

Some Features of Shaikh Abdul Ḥaq Muḥadith Dehlawī's *Akḥbār al- Akhyār fī Asrār al-Abrār*

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Introduction

One of the most dependable and scholarly collection of biographies of Indian Sufis is the *Akḥbār Al-Akhyār fī Asrār Al-Abrār*. The author, Shaikh Abdul Ḥaq Muḥadith Dehlawī was born in January/February 1551 and died in 1642. His entire life was spent on unremitting pursuit of knowledge, and his studies took place both in India and Hejaz. Being trained as a scholar of *Ḥadīth*, he was famous as Muḥadith. His close male ancestors and relatives were also scholars and mystics. His library was extensive and included all the *malfuẓāt* and Sufi works written in India, as well as large number of books written outside India. Shaikh Abdul Ḥaq was a masterly critic of *Ḥadīth* and was therefore well equipped to investigate the authenticity and historical value of religious traditions and his skill is fully demonstrated in seminal work *Akḥbār Al-Akhyār fī Asrār Al-Abrār*.

According to S.A.A. Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, his writings on Sufism are generally an attempt to reconcile *Sharī'ah* with the *Ṭarīqah*, nevertheless they also assert superiority of Shaikh 'Abdul Qādir Jīlānī among the saints and the concept of *wahdat al-wajūd*. His celebrated *Akḥbār Al-Akhyār*, relating to Indian Sufis emphasizes the belief that Shaikh Abdul Qādir Jīlānī was superior to all his predecessors and that his precedence over the future generations of saints of Allah (□) was also guaranteed. To Shaikh Abdul Ḥaq, *Gauth Al-A'zam*'s claim "my foot is on the neck of every saint of God" was a well-documented statement. Using a model of *Ṭabaqāt* literature of the biographies of narrators and transmitters of *Aḥadīth* and of the Sufi *Ṭabaqāt* literature, Shaikh Abdul Ḥaq classified the biographies into three sections.¹ Such a classification helped the Shaikh to place the biographies of Sufis whose dates were questionable into a reasonable historical sequence, avoiding dates based on unauthentic traditions. He scrupulously excluded all references to supernatural and miraculous elements, highlighting instead the

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mystical and spiritual ideas, ethical behavior and psychological perceptions of the great Sufis, using *Malfuzāt* and the letters and writings of the Sufis themselves. Although a large number of *Malfuzāt* have now been discovered, a considerable body of such literature still remains in obscurity and best source of information still remains the *Akhhār Al-Akhyār*. The *Akhhār Al-Akhyār* was completed in 996 A.H./1588 C.E., but revised and completed three years later. Some of the sources of information available to the Shaikh are now extinct according to S. S. A. Rizvi and the work remains an invaluable mine of information for Indian Sufi for the period of Shaikh Mu‘īnuddīn Chistī to Shaikh Abdul Ḥaq’s own day.²

Shaikh Abdul Ḥaq translated the famous collection of the sermons of Shaikh Abdul Qādir Jīlānī “*Futuḥ Al-Ghayb*” into Persian. The translation went a long way in popularizing the teachings of the Shaikh Abdul Qādir and got published several times in India. Shaikh Abdul Ḥaq was a disciple of Shaikh Muhammad Musā Qādrī and Shaikh Abdul Maali Qādrī.

Style of Writing:

Though a prolific writer, Shaikh Abdul Ḥaq had maintained high level of scholarship in his writings. He scrupulously edited the vast material he marshaled for effective and apt presentation for posterity. He is conscious of beauty in written expressions and proclaims that it is *dhauq* (special inclination for writing) only which makes it an essential feature of effective writings. He expresses it, thus:

"بے زوق چه نویسد که رونق سخن در ذوق است."³

While most of his writings are manifestation of “*Āamad*” (inspiration) some of his letters are exceptions to it. Some expressions, seem to have been made intentionally complex in order to ensure “*Satro Kitman*” (secrecy and hiddenness).⁴

