

**SHEIKH AHMAD SIRHINDI'S
THOUGHT AND ITS IMPACT ON
THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUFISM**

Thesis

**Submitted to the University of Kashmir
for the award of the Degree of
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By

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Dedicated to my

Mother

یاد سے تیری دلِ درد آشنا معمور ہے
جیسے کعبے میں دُعاؤں سے فضا معمور ہے

(علاسا قبائل والدہ مرحومہ کی یاد میں)



In the Name of Allah

Shah-i-Hamadan Institute of Islamic Studies
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Ref. No.

Dated

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled, ***Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi's Thought And Its Impact on the Development of Sufism***, submitted by Mr. **Afroz Ahmad Bisati**, for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), in Islamic Studies, is an original research work of the candidate. The research work has been carried out under my supervision. It is further certified that the work has not been submitted for any other degree so far.

I deem it fit for submission for the award of Ph.D. Degree.

Dr. Naseem Ahmad Shah
Supervisor

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INTRODUCTION

Development of Islamic Thought before Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi

Historically speaking, Islamic thought, which emanates from the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet(s), developed by assimilating various modes, methods and patterns, which coincide with the socio-intellectual exigencies of the time. Islamic thought passed through different phases before the advent of Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi. In its inception, the Islamic thought was simple. It was the Qur'an which served as the basis of Muslim Theology, Jurisprudence, Ethics etc. The Sunnah of the Prophet(s) being in conformity with the commandments of the Qur'an, served as the valid interpretation of the Qur'an. Belief in Tawhid (Oneness of Allah), the Prophethood of Muḥammad(s), observance of *Salah* (prayer), fasting during the month of *Ramadhan*, the payment of *Zakat*, and pilgrimage to Mekka were the fundamental tenets of Islam. The instructions of the Prophet(s) were obeyed without questioning. In case of any controversy Prophet(s) was consulted who resolved them.

During the classical period of Islam, the Muslims were of one mind in their interpretation of the Qur'an. But the state of affairs did not remain the same, after the demise of Prophet(s) and particularly after the wave of conquests that carried Islam within a century to Samarkand beyond the Oxus, and to Tours in Central France.¹ People belonging to different nationalities, races and religions adopted Islam. The converts tried to interpret the Qur'an according to their own traditional beliefs and customs, with the result differences arose, regarding the various religious-philosophical matters. The main contentious issues were 'the problem of Freedom and Determinism', 'relation of Revelation with Reason', 'relation of Action with beliefs and the Attributes of God'.² The differences on the above issues gave rise to independent schools of Muslim thought.

The Mu'tazilah was the first school of Muslim thought, that discussed the theological problems systematically. The Mu'tazilites came into existence partly as a reaction to the misdeeds of the Umayyads and partly as an attempt to meet the arguments of the Greek and non-Muslim scholars against Islam.³ They were primarily rationalists. They preached Unity of God and to safeguard this unity they denied the Attributes of God as separate from His Essence. They made reason, the absolute criterion of truth and for distinguishing between 'good' and 'bad'. The Mu'tazilites,

¹ D.B. Macdonald, *Development of Muslim Theology, Jurisprudence and Constitutional Theory*, Delhi, 1973, p. 82.

² Noor Nabi, *Development of Muslim Religious Thought in India*, Delhi, 1980, p.1.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

though desired to defend and understand Islam on the basis of reason but they overdid the job. Their rationalism began to make people sceptic and indifferent to religion.

Owing to the dissatisfaction with the Mu'tazilah doctrines and to safeguard the religion against the attacks of rationalism, eminent personality of Abul Hasan al-'Asha'ri rose on the scene and reacted against the Mu'tazilah doctrines considerably. Ash'arites, as the followers of al-Ash'ari are known, like Mu'tazilites upheld the Unity of God but affirmed His attributes side by side with His essence. They did not undermine the importance of reason but made it subservient to *wahy* (revelation).¹

