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# Shah Waliullah Dehlavi: The Great Pioneer of Islamic Revival in the Indian Sub-Continent

Sk. Ishtiaque Ahmed\*

Shah Waliullah Muhaddith (1703-1762), popularly known as Shah Waliullah Dehlavi, is the most prominent Muslim intellectual and Islamic reformer the India sub-continent produced in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He made an immense contribution to the re-integration of the structure of Islam. He was born in the town of Phulat in Muzaffar-nagar in 1703 and before he died in 1762 he had witnessed the collapse and degradation of the Mughal Empire, the greatest Muslim centre in Asia. He was a leading *Hanafi* jurist, a brilliant and distinguished Islamic scholar in the sub-continent. He worked for the revival of intellectual learning and Muslim rule in South Asia, hoping to restore the former power and influence of the *ulama* in society during a period of waning Muslim power following the death of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. Shah Waliullah urged Mughal rulers to undertake a true *jihad* against the Marathas and *Jats*, the enemies of Islam.

## Family Attribution

His genealogy can be traced back to the second Caliph of Islam, Hazrat Umar Farooq (RA) on the paternal side and to Hazrath Musa Kazin (RAH) on the maternal side. His grandfather, Sheikh Wajihuddin, was an important officer in the army of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, who supported Prince Aurangzeb in the war of succession. The forefathers of Shah Waliullah, the Shaikh Shamsuddin Mufti, came to the subcontinent and settled in Rothak near Delhi during the initial period of Islamic rule. Although the distinguishing feature of this family was their command of the Islamic religious sciences, one of his family members, Shaikh Mehmood, adopted the profession of a soldier, after which tales of remarkable bravery remained long associated with this family.

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His father, Shah Abdur Raheem, was a leading *Hanafi* jurist and a distinguished Islamic scholar in Delhi. An expert in theology, he was a student of Allama Meer Zahid Haravi and assisted in the compilation of the *Fatwa-i-Alamgiri*, the voluminous code of Islamic law. His father refused an invitation to visit the Emperor and his court and devoted all his energies to the work of organization and teaching at the 'Madrasa Rahimia', a theological college he had established and which later played an important part in the religious emancipation of the Muslims in the Indian sub-continent, becoming the breeding ground of religious reformers and *Mujahids* like Shah Waliullah, Shah Abdul Azeez, Syed Ahmad Bareli, Maulvi Abdul Haiy and Shah Ismail Shaheed. Commenting upon the teachings of Shah Abdur Rahim and his brother, the Islamic scholar Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi observed that:

"The essence of the teaching of the two brothers was the attempt to discover a path which could be traversed in common by Muslim philosophers (the Sufis and the Mutakallim) together with the Muslim Jurists (Faqih)".

### **Education and Religious Training**

Shah Waliullah was introduced to Islamic education at the age of five and completed the recitation of the Qur'an by the age of seven. By the end of his seventh year, he started taking introductory lessons in Persian and Arabic and completed them in one year. After that he concentrated on grammar and syntax, and by the age of ten he was reading the most acclaimed book of grammar, interpretation by Ja'mi. He completed the study of philosophy and theology by the age of 15 and started teaching as well. He acquired a knowledge of logic, fiqh, hadith, and especially tibb (medicine) and algebra, mathematics, and oratory from his father.

During the course of his education, he studied many books under his father and was introduced by his father to the tradition of *bayath* (sacred vows) and by the age of 17 was permitted by his father to provide spiritual guidance and reform to his fellow Muslims. At the age of 23, Shah Waliullah decided to proceed to Makkah for the Hajj. After performing the Hajj he went to Madinah Al Munawwara, the holy city of the Prophet. There, he attended the lectures on *Sahih Al Bukhari* given by Sheikh Abu Tahir Muhammad Bin Ibraheem Kurdi Madani. The Sheikh directed him in the study of the six Sahihs (Bukhari, Muslim, Tirmidhi, Abu Dawg given by Sheikh Tajuddin Hanafi Qalaei Makki for a few days and learned the six Sahihs from him. He was granted permission to teach all the books of *hadith* by Sheikh Tajuddin.

