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Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (971/1564-1034/1624): A Socio-Religious Reformer of Mughal India

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Abstract

Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi, also known as *Mujaddid-i alf-i thani*, was a well-known Sufi of the Naqshbandi order in 16th-17th century Mughal India. The period during which he lived has been seen by many as a challenging period for the Muslim intelligentsia, in the wake of numerous religious experiments carried out by the Mughal Emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605). The religious classes, perceiving these experiments as attacks on Islam, tried to find politically pragmatic solutions to deal with the circumstances. Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi also sensed the danger ahead and tried to instill an intellectual awakening among Muslims. He not only discussed socio-religious and political matters, but also tried to inculcate the Islamic ethos and restore Islamic *shariah* in everyday lives. He was well versed in Islamic sciences and *tasawwuf* (Sufism), and as a result of his efforts to awaken Muslims from their political and religious stupor, he came to be known as the Revivalist of the Second Millennium (*Mujaddid-i alf-i thani*). He attempted to halt the waning of the influence of the Muslim religious classes in India by trying to enact an Islamic renaissance and the implementation of a more orthodox interpretation of Islamic *shariah* than that espoused by the Mughal authorities. He had unique ideas for transforming the ruling elite and the society. His thoughts and the politico-religious ideas of renewal (*tajdid*) and revival of the prophetic tradition (*ihya al-sunnah*) are found in his *Maktubat*, *Ithbat al-Nubuwwah*, *Radd-i Rawafid* and *Ma'arif Laduniyah* and other writings. This paper examines Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi's political and religious thoughts and ideas from his Arabic and Persian writings, including secondary works in Urdu and English.

Keywords: Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi, *Mujaddid-i alf-i thani*, *tajdid*, Shariah, Indian political philosophy.

Introduction

Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi was born during one of the most arduous and tumultuous periods for Muslims in India, during which they had lost their religious and political grip. The selfish and unethical Muslim leadership took care of its own interests, leaving the common people at the mercy of the deviant rulers. With the accelerating decadence of the ruling class, the intellectuals helplessly watched the vulnerability and deterioration of the community. It was at this critical juncture that the Muslim community of the Subcontinent produced the monumental *mujaddid*, Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi. He is commonly known as the Renewer of the Second Millennium (*Mujaddid-i alf-i thani*), and he himself claimed to be a *Mujaddid*.¹ In India, Shaykh Ahmad was given the sobriquet of *Mujaddid* by Abdul Hakim Siyalkoti,

¹Rahman Ali, *Tadhkira-i-Ulama-i-Hind*, (Lucknow, 1894) 12; Burhan Ahmad Faruqi, *The Mujaddid's Conception of Tawhid*, (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1940) 1.

Shaykhul Islam during the reign of Emperor Shahjahan (1628-1658).² Afterwards many prominent scholars acknowledged him as *Mujaddid*, including Shah Wali Allah (1703-1762) and his son Shah Abdul Aziz (1746-1824).

Family Background and Birth

Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi was a descendant of Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second Pious Caliph, on the twenty-ninth generation.³ He was born at Sirhind on Friday 14th Shawwal 971/26th May 1564. The town of Sirhind is in fact *Sahrand* meaning alluvial land ('a forest of tigers'). The foundation of this town was laid during the reign of Sultan Firoz Shah Tughluq (1351-1388). Once Saiyid Jalal al-Din Bukhari (1308-1385 CE) was travelling to Delhi along with his disciple Imam Rafiuddin (the fifth ancestor of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi) to meet Sultan Firoz Shah when they reached at the village of Sarayas, 6 Kos away from Sirhind town (about 18 miles).⁴ The inhabitants of the village requested Saiyid Jalal after meeting with the Sultan kindly ask him to found a town between the villages of Sarayas and Samana due to their fear of the wild animals in the dense forest when officials came from Sarayas to Samana for collection of the annual revenue. After listening to the request, Firoz Shah Tughluq decided to lay the foundation of a town under the supervision Khwajah Fathullah, the older brother of Imam Rafiuddin. The Sultan ordered Khwajah to march with 2000 soldiers and laid the foundations of the city, first building a fort. However, every day when a wall was constructed the next day it was repeatedly demolished. When Saiyid Jalal al-Din Bukhari heard he wrote Imam Rafiuddin to go and laid the foundation of the fort and settled there. This fort was originally outside the city but due to population growth and urban sprawl it ultimately became central in the town by 1037/1627. This city was called Sahrand, meaning alluvial land (*Kachhar*). After a long span of time Sahrand became Sirhind, the birth place of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi.⁵

