

Impact of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi on the Mughal Polity

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The influence of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1625) on the subsequent religious and political scenerio of Indian sub-continent has been too great. "The mission of the Mujaddid which filled a large space in the religious and political history of the Muslim community of the seventeenth century, was undoubtedly a success".¹ In his efforts he was successful in neutralizing the work of Akbar and affecting a change in the mentality of his successors towards the pristine Islam. He also affected a change in the outlook of Muslim nobility and upper classes in general. His thought put an impact on the every section of Muslim society — the sufi, the theologian, the ruler or the ruled. And it seems no exaggeration on part of Maulana Azad who holds only the Mujaddid responsible for the reformation and revival of Islam during the Mughal period.² "The father of the religio-political reform movement of orthodox Islam in India",³ not only influenced his contemporaries but also the future generations. Sirhindi's endeavours brought under its impact cross section of the society. The present paper, however, will focus on his impact on the Mughal polity.

Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi, was not merely a reformer in the common sense of the word, but a *mujaddid* with a definite mission and higher ideas, the objective that he himself claimed. 'I have not been created', he said, 'for the spiritual direction of the people and their self-perfection. The purpose of my creation is different,

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and I have a different mission.”⁴ He considered himself to be more than a *wali*, a renovator (*mujaddid*) of religion, who had commissioned to Islam at the turn of its second millennium.⁵ It was the need of the time that there should be a revivalist who might oppose courageously and boldly the un-Islamic commands and practices of the Emperor. Sirhindi, having the inspiration of being the ‘renewer of the second millennium of the Islamic era,’ started the mission of rejuvenating Islam and establishing a true Islamic state in conformity with the Qur’anic injunctions.

As a part of his multifarious mission, Sirhindi made a conscious effort to get the *Shari’ah* rules implemented in the Mughal empire. And when Jehangir ascended the throne, he saw it as ripe time to accomplish the task. He wrote to officials, close to Jehangir, to tell them of the plight of Islam and Muslims in the country and impress upon them the need to act promptly. To the Sadr-i-Jahan (d. 1027/1618), who had tutored Jehangir before and enjoyed his confidence as the highest religious authority, he wrote, ‘Now that things have changed (after the death of Akbar) and the hostility of the people has subsided, it is the duty of the leaders of Islam, the *Sadr-i-Islam* and the ‘*ulamā*’, that they work for the implementation of the *Shari’ah*.,’⁶ To Khan-i-Jahan (d.1040/ 1630), another official of the court, he wrote: “Since the king listens to your words and gives them weight, it would be really great if you could explain to him briefly or in detail, as you like, the beliefs of the *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama’a*. Please inform him of the doctrines of the “people of the Truth (*ahl al-haqq*) and look for every opportunity to talk about Islam and the Muslims, defend the tenets of Islam and condemn infidelity and heresy”.⁷

Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi made contacts, through correspondence, with the men of eminence and enlisted the great nobles of the imperial court as his disciples and guided them in bringing about a change not only in their own lives but also to influence the emperor towards a change of heart and mind.⁸ As such a large number of eminent contemporaries and influential ‘*ulamā*’ at the court became his disciples. Among them the important ones were Shaykh Mirat, Prince Dara Shikoh’s tutor and the Nawab Murtada Khan, known as Shaykh Farid. Sirhindi also wrote letters to high officials in the provinces like Shaykh Murtada, the governor of Gujrat,

Qulich Khan, the devout viceroy of Lahore, Lala Beg, the governor of Bihar, 'Abdul Rahim Khan-i-Khanan, the commander-in-chief of Deccan and others and called upon them to spread the teachings of Islam, to defend the faith, abolish un-Islamic laws, restore Islamic institutions and to suppress hostile forces.⁹

Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi was jubilant with news of Jehangir's succession to the throne after the death of Akbar. So he decided to speed up his campaign. He wrote to Lala Beg, "If from the very start of the reign (of Jehangir) Islam gets a footing and the Muslims establish their prestige, then it is well and good. But if the matter is delayed, the task (of restoring Islam and the honour of the Muslims) will become very difficult.¹⁰ He invited the people to take a vow that they will not obey any order contradictory to Islam.¹¹ This campaign also extended to the army.¹² At the same time Sirhindi firmly believed that unless and until there is a change in the thought and action of the emperor, the missionary efforts at common level will not yield fruit. And if the ruler leads by example, there will be a definite change in the behaviour of the ruled. "The Sultan, in relation to his subjects, is like the heart in relation to the body", explains Sirhindi to Shaykh Farid Bukhari in one of his letters. "If the heart is healthy, the body too is healthy and if the heart is sick, the body is also sick. The rectitude of the subjects depends upon the rectitude of the ruler and the corruption of the ruler affects the entire nation".¹³

Sirhindi was imprisoned in 1028/1619 by the orders of Jehangir. The imprisonment of Sirhind, which brought him in direct contact with Jehangir, is an important episode of his life. It is, therefore, worthwhile to discuss it in some detail. The factors of his imprisonment were that, Sirhindi in order to counter the heretic ideas of the Shi'a and their growing influence on the Mughal empire, had written several pamphlets to denounce them. They (Shi'a) had, therefore, become his adversaries and wished to take revenge.¹⁴ They started a campaign against Sirhindi by inciting the Emperor against him, saying that the Shaykh considered himself better than Abu Bakr and showed him a letter of the Shaykh in which he had written the experiences of his soul to Khawaja Baqi Billah.¹⁵ The Shaykh had, however, cleared the doubts raised about the letter.¹⁶ Mirza Mazhar Jan-i-Janan,

the renowned Naqashbandi sufi. says, "the Shaykh had satisfied every one in his letter, leaving no doubt at all, and after that only an illiterate or jealous person could speak against him". Jehangir's grandson, Dara Shikuh, himself regarded this criticism as slander of adversaries of Shaykh. But Jehangir was influenced in such a way that he summoned the Shaykh and questioned him about his writings.

As the contents of *Tuzuk-i-Jehāngiri* show that Jehangir himself had no knowledge of the activities and 'place' of Shaykh among the religious reformers for the Emperor speaks of him in a very impolite way.¹⁷ He satisfied the Emperor by explaining that he never considered himself better than a dog; how could he think himself better than Abu Bakr¹⁸ When the Shi'as noticed that the Shaykh had satisfied the emperor on the first issue, they told him that the Shaykh had not prostrated himself before him, and that he had a number of followers, prepared to rebel against him.¹⁹ Moreover, Asif Khan, the prime minister of Jehangir, himself a dogmatic Shi'a, advised the Emperor to stop the soldiers from visiting the Shaykh and his *khulafa* and taking vows, and even to imprison him.²⁰ Jehangir, who according to Dara Shikoh, was against the *darveshes*, ordered to imprison the Shaykh in Gwalior Fort.²¹

Sirhindi's missionary activities continued in prison where he started preaching among the non-Muslim prisoners, a large number of whom were converted to Islam. The Shaykh used to say that God had sent him to prison only for this purpose.²² Now, the influence of the Shaykh was not only felt inside prison but in the entire realm, and when the Emperor witnessed the sincerity and enthusiasm of the Shaykh, he not only set him free after one year's imprisonment, but sent his son Shahjahan to bring him to the Court.²³ Jehangir granted him a robe of honour and a considerable sum of money,²⁴ and 'himself became his admirer.'²⁵ According to S.R Sharma, "Jehangir became so fond of him that he would not leave him alone".²⁶ After his release, the Shaykh was given an audience by the Emperor and there he placed the following demands before him: (i) that *sajidah* (prostration) before the emperor should be abolished; (ii) the permission to slaughter cows should be given; (iii) the religious innovations (*bid'ah*) should cease; (iv) the

office of the *qadi* and the department of *lhtisab* should be restored; and that the mosques in need of repair should be renovated and those which had been demolished should be rebuild.²⁷ The emperor granted his demands and issued a royal decree accordingly.²⁸ "Thus after more than a half century's struggle for life and death, Islam came out of its agony and the Muslims heaved a sigh of relief."²⁹

