

ALLAMA IQBAL'S TRIBUTE TO SHAYKH AHMAD SIRHINDI: AN APPROACH

Dr. Abdur Rashid Bhat

Introduction

Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624) and Allama Iqbal (1877-1938) are regarded as the two seminal personalities of Indian subcontinent. Both were deeply rooted in the Shari'ah knowledge, understood their times, its crisis and put forward their remedies to it in their own ways. Sirhindi belonged to late medieval times when the Muslim empire in India apparently seemed stable but religiously it was witnessing a serious decline under Akbar's innovation of '*Din-i-illabi*' the situation was inherited by his successor, Jahangir and the Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi through his keen and constant efforts of religious reformation ultimately affected a positive change in the society. Allama Iqbal belonged to the twentieth century milieu when India was under the British rule and its natives in general and the Muslims in particular were witnessing a heavy onslaught of the imperialism. Iqbal, thus, on the one hand, attempts at devising the means to obtain the freedom from the foreign subjugation and, on the other, explains keenly the truth of Islam and the richness of Muslim heritage in India throughout his poetry, prose writings and speeches. It is in this context that Iqbal is concerned with the great *Sufi* thinker and revivalist of Islam, Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi who is also called *mujadid alaf-i thani* (the revivalist of the second millennium). Iqbal not only pays tribute to the Shaykh but also illustrates the profundity and vitality of his religious thinking and seeks inspiration from him.

1. The predicament of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi's Times

Although the early two rulers of the Mughal empire were not strict followers of the *Shari'ah* yet they did not even made any direct attack on it that would harm the Muslims.¹⁴⁹ It was during the reign of Akbar that the royal court deviated from the true beliefs and principles of Islam and it got replaced by the heretic beliefs in the form of '*Din-i-Ilabi*'. It is said that Akbar earlier held true beliefs but it was in his later period of his life that he turned

¹⁴⁹ See Fazlur Rehman, *Islam*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, p. 201.

to the wrong beliefs and deviated from the actual path of religion¹⁵⁰. For this some pseudo ulama are held responsible. The historians say that though he himself was illiterate yet sincere and allowed the *ulama* to have discussions in the court on various faiths and religions¹⁵¹. The scholars belonged not only to religion of Islam but also to other religions like Hinduism and Christianity. Mullah Abdullah Sultanpuri (*Mukhdam al Mulke*) and Maulana Abdul Nabi (*Sadru Sadur*), no doubt, were given high religious status but both betrayed him in fulfilling their responsibility truly¹⁵². Decrees about the non offering of hajj and non-payment of *zakah* were issued by them and encouraged corruption and economic exploitation. The two sons of Mullah Mubarak, Faizi and Abu Fazl although men of great talent but their liberal religious thought influenced Akbar to declare himself *imam* and *mujtahid*¹⁵³. On the instance of Abul Fazl, Ibadat Khana was established for polemic discussions on religions and which ultimately led the foundation to his new religion, *Din-i-Ilahi*¹⁵⁴. Syed Abul Hasan summarizes the substance of this religion thus:

Usury, gambling, wine and pork were made lawful by the new religion, slaughter of cows was banned, the laws relating to marriage were amended, *pardah* and circumcision were forbidden, prostitutes were settled in a separate ward and rules were made for the trade of flesh and religious form of the burial was change[?]. In short, a new Indian religion was devised which, like the religions of old, met halfway the passions and desires of carnal nature and made it a handmaid of personal and political interests of the king¹⁵⁵.

This was the predicament of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi's times which he witnessed himself. Akbar's successor, Jahangir too was brought up in this environment. Sirhindi himself, a man of great stature and well versed in both esoteric and exoteric sciences of Islam gathered his energies to combat this predicament. Through initiating the disciples in great number at Sirhindi and Lahore, he sent his deputies to the various quarters of India and abroad to

¹⁵⁰ Maulana Sayyid Abul Hasan Nadvi, *Tarikh Dawat wa Azimat*, part, IV, Majlis Tahqiqat wa Nashriyat Islam, Luknow, 1980 p.70, 82-86.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*.

