

## G.W. Leitner - An Orientalist Par Excellence

Dr. Imtiaz Ahmad☆

### Abstract

Dr. Leitner was a famous orientalist. He possessed multifarious talents. The diversity and profundity of his writings speak volumes of his stature, invaluable services for uplift and advancement of oriental languages and local culture. He carried a neutral approach towards Muslims, in a time when the British vengeance was at its peak. He believed in enlightenment through education and preservation of traditional flavor.

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Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner was born in Pest (Hungary) on 14 October 1840. In 1849, chaotic situation of Hungary forced his family to leave the country and migrate to Turkey. Within five years Leitner completed his primary education in Istanbul, Brusa and Malta. He learnt Turkish and Arabic. Perhaps, Leitner is the only European orientalist who recited orally a major portion of the holy Qur'an.

Leitner was commissioned as First Class Interpreter in 1855, to her majesty's commissariat at Simla with the rank of full colonel, during the last eight months of the Crimean war. As the war was over, he returned to Istanbul and attended Muhammadan Theological School where he completed his Islamic Studies. He passed his Matriculation from King's College, London where afterwards he was appointed a lecturer in Arabic, Turkish and Modern Greek.

In 1861, he succeeded the Rev. J.J.S. Perowne as Professor of Arabic and Islamic Jurisprudence. The Freiberg University of Germany conferred upon him the degrees of M.A and Ph.D. in 1862.

The Punjab Government announced in 1864, the post of Principal for the newly established Government College Lahore. Leitner applied for the post and subsequently was made the first Principal of the college. He held this influential post for a long period of 22 years. With his untiring efforts, determination and true passion for spreading education, the college soon gained a nation wide reputation in India and abroad.

Dr. Leitner was also a prolific writer. He wrote articles regarding Islam, education in Punjab, and treatise on politics and culture of Northern Areas visited by him in 1866. He titled it Dardistan - the areas between Kabul, Badakhshan and Kashmir.

Articles on Dardistan are as follows:

- Where is Dardistan?
- Dardistan in 1893 and the treaty with Kashmir.
- History of the Dard wars with Kashmir in seven chapters.
- Legends, songs and customs of Dardistan.
- Dardistan, legends relating to animals.
- Anthropological observations on twelve Dards and Kafirs in my service.

The articles about politics and culture of Northern Areas fall under some of the following headings:

- Kafristan and the Khalifa question.
- The Siah Posh Kafirs.
- Chitral Affairs.
- Notes on recent events in Chilas and Chitral.
- Fables, legends and songs of Chitral.
- The future of Chitral and neighboring countries.
- The Races and languages of the Hindu-Kush.
- Hunza, Nagyr and the Pamir regions.
- Afghan affairs and Waziristan.
- Facts about alleged Afghan Treaty.
- A Rough account, collected in 1886 of itineraries in the "Neutral Zone" between Central Asia and India.

Dr. Leitner's writings reveal a culturally saturated mind moving from art to religion, showing how they intermix, but not with the coarseness of

ideological beliefs. Leitner was very fond of publishing journals and newspapers. He published journals in Arabic, Persian and Urdu. The journals of the Anjuman-e-Punjab revolutionized the literary scenario of the subcontinent. In 1866, he issued a journal namely Indian Public Opinion from Lahore to reflect the opinion of common populace. After a decade, it was renamed as Civil and Military Gazette. He served as the Editor and Mr. Rudyard Kipling as Assistant Editor. It continued even after the independence of Pakistan.

Before his arrival, province of the Punjab was educationally under Calcutta University despite long distance. Leitner felt this deprivation of the province and continuously struggled for the establishment of a separate university for the Punjab. Fortunately, the Governor of Punjab Sir Donald McLeod and many native chieftains supported his mission.

