

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Shah Waliullah of Delhi

Contributed by Prof. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, PhD

A great civilization must have the resilience to renew itself from within. It is what distinguishes a civilization from a mere dynasty. Islamic civilization has demonstrated time and again its innate capacity for renewal after every disaster. The death of Prophet Mohammed was the first great trial of the Islamic community. That challenge was successfully met, although the price for that success was the civil wars (656-670) that hardened Shi'a-Sunni differences. The second major challenge was that of ideas from Greece and India. The Islamic world internalized these ideas, developed them, and after a period of tumult brought on by Mu'tazilite ideas (8th and 9th centuries) remolded them within its own ethos. The result was the emergence of Asharite doctrines and a more spiritual Islam, embodied in *tasawwuf* that dominated Islamic thinking for a thousand years. The challenge of Greek and Indian ideas ended with the eloquent defense of Al Ghazzali (1111). The third test came with the Mongol devastation of the 13th century (1219-1301). Islam overcame that challenge through its inner resilience embodied in *tasawwuf*. The conquerors were themselves converted and became the standard bearers of Islamic faith. The fourth challenge came from Europe (1600-1900). It was a total challenge embracing political, economic, cultural and ideational spheres. As western civilization became global (1945 onwards), that challenge also became global, and its reach included not just the Islamic civilization but also other non-European civilizations of China, India, Japan and Africa. It continues to this day, although its thrust has shifted from religion to economics.

Reform, as a collective effort to return to the purity of faith, is a recurrent theme in Islamic history. Since the decisive moment when the Prophet passed away, Muslims have struggled to shape their destiny in the mold of the *Sunnah* (example) of the Prophet. This perpetual struggle has produced some of the most influential personages in the history of the Muslim peoples.

After the Battle of Plassey (1757), the tide of global affairs had turned decidedly in favor of Europe. Although it would take more than a hundred years to supplant and colonize much of Asia and Africa, the relative weakness of the Muslim world was obvious to perceptive minds. Some scholars felt that this weakness was the result of deviation from the path of the Prophet. First there was Shah Waliullah of Delhi (d. 1763) who followed in the long lineage of scholars in the subcontinent and had a decisive impact on the political military events in South Asia. Then came Shaykh Abdul Wahhab of Najd (circa 1760). His reformist thrust was terse, shorn of the embellishments that had accrued to religion in the Ottoman Empire. The third influential personage was Shaykh Uthman Dan Fuduye of Nigeria. Shaykh Dan Fuduye belonged to the Qadariya movement and his approach, in contrast to that of Shaykh Abdul Wahhab, was decidedly Sufic and activist.

Although they lived in the second half of the 18th century, these three reformers faced different challenges. Shah Waliullah lived at a time when rampant corruption had destroyed the Moghul Empire. He attempted to restore the glory of Muslim civilization in India. Shaykh Abdul Wahhab desired to bring back the simplicity of religion that existed in early Islam. Both Shah Waliullah and Shaykh Abdul Wahhab were dealing with local situations wherein Islamic civilization was past its zenith, and decay had set in. In contrast Shehu Uthman Dan Fuduye faced a society wherein Islam was spreading among the masses and the purity of faith was compromised by the retention of old animist practices of the people. The first two, Shah Waliullah and Shaykh Wahhab, waged a rear-guard action to arrest the decline of old societies. The last one, Shehu Uthman was in the forefront of a revolution to create a new one.

Among the thinkers who have influenced the course of Islamic history in the India-Pakistan subcontinent, the names of Shaykh Ahmed Sirhindi, Shah Waliullah of Delhi, and Muhammed Iqbal of Lahore stand out. History is propelled by ideas. These three were the giants who provided the ideas for men of action like the Moghul Emperor Aurangzeb, Shaykh Syed Ahmed Shahid of Punjab, and Muhammed Ali Jinnah, the architect of Pakistan. The triumphs and tribulations, the achievements and failures, the hopes and disappointments, the joy and the sorrow, of the great Islamic community in the subcontinent, which today stands at well over 400 million, can be traced back to the work of these stalwarts. Shaykh Ahmed Sirhindi was the intellectual force behind the triumph of the orthodox wing of Indian Islam under Aurangzeb over the Sufic Islam championed by Dara Shikoh. In choosing orthodoxy over the reforms instituted by Emperor Akbar (d. 1604), Muslims in the subcontinent selected an historical course, which would make accommodation with the largely non-Muslim Indian milieu more difficult. The political initiatives of Shah Waliullah resulted in the third Battle of Panipat (1761). It contained Maratha influence to areas east of Lahore, created a political vacuum in central Punjab, and contributed to Sikh ascendancy under Ranjit Singh. Lastly, the concept of Pakistan was first proposed by Muhammed Iqbal (1931). It was later adopted by the All India Muslim League (1940) and carried to fruition by Muhammed Ali Jinnah.