Abdul Ḥaq was not only a scholar saint but a litterateur and high-level researcher as well. Hence his works bear testimony of his very lucid style of writing while maintaining the authentic exposition of the relevant material on the subject. His style of introducing the subject has resemblance with that of Sa‘di Shirazī (1292 C.E.) as he appeared in *Gulistāni-i Sa‘dī. Akhhār al-Akhyār* Introduction runs thus:

شکر و حضرت و ابیب العظیبات را تعالی و تقدس که عطای او را پایاں نیست و شکر الای او در چیز امکان نه اول نعمتها نعمت وجود دست و سایر نعم بعد از دی مشهور و نعمت وجود دائم و دوام نعمت را دوام شکر لازم پس از عهده شکر آن که بر آید تا به شکر نعمتهای دیگر زبان بکشاید.⁵

Sa'di Shirazi has the following lines in his introduction to *Gulistāni-i Sa'dī*:

منت خداے را عزوجل که طاعش موجب قربت استوبه شکر اندرش فریه نعمت بر نفس که فرومی رود ممد حیات است و چون پری آید مفرح ذات۔ پس در هر نفس دو نعمت موجود است و بر نعمت شکرے واجب۔⁶

Shaikh Abdul Ḥaq employs a linguistic style which is clear smooth and flowing without ambiguities, while Quranic and Arabic words and phrases are frequently used in such a beautiful and natural form that they not only hamper the transmission of the ideas rather produces more force and precision in them. This only speaks of author's mastery of languages, Persian and Arabic and also of the subject matter of the work.

اول آنکه وجود اولیاء اللہ رحمتیست شامل و نعمتی بهمہ کس و اصل پس بموجب وَاَمَّا بِنِعْمَتِ رَبِّكَ فَحَدِّثْ ذکر مناقب و فضایل ایشان که در معنی شکر این نعمت عظمی و عطیہ کبری است لازم باشد و اعتقاد و صحبت این صفا کیشان واجب و محتمم⁷

Akhbār Al-Akhyār in line with other Sufistic literature abounds with induction of appropriate verses higher realities couched beautifully in brief versified expressions.

اگر چه جمال محمد در تمام آل محمد تابان است لیکن در این جا جمال دیگرست و کمال دیگرست جمال جمال محمد است و کمال کمال محمد اَللّٰهُمَّ صَلِّ عَلٰی مُحَمَّدٍ و عَلٰی آلِ مُحَمَّدٍ۔۔۔

عالم ظهور نور کمال محمد ست آدم مثال حسن و جمال محمد ست⁸.

Nature of Teaching of Saints Highlighted

Shaikh Abdul Ḥaq has often quoted excerpts from the letters of various saints to their disciples highlighting the special instructions related to spiritual path. In one such letter written by Shaikh Shrafuddin Yahyā Munīrī (d. 1381 C.E./782 A.H) and addressed to his disciple and *Khalīfah* Shaikh Muẓẓafar Balkhī (d. 1400 C.E.), the saint explains that only seeker after truth

realizes the actual import of trials and tribulation faced by him in the world unlike those superficial perceptions that see only negative of adversities.⁹ Excerpts such as the one quoted here also highlight the efforts of real saints to demonstrate to their disciples the qualities and the way of the real saints as compared to those pseudo-saints who are bereft of such qualities.

Socio-Political and Historical Situation Revealed

While *Akhhbār Al-Akhyāris* primarily concerned with the saints' lives and their spiritual and religious contributions and achievements, it nevertheless reveals lot of information relating to the nature of socio-political and historical situations of the time and place of the saints. An anecdote is quoted which focuses on the level of intolerance, prejudice and hostile activities of Hindus against Muslims in the beginnings of Muslim presence in some areas of northern India, here specifically at Narnol (Nowadays in northern Indian state of Haryana). Here Hindus were bent on devastating Muslims. Once while Muslims were offering their Eid prayers, Hindus attacked the unarmed Muslims and killed large number of them including Shaikh Mohammad Turk Narnoli.¹⁰

