

A Survey on the Origin of Safavids' Religion from Iranian and Non-Iranian Researchers' Points of View

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Abstract: The Safavid era (1501-1736) has been one of the most outstanding turning points in the history of Shia Islam and in particular in the history of Iran. This study aims to investigate the two major influencing factors which had crucial effects on the Safavids' path to power, i.e., Shia Islam (a branch of Islam) and the Sayyadat claim (descent from the Holy Prophet). As a result, Safavids established the 1st central government in Persia after Sassanid's collapse 7 centuries before. Furthermore, Safavids established Ithna Ashari (Twelver) school of Shia Islam as the official religion of their empire. Despite these great achievements, the religious tendencies of Safavid kings remains rather unclear. According to some historians, Sheikh Safi Ad-din, the founder of Safavid order was a sunni and a sufi religious leader. Contrary to this view, others regard him as a Shiite man. Following him, his descendants have openly claimed that they were Sayyeds. This simultaneous processes of conversion into Shia faith and Sayyadat claim was carried out so, adroitly that Safavid kings were proud to. Due to spiritual influence over their Murids (followers), this great cultural and political shift was easily embraced with enthusiasm at the time. Thus, the anti-Sunni Safavids started a new phase in Shiaism.

Key words: Safavid, Shiism, Sheikh Safi Ad-din, Sunni, Sufi, Sayyadat, Ithna Ashar, Iran

INTRODUCTION

Although, shiism is essentially associated with Safavid dynasty who officially established Shia Islam that at the time was completely foreign to Iranian culture as Iran's official state religion, there has always been shades of doubt on their Shia beliefs, particularly on the Shia beliefs of their grand ancestor, Sheikh Safi Ad-din Ishaq Ardabil.

The spiritual influence and the credibility of Sheikh Safi Ad-din as the leader of Safavid Sufi order caused Sheikh Safi Ad-din, descendants to step on the social and political scenes of the time and on their path to acquiring power, they profited from various pretexts including Ershadi role (leadership and guidance position), Sayyadat claim (descend from Prophet's household) and Shiism statement (Rahimlu, 1999).

Despite the vast studies done on the religion of Safavid kings by Iranian scholars and others, there is no consensus among researchers that whether Safavid family had been Shia Muslim or they had converted from Sunni Islam into Shia, later due to the time's vital requirements for taking power or for certain protections.

If Safavids were Sunis Shafei then when and on what bases, they converted into Shia. Was this conversion implemented in one stage or it has been a long term

process? More importantly, the claim that they were from the Prophet family has raised numerous controversies among Muslim as well as non-Muslim scholars since, the Safavid reign.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The aim in this study has been to argue for and against the Safavids Siyyadat claim and their religious beliefs by means of descriptive and analytic research method based on local, national and international library documents including books, journal articles and available data. This study intends to look chronologically to the most controversy-raising factors in the Safavid history, Shia and Syadat. These factors had been so decisive in the history of Islam and Iran that even today, they have their impact on the political scene of the ME and of the world. The corpus of this research consists of data in the three languages of Persian, Arabic and English. The translation of a few sources in other languages have been used. All data are considered original and liable in the literature on The Safavid Era.

Safavid Sayyadat claim (descent from the Prophet): To attain political power and to legislate their power, Safavids made use of some influencing and deep religious beliefs

among Persian people. One main excuse was the claim that they were descendants of the seventh Imam, Imam Musa Kazim. This issue has raised problems in history onwards. The 1st document in which such a claim can be traced is the Safvat Al-Safa, written by Darvish Tavakol Ebn Bazzaz Ardebil in 759 AH.

According to Safvat Al-Safa, Sheikh Sadr Ad-din (the son of Sheikh Safi Ad-din), once stated that his father, Sheikh Safi had said there is Sayadat in the genealogy (Safvat Al- Safa, 759 AH).

This evidence has been regarded as the 1st stage for publicizing the claim. In the coming years, the 2nd stage was set by one of Sheikh Sadr Ad-din's murids (spiritual followers), telling that in a trip to Tabriz along with Sheikh Safi Ad-din, he had asked Sheikh whether he was Sayyed and Alavi (follower of Imam Ali, the first Imam in Shia Islam). Sheikh's answer had been positive. However, it was not clear whether Sheikh was Hassani or Hosseini.

To clear the ambiguity, the same murid claimed that he had dreamed of Sheikh Safi Ad-din and Sheikh had asked him, why he had not told Sheikh's son, Sadr Ad-din that Sheikh Safi had been Hosseini (ibid).