Shaykh Abdul Ahad (1521-1598), the father of Shaykh Ahmad taught him the Qur'an from his infancy, and also taught him *Manqul* and *Ma'qul*. Apart from his father he studied with various teachers like Maulana Kamal Kashmiri, Maulana Shaykh Yaqub Kashmiri who taught him hadith and Qadi Bahlol Badakhshi taught him a variety of books. Shaykh Ahmad completed his education by the age of seventeen.⁶

² Ghulam Sarwar Lahori, *Khazinat al-Asfiya*, (Kanpur, 1902) 614; Yohanan Friedmann, *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi An outline of His Thought and a Study of His Image in the Eyes of Posterity*, (Montreal & London: McGill University Press, 1971) 13-4.

³ Shaykh Ahmad bin Shaykh Abdul Ahad bin Shaykh Zainul Abidin bin Shaykh Abdul Haye bin Shaykh Mohammad bin Shaykh Habibullah bin Shaykh Imam Rafiuddin bin Shaykh Nasiruddin bin Shaykh Sulaiman bin Shaykh Yusuf bin Shaykh Ishaq bin Shaykh Abdullah bin Shaykh Shoib bin Shaykh Ahmad bin Shaykh Yusuf bin Shaykh Shahabuddin Farrukh Shah Kabuli bin Shaykh Nasiruddin bin Shaykh Mahmud bin Shaykh Sulaiman bin Shaykh Masud bin Shaykh Abdullah Waiz Al-asghar bin Shaykh Abdullah Waiz Al-Akbar bin Shaykh Abdul Fath bin Shaykh Ishaq bin Shaykh Ibrahim bin Shaykh Nasir bin Shaykh Abdullah bin Umar bin Hafs bin Asim bin Umar al-Khattab. See Muhammad Hashim Kishmi, *Zubdat al-Maqamat*, (Lucknow: Nawalkishor, 1890) 127-8.

⁴ Kishmi (1890) 88-9.

⁵ Muhammad Qasim Hindu Shah Farishta, *Tarikh-i-Farishta*, Vol. I, (Bombay, 1247/1832) 88.

⁶ S. Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi, *Tarikh Da'wat wa Azimat*, Vol. IV (Lucknow: Majlis Tahqiqat wa Nashriyat Islam, 1980) 140.

After completing his studies he went to Agra and started delivering lectures there in 1590. His daily lectures were notably inspiring and revealing, and generated a crowd of regular attendees of his circle. Shaykh Ahmad's fame and brilliance draw the attention of Faizi (1547-1595) and AbulFazl (1551-1602), the Emperor Akbar's courtier. Soon they became close associates, but Sirhindi's association with the latter did not last long due to AbulFazl's un-Islamic behaviour.⁷ On the advice of his father, Sirhind moved from Agra to Sirhind, halting at Thanesar in Uttar Pradesh on their way home, where he took part in rigorous Sufi training and studied the famous books on *tassuwuf*. The local nobleman Shaykh Sultan was amazed by Sirhindi's piety and benevolence, and consequently offered his daughter in marriage to him.⁸ After his father's death at Sirhind, Shaykh Ahmad decided to go for hajj in 1007/1597.⁹

Sojourn to Delhi

At the age of 28, Shaykh Ahmad intended to go for hajj and went to Delhi and met Khwajah Abdul Baqi Naqshbandi (1563-1603), popularly known as Baqi Billah, in 1008/1598. During his first meeting Khwajah persuaded Sirhindi to stay for a few days with him, which ultimately became a three month sojourn during which he became immersed in the secrets of *tassawwuf*, particularly the Naqshbandi order. When he decided to go back to Sirhind, Khwajah Baqi requested that he impart education and training in *tariqah* (Sufi Order) to a few *murid* (disciples).¹⁰ He subsequently returned to Sirhind and was busy in giving lectures, educating people and training disciples.