شیخ محمد ترک نرنولی او از ترکستان است و از آنجا بدیار بند رسید و در نرنول ساکن شد۔۔۔ در اوایل اسلام کافران در نرنول قوت داشتند و مسلمانان در شهر اندک و بندوان فرصت نگاه میداشتند روز عید بود و در نماز یکبارگی بر سر مسلمان ریختند و شهید ساختند بسیار از مسلمانان در آن روز بسعادت شهادت رسیدند و شیخ محمد ترک نیز بمهه را آن روز شهید شد۔۔۔

The attitude of the rulers of Delhi sultanate (1206–1526 C.E.) towards saints and vice versa is revealed in the book. Sulṭān Shamsuddīn Altamash (r. 1211 – 1236 C.E.) was famously disposed to the saintly person and included them in consultation and in the administration of the state Altamash appointed Maulānāb Mujadiddin Hājī as administrator of Delhi.¹¹

سلطان شمس الدین انا الله بریانه اورا صد ولایت خویش ساخت و اراضی نبود تا دو سال ضبط ممت این منصف بروج اتم نمود۔۔۔ سلطان شمس الدین التماس اورا مبزول داشت و از منصب صدارت اورا اخلاص کرد۔

Among the Sultans of Delhi, Sulṭān Sikander's period was one of peace and prosperity. He was a pious man and possessed high character. He was

particularly inclined towards scholars, pious people and saints. He was a poet and had adopted *Gulrukh* as his eponym.¹²

--- منو سلطان سکندر با شاعران نشست و برخاست بسیار داشت و خود بهم صاحب طبع بود و گاه گاهی نظمی به
تخلص گلرخ بآن روشن قدیم هندوستان میگفت و صحبت اور به شیخ جمالی ازین ریگزر خوش برآمده بود---

During Sulṭān Sikander's period many scholars and saints were attracted to the scholarly and saintly disposition of the ruler and his administrators, thereby shifted from Arab and non-Arab countries and took India as a place of permanent residence.¹³

زمان دولت سکندر زمان صلاح و تقوی و دیانت و امانت و علم و وقار بود--- لہذا از اکناف عالم از عرب و عجم بعضی
بسابقہ استدعا و طالب و بعضی بی آن در عہد دولت او تشریف آورہ توطن این دیار اختیار کردند---

Some rulers were prejudiced against saints and scholars and even harassed and persecuted them. Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlak (1325 to 1351 C.E.) is one such ruler who would, it seemed, derive sadistic pleasure by subjecting the saints to torture and humiliations. Most of the saints would tolerate his indignations while some would react with hard counter arguments like Shaikh Ṣalāḥuddīn Darvesh.¹⁴

--- آنچه از جانب سلطان محمد بن تغلق شاه بمشائخ از ایزا و تکلیف سرسید شیخ نصیر الدین آن ہمہ را بوصیت
مشائخ خود تحمل میکرد و بر میداشت بخلاف شیخ صلاح الدین کہ با سلطان مذکور سخت پیش می آمد---

Akḥbār Al-Akhyār is an authentic compendium of Indian scholars and saints. The author has introduced the book with the description of his choicest saints and one of the outstanding saint head of the Sufi order, *Qadriya*, Shaikh Abdul Qādir Jīlānī (d. 1166 C.E.). The Indian saints discussed in the book have been arranged in the historical sequence. He has broadly divided the saints into three categories. The first one discusses Khawajā Mu‘inuddīn Chistī Ajmeri (d. 1236 C.E.), his contemporaries, his disciples and *Khulafā* of his order. In the second category the author highlights the lives and achievements of Baba Farīduddīn Ganj Shagr (d. 1266 C.E.), his contemporaries and disciples. The third category is comprised of Khawajā Naṣiruddīn Chirāg Dehlawī (d. 1356 C.E.) his contemporary saints and his disciples. Then he discusses some *Majazib* and lady saints.¹⁵ In the end he discusses his own ancestors and his

personal details with his assessment and impression of his contemporary giant saint Shaikh Aḥmad Sirhandī(d.1624 C.E.)