After a 14 months stay in Arabia, two hajj pilgrimages and a study of the

books of *hadith* from the scholars of the holy cities, Shah Waliullah finally returned to Delhi on July 9, 1732 after about six month journey. On reaching home, he resumed teaching and writing until his death three decades later.

### **The Times of Shah Waliullah**

After his return from *Makkah* he worked indefatigably on the organization and emancipation of the Muslim community in the sub-continent and started work in real earnest. This was an uphill task in a period when Muslim India was passing through the most critical phase of its history and its entire social, political, economic and spiritual fabric was in tatters. Shah Waliullah lived during times that can best be described as disastrous for India. The descendants of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb had turned to extravagance. The kingdom was reeling under severe spells of drought, poverty, hunger and hopelessness as well as blatant indifference and cruelty at the hands of their rulers. The character of the people had fallen to the lowest levels of civilized behavior and from a religious point of view the condition of Muslims was unspeakable. Another great Islamic scholar Sulaiman Nadvi has described the condition of the country in the following words:

“Governance in the Mughal Empire was purely nominal. Muslims were engulfed in wrongful and unnecessary traditions. Fraudsters and scoundrels had taken over the graves of the pious and made themselves their custodians; the seminaries devoted themselves to disputations on topics of philosophy and wisdom; religious edicts were being literally interpreted by jurists. Leave alone the common people; even scholars were ignorant of the meanings and teachings of the Quran, hadith and theology.”

His activities were not confined to the spiritual and intellectual spheres only. He lived in troubled times and witnessed during his lifetime about a dozen rulers occupying the Delhi throne. Endowed with a keen political insight, he wrote with deep anguish to leading political dignitaries like Ahmad Shah Abdali, Nizam ul Mulk and Najibuddaula to stop the rot which had invaded the political life of Muslim India. It was on account of his call that Ahmad Shah Abdali appeared on the field of Panipat in 1761 and put an end to the Maratha dream of dominating the subcontinent.

### **Service to Religion**

After returning from the holy cities of *Makkah* and *Madinah*, the miserable condition of Indian Muslims inspired him to improve their character, raise their self-confidence, inculcate a feeling of selflessness

and love for their comrades. He overhauled the existing educational system, purged the faith of unlawful invented traditions (*bidaat*), as well as unnecessary and unwanted suspicions regarding Islam and its holy books. He presented what he considered pure and pristine Islam to the people, constituted the revival of Islam in the Indian subcontinent (present-day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), which had been clouded with mystic philosophy, and the attempt to restore it to its pristine glory. He was a humble devotee to his cause, who resisted all temptations of personal glory.

He despised the divisions and deviations within Islam and its practice in the Indian subcontinent and hoped to 'purify' the religion and unify all Indian Muslims under the banner of the 'truth' (*Haqq*). He is also thought to have anticipated many "progressive" social, economic and political ideas of the modern era such as social reform, equal rights, labour protection, clothing, housing, etc.

One of his main desires was to revive Islamic learning and did so by emphasizing studies in the *Madrasah* (Islamic schools), especially his own, the *Madrasah-i Rahimiyya* in Delhi. Waliullah advocated the strenuous study of the Islamic "sciences of revelation", which comprised studies of the *Hadith* (the oral tradition of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) and the *Qur'an* (the Islamic Holy Scripture). Shah Waliullah attempted to simplify the texts in order to spread their message to Muslims of every educated class. In addition, Waliullah was a powerful advocate of the establishment of Urdu as a mainstream literary and liturgical language, citing it as the linguistic link between all Indian Muslims. Shah Waliullah's approach to learning and his Muslim revivalist agenda inspired the Deobandi movement by people who claimed scholastic heritage and lineage back to Shah Waliullah. His most valuable service to the cause of Islamic learning was his codification of the vast store of Islamic teachings under separate headings. Both in thought and preaching his works undoubtedly occupy an outstanding place.

