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## SUFI AND STATE IN MEDIEVAL BIHAR DURING FOURTEENTH CENTURY

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### ABSTRACT :

*In an attempt to explore the extent to which the Sufis were sensitive to the demands of medieval Indian politics, this paper focuses on Sufi idea of kingship and polity, and dwells upon some specificities of the Sufis' relationship with the ruling authorities. Though Chishti Sufi literature also shows that the Chishtis too had contact with rulers, their relationship with rulers was distinctly different from that of Suhrawardi. The Firdausi saints also had full respect for the rulers, yet were critical of wrong political practices. The sufis while remaining aloof from the king exercised a kind of spiritual and moral authority over the political authorities. They also gave the idea of model king and state. The Firdausi saints recommended in many cases to help the poor and deserving people. They never accepted any grant or post from the King, but were eager to help the poor and needy with their recommendations to the sultans or nobles for redressal of their problems.*

**KEY WORDS:** Sufism, Chishti, Firduasi, Wuhrawardi, Politics, Kings.

### INTRODUCTION :

The Sufis were guided in their attitude by the *Quranic* injunction "obey God and the Prophet and those who are in command over you". The Sufis, thus, were likely to accept without much resistance the legitimacy of the rulers and measures taken by them. They would also not countenance disobedience and disrespect to the rulers. This did not, however, restrain them from expressing disapproval of the rulers and their practices, which they believed to be against the law and humanity. But the Chishti and Suhrawardi saints had different attitudes in their relationship with the rulers. Suhrawardi were fully associated with government. Their plea was that this was the means by which they could give correct guidance to the rulers to secure good for the people.<sup>i</sup> Firdausi saints of fourteenth century Bihar, besides their correspondence with their general devotees, also wrote letters to the kings, nobles and government officials, mainly on requests made by them. Two letters of Yahya Maneri addressed to Muhammad Bin Tughlaq and Firoz Shah Tughlaq are available. They (letters) range freely over variety of topics and these letters contain quotations from *hadith* and *quran*. The other saint of Bihar, Muzaffar Shams Balkhi, addressed letters to Ghyasuddin Azam Shah of Bengal, some as replies and others as course of advice and instruction.<sup>ii</sup> In the late 1340s, Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq was very upset because of rebellions. He wrote a letter to Shaikh Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri requesting him to give him advice and pray for the wellbeing and stability of his rule. The Sultan also requested the Shaikh to enlighten him about some terms of Sufism.<sup>iii</sup> After receiving that letter the Shaikh replied that difficulties and turmoil of the reign were having good effect on him. To the second request, the Shaikh replied that whatever could be committed to writing on the subject had already been sent by him in the form of letters. He further advised that experiences would add to knowledge.<sup>iv</sup>

Sultan Firoz Shah Tughlaq on the occasion of his expedition to Bengal called upon Yahya Maneri and his saintly cousin Ahmad Chiramposh in the town of Bihar. He was highly impressed by the Shaikh, and Sultan showed great devotion to him. The Shaikh also seemed to be pleased with

them but when Firoz Shah Tughlaq on the advice of some Delhi *ulama* punished Ahmad Bihari and Sahikh Aaz Kakwi, a disciple of Yahya Maneri, the Shaikh could not conceal his annoyance and expressed a kind of open threat of the disastrous consequences that his action implied for the city of Delhi.<sup>v</sup>

The sufis while remaining aloof from the king exercised a kind of spiritual and moral authority over the political authorities. They also gave the idea of model king and state. In *Munis-ul-Muridin* a model for the king is given with qualifications which a ruler was expected to possess. Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri cited the example of Sultan Shamsuddin (Firoz) of Sonargaon who was told by his wazir, Arsalan, that "neither of his two sons, Hatim Khan, the ruler of Bihar, nor Ghiyasuddin (Bahadur Shah), ruler of Kamrup (Assam), would prove successful as a ruler because one is too kind and liberal and the other is haughty and overbearing. Hatim was a man of affable nature, lacking in force and severity. Bahadur Khan is violent, vain, arrogant and lacking in mildness and affability."<sup>vi</sup> Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri once observed, "People incharge of endowed properties should serve as custodians and fulfil the wants of the needy. The wealthy should serve the poor; the learned should impart knowledge to students. A disinterested and unasked for service shall bear fruit".<sup>vii</sup>

