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Yıldız Sarayı, Seyir Köşkü, Barbaros Bulvarı
Beşiktaş 34349 İstanbul, Türkiye

PHONE | +90 212 259 1742
FAX | +90 212 258 4365

ircica.org
ircica@ircica.org

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Sharafuddin Ahmad Yahya Maneri: Patron Saint of Islam in the Indian Province of Bihar

Rizwanur Rahman*

Indo-Iranian contacts date back to the time of the Ghaznavids, who had established one of their capital cities in Lahore at the end of the twelfth century. This contact gave birth to a synthesis of two cultures in India known as the Indo-Islamic culture. The first book written in the field of spiritualism in India by a Muslim saint was *Kashful Mahjoob* (Ali Hujwari). However, the Sultanate period marked the establishment of Muslim rule in India which brought in its wake Perso-Arabic language and literature and the most important contribution of the Sultanate period was the establishment of the *khanqah* (hospice). Ever since the Sultanate period, *khanqah* became a recognized Islamic institution in the Indian sub-continent where the Sufi preached the teachings of Islam in an Indian milieu which attracted not only Muslims but also people professing different beliefs and convictions gathering around the Sufis whose teachings of fraternity and brotherhood made a tremendous impact upon the people of the subcontinent irrespective of cast, creed or color. Thus India became an important centre of Sufism and the birth-place of the renowned saints of Islam. The exponents of Sufism established centers from Lahore in the west to Sonargaon in the east of the Indian sub-continent. Ali Hujwari¹ was the polar star of Sufism on the western horizon of India and Abu Tawwama was a beacon of *irfan* (enlightenment) in the eastern part of the sub-continent. Sufis and the saints of Islam were to be found throughout the length and breadth of India throughout the ages and from Kashmir to Kanyakumari and Malabar to Silhet almost every state of the Indian sub-continent came to be known after one Islamic Sufi or the other.

Sharfauddin Ahmad ibn Yahya Maneri (d. 782/1380) was one of the

* Assistant Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi & Editor, *Thaqafatul Hind*, Arabic quarterly journal ICCR, New Delhi, India

¹ He is also known as Data Ganj Bakhsh or Data Saheb, a Persian Sufi of the 11th century. He was born in Ghazna but lived and died in Lahore.

pioneer Sufis. He was born in August 1263 at Maner near Patna, the capital of the present-day Indian province of Bihar.² He was later known as 'Makhdum ul-Mulk', i. e. the spiritual leader of the country, and at present he is referred to by people of Bihar as *Makhdum Sahib* or Respectable Makhdum. He is still respected as the most famous Muslim saint ever to have lived in Bihar with a large number of people thronging during *urs* to Rajgir where there is a shrine consisting of a small cave in which he lived, a well from which he drank water and a small mosque where he prayed five times a day. Crowds also throng to Bihar Sharif where Shaikh Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri spent the last forty years of his life and where he now rests in peace.

Shaikh Sarfuddin Maneri's forefathers had migrated from Jerusalem to the then remote corner of India for the sole purpose of propagating the message of Islam. It is said that with the help of a small group of companions and crusaders, Shaikh's grandfather, Hazrat Imam Taj Faqih, was able to defeat the army of a local king near Buxar³ and take control of the eastern banks of the river Karamnasa.⁴ Though the authentic historical accounts of India do not mention this battle it finds a place in various *tazkerahs* written in that period. Syed Sulaiman Nadvi, referring to *Tabaqat-e-Nasiri*, writes in a work of research published in 1933, "after establishing his rule in Maner and its surrounding areas Hazrat Imam Taj Faqih returned home after handing over the management of the conquered land to his son Yahya Maneri, father of the Saikh. At the beginning of the 13th century, it was annexed to Delhi Sultanate by Muhamad Bin Bakhtyar Khilji."⁵