### **Socio-Religious Philosophy & Reforms**

As a reformer and as a disseminator of socialist theories he may be considered as the forerunner of Karl Marx. Shah Waliullah introduced several reforms in the religious and economic spheres, He was the first to translate the Holy Quran into a popular language, a practice later followed by others. His own son, Shah Abdul Aziz, translated the Holy Book into Urdu, the language of the Muslim masses in India. There had been a conflict between orthodox Islam as revived under Mujaddid-Alif-Sani and championed by Aurangzeb

and heterodoxy introduced by Akbar and championed by Dara Shikoh. The reign of the orthodox ruler Aurangzeb had created an aversion to Sufism and had led to the advent of extreme Puritanism. Shah Waliullah struck a mean between the two extremes and retained the virtues of both.

He was born in an atmosphere deeply imbued with the spirit of Sufism. His father was a well-known Sufi. At an early age he came under the influence of Ibn Taymiyya, a great religious reformer. During his stay in Hejaz, he came into contact with scholars who were influenced by Wahabism. This put a check on his blind following of Sufism but unlike Wahabis, he did not totally discard Sufism. He was aware of the services rendered by Sufis in popularizing Islam in the subcontinent and the spiritual self developed by the truly Islamic form of Sufism. But he was highly critical of the decadent and traditional form of Sufism which borders on asceticism and is, therefore, averse to true Islam. In his *Wasiyatnama* (will) he observes: "And the next advice (*wasiyat*) is that one should not entrust one's affairs to and become a disciple of the Saints of this period who are given to a number of irregularities". He urged the reform and discipline of Sufism and not its rejection. He wrote several pamphlets on this subject, in which he analyzed the evils and virtues of Sufism. By giving an Islamic interpretation to the Sufi doctrines, Shah Waliullah removed the dislike which the Ulama had felt for Sufism and the Sufis". Shah Waliullah had, therefore, not only bridged the gulf between the Sufis and the Ulama but also reduced the differences prevalent among different sects of Sufis. His principles on the subject were put into practice in the great Theological College of Deoband, which had among its patrons such well-known Sufis as Maulana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi and Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi.

Shah Waliullah undertook the mission of reforming the social and political order of his day. Being a realist, he diagnosed the ills which had entered into the body politic of Muslim society and suggested remedies. He criticized the un-Islamic customs which had crept into Muslim society due to its contact with Hinduism. He was particularly opposed to excessive extravagance in marriages, festivals and other ceremonies. He advocated the re-marriage of widows. He carefully analyzed the factors responsible for the economic degeneration of Muslim society during his time and proposed radical changes in the economy of Muslim society. He advocated wider distribution of wealth on socialistic lines and in this way became the forerunner of Karl Marx. In an illuminating chapter of *Hujjat-Ullah-al-Baligah*, he outlined the evils of capitalism which brought about the fall of the Roman and Sassanid Empires. He is highly critical of the economic exploitation of the poor, which, in the past, had brought about many revolutions and is the root cause of all troubles and unrest in the world.

He even criticized the Mughal rulers and nobility for their indolence and luxury. Addressing the voracious nobility of his time he observes: “Oh Amir! Do you not fear God? (How is it that) you have so completely thrown yourself into the pursuit of momentary pleasures and have neglected those people who have been committed to your care! The result is that the strong are devouring the weak. All your mental faculties are directed towards providing yourself with sumptuous food and soft-skinned women for enjoyment and pleasure. You do not turn your attention to anything except fine clothes and magnificent palaces”.

Shah Waliullah was of the opinion that intellectual revolution should precede political change. He did not contemplate a political or social change through bloody revolution. He wanted to bring revolutionary change in society through peaceful means. In his well-known book, *Izalat-al-Khafa*, (Persian) he discusses the ideology of the political revolution which he envisaged.