After his release from prison Jehangir gave him option to go home or stay with him in the camp.³⁰ Sirhindi chose the camp, for it provided him with the unique opportunity to preach to the king and people around him. In various sessions, which he had with Jehangir, he read out the Qur'an to him, explained its message, discussed the principles of faith, and elaborated the rules of the *Shari'ah*.³¹ The Emperor listened to him favourably. In a letter addressed to his sons Khawaj Muhammad Syed and Khawaja Muhammad Ma'sum, Sirhindi writes, "these days the circumstances are favourable. Extraordinary meetings are taking place. By the grace of God I have not evinced any slackness or softness in explaining" the religious matters and Islamic principles. The king gave a patient hearing.³² The modern historians are of the opinion that relation between Shaykh Ahmad and the Emperor improved. According to the author of *Zubdat al-Maqāmat*, Sirhindi moved with royal camp for about three years.³³ The Mujaddid was honoured by Jehangir with two thousand rupees in the 18th year of his reign.³⁴ All this seems to have its effect. The Emperor was fully under the Shaykh's influence and the broad-minded Emperor became an orthodox Muslim.³⁵ Sirhindi proudly used to tell his friends that by the grace of God, the Almighty, the Emperor was a sunni- Hanafi.³⁶ Hawkin tells us that he had witnessed the emperor offering the morning prayers.³⁷ Sirhindi was delighted to hear the news from one of his Khalifis, Mir Muhammad Nu'man, that "the reigning Sultan was just and had endeavoured to restore the *Shari'ah*".³⁸ A Hindu writer says that Jehangir was conscious of his duties as a Muslim sovereign,³⁹ and "he took greater interest in the future of Islam than his father had done and sometimes he tried to uphold this prestige."⁴⁰

The ever increasing impact of Sirhindi on the body-politic of the Mughals can be seen from the fact that on the occasion of conquest of fortress of Kangra

by Jehangir, in the sixteenth year of his reign, the idols were broken, a cow slaughtered, the *adhan* recited, the *khutba* read, and other rites of Islam observed,⁴¹ the presence of Sirhindi.⁴² Jehangir thanked God for allowing him to observe these rites, which none of his predecessors had done.⁴³ In the same year he forbade inter-marriage between Hindu men and Muslim women in Kashmir by a royal decree.⁴⁴ Terry, who visited India between 1616-1619AD, found the mosques full of worshippers.⁴⁵ He further tells us that the Muslims used to keep a rosary in their hands,⁴⁶ and had a great regard for the Qur'an.⁴⁷ They used to keep fasts during the month of *Ramadan* and observe the 'id festivals.⁴⁸ The age limit for marriage imposed by Akbar was abolished.⁴⁹ "The Mohamedan confession of faith on the coins was restored by Jehangir."⁵⁰ Stanly Lane Poole adds to the above statement that Jehangir also restored the *hijrah* chronology which his father had abandoned.⁵¹ The mosques that had been demolished, were rebuilt and the Arabic and Islamic learning was encouraged.⁵²

Thus, Sirhindi once again influenced the empire greatly by wining the Emperor over his side and used the royal power for his missionary objectives.⁵³ His interaction with Jehangir not only brought about a change in the outlook of the latter but also influenced the common Muslims in bringing them close to the *Shari'ah*. It is narrated that Jehangir used to say that Sirhindi had promised him to accompany him to Paradise, if Allah wished.⁵⁴

The emergence of Shahjahan (1627-1657) as the emperor of the Hindustan proved a windfall to Islam in India.⁵⁵ Shahjahan belonged to the Mujaddid's admirers. When Jehangir summoned Sirhindi to his court, Shahjahan apprehended that some trouble might befall Sirhindi on account of his non-observance of the court etiquette which was usual with the staunch upholders of the laws of Islam. He, therefore, sent Afzal Khan and Khawaja 'Abdul Rehman Mufti with some books on *fiqh*, requesting Sirhindi to perform *sajdah* before the Emperor as prostration before kings is permissible under Muslim law. But, Sirhindi rejected the suggestion, as he would not prostrate himself before anyone except God.⁵⁶