He visited Delhi three times during the lifetime of his spiritual guide Khwajah Baqi Billah, and while on a visit to Lahore he heard of Khwajah's death on 29th November, 1603, so he rushed to Delhi and visited the grave of his spiritual guide. Afterwards he returned to Sirhind and kept himself busy in his *khanqah* (hospice) and educating people there. On the occasion of Khwajah's annual *urs* (death anniversary), Sirhind performed his last journey to Delhi and returned to Sirhind in 1604.¹¹

Emperor Akbar (1556-1605)

Succeeded on the death of his father, 14th February 1556, proclaimed as Emperor by his guardian, Bairam Khan, and ascended the *musnaid* at the Takht-i-Akbari, in the Imperial Camp near Kalanaur, Gurdaspur, Punjab, on 15 January 1556. At that juncture Mughal rule in India was in its infancy because of Humayun's defeat at the hands of Sher Shah (r. 1540-1545) in 1540, and after a long gap of 15 years Humayun regained Indian territory with the help of Shah Tahmasp (1524-1576), the Safavid ruler of Persia. Humayun was under the influence of Iranians because of his marriage with the sister of Shah and temporary acceptance of Shia belief in Persia. In the early years of Akbar's reign Bairam Khan, also a follower of Ithna Ashari belief, was appointed as his guardian.¹²

After Bairam Khan's death Akbar attained his majority and assumed government at the age of 18. Akbar was literally uneducated in terms of literary and scholarly knowledge, but he proved adept and

⁷Kishmi (1890) 6.

⁸Kamaluddin M. Ihsan, *Rawdat al-Qayyumiya*, Urdu trans. (Lahore, 1336) 67-8.

⁹Kishmi (1890), 123; Nadvi (1980) 140-2.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 139.

¹¹Muhammad Masud Ahmad, *Seerat-i-Mujaddid Alf Thani*, (Karachi: Imam Rabbani Foundation, 2005) 116.

¹²I. H. Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent (610-1947) A Brief Historical Analysis*, (The Hague: Mouton & co., 1962) 137-8.

intelligent at dealing with administrative affairs. Akbar's reign can be studied based on three distinct phases, as explored below.

The First Phase (1556-1575)

This phase begins just after the death of Bairam Khan in 1560. In his early days Akbar was devoted to the Islamic faith and was very concerned about his daily practice. He paid much attention and devotion towards the *Ulama* and held them in high esteem,¹³ but he became disillusioned by witnessing their hair-splitting and mutual jealousy and scheming among them, turning the royal court into a battleground between opportunists who undermined each other with slander. It became the routine behaviour of scholars to act in front of the young king.¹⁴ Akbar turned to Shaykh Mubarak Nagori (1506-1593) and his sons Faizi and AbulFazl, undermining the influence of the traditional *Ulama* in the court, which proved to be a turning point in Akbar's life, belief and daily practices. In addition, Akbar's marriage to the Rajput princess, the daughter of Bhara Mal, and his son Prince Salim's marriage to another princess from the same family gave the Rajputs significant clout at court. The Rajput women in the *harem* wielded much influence in various matters. For reasons of realpolitik, Akbar abolished the *jizya* in 972/1564.¹⁵

The Second Phase (1575-1578)

Akbar ordered the construction of *IbadatKhana* (Hall of Worship) in 1575,¹⁶ in which the Emperor and hundreds of scholars, mostly Muslims, gathered every Friday night to discuss religious and philosophical issues. Subsequently, arguments began among the scholars on certain issues that turned into ugly debates and accusations of deviancy and apostasy, ultimately causing physical fighting in the Hall.¹⁷ Akbar thus underwent a secondary disillusionment with the *Ulama* and with religion and religious belief itself. Subsequently, Akbar increasingly gave ear to scholars from different faiths, particularly Hindu Brahmins, Catholic missionaries, Zorostrains, *mobeds*, Jain anchorites and rationalists. The *Ulama* sought rapprochement with Akbar, and they affirmed a testimony (*mahzar*) prepared by Shaykh Mubarak in 987/1579, conferring all authority on Akbar and testifying that he was 'the just, most conversant and most God-fearing, he had full control to rule in matters in which they differed'.¹⁸

The Third Phase (1582-1605)

The third phase started with the initiation of a new Divine Religion (*Din-i-Ilahi*)/*Tawhid-i-Ilahi* for the introduction of the second millennium.¹⁹ In this new era there would be a new religion, new laws, a new ruler and a new calendar (disseminated among the public by proclamations on coins).²⁰ Akbar declared himself *khalifa* (vicegerent), and accorded himself self-recognition as the Perfect Man, familiar with the

¹³ Abdul Qadir Badauni, *Muntakhabul-Twarikh*, Vol. II. (Calcutta, 1286/1869) 315; Muhammad Husain Azad, *Darbar-i-Akbari*, (Lahor: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2001) 36.