No scholar of Mediaeval India understood the various aspects of civics as well as Shah Waliullah. He considered “Self consciousness” as a prerequisite of “political consciousness”. He dealt in detail with the factors which contribute towards the growth of civil consciousness in his immortal work *Hujjat-Ullah-al-Baligah*. Shah Waliullah was, perhaps, the only Muslim scholar of Mediaeval India who realized the importance of economics in a social and political set-up. He advocated the maintenance of economic equilibrium in the society and strongly criticized the accumulation of wealth which leads to all sorts of evils in the world. He visualized a social order based on economic equality, fraternity and brotherhood which were the principles governing Islamic socialistic practices during the time of the pious Caliphs. His seminary, Madrasah-i Rahimiya, became the Centre of Islamic renaissance in the subcontinent, where scholars flocked from the four corners of the country and, after being trained, became the torch bearers of the freedom movement in the subcontinent. The “Madrasa” in fact, became the nucleus of the revolutionary movement for the reconstruction of religious thought in Islam. It produced many zealous workers who carried on their preacher’s work with missionary zeal. Among these were Maulana Muhammad Ashiq of Phulat, Maulana Noorullah of Budhana, Maulana Amin Kashmiri, Shah Abu Saeed of Rai Bareli and his own son, Shah Abdul Aziz, who was initiated into the religious and political philosophy of his father.

### **Religious Personality & Prestige**

Shah Waliullah was also a key protagonist in initiating the spiritual revival of Muslims through *Tasavvuf* and *Sufism* (Islamic spirituality). He spread

the message of Islamic spiritualism to the Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi masses, emphasizing *Da'wah* and *Tableeg* (Islamic propagation) to his students and supporting the well-established tradition of the *Sufis* in South Asia, while at the same time condemning external influences and innovations (*bid'ā*) in Sufi practices, advocating the idea of a pure Islam devoid of such influences on the basis that Muslims should assert an independent identity free from the influence of Hindu polytheists. In this respect, as well as others, Shah Waliullah was a follower of the Islamic tradition of Imam al-Ghazali.

It is interesting to note that Shah Waliullah is very highly respected and revered by all Muslims in South Asia and beyond, including the *Barelvi*, *Deobandi* and *Ahl-e-Hadith* groups and movements of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh who include both Sufis and Salafis. The powerful Deoband movements as well as the Ahl-e-Hadith both claim to espouse the Islamic ideology and doctrine of Shah Waliullah and the Barelvi movement follows his spiritual tradition. This was the unique quality of Shah Waliullah as an Islamic scholar and religious revivalist.

### **Dedicated Writer and Researcher**

Shah Waliullah was also a prolific writer. It is in the realm of Islamic learning that he made a lasting contribution and within a period of 30 years wrote 51 books of outstanding merit, 28 in Arabic and 23 in Persian. Some of these are still unsurpassed in the whole domain of Islamic literature. More than fifty books and monographs are testimony to his fame as a prominent Islamic scholar. Shah Waliullah analyzed both victory and defeat under the guidance of the Holy Quran.

### **Literary works**

The biographers of Shah Waliullah place the number of his published literary works at above fifty. Shah Waliullah was a prolific writer who wrote extensively on several Islamic topics. The famous among them are:

1. *Fath ur Rahmaan Fee Tarjumatul Qura'an*, an exegesis of the Holy Qur'an in Persian.
2. *Al Fauzul Kabeer Fee Usool at Tafseer*, a booklet in Persian that follows his Persian translation of the Holy Qur'an. It contains the nucleus of the holy Qur'an, the rules for interpretation, and interpretations of the holy Qur'an by other famous scholars.

3. *Hujjat Ullah al Baligha*, is the most renowned book by Shah Waliullah, the title of which is taken from the holy Qur'an (Surah Al Anaam: 149). It is a two volume Arabic manuscript and is a commentary upon the jurisprudence from the hadith and the requirements of the shari'ah. It is taught in many seminaries. The Urdu commentary, the Rahmatullahil Waasiya by Hazrath Mufti Saeed Ahmad Palanpuri, was published by Maktaba Hijaz.