Meanwhile, the developments in the field of Jurisprudence continued, which had begun when the Prophet and his Companions passed away. In this domain the endeavours of the early jurists of Islam and *Muḥadithin* are a watershed in the history of Islamic thought. The renowned jurists of Islam founded their own schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), which were known as *Ḥanafī*, *Maliki*, *Shafi'i* and *Ḥanbali* schools. All of them upheld the primacy of the Qur'an and the Sunnah as the original source of Muslim jurisprudence. The *Ḥanafis* permitted the use of *Ra'y* (speculation) in the interpretation of the Ḥadith; but *Malikes* strongly disapprove of this tendency. Imam Shafi'i critically examined the Ḥadith and laid foundation of the principles of jurisprudence (*Usul-i-Fiqh*). Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal depended extensively on the Ḥadith. He

¹ M.M. Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, Vol. I, Delhi, 1995, pp. 230-231.

also gives due place to *qiyas* (analogical deduction) and *istislah* (seeking of that which is in the public interest).¹

With the beginning of the translation movement of the Greek scientific and philosophical texts during the 'Abbasid reign, Muslims took a considerable interest in formulating their thought on philosophical methods. Many Muslim philosophers such as al-Kindi (d. 251/866), al-Farabi (d. 339/950), Ibn Sina (d. 428/1037), Ibn Maskawaih (d. 1030A.D.) in the East, and Ibn Baja (d. 1138AD), Ibn Tufail (d. 1185AD) and Ibn Rushd (d.593/1198) of Spain propounded their own philosophical systems. These philosophical systems were deeply influenced by the Greek philosophy.² They made reason the absolute criterion for true knowledge. They also tried their best to establish harmony between religion and philosophy. Some of them put forward the Emanation Theory of Creation.

As a reaction against the formalism advocated by the jurists and theologians and as a protest against the philosophical doctrines and heresies, a new trend started in the Islamic thought, called sufism or tasawwuf, which by now had become institutional. The essence of tasawwuf was not foreign to Islam. It started due to Muslims' general concern with the purification of the heart. During the time of Prophet(s) a large number of the Companions were leading a life of devotion, piety and seclusion. They were known as *ahl al-suffa*. The saints of this period laid great stress on *Tawakkul* (trust in God) and *Zuhd* (piety), and such men

¹ Abu Zuhra Misri, *Hayat Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal*, (Urdu), Delhi, 1984, p. 120.

² M. 'Abdul Hye, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, Delhi, 1989, p. 95.

were known as *zahidun* and *'abidun*. By the end of second century of Hijrah, fear of God and concern for the day of judgement had become the chief characteristic of sufism. However, the love of God, propounded by Rabi'a Baṣri (d.185/801) and Dhu al-Nun Misri (d. 243/859) was not absent. During the reign of 'Abbasids sufism assumed the form of a regular movement. With the advent of Bayazid Bistami and Mansur al-Ḥallaj, sufism tended to monistic doctrine. The former introduced the doctrine of *sukr* (ecstasy), and for the first time employed the word *fana* (annihilation of the self), in sufism.¹ The latter, in continuation of the Bistami's trend, uttered in ecstasy *Ana al-Ḥaqq* (I am the Truth), which served as inspiration and basis for the writings of Ibn al-'Arabi.

Such idiosyncratic views of Bistami and Hallaj, on 'annihilation' and 'Union with God' were strongly reacted by the 'ulama' as well as the general public who considered them unislamic and heretical. Thereof, a new trend characteristic of reform from within started in sufism. As against the doctrine of *fana* and *ma'rifah* (gnosis), the valid knowledge, Junaid of Baghdad (d. 298/910) propounded the doctrine of *baqa* (subsistence) and priority of knowledge over gnosis.² However, in this reformative trend in sufism, the attempts of Imam Ghazali and Sheikh 'Abdul Qadir Jeelani are notable.

Al-Ghazali, for the first time, based tasawwuf on the theory of knowledge.³ To him, tasawwuf is not a way of finding the extra facts

¹ Noor Nabi, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

² Sharif, *op. cit.*, pp. 344-45.