¹⁵² *Ibid* pp. 88-91.

¹⁵³ *Ibid* p. 103.

¹⁵⁴ *Darab Ma'arif Islamia*, vol.1, Punjab University Pakistan, pp. 889-890.

¹⁵⁵ M.Sayid Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi, *op.cit.* p. 107.

have moral regeneration of the people¹⁵⁶. Due to his constant efforts the Shaykh gained fame and even his influences reached the royal army¹⁵⁷. Although, Jahangir had no pure picture of Islam before him yet was not inimical to it and initially he did little care for the special esoteric views of the Shaykh, propounded in his letters *Maktubat*¹⁵⁸. However, it is said that people of vested interests among the nobles of the court motivated Jahangir that the Shaykh's endeavours are politically motivated rather than his own understanding of the letters led him to say that they contain the views which ran counter to the true Islam. On this Sirhindi was imprisoned in Gwalior jail by Jahangir for one year. The release of the Shaykh, was however, due to displeasing of religious minded courtiers and even Jahangir's own feeling of regret for the act¹⁵⁹.

2. The Guardian of the *Millah*

Allama Iqbal himself had keen interest in esoteric of Islam--the inner dynamism of the individual self--side by side with his poetic creativity and the philosophical thinking. Out of this devotion for spirituality of Islam he visited the grave of *Nizam ud Din waliya* in Delhi in 1905 before he left for England for higher studies. In 1935, i.e. after the return from England and during the later of his life, Iqbal visited the grave of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi. What impressions he gathered from his visit to Sirhindi's grave Iqbal expresses them in the context of the Indian Muslims heritage in his poem entitled, *Punjab kay Peerzadun kay Naam*. The poem is the symbolic expression of Shaykh Ahmad's great personality of religious learning and dynamism. Among other things Iqbal describes him as the guardian of the Muslim *millah* in India:

He the guardian of the estate of *millah* in India

Whom Allah awakened at the right time.¹⁶⁰

As mentioned above the 17th century witnessed the deterioration of Islamic faith and tenets in India due to the maneuvering of the pseudo-ulama

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid* pp. 154-155.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid* pp. 157.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*. 159.

¹⁶⁰ Iqbal, *Kulliyat-i Iqbal*, Markazi Maktaba Islami, Delhi, 1993, p. 375.

of the court and the king's own crisis in understanding the religions. Of course true religious faith and tenants serve as the chief properly of the *millah* (*sarmaya-i millat*). During the times of Shaykh this estate was being exploited wrongly and heresy (*ilbad*) and the views tending to apostasy were propounded openly. By explaining the truth of *Tawhid* and Prophethood and the moral values of Islam, Sirhindi safeguarded the 'property' (Din) of the Muslim community in India. To Iqbal, this defense of religion by the Shaykh took place at its right time when the Shaykh was made aware about the loss by Almighty Allah¹⁶¹.

According to Iqbal Sirhindi was adequately God-conscious and bold which did not allow him to offer prostration in Jahangir's court. He took this risk even at the cost of the severe resentment of the king. At the same time, the warmth of *iman* within his heart (self), says Iqbal, represents the vigour and dynamism of change and freedom. It excites the energies of the men of freedom:

The one who did not bow his head to Jahangir.

Whose warm breath lends heat to the freemen.¹⁶²

3. *Faqr* and Its Truth

Faqr is the other theme which Iqbal treats in the poem vis-à-vis the Shaykh's achievements. Some scholars are of the opinion that *faqr* is the foundation of *sufi* path. The men of saluk who propound the spirituality of life and ignore materialism are led to uphold *faqr* not as the negative entity of life but to distant themselves from the other (*ghayr*) than Allah. It means the withdrawal from ones attributes and return to Allah alone.¹⁶³ It is these traits of *faqr* and *zuhd* which bestow upon the seeker of the *sufi* path contentment in life and recognition of the triviality of this mundane world. This is also described as the special station of the path.¹⁶⁴ Iqbal has devoted a whole poem to *faqr*. It illustrates truth and meaningfulness of *faqr* as compared to rational and philosophical knowledge. He says that the very existence of the