While discussing the duty of a king towards his people; Shafruddin Yahya Maneri narrated an anecdote: 'the famous sufi Bashar Hami was told by his *murid* about a king who spent his whole night praying and whole day fasting. The shaikh replied that he was not fulfilling his own duty as a king, because the real duty of a king is to feed the hungry, cloth the naked and help the needy.'<sup>viii</sup> On another occasion Shafruddin Yahya Maneri also discussed the qualities that were necessary for a king to run the government smoothly. He observed: 'It was necessary that the king should have the blend of the qualities of being an extravagant as well as of a miser. He should infuse the feeling of fear as well as love, and should give both severe punishment and mercy as the need be, because all these things are necessary for the country's glory, success and reputation.'<sup>ix</sup> In *Adab-ul-Muridin*, Yahya Maneri narrates a saying from an eminent early sufi, Khwaja Muhammad Bin Sirin, indicating that he would pray for the Sultan as he believed a prayer for the ruler was prayer for the welfare of the people.<sup>x</sup>

Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri at the time of a recommendation he made to the Sultan Firoz Shah Tughlaq for a case for redressal of certain grievances, he addressed the sultan as "the refugee of the oppressed and distressed ones". But at the same time he also mentioned the hardships of the people because of the scarcity of commodities and rising prices.<sup>xi</sup> *Ganj-i-la yafna* records that on the day of judgement the kings and officials have to give an account of their misdeeds and oppressive acts and the good work for the welfare of the people might out - weigh their works of mischief.<sup>xii</sup>

The Sufis laid special emphasis on justice, as *Ganj-i-la Yafna* records: 'one hour of justice is better than sixty years of prayers and devotions'.<sup>xiii</sup> Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri had high regard for Sultan Firoz Shah Tughlaq, particularly for the Sultan's piety and concern for justice. Once the Shaikh received a complaint of injustice by the officer of Firoz Shah Tughlaq. He addressed Firoz Shah in his letter: "Praise to God, for today on your exalted and benevolent Self on which the protection and refuge of the oppressed and the distressed ones depends". Highlighting the importance of justice, the Shaikh quoted a *hadith* in support of his view and comment.<sup>xiv</sup> Abdul Quaddus Gangohi in his letter to Sultan Sikander Lodi commented and compared the importance of office of the King with that of a judge, and clearly attached more importance to justice. He mentioned, "Let the King who wears the crown understand that kingship is the highest and the noblest of occupations and his sense of justice concerns various groups of people. Justice done by him for one moment is better than or superior to, the prayers and worships of sixty years by others. Justice brings stability in the kingdom. The king is the master of the state and soul of the people. The kingdom gets its stability from the king. The Prophet says: The most beloved person in the eyes of God on the Day of Judgment will be the just and truthful '*imam*' (king), because the benefits of his justice cover the whole creation of God". The letter was followed by an advice to look after the weak ones, the pious, the learned, and the saintly people sympathetically. The king should never be negligent of them for the prosperity of two worlds and eternal felicity lay in sincere devotion to God

and service to his creatures.<sup>xv</sup> Here Abdul Quddus Gangohi gave legitimacy to the king as the highest and most respectful occupation. In the last part of his letter he clearly mentioned that the King should not be neglectful of the requirements of the learned and pious saints. He should seek association with saints and thus, reinforce his position.

Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri in one of his letters to Firoz Shah Tughlaq in which he discussed justice and equity and help to oppressed ones,<sup>xvi</sup> mentioned an incident from the life of the Prophet. The incident which was reported by Bilal is as follows: "Once when I was sitting down besides the Prophet in Abu Bakr's house in Mecca, somebody came to meet the Prophet. After the meeting, he said 'O Muhammad, you claim to be an apostle of God, You say that He has sent you. You invite one and all to embrace Islam. If you are infact an apostle, will you allow a strong man to oppress a weak one?' The Prophet said: "who has oppressed you". He replied 'Abu Jahl has snatched away some of my belongings.' Prophet after hearing this got up and went to Abu Jahl's house and called him. When Abu Jahl came out outside and saw the Prophet standing there, he said: 'You have come here. Why did you not send someone to me?' Prophet angrily retorted: 'Why have you seized the belongings of this Christian? Give him back whatever belongs to him. He replied 'Is this what you have come for? Why did you not send a companion of yours through whom I would have returned that?' The Prophet replied: 'Do not make a lengthy speech. Simply give him back whatever is his'. At this, Abu Jahl took out everything and handed them over to the Christian. The Prophet says: 'O Christian, now you have got you belongings back'. The Christian replied, 'except one sewing needle'. The Prophet told Abu Jahl to give it back to him, and until the needle was not returned the Prophet refused to go back"<sup>xvii</sup> In this letter, the importance of justice was emphasized by showing the incident related to a Christian. Justice was provided by the Prophet, and it was ensured that even a needle was to be returned by Abu Jahl. The Prophet was very particular to ensure the dispensation of justice. No matter how big or small the amount, it must be safe, and if confiscated by someone unjustly, it must be handed over to the owner. In this incident it is also shown that justice should be dispensed to all, irrespective of their personal beliefs and religions. All people without any discrimination should be given justice because it is the duty of the king to dispense justice. He should not allow a strong man to oppress a weak one.

Sufis discussed to a large extent, the issue of king's duty to serve the needy and provide protection and basic necessities for their survival. These should be the foremost concerns of a king. *Ma'adin-ul-Ma'ani* gives a full description about the responsibilities of a king. Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri observed likewise through the example of Prophet Sulaiman, who not only governed over the human beings but also over all creatures of the world. He never ruled for his personal gains nor did he seek any pleasure and reward out of his governance. He carried out the responsibilities that he had been assigned.<sup>xviii</sup> This example is cited only to provide an ideal of governance for the ruler to follow. Duty and responsibility required primacy over personal gains. Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri again cited an example of Joseph (Yusuf). After becoming king he forgave his brothers and made no mention about their misdeeds of the past. He only says, "God may forgive you, for He is the most merciful of the merciful."<sup>xix</sup> The king was expected to avoid being vengeful for personal gains and to be merciful as far as possible to his people. Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri once observed an anecdote: "Once a King named Mohlib, wearing a precious tunic walked in a boastful and arrogant way. Then a *darwesh* intervened saying that the kind of imperious walk that you are taking is not liked by God. Hearing this king got ashamed and gave up this habit."<sup>xx</sup>

In Sufi literature of Bihar, the following incident is mentioned by the Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri: "When I was in that old cave, there was a military governor there; he did not have a very good way of dealing with the people, many of whom would come to me asking me to intervene on their behalf. I used to do so for to each one of them."<sup>xxi</sup> Shaikh gave full emphasis on dealing with the people by the government officials because that duty was assigned by God and it was necessary for ruler or aristocracy not to harass or torment their people. The Sufis who tried to give a model of state to a ruler on the basis of *Quran* and *hadith* and having in their mind the model of the prophet and the pious caliphs, expected the example of these models to be emulated in the medieval period.

While dealing with various dimensions of the relationship that existed between the Sufis and political authorities, it is also necessary to analyse the involvement of Sufis in the policies of the state, the extent to which they accepted financial assistance for the state authorities, that is, *wazaif*, *imalak* and *madad-i-maash*, for maintenance of their *khanqas* and for running their *langars* (free kitchen). Also, how much influence was exercised by them on the king and political authorities? It is not unlikely that rather than their political connections, it was because of their very close contact with people and their purported miraculous powers that the Sufi became very influential.