Maneri sat at the feet of Shaikh Abu Tawwama who had established his school of theology at Sonargaon in Bengal, now in Bangladesh, during the reign of Sultan Balban. The young Sharfuddin traveled to Sonargaon and spent the early part of his life in imbibing Islamic learning in the school of Abu Tawwama. Having achieved excellence in Islamic learning, he settled at Bihar Sahrif during the reign of Sultan Firoz Shah Tughlaq and Mohammad Bin Tughlaq of the Delhi Sultanate to disseminate the teachings of Islam. From his hospice he used to send letters to his disciples in different parts of India preaching the teachings of Islam and the way of attaining enlightenment. These letters were not only beautiful works enriching the coffer of literature but also sublime thoughts enabling human beings to improve ethically and

2 Buxar is a small town located at some 150 kms. to the west of Patna.

3 A tributary of the Ganges on its right bank. The name means destroyer of religious merit.

4 Nadvi, Abul Hasan: *Tarikh Dawat-o-Azimat* vol. III, p. 179.

5 Quoted from a secondary source, Ashsharf: *Hazrat Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri*, p. 56.

morally and become honorable citizens of the state. These letters were collected by his disciples and came to be known as *Maktubat-e-Sadi* or the Hundred Letters. Recently, the Revered Jesuit Father Paul Jackson translated them into English under the guidance of Prof. Hasan Askari. The English translation of *Maktubat-e-Sadi* indeed makes pleasant reading and constitutes an addition to Sufi literature in India for common readers seeking enlightenment on the subject of Sufism from Shaikh Sharfuddin Ahmad Yahaya Maneri. The Sheikh has left behind an important series of discourses which explain the nature and dimension of Sufism in the light of the Quran and *Sunnah* (tradition of the Prophet) known as *Malfuzat* (Sufi discourse). Abu Najib Suhrawardi was an important authority on *Tasawwuf* and his work *Aadabul Murideen* is an important work of reference written for those aspirants who wish to tread the path of Sufism. The Shaikh of Maner wrote a commentary on this important manual of *Tasawwuf* and thus made an important contribution to the development of *Sufi* learning and literature in Bihar.

One of the permanent features of Sufism in India is the influence the Indian Sufis continue to exert, not only in their life time but also after their demise. They left behind a *khalifah* who was invested with the *khirqah* of the sheikh to continue the mission for succeeding generations. This practice has been very important in the propagation of Islamic teachings in India and the development of *Sufi* culture. Every Sufi saint appointed a *khalifah* (deputy) who continued his mission and took care of the institution after his demise. Hazrat Shaikh Nizamuddin Aulia was succeeded by Nasiruddin Chiragh Dehlavi. Similarly Hazrat Shaikh Sahrufuddin Ahmad Yahya Maneri had innumerable disciples who continued his mission in successive periods. These included:⁶ Husain Muiz Balkhi, a saint of the Firdosi order of Bihar who was trained in *Sufism* by Shaikh Sharfuddin Maneri. He compiled his mentor's discourses under the title of *Ganj-e la Yafna*.

Shaikh Ibrahim Qauwam Faruqui lived in the village of Maner in Bihar. He was another great Sufi and a disciple of Shaikh Maneri who stayed at the court of Ruknuddin Barak Shah the king of Bengal (863/1458 – 879/1474). The king was a great patron of the Sufis. Later, Ibrahim Qauwam moved to Lucknow where he spent the last years of his life. He compiled a dictionary as a mark of respect for his saint and named it *Sharaf Nama-e-Maneri* which was otherwise known as *Farhag-e-Ibrahimi*.

Ghulam Sharfuddin was a disciple of Abul Faiyaz Ghulam Rasheed who had his *khanqah* at Jaunpur in north India. Ghulam Sharafuddin attended

⁶ See *Tarikh Dawat-o-Azimat*, vol. II & III for details.

the lectures of Abul Faiyaz and recorded them in *Ganj-e-Faiyazi* (1147/1734) in which he also included a biographical study of Shaikh Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri.⁷ Amin Ahmad was a Sufi poet of Bihar and belonged to the Firdosi order. He composed a *mathnavi* entitled *Gul-e-Firdod* (1258/1840) which described the life and teachings of Shaikh Sharfuddin Yahya Maneriri.