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ Dr. Ubaidullah Farahi, *Tasanwuf: Aik Tajziyati Mutalab*, Idarah Tahqiq wa Tasnif, Aligarh, 1991, p. 26.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p. 31.

two are different. The blessings of *faqr* become possible only when a man develops a living and conscious mind in him:

The miracles of *faqr* are the crown, the throne and the soldiery

Faqr is the leader of the leaders, it is the king of kings

The end of knowledge is the purity of reason and intellect

The end of *faqr* is sanctity of heart and vision.¹⁶⁵

While describing Sirhindi as the man of secrets-one who has undergone through various religious experiences and ecstasies-Iqbal seeks from him the blessings of *faqr*. It is because the latter is conscious of his own limitation who describes himself as merely a man of sight and not a man of the vision.

My eyes do see things but they lack the wakeful sight.¹⁶⁶

The last part of the poem, *Punjab kay Pirzadaun kay Nam*, touches upon the Shaykh's response to Iqbal's request. This is an admonishing response which indicates the resentment of the *Sufi* and religious mentors, over the deeds of the present day Muslims.¹⁶⁷ The Shaykh explains to Iqbal that the order of *faqr* is closed due to the mentors' indignation against the people of Punjab. In the symbolic way the truth of *faqr* is illustrated here through the message of Sirhindi. To him the mentors abode is not the nation that will misuse the status of *faqr* for the worldly gains. The reality of *faqr* lies in the vigour of religious truth (*al-haq*) and not in subordinating oneself to the petty government. The message is, therefore, a lesson to the people of Punjab and through them the whole nation of India that the spiritual blessings of *faqr* are attainable only when the seeker follows the true path of *Tawhid* and strives to safeguard it from the contamination of greed and worldliness.

4. Significance of the Religious Experience in Sirhindi

In his famous lecture entitled "Is Religion Possible?" which forms the seventh chapter of his classic work, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*; Allama Iqbal discusses the two ways of understanding reality. One is

¹⁶⁵ *Supra*. n. 12.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*. p. 302.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*. p. 375.

the scientific way and the other is the religious way and considers the latter better and vital one. At the outset, of his discussion, Iqbal says that religious life may broadly be divided into three periods 'Faith,' 'Thought' and 'Discovery'.¹⁶⁸ The first period appears as a form of discipline where command (*bukm*) is accepted without rational understanding of its ultimate meaning and purpose. The second is the period of perfect submission which is through the rational understanding of the discipline and its ultimate source of authority.¹⁶⁹ In this period religious life seeks its foundation in a kind of metaphysics a logically consistent view of the world with God as a part of that view. In the third period metaphysics is replaced by psychology and religious life here develops an ambition to come into direct contact with the Ultimate Reality.¹⁷⁰ Now religion becomes a matter of personal assimilation of life and power and the man 'achieves a free personality, not releasing by the fitters of law but by discovering the ultimate source of the law within his own consciousness.' Iqbal emphasizes that he uses religion in this very sense and this meaning of it is known by 'unfortunate Mysticism' which is termed as life and fact denying attitude and radically opposed to empirical out look of the modern times. 'To Iqbal higher religion is actually a search for a larger life and is an experience and Religion (Islam) had recognized experience' as its foundation long before science learnt to do it.¹⁷¹

It is in this context of the richness of religious experience that Iqbal refers to Sirhindi in the lecture. He holds that the highest stage of religious life is the discovery of the ego (self) and in the individual's contact with the Most Real (God) that the ego can discover the 'uniqueness, its metaphysical status and the responsibility of improvement in that status'.¹⁷² But the experience due to which this discovery is attained is not, says Iqbal 'conceptually manageable intellectual fact, it is a vital fact'. It is not accessible in logical categories. While referring to the discoveries of modern psychology. Iqbal mentions that it has only come to recognize that some 'unknown phenomenon of the mind' exists.¹⁷³ He directly refers to C. G.

¹⁶⁸ Sir Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Kitab Bawan, Delhi, p. 181.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.* p. 182.

