

A Brief Introduction to the Risalahs of Syedna Taher Saifuddin RA

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The *Rasā'il-Ramaḍāniyyah* of Syedna Taher Saifuddin

Syedna Taher Saifuddin managed the phenomenal task of penning over 40 *Rasā'il-Ramaḍāniyyah* while handling the heavy responsibilities and demands of Dā'ī-ship.³⁸⁹ I wish to discuss briefly how these *risālahs* agree, differ and interact with *risālahs* composed in the time of the earlier Dā'īs, in order to highlight the tangible inter-textual dialogue between Syedna Taher Saifuddin's composition, including *Risālah-Ramaḍāniyyah*-1335H (Appendix-4:182), and texts of the past.

In terms of their purpose and overall nature, Syedna Taher Saifuddin's *risālahs* retained much of the character of the earlier *risālahs* discussed in the previous chapter, but gained much more prominence because of the position of the author and the nature of the content. They were written to be sent out in the month of Ramaḍān like earlier *risālahs* but, with the gradual increase in length, the completion was often delayed for later *risālahs*. The actual writing was, however, always begun in the holy month. They were still in Arabic (with all the implications of that choice, discussed in the previous chapter), the *basmalah* was still written by hand, in limited copies by the author himself, even though the *risālah* was printed³⁹⁰, and they were still sent out to representatives of the Dā'ī to be used in sermons and lessons (*sabaqs*). With Syedna Taher Saifuddin's *risālahs*, however, frequency of usage and reference and, more importantly, the authority of the texts, was greater than before, primarily because of the direct authorship by the Dā'ī. In addition, they were taught and used as the basis for the annual oral examination in the Jami'ah Saifiyyah, the Fatimid-Ṭayyibī seminary founded by Syedna Taher Saifuddin on the basis of the Dars-e-Sayfī established by the forty-third Dā'ī. The *risālah*, as the statement at the end of each clearly states, was meant essentially for internal community consumption, to strengthen and consolidate the community from within.

³⁸⁹ A full set of Syedna Taher Saifuddin's *risālahs* was presented to the British Library and the Bodleian Library by Syedna Taher Saifuddin himself. Many of the *risālahs* are also held by library of the Ismaili Institute in London. The majority of the copies however remain within the community. It must be noted that Syedna Taher Saifuddin's literary output included also his *Diwān* which has *qasīdahs* in both Arabic, Urdu and Gujarati. Another major output was the many sermons in which he expounded on many issues of relevance to the community, reiterating esoteric interpretations of the Qur'ān by Fatimid-Ṭayyibī scholars in addition to expounding new interpretations based on his authority as the representative of the Imām.

³⁹⁰ See image of the first page of *Risālah-Ramaḍāniyyah*-1335H in Plate-VIIIb, in which the *basmalah* is written by Syedna Taher Saifuddin.

The *risālahs* of Syedna Taher Saifuddin were, according to him, both original composition (*taṣnīf*) and collation of excerpts from earlier texts (*ta'līf*). The Taḥmīd was the primary venue for *taṣnīf*, especially in Syedna Taher Saifuddin's earlier *risālahs*, and he used its potential to the utmost in order to express his insights into Fatimid-Ṭayyibī philosophy. The *ta'līf* formed the larger part of the main body (*matn*) of the earlier *risālahs*, in which excerpts from various Fatimid-Ṭayyibī texts, carefully selected on the basis of thematic relevance, were presented, each with a brief introduction by Syedna Taher Saifuddin. The *risālahs* were also valuable because they were repositories of excerpts from many manuscript texts and provided a proper table of contents (*fihrist*). The printed and, relatively speaking, readily accessible *risālahs* became an encyclopedia of Fatimid-Ṭayyibī theology and a vital resource for the various disciplines of Fatimid-Ṭayyibī learning. The extent and variety of *taṣnīf* and *ta'līf* increased concurrently over the years.

The impact of the Fatimid-Ṭayyibī tradition, especially the writing of al-Mu'ayyad and earlier *Rasā'il-Ramaḍāniyyah*, is clearly visible in both the *ta'līf* and the *taṣnīf* in Syedna Taher Saifuddin's *risālahs*. Syedna Taher Saifuddin is known to have browsed through many older *Rasā'il-Ramaḍāniyyah*, which were laid out on a table for him, while he was authoring his own *risālah*. The *ta'līf* section, the *matn*, consistently features passages from al-Mu'ayyad's *Majālis* and the earlier *risālahs*. But the influence of these can be seen in the *taṣnīf* section as well. The beginning of the Taḥmīd in *Risālah-Ramaḍāniyyah*-1335H (Appendix-4:182), for instance, is clearly inspired by the Taḥmīd in *Risālah-Ramaḍāniyyah*-1221H (Appendix-4:175), written in the time of the forty-third Dā'ī³⁹¹. Many other Fatimid-Ṭayyibī texts, especially the *Majālis* of al-Mu'ayyad, can be seen to have a strong echo in Syedna Taher Saifuddin's *risālahs*³⁹². Syedna Taher Saifuddin acknowledges this impetus of *iqtidā'* in his very first *risālah* during the *khīṭāb* following the Taḥmīd (p.16):

³⁹¹ The first few phrases in *Risālah-Ramaḍāniyyah*-1221H (Appendix-4:175) are identical to their counterparts in *Risālah-Ramaḍāniyyah*-1335H (Appendix-4:182). There are also other instances in which earlier *risālahs* are quoted in the Taḥmīd of *Risālah-Ramaḍāniyyah*-1335H referred to below. While the quotations in the *matn* of the *risālah* are introduced and referenced, the shorter quotations in the Taḥmīd are assimilated without reference.