Consequently, the Sayadat claim by Sadr Ad-din gained more weight among the increasing murdis and afterwards among Iran's multi cultural community. In fact, Safavids claiming to be Sayyeds, spread their spiritual and religious savagernity over their expanding empire which was surrounded by Sunni Ottomanid and Uzbek empires. In other words if it was not known by public that the Safavid household were Sayyeds, they seized the opportunity to force their influence and religious leadership in Persia and to exercise their options in acquiring political power over Persia which consisted of many peoples with independent traditions, culture and language.

In addition, Persian people historically were religion-oriented and at that time, the Persia was separated into parts as a result of lack of a central powerful ruling system. So, the Persians had the historic background for accepting the Safavid's claim.

Due to Socio-historical and religious Murid-Morad bonds among the Safavid order leaders and their followers, the claim was easily set itself as the Safaviyah order's and the empire's vital principal. Even, the enemies of Persia such as Sultan Khalil, ruler of Shervan and Bayazid the 2nd, the Ottomanid empire, who were suni Islam believers, recognized Safavids new religion with Shah Esmail's ruling, who established Shia as the Persia's state religion, the questionability of the claim was an unforgettable sin. Shah Esmail himself was proud of being a Sayyed and emphasized it in his poems and letters to other rulers. Ahmad Kasravi, a historian in the recent century has presented for the 1st time, some reasons on

inaccuracy of the Safavid dynasty's Seyadat claim and their family tree. He sees them as forged and falsified by the kings and governments of that time. Kasravi's theory is confirmed by many Iranian and non-Iranian researchers. Kasravi presents the reasons as follow (Kasravi, 1976):

- The contents of Safvat Al-Safa were distorted by the Safavids before and after their kingdom establishment and Shah Tahmaib I ordered a person called Mir Abolfath to correct and expurgate it
- According to Safvat Al-Safa, Sheikh Sadar Ad-din who claimed that he was Sayyed for the 1st time did not know whose side (father's or mother's) was Sayyed
- Sheikh Safi Ad-din's wife who had lived with him for many years was not informed of her husband's Sayadat and wondered of her son's statement that the Sayyeds were of his kin
- Neither Sheikh Safi nor his sons have been titled Sayyad in any official documents of the era
- The people of Ardabil had been Shafei which was the religion of Azerbaijan

Savory (1970) believes that the Safavids after the establishment of their empire, deliberately falsified the evidence of their own origins. Their fundamental aim in claiming a Shia origin was to differentiate themselves from the Ottomans and to enable them to attract the sympathies of all heterodox elements (Savory, 1970). To this end, they systematically destroyed any evidence which indicated that Sheikh Safi Ad din was not a Shia and they fabricated evidence to prove that the Safavids were sayyids. They constructed a dubious genealogy tracing the descent of the Safavid family from the seventh of the Twelver Imams, Musa al-Kazim (ibid).

In regard to Safavids linkage to the seventh Imam, they provided a family tree and had added it to the Safvat Al-safa as it was customary for Sayyeds to present their family tree (Rahimlu, 1999). Against this view, some scholars verify the claim.

Karbalaee Tabrizi quotes Mohammad Mohit Tabatabaee, a contemporary writer that he has investigated the claim in several researches and confirms Safavid's claim. He writes that the existence of Sayadat genealogy in Piruz Kurd Sanjabi or Sanjari has been possible because at present, there are hundreds of Alavi families among Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Iran and the Caucasus. Furthermore, he argues that being both a kurd and an Alavi at the same time does not contradict the Safavid's claim. Although, the Safavid dynasty Sayadat claim whether false or true had ambiguously been presented by Skeikh Sadr Ad-din, it became a certain

subject from the age of Joneyd. Even the claim was strangely confirmed by their enemies. Furthermore at the time of shah Esmail, it became his sincere belief and since, the genealogy could make his monarchy legal and increase his political power, he always persisted in it and tried to confirm it (Roymer, 1991).

On the role and importance of Sayadat claim in Shah Esmail's Monarchy, Roymer argues that it is obvious such a claim can be a decisive element in gaining the legitimacy of power in Shia Ideology and supports the Safavids (ibid).

The other excuse by which Safavids facilitated their attempts to acquire political power and later to legitimate that power was the Shia principle. Although, Safavids openly expressed their Shia at least from Sheikh Jonyed's time and coming to the throne, they did their best in promoting Shia. But their claim about Sheikh Safi Ad-din's Shiism has always been obscure as their Seyadat claim had always been.

