
Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi's Concept of the Shari'ah

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Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi's (971/1564—1034/1624) thought, which is basically revivalistic in character, emanates from the Qur'an and the Sunnah, and attempts at the revival of the doctrines of Faith and social practices of the community. It aims at curbing the greatest menace of the time by re-asserting the abiding truth of Shari'ah and restoring conviction in the Prophethood of Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم). As a serious scholar of his time, he explains the truth of Shari'ah as he belonged to the age where the trend was to overlook, rather reject Shari'ah over *tariqah*. The former was supposed to sub-serve the latter, as India being the home of *yoga* and asceticism there was no dearth of misguided mystics who had blended mystic practices with philosophical meditation reposing trust in self-mortification, spiritual ecstasy and direct intuition.¹

Sirhindi being a qualified scholar (*'ālim*) of his time was expected to write on the Islamic subjects like Shari'ah etc., but there were other reasons behind the elucidation of the concept of Shari'ah by him. At his time, there was a common misunderstanding of the concept (of Shari'ah), either due to the ignorance of the *'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* or due to the

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wrong experiences or interpretations of the sufis. The common views prevalent at that time can be summarised as follows:

1. That Shari'ah is essentially a code of law that seeks to regulate external behaviour only. It is concerned with the outer structure of religious life but not with the inner reality;
2. That the Shari'ah is for common man only;
3. That captives of reality (*griftran-i-haqiqat*) attended to reality (*haqiqah*) only, as they thought it out of the purview of Shari'ah;
4. Others sought the synthesis of Shari'ah and *tariqah*.

We may say that some looked at it (Shari'ah) from a juristic point of view only and others from a sufi-outlook. Thus responding to the situation and amidst such conflicting views about Shari'ah, Sirhindi in all seriousness elaborates the concept of Shari'ah in Islam, which forms an essential part of his revivalist thought.

Sirhindi deals with the concept of Shari'ah at two different levels, micro and macro-level. At the micro level he defines the Shari'ah in the usual sense of the rules and regulations of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, concerning worship and rites, morals and society, economy and government along with the elaborations and applications of these rules by scholars which agree with the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Here he considers it from the point of view of a traditional jurist and gives his opinion on certain points of law. For instance, in a letter to Abdul Rahim Khani- Khanan, a high official of the Mughal court, he tries to convince the recipient that Islamic law is not difficult but easy to practise.² Islam does not impose difficult duties on the believers. For instance, only seventeen daily *rakahs* were prescribed for prayer and these can be performed in less than an hour. If a Muslim finds *rukūs* and *sajūd* to be difficult, he can comply with the law by performing them symbolically.³ Only one-fortieth of the property was fixed as *zakāh* and even then not all kinds of property are

taxable.⁴ Pilgrimage has only to be performed once in lifetime⁵. God has permitted every man to wed four wives and have an unlimited concubines.⁶ Sirhindi continues in the same vein, while dealing with matters such as clothing and food and concludes saying, that if anyone finds Shari‘ah onerous, despite all this, he doubtlessly suffers from an affliction of the heart (*maraz-i-qalbi*)⁷. Discussions of such juridical problems are rare in *Maktubāt*.

At the macro level Sirhindi defines and uses the term in wider sense. Along with the rules and laws, Shari‘ah also includes faith and belief, values and ideals, as well as Prophet’s way to cultivate piety and achieve God’s pleasure. Shari‘ah in this sense is a comprehensive system of faith and practice, including everything which God has prescribed (Shara‘a) directly or through the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم).⁸ Thus to Sirhindi Shari‘ah is self-sufficient, when he writes, ‘it embraces all the realities of this world and the next, leaving nothing out for which one should have to go beyond Shari‘ah.’⁹ Let us elucidate this statement of Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi, which is pivotal aspect of his thought.

As outlined, the faith (*imān*) is the first part of Shari‘ah which means conviction in transcendental realities—God, Angels, the Hereafter, Revelation, prophecy etc. According to Sirhindi, the only way to know these articles of faith is the *wahy* (revelation) of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم). Neither reason nor mystic *kashf*¹⁰ is capable of revealing them. Reason on its own cannot ascertain these realities. Sirhindi writes, ‘Everything that we know through the prophets regarding God’s existence and attributes, prophets and revelation, the impeccability of angels, resurrection, Paradise and Hell, Eternal happiness and damnation, and other similar truths which Shari‘ah has revealed to us, are impossible to know through reason. Before hearing from the prophets, reason is incapable of establishing them by itself.’¹⁰ Here his views regarding the shortcomings of the reason are not different from some of the important thinkers like Imam Ghazzali. However, on the position of mystic *kashf* Sirhindi has a different view.