Shaikh Sharfuddin Ahmad Yahya Maneri's early formative years have not been documented in detail and for this very reason all chronological accounts written by various writers have been described as purely tentative, but his later years, after he settled down in Bihar Sharif, have been documented in detail in an abundance of *malfuzat* or written accounts of what he said and did recorded by his disciples. The person to whom we are indebted for these writings is Zain Badr Arabi, the compiler of *maktubat-e-Sadi* or *The Hundred Letters* which have been translated into English by Paul Jackson. Shaikh wrote a series of two hundred letters, many dealing with topics similar to those covered in *Maktubat-e-Sadi* and a small collection of twenty eight letters addressed to his main disciple and *khalifah* or successor Muzaffar Shams Balkhi. However, though he wrote more than twenty eight letters to him, on the instructions of Shaikh Balkhi himself other letters were not disclosed as they were considered to be very confidential. Scholars are also of the opinion that the whole of Shaikh's output has not been compiled for reasons unknown. On the subject of the *Maktubat-e-Sadi*, Zain Badr Arabi writes that Qazi Shamsuddin, the governor of Chausa in Western Bihar, had often requested Shaikh Maneri to send him instructions for his spiritual well-being as he was unable to attend his lectures regularly. Shaikh complied with his request, sending him many letters on various topics in 1346-47 AD. Zain Badr Arabi and others copied these letters and made them into a collection. For the spiritual content and popularity of Shaikh, various versions of *Maktubat-e-Sadi's* translation appeared from 1908 to 1980 in Urdu, English and Bangla. (*In 1908 5% of maktubat-e-Sadi was translated into English. In 1973 a complete Urdu rendition surfaced in Bihar Sharif. In 1976 the first 40 letters came out in Bengali in Dhaka while in 1980 Maktubat-e-Sadi was translated by Rev. F. Paul Jackson*).

Like all books written in the Middle Ages, this great work begins with praise to God and prayer for the Prophet. After that, Zain Badr Arabi narrates how Qazi Shamsuddin, a disciple of Shaikh and governor of Chausa, requests Shaikh Maneri to send him regular spiritual instructions as he was unable to attend his teaching sessions. He also mentions the content of the letters written to Qazi Shamsuddin. The first letter is on the belief in *tawhid* or the

⁷ Farooqui, *Sharaf Nama*, p. 215.

unity of God. In this letter Shaikh describes the various stages in the unity of God. In the first stage, a person proclaims that “there is no god but God” while the heart is still devoid of faith all is simply hypocrisy. In the second stage, a person proclaims the same but has firm faith in his heart. This type of belief can be either conventional or supported by ordinary proofs as in the case of the learned.⁸ On the other hand, in the third stage a person’s soul is illuminated in such a way that he is able to perceive every action as flowing from a single source and deriving from a single agent. This elevates the heart. It is a contemplation of light that effaces all created things. Sufi masters are of the opinion that, in the fourth stage, a surfeit of the dazzling Divine light becomes manifest to the pilgrims in such a way that every single existing particle that lies within his vision becomes concealed in the very luster of that light, just as particles in the air are lost to sight on account of the brightness of the light emanating from the sun. Then Shaikh goes on to give various examples and explanations to make the real meaning of *tawhid* comprehensible. The second letter is on *taubah* or repentance. Quoting the verse of the Holy Quran he tries to explain that the term repentance does not mean the same for everyone. He says, “Dear brother Shamsuddin, God’s bounty be upon you! Realize that sincere repentance is like a beautiful carpet on which you perform your devotions. God has said: ‘توبوا إلى الله جميعاً أيها المؤمنون لعلكم تفلحون’ (Q 24:31) “Turn towards God in repentance, believing that you may triumph”. Shaikh then goes on to say how this verse was revealed to the companions of the Prophet, who discussed the matter in detail. Then the Prophet replied that repentance is incumbent upon all, at every hour and at every moment. Infidels; should renounce all and become true believers; sinners should turn aside from their sins and observe God’s commandments; those already doing good should progress from what is good to what is still better; those standing still should not linger in the courtyard but come straight up to His door while those immersed in the affairs of this world should not sink lower into them, but rise to the pinnacle of detachment. It would be a sin for a pilgrim who has already ascended to a certain stage if he were to descend to a lower one. One should turn away from all sorts of greed. There is no room for complacency, since there is always a higher state than the one the pilgrim happens to be in. He must always press on! There is a command: “Walk ahead of those who travel alone”. Moses said, “تبت إليك توبة” (Q 7:143). That is to say, I turned from myself to You because of my passionate desire to see Your Face”. The Prophet said, “I beg for pardon seventy times a day.” For him, seeking pardon meant

