

Shah Waliullah (1703 – 1762): The Man and his Mission

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How many historical figures have India produced who won the respect of the whole Muslim Umma? Was not Shah Waliullah one of those who wielded a lot of influence among all sects of Muslims? If yes, what gave him such a unique status and immortalized his name in the world of Islam? Why poet philosopher like Allama Iqbal could not fail, despite some differences, to recognize his efforts for the revival of Muslim Umma? What has he left to posterity and how have his descendents contributed to the Muslim freedom movement in India in its embryonic stage? How justified was Maulana Shabbir Ahmed Usmani to say that after the death of Shah Waliullah, there was no undisputed leader among the Muslims of India? What did he mean by Khilafat-e-Kubra¹ and whether this concept was identical to that of Khilafat-e-Rashida?² How many Islamic revivalist movements were inspired by his work? To what extent his efforts bore fruit in his life and subsequently? An attempt is made in this paper to provide plausible answers to these questions.

Introduction

A descendent of Umar Farooq the Great, Shah Waliullah was son of a renowned scholar of Islam, Shah Abdul Raheem. When Aurangzeb

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1 Shah Waliullah presented concept of Khilafat-e-Kubra in his famous book *Hujat-Ullah al-Baligha* in which he suggested that if it is impossible to unite every Muslim state under one leadership but it is possible that all or most of the Muslim states should establish consensus on some points and a confederation system. Detail is available in his book, (Delhi: Bijnoor Press, 1937), p.42.

2 Khilafat-e-Rashida was the system of ideal Islamic states which sustained for 30 years after the death of Holy Prophet (may peace be upon him). Shah Abdul Haq, Mushkaat. (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1963), p.97

Alamgir constituted a board of Muslim scholars to compile a work dealing with problems of daily life and providing solution to them in the light of Islamic injunctions, the end result of that effort was “*Fatawa-i-Alamgiri*”.³ Shah Muhammad Ishaq, the grandson of Shah Waliullah, described the ‘*Fatawa*’, though written for the service of Muslim community, elitist in its purport and undertones. Shah Abdul Rahim had only separated from that board but also started to educate the next generation to prepare them for the future challenges. He thought Aurangzeb was the most formidable barrier to Muslim decline in the subcontinent, but had doubts about his successors’ ability to sustain power. Therefore, he deputed some disciples to most parts of Muslim India to preach his mission urging intra-Muslim unity and discouraging the schism which was detrimental to the Muslim supremacy.⁴

Shah Waliullah was only four when Emperor Aurangzeb died and a battle for throne started among the royal siblings. Succession wars, characteristic of the Sultanate and Moghal periods in India, intensified as soon as Aurangzeb died causing endless misery, dislocation and fragmentation of power. A privy to the Muslim decline, Shah Waliullah could not conceal his grief which he expressed through powerful writings and intellectual discourse.

Contribution of Shah Waliullah

Having memorized the Holy Quran at seven, Shah Waliullah started teaching in the Madressa Rahimia in 1721. Later, he went to Mecca where he studied *Hadith* and other disciplines of Islam like *Fiqah* (Jurisprudence and comparative study of different sects of Islam). To further his knowledge of *Hadith*, he met Sheikh Abu Tahir Madni, a leading Islamist who was his contemporary.⁵ Apparently, he also met Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab but some of Shah Waliullah’s disciples denied it. According to Ashiq Hussain, Sheikh Muhammad bin

3 This book deals with the problems of daily life of a Muslim and presented solution of these problems in the light of Islamic injunctions. Shah Abdul Raheem did not want to keep it confined to the problems of daily life but he wanted to identify the evils which were being emerged due to weakness of Indian Muslim in general and elite class in particular.

4 Ashiq Hussain, *Sarguzasht-e-Rahimia* (Delhi: Bijnor Press, 1937).

5 Some of the scholars opine that periods of Sheikh Muhammad Bin Abdul Wahab (the spiritual leader of Saudi dynasty), and Shah Waliullah were the same i.e. 1703 – 1793. Although there is no any clear evidence through which it can be proved that Shah Waliullah met with Sheikh Muhammad Bin Abdul Wahab but it is obvious that Sheikh Abu Tahir Madni and Sheikh Muhammad Bin Abdul Wahab had similar ideas. Therefore, influence of Wahabi movement is found in his ideas except mysticism which was used as the device of reformation.