To Sirhindi, *kashf* is not an independent source of knowledge parallel to *wahy*. It can only act as an interpreter of the prophetic revelation concerning matters of faith. He says, (*ilhām*) inspiration only brings out the non-apparent truths of religion; it is not to add upon its truths. As *ijtihād* reveals rules that are implied (in Shari‘ah), similarly, *ilham*, reveals the hidden truths (of faith) which ordinary people are not able to see.¹² Sirhindi then says, even in this capacity of interpreter, *kashf* is not infallible; like the *ijtihād* of a *mujtahid* the *kashf* of a sufi may be right or wrong. Inspiration is uncertain (*zanni*) and the revelations of *kashf* do not generate truth.¹³

Explaining his ideas on *kashf*, Sirhindi goes on to say that the opinion of the theologians of *ahl al-Sunnah* is the measuring rod of ascertaining the validity of the ideas of a mystic in the light of his *kashf*. In case the mystical ideas are contradictory, they should be treated as the product of *sukr* (intoxication) of the mystic and rejected as false. He writes, ‘there are mystical ideas which conflict with the views of the *Ahl-i-Haqq* (i.e., theologians of *ahl al-Sunnah*), in such cases the truth is with the ‘*ulama*’ of the *Ahl-i-Haqq*.¹⁴ At another place he writes, ‘the criterion of the validity of mystical ideas (*‘ulūm ladunniyah*) is that they should agree with the clear ideas of the disciplines (*‘ulūm*) of Shari‘ah; if there is a hair’s breadth of divergence, it is due to *sukr*. The truth is what the ‘*ulama* of the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama‘ah* have established. All else is *zandaqah* (blasphemy), *ilhād* (heresy) and the result of *sukr* (intoxication) and *ghalbat al-hāl* (ecstasy).¹⁵ To sum up, we can say that the *kashf* of sufi should pass the test of the Qur’an and the *Sunnah* and their interpretation by theological reason.¹⁶

According to Sirhindi, Shari‘ah not only means belief in transcendental realities but also defines what religious life truly is (*Haqīqah*), what are its constituents and what they really mean. Shari‘ah is not just a code of rules and regulations that govern external action. It also explains what faith, *tawhīd*, truth, gratitude, patience, worship,

dhikr, *jihād*, *taqwa* and *ihsān* are, and shows how to realize these realities. It is concerned with outer behaviour as well as internal state of mind and will; with faith and virtue, motive and intention, feelings and emotions. Thus Shari'ah is a complete unity of *surah* (form) and *haqīqah* (essence or reality).¹⁷ In other words it has an outward (*zahir*) and an inner aspect (*bātin*).¹⁸ The outward form of Shari'ah involves compliance with the clear Qura'nic commandments (*muhakmāt*) and the inward or essence of the shari'ah (*haqīqat-i-shari'ah*) can be arrived at by properly understanding the ambiguous verses of the Qur'an (*mutashabihāt*).²⁹

The sufi *tariqah*, on the other hand, is only a means to achieve the realities of religious life and confirms without any addition, to what Shari'ah says.²⁰ There are no realities outside Shari'ah and the sufi *tariqah* is only a further help to attain those realities. And *tariqah* is always subservient to Shari'ah.²¹

In Sirhindi's view it is 'heresy and infidelity,²² to consider that Shari'ah is to be followed only till the *ma'arifah*²³ is achieved. There was a group of sufis (though small) who believed that Shari'ah is for common man who does not know or cannot know the truth (*ma'arifah*); but those who have known the truth do not need it any longer. But to Sirhindi, the truth is just opposite.²⁴ Sirhindi also holds that the Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet, the *ijtihād* and *ijma'* (concensus of opinion of the jurists) are the only means to determine what things are *halāl* (legal) or *harām* (illegal) and what acts are right or wrong. They also specify the degree of obligation, i. e., whether a thing is *wajib* (obligatory) or *harām* (forbidden), *mandūb* (commendable), *makruh* (undesirable), or *mubah* (permissible). He writes, 'it is commonly agreed that in determining the *ahkam* (rules) of Shari'ah, what counts is the Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet, the *qiyas* of the qualified jurist (*mujtahid*) and the consensus of the *Ummah*. No other principle apart from these four is to be taken into consideration to determine the legality of

rules'.²⁵ Sirhindi also believes that the *ilhām* (inspiration) or the *kashf* of the sufi has no role in determining the legality of things or fixing the degree of their obligation. He writes, "*ilhām* (inspiration) does not determine whether something is right or wrong, and the *kashf* of a sufi does not establish the degree of a rule, whether it is obligatory or desirable."²⁶ He clearly gives superior position to the jurists against sufis and treats the later at par with the common men. He again writes, "the *awliya*' (saints) have to follow, like an ordinary Muslim, the opinion of *mujtahids*. Their *kushuf* (revelations) and *ilhamāt* (inspirations) do not elevate their status and relieve them from following the judgments of the *fuqaha* (jurists). Dhu al-Nun, al-Bistami, Junayd and al-Shibli are just like ordinary men, Zayd, 'Umar, Bakr and Khalid. They have to follow the judgments of the *mujtahidīn* (jurists) in matters of *ijtihād*.²⁷

Besides, Sirhindi also believes that Shari'ah deals with the matters like what is the ideal life or ultimate goal of man. He is of the view that Shari'ah has its own system of values and priorities, which can only be revealed by contemplating over its structure, not by *kashf* or philosophical speculation.