He encouraged the local scholars and linguists to contribute towards the promotion of Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit. He rejected the arguments presented by the Anglicists against vernacular languages and thus tried to keep them alive at a time when they were faced with a bleak future. He was also instrumental in establishing Oriental College, Lahore for the teaching of Arabic and Persian along with Sanskrit, Hindi and Punjabi.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan formed the British Indian Association for the welfare of Indian Muslims through education. The Association solicited the Government of India to establish a system of public education of the highest class, in which the arts, sciences, and other branches of knowledge may be taught through the instrumentality of the vernacular; that an examination in the vernacular be annually held in those very subjects in which the student is examined in English in the Calcutta University; and that degrees then conferred on English students of various departments, be likewise conferred on the students who successfully pass the same subjects in the vernacular; and finally, that either a vernacular department be attached to the Calcutta University, or an independent vernacular university be established for the North Western provinces. While presenting the idea of a vernacular university in 1867, the BIA referred to Punjab Government's admission in the same year to the necessity of an oriental university. Such a university was the brainchild of the Anjuman-e-Punjab,

which was established by G.W. Leitner, the Principal of the Government College of Lahore, in 1865. (1)

Dr. Leitner's contribution towards oriental languages may be evaluated very well if we study Lord T.B. Macaulay's Minute on Education presented to Lord Bentinck, the Governor General of India in 1835. In the Minute he advocated education of upper classes in India and made a vigorous plea for spreading of Western learning through the medium of English.(2)

The detailed study of Lord Macaulay's Minutes may throw sufficient light on the way Anglicists ignored the 'cultured imagination' as explained by Dr. Leitner in his article 'On the Sciences of Language and Ethnography':

"The human mind is extremely limited, and amongst the limits imposed upon it are those of in early life, connecting an idea, fact, or process, with certain words. It is a great advantage, for linguistic purposes, which are far more practically important than may be generally believed, that the study of classical languages still holds the foremost place in this country; because, however necessary scientific "observation" may be it cannot take the place of a cultured imagination. The stimulus of illustration and comparison, which, in the historical sense of the terms, is an absolutely necessary primary condition to mental advance, is derived from classical and literary pursuits". (3)

The activities of Missionaries before Leitner's arrival developed an aversion among Indians in general and Muslims in particular. The schools founded by the Missions were the forerunners of government institutions; and they combined the teaching of English with the teaching of Christianity, despite the so-called policy of religious neutrality of the government. No young man, whether Hindu or Muslim, passed through our Anglo-Indian schools without learning to disbelieve the faith of his father. The fear of proselytization was so widespread among Indians that its echo was heard even in the British Parliament. H.H. Wilson gave his testimony in this regard before a Select Committee of the House of Commons, on 18 July 1853. It was related a petition from the Muslims of Calcutta which held that the evident object of the government was the conversion of the natives that they encouraged English exclusively, and discouraged

Mohammedan and Hindu Studies, because they wanted to induce the people to become Christians. (4)

The hostility towards Christian Missions was in Leitner's notice and he went through its merits and demerits and gave an advice to Missionaries. in his article 'Indigenous Oriental Education' he wrote:

"It is an encouraging sign of the liberality and farsightedness of several of our Punjab Missionaries that they would infinitely prefer instruction being given to say, Mohammedans in their own religion than that the present 'secular' system, which is destructive of the religious sense should continue. The large-heartedness also of those Missionaries who would pledge themselves not to make attendance at the Bible-class compulsory, wherever a government institution is handed over to them, is deserving of the warmest appreciation and of the success with which it will certainly meet, though it is no more than what the Maulvis and Mianjis in India have done for ages, as a matter of course, namely, allow Hindus who were desirous of studying Arabic or Persian, to attend only the purely literary classes of Mohammedan institutions, whilst positively discouraging their attendance at the religious legal classes". (5)

The first war of Independence dubbed as 1857 Revolt by the British Government caused them to behave with the Muslims discriminately. Salamatullah describes:

