

Imam Zahir Ahsan al-Nimawi ﷺ

Muaz Billoo

Among the foremost Hadith masters and jurists of the Hanafi school in the 14th century Indian subcontinent was Maulana Zahir Ahsan ibn Subhan ‘Ali al-Hanafi al-Nimawi al-‘Azimabadi ﷺ. Born in the year 1278, he grown up in the town of Nimi located in the state of Azimabad, and embarked along the path of knowledge from a young age, travelling to Lucknow where he studied at the feet of the encyclopedic and prolific scholar, Maulana ‘Abdul Hai al-Lucknawi (d. 1304) ﷺ.¹ He also studied from the likes of Maulana Muhammad Abdullah al-Ghazipuri (d. 1337)² ﷺ and Maulana Muhammad Sa’eed al-‘Azimabadi (d. 1304)³ ﷺ. He embarked on the spiritual path – to ensure unity between his knowledge and practice – under the guidance of the great shaikh, Imam Fazlur Rahman Ghanj al-Muradabadi (d. 1313) ﷺ.⁴

He was initially enamored in the study of poetry for a lengthy duration during the earlier part of his life, but he witnessed a dream that would alter his trajectory. One night, he saw himself carrying the janazah of the Prophet ﷺ, for which was interpreted to mean that he would be a bearer of the Prophetic inheritance. Thus, Allah ﷻ blessed him to be able to gain mastery over the Hadith sciences, which one can observe in his most famous work, *Athar al-Sunan*, which is not only a book of Hadith, but a critical analysis of the authenticity and application of Hadiths used by the various schools of Islamic law, and thus it is also a book of comparative fiqh. He would go on to write two annotations on the work, the first being known as *al-Ta’liq al-Hasan*, and the second being *Ta’liq al-Ta’liq*, wherein he adds further details to his discussions. His primary focus is to present the academic rigor of the Hanafi school, refuting the notion that the Hanafi school rejects Hadith.

Those proficient in Hadith will find that Imam al-Nimawi ﷺ did not employ nor introduce a new critical methodology in his assessment of the authenticity of the Hadiths in this book. Rather, he followed the methodology of the classical Hadith

¹ See: *Nuzhah al-Khawatir* 8/250-256 and *al-Raf’ wa al-Takmil fi al-Jarh wa al-Ta’dil* pgs. 18-33.

² See: *Nuzhah al-Khawatir* 8/306-307.

³ See: *Nuzhah al-Khawatir* 8/454-455.

⁴ See: *Nuzhah al-Khawatir* 8/384-387.

scholars – even using this methodology at times to criticize the classical Hadith scholars in their unfair judgments of the Hanafi school and its proofs. He was unparalleled in his evaluation of the status of Hadith narrators, and identification of hidden defects, which is considered one of the most difficult sciences of Hadith as it requires the ability to detect even the slightest minute issues in the text and chain of narration.⁵

Imam al-Nimawi sent a copy of *Athar al-Sunan* to Makkah Mukarramah for Maulana Shah Abdul Haq al-Makki's (d. 1333)⁶ رَحِمَهُ اللهُ comments – who had been teaching Hadith in Makkah Mukarramah for fifty year – upon which Maulana Abdul Haq responded with high praises. He even mentioned that the Shaikh al-'Ulama of Makkah made a special dua for him in al-Masjid al-Haram. At the end of his letter containing his praises for the book, he requested Imam al-Nimawi to provide a written ijazah of Hadith for the scholars of the Haram. This ijazah with his sanad was compiled into a treatise known as '*Umdah al-'Anaqid min Hadaiq Ba'd al-Asanid* which is typically published within *Athar al-Sunan* prints.

