

## SHAIKH AHMAD SIRHINDI'S ROLE OF REFUTING THE BID'AT: THE CASE OF AKBAR'S DIN-I ILAHI

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper focuses on Emperor Akbar's innovation and promotion of a new religion "Din-i Ilahi" that was, according to the Muslim orthodox, against the basic canons of Islamic scriptural message. Akbar's motivation and intention behind this new configuration, and the alteration in Islamic and the Quranic basics, was just political rather than religious. His new wave towards the transformation and so-called religious reformation, "Sulh-i-kul," (absolute peace) was just that he wanted to have stability in autocracy and strengthen his administrative grip. He knew how a Muslim ruler could govern over the Hindu majority country. To have a strong relationship with a predominant nation, he tried to attract them with new tact and propagated so-called brotherhood, interreligious harmony, and tolerance by mingling it with the mysticism, philosophy, and nature-worship. Conversely, the response and reaction of Muslims in general and Sufis in particular, exclusively, Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi, to that new cultic milieu, was categorically heretical, strongly exhorting and condemning. He rejected and defamed Akbar's new religious theory and exposed his worldly drives to the Muslim Ummah. This article will also highlight the teachings of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi regarding the liabilities of a Muslim ruler as he proposed the Quranic teachings and strictly instructed that the Islamic Sharia and theology should be implemented against the secularism and syncretism in the subcontinent.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Akbar's innovation, Din Ilahi, Reaction of Sufis, Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi,*

### **Introduction:**

Since the creation of the world, every age is filled with its historical events in multiple fields. Civilizations, nations, communities, religions, and individuals from different walks of life have their own philosophies and diverse interpretations of various phenomena. There is no single community or country in the globe that has not yet experienced any kind of revolution, event or accident. Historically, many individuals, through different channels and platforms, were either famous or notorious for their words, actions, thoughts, and inspirations, and are still being referred in the socio-religious history since a long time. There are many examples of individuals who made history and are still being remembered, praised, or cursed in their respective fields and school of thought. Among such individuals, was Akbar, the great emperor of the subcontinent who shuddered his period in all directions for a new religious trend and innovation. Akbar's that move, on one hand, attracted some religious communities but caused a rift & division among Muslims on the other. Akbar, the great, who is considered as charming and a unique personality and ruler, assumed himself the ruler of all subjects (Dr. Jawad Syed, 2010, p,404).

Undoubtedly, the Mughal Empire, if it is to be mentioned, since its establishment in 1526, was considered great Muslim supremacy in the Indian subcontinent. Especially the period of Akbar from 1556 to 1605, who is being paid tribute and perceived as the

greatest and very influential emperor by the historians for his achievements in the fields of military, politics, development, and administration. (Richard Garbe, 1909, p. 163, 164). This period contributed marvelously in Islamic art, architecture, literature, culture, and civilization. It was the age of political stability, cultural flourishing, and intellectual flurry (Dr. Chandni Sengupta, 2016, p. 51).

But at the same time this period is considered as controversial by orthodox Muslim scholars due to Akbar's innovative approach to religious affairs. Rizvi S.A.A (1975, p. 375) quotes Professor Fazlur Rahman as: "The first Islamic crisis in India came to a head during the reign of Akbar, who partly through political motives but largely based on his personal religious views and experiences and helped intellectually and encouraged by the two brothers Abul Fadl and Faydi formulated and inaugurated a new eclectic religion, the Din-i Ilahi. The new religion perished in the bud, rejected equally by Hindus and Muslim". In following pages, we will be discussing the personality of Akbar, motives which led him to create a new religion, the main features of that religion and finally efforts taken by Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi to refute Akbar's move of diluting Islamic teachings into his self-proclaimed new religion called The Din-i Ilahi.

### **Akbar, the emperor:**

Abu al-Fath, Jalal al-Din Akbar was a renowned Mughal ruler of India. His real name was Muhammad. The meaning of 'Akbar' is the 'the greatest', born on the 15th of October 1542 in Umarkot, Sindh. His father's name was, Nasir al-Din Humayun, the second Mughal ruler. Humayun was happy over Akbar's birth because the newly born baby would-be successor to his throne. Since childhood, Akbar was fond of hunting, running, and fighting and that passion led him to be a brave, powerful and strong warrior. Unfortunately, he could not read and write. Nonetheless, he did not stop himself to be in the seeking of knowledge whenever he found leisure time (Smith V A, 1917, p. 14-22; Syed Abul Hasan Nadwi, 3/61-62).