"When several vacancies occurred in the Office of the Sunderbans Commissioner, the official in advertising them in the Government Gazette stated that the appointments would be given to none but Hindus. The oppression perpetrated and the injustice done by the government created two contradictory reactions amongst the Muslims: one was of reinforcing the alienation from and disgust towards Western culture, and the other, a feeling of impotence and even a perception of the danger of opposition to the British." (6)

Dr. Leitner contributed much to lessen the differences between Christians and Muslims and brought them closer to each other. Utilizing his intellect of both the religions and more or less sympathy he elaborated it as:

If we wish to influence the many through the few, we should identify ourselves more closely with the Mohammedans, a once ruling race, than

we have done hitherto. It is also time that the unnecessary antagonism, at any rate in India, between Christianity and Mohammedanism should cease. As a student of both systems of theology, I have been struck rather with their similarities, than with their differences, and it is the former, rather than the latter, that we should accentuate in our relations. As for Mohammedan fanaticism, this was chiefly stimulated and maintained in self-defence by the wanton expulsion and pauperization of hundreds of thousands of the industrious Moors from Spain, by the crusades waged by Christians and by the domination of the Ottomans who accepted the sterner 'Suras' of Medina, when Muhammad was under the pressure of his followers, in preference to the all-loving, if fiery, utterances of Mecca (see my pamphlet on Mohammedan Education). My own long residence in Mohammedan countries has convinced me that it is earnestness in the few, rather than fanatics, which characterizes them, whilst the bulk of the people are too dreamy or apathetic to be bigoted. The Christian of various sects, as also the Jews, were allowed complete autonomy under Turkish rule, when all were a happy family, with occasional dissensions, till European interference, "constitutions" with the code Napoleon and "foreign" education, which taught the "advanced" Turks the small-talk of infidelity, revolutionized the country. It is in various European countries that I have seen real bigotry, of sect against sect, class against class, and nation against nation, often fanned by those religious leaders whose fervour is a substitute for their real *raison d'etre*, learning. Indeed, I consider that the East is, and has never been, characterized by tolerance, though European spies, emissaries and unscrupulous merchants have often taxed its patience and roused an inevitable hostility. (7)

When the British colonized the subcontinent, the following kinds of schools were imparting education in India:

- Qur'an schools.
- Qur'an and Persian schools.
- Arabic and Persian schools.
- Arabic schools.
- Persian schools.

Among the Arabic schools, the Qur'an schools were more in number. These

were sometimes called *maktabs* and they taught the rudiments of the alphabet—both the *naskh* for reading the Qur'an and the *nastaliq* for reading simple Persian and Urdu texts along with basic arithmetic.

In Punjab, eastern part of Bengal and Assam, according to British sources, those were started by a Mianji (a local teacher) in a village and had, on the average, about twenty pupils each. The same was true for the rest of north India. One does not know what most British officers felt about the teaching of Arabic but those who wrote official reports were generally not sympathetic. Adam called them Kath-Mollas and accused them of having memorized a little Arabic. Henry Stewart Reid reported that those who read the Qur'an only memorize it in the Qur'an and Persian schools. He was not sympathetic even to those who read Arabic with understanding because he mentions elsewhere in the same report that 'Arabic learning had declined and good teachers of it were hard to come by— a state of affairs which he views with some satisfaction. (8)

Dr. Leitner attended a Qur'an School in Istanbul, when his family migrated from Hungary to Turkey in 1849. Despite the adverse remarks given by British Officers, he advocated sympathetically the worth of Qur'an Schools saying:

"Even were the Koran schools as 'educationally worthless' as they are described to be in our Official Reports, they would still deserve respect and tender treatment as the nurseries in which the bulk of our Mohammedan fellow-subjects derive, if only, the Shibboleths of their religion, but they do more, they give hope and comfort and resignation to millions of human beings, whom the irritation, false views of life and discontent taught by our system would render unhappy and drive into disaffection. (9)

Moreover, Leitner found out that the Qur'an schools fulfilled a double purpose: first, that of giving that amount of religious knowledge which is essential to a good Muslims and which was more intelligible, when Arabic was more spoken than it is now and secondly, that of preparation for Qur'an schools or Arabic schools, in which the Qur'an is explained with conscientious and scholarly minuteness. The institutions established by the British effected the traditional system of education in India.

