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Husayni, Shah Tahir b. Radi al-Din (d. 956 AH/ 1549 CE)

Farhad Daftary

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A learned theologian, poet, stylist and an accomplished diplomat, Shah Tahir Husayni was also the most famous Imam of the Muhammad-Shahi branch of Nizari Ismailism. He was born in the final decades of the 9th AH/ 15th CE century in the village of Khund, near Qazwin in northern Persia, where his forefathers known locally as the Khundi Sayyids had lived and acquired some following after the middle of the 8th AH/ 14th CE century. The most detailed account of Shah Tahir is contained in the *Tarikh-i Firishta* (History of Firishta), composed around 1015 AH/ 1606 CE by Muhammad Qasim Hindu Shah Astarabadi, better known as Firishta, the celebrated historian of the Deccan who knew members of this family.

Shah Tahir's father, Imam Shah Radi al-Din, who had led the Muhammad-Shahi Nizaris of Quhistan and Sistan in eastern Persia, later established his rule over a part of Badakhshan where he had many followers. Shah Radi al-Din was murdered in 915 AH/ 1509 CE and his head was taken to Mirza Khan, a local Sunni Timurid ruler who persecuted the Ismailis of Badakhshan. Shah Tahir succeeded his father to the imamate of the Muhammad-Shahi Nizaris. It seems that from early on in his life and as a form of taqiyya or precautionary dissimulation, Shah Tahir presented himself as an Ithna 'Ashari or Twelver Shi'i, and this explains why he composed several commentaries on the theological and juridical treatises of a number of well-known Twelver scholars such as al-'Allama al-Hilli (d. 726 AH/ 1325 CE). He was also in contact with Sufi circles and wrote a commentary on the *Gulshan-i raz* (The Rose Garden of Mystery), the famous *mathnawi* poem of the Sufi master Mahmud Shabistari (d. after 740 AH/ 1339 CE).

Owing to his learning and piety, in 920 AH/ 1514 CE, Shah Tahir was invited by Shah Isma'il, the founder of the Safavid dynasty in Persia, to join other Shi'i scholars at his court in Sultaniyya. However, in a manner which is not clear, Shah Tahir soon aroused the anger of the Safavid monarch and was banished from the court. Subsequently, he was permitted to teach at a theological seminary in Kashan, where countless numbers of his own followers also attended his lectures. Shah Tahir's popularity in Kashan once again aroused the jealousy of the local Twelver scholars, who complained about his 'heretical' teachings to Shah Isma'il. The Safavid monarch now ordered Shah Tahir's execution, but in 926 AH/ 1520 CE the Nizari Imam succeeded in fleeing from Kashan, sailing to Goa in India. After his initial failure to attain a position at the court of Isma'il 'Adil Shah in Bijapur, Deccan, he was invited to join the entourage of Burhan Nizam Shah. In 928 AH/ 1522 CE, Shah Tahir arrived in Ahmadnagar, the capital of the Nizam-Shahi dynasty in the Deccan, where he was to spend the rest of his life; hence, his surname of al-Dakkani.

Shah Tahir became the most trusted advisor of Burhan Nizam Shah (914-61 AH/ 1508-54 CE) and delivered weekly lectures on religious matters in the fort of Ahmadnagar. Shah Tahir's

success, while still closely disguising his Ismaili identity, culminated in his conversion of Burhan Nizam Shah from Sunni Islam to Twelver Shi‘ism, which also enabled the Deccani monarch to cultivate friendly relations with the Twelver Safavids of Persia. In 944 AH/ 1537 CE, Burhan Nizam Shah also adopted Twelver Shi‘ism as the official religion of his kingdom. Subsequently, Shah Tahir rendered great diplomatic services to the Nizam-Shahis of the Deccan. Shah Tahir’s successful *taqiyya* practice thus explains the strange phenomenon of the Twelver form of Shi‘ism being propagated by an Imam of the Ismaili Shi‘i branch. Shah Tahir’s *Diwan* or collection of poetry and other compositions exist in manuscript form.

Shah Tahir died between 952 AH/ 1545 CE and 956 AH/ 1549 CE in Ahmadnagar, and his remains were taken to Karbala and interred in Imam al-Husayn’s shrine there. He was succeeded in the Muhammad-Shahi Nizari imamate by his son Haydar (d. 994 AH/ 1586 CE). Shah Tahir had three other sons, all attaining high positions at the courts of various Deccani rulers.

Further Reading

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