



## BARĒLVĪ, AḤMAD ŠAHĪD

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**BARĒLVĪ, SAYYED AḤMAD ŠAHĪD**, Indo-Muslim saint, author of Persian works, known for his reformist ideas, military ventures, and eventual martyrdom (1201-46/1786-1831). He was born into a pious Muslim family at Rae Bareli; after elementary education at home, he went to Lucknow in search of employment and then proceeded to Delhi, where in 1222/1807-08 he was initiated into Sufism by Shah ‘Abd-al-‘Azīz b. Shah Walī-Allāh Dehlevī (q.v., d. 1239/1823). For seven years he served in the army of Nawwāb Amīr Khan, later the ruler of Tonk. Returning to Delhi, he gradually gained spiritual eminence, and many distinguished persons were initiated by him, including two relatives of Shah ‘Abd-al-‘Azīz, Shah Moḥammad Esmā‘īl and Shah ‘Abd-al-Ḥayy, who became his principal disciples. He gained many more followers during missionary tours in north India. In 1237/1821, he set out with a large party to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, returning home in 1240/1824 (Sayyed Moḥammad ‘Alī, *Maḳzan-e aḥmadī*, Agra, 1299/1824). Sayyed Aḥmad’s ideas during this period have been lucidly presented in *Šerāṭ-e mostaqīm* (Lahore, n.d.), a Persian digest of his conversations compiled by Shah Moḥammad Esmā‘īl and Shah ‘Abd-al-Ḥayy in 1232/1817-18. He strongly affirms the profession of God’s Unity (*tawḥīd*), uncompromisingly denounces all innovations (*beḏ‘at*), and advocates outer as well as inner holy war (*jihād*). Further, many references in his letters indicate Sayyed Aḥmad’s awareness of the growing foreign political domination of Hindustan and the need to oppose it (*Makātīb-e Sayyed Aḥmad Barēlvī*, Patna University ms., pp. 36, 102, 129, and passim). In 1242/1826, accompanied by a large party of volunteers, he “migrated” from British India to the northwestern frontier tribal area, chosen



for both religious and tactical reasons. The increasingly large segment of India under British control had been declared *dāral-ḥarb* as early as 1217/1801, so it was considered incumbent on Muslims to leave British India whenever possible (‘Abd-al-‘Azīz b. Walī-Allāh, *Fatāwā-ye ‘Azīzī*, Delhi, 1311/1893, I, p. 116). More importantly, Sayyed Aḥmad had been assured support by the area’s battle-hardened Pathan chiefs, some of whom were nominally subservient to the Sikh kingdom. Though his primary interest was to combat the British, Sayyed Aḥmad became entangled in wars against Sikh commanders and local Pathan chiefs; his differences with the latter stemmed largely from his reformist ideas. He died while fighting a Sikh force at Balakot on 25 Dū’l-qa’da 1246/8 May 1831. When his corpse was not immediately found, some of his followers developed the belief that he had not died but only disappeared temporarily; tracts were even written predicting his coming as Mahdi, though the belief faded with time (Walāyat ‘Alī, *Rasā’el-e tes’a*, Delhi, n.d., pp. 46-78; Q. Ahmad, *The Wahhabi Movement in India*, Calcutta, 1966, pp. 76-78).

Sayyed Aḥmad’s actions and the movement resulting from them have to be viewed against the background of both the social and political disintegration of late eighteenth century India and the ideas and activities of Shah Walī-Allāh (d. 1176/1763). The latter’s impact on Sayyed Aḥmad is evident in many respects, both substantive and procedural. For instance, Sayyed Aḥmad, like Shah Walī-Allāh, was considerably influenced by Sufi ideas and practices. He initiated people into Sufism first according to the four prevalent orders and then according to his own, the *Ṭarīqa-ye moḥammadiya* (Moḥammad Ja’far Thānesarī, *Tawārīk-e ‘ajība*, Sadhaura, n.d., pp. 22-23). His *Šerāṭ-e mostaqīm* is composed on the lines of the Indo-Persian *malḡūzāt* (compilation of conversations); it discusses various mystical terms and practices, also dwelling upon jihad, which is not generally discussed in such works. He conceived of it mainly in religious and moral terms, but he was not oblivious to its political implications (*Makātīb*, pp.28, 50, 131). He noted that “while rulers and statesmen have fallen into obscurity, foreigners from distant lands have become masters of Indian territories; it is the vendors of merchandise who have obtained sovereignty” (ibid., p. 102). He realized the importance of controlling the levers of political power in order to implement his reformist program (ibid., p. 188), but envisaged his task as the restoration of Indo-Muslim polity to a certain level and then a return to spiritual pursuits (ibid., pp. 81, 131).

Certain of Sayyed Aḥmad’s ideas resembled those of Moḥammad b. ‘Abd-al-



Wahhāb, the founder of the Wahhabi movement in Arabia, partly because of a common emphasis on the Qur'ān and the Hadiths. But the Sufi influence, the brief spell of Mahdist fervor, and the strong political undercurrent are not evident in the Arabian antecedent. Due to the similarities, however, and the supposed influence of Arabian Wahhabism, Sayyed Aḥmad's adherents have come to be dubbed, incorrectly and misleadingly, Wahhabis or neo-Wahhabis (see, e.g., M. Mujeeb, *The Influence of Islam on Indian Society*, Meerut, 1972, pp. 84-85). The followers of Sayyed Aḥmad called themselves *mowaḥḥedīn* or *moḥammadīn* (*Rasā'el-e tes'a*, pp. 2, 70) and later *ahl-e ḥadīth*. The vigorous movement initiated by Sayyed Aḥmad evoked great sympathy among South Asian Muslims; though ultimately a failure, it drew attention to the threat of foreign domination and made a sustained effort to counter the British. Appealing to the masses rather than merely the élite of the Indo-Muslim community, it brought about significant social reforms. Negatively, its failure in the political field inspired alternative courses of action, including that which was to be advocated by his namesake, Sir Sayyed Aḥmad Khan, thus marking the beginning of the modernization of Indo-Muslim society.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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