³ Noor Nabi, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

about Reality but is a meaningful way of looking at it as a unit. It is both knowledge and action. He criticized the sufi claim that one reaches God through fusion into or unity with the divine Being. Knowledge of Him is never the knowledge of His self but of His will.¹ In al-Ghazali, there is repudiation of those sufis who preached doctrine of *rahbaniyat* (renunciation of the social life) and non-observance of the shari‘ah.² To Sheikh ‘Abdul Qadir Jilani (1077-1166 AD), there are four stages of spiritual development—stage of piety, reality, resignation and annihilation. To him tasawwuf consists of generosity, cheerful, submission, patience, constant communion with God through prayer, solitude, *faqr*, humility, sincerity and truthfulness.³ Thus both al-Ghazali and ‘Abdul Qadir, while repudiating ascetic and monistic forms of sufism, there is an attempt to present it as a meaningful way of life which affirms both knowledge and action, and obedience to the shari‘ah.

With the establishment of Muslim rule in the sub-continent, sufism flourished throughout the land. In the due course of time sufi orders became popular among the people. Khawaja Mu‘in al-din Chisti (b. 590/1193) founded the Chistiyah order in India, with emphasis on love, simplicity, equality, social justice and *sama‘* (sufi music). The important personalities of the order were Khawaja Bakhtiyar Kaki, Sheikh Nizam al-Din Awliya and Nasir al-din Chirag-i Delhi. The other orders that flourished in India before the advent of Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi were

¹ Isma‘il Raj al-Faruqi, *Cultural Atlas of Islam*, New York, 1986, p. 300.

² *Ibid.*

³ Sharif, *op. cit.*, pp. 352-53.

Suhrawardiyah and Qadiriyyah. Sheikh Baha al-din Zakariyyah (578/1128) and Sheikh Sharif al-din Yahya Munairi (d. 728/1380) were the followers of Suhrawardiyah order and Shah Musa Gilani (1002/1593) and Sheikh Abdul Ḥaq Muḥadith Dehlvi (d. 1033/1663) introduced the Qadiriyyah order here. As these two orders have been expounded by their followers, speculative and practical issues about sufism became complex and intricate due to the influence of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud* (Unity of Being).¹ In the late medieval times, the Naqashbandiyah order was introduced in India by Khawaja Baqi Billah (971-1012/1563-1603). However, the order flourished under the great personality of Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi, commonly known as *Mujaddid alfi-Thani*.

Born in 971AH/1564 A.D., in Sirhind, Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi grew up to manhood during the reign of Akbar. He was deeply perturbed at the religious experiments of Akbar and left no stone unturned in challenging the situation created by political interference in religious life. He criticized severely the *‘Ulama-i Su* (the worldly minded ‘Ulama) and challenged the validity of principles of *ijtihad* (interpretation of Islamic law), followed at the court. In the beginning of Jehangir’s reign he established close contact with eminent Mughal nobles through correspondence and made them realize the nature of heretical developments at the court. He deputed his disciples and *khulafa* to spread his spiritual mission in every important city and town of the Mughal Empire. A large number of *‘ulama*, sufls, scholars, nobles, civil and

¹ Yusuf Husain, *Glimpses of Medieval Indian Culture*, Bombay, 1957, p. 95.

military officials, and common people joined the mystic fold. His success was more marked in the reign of Jehangir, when many of the leading nobles at the court became his devotees.

Sirhindi's thought as expounded in his writings is vivid, dynamic and revivalistic in nature. His thought basically springs from the understanding of the scriptural knowledge (the Qur'an) and its interpretation, the Sunnah of Prophet Muḥammad(s) and *kashf-i-ṣaḥih* (sane sufi experience). For an essentially just estimate of his thought one must consider him with reference to his times. Theology (*kalam*) and tasawwuf (mysticism) are two important aspects of his thought. He expounds the former on the basis of Qur'anic orthodoxy, deeper philosophical plane, as well as through common reason. The Shari'ah and Prophethood, the two important ingredients of his theological thought are dealt by Sirhindi in a comprehensive manner, which reflect his deep understanding of basic sources of Islam. To Sirhindi, tasawwuf is merely a means to an end, the end being complete and unconditional adherence and fidelity to the Qur'an and the Sunnah. His sufi thought, therefore, makes a distinction between the prophetic way and saintly way of God and judges the latter in the light of the former. He severely criticized Ibn al-'Arabi's *waḥdat al-wujud* by declaring it one of the main causes of weakening the edifice of the Faith. His main contribution to the sufi-thought in Islam was his enunciation of a counter theory, popularly known as *waḥdat-al-shuhud* (unity of perception). He opposed *bid'at* (deviation from the accepted practices of the shari'ah), and declared that no spiritual progress was