Claims have been made that Imam al-Nimawi رَحِمَهُ اللهُ was biased towards the Hanafi school in his assessments, thereby making his work highly questionable. The most famous to champion this claim was the Ahlul Hadith scholar and author of *Tuhfah al-Ahwazi Sharh Jami' al-Tirmidhi*, Maulana Abdur Rahman al-Mubarakpuri (d. 1353)⁷ رَحِمَهُ اللهُ in his *Abkar al-Minan Fi Tanqid Athar al-Sunan*. Although Imam al-Nimawi رَحِمَهُ اللهُ was not alive to respond to al-Mubarakpuri's claims, his son, Abdur Rashid ibn al-Nimawi رَحِمَهُ اللهُ, wrote a refutation called *al-Qawl al-Hasan Fi al-Radd 'Ala Abkar al-Minan*, demonstrating that his father's approach to the Hadith sciences was sound and matched the approach and methodology of the Imams of the field. Rather, it is al-Mubarakpuri's work which suffers from shortcomings in his research and reading, often neglecting to fully address al-Nimawi's claims.⁸

⁵ See for example, Imam al-Nimawi's comments in his *al-Ta'liq al-Hasan* under Hadith #5 in *Athar al-Sunan*.

⁶ See: *Nuzhah al-Khawatir* 8/236.

⁷ See: *Nuzhah al-Khawatir* 8/259-260.

⁸ For a comparative analysis between Imam al-Nimawi's and Maulana Mubarakpuri's works, see Massoud Vahedi's article entitled, "In Defence of the Hanafi Tradition: The Legal Utility of al-Nimawi's *Athar al-Sunan*," in *Journal of Hadith Studies Volume 1* pgs. 69-97.

While compiling his work, Imam al-Nimawi was able to gain assistance from the grand Hadith master and Imam of his era, ‘Allamah Anwar Shah al-Kashmiri (d. 1352) رحمہ اللہ. There was a correspondence between them, with Imam al-Nimawi consulting ‘Allamah Kashmiri regarding complex matters in the Hadith sciences. ‘Allamah Kashmiri writes in *Nayl al-Farqadain*, “The late Shaikh al-Nimawi, may he be encompassed in mercy, while writing his book would send me portions of his book at a time...I have added many things to it after him.”⁹ ‘Allamah Kashmiri wrote his own annotations to the work, which came to be known as *al-Ithaf Li Madhab al-Ahnaḥ*, which – by Allah’s immense grace – was just sent in for publishing in Pakistan, under the guidance of the late ‘Allamah Abdul Halim al-Nu’māni (d. 2020) رحمہ اللہ.

Imam Zahid al-Kawthari (d. 1371) رحمہ اللہ said in praise of *Athar al-Sunan*, “Here is ‘Allamah, the Hadith master, Maulana Zahir Ahsan al-Nimawi – may Allah have mercy on him – he penned his work, *Athar al-Sunan*, in two thin volumes, gathering within them Hadiths pertaining to the laws of purification and prayer, on top of (discussing) the differences of the various juristic schools. He analyzed each Hadith in terms of narrator criticism (*jarh*) and praise (*ta’deel*) in accordance with the methodology of the Hadith scholars, and he thoroughly excelled in what he did. He intended to continue in this way until the end of the chapters of fiqh, however the decree of Allah overtook him before he could fulfill his desire.”¹⁰

‘Allamah al-Nimawi penned other works as well, such as *Habl al-Matin Fi al-Ikhfa bi Amin* on the Hanafi position of reciting *Amin* softly in congregational prayer, *Jala al-‘Ayn Fi Tark Raf’ al-Yadain* on the Hanafi position on raising the hands in the start of prayer only, *Wasilah al-‘Uqba Fi Ahwal al-Marda wa al-Mawta* in Farsi, *Lami’ al-Anwar*, and others, but his most celebrated work is *Athar al-Sunan*, which he was only able to complete until the chapters of salah. He started the chapters of Zakah but passed away in the year 1322 رحمہ اللہ.¹¹

⁹ Pg. 56 as mentioned in *Tarajim min Sittah Min Fuqaha al-‘Alam al-Islami fi al-Qarn al-Rabi ‘Ashar wa Atharuhum al-Fiqhiyya* pg. 29.

¹⁰ *Muqaddamat al-Kawthari* pg. 68

¹¹ For reference, please refer to Maulana Abdur Rashid ibn al-Nimawi’s biography of his father that is normally published with *Athar al-Sunan*, as well as Maulana Abdul Hai al-Hasani’s (d. 1340) *r Nuzhah al-Khawatir* 8/222, and Yusuf Abdur Rahman al-Mar’ashli’s *Nathr al-Jawahir wa al-Durar Fi ‘Ulama al-Qarn al-Rabi’a ‘Ashar* 1/556.