

SHAH-I-HAMADAN'S ACTIVITIES IN CENTRAL ASIA *

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We meet here today to commemorate a great personality of the Muslim world, who, in the fourteenth century A.D., chose to work for the cultural transformation of the life of people in the hilly zone of Central Asia, north and south of the Pamir Range, forged spiritual unity among them and presented political ethics that could bring about peace not only among the kings and princes of the time but also between the rulers and the ruled. He was the great Muslim saint, scholar, missionary and reformer — Sayyid Ali Hamadani, who is better known as *Amir-i Kabir*, *Ali Thani* and *Shah-i Hamadan*. These titles are attributed to him by other learned scholars as they appreciated one or the other facet of his character. For me he is not just a Muslim saint, a seeker of spiritual solace, a mystic, a philosopher and a pursuer of divine knowledge but also a great personality, who spurned the princely pleasures of life by abandoning the princely patrimony of his family in Hamadan and persistently sought for knowledge of all kinds in his 21 years of spiritual wanderings. This accumulation of knowledge was not merely for satisfying his own sense of spiritual or intellectual curiosity but also for a higher aim of spreading the knowledge by teaching and practical living among those people of Central Asia who for long had been disarrayed and disorganized by constant wars and feuds among them. If for nothing else, Sayyid Ali Hamadani will be remembered today for showing, in the disturbed world of his time, a torch of light for bringing about peaceful conditions of human understanding, spiritual solace to the forlorn, and above all cultural transformation of the social living of man from abyssmal ignorance and depravity to a moral ethos of human fellow-feeling, brotherhood of man and equality between one individual and another under the

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principle of Unity of God and His creation of the universe as a manifestation of His own will. It is this moral ethos which was propagated and practised by Shah-i Hamadan and his disciples and under this principle he aimed at bringing about a revolutionary change in the social order of his time and in the political ethos of the contemporary governments so that common men could live in a better environment of peace and freedom of human rights.

Unfortunately, eminent historians, his contemporary as well as of modern time, have misjudged historical sequence of his age and presented his missionary activity in contradiction to the enviable personality of Amir Timur who built a mighty state in Central Asia. The character of Timur has been adversely depicted by historians. His real nature is clearly brought out in his own *Tuzukat-i Timuri* and we learn how devoted he was to the principles of Islam. He himself dictates:

"In the year 771, I entered my thirty-fifth year of age, on which occasion four of the most revered Syeds, viz. Abu al Berkat, Abu al Mualy, Zynad-dyn, and Aly Akber, having chosen a fortunate hour, took me by the arms, and placed me on the throne of sovereignty; after I was seated on the throne, I opened the Koran, which was my constant companion, and this verse came forth, 'Say, God is the master of the world. He gives the kingdom to whom He chooses, and takes it away from those He chooses.' The learned body who were standing at the foot of my throne, wrote the interpretation of this verse, and read prayers for the perpetuity of my dominion . . . I then commanded a proclamation to be made, that 'all people whether great or low, Turks or Persians, Noble or Mean, Officer or Soldier, were in perfect security from me; and I issued edicts through all parts of my dominion, stating that I had pardoned all guilty persons of every description'."

Such a sovereign personality with such a high sense of moral duty has been misinterpreted as a "destroyer" and it is said that he banished Shah-i Hamadan from his home country and hence the latter took refuge in Kashmir along with his six hundred disciples. The way in which Amir Timur constructed the great mosque at Samarqand and placed therein the biggest model of Holy Qur'an in stone as a guiding principle of his life reveals the picture of a different man — a towering builder of an empire, who bowed his head before God. On the other hand we learn from different sources that Shah-i Hamadan left his hometown of Hamadan as far back as 773/1371-72 long before Timur advanced into this part and settled down in Khuttalan, modern Kulab in Tajikistan, USSR. But even before this he had come to Kashmir and made enquiries about the conditions of life in this country. It is from Khuttalan