Hamdolah Mostofi's account in Nozhat Al-Ghloub written in 740 Hejri, i.e., 5 years after Sheikh Safi Ad-din's death is the oldest available historical document about Sheikh Safi Ad-din. In this report, Mostofi considers most of Ardebil people as Shafei and followers (Murids) of Sheikh Safi Ad-din. Following Mostofi, Ebne Abzar in 759 Hejri on Sheikh Safi Ad-din Shiism reports that Sheikh Safi Ad-din being asked on his religious beliefs, said that the religion is Sahabeh's (The Prophets close supporters). We love the four and pray for all four (ibid).

Hosseini Mir Abol Fath, correcting the book Safvat al Safa, emphasizes that Sheikh Safi Ad-din had to observe Tagyeh (hiding his belief because of danger). He accuses Ebn Abzar of hypocrisy and acting in a double way in his reports, contrary to him, Hosseini believes that since, Sheikh Safi Ad-din was following Sunnis in his religion, he has said some words which were in favor of sunnism and against Imamieh (Ithna Ashari Shia).

However, according to some scholars, Sheikh Safi Ad-din and his ancestors strongly adhered to Imam Ali. However, this adherence did not contradict with his Sunni beliefs. To support their view, these scholars cite these causes as a proof for their claim:

Firstly, Sheikh Safi Ad-din had been a Shafei. Compared to other Sunni sects, Shafei is the closest to Shia in essence. Even Shafei's leader, Muhammad Ebne Edris Shafei has said poems on the praise of the Prophet household. Secondly, the 7th century onwards due to a number of factors such as Suffism approach to Shiism, Mughol's Attack on Iran, caliphate collapse in Baghdad as well as Muslims feeling of Mughol's domination danger on Islam world, there had been a general tendency among Muslims to revive Islam's original principles and

to seek Islamic unity. Consequently, this revival tendency provided increased attention on Alavism and Sadats (Sayyeds). In a nutshell in the year of Mughol's domination, Alavi tendencies had had a strong impact on the Suffism order and on Ardabil order (919 HQ) at the same time.

Dr Zarinkob, contemporary writer argues that at Sheikh Safi Ad-din time due to gradual development of shiism in Azerbaijan and neighboring regions, a great number of Shia followers joined the Ardabil order. As a result, this background triggered biased Shia beliefs among Sheikh Safi Ad-din's descendants, especially in Khaje Ali.

Succeeding Sheikh Safi Ad-din, his son, Sadr Ad-din was entitled to lead the Safaviah order. About his religious beliefs and tendencies, nothing is known except his Sayadat claim. However, some historians regard Shia tendency, especially twelve-Imam Shia or Ithna Ashar believers in Safaviah order as Sheikh Sadr Ad-din's major achievements.

Contrary to previous mentioned belief, some other scholars believe that Khaje Ali was the source of religious reforms in Safaviah order. Navaei writes that under Khaje Ali's leadership Safaviah order openly expressed its Shia beliefs.

Edward brown points out that Khajeh Ali was the first in Sheikhs of Safaviah order to openly express his strong and biased adherence to shiism. In regard to Khaje Ali's son, Ebrahim and his religious beliefs, it can be said that he expanded the order among Shia Turkmen in Anatolia and Syria.

The researchers of the book Islam's revolution between the elite and the common whose judges on Safavids is not bias-free, believes that Sheikh Heidar established Heidarieh, a fresh religion which had no link to Twelve Imam Shia.

Heidarieh had been a separate religion and its followers, wearing Baktashieh clothes, lived in different parts of Anatolia. These followers known as Heidarieh believe that one of Allah's qualities has been transmitted to Ali (PBUH) and afterwards it has been transmitted to his sons.

Finally, through the seventh Imam, Musa Kazim (PBUH), Sheikh Safi and later, Sheikh Heidar and Shah Ismail, inherited it.

This is the reason, why Sheikh Heidar has earned God's permission to promote the right religion (Pashazadeh, 2000). It was in this way that Shah Esmail I who reached the monarchy throne in 907 Hejira in Tabriz, gave an official state to Shia Islam in Iran and by means of spiritual and political aspects of this movement made the Safavids' ruling stronger and ensured it for the next kings.

CONCLUSION

The Safavids tendency to Shia Islam was gradual and during different stages and conditions. One reason of that tendency was a political one so that they wanted to have the Shia people of the Ottaman Empire Anatolia as the Safavids' disciples. After the Mongol dominance, who had no tendency to religion, required situations were provided to achieve this aim. Presence and effort of some learned men such as Khaje Nasir Ad-din Tusi and Allameh Helli at that time and the Mongol's religious facilitation policy all caused the Shia Islam to be in a formal state by the Safavids in Iran. Also, it should be noted that the Shia teachings had common points with Shafiite branch of Sumi Islam which influenced on the conversion of the Safavids' Sunni religion to the Shia Islam after Sheikh Safi Ad-din.

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