

Funerals

The Friday prayers had just finished at the Shah Jehan Mosque in Woking. It was a balmy August day and the small gathering of Muslims seemed to have come from all over the world: India, Arabia, Nigeria, Egypt and Tunisia. There were also some white converts. It was a year into the war and many of the people present knew someone serving in the trenches or who had died. Maulvi Sadr-ud-Din had said a prayer for everyone. But he was troubled. As the head of the only purpose-built mosque in Britain, the war had brought additional responsibilities.

Built in 1889, the Shah Jehan Mosque had been funded by the Begum of Bhopal and built by the Orientalist Dr Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner, a professor of Arabic and Islamic law, who had lived for several years in Istanbul, London and India. It was an inclusive mosque functioning within the remit of the West and attracted mostly middle class educated Muslims. The mosque, with its green dome and pillars, looked somewhat like the Brighton Pavilion, and was where Muslims around Britain gathered on Fridays and during the Eid festival. Visiting Muslim dignitaries made it a point to see the mosque when in Britain. Queen Victoria's munshi, Abdul Karim, used to worship there, as did the first Prime Minister of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

The mosque had fallen into disuse after Leitner's death in 1899, but was revived in 1912 when the Indian lawyer Khwaja Kamuluddin established the Woking Muslim Mission there and the Ahmadiya Muslims took over the running of the mosque. In 1913 Kamaluddin returned to Lahore and Sadr-ud-Din was sent to take charge as the head Maulavi. A highly articulate and scholarly man, Sadr-ud-Din was responsible for the first German translation of the Quran. On that August day, however, he was angry and upset. He had been forced to write a letter to the authorities criticising them for not doing enough for the Muslim soldiers who had died.

Sadr-ud-Din had been requested by the government to bury the Muslim soldiers who died in the hospitals in England. When he consented to do this, the letter was sent to the Viceroy and much publicity given in India to the fact that Muslims would be buried with full religious rites by the Imam of the mosque. Initially the burial ground at Netley Hospital was offered to him, but the Maulvi felt that it was not right for Muslims to be buried in a Christian cemetery. It would also be inconvenient for visitors as they would need the permission of the War Office to visit the burial grounds. Furthermore, as there were six hospitals in the area, it would not be possible for him to go from Woking to the various hospitals to carry out the burials. He had therefore requested that the Muslim soldiers be buried in grounds near the mosque at Woking.

It caused a great controversy but ultimately a plot of land was procured. However, the Maulvi, was not satisfied:

I then asked the government whether they would not (1) rail in the cemetery (2) make paths in the ground (3) provide a gravedigger (4) provide a caretaker (5) provide some place where the bodies should be left for the night (6) provide a decent waiting room (7) erect a gateway in Eastern style – however inexpensive – as a Memorial to the fallen Indian soldiers.

At first the government blankly refused to do anything, and many months went past. I could not bury the dead soldiers in the marshy piece of unfenced ground over which people and dogs could stray. Therefore I buried twenty-five of them in the Mahomedan burial ground at Brookwook at my own expense. This is now full, and I have already buried three in the new burial place, but though it is fenced in, it is in such a disgraceful state that it would not be policy to allow the Indian soldiers to go and see the burial place of their comrades. They have frequently asked, but I have had to put them off because – being a loyal subject of His Majesty – I did not desire to raise the resentment which must inevitably be felt when the truth becomes known of the manner in which the British government have treated their dead heroes.

I have had bodies sent to me bearing the wrong names, bodies sent without any flowers; bodies sent to me at any hour of the day or night without any previous notice, and no respect shown for them whatever – not even any military demonstration at their graves.

I desire to point out to the government the very grave danger of allowing the impression to gain ground in India that England is not showing sufficient respect to the memories of her Indian heroes.

I need not enlarge upon the very serious effect which an exposure of this kind would make, both among the soldiers at the front, and the entire population throughout India.¹

The Maulvi's scathing letter was not received well by Walter Lawrence, who was in charge of the welfare of Indian soldiers. Lawrence blamed Sadr-ud-Din for the problems. In his report to Lord Kitchener he said that the burial ground had been waterlogged because the Maulavi had been in a hurry and not waited for the trial pits to be sunk into the ground first. 'His object is to make mischief,' wrote Lawrence. The matter, he said, was in the hands of the India Office and the War Office had no responsibility. 'In France, where the burials and cremation are under the military authorities, and in England where cremation has been carried out by the same agency, the greatest pains have been taken and everything has been done to the complete satisfaction of the Hindus and Mahomedans,' Lawrence said.

The Maulvi's letter nevertheless had the desired effect. Efforts were made to ensure that the bodies of the Muslim soldiers were taken to Woking from hospitals in Brighton, Bournemouth and Netley in a convoy, with the body in a hearse and forty to fifty mourners in lorries. The Assistant Quarter Master of the Muslim priest at Woking Mosque, D.R. Thaper, wrote that each death meant a whole day's travel to London and back. Though Thaper was not a Muslim, he soon became proficient as an undertaker and the chief mourner. To make the Muslims feel that they had not been neglected, the souvenir on the Brighton Pavilion mentioned the fact that the Muslims were taken to Woking accompanied by a Muslim doctor and that the burial was conducted with full military honours including a firing party. This was circulated in India for the satisfaction of those Muslims who may have been critical of the British government for fighting the Turks.

A letter written from Brighton in January 1916 described the funeral of a fellow Muslim soldier: 'A fine coffin was provided on which his name and age were engraved. The inside was lined with silk cloth and cushions of silk. In our country doubtless only the greatest in the land are furnished with coffins of this sort. He was buried in a Muslim cemetery near London with great honour and dignity.'²