At the age of 13, Akbar was appointed as the governor of Punjab. Humayun, his father, had a plan to appoint a mentor who could run the affairs of state and guide Akbar till his maturity. In this regard, Humayun selected his loyal and faithful friend, Bairam Khan for this task. (smith V.A, p.29). Both Akbar and Bairam Khan were at kalanaur in the Gurdaspur district of Punjab, busy in state affairs when they received the authentic news of Humayun's accidental death. The ceremony of Akbar's formal enthronement was held in a garden at Kalanaur on February 14, 1556. (smith V.A, p.30) During Akbar's rule, the Mughal Empire expanded over whole Indian soil. He organized the Mughal army and conquered Hindu territories one by one and remained undefeated. (Smith V.A, p.32) After regaining the control over Agra, Bairam Khan was appointed as the Prime Minister (Khan Khanan) promptly. After his retirement, Akbar, with courtesy, granted him a bulk amount and sent him to perform Hajj but. He proceeded to Makkah, and in due course arrived at Patan the ancient capital of Gujrat where he was stabbed to death by a group of 30 to 40 Afghans. (Smith V A, 1917, p. 42-46).

It is believed that Akbar, not only succeeded to make his Kingdom magnificent, but he also had a high accomplishment to get his aims fulfilled. He had a dream for the formation of the Mughal Union. For this cause, he had to take initiatives for strengthening his administrative policies and military actions. For this unity and success, he became successful in establishing the Indian National Alliance, assisted by the support provided by the Rajput Hindus who were loyal supporters of Akbar as they were ready to sacrifice their lives, property, honor, and religion, the four degrees of devotion set by Akbar. Due to such contributions from local Hindu communities, he overcame his foes (Rizvi, 1975, p.395-397).

In addition to this, for getting sympathy and loyalty from people of other faiths and communities, he introduced his new program to unite them in one bunch that was called Din-i-Ilahi or the religion of Akbar. (Cemil Kutlutürk, 2016, p.408)

### **Din-i-Ilahi:**

Din-i Ilahi (1582 CE) "the religion of God," was a new religious doctrine expounded by Akbar. Though, apparently, the purpose of Din-i-Ilahi was the initiatives taken by Akbar to merge all the Indian communities under one umbrella what was called the 'Mughal Union' (Ezad Azraai Jamsari, 2017, p.769-770).

Akbar had a big tolerance for other faiths. He would, not only, display tolerance himself but also encouraged debate on philosophical and religious issues in his Ibadat Khana in order to convert all religions into one common unity. From those debates, Akbar concluded that no single religion could claim the monopoly of truth. This inspired him to create the Din-i Ilahi (RoyChoudhury, 1941, p. 69-72).

And the impression that was shown of this new drive was to amalgamate Islam with other different faiths into one. He was very anxious in that adventure because he wanted to have a complete dominancy of his rule over all the adorers of faith, by treating them with kindness, equality and showing great interest in their religious teachings. The sole purpose behind that move was strengthening his plan of bringing all people from all religious backgrounds under the umbrella of one faith. (Ishwari Prasad, 1974, p.301).

In this regard, he established a school, the *Ibadat Khana*, "the House of Worship," in 1575, where the representatives of all major religions could meet and exchange the common views on different inter-religious beliefs for making the society free of controversies and conflicts among the followers (Smith, 1917, pp. 130,133). Akbar himself used to participate in those sessions every Thursday night and on Friday after Friday prayer. He concluded that all religions had the same common truth, and no one could claim a monopoly on one single truth. This notion turned his policy of Syncretism into practice and helped him achieve his aim and dream of becoming sole sovereign authority all over India (Rizvi, 1975, pp. 112,113,140)

There were some beliefs and practices that Akbar believed in and performed them in his period to win the hearts of Hindus. For example, he believed in the transmigration of soul, was impressed by Bakhti thinkers who devoted their lives to Hindu gods like Rama and Krishna. He also considered the value of Hindu gods and goddesses. In this

regard, he issued some coins in which images of Ram and Sita were inscribed. (Aslam, 1969, p. 119).

Moreover, he used to attend Hindu marriage ceremonies and observe some rites (Abu Bakr p.100) Due to his efforts of merging both Islam & Hinduism for the welfare of all citizens of India; and because of practicing some Hindu customs and believing in some Hindu doctrines, some Brahman considered him as an important figure and even an incarnation of God. (Satish Chandra, 2007, p.253).