Abdul Wahab was not permitted entry in Hijaz by the Turkish Caliph and that Shah Waliullah never visited Najad.⁶ However, it was just a coincidence that Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab was also a student of Sheikh Abu Tahir Madni. Regardless of whether or not the two luminaries ever met, they differed in their understandings of Islam and its articulation. Shah Waliullah believed in mysticism like the followers of Ahmed Sarhandi (Mujjadid Alf-i-Sani), whereas Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab was a strict puritan who opposed mysticism and any compromise on the word of Quran and *Hadith*.

Shah Waliullah twice stayed in Mecca and Madina for two years on each occasion in 1730-1732 and 1734-1736. According to Ashiq Hussain, Shah Waliullah wanted to stay there forever like successors of Shah Abdul Haq Mohadiss Dehlavi but Sheikh Abu Tahir Madni had ordered him to go back to India and lead the Muslims towards the righteous way, the way of Allah and his Prophet⁷ (PBUH).

Thus, Shah Waliullah came back to India in 1737 and started preaching as advised by his teacher, Sheikh Abu Tahir Madni. He adopted a three dimensional strategy of reformation:

- a. He started delivering sermons of Jumma prayer, and used the pulpits of the mosque to convey his message to the Muslims as well as their rulers.
- b. He founded an organization Hizb-e-Waliullahi, through which his religious ideas were conveyed to other parts of India.⁸
- c. He urged that the Holy Quran and other literature of Islam be translated into Persian, then official language.

He himself translated the Holy Quran into Persian, an effort that was not welcomed by the traditional ulema.⁹ He criticized social and political hierarchies of the time and thus provoked negative reaction. According to Maulana Khalil Ahmed, the administration of Delhi tried its best to restrain Shah Waliullah from delivering religious sermons and speeches. Shah Waliullah, besides speeches started writing on different aspects of life in the light of Quran and Sunnah. His works revealed that

6 Ashiq Hussain, *Wahabi Movement in India* (Patna: Patna University Press, 1942) p.37.

7 Shah Waliullah, *Hujjat Ullah Baligha*, (Preface).

8 According to research of Dr Ashiq Hussain of Patna, spiritual guide of Tipu Sultan was also member of this organization.

9 Some of the followers of Shah Waliullah claimed that the first effort of translating the Holy Quran was made by Shah Waliullah but it was proved that Mukhdoom Loo was the first person who translated the Holy Quran in Persian.

he was not a blind follower of any particular Imam but was inclined more to Hanafite School of Islamic Law. Representing a blend between the orthodox ulema and eclectic Sufi, Shah Waliullah earned the sympathy of Sunnite Muslims within India and abroad¹⁰.

Shah Waliullah adopted the way of Sufi. However, his mysticism was not passive but proactive in both doctrinal and temporal matters. Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi regarded him as the first among the leading ulema who declared monarchy as un-Islamic, inhumane and immoral.¹¹ According to Basharat Mirza, it was Shah Waliullah, who clearly described the four phases of development of mankind. The author considered him the first sociologist and anthropologist of modern world whose views, unfortunately, neither published on time nor did they receive the due attention by Muslim scholars. A chapter in "*Hujatullah Al-balighah*" namely "*Irtifaqat*" is a pointer to the *alim*'s grip on matters not strictly religious but also falling in the purview of sociological sciences.

In his book, Shah Waliullah defined politics and differentiated it from government. He narrated the qualifications of *Khalifa*, Prime Minister, Minister of Finance, Army Chief and real soldier of Islam. He insisted that army should be organized as a separate and professional organization. He was opposed to the weaponisation of the civilians. In his view a *Khalifa* should come preferably from the tribe of Quraish but in case of non-availability of an eligible Quraish, others may be elected.

He also described the qualities of chief justice, judges and the whole structure of judiciary. He was of the view that the root cause of Muslim decline lay in the weakness of judiciary and criminal negligence of the rulers to impart modern education to the masses. He abhorred the pernicious status quo and demanded a system adapted to the need, dignity and honour of Muslim India.

