 1940s, but which has been consistently abandoned due to the interests of great powers. In order to install peaceful and stabilised world, there is a dire need for genuine international unity or unity of nations.

Shaikh Nesarabadi very persuasively argued that we need to have unity among the countries or nations to secure the world peace and harmony: “to keep up the national independence and national individual entities, national unity is needed in the same way the unity of the nation with nation is needed for international peace (Note 54).” From his statements, it is obvious that international unity is important to make this world better and more peaceful place. The Shaikh was more universal in his approach toward solving international issues. Bimal Kundu, former District Commissioner of Jhalokathi, commented on his philosophy that:

“The main theme of philosophy is to uncover the unknown and self-inquiry. Hearing and reading Shaikh Nesarabadi’s books, articles, and speeches, I mark them a

separate comprehensive philosophy. Like other religious philosophers he was an ideal philosopher. More particularly, his concept of unity with disagreement not only severed Muslim to be united but also the people of all segments of the society. Because of his universal approach he got recognition from all over the world.” (Note 55)

Shaikh Nesarabadi was concerned about oppressed people around the world, and he often spoke about those in Kashmir and Palestine. He could not tolerate the oppression of any people, irrespective of their faiths or doctrines, and he called for their rescue:

“The repressed person, whether he Muslim or non-Muslim, I cannot tolerate. No believer can tolerate it and it should not at all! Every repressed individual has to be rescued from any kind of infliction irrespective of religion, race, tribe, and colour.” (Note 56)

In other words, nations should be untied to save the oppressed from tyrant rulers and have peace in the world. His main aim was to build a harmonious world within the framework of Unity in Diversity or diverse opinions or differences in colour, races, religions, or nations.

12. Conclusion

In closing, it is obvious that Shaikh Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi was a self-disciplined and integrated complete person, and a symbol of unity and integration. His educational experience and practical life was a model for Unity in Diversity. Shaikh Nesarabadi on one hand earned conventional educational laurels, while on the other he endowed himself with extensive spiritual training, both of which he levered to propose a way out of the current desperate impasse faced by the people of Bangladesh, the Ummah, and humanity in general. One may precisely conclude 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, fulfilling the injunction of the Creator:

“And hold fast, all together, by the rope which Allah (stretches out for you), and be not divided among yourselves; and remember with gratitude Allah’s favour on you; for ye were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His Grace, ye became brethren; and ye were on the brink of the pit of Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus doth Allah make His Signs clear to you: That ye may be guided?” (Note 57)

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Notes

- Note 1. Bernard Thierry, "Unity in diversity: lessons from macaque societies." *Evolutionary Anthropology*, 16(6), (2007), pp. 224-238.
- Note 2. Babul Roy, Understanding India's sociological diversity, Unity in Diversity and caste system in contextualizing a global conservation model, *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* Vol. 3(12), pp. 440-451, December 2011 Available online <http://www.academicjournals.org/IJSAISSN2006-988x> ©2011 Academic Journals.
- Note 3. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, (Amana Publications, 2006).
- Note 4. Said Nursi, *Khutb-e-Shamela* (Dhaka: Liberty publication, 2017), p. 115.
- Note 5. Shakib Arslan, *Our Decline: Its Causes and Remedies* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2009).
- Note 6. Mahmudur Rahman, *The political history of Muslim Bengal: An unfinished battle of faith* (Newcastle: Cambridge scholars publishing, 2019), pp. 35-351.
- Note 7. According to Muhammad Rafiqullah Nesarabadi's report, he was born in 1915. Some other reports also claim he was born in around 1912/13. We have cited Rafiqullah's account since it is more likely.
- Note 8. Pir Badshah Mia was a disciple of Haji Shariatullah Faraizi movement.
- Note 9. Shariatullah, "Haji (1781-1840) was an eminent Islamic reformer of Bangladesh. The district of Shariatpur is named after him. He was born in 1781 in a petty Talukdar family at the village Shamail

under the then Madaripur sub-division of greater Faridpur district. He emigrated to Makkah in 1799, returned to Bangladesh in 1818 and started an Islamic revivalist reform movement, akin to the contemporary Arabian Wahhabism. The movement he started came to be popularly known as the Faraizi movement. His reform movement was basically religious; but it touched upon various other aspects of the society. He may be characterised as an Islamic revivalist, a social reformer and a populist peasant leader.” See http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Shariatullah,_Haji