### **Main characteristics of Din-i-Ilahi:**

The term "Din-i Ilahi" was used by Badauni propagating Akbar's four degrees of devotion, which are the sacrifice of property, life, honor, and religion. The main feature of this new tendency created a new trend in Akbar's nature that he undervalued and underestimated orthodox Muslims as well as some essential Islamic values (A.F.M Abu Bakar Siddique, 2001, p.97).

Different beliefs called Ilahiya Beliefs, extracted from various inter-religious as well as intra-religious groups such as Judaism, Christianity, and Hinduism were discussed among the representatives of those groups in the presence of Akbar. At the end of discussions, it used to be unanimously concluded among religious leaders that redemption or success is to be attained only by either the awareness of Truth or by acting upon some certain good deeds that are: asceticism, exclusion from the worldly affairs and preparation for life hereafter; avoiding from lust and sensuality; abstaining from fornication, treachery, cruelty, unethical characters, coercion, and foolishness, doing charity, forgiving people, rethinking on the consequence of action, gaining the power of having farsightedness of the virtuous actions, talking softly with everyone, behaving good with brothers, attachment with nature and devotion with God. (Roychoudhury, 1941, p.279)

Apart from these merits, there were some strict rules to be adopted before entering the fold of Din-i-Ilahi. Such as the followers of Din-i-Ilahi had to greet each other with some special words like "Allahu Akbar and Jalla Jalaluhu". Every follower should serve dinner during his/her life which otherwise is traditionally done by people after his/her death as a sign of charity to be considered as a relief to the deceased soul; he should arrange a party on his birthday and give charity as well with such intention that it will be a virtue in his/her next life; abstain from eating meat; should not utilize the pots used by fishermen, bird-catchers and butchers; should not also live with pregnant, old, and infertile women or underage girl (Abul Fadl, I/110; Blochmann, 1939, pp. 175-176).

It is also believed that the Din-i Ilahi was a social religious combination of the like-minded persons who wanted to get rid of the orthodox religious views and practices. Though the number of followers could have increased but that new cult had opened a series of disputes and conflicts. Hence this innovation could not fascinate the general public of that era and was soon called off with the death of Akbar (J.L Mehta, 1984, p.260).

### **Sufism:**

Sufism is the esoteric and spiritual aspect of Islam representing the inner dimension of a man. The term points the philosophy and practices which intend at the direct relationship between God and man, and those who practice Sufism are called Sufis (Farida Khanam, 2006, p, 1). The mystic spirit in Islam is just like a direct meditation of spiritual or divine realities achieved from the fulfilling of the divine laws. Sufism contains its aim within itself in the sense that it can give entry to direct knowledge of the eternal (Titus Burckhardt, 2008, p.3).

The root and foundation of Sufism is Tasawwuf which has six important doctrines and principles that are the same as described in *Iman Mufasssil*. The origin of Islamic Sufism dates back to the era of Prophet of Islam Muhammad (S.A.W.) himself, who is the actual inspiration of spirituality for all Mystics who had devoted their lives for reaching to the reality of life (Gosh & Sumeer Ahmad Mir, 2016, p.75). Sufis believe that there is only the Quran and life of prophet that give them the hope for gaining the true path towards the ultimate real (Sayyid Ali Hamadani, Zakhirrat-ul-Mulk, 2009, p.34).

On the origin of the word of Sufi, and its adoption, there are many different opinions among the learned. The following is a list of the various Arabic and other words which are supposed to be the origin of the word of *Sufi*:

1. *Safaa*-which means cleanliness, particularly the purity of the heart, soul, and actions of a man.
2. *Ahle Suffa*-During the lifetime of Holy Prophet (saw) there were certain ascetics (*Zahids* and *Abids*) whose sole occupation in life was nothing but continuous study and recitation of the Holy Qur'an, meditation, prayers and absolute devotion to God in the Prophet's historical mosque at Medina.
3. *Suff*-means row [Those Muslims who always tried to offer their *Namaz* (prayers) in the coveted first row of the 'five daily' congregations during the Prophet's (saw) time].
4. *Soofa*-It is the name of an old Arab tribe who was dedicated to the service of the Kaaba (*Mecca*).
5. *Safoot-ul-Qafa*-The hair that grows at the back of the neck.
6. *Siyu Soofia*-It is a Greek word which means Divine knowledge.
7. *Sufana*-A kind of Plant.
8. *Soof*-means Wool. (Shahida Bilqies, 2014, p.56)

All Sufis follow the Holy Qur'an and the tradition of Prophet completely and they believe that Prophet Muhammad S.A.W himself was a Sufi throughout his life. (Rizvi, S.A.A. 1978, p.21).