He had no qualms in seeking an end to the contemporary governments in Muslim countries and their replacement by a system of government based on Quran, Sunnah and pristine example of Khilafat-e-Rashida¹². Such a system he would name as Khilafat-e-Kubra. Knowing that Khilafat-e-Kubra cannot be established at present due to the so-

10 Shiites Muslims, the second largest Muslim sect, nevertheless did not subscribe to his views.

11 Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi, *Shah Waliullah ki Syasi Tehreek*, edition 13, (Delhi: Bijnor Press, 1939) p.23.

12 He made it clear that Khilafat-e-Rashida had ended with the martyrdom of Hazrat Ali. He included Hazrat Hassan and Hazrat Omer bin Abdul Aziz with some reservations.

called national interests of Muslim states, he urged a loose arrangement whereby harmony, community of interest and internationalism could be promoted in Islamic world. Only such a converse, added Shah Waliullah, would help realize the ultimate goal of Khilafat-e-Kubra.

Invitation to Ahmed Shah Abdali for Invasion of India

Shah Waliullah was concerned that Marathas had occupied the whole of Muslim India except Red Fort by 1760, yet the Mughals had failed to rise to the occasion. He wrote to Ahmed Shah Abdali to attack India and to check Maratha menace. A special messenger was sent to Qandahar carrying the letter of Shah Waliullah to Abdali¹³, who had invaded India thrice before and was well aware of political predicament of Indian Muslims. Abdali responded to this call for Jihad and inflicted a crushing defeat upon the Marathas.

There are two schools of thought about the consequences of this step. The first school has argued that Abdali's conquest was momentary in effect as it did not establish a strong Muslim rule despite the destruction of the Marathas. It was rather British who filled this political vacuum. This school holds Abdali as responsible for facilitating the British imperialism in India. On the other hand, partisans of Waliullah have argued that Maratha force was staunchly anti-Muslims; it had resorted to ethnic cleansing and forcible conversion; it had forced the Muslims to live as second-rate subjects under Hindu domination. They regarded British as lesser evil who being aliens were bound to leave in time. Thus Pakistan was the natural corollary of events leading to the defeat of Marathas, rise of British and partition of India or birth of Pakistan. Shah Waliullah did not want to establish British rule in India. His intention was to save the Muslim rule even if it would entail aggression from a brotherly Muslim ruler. What Waliullah could not achieve in his life, the founding fathers of Pakistan did two centuries later subscribing to his political philosophy that Islam and Hinduism are antithetic to each other and cannot become the basis of a common nationality.

Intellectual Legacy

Shah Waliullah was a prolific writer. He had written 143 books out of which 86 were published. The manuscripts of the remaining 57 books were found in the personal libraries of different scholars. Those works, if published, would have enhanced our knowledge on various aspects of his struggle and views. It is no wonder that even Allama Iqbal had to say,

13 Original letter sent by Shah Waliullah is preserved in Peshawer Museum.

“We can understand easily the *“Hujat”* but not *“Tafheemat”*. Waliullah’s work ranged from *hikmat* to mysticism to politics, history, hadith, principle of interpretation of Holy Quran and Arabic grammar. Three main groups of Muslim theologians of subcontinent regard him as their spiritual and intellectual guide. *Ahle Hadees* and Ulema of Deoband claim to be real successors of Shah Waliullah. Likewise, the Brelvi sect of Sunnite Muslims also considers him as their mentor. Besides this, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Syed Jamaluddin Afghani, Ayatullah Khumaini and many other stalwarts of religio-political movements seemed to have imbibed from the intellectual discourses of Shah Waliullah. Shah Waliullah was born two centuries ago, therefore, his work did not receive the deserved attention. The Arabic *“Hujjatul al Baligha”* focused on socio-economic, political, religious and anthropological fields of knowledge. Lacking knowledge of Arabic, Muslim scholars as well as European Islamists could not appreciate its worth.

