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SHAH WALIULLAH'S REFORMS AND ISLAMIC REVIVALISM IN THE SUBCONTINENT

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ABSTRACT

Shah Waliullah was a pivotal figure in the Islamic revivalist movement in the Indian subcontinent, whose reforms significantly shaped the socio-religious landscape of the region. Living during the declining phase of the Mughal Empire, he sought to address the challenges faced by Muslims, including political fragmentation, moral degeneration, and the loss of Islamic values. His efforts were rooted in restoring the primacy of Islamic teachings while fostering unity among Muslims through reforms in education, jurisprudence, and theology. Shah Waliullah emphasized the importance of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and sought to reconcile sectarian differences, particularly between Sunni and Shia communities, to create a unified Muslim society. He translated the Quran into Persian, making its teachings accessible to the masses and encouraging a deeper connection to the core principles of Islam. His works, including *Hujjatullah al-Baligha*, provided a comprehensive framework for understanding Islamic law and societal organization in the context of the subcontinent. A critical aspect of Shah Waliullah's reforms was his call for political revitalization and the establishment of just governance based on Islamic principles. He advocated for a balanced relationship between spiritual and temporal authority, urging rulers to uphold justice and adhere to Sharia law. His influence extended to later Islamic movements in the region, shaping the foundations of 19th-century reformist and revivalist efforts. This paper examines Shah Waliullah's reforms in the context of their historical significance, assessing their impact on Islamic revivalism and their enduring legacy in the socio-political and religious fabric of South Asia. By bridging classical Islamic thought with the realities of the time, Shah Waliullah provided a model for reform that remains relevant in contemporary discussions on Islamic revival and identity.

Keywords: Shah Waliullah, Islamic Revivalism, Indian Subcontinent, Religious Reforms, Sectarian Reconciliation, Political Revitalization, Reformist Movements

INTRODUCTION

The 18th century marked an important epoch in the political history of the Indian subcontinent, that is, the westward expansion of the European powers through colonization, and particularly the efforts of the British East India Company to overtake India while conflict within the Mughal Empire increased. In fact the Mughal Empire was a symbol of unity and cultural development but severally faced tons of internal

competition, weakening central control and economic troubles. Looking at the society at that time, the Muslim society irrevocably underwent changes that cut across their moral fabric, the sect and their political bases. It is under these circumstances, that Shah Waliullah (1703-1762) came to the scene and made a difference striving to reform the educational narrative and address the challenges that have beset the Muslim population of the subcontinent. As a result of his intellectual, theological, and political changes Islam was forever altered, and his vision would be behind subsequent resurgence.

A major part of the reformist agenda of Shah Waliullah was the renaissance of Islamic learning among Muslims. He was aware that many Muslims had become out of touch with the basic teachings of Islam as presented in the Holy Quran and Hadith because of language barriers and over-dependence on narrow and rigid traditionalism. His revolutionary initiative of transferring the Quran into the Persian language was an important milestone in making Quranic texts available, as Persian was the key language of all the educated classes of the subcontinent. This translation helped many of the people in society begin to read and understand the Quran, hence increasing the returns of their faith (Rizvi, 2021). His emphasis on *ijtihad* (independent interpretation) rather than *taqlid* (copying) also showed his intention of making Islamic law an active and effective tool in dealing with the current social and political issues and needs (Alam, 2020).

This shifting of center of politics posed a threat to Islamic governments and Shia sect through its leaders attempted to Muslim ummah but him took to fence them off through justification of Islam. For Hujjatullah al-Baligha Sunni Islam and Shia Islam could not go against someone if they fought, it was something which weakened the fighting where unity of Muslims were as a state in Islam. In addition to that, in politics, he dealt with the raiding kings including Ahmad Shah Durrani and sought to stem the disintegration of Islamic order. His vision for the Church was one that would fulfill the requirements of justice, morality and the welfare of the people (Zaman 2015). Several problems during this period did Waliullah solve for his community but more than that, the period became important in modern Islamic politics and movements in sub-continental Islam and communities of relevance in nineteenth twentieth century and twenty first century.

Historical Context: Shah Waliullah's Era of Reform

The 18th century proved a critical phase in the development of the Indian subcontinent as the Mughal Empire began responding to disintegration. An empire that was once synonymous with political cohesion, religious and cultural assimilation faced serious political, territorial, and epistemological crises, especially amongst the Muslims. The fall of a unitary power in Central Islam disarmed the region and left them exposed to the emergence of regional chief and the consolidating powers of the Europeans especially the East India Company. The rise of these powers caused a lot of economic marginalization as pre-colonial trading systems were disrupted. The conflict of rival sects within the Muslims, particularly the Sunnis and the Shias, further compounded the problem and helped to diffuse the responses to the threats posed (Habib, 2019).