Besides the basic principles of Sufism that are found in Islam, some other rules are also to be considered like beliefs. They are: 1-*Kashf* is the source of knowledge, 2- God is unique, eternal and all-pervading, 3-The world is temporary, and 4- God is near to His creatures. The goal of Sufism is only to be a servant of God because there is no higher rank than to be servitude to God, no reality without having faith in Shari'ah completely. The essence of Sufism is annihilation in God and knowing the

fact that He transcends all over His creation. Though the main source of Sufism is the Qur'an and Hadith, the Western Scholars have tried to find the origin of Sufism in other sources. For example, Van Kremer and Dozy have originated it from Indian Vedantism; Merse and Nicholson attributed it to Neoplatonism and Christianity; Brown considers it as an Aryan reaction against an emotional Semitic religion. (Shahida Bilqies, 2014, p.61-62).

**Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi:** was born on May 26, 1564 at Sirhind in present-day Patiala, a district of Punjab. He received his basic education from his father Shaikh `Abd al-Ahad, who was a renowned scholar. In 1599 AD, he met Khuwajah Muhammad Baqi Billah, who introduced him into the Naqshbandia order. Shaikh Ahmad soon proved himself a man of letters and wrote many fine points of the Sufi doctrine (Shaikh Badr al-Din Sirhindi, 1991, p.14-15).

Sirhindi had a pearl of intellectual wisdom and insight on Islamic thought; he profoundly influenced social and political development in India. Sirhindi was in opposition to any form of alteration in religion and he made people aware that religion should be followed by the simplicity and rigor of the rightly guided caliphs of Islam.

Once, Baqi Billah communicated to his friend that a very learned man came to him from Sirhind who had great spiritual power and I see one day he will be like a lamp which will lighten the world (Kulliyat-i-Khawaja Baqi Billah, op. cit., p. 130/ Afroz Ahmad Bisati, p. 70).

Sirhindi was not only a religious scholar and mystic but also a reformist leader and his teachings were exclusively based on the Quran and Hadith. Sirhindi was a strong opponent of Bid'at in Islam and considered it contrary to the Sunnah. He belonged to the Naqshbandia order of Sufi school which was contemporaneous to the Mughal Empire. Sirhindi tried his best to persuade the Mughal Emperors for implementing Sharia rules through speeches and letters. After the announcement of Din-e-Ilahi by Akbar, the relations of Shaikh Sirhindi with the Mughal empire got deteriorated. He strongly opposed Akbar's initiative of issuance of a new religion and played a very significant role in diminishing its impact. (Afroz Ahmad Bisati, p. 191 & 226)

#### **Shaikh Ahmed Sirhindi's Rejection of Din-i-Ilahi:**

Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi rejected and opposed all the steps taken by Emperor Akbar regarding the establishment of Din-i-Ilahi. He severely criticized the liberal approach of him. Sirhindi started to write letters to the Muslim scholars and Imams and strictly stressed to come forward and face this new religious phenomenon developed by Akbar for the protection of his throne. He was of the view that all the Indian Muslim Scholars were responsible to curb this new trend of Bid'at and protect themselves from the tactics of Akbar. He insisted further that Akbar's intention was only to gain the supremacy overall and wanted to win hearts of followers of all religions by implementing such rules that everyone gets happy and satisfied with him, no matter how much he altered the Islamic principles, he just wanted to be the great ruler. (Numani, Muhammad Manzoor p.78-82)

Sirhindi condemned the attitude of Muslim Scholars who were responsible to help Akbar in the formation of new religion especially those Sufis who were impressed by such doctrine of unityism (Wahdatul Wujud). Shaikh Sirhindi considered such scholars as narrow-minded and world seeking. This philosophy, according to Sirhindi, harmed the essence of Islam because it was totally against the Islamic dogmas. For example, Shaikh Tajuddin, due to his impression of "Wahdatul Wujud", believed that to bow down before Akbar was nothing but prostrating Allah (Ahmed Sirhindi, Maktubat vol.1, p.6, Letter No. 43; Badauni, Vol. 2, p.259). This idea also supported Akbar's view of Din-i-Ilahi that through all religious worships, no matter how they are being performed and by whom, in fact Allah is worshiped. All kinds of worship lead to the same truth. The followers of this philosophy, according to Sirhindi, were boosting Akbar's plan further. (Yusuf Husain Khan, 1957, p.57,58).