Three Components of Shari'ah

Shari'ah, according to Sirhindi comprises of three parts: *'ilm* (Knowledge), *'aml* (action) and *ikhlas* (sincerity). For the complete obedience of Shari'ah, all the three parts have to be accomplished. He writes, "The Shari'ah has three parts—knowledge, action and sincerity of motive; unless you fulfill the demands of all these parts, you do not obey the Shari'ah. The *tariqah* and *haqiqah* for which the sufis are known are subservient to the Shari'ah, as they help to realize its third part, namely sincerity. Hence they are sought in order to fulfill Shari'ah, not to achieve something beyond Shari'ah. The purpose of traversing the stages of *tariqah* and *haqiqah* is nothing other than the

realization of *ikhlās*, which involves the attainment of *riḍa* (satisfaction). Only one out of thousand sufis is graced with the three illuminations (*tajalliyāt sih ganah*) and gnostic vision, given *ikhlās* and elevated to the stage of *riḍa*.²⁸

Shari'ah Superior to *Tariqah*

In Sirhindi's view, Sunnah and Shari'ah are the most important components of Islamic culture.²⁹ On the day of Resurrection, says Sirhindi, people will be questioned about their adherence to Shari'ah, not about *tasawwuf*.³⁰ He urges his disciples to read books on *fiqh* and affirms that sufi experience is inferior to Shari'ah and not vice-versa, because Shari'ah is based on incontrovertible proof, while sufi experience is result of fallible speculation only.³¹ One of his disciples recalls that when he was overwhelmed by *hāl*, Sirhindi used to tell him, "Go study your lesson, because an ignorant sufi is a fool of satan". Any sufi experience that is rejected by Shari'ah is heresy³², says Sirhindi. His *Maktubāt* contains countless exhortations to follow the Sunnah and comply with Shari'ah.

He regarded Shari'ah as all comprehensive, embracing all the realities of this world and the next, and the possibilities of true mystical experience. It has two appearances, an external and a real one. The external appearance is based on whatever is unambiguously enjoined in the Qur'an and the Sunnah; it is the sphere of knowledge of the formal 'ulama (*'ulama-i-zawāhir*).³³ Whatever has been left ambiguous and unexplained in the Qur'an and in Sunnah is the sphere of the speculation of the profound (*ulama-i-rāsikhīn*). These 'ulama who follow the lead of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) are superior to the saints, as prophethood is superior to sainthood.³⁴ Thus to Sirhindi, the observance of single religious commandment is more profitable for emancipation from sensual desires than 'a thousand years' of self-imposed penance

or spiritual concentration and from this point of view all the exercises of a Hindu *yoge* are an absolute waste.³⁵

Sirhindi's approach to the issue of innovation is also relevant to the description of his views on the Islamic law. He generally exhorts to follow Sunnah and avoid *bida'h*. He unlike a jurist, rarely speaks of innovations which are peculiar to the Muslims of India as a result of their life in the midst of the Hindu people. He deals with the problem on theoretical level.

In several places in the *Maktubāt* he launches a vigorous attack against the distinction between *bid'ah hasanah* (good innovations) and *bid'ah sayyi'ah* (bad innovations), asserting that either of them is certain to do away with a Sunnah and should, therefore, be scrupulously avoided.³⁶ He cites examples. It has been said, for instance, that the use of the turban as a part of the shroud is a good innovation. It is clear, however, that this contravenes the Sunnah by using an additional piece of cloth beyond the three prescribed ones.³⁷ To place the turban-sash on the left side has also been considered good innovation, though it is evidently inconsistent with the Sunnah, which demands that the sash be allowed to hung between the shoulders.³⁸ The opinion of those 'ulama who maintain that it is laudable to express the prayer-initiation (*niyat-i-nimāz*) aloud, though the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) and his Companions never did it in this manner, is also unacceptable. In case this recommendation is followed, most people are satisfied with the words and are not concerned with the intention of the heart (*irādai-qalb*); a Sunnah is thus abrogated.³⁹ Therefore, all innovations are bad and ought to be shunned. The Qur'an says: 'Today I have perfected your religion for you and bestowed upon you all my favour, and I have approved Islam as your religion'. Islam is thus perfect and does not require any modification or addition.