¹⁷² *Ibid.* p. 184.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.* p. 191.

Jung (1875-1961) and indirectly to William James(1842-1910)and Sigmund Freud(1856-1939). James though gives place to transcendental or mystical experience but does not recognize it as an independent entity but a function of particular experiences.¹⁷⁴ On the other hand, Freud's theory of unconscious is related to the hidden causes or processes of mind over which man has no control. To him instincts are the principle motivating forces in this realm.¹⁷⁵ Jung in his response to Freud, gives large place for intuitive contact with the majestic and divine in his theory.¹⁷⁶ However, these researches of analytical psychology fail to recognize the truth of the religious experience. To Iqbal, they have missed the whole point of higher religious life. Some moral restraints to the ego are not its goal but the preliminary stage of evolution to move in a direction far more important to the destiny of the ego than the moral health of the social fabric. The forward movement of religious life is described by Iqbal in terms of 'the unity of ego, his liability to dissolution, his amenability to reformation and the capacity for an ampler freedom to create new situations in known and unknown environments'.¹⁷⁷ To Iqbal, modern psychology has not yet touched the outer level of this richness and variety of religious-experience. It is in this domain of religious experience that Iqbal considers Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi's contribution highly commendable. Iqbal says that the Shaykh developed a new technique of Sufism which got popular not only in India but in Afghanistan and Asiatic Russia. He discovers in this Shaykh the true understanding of religious experience (religious psychology in modern terminology) which is developed in the atmosphere of different culture'.¹⁷⁸ He quotes one of the letters of Shaykh in which is the latter's reply to the experience of Abdul Mumin. This was described to the Shaykh as following:

Heavens and the Earth and God's Thorne and Hell and Paradise have all ceased to exist for me. When I look round I find them nowhere. When I stand in the presence of somebody I see nobody before me: nay even my own being is lost to me. God is infinite. Nobody can encompass Him; and this is the extreme limit of

¹⁷⁴ See his *Varieties of Religious Experiences*.

¹⁷⁵ See his *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*.

¹⁷⁶ See his *Psychology of Unconsciousness*.

¹⁷⁷ *Supra* n. 25.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid* .p. 193.

spiritual experience. No saint has been able to go beyond this.¹⁷⁹

On this the Shaykh gives him the following reply:

The experience which is described has its origin in the ever varying life of the *Qalb*; and it appears to me that the recipient of it has not yet passed even one-fourth of the innumerable “Stations” of the *Qalb*. The remaining three-fourths must be passed through in order to finish the experiences of this first “station” of spiritual life. Beyond this “station” there are other stations” known as *Ru h*, *Sirr-i-Khafi*, and *Sirr-i-Akhfa*, each of these four “Stations” which together constitute what is technically called’ *Alam-i-Amr* has its own characteristic states and experiences. After having passed through these “stations” the seeker of truth gradually receives the illuminations of the Divine Essence.¹⁸⁰

This letter of the Shaykh thus provides a better illustration of the religious experience as well as its significance. It gives the idea of inner experience of the individual what so ever the grounds of distinctions of its various stations (*maqamat*) it depicts. To reach the stage of the unique experience it is essential to pass first through the *Alam-i amr* (the world of directive energy).

Conclusion

The above discussion, thus, brings out that Allama Iqbal pays tribute to Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi for the latter’s keen insight into the Shari‘ah sciences (*ulum*) and the spiritual experiences of life which made him to visualize the grave crisis of his times and led him to success in combating it. The Shaykh’s constant struggle for moral and social reformation, according to Iqbal, safeguarded the real estate (*Din*) of the *millat* of the subcontinent. The truth of *faqr* and the prerequisites for its acquisition are elaborated vis-à-vis the uniqueness and purposefulness of religious experiences by Iqbal in the context of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi’s achievements. This tribute, on the one hand, highlights the Shaykh’s seminal contribution to the religious thought and, on the other, explores the possibility of understanding religion in terms of the new developments in modern philosophical, psychological and

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid. Maktabat-i Rubbani*, Nawal Kishur edition, Letter no.253, p. 276.

scientific thought.