The book *Akḥbār Al-Akhyār* speaks of the author's scholarship, profundity, ability to critically evaluate the material and superb command of arranging the diverse and exhaustive material in the lucid language and scholarly style. Some of the salient features of the book are:

1. Only authentic information about saints have been included, extraneous details have been excluded. The author has exercised his ability in subjecting the material to highest level of critical appreciation.
2. The author has not contended itself with simple description of the saints but often quotes excerpts from the books of the saints, their sayings and their letters to highlight different aspects of their lives, thoughts and achievements the assertions made about the discussed saints and scholars is very well corroborated in an authentic way, which speaks both about the books authenticity and authors scholarship.
3. The compendium includes description of the saints spreading across the subcontinent (now India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) belonging to different regions.
4. The book is not only an authentic account of Indian saints but discusses here and there the rich subject matter of *Taṣawwuf*, its terminology, his theoretical and practical implications, its relationship with other disciplines so on and so forth.
5. The language is lucid and simple but very effective.
6. Though the book has avoided extraneous details, yet does not ignore any important aspect of the description of the saints and their contributions.

Significance of the Book

Akḥbār Al-Akhyār is the most popular book of Shaikh Abdul Ḥaq. It was appreciated even by the emperor Jahangir (r. 1605-1627 C.E.) and other contemporaries of the author. It is considered the first book of the author so continued to be revised by him. Hence, this is the reason for different versions of the manuscript of the book in various libraries. It has been translated into Urdu language as well.

Notes and References:

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- ¹ Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1978, pp. 11-12
- ² *Ibid.*
- ³ K. A. Nizami, *Hayat-i Shaikh Abdul Haq Muḥadith Dehlawī*, Lahore: Maktabah Rahmaniyyah, ND, p. 10
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 195-199
- ⁵ Shaikh Abdul Haq Muḥadith Dehlawī, *Akḥbār Al-Akhyār*, Tr. into Urdu by Maulānā Subḥān Maḥmūd Saḥāb, Pakistan: Madīnah Publishing Company, ND, p. 16; Isbah Khan's Article Titled "Akbar Al-Akhyār ke Adbī Lisanī aur Tareekhe Mahasen" (Akḥbār Al-Akhyār's Literary, Linguistic and Historical Virtues), *Ma'ārif*, Monthly Urdu Journal of Darul Musanifeen Academy, Aramgarh, Vol. 166, Issue: 2, August 2000, p. 110-123; The authors contribution on the stylistic beauty of *Akḥbār Al-Akhyār* has been consulted in this section of the paper, Isbah Khan's M.Phil dissertation *Akḥbār Al-Akhyār Ka Tanqīdī Jā'izah*, Submitted in the Department of Persian AMU Aligarh.
- ⁶ Shaikh Sharf Al-Dīn Muṣṭah Sa'dī Shīrāzī, *Gulistān-i Sa'dī*, Tr. into Urdu by Maulānā Qaḍī Sajād Ḥussāin Lahore: Maktabah Rahmaniyyah, ND, p. 5
- ⁷ Dehlawī, *op. cit.*, p. 28
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 108
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113; Isbah Khan in the article quoted above asserts that the event should have taken place in Of Aligarh Muslim University in 1993-94, a copy now in the dissertation section of Maulānā Azad University of AMU.
- ¹² Abdul Qādir Badāyūnī, *Muntakhab Al-Tawārikh*, Tr. into Urdu by Aleem Ashraf Khan, New Delhi: National Council for Promotion of Urdu Language, Vol. 1, 2008, p. 266
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 256-269
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 155-170
- ¹⁵ Sir Al-Arifin, as per Asbah Khan's assertion was completed in 1525-1531. Darwesh Jamali belonged to Suhrawardi Ordre. He died in 1526 and was buried near Haus Shamsi in Delhi. For details see Darwesh Jamali and his Sir Al-Arifin—Indo-Iranica, Vol. 37, No: 1, Calcutta, 1984