In another book *“Al-Badoor al-Bazigha”*, scolding the rulers of that time, Shah Waliullah said “you retreat from the enemy of Islam and attack the helpless communities of the Muslims. Blood of the poor Muslims is sucked from their bodies which has developed your stomachs bigger with the passage of time. You have lost your honour to such extent that you invite the enemy of Muslims and Islam to crush other Muslim brothers. I predict that Allah has decided to destroy wholly this unholy”. No doubt Shah Waliullah was opposed by the contemporary elites but majority of the Muslim learned classes had great respect for him and even the poor Muslim masses gathered around him.

Shah Waliullah also wrote a book about the four pious caliphs of Islam. A perusal of *“Al-Farooque”* by Maulana Shiblee Noumani¹⁴, it would reveal that most of the material used in his work was borrowed from the biography of Omer the Great, written by Waliullah. Moreover, he compiled forty Hadiths with their translation. All of these Hadiths deal with the norms of daily life and do not have any concern with controversial or disputed matters.¹⁵

Another valuable book by Shah Waliullah deals with mysticism. A single reading would not suffice to understand this book. As Iqbal had said, “Shah Waliullah of *Hujjat* can be understood but Shah Waliullah

14 Syed Abul Hassan Ali Nadvi, *Musalmanon kay Syasi Afkar*, edition 13, (Lucknow, Nadva Publications, 1927) p.22.

15 Apparently, 40 hadiths look very small in numbers but these were selected alongwith the detailed chain of narrator of these hadiths. Therefore, it does not mean that this book consists of only the text of 40 hadiths without any reference. This way of narration is called “San’ad”.

of *Tafhimat* is hardly understandable for us”. Despite that the book, “*Tafhimat-e-Ellahia*” is so important that it has undergone 26 editions. Indeed, it is a rare book on mysticism.

Shah Waliullah’s “*Al-Fouzul Kabeer*” seeks to explain the Holy Quran and basic principles. This book cannot be understood without help from a seasoned teacher of Islamic Studies. Shah Waliullah was of the view that some misled Ulema tried to verify some scientific truths mentioned in the Holy Quran but forgot that the Holy Quran is not a book of geography, mathematics or physics. It is revealed by Allah on His Prophet (PBUH) to purify the spirits of its readers and reform the socio-cultural aspects of their life. Whenever some geographical and other scientific facts are narrated in the Quran, these are based on the observations of the Arabs. Therefore, name of mango, apricot and other fruits which are not found on the soil of Arabia have not been mentioned as paradise fruit. Only it is told that “you will find taste of every fruit favourite to you”.

According to Shah Waliullah, concept of paradise was given as incentive to those people who do not worship Allah for the sake of His pleasure. It is a known fact that the man is inspired to act any virtuous or good act due to fear or greed. A small number of people can be persuaded to please Allah for the reason that He is our creator, sustainer and benefactor of such type that could not be counted in spite of our all efforts. The person who wants to write any Tafseer should not involve himself in scientific discoveries which he supposes to be conformed in the Quran. Facts may develop changes with the passage of time, therefore, it is feared that reader of such Tafseer may get confused and become victim of doubts. Hence, he should try to avoid such debates and the Holy Quran should be presented as the book of reformation and purification of soul.

Another point is taken as weaker weapon in the hands of anti-Islamic elements that Quran provides the guidance to the *Muttaqeen* (pious persons) only. They have exploited this point that the person who is not pious cannot receive guidance from the Holy Quran. Whereas the merits of the *Muttaqeen* are given in the other verses of Quran through which this fact can be established that “*Muttaqeen*” mean the people who have impartial minds by nature like the justice and honesty. If it was not so, then how could millions of those persons who had no knowledge about the alphabets of conventional *Muttaqeen*, embraced Islam and dedicated their lives for its preaching. This concept of *Muttaqeen* is also new and unique for modern researchers.