⁸ *Maktubat-e-Sadi*, Nawal Kishore, p. 4

advancing from what was of some merit to what was of much greater merit; to proceed from one stage to a higher one – that is the divine command. A person in the first stage cannot hope to have repentance of someone's sin for the second time. Shaikh goes on to explain the real meaning of repentance and its various manifestations through the narration of stories of Sufis and Shaikhs. The third letter is on reconciling offended parties. The fourth is on the renewal of repentance which follows the former in searching for spiritual guidance. In brief, Shaikh Makhdum Sharfuddin Ahmad Yahay Maneri in his letters deals with each aspect of spiritual life and worldly dealings which are based on the teaching of the Holy Quran and the traditions of the Prophet. For this very reason he quoted profusely from these two sources. The reader of *Maktubat-e-Sadi* discovers a whole new interpretation of various Islamic terms and for this reason a scholar says that it is like a sea full of pearls which can be found only by divers.⁹

The importance of this masterpiece of Sufi literature can be assessed by its mention in various books dating from mediaeval and modern times. Abu Fazl in his book *Ain-e-Akbari* mentions this book with utmost respect.¹⁰ In another place he writes about the life of Makhdumul Mulk.¹¹ Munshi Ghulam Husain Taba Tabai in his book entitled *Siyar Al Muta'akherin* devoted a whole chapter to Shaikh Makhdumul Mulk Sharfuddin Maneri, though all the information is taken from *Ain-e-Akbari*. The *Mutakabut Tawarikh* of Abdul Qadir Badayuni tells how son of Khan Jahan Lodhi of Delhi Sultanat visited Shaikh Sharfuddin Maneri, the king of Tirhut i. e. Bihar, in 1496.¹² The *Kitab Miraatul Asrar* of Aasi Shaikh (ms. p 204) also sheds light on Shaikh, describing him as a great Sufi and master of the pen. Similarly, *Tarikhe Farishta*, *Maktubat Qudsiya* of Abdul Quddos Gangohi, *Tabaqat-e-Akbari* of Nizamuddin Ahmad Bin Muqem Al Harwi, *Rfiqul Arefeen* of Mohammad Hisamuddin Manakpuri, *Fawaid Rukniyah* of Shah Ruknuddin Jundhi, *Ma'adinul Asrar (mal'uzat* of Skaikh Qazin Ala Shatari), *Khazinatul Aulia* of Mufti Ghulam Sardar bin Mufti and *Shah Alam Namah* of Ghulam Ali Ghulam also discuss the life and works of Shaikh with respect and honour.

Shaikh Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri has bequeathed a large treasure house of knowledge in the form of letters through which he guides his own followers in particular and the common people in general on the path of righteousness.

⁹ Firdosi, *Manaqibul Asfiya*, p. 125.

¹⁰ Abul Fazl, *Ain-e-Akbari*, vol. 3 p. 269.

¹¹ Abul Fazl, *Ibid.*, p. 283.

¹² Badayuni, *Mutakabut Tawarikh*, vol. 1, p. 316.

These very reasons attract thousands of people to his tomb in Bihar Sharif and the cave of Rajgir where he spent some time in seclusion. A sufi teaches not only through words but also by means of the lofty moral standards he sets. Islam is radiated not only through sermons but in the very purity of the lives of the prophet and his followers wherein can be found the highest principles of Islam. In the very simplicity of their material existences we learn the true meaning of *tawakkul*, or absolute trust in Allah, and through observing their words and deeds, we discover exactly how we should lead our lives.

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