that he made his third and final visit to Kashmir with the sole purpose of propagating his mission of life. His third visit, which coincided with Timur's subjugation of the ruling family of Khuttalan, was the result of his long-felt desire to bring about social transformation in Kashmir. The political situation might have been uncertain in Khuttalan, where the Sayyid had earlier settled and made a centre of his activity. His leaving Khuttalan at this time was not due to Timur's invasion. In fact the saint selected the entire hilly region for his missionary activity. From Khuttalan to Kashmir and from Kashmir to Kashgar the Sayyid had gone around the Pamir in propagation of his mission. Thus the Sayyid was not fleeing from the wrath of Amir Timur but rather he was wandering about in the fulfilment of his own mission. In order to understand his achievements, we have to understand the values, both social and moral, that inspired men of his time. These values, which were derived from the precepts of Islam, were the norms. The kings, the nobles and the saints all accepted them. And yet while the kings were to establish political solidarity of their dominions, the saints were to present a moral standard both for royalty and common man so that human values could be raised to the ideal of Islamic principles. There was no contradiction between them but there were different methods to achieve them. While Timur was building a political state to reconstruct new ways of civilized life — a cultural norm so well attested in poetry, painting, monumental buildings and scientific achievements of the time — Sayyid Ali Hamadani lit up a perennial torch of spiritual and moral light to eradicate darkness of evil, to promulgate ethical values of human life and to build a social order in this wide region of Central Asia for which he had left his home city of Hamadan. In this wide region, where once Buddhism had stronghold, there had been considerable movements of population since the invasion of Chingiz Khan. Ancient ways of peaceful living had been torn asunder by the bickerings of tribal chiefs and heads of nomadic groups who had fought one against the other for centuries. While Timur attempted to reconsolidate them into one state, Sayyid Ali Hamadani presented a politico-moral ethos to weld the entire people of the region into a human bond of friendship. The prevailing social order was to be transformed into a new moral order of a higher standard. The credit must go to Sayyid Ali Hamadani for paving the ways for this great revolutionary change in the medieval history of Central Asia for the adoption of common moral

standard, inspired by Islam, in which different groups of men could find their due expression — those values of life which persist even today and inspire modern man to those social ideals which are ethical, moral, spiritual, blissful and harmonious for all mankind. In my own wanderings over this wide region from Khuttalan to Kashmir and from Kashmir to Kashgar, I have seen these values still active as a cohesive force to bind the people together as members of human society. Wherever Sayyid Ali Hamadani went, north and south of Pamir, these lessons of noble virtues have been preached and practised. Whether in Kashmir, where the great *Khan-qah-i Mu'alla* is located, or in Baltistan, where a large number of mosques and *ziarats* perpetuate his memory, or in Kulab (old Khuttalan), where his own tomb stands in the centre of a public park, the strong tie of common cultural heritage still brings all the people together on the same tradition of human values that were once taught by the Sayyid. It is a torch that continues to burn for the betterment of human life.

Apart from over hundred works that the Sayyid produced for preaching his philosophy of life, it is his ethical philosophy that is of paramount importance as it is extremely practical and human for moulding the personality and character of man. His ethics is derived from the Holy Qur'an but its practical aspect is based on the *Sunnah* of the Holy Prophet (Peace be upon him). It was through a high standard of Islamic virtues that he strove to raise the moral level of the people as that standard was found to be the most attractive and competitive. However, as he laid greater emphasis on its practical aspect, the substance of his ethics emphasized primarily on *Husn-i Khulq*, as we learn from the third chapter of his book *Zakhirat al-Muluk*. As far as individual human behaviour was concerned, the practical living of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) became the model of virtues, in the light of which *Husn-i Khulq* could be understood and followed. On the other hand the kings and the nobility were also to follow a political behaviour pattern that was based on the nature and character of *Khulafa-i Rashidin*. In this political wisdom again he did not lay emphasis on the form of government but he was more particular on character building and raising the *akhlaq* (moral standard) of the individual men, in whatever position they might be. He viewed two processes of life — *Surat-i Zahir* (i.e. external appearance or the phenomenal world) and *Sirat-i Batin* (i.e. internal build of the self), both having

two aspects of virtue and vice. The one makes up the physical world and the other constitutes the inner self. It is the inner self that needs to be raised higher and higher so that it compasses the external world, not by destroying it but by bringing it within the control of the purified self so that there is a true balance between the inner spirit of man and the physical world. He enumerates ten basic principles of human conduct. They are knowledge, politeness, charity, piety, courage, justice, truthfulness, forbearance, nobility and faith. All these virtues are moral in nature and as far as their practicability is concerned, Sayyid Ali Hamadani presented the *Sirat* of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) as a model of virtuous life. Pious and the leaders of men, who follow these precepts are distinguished from others. They are set apart from those who are evil-minded. But such pious men are enjoined to create a new environment of moral order so that human society as a whole rises higher than the limits of the simple physical world. The outer appearance of the man and of the world is the exterior aspects of which man's inner purification gives the semblance of virtuous life. It is in virtuosity that the outer self gets harmonized and balanced. This leads to a new social order in which individuals get bound to higher principles of life, which, to him, were based on Holy Qur'an. It is this virtuosity of Islam which Sayyid Ali Hamadani propagated so that people of diverse groups, stocks and ethnic background could be welded together on the rock foundation of human fraternity.

Such a virtuous behaviour was not only individual but also social in nature. It was not the individual alone to rise to the state of piety but the entire society was to rise above the state of vice to the higher stage of virtue. It is this social rising — a social upheaval — that was given a revolutionary character in the preachings of the Sayyid. But such a social reform is hardly possible without a political philosophy and therefore he devotes the entire fifth chapter of *Zakhirat al-Muluk* to the rights and obligations of Kings and subjects and to a detailed discussion of *'Adl* (justice) and *Ihsan* (obligation), which underlie the principles of government. The rights of the people and responsibility of the kings to see that no injustice was done to the people in the discharge of their functions have been discussed in great depth. There are three basic factors in his concept of a good government: the first is the king who should be a model of virtues to dispense justice to the people with kindli-

ness and benevolence; the second is the people who have certain rights as virtuous members of the society. Their rights are to be protected by the king and they should be helped in observing their duties and making their lives worthy of the society of which they are a part and parcel, and the third is the category of public servants who should be chosen carefully and whose discharge of duties watched fully in such a way that they follow 'Adl in their behaviour towards the people. According to Sayyid Ali Hamadani the subjects of a state have rights over the king and unless the king favourably respects these rights, he deviates from the principles of 'Adl and *Ihsan*. In treating this issue of rights and obligations the Sayyid enumerates twenty measures of properly executing them. It is in these measures that he lays stress on equality of all subjects of faith, justice and benevolence to people, respect of the aged and learned, courtesy to poor and rich alike, elimination of poverty and avoidance of nepotism, eradication of robbery and theft, safety of people and public property, erection of mosques and other public places of convenience such as roads, inns and caravanserais, encouragement of religious life and above all proper maintenance of justice between groups of people.

These injunctions were guides for political behaviour with a view to bringing about just government under which both the king and the public could perform their duties to the good of the society which ought to raise its standard in the light of the teachings of Islam. Such a society was to be distinguished from a non-Muslim social order. It was the primary purpose of Sayyid Ali Hamadani to introduce the virtues of Islam in the new social order that he was trying to build out of the old decrepit society. Hence his injunctions were clearly defined as regards a true Muslim in contrast to a non-Muslim.

The final mission of his life was to transform the socio — moral conditions of living in Kashmir. The Sayyid came in 781 AH when Sultan Qutbuddin was ruling in Kashmir. Long before Islam had been introduced in Kashmir. Rinchana Shah was the first ruler who had accepted Islam at the hands of Bulbul Shah but this early acceptance did not alter the traditional ways of the people who dressed and behaved in the same fashion as non-Muslims. Even Sultan Qutbuddin had married two real sisters. The laws of the Shariat were hardly known and obeyed. The traditional loose life pattern had created an environment where Islamic principles

could hardly be observed. It was this loose moral way of living that needed to be transformed into a higher spiritual life. The credit for transforming the entire society from these earlier corrupt practices to a higher form of Islamic social and spiritual life goes to Sayyid Ali Hamadani. First of all by his educational activity and a series of letters that he wrote to Sultans he purified the thought process of the intellectuals. Then by enunciating the true meaning of the Shariat laws he cleansed the society from un-Islamic practices. By preaching the *Sirat* of the holy Prophet (Peace be upon him) he illustrated the true Islamic way of living. By building mosques and Khanqahs he attracted the masses of the people to religious way of life. We are also told that he introduced several new handicrafts, thus showing a way to the poor for rightful earning by their own skills and efforts. And finally we get the tradition of many debates that he held with non-Muslim ascetics and spiritual leaders and converting them to his ideas and thus paving the way for a new spiritual order. At the same time he was fearless in admonishing the Sultans to give up non-Muslim ideas and practices and promulgate a system of governmental behaviour that was in conformity with the Principles of Islam. He himself and his disciples showed by their own examples new ways of living. The result was a rapid change in the society so much so that by the time Zainul Abidin had come to occupy the throne, Islam became the dominant religion in Kashmir and Islamic pattern of social living had completely transformed the life of the Kashmiri people. This was a total regeneration of Kashmir at the hands of Sayyid Ali Hamadani and the same process extended further in the whole of Baltistan right upto Kashgar. The new face that Kashmir has worn since that time bears a deep impress of Shah-i-Hamadan, Kashmir in fact was reborn to a new life in the world of Islam and the life of the Kashmiri people absorbed fully the new spirit of Islam. That was preached by Sayyid Ali Hamadani. Kashmiri society got rejuvenated and integrated into the new social order of Islam. For Kashmiris this became the life model and an harbinger of a new era — a transformation from an earlier corrupt society to a new tradition of Islamic life. This new social order has sustained, got strengthened and further re-invigorated by several historical trials that the common people of Kashmir have suffered but borne with patience in the sincere hope that their deliverance lies in the true teachings of Sayyid Ali Hamadani who prepared the masses for a

real free and disciplined life on the touch stone of Islam. These lessons are as important today as they were in the mediaeval period because they are the greatest source of inspiration for the people of Kashmir to unite and snatch freedom of living according to their own will in accordance with the precepts of Islam which they really deserve. This day of Sayyid Ali Hamadani is the greatest reminder to the people of Kashmir that they have yet to achieve their goal of freedom and towards that end they have to continue their struggle to break through the shackles and get reborn as a united people.