### Other works

*Arbain* (Arabic)- A collection of 40 ahadith which are brief yet of inclusive character.

*Al-Irshad ila-Muhimmat-i-Ilm-al-Isnad* (Arabic) - is about the scholars of Hejaz who taught Shah Waliullah.

*Izalat al-Khafa 'an Khilafat al-Khulfa* (Persian)

*Al-Fauzul Kabir Fi Usoolu-Tafseer* (Arabics)

*Atayyab al-naghm fi Madh-I-Saiyid al- Arab wal-Ajam* (Arabic)- A collection of odes eulogizing Muhammad which speak of the Shah's poetic talent and love towards Muhammad.

*Altaf al-Quds* (Persian) - Deals with esoteric principles of mysticism.

*Al-Imdad-o-fi Ma'athir al-Ajdad* (Persian) - A brochure giving Shah Waliullah's genealogical table and containing brief notices about some of his ancestors.

*Al-Intibah-o-fi Salasil-il-Aulia Allah* (Persian) - Gives the history of and brief introduction to various mystic orders.

*Insan al-ain fi Mashikh al-Haeamyn* (Persian)

*Al insaf-o-fi Bayan-I-Asbab al-Ikhtalaf* (Arabic)

*Anfas aal Arifin* (Persian)

*Al-Budur al-Bazigha* (Arabic) - This work on theology employs philosophical terminology in discussing human nature and social behavior.

*Bawariq al-Wilayah* (Persian) - This tract forms part of the *Anfas al-Arifin* in which the Shah describes the life and spiritual attainments of his father, Shah Abdur Rahim.

*Tawil al-ahadith* (Arabic) - It recounts the stories of the various prophets mentioned in the Quran in order to draw lessons and rules for the Shariah from the Quranic account.

*Tuhfatul Muwahhidin* - A Persian tract explaining the creed of tauhid.

*Tarajim-o-Abwab al-Bukhari* (Arabic) - Expounds the principles which would

be found helpful in understanding certain difficult portions of the Bukhari.

*At-Tafhimat al-Ilahiyah* (Arabic and Persian)- A mystical work, partly in Arabic and partly in Persian, describing the mystical experiences of the Shah.

*Al-Juz al-Latif fi- Tarjumata al-Abd al- Dhayif* (Persian)

*Hujjat Allah al-Baligha* (Arabic)- The magnum opus of the is discussed in the seventh section of this work.

*Husn al- Aqidah* (Arabic)- The fundamental creed of Islam as accepted by the Ahli-I-Sunnat sect, has been expounded in this work in the light of the Qur`an and the Hadith.

*Al-Khair al-Kathir* (Arabic)- This work on philosophy of religion elucidates the concept of m`arifat and the wisdom of Divine Names, revelation etc

*Ad-durrus Thamain fi-Mubashshiratil Nabi al-Amin* (Arabic) - A collection of the glad tidings the Shah and his ancestors received from Muhammad.

*Diwan-o-Ashar* (Arabic) - A collection of the Arabic verses of the Shah.

*Risalah* - was written in reply to certain mystical issues raised by Shaikh `Abdullah bin Abdul Baqi.

*Risalah Danishmandi* (Persian) - A valuable tract containing detailed directions in regard to the pedagogical methodology.

*Zahrawayn* - A commentary on the Surat-ul-Baqarah and Imran.

*Surur al- Mahzun* (Persia)- A concise Persian rendering of the Kitab Nur al-Uyun il-Amin al-Mamun, a well-known biography of Muhammad.

*Sharh-o-Tarajim-I-Abwab-I-Sahih al-Bukhari* (Arabic) - A commentary on certain chapters of the Sahih of Bukhari.

*Shifa al-Qulub* (Persian) -A mystical tract.

*Shawariq al-Marifat* (Persian)- A biography of the Shah's uncle, Shaikh Abdul Raza.