Note 10. Munshi Mohammad Meherullah (1861-1907) was a self-educated social reformer who tried to save the Islamic spirit of Muslims during the British Raj. See Abdullah Al Masud, Róhmótullóh Kairónawô (1818-1891) and Munshi Mohammad Meherullah’s (1861-1907) Methodology of Presenting Christianity: A Comparative Study (PhD dissertation, International Islamic University Malaysia).

Note 11. Muhammad Atiqur Rahman, Maulana Muhammad Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi Quayed Saheb: life and works (Master thesis, Islamic University Kushtia, unpublished).

Note 12. Mohammad Rofikullah Nesarabadi, *Quayed Saheb Hujur (Rah): Life and works*. Jhalokathi: Hezbollah Publication, 2013), p. 22.

Note 13. Ibid.

Note 14. Ibid., p. 25.

Note 15. Sharif Taibur Rahman, *Insan Kame: Quayed Saheb Hujur (Rah)* (Jhalokathi: Quayed Saheb foundation, 2009), p. 249.

Note 16. Muhibullah Jami, *Philosopher Quayed Saheb (Rah): life and thoughts* (Jhalokathi: Hezbollah Publication, 2009), p. 15.

Note 17. Ibid.

Note 18. Shaikh Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi, *speech: Necessity of Unity and its way* (Jhalokathi: Hezbollah Publication, 1998), p. 10.

Note 19. Shaikh Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi, *speech-1: Necessity of Unity and its way* (Jhalokathi: Hezbollah Publication, 1997).

Note 20. Rahman, p. 410.

Note 21. “Afghani, Jamal-Ud-Din (c. 1838-1897), journalist, political activist, one of the leaders of the Pan-Islamic movement. Sayyid Jamal-ud-din, known outside Iran as Afghani and in Iran as Asadabadi, was born in Asadabad, in northeast Iran, in 1838 or 1839. Although he usually claimed to be from Afghanistan, primary documents establish beyond doubt that he was born and educated in Iran.” See <https://www.encyclopedia.com/international/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/afghani-jamal-ud-din>

Note 22. Sir “Muhammad Iqbal, also spelled Muhammad Ikbal, (born November 9, 1877, Sialkot, Punjab, India [now in Pakistan]—died April 21, 1938, Lahore, Punjab), poet and philosopher, known for his influential efforts to direct his fellow Muslims in British-administered India toward the

establishment of a separate Muslim state, an aspiration that was eventually realized in the country of Pakistan. He was knighted in 1922.” See <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad-Iqbal>

Note 23. Sharif Taibur Rahman, *Hazrat Quaid Sahib Huzur As I saw*, Insan Kame: Quayed Saheb Hujur (Rah) (Jhalokathi: Quayed Saheb foundation, 2009), p. 247.

Note 24. Shaikh Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi, speech-3: *Necessity of Unity and its way* (Jhalokathi: Hezbollah Publication, 1998).

Note 25. Shaikh Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi, speech-8: *Necessity of Unity and its way* (Jhalokathi: Hezbollah Publication, 1997).

Note 26. Ibid.

Note 27. Shaikh Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi, *speech-4: Necessity of Unity and its way* (Jhalokathi: Hezbollah Publication, 1997).

Note 28. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The meaning of the Holy Qur’an* (Amana Publications, 2006).

Note 29. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The meaning of the Holy Qur’an* (Amana Publications, 2006).