possible without closely following the path indicated by the Prophet, i.e., Sunnah.

His thought put an impact on the cross-section of society, viz., masses, scholars, sufis, and statesmen, leading to the reformation and renewed life in the body-politic of Islam. For this reason his contemporaries, both 'ulama and sufis, accept Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi as the most important religio-spiritual leader of the Muslims and addressed him with the title of *Mujaddid Alf-i Thani*, the Renewer of the second millennium of Islam.¹

The personality of the Mujaddid has remained a source of attraction to the scholars of the past and the present. A great number of works have been written on the Mujaddid. Among the earliest works *Zubdat al-Maqamat* of Khawaja Muhammad Hashim Kishmi and *Hadhrat al-Quds* of Badr al-Din Sirhindi deserve special mention. The former work appeared within three years of Sirhindi's death (1034/1624) whereas the latter was completed in 1052/1642. The authors of both these works owed spiritual allegiance to Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi. They also serve as the primary source for the present work, particularly for the biography of Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi. In the modern times a number of works (books and articles) have been produced on the various aspects of the life, thought, spiritual experiences and practices of Sirhindi. The works of

¹ According to Burhan Ahmad Faruqi, it was Mulla 'Abdul Hakim of Sailkot (d. 1067 AH), the most illustrious scholar of the day and the *Sheikh al-Islam* of India, who was first to apply Sheikh Ahmad the epithet of *Mujaddid-i Alf-i Thani*. (Burhan Ahmad Faruqi, *The Mujaddidi's Conception of Tawhid*, Delhi, 1977, p. 3).

Sheikh Muhammad Ikram (*Rud-i-Kauthar*), Burhan Ahmad Faruqi (*The Mujaddid's Conception of Tawhid*), Manzoor Nu'mani (*Tadhkira Imam Rabbani Mujaddid Alf Thani*), Muhammad Farman (*Hayat Mujaddid*), Shah Zawwar Husain (*Hadhrat Mujaddid Alf Thani*), Muhammad Mas'ud Ahmad (*Seerat Mujaddid Alf Thani*), Abul Hasan 'Ali Nadwi (*Tarikh Da'wat wa 'Azimat*), Yohanan Friedmann (*Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi*), Ghulam Mustafa Khan, (*Hadhrat Mujaddid Alf Thani—Aik Tarikhi Ja'iza*), Ahsan-u-Allah 'Abbasi (*Sawanih 'Umri Hadhrat Mujaddid Alf Thani*), and Athar 'Abbas Rizvi (*Muslim Revivalist Movements in Northern India*), have attracted the notice of the contemporary scholars. Besides there are some other works in English and Urdu which throw light on some aspects of Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi. However, the need of a comprehensive work dealing with all aspects of his life and thought and particularly study of his impact on the political and religious life of the period and on the later generations, has been a desideratum. This work is a humble attempt to fill this gap.

The present work attempts at the analytical study of thought of Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi. The study focuses on theological and sufi thought of Sirhindi, which is essentially revivalistic (*tajdidi*) in nature. In the work, the 'Theological Thought' has been used in comprehensive sense. In addition to all the fundamental concepts about God, Universe and Man, it also includes the explication of the Shari'ah, reassertion of the Prophethood and a review of the Muslim sects. The study also focuses on the impact of Sirhindi's thought on the development of sufi, political,

religious and social thought of his contemporary and succeeding generations. The *Maktubat* of Sirhindi and his other works have been mainly utilized as primary source to examine the various aspects of his thought. The writings on and about Sirhindi by the later scholars have also been utilized as the secondary sources of study. The study follows the historical methodology. The work has been divided into following chapters:

Chapter I. Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi : The Milieu

The chapter studies in detail the milieu of Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi. It makes a survey of the political, social and religious conditions of the age in which Sirhindi was brought up. It describes the various reformist movements of the period, and the trends of thought emerging out of Akbar's religious experiments, which played a part in shaping the thought of Sirhindi.