³⁹² An illustration of al-Mu'ayyad's impact is Syedna Taher Saifuddin's recitation and explication of all 800 of al-Mu'ayyad's *Majālis* in community gatherings, one Majlis every Thursday, much like al-Mu'ayyad used to recite nine centuries earlier. Syedna Taher Saifuddin finished the 800 once and had started over again before he passed away (Khuzaima b. Syedna Taher Saifuddin).

أَسْعَى لِأَثَارِ دُعَاةِ قَبِيلِي هُدَاةٍ مُقْتَبِيًا، وَبُهْدَاهُمْ مُقْتَدِيًا،

Other examples of this influence will be highlighted during the analysis of the Ṭahmīd.

The format of the *Rasā'il-Ramaḍāniyyah* entails that the primary venue for Syedna Taher Saifuddin's contribution, and for originality, becomes the Ṭahmīd. The praise-preamble increases in length dramatically over the years, extending to over a hundred (A5) printed pages in the later *risālahs*. The consistency of the rhyme and rhythm, coupled with the fluidity of the language, also stands out in comparison with earlier *risālahs* in the Indian phase. The richness of vocabulary and mastery of language, highlighted in particular in those *risālahs* that boast *luzūm mā lā yalzam* (i.e. Ṭahmīds without *alif*, without *fā'*, without dotted letters etc.), is also a distinguishing feature. There is also a greater variety in the approaches to the Ṭahmīd: for example, while the Ṭahmīd of *Risālah-Ramaḍāniyyah*-1335H focuses on the necessity of the spiritual continuity of the Imāmate and the *Da'wah*, the Ṭahmīd in *Risālah-Ramaḍāniyyah*-1356H (Appendix-4:189), following Syedna Taher Saifuddin's Hajj, focuses on the esoteric signification of the rites and rituals of the pilgrimage. This also underlines the gradual development in Syedna Taher Saifuddin's Ṭahmīd over time. The Ṭahmīd becomes the prime venue for the author to contribute his insights into Fatimid-Ṭayyibī theology and esoterics.

The *matn* of the *Rasā'il-Ramaḍāniyyah* also sees development, with the gradual inclusion of new elements over time. Later *risālahs* also had answers to jurisprudential questions (*masā'il fiqhiyyah*) presented to the Dā'ī, historical narratives about past Fatimid-Ṭayyibī Dā'īs, edited sermons translated into Arabic and a chronicle of contemporary significant events authored by Syedna Taher Saifuddin.

However, the basic format of the *risālahs* as a whole, and of the Ṭahmīd in particular, did not change much over the years. While *risālahs* of earlier Dā'īs, for instance, might or might not feature *ṣalawāt* on the progeny of al-Ṭayyib, *ṣalawāt* on the Dā'īs and *qasīdahs*, Syedna Taher Saifuddin had a consistent structure from the very first *risālah*. The following is an outline of a typical Syedna Taher Saifuddin *risālah*:

- **Ṭahmīd** (addressing contemporary events or often with a particular theme)
 - **Ḥamd** (repeated 'x' times)
 - *Subḥāna*
 - **Shahādah**
 - *Allāh*
 - *Muhammad*
 - 'Alī ('*waliyy Allāh, waṣiyy rasūl Allāh*- very rare-one example 1356H; Appendix-4:189)
 - **Ṣalawāt**
 - Muhammad
 - 'Alī
 - Fāṭimah
 - Ḥasan and Ḥusayn
 - The Imāms
 - *Qaṣīdah* of praise
 - Al-Ṭayyib
 - Imām *al-'aṣr*
 - *Qaṣīdah* of praise (in later *risālahs*)
 - Culmination of *ṣalawāt* on Imāms
 - The Dā'īs
- **Ammā ba'd**
 - *Khīṭāb/salām* (formal address by Syedna Taher Saifuddin and greeting)
 - *Du'ā* (becomes longer in later *risālahs*, often quoted but many original *du'ās* also authored by Syedna Taher Saifuddin)
 - *Maw'izah* (spiritual exhortation; the *khutbahs* of 'Alī and excerpts of al-Mu'ayyad's *Majālis* become a standard feature)
- **Matn**-Main Body of *risālah*
 - Mostly thematically collated material from various sources with introduction and sometimes commentary by Syedna Taher Saifuddin.
 - Historical Narratives of previous Dā'īs (an original composition; a standard in later *risālahs*)
 - *Masā'il fiqhīyyah* (answers to jurisprudential questions posed to Syedna Taher Saifuddin by followers)
 - Chronicle of yearly events (a feature of later *risālahs*)
 - Syedna Taher Saifuddin's *wa'z* or sermons edited and translated into Arabic; these include his insights into Fatimid-Ṭayyibī esoterics.
- **End Ṭahmīd**

The combination of a protracted Ṭahmīd, elegant on the surface and with promise of deep esoteric signification, and a *matn* combining spiritual exhortation, history, religious philosophy, esoterics (*ta'wīl*), higher esoterics (*ḥaqīqah*) and jurisprudence, made Syedna Taher Saifuddin's *Rasā'il-Ramaḍāniyyah* a distinctive multi-disciplinary work: the diversity of the *matn* was anticipated and given foundation in the rich Ṭahmīd.