To conclude we may say that for Sirhindi Shari'ah is all comprehensive,

encompassing minutest detail of this world and the next. Shari'ah and *tariqah* are, on the one hand, two expressions of the same reality;⁴⁰ on the other hand, *tariqah* is the servant of Shari'ah whose service is essential to making Shari'ah complete.⁴¹ The relationship between Shari'ah and *tariqah* is parallel to that between prophecy and sainthood: Shari'ah is superior to *tariqah* in the same way that prophecy is superior to sainthood.⁴² Sirhindi thus speaks of *al-fana fi al-Shari'ah*.

References

1. Sayyid Abul Hasan 'Ali Nadwi, *Tārīkh Da'wat wa 'Azīmat*, Vol. IV, Lucknow, 1988, p.194
2. Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi, *Maktubāt-i-Imām Rabbāni*, Vol. I, Letter No. 191.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. In the eighteenth verse of *Surah al-Jāthiya* (45th) of the Qur'an, the term shari'ah is used in its wider sense. Abdullah Yousuf 'Ali, commenting on the verse, writes that, 'Shari'ah is best translated the "right way of Religion", which is wider than the mere formal rites and legal provisions (p. 1536).
9. Sirhindi, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, Letter No. 36.
10. *Kashf* literally means to reveal or uncover. It is knowledge acquired through mystical means, e.g., vision, audition, dream, inspiration, insight, etc.
11. Sirhindi, *op.cit.*, Vol. III, Letter No. 23.
12. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, Letter No. 55.
13. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, Letter No. 209 and 266.
14. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, Letter No. 112,
15. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, Letter No. 31.
16. When the views of Sirhindi on *kashf* are compared with those of Imam Ghazzali, they are quite different. According to al-Ghazzali, *wahy* (Prophetic revelation) is ambiguous about metaphysical realities of faith, and uses the language of symbols and metaphors. To know its real meaning, one has to interpret this language, and to do that theological reason is quite incapable. (Al-Ghazzali, *Ihya'Ulūm ai-Din*, Vol. I. Cario, 1939, pp.10-11). Hence for al-Ghazzali *kashf* is the most reliable instrument of interpretation. It is not at all subject to theological reason. On the contrary theology has to submit to mystical

revelations. (Al-Ghazali, *al-Munqidah min al-Dalāl*, ed., Dr. Ah. Hamid Mahmud, Cario, 1964, p. 13). In his writings al-Ghazzali plays down the theological reason and extols *kashf* (Muhammad Abdul Haq Ansari, 'The Doctrine of Divine Command: A Study in the Development of Ghazzali's view of Reality', *Islamic Studies*, Vol. XXI, No.3, 1982, pp. 22-24). *Ibn al-'Arabi* in comparison to al-Ghazali gives reason a greater role but puts *kashf* at a higher position. Baha' al-Din Naqashbandi's view is similar to that of Sirhindi. When the former was asked, 'what is the purpose of *sulūk*? He replied: 'The purpose is to know in brief, and to perceive in vision what you know through arguments.' (Sirhindi, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, Letter No. 84). Commenting on these words, Sirhindi says, 'The shaykh did not say that the purpose is to acquire truths beyond the truths of the shara. Shihab al-Suhrawardi (d. 1234) is of the same view (see his book *'Awārif al-Ma'ārif*).

17. Sirhindi, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, Letter No. 276.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Al-Qur'an, III/7.
20. Sirhindi, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, Letter No. 36.
21. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, Letter No. 261.
22. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, Letter No. 276.
23. *Ma'rifah* means knowledge. In tasawwuf it is particularly that knowledge which is acquired through mystical means, gnosis.
24. Sirhindi, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, Letter No. 276.
25. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, Letter No. 55.
26. *Ibid.*, Ibn-al-'Arabi's view on the shari'ah is essentially same. He says, "the shari'ah has been fixed and what is incumbent (*farḍ*) or obligatory (*wājib*), desirable (*mandūb*), permissible (*mubah*) or undesirable (*mukruh*) has been defined."
27. Sirhindi, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, Letter No. 55.
28. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, Letter No. 36.
29. Younan Friedmann, *Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi: An Outline of his Thought and a History of his Image in the Eyes of Posterity*, London, 1971.

30. Sirhindi, *op.cit.*, Vol.I Letter No. 48.
31. Sheikh Badr al-Din Sirhindi, *Ḥadhrat al-Quds*, tr., Dr. Gh. Mustafa Khan, Delhi, 1991, p. 37.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Sirhindi, *op.cit.*, Vol.I, Letter No. 276
34. *Ibid.* Vol.III, Letter No. 55.
35. *Ibid.* Vol.I, Letter No. 52.
36. *Ibid.* Vol.I, Letter No. 186.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.* Vol.I, Letter No. 36.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.* Vol.I, Letter No. 95 and 108; Vol. II, Letter No. 46.