Shah Waliullah's work "*Al-Irshad fe Ilmul Iqtasad*" (Some Instructions about the Economics) defined economic ideas according to the need of the hour. He predicted that a time would come when religion would be replaced by money and wealth. He also advised that amount of *Deyyet* should be determined in the form of coins instead of camels, goats and other kinds of animals and that the system of *Zakat* and *Ushr* be revised because of changes in economy. He also foresaw that a time will come when agricultural economy will be replaced by industrial goods and products. Just as coins have replaced the barter system, it is just possible that other easier and lighter items are introduced with the passage of time. Therefore, we should prepare ourselves for that time. He also mentions in this book that earth and other natural resources have been bestowed by Allah equally for the mankind. When a person owns more than average members of society, it means that he has acquired the share of another man. Therefore, Allah says that the resources exceeding your needs must be spent for the welfare of the poor because you have fetched their shares too. Sounding egalitarian, Shah Waliullah is seen sometimes as the first communist of Muslim India.¹⁶

Another revolutionary idea floated by Shah Waliullah was that war between privileged and deprived classes is not new phenomena but had started since the origin of the mankind. Prophets of Allah were mainly supported by the poor class as Prophets championed their cause. Carl Marx had based his defense of the proletariat on atheist foundations while Waliullah sought his inspiration from Quran or hadith. He saw every aspect of human life with the eyes of a mystic and a true Muslim. His work predated Communist Manifesto in which theory of class conflict was presented by Marx in 1848, whereas *Ilmul Iqtasad* was written in 1757. To ensure a welfare state, he proposed that *Zakat* and *Ushr* could be spent on particular heads and that additional taxes may be levied to meet the revenue demands of the state. He suggested that surplus wealth should be collected from the rich classes and distributed among the poor. This is the only way to prevent the accumulation of wealth in few hands attendant with its immoral and social consequences.¹⁷

Impact of the Ideas of Shah Waliullah

Shah Waliullah was regarded as main inspiration for every Islamic movement to reform and revive the Muslim Ummah. His religious ideas

16 Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi, *Shah Waliullah ki Syasi Tehreek*, edition 13, (Delhi: Bijnor Press, 1939) p.23.

17 This theory was introduced by Robert Peel to prevent communism in Britain.

were adopted by the Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadees sect. He issued a *Fatwa* (religious decree) that every Muslim youth should study the modern science and technology which was *Farz-e-Qifaya*.¹⁸ He was the pioneer in the world of Muslim theologians to emphasize the updating of the old and outdated research of past Muslim scholars. Among others, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan seemed to have imbibed his ideas in urging modernity or re-interpretation of Islamic thoughts, although he could not establish an institution where real Islamic teaching along with modern science and technology could be provided.

Shah Waliullah's four sons also served the Muslim Community. The eldest was Shah Abdul Aziz who conducted research on Hadith and tried his best to unite all the Muslim sects. His second son, Shah Abdul Qadir, translated the Holy Quran into Urdu with its brief explanation, named as *Mouze-ul-Quran*. His third son, Shah Rafiud Din, also translated the Holy Quran without any comments. Perhaps he wished the reader to get help for learning the Arabic of Quran through this translation. His fourth son, Shah Abdul Ghani, though blind, was educated under the supervision of Shah Waliullah. He was a good preacher, orator and debater. He did not leave behind any book as his legacy but a son,¹⁹ Hazrat Shah Ismail, (the grandson of Shah Waliullah) who launched the Mujahideen Movement alongwith Sayyid Ahmed against the tyrannical Sikh rule²⁰ in the Punjab. Shah Ismail succeeded initially and occupied the whole (present) NWFP and parts of Kashmir. He crossed the Indus River and defeated Sikh Army near Hazro (Attock). This movement was encountered by the weapons of treachery. Sectarian differences were created. Shah Ismail was projected as an outsider who cared least for traditions and conventions of local peoples. Consequently, this movement suffered from internal problems. Shah Ismail and his spiritual guide Syed Ahmed were martyred by the Sikhs and their Muslim collaborators. The amber of the movement nevertheless

18 According to Islamic injunction, Farz Qifaya is such a duty on Muslims which can be paid by the representative of city, village or different groups and the rest of the Muslim community can be excused by Allah to perform this duty.

19 According to new research, it is found that Shah Abdul Ghani also left great legacy in form of books. Though, he could not write but some of his followers helped him write dozens of books but these are hardly found in the shape of publications. Moreover, authenticity of these books is needed.

