

Q How the reform movement of Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi influenced the history of Muslim India?

Introduction

Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi was born in 14th century in Sirhind and received his early education from his father. Later on, he became disciple of Khwaja Baghi Billah, a prominent saint who started Naqshbandia order in India. Sheikh Ahmad, also known as Mufaddad Alf Sani and reformer of second millennium, started his reform movement in India when Muslim society was riddled with un-Islamic practices and beliefs. A lot of Hindu practices and beliefs penetrated Islam and the distinction between Muslims and Hindu was fading. Reform movement by Sheikh Ahmad played significant role in purifying Islam from Hindu customs and practices and establish separate and distinct identity of Muslims in India, and thereby he became the first person to lay foundation of Two-Nation theory. The mission undertaken by Sheikh Ahmad restored the true teachings and image of Islam that was distorted majority under Akbar's rule. To accomplish his objectives Sheikh Ahmad worked in different ^{areas} like religious, political, and social to revive ^{true} Islamic teachings in India and instill in Muslims a sense of uniqueness and distinction from Hindus. In this regard, his efforts were also acknowledged by Allama Iqbal who called Sheikh Ahmad as "spiritual guardian" of Muslims in India.

Condition of Islam before Reform Movement

An order to spread Islam in India, a number of Muslim saints and Ulama adopted liberal version of Islam to attract a large number

of people towards Islam. Although saints were successful in achieving their desired result but, this liberal view of Islam deteriorated image and identity of Muslims as separate and unique entity. This problem was further aggravated when Sufi began adopting new ideas that corrupted the true teachings of Islam. As it was Sufis who were majorly responsible for spreading Islam in India. This liberal view and corrupted teachings of Islam gave rise to idea of Joint Nationalism, to which Sheikh Ahmad was very critical.

When Sheikh Ahmad began his reform movement Muslim Society had already lost touch with true teachings of Islam. Adnan Malik writes in his paper "Effects of Reforms of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi" on Muslim Society in Subcontinent" that during the reign of Akbar, UnIslamic practices and customs were part of the state that also impacted the Muslim Society. Additionally, Akbar had also introduced Din-e-Ilahi because of his inspiration from Mullah Mubarak's sons Abul Fazi and Faizi who were advocates of 'Wahadat-ul-wajood' philosophy.

Din-e-Ilahi was introduced as a common ground between Muslims and Hindus. Emperor Akbar also waived off Jizya, and banned cow slaughter. He also appointed Hindus at prominent positions and included them in his royal court. Under his reign intermarriages between Muslims and Hindus became common. Other unIslamic practices prevalent under him included 'misplaced' belief of Muslims in Keramat (magic by saints as in Hindu religion). whereas some Sufis and mystic denied the authenticity of Shariah law as superficial. While on the other

there were some Ulama who disregarded Quran and Sunnah in their jurisprudence, and applied their own interpretation and commentaries.

Another challenge posed to Islam at the time was from liberal Sufis advocating philosophy of 'Wahdat-ul-wajood'. It basically argues that all beings are one in origin despite their religious, cultural, and language differences. Furthermore, this philosophy also advocated that there was no living difference between the Man and the God, and every particle in universe represented presence of God and therefore, worship of God's creation amounted to God's worship. Famous advocates of this philosophy included Abul Fazl and Faizi who were close courtiers of Akbar.

Sheikh Ahmad was very critical of all these developments and strictly opposed to Wahdat-ul-wajood philosophy. Therefore, in order to overcome this crisis he started his reform movement.

Reform Movement by Sheikh Ahmad

The efforts undertaken by Sheikh Ahmad to purify religious and practical life of Muslims had a lasting impact. His successful efforts are widely recognized by historians as in Book "Social History of Islamic India" author argues that the "mission undertaken by the Mujaddad was undoubtedly a success".

To purify Muslim society of unIslamic practices Sheikh Ahmad sent his disciple in all directions in India to preach true Islam. He emphasized learning from Sunnah of Prophet (pbuh) and Quran. He was greatly opposed to liberal ideas and views of Islam and openly denounced unIslamic practices and society under Akbar rule. He

exposed fallacy of Dine-Ilahi and declared that any mysticism without Shariah was misleading. He also denounced those Ulemas who had questioned the authority of Shariah law.

Regarding the challenge posed by Sufis Sheikh Ahmad gave his own philosophy of Wahadat-ul-Shahood that meant that both God and his creations were two different and separate entities. He gave his philosophy in opposition of Wahadat-ul-wajood philosophy that had not only corrupted Islamic teachings but also deteriorated Muslim identity by giving impetus to the idea of joint nationalism.

Impact of Reforms on Emperor Jahangir

Revival of Shariah is one of the greatest achievements of Sheikh Ahmad. In this regard he wrote letters to government officials emphasizing the need of true teachings of Islam, as it was in these high ranking officials that a large number of evil existed. Due to these efforts many ministers and Emperor Jahangir became influenced by him.

Among the letters sent by Sheikh a prominent one include the letter written to the tutor of Jahangir who was also one of the highest religious authority in India, Sardar-e-Islam. He wrote to him,

"Now that things have changed and the hostility of the people has subsided. It is the duty of the leaders of Islam, Sardar-e-Islam and Ulemas that they work for the implementation of Shariah."

His efforts became successful when Jahangir became influenced by his teachings and issued official orders that restored Islamic practices

in society. Sheikh Ahmad put forth three demands before Jahangir, and he accepted all of them according to Book "Rise and fall of Muslims". Three demands were:

- i) Prostration to Emperor should be abolished, and permission to slaughter cow should be given
- ii) Religious innovations should be ceased.
- iii) office of Qazi and department of Justice should be restored.

Impact of Reforms on Mughal Court

Since Sheikh Ahmad was part of the Mughal court so he had an opportunity to preach not only nobles but the Emperor himself. Sheikh Ahmad used to read out Quran to Jahangir and explained it to him. This had a very profound impact on Jahangir that even Hindu writes acknowledged. As one of the Hindu historian Sirvastava wrote in his book "The Mughal Empire" that Jahangir was fully aware his duties a Muslim Sovereign and "took greater interest in the future of Islam than his father".

The impact on Jahangir as an Emperor was manifested during conquest of Kangra where idols were shattered down to pieces, cows were slaughtered, khutba was read and other rites of Islam were observed. The same year Jahangir also forbade intermarriages between Muslim women and Hindu men in Kashmir by a royal decree that is recorded in Tazake-Jahangir.

Impact on Reforms on Religious Teachings.

Sheikh Ahmad believed that the true source of evil that corrupted Islamic teachings were liberal and open minded Ulama, called as Ulama-e-su. The Ulama took jurisprudence

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(Fiqh) as the sole source of Islamic law and disregarded teachings of Quran and Sunnah.

In words of Sirhindi as taken from his one of his letters on Islamic school of thought "every slackness and integrity that has taken place in the matters of Shariah in his age, and every obstruction that Islam has faced in its expansion is due to the wickedness of the 'Ulama-e-Sul and the result of their incompetence." At the same time, he also worked very hard to eliminate bid'ah from Islamic Society. He identified bid'ah as the primary cause of changing Islamic practices and beliefs that were an aberration.

In essence, Sheikh Ahmad's efforts for the revival and purification of Islamic teachings and practices played vital role in establishing separate identity of Muslims. His reform movement gave new life to Muslims that had a far reaching impact on religious and political lives of Muslims.