Muslim saints claimed to be God's representatives on earth. The power of the rulers did not belong to them as a natural right but flowed to them from the grace of the Muslim saints. The all-powerful roles assigned to Sufi saints have been best captured in Al-Hujwiri's statement that God had made the saints the governors of the Universe. This assigning of such a central role to the Muslim saints had important consequences on the authority that they exercised over the political domain. The most obvious example of such authority could be seen in the manner in which their predictions regarding the future ruler and the length of his reign were always true. Eaton opines that behind this explicit act of prediction lay the implicit act of appointment -- that of a Sufi entrusting his *wilayat*, an earthly domain to a prince.<sup>xxii</sup> Simon Digby opines that the territorial *wilayat* of the Sufi Shaikhs had a close bearing on political and social events.<sup>xxiii</sup> Thus, it is very logical that the prosperity of the reign of Sultan Alauddin Khalji (1296-1316) was attributed by his contemporaries to the blessings of the Shaikhs.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Husamuddin Manikpuri (1455) refers to Sultan Firoz Shah's visit to Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri, seeking the prayers and blessings of the Saint. *Sirat-i-Firoz Shahi*, gives the details of the interview between the Sultan and Suharwardi Saint of Amber, Ahmad Chiramposh.<sup>xxv</sup> According to *Malfuzat-i-Rukni*, a collection of conversations of Pir Imadullah who was a seventeenth century Shuttari saint of Jandahah, "When he (Firoz Shah) came to Bihar he first called upon Makhdum Ahmad Chiramposh who did not show respect due to the sultan, while Shaikh Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri, the Makhdum, is reported to have received him well. The Sultan took the hands of Makhdum in his own hand and requested him to walk ahead of him. The Makhdum, however, in all humility kept himself behind the Sultan and made the latter walk ahead of him. At this, Sultan Firoz recited this couplet:

*"gar pesh rawam tariq-i-hajib-war pas berawam chunist wajib* (if I walk ahead, it would be like a chamberlain, but it is incumbent upon me to keep my self behind).

The Makhdum immediately replied:

*"gar pesh rawi cheraghi - rahi - war pas berawi jahan panahi"*. (If you walk in front, you serve the purpose of a lamp. But if you proceed behind, it would mean that you are the refuge of the world).<sup>xxvi</sup>

Shaikh Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri's relations with Firoz Shah Tughlaq were also cordial. And the Shaikh showed great regard for his dispense of justice and piousness. When Shaikh received complaint from Khwaja Zafar Abdi about the injustice of an officer of Firoz Shah, he addressed the Sultan, "Praise is to God for today on your exalted and benevolent self is dependent the protection and the refuge of the oppressed and distressed ones". He also gave emphasis on justice by quoting a *hadith* on justice.<sup>xxvii</sup> Yahya Maneri once also observed that "It is essential for a Sufi to visit the King if he is summoned. If fails to do so, it would be heretical. If he were not invited by the King, the Sufi should refrain from visiting him. However, if the Sufi's visit would prove to be beneficial to anyone then he should go ahead and visit the king."<sup>xxviii</sup>

Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri and the Sultan of Bengal were very friendly. In a letter written by Muzaffar Shams Balkhi to Sultan Ghiyasuddin of Bengal he writes, "I always found that the Shaikh of Islam, Sharfuddin, showed a favour towards this land (Bengal). It was especially blessed by God, in that he had called Sheikh Sharfuddin, who was God's vanguard, to stay there".

Although Firoz Shah and others on his side made repeated requests to the Sheikh to write something especially for them which they might retain as memento, he did not write or send any

thing separately to them. On the other hand, with glad and willing heart he frequently wrote to, and was happy with Sikandar Shah 1389 AD.<sup>xxix</sup>

Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri only wrote one letter that was a recommendation not a reply to Firoz Shah's letter. This excerpt gives us the idea that Yahya Maneri was having very good relations with Sultan Ghiyasuddin of Bengal. Shaikh Husamussin Manikpuri recorded that the gift sent by Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah to Shaikh Nur Qutb Alam, was accepted by the Shaikh and observed: "Prophet says: whosoever hates his chief, hates me and if one hates me, it means that he hates Allah."<sup>xxx</sup> By this, the Shaikh clearly legitimised the gift and whatsoever was given to him. Maulana Muzaffar Balkhi spent two years as a guest of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah, while he was on his way on pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>xxxi</sup>

The *Maktubat-i-Sadi*, which is a collection of hundred letters on mystical doctrine addressed to Qazi Shamsuddin, 'hakim of Chausa near Buxar. He was a *murid* of Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri and because of his preoccupation with administrative works he was unable to attend the *majlis* of Shaikh. He requested the Shaikh to give him lessons through correspondence and that the letters would later permitted to be collected and compiled for benefit of posterity.