Note 30. Jami, p. 59.

Note 31. Muhibullah, pp. 60-65.

Note 32. “The Constitution should provide for a Federation of Pakistan in its true sense on the Lahore Resolution, and the parliamentary form of government with supremacy of a Legislature directly elected on the basis of universal adult franchise. 2) The federal government should deal with only two subjects: Defence and Foreign Affairs, and all other residuary subjects shall be vested in the federating states. 3) Two separate, but freely convertible currencies for two wings should be introduced; or if this is not feasible, there should be one currency for the whole country, but effective constitutional provisions should be introduced to stop the flight of capital from East to West Pakistan. Furthermore, a separate Banking Reserve should be established, and separate fiscal and monetary policy be adopted for East Pakistan. 4) The power of taxation and revenue collection shall be vested in the federating units and the federal centre will have no such power on the issue. The federation will be entitled to a share in the state taxes to meet its expenditures. 5) There should be two separate accounts for the foreign exchange earnings of the two wings; the foreign exchange requirements of the federal government should be met by the two wings equally or in a ratio to be fixed; indigenous products should move free of duty between the two wings, and the Constitution should empower the units to establish trade links with foreign countries. 6) East Pakistan should have a separate militia or paramilitary force.” See http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Six-point_Programme

Note 33. Said Yavuz, *The History of Islamic Unity*, accessed on February 10, 2019. See <http://www.thepenmagazine.net/the-history-of-islamic-unity/>

Note 34. Ibid.

Note 35. Muhibullah Jami, Dishari 8. (Jhalokathi: Quayed Saheb foundation, 2009), p. 47.

Note 36. Conference speech; Jami. M. (1998). *Speech 1: Necessity of Unity and its way*. Jhalokathi: Hezbollah publication.

Note 37. Ibid.

Note 38. Jami, p. 65.

Note 39. “The European Union is a unique economic and political union between 28 EU countries that together cover much of the continent. The predecessor of the EU was created in the aftermath of the Second World War. The first steps were to foster economic cooperation: the idea being that countries that trade with one another become economically interdependent and so more likely to avoid conflict.” See https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/eu-in-brief_en

Note 40. Rahman, *Insan e kamala*, p. 230.

Note 41. Ibid.

Note 42. Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi, *Islamic way of life* (Jhalokathi: Hezbollah Publication, 2006), pp. 83-84.

Note 43. Ibid.

Note 44. “Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) is an independent, non-government, non-partisan and non-profit organization with a vision of Bangladesh in which government, politics, business, civil society and the daily lives of the people shall be free from corruption. In the context of the international movement against corruption, as the fully accredited national chapter in Bangladesh of the Berlin-based Transparency International (TI), TIB partners and cooperates with TI and its chapters worldwide.” See <https://www.ti-bangladesh.org/beta3/index.php/en/about-us/>

Note 45. Shaikh Azizur Rahman *Nesarabdi Osiat noisat* (Jalokhati: Hezbollah publication, 2006), p. 92.

Note 46. Ibid.

Note 47. Khalilur Rahman, *Quayed Saheb; an example of integrity*, Insan Kame: Quayed Saheb Hujur (Rah), (Jhalokathi: Quayed Saheb foundation, 2009), p. 12.

Note 48. Jami, pp. 65-68.

Note 49. Ibid., p. 58.

Note 50. Ibid., p. 59.

Note 51. Taibur, pp. 246-255.

Note 52. Nesarabadi, p. 97.

Note 53. Taibur, p. 259.

Note 54. Hari proshad pal, *Quaid sahib Huzur cilan akjon adorsho mohapurush*, Insan Kame: Quayed Saheb Hujur (Rah), (Jhalokathi: Quayed Saheb foundation, 2009). pp. 247-249.

Note 55. Khalilur, p. 12.

Note 56. Rahman, p. 140.

Note 57. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The meaning of the Holy Qur’an* (Amana Publications, 2006).