Born into a family of scholars in 1703, four years before the death of Emperor Aurangzeb, Shah Waliullah received his early education from his father. At the age of sixteen, he became an instructor in the *madrasah* run by his family. In 1731, at the age of twenty-eight, he embarked on the Hajj, and stayed in Arabia for more than a year to learn from well-known scholars in Mecca and Madina. Returning to Delhi in 1732, he delegated the teaching tasks to his assistants, and concentrated instead on social reform and religious reconstruction.

Rare among Islamic scholars, Shah Waliullah combined in himself a mastery of *kalam* and *tasawwuf*, the two streams of thought that have been the primary modulators of Islamic history over the last thousand years. In his encyclopedic knowledge and the breadth of his vision he was without peers. Aware that sectarian differences in Fiqh and madhab were tearing the community apart, he attempted a synthesis of Hanafi and Shafi'i schools of jurisprudence based on the central themes of *adl* (justice) and *ihsan* (good deeds towards fellow humans). In this respect alone, he stands tall among a handful of great scholars who mastered different schools of Fiqh and sought to synthesize them. It was Shah Waliullah's successors who laid the foundation of the Fiqh that is practiced in India and Pakistan today. The Shah was aware that independent thought was muzzled among learned men, that the spirit of *ijtihad* was asleep, and Muslims had long accepted *taqlid* (to follow, to emulate, to copy) as the governing principle of religious life. In his incisive analysis of Islamic history, he traced the origin and development of *taqlid*. He held that *ijtihad* was essential if Muslims were to confront the acute problems of the age. (*ijtihad* is a rigorous and independent application of the Shariah by a competent scholar who analyzes and offers solutions to the paramount issues of the age). With this conviction, he set out to transform the entire

spectrum of Muslim life, including its religious, social, political, and military aspects. His major works include *Mussafa*, *Izalah*, *Hujjah*, *Buddor e Bazigah*, *Tafheemat e Ilahiyah*, *Musawwa* and *Musaffa*. In his writings, he attacked theological rigidity along sectarian lines, excessive argumentation and disagreements among scholars, social diseases such as drinking, prostitution and gambling, corrupt social customs such as lavish marriages, extravagant banquets and prevention of widow marriages, excessive attachment to esoteric doctrines and shifting the focus of worship from God to grave worship, corruption of the ruling circles including excessive taxation, armed oppression of peasants, drinking and debauchery. To combat the rampant corruption prevalent in the land, Shah Waliullah presented a vision of Islam as a complete way of life based on the Qur'anic injunction to enjoin what is good, forbid what is evil, and believing in God. He sought to infuse in the society rectitude based on the example of the Prophet and the early Companions. It is for the breadth of his scholarly reach, his incisive analysis of the evils of the age, and his attempts at a reconstruction of Islamic life in the subcontinent, that the Shah earned the title of Mujaddid.

Shah Waliullah was the first in the subcontinent to translate the *Qur'an* into the Persian language that was widely spoken among the learned circles in India at that time. It was his initiative, and his example, that later inspired translations of the Qur'an into Urdu and other Indian languages. His sons were the first to translate the Qur'an into Urdu. He trained a large number of scholars and teachers whose influence in northern India and Pakistan was felt throughout the 19th century. His son Shah Abdul Aziz was a principal figure in the religious life of Delhi in the waning years of the Moghul Empire. His grandson Shah Ismail Shahid fought for a just political order in the Punjab. His followers Sayyid Ahmed and Shah Ismail founded an Islamic movement in northwest India in the first half of the 19th century. In modern times, his influence inspired the voluminous works of Maulana Maudoodi of India and Pakistan, and the Jamaat e Islami movement.

It was in the political military sphere that Shah Waliullah's presence was immediately felt. Comparing kingship to pre-Islamic governments, the Shah called for the re-establishment of the Caliphate after the example of *Khulfa e Rashidoon*. He was a prime mover in the political military events of the age.