20 During their period, Sikhs desecrated Muslim holy places and converted Shahi Mosque of Lahore into a stable of horses. Moreover, they kidnapped Muslim girls and subjected them to all sorts of humiliations.

remained till 1947 when its last Ameer, Haji Fazal Ellahi Wazirabadi declared its formal ending on August 14, 1947.²¹

Syed Jamaluddin Afghani who was born in 1839 adopted Shah Waliullah's concept of Khilafat-e-Kubra in the form of a Pan-Islamic movement. Although he failed to see its translation into a successful movement, his followers followed his message in every part of the Muslim world to liberate it from Western colonialism and imperialism. Ayatullah Kashani of Iran had started a movement culminating in the Iranian revolution of 1979. A great figure of the Iranian revolution Dr. Syed Ali Shareyati claimed, "We are followers of Syed Jamaluddin Afghani who was the disciple of grandson of Shah Waliullah, Shah Muhammad Ishaq". Shareyati paid a great tribute to Allama Iqbal, who was no less impressed by Shah Waliullah by saying, "He had restless soul and anxious mind but could not see fruits of his efforts".²² A great freedom fighter, Mufti Muhammad Abdur Rabbuhu had started an anti-imperialist movement in Egypt which spread throughout Muslim Africa in the form of an intellectual as well as armed struggle. In effect, Libya, Morocco, Algeria and rest of Muslim Africa were liberated from colonialism.

No doubt, spiritual, religious and ideological basis was provided to the Pakistan Movement by the ideas of Shah Waliullah. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, the founder of the two nation theory, had started studying Holy Quran with the help of Shah Ghulam Ali, the grandson of Shah Waliullah. Similarly, founder of Deoband, Maulana Muhammad Qasim Nanotawi, was a student of Maulana Mumlooq Ali who used to teach Islamic Studies in Aligarh.

Allama Iqbal was also a great admirer of Shah Waliullah. Mufti-e-Azam of Pakistan Maulana Shabeer Ahmed Usmani said on the eve of Quaid-i-Azam's death, "None of the Muslim leaders after Shah Waliullah had been like Quaid-i-Azam over whom the whole Muslim community was agreed and accepted him as their leader irrespective of sectarian and communal differences".

No doubt, Shah Waliullah is counted among the rare figures of Muslim India, however, his work is not above criticism. According to Maulana Syed Abu'al Aala Modudi, he was the great physician and diagnosed exactly but proposed such prescription through which Muslim society became victim of moral degeneration and sectarian conflict, i.e.,

21 Fazl-e-Mehmood Makhfi, *Mujahideen Movement* (Lahore: Idara Muarif Islami, 1956) p.57

22 Riaz, *Ma o Iqbal*, (Islamabad: Allama Iqbal University, 1976), pp.39-41.

mysticism.²³ According to Fateh Muhammad Malik, Shah Waliullah did nothing wrong because it was the most effective device of that time when Shah Waliullah started reformation of society.²⁴ A renowned American Muslim convert, Maryam Jamila says that Shah Waliullah was the person who opened the doors of *Ijtihad* which had been closed three centuries ago but when he wrote about mysticism, he forgot what he had written in “*Hujjatullah al Baligha*” and “*Al-Badoorul Bazigha*”.²⁵ This contradictory approach may also be seen in the work of Shah Ismail (the grandson of Shah Waliullah). He also forgot what he had written in “*Sirat-e-Mustaqeem*” while he wrote “*Taqviatul Eiman*” and “*Mansab-e-Imamat*”. Such dichotomy of views is found in the works of several Muslim scholars. However, according to Yousaf Islam (formerly Kate Stevens), he was Mujadid of his own era.²⁶ In the words of Dr. Hameedullah, “Real reformer is the one who creates rebel against his socio-political and economic scenario”.²⁷ By the same token, Waliullah deserves to be called Mujadid of the eighteenth century.

23 Maulana Abul Aala Maududi, *Tajdeed-o-Ahyae Deen*, (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1967) pp.56-57.

24 Fateh Muhammad Malik, *Ta'assubat*, (Islamabad: Idara Adbyat Pakistan, 1981).

25 Maryam Jamila, *Islam in Theory and Practice*, (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1963), p.292.

26 Interview with Yousaf Islam, *The Asia Weekly* (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1973).

27 Dr. Hameedullah, *Khutbat-e-Bahawalpur*, (Lahore: Idara Muaraf e Islami, 1974) p.71.