Shahjahan, who on account of his orthodoxy has been called by some

historians, 'faith defending emperor',⁵⁷ exerted utmost to purify Islam and bring it in accord with the *Shari'ah*. Historians agree that Shahjahan was kind and benevolent and held the *Shari'ah* in reverence. His personal life was blameless, which he led according to the dictates of the *Shari'ah*.⁵⁸ In Shahjahan's reign there was marked departure from Akbar's policy, which is apparent from his several measures that he took towards the restoration of Islamic tenets. "His objectives were", writes Sir Richard Burn, "primarily to restore the strict profession of Islam rather than to persecute believers in other religion." He further says, "thus he soon abolished the ceremonial prostration before the throne which had been instituted by Akbar, and in its place prescribed forms which savoured less of divine worship. The ostentatious use of divine era instituted by Akbar ceased, so far as the record of months on the coinage was concerned, a few years after Shahjahan's accession. Inter-marriage between Hindus and Muslims which had been common in Punjab and Kashmir, was forbidden in 1634".⁵⁹ Thus the nature of administration changed and the liberalism of the days of Akbar was definitely on wane.⁶⁰ Shahjahan stands midway between Jahangir and Aurangzeb.

The mission of re-establishing the authority of Islam in India, initiated by Sirhindi, was continued by his sons and *khulafa*, who under his guidance were trained enough to consolidate his mission. Aurangzeb (1657-1707) claimed the throne as the champion of orthodox Islam against the heretical practices and principles of his elder brother Dara Shikoh.⁶¹ But the orthodoxy and puritanism in Aurangzeb was not a sudden outburst or an accident but the logical consequence of the long cultivated reactionary tendencies. "It will not be an exaggeration to say that Awrangzeb's state policy was prompted by the voice of Sirhindi from behind the scene."⁶²

Aurangzeb had come in contact with Khawaja Muhammad Ma'sum, the third son and successor of Sirhindi, who continued the mission of his father, during the period of his princehood. According to *Rauzat al-Qayyumiyyah*, the prince became a disciple of the Khawaja. Aurangzeb was guided in the mystical journey (*sulūk*) by Khawaja Muhammad Saifuddin, the son of Khawaja Ma'sum, on the

instruction of his father. Khawaja Ma'sum was fully conscious of his responsibilities in bringing Aurangzeb in complete accord with the *Shari'ah* and a complete transformation of his heart in favour of Islam. In one of his letters to Khawaja Saifuddin, he states, "This *darvish*, according to the customs of the *faqirs*, is not free from attention and prayers (for the success of Saifuddin in his mission). He desires to see the purification of the soul (of Aurangzeb) and the outward conformity of his actions to the laws of Islam.⁶³ Besides, Aurangzeb on his part, maintained a regular correspondence with Khawaja Ma' sum. He consulted him on important points of Muslim theology and sought his advice.⁶⁴ Khawaja Ma'sum was quite satisfied with the policy of Awrangzeb and gave expression to his feelings in his letters.⁶⁵

Aurangzeb, thus, under the influence of the successors and disciples of Sirhindi, issued in 1659 various ordinances 'to restore the rules of orthodox Islam in the administration and to bring the lives of the people into closer accord with the teachings of the Qur'an. He set the example himself by abolishing the practices, followed by the previous Mughal emperors, of stamping the *kalima* (Muslim confession of faith) on his coins, lest the holy words be defiled by the touch of unbelievers. The celebration of Persian festival of *Nauroz* was forbidden; and in the eleventh year of his reign playing of music at court was also forbidden and the state musicians and singers were pensioned off.⁶⁶ Aurangzeb's personal and private life was in accord with the *shari'ah*. He abstained scrupulously from the slightest indulgence in prohibited food, drink or dress and even avoided music. He strove to live up to the ideal of a strict orthodox Muslim. Thereof, Aurangzeb, in the first year of his reign, reiterated the order of his father that his religion forbade him to allow the building of new temples, but did not enjoin the destruction of old ones, as envisaged in the Muslim canon law.⁶⁷ The teaching and practising of idolatrous forms of worship were stopped under the royal orders.⁶⁸ In 1619, *jizya* was re-imposed on the unbelievers in order to spread Islam and put down the practice of infidelity.⁶⁹ He appointed Mulla Iwaz Wajih as *Muhtasib* for enforcing the prohibitions on the use of *bhang* (hemp), *buzi* and other intoxicants and indulgence