¹⁴ Ghulam Ali Azad Bilgrami, *Ma'athirul-Kiram*, (Agra, 1328/1910) 40.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 198; Nadvi (1980) 100.

¹⁶ Badauni (1869) 315; Abdullah Niyazi gave the name *IbadatKhana*.

¹⁷ Badauni (1869) 315, 465.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 271-3; Khwajah Nizamudin Ahmad, *Tabaqat-i-Akbari*, 343-4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 325; Nadvi (1980) 140-2.

²⁰ Badauni (1869) 301.

famous heretical views of Ibn al-Arabi.²¹ His followers greeted each other with *Allah-u-Akbar* and they responded with the greeting *Jalla-Jalaluhu*. Akbar disavowed belief in the Qur'an, life after death and the day of Judgement, and he actively opposed the teachings of Islam, forcing people to perform *Sajdah* (prostration) before him and declaring wine lawful, abolishing *jizya* and prohibiting the slaughtering of cows, while swine and dogs were elevated to the status of signs of God. Under this regime, Akbar made *halal* the prohibited activities of usury, gambling, drinking alcohol and eating pork; amended Muslim matrimonial laws; and forbade eating beef, *pardah* (veiling) and circumcision. Prostitution was legalized and dedicated brothels were established in all cities and towns. The *Hijri* calendar was replaced by *Ilahi* months and years. The *adhan* (call for prayer) was banned, the five daily prayers were abolished and mosques were transformed into store rooms with Hindu guards. All Islamic practices were entirely replaced by the Emperor's orders, and Akbar discouraged the use of the names of the Prophet, like Ahmad, Muhammad and Mustafa.²² The utter effacement of Islam during this phase of Akbar's reign meant that the continuity of the religion's long presence in India could only be guaranteed by the emergence of a *mujaddid* to revitalise the turmoil effected in the society by the deviant practices of Akbar.

The Role of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi

Emperor Akbar's un-Islamic policies seriously affected Muslims' beliefs and daily practices. His fundamental delusion was that the religion of the Prophet had run its course, and should be replaced by a new religion. Indeed, he initiated an assorted creed of his own i.e. *Din-i-Ilahi*, assisted by Hindu and Zoroastrian priests and opportunist *Ulama* in the rationalization of un-Islamic practices. Thus, Muslims suffered from intense persecution and had no champion or defender among their traditional leaders.

Non-believers publicly mocked and criticized Islam and the Muslims. Hindus celebrated their festivals in every part of the country with great pomp, while the Muslims were not permitted to display any religious signs or practices. On the occasion of *ekadasi* (a Hindu rite involving a fast) Muslims were forbidden from eating and drinking in public, while Hindus ate and drank freely during the month of Ramadan. During *EidulAdha* if Muslims slaughtered a cow their lives were forfeit. A large number of mosques were demolished by Hindus and temples were constructed on their foundations.²³

Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi was one of the rarest persons in Muslim India who made his life mission of the propagation of Islam and the implementation of Shariah in the lives of Muslims. Sirhindi was a greatest and rarest reformer who wanted to rejuvenate the reform movement in a very large scale. For that purpose he targeted the three groups of Muslim society: *Ulama*, Sufis and the nobility. He worked upon them to make them to practice Shariah on a better way and inculcated in them the religious ethos so that they would implement Shariah in their respective areas. After studying closely and analysing the socio-religious conditions of his times, he concluded that there were three main reasons for the Muslims' deviation in their daily lives: *Ulama-i-Su* (the worldly divines), deviant Sufis and the imperial administrative machinery (i.e. the emperor and nobility). If they accepted the purpose of Islam and *Shariah* then reform would be very easy, and the common people would be inspired. Sirhindi primarily targeted the third group of people (i.e. the elite class), who were most intertwined with the other two,

²¹Ibn al-Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam*, Eng. trans. Khaja Khan (Madras, 1928) 6; Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964) 171; Qureshi (1962) 145.

²²Badauni (1869) 203-307, 314; Burhan Ahmad Faruqi (1940) 6-8.