Chapter II. Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi : Life and Works

The chapter gives an account of the family background, early life of Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi, his meeting with Baqi Billah and the latter's impact on his career. It also describes Sirhindi's initiation into the Naqashbandiyah silsilah and his role in propagation and spread of the *Silsila* in India. The concluding part of the chapter gives an introduction of the works of Sirhindi.

Chapter III. Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi : Theological Thought I

The chapter describes in detail the concept of God, Universe and Man. According to Sirhindi God is pure, absolute and transcendental. To him, independent attributes are not at all essential for God as an absolute being. About Universe, Sirhindi holds that it is the creation of God and He has created it out of nothing and is completely dependent upon Him. He rejects the theories of Emanation and eternity of the Universe. The chapter lastly discusses the concept of Man, as elaborated by Sirhindi. Sirhindi speaks of the nature of Man and his relation to God. He says that soul belongs to the realm of command (*Amr*). He further says that since soul comes from God and belongs to the world of command (*‘Alim-i-Amr*), it is therefore transcendental and unique as compared to physical bodies. Soul is the essence of human personality and is connected with both the spiritual and sensual world, and is immortal. The chapter finally discusses Sirhindi’s view on the most important point of Islamic theology, i. e., the relationship between the Act of God (*Takwin*) and the human action.

Chapter IV. Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi : Theological Thought II

The chapter has been divided into three parts. The first part discusses the ‘Explication of the Shari‘ah’. In it Sirhindi’s view that Shari‘ah is all comprehensive, encompassing minutest details of this world and the next, has been discussed in detail. He asserts that Shari‘ah is superior to *ṭariqah* and the latter is subservient to the former. The second part of the chapter—Re-assertion of the Prophethood, discusses the

need and importance of Prophethood in Islam. It studies the causes that lead Sirhindi to re-assert the vitality and indispensability of the institution of the Prophethood in Islam. He upholds that the Prophethood is superior to sainthood. The third part of the chapter—Review of the Muslim Sects, highlights Sirhindi's views on the two major sects of Muslims i.e., *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'* and the Sh'ias.

Chapter V. Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi : Sufi Thought

The chapter begins with the historical development of sufi thought in Islam. The chapter describes in detail the *waḥdat al-shuhud* philosophy of Sirhindi. In order to have better understanding of Sirhindi's philosophy, Ibn al-'Arabi's philosophy of *waḥdat al-wujud* has been briefly discussed in the background. It concludes with the assertion that mystic experience as well as theological reason are subject to the test of revelation.

Chapter VI. Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi : Impact

The chapter traces the impact of Sirhindi's thought on his contemporaries and posterity, under various sub-headings. In the first place, the impact on the development of sufism has been dealt in detail. His impact lead to the foundation of two new Orders—*Tariqa al-Muḥammadiya* and *Silsilah Mujaddidiya*. The Naqashbandiya silsilah developed on the lines chalked out by Sirhindi. His sufi thought influenced Sayyid Ahmad Barailwi, Shah Wali-Ullah, Shah Isma'il and others. The impact of *waḥdat al-shuhud* philosophy lead to the scrutiny of

wahdat al-wujud philosophy. The spread of his discipleship and their role in disseminating the thought of Sirhindi has also been discussed. Sirhindi's impact on the Mughal polity has been discussed in detail and his efforts lead to a definite change in the religious policy of the Mughal Empire, has been highlighted. His impact on the social practices and on the religious learning has also been discussed. Finally, Sirhindi's impact on the contemporary thinkers like Dr. Iqbal and Abul Hasan 'Ali Nadwi, has also been discussed.

Chapter VII. Conclusion

The last chapter sums up the thought of Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi.