Reformist Movement in South Asia: An Analytical Study of *Ahmad Sarhandi* Order in Mughal System

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Mujaddid Ahmad Sirhindi, Maktubat-i Imam Rabbani, Mughal Empire, Sharia enforcement, Naqshbandi Sufism, religious syncretism, South Asian reform movements, Two-Nation Theory	This article examines the reformist movement of Mujaddid Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624) in the context of the Mughal Empire, particularly under the reigns of Akbar (1556–1605) and Jahangir (1605–1627). It explores Sirhindi's central objectives of Sharia enforcement, spiritual revival within the Naqshbandi Sufi framework, and his attempts to guide rulers and courtiers toward Islamic governance. Drawing on evidence from the *Maktubat* and contemporary chronicles, the study highlights the dynamics of his interaction with Mughal authority, including both cooperation and episodes of conflict. It further analyzes the challenges his reformist agenda faced, such as Akbar's legacy of religious syncretism, court intrigues, and the gradual decline of imperial cohesion. Finally, the article assesses Sirhindi's lasting legacy, demonstrating how his thought shaped subsequent reformist movements, influenced Mughal orthodoxy under Aurangzeb, and contributed to the intellectual foundations of the *Two-Nation Theory* in modern South Asia. By situating Sirhindi within the broader religious and political currents of his time, the article underscores his historical significance as both a spiritual reformer and a political thinker.

Introduction

The Mujaddidi Reformist Movement, led by *Mujaddid Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624),* emerged at a critical juncture in the history of South Asia. Grounded in the Naqshbandi Sufi tradition, Sirhindi aimed to revive Islamic orthodoxy, reestablish the importance of Shariah, and challenge what he viewed as deviations in faith and practice among the Muslim community. His reform initiatives developed within the intricate political and religious structure of the Mughal Empire, especially during the reigns of Emperor Akbar (1556–1605) and Emperor Jahangir (1605–1627)

The Mughal empire in this era was characterized by robust governance and exploration of religious practices. Akbar's principles of *Sulh-i Kul* (universal peace) and the endorsement of the syncretic *Dīn-i Ilāhī* confronted conventional Islamic values, generating conflict between imperial ideology and orthodox Muslim scholars. Jahangir, while not as extreme in his religious approaches, maintained a balance among different religious and political factions within the empire. In this context, Sirhindi's movement emerged as a champion of Islamic renewal, aiming to impact the ruling class while transforming the ethical and spiritual essence of Muslim society

This article explores the beginnings, goals, and strategies of the Mujaddidi Reformist Movement, its engagement with the Mughal political framework, and the underlying tensions and alliances that defined this connection. The research additionally examines the obstacles encountered by Sirhindi's mission—from religious diversity

and court dynamics to the slow decline of Mughal power—and evaluates the movement's enduring influence on Islamic thought and governance in South Asia.

Historical Background – Religious and Political Climate under the Mughals

The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries marked a period of significant religious and political transformation in the Mughal Empire. The reigns of Emperor Akbar (1556–1605) and Emperor Jahangir (1605–1627) witnessed experiments in governance that directly shaped the intellectual and spiritual environment in which Mujaddid Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624) advanced his reformist agenda. The conservative Shaykh fearlessly rebuked Akbar for his policy of religious tolerance and his interest in other faiths (Jerry H. Bentley Herbert F. Ziegler Heather Streets-Salter Carig Benjamin, 2015).

Akbar's Religious Policy and Political Vision

Akbar inherited an empire with a Muslim ruling elite but a Hindu majority population, compelling him to consider strategies of political integration. Early in his reign, he upheld orthodox Islamic practices, relying on the support of the *ulema* and enforcing Sharia in judicial matters (Nizami, 1989). However, by the mid-1570s, his policies began shifting toward a universalist model of governance. The establishment of the *Ibādat Khāna* at Fatehpur Sikri in 1575 provided a forum for interreligious dialogue, where scholars of Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism debated theological and philosophical questions (Abu'l-Fazl, 1907).

By the 1580s, Akbar abolished the *jizya* and pilgrimage taxes, measures that signaled a departure from orthodox fiscal policy toward religious neutrality (Asher, 2008). His promulgation of the *Dīn-i Ilāhī* in 1582—an ethical fellowship incorporating elements from multiple traditions—was met with sharp criticism from orthodox circles, who viewed it as an innovation outside the bounds of Islam (Alam, The Languages of Political Islam in India, c. 1200–1800, 2004) 86–88. While the order attracted only a handful of courtiers, it represented Akbar's effort to diminish the authority of the *ulema* and establish imperial authority over religious life.

Reformist Aims (Sharia Enforcement, Spiritual Revival, and Guidance to Rulers)

The reformist agenda of Mujaddid Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624) was rooted in the conviction that the preservation of Muslim identity in the Mughal realm depended on strict adherence to Sharia and the spiritual purification of the community. His aims combined theological clarity, moral discipline, and political engagement, forming a program that sought to influence both the masses and the ruling elite.

Sirhindi's reformism extended beyond personal piety to direct engagement with political power. He believed that the ruler held a divinely entrusted responsibility to uphold Sharia and ensure the moral health of the empire. Consequently, numerous Maktubat of his were directed towards, or meant for, individuals in positions of political power. Although direct communication with Emperor Jahangir was uncommon, Sirhindi frequently offered indirect advice via reliable

intermediaries at the court. Certain letters offered implicit advice to the emperor regarding the enforcement of Islamic law and the limitation of unorthodox practices (Sirhandi 1988). He also spoke to Mughal royals, including Prince Khurram (later Shah Jahan), urging them to maintain Sharia compliance and to work for the supremacy of Islam (Sirhandi, 1988; Ahad, 1988).

Notable intellectuals such as Mulla Abdul Hakim Sialkoti, an esteemed court theologian, obtained Sirhindi's letters and acted as intermediaries for his reformist message to the emperor (Sirhandi 1988). In the same way, Sirhindi communicated with notable Mughal nobles, such as Mirza Dara Beg and others who held considerable sway at court, to promote the strengthening of Islamic principles in governance. Sirhindi also communicated with Sufi leaders and officials associated with the Mughal court, including Nawab Mufarrah Khan, Mirza Badruddin, and Sheikh Farakhanda ibn Abdul Baqi, encouraging them to leverage their closeness to the throne for advancing religious reform (Sirhandi 1988). Utilizing this communication network, Sirhindi crafted a complex approach to indirect political sway, aiming to reshape the empire's moral and administrative structure internally.

Sharia Enforcement and Legal Orthodoxy

Sirhindi's texts consistently stressed that Islamic law, based on the Qur'an and Sunnah, should be the supreme authority in all aspects of life, both public and private. In his Maktubat, he condemned the weakening of Islamic legal norms due to Akbar's policies, especially the removal of the jizya and the approval of actions considered against Sharia

(Sirhandi, 1988). He argued that imperial patronage of heterodox rituals undermined the moral authority of the Muslim *ulema* and eroded the boundary between Islam and other faiths (Nizami, 1989). By framing his argument within Sunni orthodoxy, Sirhindi aligned his reformist project with the Hanafi legal school, the predominant juridical tradition in the Mughal Empire. His goal was to restore Sharia-based governance not merely as a religious ideal, but as a stabilizing framework for imperial authority (Rizvi, 1975).

As a Naqshbandi Sufi, Sirhindi valued spiritual discipline and inner purification, but he sought to reform what he regarded as deviations in mystical practice. In particular, he addressed the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd* (unity of existence), associated with Ibn 'Arabi, which he believed blurred the boundary between Creator and creation. Rather than rejecting mystical experience altogether, Sirhindi reinterpreted it through the doctrine of *wahdat al-shuhūd* (unity of witness), which preserved the transcendence of God while maintaining a clear ontological distinction between the divine and the created order (Alam, The Languages Of Political Islam India 1200-1800, 2004). By merging Sharia enforcement, spiritual revival, and political advice, Sirhindi's reformist goals embodied a comprehensive vision for societal change. He regarded the ruler as a political and moral guardian, tasked with maintaining divine law, promoting religious education, and safeguarding the Muslim community against theological decay. His initiative, although profoundly grounded in the medieval Islamic

heritage, was adapted to the distinct political and cultural circumstances of Mughal India.

Engagement with Mughal Authority – Collaboration and Areas of Dispute

The connection between Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi and the Mughal Empire was intricate, showing both chances for reformative impact and conflicts with imperial power. His reform agenda necessitated interaction with leaders and nobles, but his emphasis on strict Sharia compliance frequently conflicted with Mughal traditions of religious tolerance and political practicality. Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi did not advocate insurrection against Mughal rule. Rather, he instructed that Muslims ought to stay faithful to the emperor, provided this loyalty did not demand them to violate Sharia. In his Maktubat (Sirhandi 1988), he stated that following the rulers is a religious obligation, as long as their orders do not contradict divine law.

This role allowed him to build connections with Mughal aristocrats. He communicated with aristocrats like Nawab Mufarrah Khan and Khan-i-Jahan Lodi, encouraging them to sway the court toward supporting Sharia compliance (Sirhandi, 1988). He also engaged with Prince Khurram (later Shah Jahan), emphasizing the necessity of supporting orthodoxy and resisting heterodox practices (Friedmann, 1971). Through such correspondence, Sirhindi created indirect channels of cooperation with the Mughal establishment, framing reform as a service to imperial order.

Points of Conflict

Despite his emphasis on loyalty, Sirhindi's critique of Akbar's legacy of religious syncretism inevitably brought him into conflict with aspects of Mughal ideology. His condemnation of practices associated with *Dīn-i Ilāhī* and his sharp opposition to *wahdat al-wujūd* positioned him against influential currents in the court (Alam, The Languages Of Political Islam India 1200-1800, 2004).

The most direct clash came during Jahangir's reign. Court chronicles and Sirhindi's own letters suggest that he was briefly imprisoned at Gwalior Fort around 1619–20, accused of exceeding his influence and challenging imperial religious policy (Richards, 1993; Friedmann, 1971). In the *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, the emperor records his suspicion toward Sirhindi's growing authority, though he later released him and allowed him to resume teaching (Jahangir, 1909).

This oscillation between cooperation and conflict highlights the pragmatic nature of Mughal–Mujaddidi relations. On the one hand, the empire needed the moral legitimacy of orthodox scholars; on the other, Sirhindi's uncompromising vision of Islamic order risked constraining the emperor's pluralist policies. Ultimately, Sirhindi's interactions with the Mughal court reflected a careful balancing act: working within imperial structures to push for reform, while accepting the risks of confrontation when principles of Sharia seemed compromised.

Religious Syncretism, Political Intrigues, and Imperial Decline Challenges

The reformist mission faced multiple challenges that limited its immediate impact and shaped its trajectory within Mughal India. These challenges arose from the religious policies of the emperors, the factional nature of court politics, and the broader weakening of Mughal authority in the seventeenth century.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to Sirhindi's reformist program was the enduring influence of Akbar's religious syncretism. Policies such as the abolition of the *jizya*, the institution of *Sulh-i Kul* (universal peace), and the promotion of the Dīn-i Ilāhī weakened the public authority of Sharia and emboldened heterodox practices at court (Rizvi, 1975). Even after Akbar's death, these policies shaped Mughal governance, leaving Sirhindi to confront an entrenched culture of pluralism. In his *Maktubat*, Sirhindi described the spread of such *bid'a* (New theological inventions) as a major danger to Muslim identity, urging nobles and rulers to restore Islamic legal authority (Sirhandi, 1988). His critique of *wahdat al-wujūd* was also part of this effort to curb religious syncretism, since mystical doctrines that blurred distinctions between faiths could reinforce pluralist tendencies at court (Alam, The Languages Of Political Islam India 1200-1800, 2004).

Sirhindi's reinterpretation of mystical doctrines, especially his reformulation of *wahdat al-wujūd* into *wahdat al-shuhūd*, provided a framework for reconciling Sufi practice with strict adherence to Sharia. This balance between inner spirituality and external law became a hallmark of Naqshbandi influence in South Asia (Alam, The Languages Of Political Islam India 1200-1800, 2004). His *Maktubat* circulated widely, serving as a reference point for scholars and Sufi leaders who sought to integrate metaphysical thought with orthodoxy

Political Conspiracies and Court Factionalism

Another challenge was the highly factionalized nature of Mughal politics. Court politics in Jahangir's reign were marked by competing noble factions and struggles for succession among the princes (Richards, 1993). Sirhindi's reformist message reached courtiers like Khan-i-Jahan Lodi and Nawab Mufarrah Khan, but it often had to compete with political maneuvering driven more by ambition than by piety. The imprisonment of Sirhindi at Gwalior Fort around 1619–20 illustrates the precariousness of his position. While his growing influence among nobles gave him channels for reform, it also aroused suspicion from Jahangir, who feared the potential political implications of his spiritual authority (Jahangir, 1909; Friedmann, 1971).

Finally, the broader decline of Mughal authority in the later seventeenth century posed challenges for the Mujaddidi vision. While Sirhindi sought to influence a strong, centralized monarchy capable of enforcing Sharia, the empire's later trajectory was marked by regional fragmentation, fiscal crises, and increasing military pressures (Richards, 1993). In such conditions, the implementation of Sirhindi's ideals was limited, as the Mughal state increasingly lacked the stability and cohesion to act as custodian of Islam. Together, these

challenges reveal why Sirhindi's reformism operated more as a moral and intellectual revival movement than as a comprehensive state program. By addressing religious syncretism, political intrigues, and imperial decline, Sirhindi framed a vision of orthodoxy that outlasted his immediate context and influenced later Muslim reformist movements in South Asia.

Influence on Governance and Political Thought

Sirhindi's insistence that rulers act as custodians of Islam resonated with later Mughal monarchs, especially Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707), whose policies emphasized the enforcement of Sharia through measures such as the compilation of the *Fatawa-i Alamgiri* (Richards, 1993). While Aurangzeb's reign cannot be seen as a direct implementation of Sirhindi's program, the Mujaddidi call for state alignment with Islamic law contributed to the intellectual climate in which such policies found legitimacy (Ahad, 1988; Nizami, 1989).

Beyond the Mughal period, Mujaddidi teachings continued to shape Muslim responses to changing political contexts, including colonial rule. Reformist figures such as Shah Wali Allah of Delhi in the eighteenth century built upon Sirhindi's emphasis on spiritual revival and Sharia enforcement, adapting his ideas to new realities (Rizvi, 1975). More broadly, Sirhindi's insistence on preserving the distinct identity of the Muslim community against assimilation into a syncretic order anticipated later currents in South Asian Muslim political thought. His perspective on protecting Islamic faith and practices

established significant intellectual bases for the Two-Nation Theory (دو قومی نظریہ), which asserted that Muslims and Hindus in India constituted separate nations. Thus, Sirhindi's legacy connected early modern reform efforts with later revivalist movements and the ultimate ideological development of Pakistan.

In conclusion, the legacy of Ahmad Sirhindi resides not only in his direct engagement with the Mughal system but also in the intellectual and institutional traditions that his ideas motivated. By merging Sufi spirituality with Sharia orthodoxy and placing reform under the auspices of political power, he created a lasting impact on South Asian Islam, affecting governance, communal identity, and the directions of subsequent reformist movements

Discussion

The analysis of Ahmad Sirhindi's reformist agenda within the Mughal context reveals the intricate interplay between spiritual authority and imperial politics. While earlier sections traced his aims, challenges, and legacy, it is necessary to reflect on the broader implications of his thought.

First, Sirhindi's model of reform demonstrates how Islamic renewal movements could operate within existing political structures rather than in opposition to them. His strategy of working through princes, nobles, and courtiers distinguished him from later movements that adopted confrontational or revolutionary approaches.

Second, the Mujaddidi case illustrates the tension between universalist imperial ideology and confessional identity. Akbar's

syncretic project envisioned an inclusive political order, while Sirhindi's response emphasized the need for religious distinction. This dialectic shaped not only Mughal policies but also long-term patterns in South Asian Muslim identity formation.

Third, the continuing influence of Sirhindi's thought—reaching from Shah Wali Allah to the Two-Nation Theory—underscores the durability of reformist discourses that combine spiritual revival with socio-political guidance. His insistence on balancing Sufism with Sharia created a template that remained relevant for centuries, adapting to contexts as diverse as Mughal governance and colonial resistance.

Thus, Sirhindi's role is best understood not in isolation but as part of a continuum of Islamic reform in South Asia, linking pre-modern revivalism to modern Muslim political thought.

Conclusion

The study of Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624) reveals a reformist vision that united spiritual revival with political engagement. His reinterpretation of mystical doctrine from *wahdat al-wujūd* to *wahdat al-shuhūd* preserved orthodoxy while retaining the vitality of Sufi experience. Through his *Maktubat*, he promoted principled cooperation with Mughal authority, maintaining loyalty to the crown while firmly opposing practices that undermined Sharia.

Although his efforts faced obstacles such as Akbar's legacy of syncretism, court intrigues, and imperial decline, Sirhindi's ideas shaped Mughal orthodoxy under Aurangzeb and inspired later thinkers,

including Shah Wali Allah. Beyond the Mughal era, his emphasis on Muslim distinctiveness contributed to revivalist currents and laid conceptual foundations that eventually informed the Two-Nation Theory in modern South Asia.

Historically, Sirhindi emerges as both a spiritual reformer and political thinker, whose legacy continues to influence Islamic thought and Muslim identity from the Mughal court to the present.

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