Sirhindi mentioned that some unaware and world seeking Ulamas and Sufis of that period were mainly responsible for derailing the Akbar from Sirat-e-Mustaqeem (The right path). He was of the view that the sole intention of those Ulama and Sufis was to gain authority, dignity, and respect in the eyes of masses and ruler. (Ahmed Sirhindi, Maktubat Vol. 1, p.18-20, Letter No. 47).

Sirhindi opposed Akbar's policy to remove the Jizyah, a special poll tax on Hindus. He said that removing Jazyah not only to suppress them but also to humiliate them. According to his philosophy, the State should be well-ordered by Islamic law (*Shariah*), Islamic law, which was not to be amended to suit changing environments. Sirhindi took charge of the task of cleansing the Muslim society. His goal was to get rid of Islamic teachings of the synthesis of Hindu Pantheism. He was highly critical of the philosophy of Wahdat-ul Wujud and substituted his theory of Wahdat-ush-Shuhud (Ahmed Sirhindi, Maktubat Vol. 1, p.18-20, Letter No. 47).

According to the Sirhindi, innovation (Bid'at) in Islam (*Din*) is against the teachings of Islam. He has categorically opposed the division of (Bid'at) innovation into al-Hasana & al-Siyyah (The good and bad) unlike other scholars. Due to this division of innovation in religion confusion has been created in the concept of Bid'at. He considered it extremely harmful to obey such a monarch who believes in any kind of innovation in the religion. According to him it is a virtue to promote Sunnah instead of innovation in the religion. He further states that the person who revives one sunnah of Prophet will get a reward equal to a hundred martyrs. (Ahmed Sirhindi, Maktubat, Vol.2, p.56-57, letter No.23, & vol. 3, p. 85, letter No.105)

Sirhindi quotes the selected following verses from the Quran and Hadith to show that innovation is forbidden at all:

- Today I've perfected the religion for you and have completed My favor upon you. (Quran.5:3)
- He who invents something false which has no relation with the religion of Islam is rejected. (Muslim, 3/1343)

- The best discourse is the discourse of Allah and the best way is the way of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the worst things are the innovations and every innovation in the religion is misleading. (Muslim, 2/592)
- I advise you to fear Allah and must hear your ruler and obey him though he is a Negro slave. So it is an obligation upon you to follow my Sunnah and my caliphs and hold it strongly and avoid the innovations because every new thing is an innovation in the religion and every innovation is misleading. (Abu Dawood, 7/16-17; Maktubat vol. 1, p.72-73, letter No.186)

Shaikh Ahmad's main contribution was to tackle the heretical Sufism and mystic beliefs. He established the Naqshbandiya order to transform the society that might turn to the well balanced and adjusted with Islamic Sharia. He encountered and challenged Bid'at with full power and succeeded to make it fail for further development in the Indian Muslim Society. He kept on preaching Islam till his death. He would stress the people to follow the true teachings of Islam for the success in this world and hereafter through letters written to various dignitaries (Numani, Muhammad Manzoor p.136-139).

### Conclusion

Though, Akbar, a unique emperor, is regarded as one of the most important figures in Indian Muslim history. After ascending to the throne, he wanted to enjoy his dynasty with full jurisdiction. He wanted to be an unbiased ruler equally to all the people of India. For the accomplishment of his desire, he thought to amalgamate all religious beliefs and practice in one common platform and promulgated the slogan of Sulh-i Kul, peace for all. He contacted his likeminded people from different faiths and attracted them and planted a new religion for his own benefits. Though, this new program ended soon and could not continue after his death.

But the reaction of orthodox Muslims and especially the severe criticism and condemnation by Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi, the new heretic beliefs and the mixture of practices of Din-i- Ilahi could not influence the true followers of Islam. Sirhindi exposed Akbar's tactical conspiracy against Islamic teachings and protected Islam by his untiring endeavors and managed to maintain its real teachings that were given by the Quran and Sunnah. He deprecated Akbar's plan of mixing all religions into one and his hidden intentions to be the god of all religions. In this regard, he wrote many letters, Maktubat, depicting the hidden intentions of Akbar and categorically exposing him to the Muslim world about the conspiracy of Akbar hatched by him for harming Islam. Thus, Sirhindi succeeded to curb Akbar from causing further damage to the basic doctrine of Islam.

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