The Firdausi saints recommended in many cases to help the poor and deserving people. They never accepted any grant or post from the King, but were eager to help the poor and needy with their recommendations to the sultans or nobles for redressal of their problems. Muzaffar Shams Balkhi always drew attention of officials and nobles towards the welfare of the people.

All the incidents that have been referred above reinforce the point made about the active involvement of Sufis in politics during fourteenth century Bihar. Involvement in political matters is obvious in the case of the Saint from Bihar, Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri, who took strong exception to Firoz Shah Tughlaq's act of punishing Ahmad Behari and Shaikh Aaz Kakavi (who happened to be the disciples of Yahya Maneri). Yahya Maneri made no efforts to conceal his anger and he expressed this anger through his prediction that consequences of this action would not be good. This active involvement and interest in politics can also be seen in the letters that Yahya Maneri wrote to Muhammad bin Tughlaq and Firoz Shah Tughlaq.

<sup>i</sup> A. Rashid, *Society and Culture in Medieval India*, (1206-556 AD) Calcutta, 1969, p. 182.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iii</sup> Paul Jackson, *The way of a Sufi: Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri*, Delhi, 1987, pp. 115-16.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid

<sup>v</sup> S.A.A. Rizvi, *History of Sufism in India*, Vol.1, Munshilal Manoharlal, New Delhi, p.231.

<sup>vi</sup> Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri, *Munis-ul-Muridin* (Urdu translation by Shah Syed Qasimuddin), Bihar Sharif - 1998, PP.66 -67.

<sup>vii</sup> A. Rashid, *Society and Culture in Medieval India*, (1206-556 AD) Calcutta, 1969, p. 180.

<sup>viii</sup> Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri, *Maktubal-i-Do Sadi* (Urdu translation by Shah Qasimuddin) p. 238.

<sup>ix</sup> Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri, *Munis-ul-Muridin* (Urdu translation by Shah Syed Qasimuddin) Bihar Sharif - 1998, pp. 66-67.

<sup>x</sup> Paul Jackson, *The Way of a Sufi: Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri*, Delhi, 1987, PP.115-16.

<sup>xi</sup> S.A.A. Rizvi, "*History of Sufism in India, Vol.1, Delhi*" 1978.

<sup>xii</sup> S.K. Latif, *Muslim Mystic Movement----*, pp. 65.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid, p.182.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Fawaid-ul-Fuad* (English translation by Ziauddin Farooqi) p. 252.

<sup>xv</sup> A. Rashid, *Society and Culture in Medieval India*, (1206-556 AD) Calcutta, 1969, p. 184.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xvii</sup> S. Askari, *Islam and Muslims in Medieval Bihar*, Patna, 1998, p. 184.

<sup>xviii</sup> Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri, *Ma'adin-ul-Maani* (Urdu translation by Shah Qasimuddin) Calcutta, 1985, p. 509.

<sup>xix</sup> Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri, *Khwan-i-Pur Naimat* (English translation by Paul Jackson) p. 85.

<sup>xx</sup> Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri, *Maadin-ul-Maani* (Urdu translation by Shah Qasimuddin) Calcutta, p. 440.

<sup>xxi</sup> Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri, *Khawan-i-Pur Nanimat* (Eng. Tr.by Paul Jackson) p 257.

<sup>xxii</sup> R. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, 1996, p. 83.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Simon Digby, " The Sufi Shaykh and the Sultan: A Conflict of Claims to Authority in Medieval India (pp. 71-81)", *Iran, Journal of British Institute of Persian Studies*, Vol. XXVIII, London, 1990, p. 1.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ibid

<sup>xxv</sup> S.H. Askari, *Islam and Muslims in Medieval Bihar*, Patna, 1998, p. 63.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxvii</sup> S.K. Latif, *Muslim Mystic Movement----* p.59.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri, *Khawan-i-Pur Nanimat*,, English translation by Paul Jackson, Adarah-i-Adbiat, Delhi, 1986,p. 59.

<sup>xxix</sup> Paul Jackson, *The way of a Sufi: Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri*, Delhi, 1987, p. 117.

<sup>xxx</sup> S.K. Latif, *Muslim Mystic Movement----*, p.63.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Ibid, p. 65.