The two woeful characteristics of Islam, namely an inclination towards traditionalism and a withdrawal from Islamic values, seem to have predominated the politics of India during the Mughal rule. It is a period marked by a decreasing population, economic regression and decreased agricultural yielding, which culminated in a Muslim empire almost at the brink of collapse. The architect behind the decline of the empire has been noted to be Shah Waliullah (1703 – 1762) who has been called a revivalist but at the same time holds views contradictory to the restoration of a homogeneous Indian Muslim identity, Hussain (2016:129). The very life of Shah Waliullah as a teacher, philosopher and a cleric starts from the very context of being challenged, Khilji (2017). Shah Waliullah inadequately addressed several factors including communicating in a language that pertinent social segments understood, at the same time establishing underlying structural linkages within the Muslims by enhancing their connection to religion, socio-political themes, governing, and involvement in foreign affairs on behalf of Muslims. He also took the step of converting the Quran from Arabic to Persian in order to expand Islamic ideas to the more general population. As a result, it encouraged and increased the frequency of practicing Islam among ordinary Muslims. In this context, it is easy to understand how and why he was revered by many, especially underscoring the reality that ordinary Muslims could practice Islam on their own without relying on educated elites (Ansari, 2018).

As a distinguished leader within his context, crisis of the modern crisis, Shah Waliullah's approach to reform seems quite appealing, for it was more than just an intellectual, theological and political approach. Such reconstruction enables the growth of revival movements within Muslim communities, thus it underlines the value of his ideas in the face of social and political change.

Educational Reforms

In terms of the Greater Islamic Revival in Subcontinent, Shah Waliullah's Call to arms for Change is to say the least one of the most remarkable and transformative. His vision of undoing the moral, spiritual and political disarray among Muslims was to reclaim their identity through real bonding to Islamic teachings. His ideas aimed at empowering the Muslims through knowledge of the Holy Quran, the Sunnah, and the science of reason, which would help them deal with the socio-political changes effectively. His endeavor to articulate a more functional Muslim thought ushered in the starting point to the unification of traditional Muslim 'sciences' and the 'applied' areas.

Shah Waliullah's ground-breaking step which is Quran translation to Persian, was astounding for its time. This was crucial as Persian was much used to the elites of the Indian subcontinent. By allowing the non-Arabic speaking Muslims to read the Quran, Waliullah has made Islamic knowledge available for its believers to practice its basics by reading it. His acts encouraged later Quran translations in local languages including Urdu which made the holy book more available. This effort closed the rift between the ordinary and the more sophisticated Muslims, strengthening their emotional and intellectual ties with the religion (Ahmed, 2020).

Shah Waliullah warranted the study of Hadith to restore the understanding of the practices of the Prophet Muhammad (Sunnah). He noted that the Shariah had become too much of a primitivistic literalism combined with a casual technical science that often bypassed the practical and moral concerns embedded in the words of the Prophet. Please note, it was this perception that was to the establishment of the study Islam in a holistic way which Shah Waliullah envisioned. He was instrumental in reinvigorating the study of hadith in the sub-continent but he also shaped the later reformers who placed more emphasis on the prophetic traditions in individual and community life (Qadri, 2018).

Shah Waliullah, in addition to emphasizing the pursuit of religious knowledge, also called for the inclusion of secular disciplines in the Islamic education system. He argued that logic, philosophy, and ethics were necessary for Muslims to comprehend the intricacies of the world. He reformulated the educational system in a way that enabled the Ummah to have scholars who possessed religious learning as well as reasoning and problem solving which were required in combating the socio-intellectual impact of colonization (Habib, 2019). For Waliullah the major goals of education reforms were of fully feasible nature and were casting a wider net at the societal level. This need based vision on Islamic education permeates Muslim thought and remains central to the scholarship in meeting this aim.

Theological Reforms

Shah Waliullah attempt was crucial in dealing with the divisions and degeneration of the Muslim community in the Indian sub-continent. His appeal to the Muslim Ummah (community) to come together under one banner and his call for cognitive advancement matured a more harmonious and progressive Islamic tradition. When there were external threats in terms of colonial forces and internal schisms, Shah Waliullah made it decisive to reemphasize and promote the universal aspects of Islam while also encouraging a contextual and rational application of religion.