*Al-Atiyatus Samadiyah Fi Anfas Al-Muhammadiyah* (Persian) - This small brochure contains a biographical sketch of the Shah's maternal grandfather Shaikh Muhammad Phulti.

*Iqd Al-Jid Fi-Aakham Al-Ijtihad Wat-Tajdid* (Arabic)

*Fath-ur-Rahman* (Persian) - A translation of the Quran.

*Fath-al-Kabir* (Arabic) - A glossary of abstruse words in the Quran.

*Fath al-Wadud-li-Marifata-al-Junud* (Arabic) - A commentary on ethics and mysticism.

*Al fadhl Al-Mubin Fi Al-Musalsal Min Hadithin Nabi Al-Amin* (Arabic) - On the Hadith.

### Classification of Shah Waliullah Works

His works may be classified into six categories. The first consists of studies on the Holy Qur'an. It includes his translation of the Holy Book into Persian, the literary language of the subcontinent at that time. According to him, the object of studying the Holy Book is "to reform human nature and correct erroneous beliefs and harmful actions".

The second category deals with the Hadith (the words and traditions of the Prophet) in which he left several works, including Arabic and Persian commentaries on the Muwatta, the well-known collection of the Traditions of the Holy Prophet compiled by Imam Malik. He attached great importance to this collection of Traditions by Imam Malik, even greater than those of Imam Bukhari and Imam Muslim. He is an outstanding Muhaddith (traditionalist) and links to all the modern scholars of Hadis in the subcontinent may be traced to him. Foremost among these modern Traditionalists were his son and successor Shah Abdul Aziz and Syed Murtaza Bilgrami. Shah Waliullah wrote a number of books and pamphlets dealing with the Hadith.

The third category deals with 'Fiqh' or Islamic jurisprudence, which includes *Insaf-fi-bayan-i-Sahab-al-Ikhtilaf* which is brief but a very interesting and informative history of Islamic jurisprudence in the last five centuries. The fourth category deals with his works based on mysticism. The fifth category pertains to his works on Muslim philosophy and *Ilm-al-Kalam*. He also wrote a pamphlet on the principles of 'Ijtihad' (independent interpretation) and taqlid (conformity). In his principles of 'Ijtihad' he discusses whether it is obligatory for a Muslim to adhere to one of the four recognized schools of Islamic jurisprudence or whether he can exercise his own judgment. In the opinion of Shah Waliullah, a layman should rigidly follow his own Imam but a person well versed in Islamic law can exercise his own judgment, which should be in conformity with the practice of the Holy Prophet. But the most outstanding of all his works is *Hujjat-Ullh-al-Baligha* which deals with aspects of Islam common to all Muslim countries. In its introduction he observes: "Some people think that there is no benefit involved in the injunctions of Islamic law and that in actions and rewards as prescribed by ALLAH there is no beneficial purpose. They think that the commandments of Islamic law are similar to a master ordering his servant to lift a stone or touch a tree in order to test his obedience and that in this there is no purpose except to impose a test so that if the servant obeys, he is rewarded, and if he disobeys, he is punished. This view is completely incorrect. The Traditions of the Holy Prophet and the consensus of opinion of those ages, contradict this view".

The sixth category deals with his works on the Shia–Sunni problem which had become somewhat acute in those days. His writings on this subject have done a great deal in simplifying this problem. His theories pertaining to economics and socialism are of revolutionary nature and he may be considered as the precursor of Karl Marx. Writing about his works in the History of the Freedom Movement, Sheikh Muhammad Ikram states: “Shah Waliullah wrote learned works and initiated powerful and beneficial movements, but perhaps no less important are the invisible qualities of approach and outlook he bequeathed to Muslim religious thought in the Indo–Pakistan subcontinent. His work is characterized by knowledge, insight, moderation and tolerance, but the quality on which he laid the greatest emphasis, in theory and in practice, was *Adl* or *Adalat* (justice, fairness, and balance). His works and views bear ample testimony as to how he observed this principle in practice and how he lost few opportunities of emphasizing in theory its role in maintaining the social fabric”.

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