Sayyid Ahmad Shahid in Sind

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A number of works has been written, out of devotion and reverence, on the life and the movement of Sayyid Ahmad Shahid (d. 1832), but no attempt is made to analyse the movement critically. It is not the scope of this paper to examine the movement in broader perspective of political, social, and economic condition of the 19th century India, but to analyse the arrival and stay of Sayyid Ahmad Shahid in Sind and the reaction of the ruling classes and the people towards the movement.

On the eve of his arrival, the rulers of Hyderabad were Mir Nur Muhammad (d. 1841), Mir Karam Ali (d. 1823), and Mir Murad Ali (d. 1833). It appears that the Mirs were well informed about the person and the activities of Sayyid Ahmad through their agents and spies. The Mirs were particularly apprehensive about the expansionist policy of the East India Company and kept all kinds of nformation about the happenings in the British territories. It was natural that some doubts were created in the minds of the Mirs regarding the movement of Sayyid Ahmad, who recruited the majority of his followers from the British territory and received generous donations to equip his followers to fight against the Sikhs, and in spite of all his military preparations and preaching of the holy war, the British government connived and allowed him to march along with his armed men through the British territories. The rulers of the Indian states, who were completely under the British influence and never dared to annoy them, welcomed him and provided him moral and material support. Under these circumstances, the Mirs believed that Sayyid Ahmad and his movements were supported by the British government. It was roumoured in Sind, Baluchistan, and the Punjab that he was the British agent and the British were sponsoring his

cause. Charles Masson, who was wandering these areas, reported that as Sayyid Ahmad paid his troops in Company's rupees, people believed him an agent of British government.[1] He further writes:

> It was suspected that he was sent by the Sahib Loghs, by the vulgars, and I was often questioned on the point, but of course was unable to reply.[2]

The arrival of Sayyid Ahmad in Sind and his interview with the Mirs of Hyderabad did not remove their doubts. When James Burnes visited the court of the Mirs in 1827, Mir Murad Ali asked him in one of the private meetings whether the British government supplied money to Sayyid Ahmad. James Burnes writes:

> I expressed my wonder that any person form such an idea, since it was notorious that the Seyud was fighting solely for the faith; but my answer did not seem to convince him, as he remarked that though the Bombay government, whose servant I was, knew nothing of the matter, it was probably very well understood at Bengal.[3]

Under these circumstances when Sayyid Ahmad came to Sind in 1826, he was not welcomed here as he expected. Neither he got the volunteers for his arms nor the financial support for the movement. He arrived in Sind from Marwar crossing the desert and reached Umarkot as his first stopover in Sind. Soon after his arrival, he sent Haji Abdur Rahim to talk to the keeper of the fort (Qil'dar) and discuss with him for the arrangement of his stay. The Qil'dar was suspicious about Sayyid Ahmad's arrival from the British territories, therefore, he refused to allow him and his followers to enter the fort. He took precautionary measures and asked him to stay outside at a safe distance.[4] He was also ordered not to come to the fort and leave the place next day. When some of the followers of the Sayyid approached the fort for the purpose of visit, the soldiers suspected their approach and were ready to fire. When they were assured that their only purpose was to visit the fort, the soldiers allowed them to enter.[5]

From Umarkot he reached Karo, there he met Sayyid Choran

Shah, a highly respected sayyid, who presented him a buffalo.[6] Choran Shah told him about the rumours which were circulated throughout Sind that he was an English agent. He proposed that he would introduce him to the ruler of Mirpur in order to remove his doubts.[7] When he reached Mirpur, Mir Ali Murad (d. 1837), did not come to see him. He sent some food and two persons to guide him to Hyderabad.[8]

From Mirpur, he went to Tando Allahyar, where two persons came from Hyderabad to investigate about Sayyid Ahmad.[9] From Tando Allahyar, he went to Tando Jam and from there he sent a message to the Mirs of Hyderabad informing them about his arrival. The Mirs sent Sayyid Sibghat Allah to receive him. On reaching Hyderabad, he was welcomed by the Kotwal of the city, who provided him foodstuff on behalf of the Mirs.[10] Three days after his arrival, he went to the fort to see the Mirs. He was well received and the Mirs gave him some cash and some minor gifts.[11] Some of the courtiers took oath of allegiance (Ba'a) to the Sayyid such as Mir Ismael Shah, the wazir of the Mirs, Muhammad Yusuf, the agent of the Bombay government, and Muhammad Yusuf Khan, a noble.[12] He stayed in Hyderabad for 13 days. He was greatly disappointed by the cold attitude of the Mirs. He could not get the support and the financial help from them as he hoped. He also abandoned the idea to call his family to Hyderabad. From Hyderabad, he went to Ranipur, Hala, Kot Sayyid, Lalukot, Hangorja, and Pirkot. Sibghat Shah Rashidi, the spiritual leader of the Hurs, who first met him at Ranikot, arranged his stay in his town and provided him all kinds of facilities. Finding him friendly and cooperative, he decided to settle his family there.[13] Pir Sibghat Shah expressed his desire to participate in the holy war against the Sikhs.[14] From Pirkot he went to Rakha, Habibkot, and finally Shikarpur.

His sudden arrival at Shikarpur surprised the people of the town and they mistook him and his followers as a part of Shah Shuja's army, who had left bitter memories for the inhabitants of the city. Therefore, the people and the administration of the town immediately closed the gates and did not allow anybody to come in. Sayyid Ahmad sent some of his trusted men to Agha Kazim, the governor of the town, to give him assurance that he had no relation

with Shah Shuja and wanted to stay in the town for only two or three days. The governor then allowed two persons to come in the city for shopping.[15] Later on the city gates of the were opened and the people of the town came to see him. Agha Kazim also entertained him and his followers and gave him presents to show his devotion. He showed much enthusiasm and promised to follow him along with his army to fight the holy war.[16] At Shikarpur, which was the commercial centre of Sind, Sayyid Ahmed bought shoes and clothes for his followers. He left Shikarpur on 20th July, 1826 and marched onward.[17]

Sayyid Ahmad had high expectation from Sind to get volunteers for his movement and financial aid from the Mirs and the people. The author of the Tarikh Taza Nama-i-Ma'arik reported that Sayyid Ahmad faced great criticism and opposition in Sind on account of his religious views, as he was known as the Wahabbi. There were also doubts among the people regarding his plan to fight against the powerful Sikh government with a small number of his followers. There was a general belief that the whole movement had no definite and solid motives except to entangle innocent people in the name of religion.[18]

The reason why Sayyid Ahmad and his movement could not attract the people of Sind is found in the different political, social, and economic conditions of British India and Sind. Sind like India was not the occupied country, therefore, the people could not be roused and united on any political slogan. The whole basis of Sayyid Ahmad's movement was on religious emotionalism and for the people of Sind this approach had no attraction as they felt economically and politically satisfied and saw no material benefit in joining the movement. Therefore, a section of the people, such as Agha Kazim, who showed sympathy for his cause and promised to join him never fulfilled their promise. Moreover, Sayyid Ahmad's short stay did not give him any opportunity to propagate his religious and political views among the people and win them for his cause.

The attitude of the Mirs was diplomatic. They showed their sympathy in public, but remained very cautious not to involve themselves in his movement. They were not sure of the real motives of the movement and did not like to offend Ranjit Singh, who was very powerful and had the intention to find some pretext to attack Sind.

In 1831, the Mirs, however, tried to exploit the name of Sayyid

Ahmed to prevent the mission of Alexander Burnes to navigate the Indus. The Mirs' agent at the court of Ranjit Singh told him that the carriage which Burnes was bringing for him was full of gold Mohars to give to Sayyid Ahmad.[19] The ruse was not successful and the navigation of the Indus was done by Burnes.

Though the arrival and the stay of Sayyid Ahmad had no significance in the history of Sind, but his wars with the Sikhs indirectly affected the course of Sind history. Ranjit Singh was involved in a series of wars with Sayyid Ahmad at a time when he planned to invade Sind. In 1832, when he became free after the defeat and death of Sayyid Ahmad and sought the British consent to occupy Sind, it was refused. Khera rightly observes:

> The Maharaja was evidently too late, for during the period that he was occupied with Syed Ahmad, the views of the British Government had changed, and they were now 'interested' in Sind.[20]

Thus, Sayyid Ahmad saved Sind from the Sikhs and left it to be occupied by the English.

References

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11. Ibid, p. 264.
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19. P. N. Khera: *British Policy towards Sind upto the Annexation*, Lahore, 1941, p. 12.
20. Ibid, p. 16.