in lewd practices and adultery.⁷⁰

Thus, Sirhindi's thought had far-reaching impact on the body-politic of the Mughal empire to the extent that from Akbar upto Aurangzeb there was a marked change in the religious policy of the Mughals. The political effect of this change can be seen in the differing atmosphere of the courts of Akbar, Jehangir, Shahjahan, and Aurangzeb. "Akbar was the culmination of the successes of heterodoxy, Jehangir's accession marked its decline; Shahjahan, pious and orthodox, did not tolerate laxity in court but, at the same time, kept the non-orthodoxy contended; Alamgir was the symbol of the victory of orthodoxy⁷¹, and his (Alamgir) rise to the throne, 'proved to be the political culmination of the Mujaddidi movement.'⁷²

References and Notes

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3. Yasin, *op. cit.*, p. 145.
4. Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi, *Maktūbāt Imam Rabbāni*, Vol. II, Letter No.6
5. *Ibid.*, Vol. I. Letter No. 234 and 261; Vol. II, Letter No.4; Vol. III, Letter No. 100.
6. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, Letter No. 195.
7. *Ibid.*, Vol. II. Letter No. 67.
8. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, Letters 23, 25, 43,54, 1981,194, 195, 198,209,214,228,231,238.
9. See *Ibid.*, Vol. I, Letter Nos. 65, 53, 195, 165, 163, 269; II, Letter No. 57; Vol. III, Letter No. 54
10. *Ibid.* Vol. I, Letter No. 81.
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13. Sirhindi, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, Letter No. 47.
14. Muhammad Aslam. "Jahangir and Hadhrat Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi", *Journal of Asiatic Society of Pak*, June, 1965, pp. 135-148.
15. *Ibid*
16. See *Maktub* 11 of Vol. I.
17. Jahangir, *Tuzuk-i-Jehangiri*, Aligarh. 1864, pp. 272-273.
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19. Aslam. *op. cit.*, p. 138.
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24. Jahangir, *op. cit.*, p. 308
25. Mufti Ghulam Sarwar, *Khazinal-Asfiya*, Vol. I. Kanpur, 1902, p. 613. Rizvi contests the view by saying that it is an exaggeration of Naqashbandi historical

- Sources. (see Sayyid Athar Abbas Rizivi, *Muslim Revivalist Movements in Northern India*, Agra. 1965, p. 397).
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 27. Akbarabadi, *op. cit.*, pp. 305-6.
 28. *Ibid.*
 29. Ihsan-Allah, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89.
 30. Jehangir, *op. cit.*, p. 308.
 31. Sirhindi, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, Letter No. 43, 106, 72. ~
 32. *Ibid.*, Vol., III, Letter No. 43.
 33. M.Hashim Kishmi, *Zubdat al-Maqamāt*. Kanpour, 1890, p. 159. ~ 34 Jehangir, *op. cit.* p.276.
 35. Yasin, *op. cit.* p. 146.
 36. Sirhindi, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, Letter No. 15 and 67.
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60. Yasin, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
61. Edwards, *op. cit.*, p. 114.
62. Yasin, *op. cit.*, p. 150.
63. Khawaja Ma'sum, *Maktūbāt-i-Masumiya*, Amritsar edition, Letter No.221.
64. *Ibid.*, Letter Nos., 122 and 127.
65. In a letter addressed to the emperor himself, he writes. (This humble Faqir offers his respect and expresses his gratitude for the glory of Islam and the stability of Islamic principles (which has resulted due to the policy of Aurangzeb). (*Ibid.*, Letter No.6).
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