One of Shah Waliullah's main theological contributions was his attempt to guard against sectarianism. The division between the Sunnis and Shias during his life was very problematic for the unity of the Muslim Ummah. Understanding the negative implications of these divisions, Shah Waliullah declared the commonalities of different Islamic sects. In his greatest work, *Hujjatullah al-Baligha*, he described the foundational ideas and perspectives of Islam that are applicable to all and do not endorse affiliation with any particular sect. This work stressed the fundamental aspects of Quran and Sunnah rather than contentious topics and encouraged Muslims to who wished to work together towards why need to unity. His appeal for unity was not only psychological; it was in fact a practical answer to the Indigenous threats of colonial expansion which wanted to divide and rule the Muslim Ummah (Baljon, 1986).

Shah Waliullah was repositioning the religious identity of Muslims in the subcontinent. The issue of his changing paradigm emerged from the failure of Muslims to capture political power in South Asia the irredentist narrative he constructed as Clarke called it provided Muslims with a salient primary identity. In reality however the Muslims and Hindus had shared cultural and linguistic bonds Islam was actively seeking native

converts and with the added help of social and cultural advances helped solve the issues of colonial dominance among other things. It worked so well that one could argue that the political if not all of the we are Muslims narrative was the foremost identity of Indians that made considerably more sense over that self-promulgated with the coming of Congress. The bottom therefore was United India goal of any political struggle the top remained the Islamic Ummah.

Political Reforms and Advocacy

Shah Waliullah's political reforms and advocacy focused on the politics of Islam by uniting the Muslim emperors to face the problems in which he lived. His political theology emphasized the integration of political order and religion promoting the concept of a morally-sanctioned Islamic state where he has power.

Among such actions was the exchange of letters with some local kings among whom was Ahmad Shah Durrani. In these letters, Shah Waliullah sought integration of the Muslim leaders in order to be able to contain the colonial and disintegration forces among the Muslims. He called on rulers to take into account the common good of the Muslim Ummah rather than personal or tribal or local interests. His letters outlined plans on how to use political unity to deal with communal threats and dangers, and laid out strategies to politically integrate Muslims according to Islam (Khan, 2021).

Shah Waliullah's argued for implementation of Islamic law in order to achieve economic prosperity while promoting justice and equitable governance. He contributed greatly to the Islamic worldview by articulating that leaders have ethical obligations towards the needs of their people. He underscored that no governor can treat his or her subjects unjustly and that an Islamic state's main goals include the fair distribution of resources, guaranteeing of human rights including the moral and spiritual enhancement of the people. Policies that take into account material wellbeing along with moral guidance were also advised by him as a basis for an Islamic state. His vision was later echoed by other reformist movements on the Indian subcontinent (Ahmed, 2020).

He also criticized Muslim rulers for lack of moral integrity while emphasizing the importance of accountability and Islamic beliefs when in positions of governance. His disapproval of practices that were deemed unjust and corrupt was in relation to the negative implication they had on the development of the Muslim community. He intended for his political ideas to be long term so as to address governance issues of Muslims across the world irrespective of the geo-political factors at a particular period (Rizvi, 2018).

A significant theme which encompassed the political reform and advocacy of Shah Waliullah's was his vision for the renaissance of the Islam religion. His teachings on issues of cohesion, justice and ethical political leadership are still applicable in modern context of religion in politics and political reform.

Influence on Islamic Revitalization

As an activist and a political leader Shah Wali Ullah reformist activities influenced a level of Islamic revivalism in Islamic societies in South Asia in more ways than possible during his life. The lifelong combination of political, social, and theological activism in

his life history prompted subsequent generations of revivalists in Islamic civilization to emerge. They subsequently set the stage for anti-colonial struggles, educational reforms, and a resurgence of Islamic practices in the region.

Shah Waliullah's thoughts were able to further penetrate the area of philosophy giving birth to reformist movements. Such ideas provided the intellectual resources to many leaders like Syed Ahmed Bareli who fought for the revival of Islamic way of life during the 19th century against the British rule. The movement led by Bareli focused on the faith, the sharia practice and the establishment of a single authority to unite against the external and internal aggressors. These ideas of Shah Waliullah's about oneness and Islam's basic practices being the prime focus of belief and action are quite consistent with such movements that evolved in this time of crisis and rebuilding forces during colonialism (Ansari, 2020).