Dr. Tariq Rehman wrote about it:

"In 1780, when the British created the first educational institution in India, the Calcutta Madrassah, the policy was Orientalist, i.e. continuation of traditional Persian and Arabic education for the Muslims and Sanskrit for the Hindus in order to conciliate their elites and prevent an uprising against British rule. This does not mean that the traditional system of education was not disrupted because of the colonial impact. It was, indeed, disrupted because, whereas the older system was personalized and flexible, the colonial one was not. In the older system boys went to the homes of teachers generally reading specific books with those who were reputed as being masters of them. The British opened institutions and the old forms of patronage to the individual teachers dried up". (10)

Dr. Leitner as an educationist, was fully aware of the difficulties faced by the followers of traditional system especially education after the introduction of 'new man' by the British. He sought a solution to remove the difficulty while looking into it:

"I need not add that all the professions, including that of priest, are open to the humblest Mussulman, though, as a rule, the hereditary professionals, priests, physicians, and professors, take the lead or the larger share in emoluments and public consideration. Our educational system, by ignoring the native professions, has impoverished them, whilst it has closed the avenue to these professions by the introduction of 'new men', from whom technical aptitude, rather than learning, is required. But India still resembles in many respects the Middle Ages, in which scholastic learning was the road to preferment of culture, and it is a very serious proceeding to have thrown out the hereditary guides of the people from professions which enabled them to live and to render learning honoured by the community. In the restoration of the highly-gifted Maulvi class to their hereditary dignity, I see a solution of the educational difficulty among Mohammedans, whether male or female, because it is their wives, as also widows, who are the most congenial material from which to supply female teachers, just as the utilization of the Pundit class would place at our disposal the educational services both of the Pundits and of their wives among Hindus, and the similar employment of Bahais and their spouses would restore that teaching, under civilized auspices and more in accordance with the spirit of the age, which is so emphatically the characteristic of Sikhism".(11)

Dr. Leitner had a vast knowledge of Oriental languages particularly Arabic and taught it along with other classical languages throughout his life. According to him 'wish to obtain a real hold on the language' may not be fulfilled unless we consider other aspects such as:

"The time has long passed since grammar and its rules could be treated in the way to which we were accustomed at school. The influences of climate and of religion have to be considered, as also the character of the people, if we wish to obtain a real hold on the language we study."(12)

Dr. Leitner kept a moderate attitude towards religion. He invited his fellowmen to understand ethics of the other religions in their particular context without any prejudice. In the same way, learning a language is 'you know nothing about it, in the midst of strangers who speak it'. Let us read what he said about the teaching of Islam in 'On the Sciences of Language and Ethnography':

"In 1859 I pointed out before the college of Preceptors, how necessary it was not only to discriminate between the chapters in the Koran delivered at Mecca and those given at Medina, but also to arrange the verses out of various chapters in their real sequence. I believe we are now advancing towards a better understanding of this most remarkable book. But we still find in its translation such passages, for instance, as, 'when in war women are captured, take those that are not married'. The meaning is nothing so arbitrary. The expression for 'take' that we have there is ankohu - marry i.e., take in marriage or nikah, as no alliance can be formed with even a willing captive taken in war, except through the process of nikah, which is the religious marriage contract. Again we have the passage, 'kill the infidels wherever you find them'. There again is shown the want of sympathetic knowledge which is distinct from the knowledge of our translators who render "qatile" with kill when it merely means 'fight', and refers to an impending engagement with enemies who were then attacking Muhammad's camp." (13)

In a nutshell we can say that Dr. Leitner was indeed a luminary of his kind. He was a prolific writer. He yearned to invigorate beans of enlightenment, courage and hard work in the mindset of the colonized Indians.

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