

# What the Prophet means to the Muslim

**H**uman destiny, by Islamic lights, is a matter of man having been placed on this earth by God that he may be put to the test — the test being of his capacity to make correct moral choices. It is for this purpose that man has been given complete freedom, for without such freedom, the divine test would have no meaning, no validity.

It is required of man that he should lead his life on earth following a regimen of strict self-discipline. Wherein should he find the guiding principles for such a course? The answer, according to Islam, is in prophethood. Throughout the history of mankind, God appointed certain human beings — prophets — who would be the recipients and conveyors of His guidance as sent through his angels. The last in the series was Prophet Muhammad.

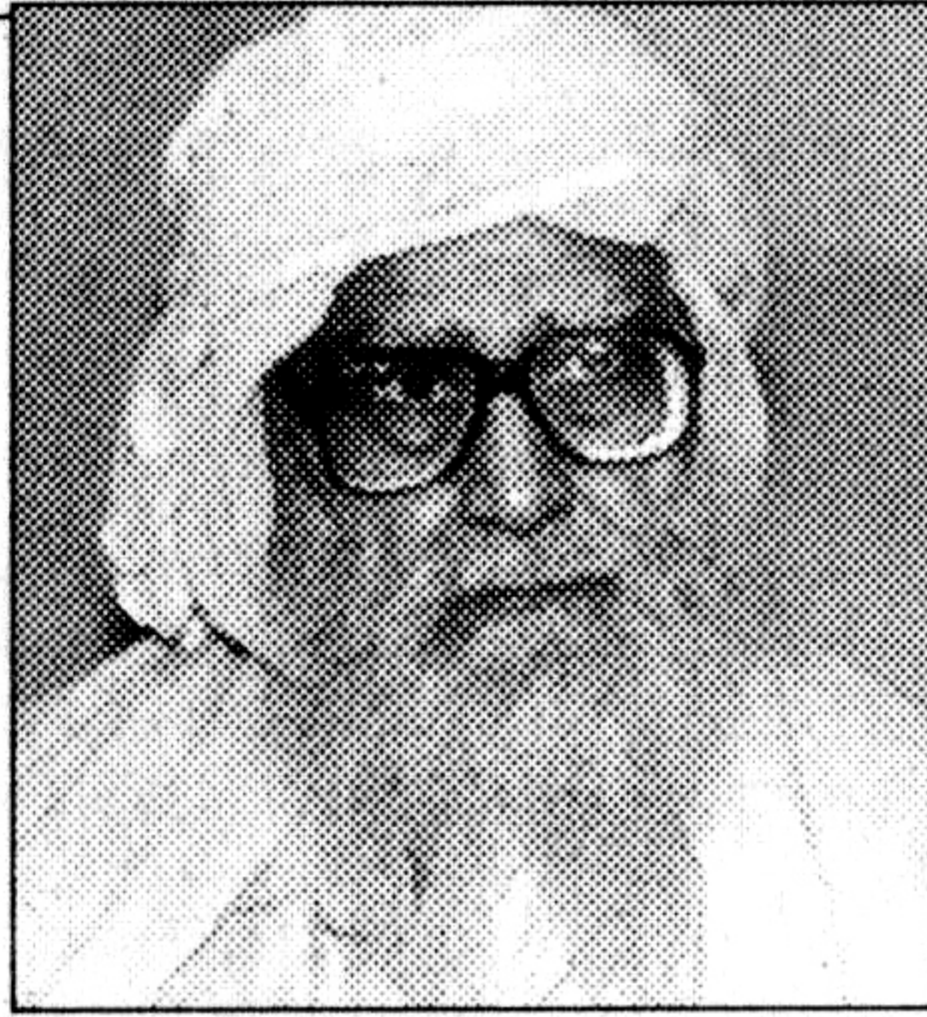
The concept of prophethood is totally different from that of incarnation. According to the latter, God himself is re-born in human shape on earth in order to give succour to humanity. But a prophet in the Islamic sense is a man just like any other: his uniqueness resides solely in his also being a messenger of God.

By Islamic tenets, prophethood is dependent not on inspiration, but on divine revelation. Inspiration is a common psychological phenomenon, of the kind experienced by a poet, whereas revelation is a true and direct divine communication. The Quran is a collection of these divine revelations, which the Prophet received over a period of 23 years.

According to Islam, prophethood is not acquired but God-given. That is, it is not possible to engage in spiritual exercises and then, as a result, be elevated to prophethood. Not even the Prophet had any say in this matter of selection. The choice depends upon God alone.

The Prophet's responsibility was to communicate the divine message to humanity. In doing so if he received a negative response from the people, or was even persecuted, he had nevertheless to follow a strict policy of

## Horizons



*Wahiduddin Khan*

non-confrontation, and had unilaterally to adopt the path of patience and forbearance. He was responsible only insofar as the conveying of the message was concerned. The response to, or acceptance of, the message, entirely depended on the addressees. But clearly, the greater the number who accepted the message, the greater the sphere in which a practical system of guidance sent by God became established.

The Quran testifies to the fact that God's messenger came in every age and in every region. According to a *hadith*, more than one lakh messengers were sent to guide the people. However, the prophets mentioned by name in the Quran are two dozen in number, Prophet Muhammad being the last. In the past, the need for new prophets had always arisen because God's religion, suffering from the vagaries of time, had frequently been distorted from its original form. New prophets had to come to the world time and time again in order to revivify the true spirit of religion, which had been lost when nations in ancient times, entrusted with the guardianship of the divine scriptures, repeatedly betrayed their trust, allowing the book of God to be laid waste. They had to right the wrongs done by human interpolations in the books they brought with them. But after

the Prophet Muhammad, the world will see no further prophets, for the Book which the Prophet gave to the world — the Quran — is still perfectly preserved in its original state. In the divine scheme of things, no further prophets are then required.

It is not only the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) Scripture which is preserved in its pristine state but his very spirit, for his utterances, the events of his life, the struggle of his prophetic mission, have all been fully recorded and have remained intact.

The Quran tells us that when the Prophet Muhammad proclaimed his prophethood, people found it difficult to believe in him. They asked, "What kind of messenger is this? He eats and drinks and moves about in the markets. If God had to send a prophet, why didn't He send an angel?"

In reply the Quran has this to say: "If the earth had been inhabited by angels, We would have sent an angel as a prophet, but since it is human beings who live on earth, a man has been selected as God's Messenger."

The Prophet then, as the bearer of God's message, had to project himself as a model for other human beings. The Quran, indeed, describes the Prophet as a model character. He experienced all that was experienced by others: grief and solace, advantages and disadvantages, pain and pleasure, etc. Yet he never wavered from the truth, thus setting an example of how others must abide by the truth on all occasions. This deprived wrongdoers of the excuse that they had no role model to show them the path God desired them to follow.

The messenger of God was born just like any other human being. He led his life just as others did. In this way, he clearly demonstrated that the way of life which he exhorted others to lead was entirely practicable. His words and deeds thus became a realistic example of how God's servants should conduct themselves on earth and what path they must opt for to avert God's displeasure and earn His blessings.