²³Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi, *Maktubat-i-Imam-i-Rabbani*, (ed. Nur Ahmad Amritsar, 1334 AH) Vol. II, 92.

and tried to inculcate Shariah among them. A study of Sirhindi's letters reveals that he considered the elite to be like the heart or animating spirit in the body, determining the functions of the other organs and limbs, thus if it is rotten then the entire body will collapse. However, given that the corruption and abasement of Islam had originated among this very class, thus Sirhindi had a formidable task. However, his arduous and steady working strategies and efforts began to turn the tide, prompting him to write a series of letters to Akbar and Jahangir's (1605-1627) nobles citing examples from the Qur'an and *hadith*. He espoused the subsequent means to make his plan successful.

He trained a number of *murid* for *da'wah* and dispatched them in every region to preach Islam based on the Qur'an and Sunnah with special emphasis on *ittiba-i-Sunnah*. The movement sought to bring people back to the path of *Shariah* not only inside the country, but outside the borders of India in neighbouring Muslim countries.²⁴ He wrote letter to eminent persons in different parts of India inculcating the idea and emphasizing the importance of *ittiba-i-Sunnah*.²⁵ He selected a number of prominent nobles of the Mughal court as his *murid* and made them a means to exchange a few words and influence the mind and heart of Emperor at opportune junctures,²⁶ and with the death of Akbar the movement of Sirhindi could openly pursue a vigorous drive to call for orders to conform with *Shariah*. Sirhindi extended scope and area of his *dawah* to the imperial army and many powerful commanders were his disciples.²⁷

Asaf Khan, the prime minister of Emperor Jahangir, encouraged the latter to halt Sirhindi's growing influence in India, which was extending to Iran, Turan and Badakhshan. He also advised that soldiers should be banned from attending his circle, and he petitioned to imprison Shaikh Sirhindi. However, it was not easy to imprison Sirhindi because of his widespread influence over the powerful nobles. Jahangir ordered him to present himself at the court and demanded *Sajdah-i-Ta'zimi* (prostration) as a pretext to arrest him; when Sirhindi naturally refused he was imprisoned in Gwalior Fort and released after two years in 1028/1618.²⁸ The imprisonment of Sirhindi angered many nobles and a few rebelled, but Sirhindi requested his followers to cooperate with the Emperor.

In jail, Sirhindi's preaching led to many prisoners accepting Islam, and the repentance of Muslim prisoners. The Emperor desired to meet Sirhindi, who called on the ruler to implement *Shariah* and restore the dignity and honour of Islam and Muslims. Most of these demands were accepted, and the

²⁴Kamaluddin M. Ihsan (1336) 166-7.

²⁵Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (1334), Vol. I, 25, 36, 41, 42, 44, 75, 79, 114, 152, 165, 195, 249, 254, 255, 272.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 23, 25, 36, 43-54, 65-72, 119-21, 191, 195, 198, 209, 214, 228, 231, 238.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 170-174; Nuruddin Muhammad Jahangir, *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, ed. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (Aligarh: Aligarh Institute Press, 1300) 273.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 175-186.

king gave him a robe of honour.²⁹ Sirhindi was free to leave or to become an adviser of Jahangir.³⁰ It was indeed the achievement of a *Mujaddid* to restore Islamic Shariah in the daily lives of the Muslim of the Indian Subcontinent. Sirhindi inculcated the ethos of Islam and the study of the Qur'an and *hadith*, which had been neglected and subsequently suppressed throughout the Mughal Empire. Sirhindi was successful in his mission of *Ittiba-i-Sunnah*. It was for this greatest reform or *Tajdid* that he was popularly known as the Renewer of the Second Millennium (*Mujaddid-i alf-i thani*).

Conclusion

While a general appraisal of Sirhindi's efforts would conclude that he was largely successful in his main objective (the restoration of the Shariah in India), this does not take into account the unusual Sufi

²⁹Nuruddin Muhammad Jahangir (1300) 308.

³⁰Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (1336), Vol. III, 43,44.

approach to the implementation of Shariah espoused by him. His primary objective was the restoration of Islamic creed in daily lives of Muslim society. He wrote various letters to Mughal officers in which he stipulated the complete execution of the Shariah by the state. The majority of Sirhindi's letters integrated his Sufi ideas into a more mainstream Sunni practice of Islam. He called this success the 'perfection of prophecy' and upheld that a state of grace could be reached only by diligently following the path of the Prophet and his companions. Although a dedicated Sufi, Sirhindi was a pragmatic thinker interested mainly in the relationships between religion and state and between Muslims and Hindus. The core of his interest lay in the discovery of the Sufi mysteries, which inspired him to become a practising Muslim. His thoughts and ideas give a greater weight to the basic facts of life.