Waliullah's also had an impact on the education sector of the Muslims. His attempt to translate the Quran into Persian was part of an initiative to spread Islamic knowledge amongst the average Muslim. He built the foundations of a liberal system of education. The resulting output of Islamization of knowledge by promoting its practical aspects brought about the building of madrasas and modern schools which integrated the Islamic sciences with the scientific ones. These institutions achieved great success in nurturing Islam and developing Muhammad's teachings for the future (Rahman, 2021). Also, the theological foundations of Shah Waliullah's thought, especially his concept of *ijtihad* (free or independent interpretation), seem to have influenced later Islamic scholars to interpret Islamic teachings in conjunction with the realities of the time. This opening of the Islamic mind stretch also gave birth to the movements which sought the integration of Islam, its polity, education and culture with the emerging socio-political conditions of the times (Ali, 2019). In essence, the reformist vision of Shah Waliullah's did not only meet the antagonistic demands of his time but also laid an effective groundwork for Muslim revivalism in the subcontinent. His intellectual heritage today is a valuable source for various initiatives aimed at Islamic unity, educational reform, and theological revivalism across the world.

Criticism and Challenges

The socio-political nature of south Asia was such that it was vehemently opposed to the reformist ideas of Shah Waliullah, though he was a visionary and transformed the Islamic thought to certain extent, during his life. Today he is given high accolades, but it is a fact that such practices were discouraged during his lifetime. Of the many critiques he faced, perhaps the harshest criticism among others came from orthodoxy. Shah Waliullah's encouragement of *ijtihad* (independent judgment) in replacement of *Taqlid* (strictly following the principles) was viewed as an act detrimental to the preservation of Islam. There were fears that what was the orthodox stance would be subjected to personal opinions and the practices would be religiously diversified. The reformists, however, were actively against the idea as they would enhance their premises on the ideals held whereby they blurt out that Shah Waliullah's innovations were novel and did not precedent Islamic philosophies. They supported *ijtihad* as it was less conservative, however they were aware that it would fracture interpretations

of Islam. The tussle and conflict between orthodox Islam and contemporary Islam will recur or remains the perpetual state in the progress of Islamic intellectual history. (Malik, 2018).

Another challenge was putting to practice the reforms proposed by Shah Waliullah. The 18th century witnessed the disintegration of the Mughal Empire and as a result, a centre unable to unify the Muslim population of the subcontinent. The decentralisation of the political context, as well as the emergence of numerous regional powers, resulted in a state of affairs that was fundamentally unstable and fragmented, which meant that it was particular difficult for the ideas of Shah Waliullah to take root. For example, his appeals for governance based on justice, for the Muslim community to be united, and the political framework in which society would be led by Islamic principles were often left unfulfilled, as the form of government was fragmented and the interest of local strongmen dominated. In addition, the growing expansion of British colonialism also diminished the role of Muslim leaders to adopt and implement the strategies of Shah Waliullah, particularly the leaders of the subcontinent. (Ansari, 2020).

Bridging the sectarian gulf was also a site of conflict for Shah Waliullah. Although he called upon the Sunni and the Shia sects to reconcile, this was in one respect revolutionary, it was unwelcomed by both sects. The sectarian hostilities which were interwoven in the socio-religions structure of the subcontinent proved to be rather more difficult to be overcome in light of his reasoning which stressed Islamic commonality. This strong desire for unity, as well showed up in his work entitled *Hujjatullah al-Baligha*, but the deep seated suspicions and diversities of the people made it all very costly to achieve much in the way of reconciliation efforts (Ali, 2021). In addition, the perception that Shah Waliullah's focus on the Islamic character of political authority was rather utopian created disagreements. It was, however, claimed that his Islamic state based on justice, morality and people's welfare was an impossible dream during that time period in the social and political setting. Coupled with the fragmented political system and the absence of a unifying power, his ideas were therefore quite difficult to work on in real sense.

Even in the face of such criticism and challenges, Shah Waliullah's contributions to Islamic thought and fundamentalism are said to be enduring. As well as impacting his peers, they also provided a foundation for subsequent reform movements across South Asia. The backlash he suffered sheds light on the reformist challenges pertaining to a more active society, but his legacy speaks volumes as regards his vision and its applicability and relevance in the modern Islamic world.

Legacy

Shah Waliullah's conception of Islamic revivalism has been influential not only in the Indian subcontinent but in many parts of the world and affected entire generations and groups of scholars and reformers as well as movements. His concern for a more rounded improvement in the conditions of his society including education, doctrine, politics and partisan integration still resonates in the present day.

It is believed that Shah Waliullah contributed significantly to the studies of the Quran, among other things. It is said that by translating the Quran into Persian, he untethered Islam for non-Arab Muslims and blanketed the ground for further interpretations into native languages. Such an endeavor did not only ensure security and Islamic awareness in society but also promoted cognitive appreciation of the religion. His method makes it possible for every person to access the teachings of the Quran without co-dependence on mediators. This legacy to advance Quran interpretation is said to be the shockwave to impact Islamic institutions and reformist movements in the Sub-Continent (Rahman, 2018).