The India of Shah Waliullah was in an advanced stage of social and political disintegration. There was chaos in the court of Delhi. After Nadir Shah ransacked Delhi (1739) and withdrew, the Moghul Emperor Mohammed Shah tried to hold the empire together. Muhammed Shah died in 1748, and his son Ahmed Shah (1748-1754) became the Emperor. Ahmed Shah appointed Safdar Jung as his grand vizier, but Safdar was more interested in settling scores with his personal enemies than in the administration of the state. The Emperor then favored Ghaziuddin, a grandson of Nizam ul Mulk, the *Subedar* of Deccan. Safdar Jung rebelled. Ghaziuddin forged an alliance with the Marathas in Poona, and marched north to Delhi with a contingent of 20,000 Maratha cavalry. Safdar Jung was defeated, but now real power in Delhi had passed on to the Marathas. When Ahmed Shah died in 1754, Alamgir II ascended the throne. He was a mere puppet in the hands of the Marathas who continued their relentless advance in the Punjab. With central Punjab under their control, the Marathas became the dominant power in the subcontinent, except for the territories controlled by the British and the armed state of Mysore under Hyder Ali and his son Tippu. Ghaziuddin himself killed Alamgir II in 1759, and the disintegration of the Empire accelerated.

It is against this background of chaos that one has to look at the life and work of Shah Waliullah of Delhi. In 1758, the Maratha armies occupied Lahore and evicted Timur, son of Ahmed Shah Abdali of Kabul. The Punjab is where the vast Islamic world meets up with the subcontinental Hindu culture. At this juncture, Shah Waliullah of Delhi wrote to Ahmed Shah Abdali, inviting him to enter Punjab and stop the Marathas. Three years later, in 1761, Ahmed Shah crossed the Indus and took Lahore. A large

Maratha army advanced from Delhi and met him on the plains of Panipat. The decisive battle, commonly known as the Third Battle of Panipat, was fought on June 14, 1761. In the desperate clash of arms, over 150,000 Indian soldiers perished, and the Afghans were victorious.

This event has elicited controversy among Indian historians as to the “foreign” orientation of Shah Waliullah. The controversy has been accentuated by the current India-Pakistan dialectic. Those who support the Pakistani position praise the Shah for stopping the Marathas east of Lahore. In India, on the other hand, the Shah is taken to task for inviting a “foreign invader” to Indian soil. Some have gone so far as to portray the Third Battle of Panipat as a Hindu-Muslim clash. None of these positions is supported by historical facts. First, in the context of the times, Lahore and Kabul were not “foreign territories”. They were part of Moghul territories that had been taken by Nadir Shah as late as 1738. The factions headed by the Afghans, Pathans, Moghuls, Rajputs and Marathas were all “internal” to Hindustan. Secondly, it is incorrect to portray the Maratha armies as “Hindu”. Of the five Maratha army corps that fought at Panipat, one was led by a Muslim general who spearheaded the very first charge, and was a casualty of the war. Thousands of Muslims fought on the Indian side believing that the Marathas were safe-keepers of the Moghul throne. It would be more correct to portray the Maratha armies as “Indian”. Conversely, Ahmed Shah Abdali was interested primarily in taking revenge for the eviction of his son from Lahore, and not in the affairs of Hindustan. This is confirmed by the fact that he retired to Kabul after the Battle of Panipat and did not advance towards Delhi. Given the contest for Lahore, a test of arms between the Afghans and the Marathas was inevitable, and would have taken place with or without the correspondence of Shah Waliullah. Maratha influence in the Delhi-Agra areas did not decrease as a result of the Afghan invasion. In 1785, the Moghul Emperor Shah Alam invited Sindhia of Gwalior to become the divan and reorganize the empire. Maratha power in the Delhi-Agra area decreased and disappeared not because of the Third Battle of Panipat, but because the Marathas were defeated by the Rajputs in 1787. Lastly, in historical hindsight, the Maratha-Afghan contest comes across only as a footnote to the broad and sustained advance of the British upon the subcontinent, which was taking place about the same time.

Shah Waliullah passed away in 1763, leaving behind a scholarly legacy that has seldom been surpassed. If there is any critique of his work, it has to be that he overlooked the British challenge to Islamic civilization. Even as the Shah was involved in the internal disputes between the Afghans and the Marathas, the shadow of European domination was extending inland from the Indian Ocean. The Battle of Plassey (1757) gave the East India Company control of all the territories from Allahabad to Calcutta. Shah Waliullah must have been aware of the oppressive policies of the Company, and of the economic collapse of Bengal and Bihar under British jurisdiction. Yet, one does not find awareness in his writings about the rising challenge of the West to a static and disintegrating India. Indeed, the great Islamic reformers of the 18th century had their vision directed inward, and were focused more on internal reform than external threat. The task of placing Islam in the context of a world-domineering Western civilization was left to scholars of a later age. Shah Waliullah offered no fresh guidance as to how to live with people of other faiths except to reiterate the practices of an earlier age based on a compartmentalized division between “*Dar ul Islam*” and “*Dar ul Harab*”.

Comments are closed.

[Blog at WordPress.com.](http://Blog.atWordPress.com)