Shah Waliullah holding Muslims to a single unit is one aspect of his legacy. He in his time endorsed a rapprochement between the Sunni and Shia sects and tried to reduce the sectarian wars that fought the strength of the Ummah. Writing on the defense of Islam he expounds on the common denominator of Islam thus encouraging Muslims to settle their differences when faced with a common enemy. Today, the call to unity is one of the objectives that seek sectarian animosities hence forging togetherness in a polarised region (Ansari, 2020).

Other areas that stand out are where Shah Waliullah stressed the need of a contextual interpretation of Islamic law. He promoted the concept of *ijtihad* that allowed for the Sharia in its substance to adjust with the needs of the people at the time. It bridges the gap between the orthodox and the modern, thus paving way for the development of reform movements which sought to suit the teachings of Islam with the time at hand. His principles however draw a more important relation with the contemporary issues that affect the Muslim societal beliefs, especially focusing on the multicultural and pluralistic societies (Khan, 2021).

Also, it is important to note that Shah Waliullah was highly influential in graduated many reformers such as Syed Ahmed Barelvi and the Deoband movement who were pivotal in trying to combat colonialism as well as recreate Islam through his works. His messages of focus, on education, on unity and on justice always pointed to the road that rulers in Islamic countries had to take to modernize yet remain Islamic. The ideas of Sah Waliullah are still prevalent today around his followers in South Asia. His basic ideas of modern education, unity of the Ummah and reform in the communities are still very relevant today in tackling the issues facing the Muslim world. This also emphasizes the universality of his legacy, proving once again that Islam has a great potential to be moulded to circumstantial changes.

Conclusion

The reforms carried out by Shah Waliullah are a turning point in the narrative of Islamic thought and the revivalist movement in the Indian subcontinent. Addressing the complex issues of his time such as a disintegrating polity, morals in decay, and enemies of the faith, he crafted a strategy to reignite the essence of Islam. His works tackling areas of theology, education, politics, and societal integration have made a lasting mark on Islam in South Asia and remains relevant in examining the issues of reform and identity today. One of the salient features of Shah Waliullah's work was his zeal to popularize Islamic knowledge. His translation of the Quran from Arabic to Persian and

his promotion of Quranic as a primary content of learning were crucial changes that enabled non-Arabic speaking Muslims to understand the words of their religion. This initiative did not only make religious information available even to the common believer but also promoted an active and well-informed belief in the faith. In the same way, his initiative to deal with the study of the hadith was another one that aimed at the revival of interest in the prophetic traditions and its practice in the Muslim world, as he thought, neglect of Sunnah had occurred.

One of Shah Waliullah's most important legacies is his plea for Muslims to unite. Such a plea was made on the understanding that both Sunnis and Shias need not be at loggerheads since there were fundamental Islamic tenets that they both adhered to, which he as a Muslim sought to bridge divisions within the Ummah that he perceived as weakening the Islamic cause. The desire for intra-communal cohesion, which transcended sectarian consideration in his case, was to foster the emergence of a collective force that would both withstand external aggression and quell internal disturbances. This ideal has scope today in efforts to address issues of sectarianism and promote peaceful co-existence. Besides, Waliullah Allah's view on the necessity of ijtihad set the tone as to how Islam was to respond to the particularities of a given epoch through its legal tenets. His emphasis on free thought rather than blind loyalty was more because of his understanding of Islam as one which did not stagnate but rather was always relevant to the changing dynamics of the society it was implanted in. This ideology of Waliullah has fuelled various reformist movements and remains significant today when there are contemporary discussions on Islamic legal and political thought. Regardless of the threats and resistance that Waliullah faced, his thought and ideas were passed on to succeeding reformers and movements. For example, Syed Ahmed Barelvi and the leaders of the Deobandi movement were very influenced by Waliullah's works and thoughts, a fact which prevented the splintering of Barelvi's vision of Islamic renewal as other Islamic revivalist leaders who came after him would also follow in his footsteps.

With astounding insight and concern, Shah Waliullah's efforts sought to counter the moral, intellectual, and political challenges of the time. His lasting influence stresses the importance and relevance of Islamic norms and principles for there always exists a model in Islam to deal with challenges in different social and political environments. Also, his works remain one of the most important forms of South Asian Islamic thought and offer today's reformist movements great guidance.

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