

# HOW SUCCESSFUL WERE THE RELIGIOUS THINKERS IN SPREADING ISLAM IN THE SUBCONTINENT DURING THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES?

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- *Haji Shariatullah and the Faraizi Movement.*

## Key Questions addressed in this chapter

- How important were the religious reforms of Shah Waliullah?
- What influence did Syed Ahmad Barelvi exert in the revival of Islam?
- How influential was Haji Shariatullah and the Faraizi Movement?

## The Work of Shah Waliullah (1703 - 1762)

### Early Biographical Details

Vocabulary

**piety**  
strength of religious belief

Shah Waliullah was born on 21 February 1703, during the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb Alamgir. His real name was Qutub-ud-Din, but he later became known as Shah Waliullah because of his piety. His father was Shah Abdul Rahim, who founded the Madrassa Rahimiya in Delhi. When his father died in 1718, Shah Waliullah began teaching at the Madrassa.

In 1724, Shah Waliullah went to Arabia to perform Haj and to further his studies. He studied under the famous scholar Sheikh Abu Tahir bin Ibrahim, before returning to Delhi in 1732.

### Beliefs

- During his time in Arabia, Shah Waliullah thought deeply about the problems faced by Muslims in the Mughal Empire. The Empire was in decline and Muslims were disunited and vulnerable to attacks on their religion. Shah Waliullah realised that reform could not come from the weak leadership in Delhi and that it had to come from within the Muslim community itself.
- He believed that many of the problems of the Muslims resulted from their incomplete knowledge of the Quran and about Islam in general – and it was necessary that Quranic teachings become more accessible to the people.
- All political, social and economic behaviour should be based on Islamic principles.
- Shah Waliullah wanted Muslims to concentrate on the fundamental principles of Islam, believing that this would create a more united community.
- It was essential to follow the moral and spiritual principles of Islam in order to create a good society. Un-Islamic principles were not acceptable in any area of society, whether politics, economics or just the day-to-day lives of the individual Muslims.

### AD TO LEARNING

1. What did Shah Waliullah think were the main causes of the problems of the Muslims?
2. What did he believe was essential to create a good society?

## Work

- Shah Waliullah worked hard to ensure that he was a role model for other Muslims. His deep understanding of the Quran, Hadith, Fiqah and Tasawuf made him a highly knowledgeable scholar at an early age.
- Since he believed that an emphasis on Quranic teachings was vital to Muslims, he translated the Quran into Persian. Few Muslims spoke Arabic and so the Quran had not been widely studied previously. Now it could be understood by a larger number of Muslims. The *ulama* criticised Shah Waliullah, but his work proved very popular. Later his two sons, Shah Abdul Qader and Shah Rafi, translated the Quran into Urdu, which meant that many more people could study it.
- In addition to translating the Quran, Shah Waliullah wrote fifty-one books in Persian and Arabic. Amongst the most famous were *Hujjat Allāh al-Baligha* and *Izalat-Akhfa*.
- His writings brought him great fame and prestige and enabled him to have influence in other areas too. For example, in economics he emphasised the need for social justice and for peasants and craftsmen to be truly valued for their contribution to the economy.
- One of Shah Waliullah's most important contributions to the Muslim community was his organisation of opposition to the Marathas, who were threatening to over-run the Mughal Empire from the south. He realised that the Muslims had to unite to deal with this threat, and that of the Sikhs who were attacking in the north. Shah Waliullah wrote to all the Muslim nobles calling on them to join together to save the Mughal Empire. It was partly his influence which helped to persuade Ahmed Shah Abdali of Persia to intervene. He joined forces with local Muslim leaders and defeated the Marathas at the Battle of Panipat in 1761. However, despite encouragement from Shah Waliullah, the Muslim leaders did not unite to take advantage of the defeat of the Marathas.

## TO LEARNING

were the writings of  
Waliullah  
important?

What role did he play in  
defeating the Marathas?

## Importance

Shah Waliullah's contribution towards Islamic revival was extremely important for a number of reasons:

- He was one of the first Muslim thinkers to state that the decline of the Mughal Empire and the vulnerable position of the Muslims were due to a neglect of the principles of Islam. He believed that, if the decline in the position of the Muslims was to be stopped, there had to be spiritual and moral regeneration.
- He showed how this regeneration might take place. The Madrassa Rahimiya continued to play a vital role in teaching Islamic principles and researching Islamic thought.
- His writing in Persian made Islamic teaching available to large numbers of Muslims who had not been able to understand Arabic. He believed that Muslims could only prosper if they followed proper Islamic customs and did not indulge in social evils. Shah Waliullah provided the inspiration for all Muslims to lead a pure life, based on the belief that anti-social attitudes incurred the displeasure of God.
- He also showed that a Muslim revival could only take place if there was an acceptance that sectarian division was to stop. Muslims had to concentrate more on the basic principles of Islam, and not allow the differences between them to lead to conflict. He tried to build bridges between the different Muslim sects and to unite the community. He tried to do this by organising opposition to the Marathas and uniting Muslims by emphasising the importance of Jihad against a common enemy.

- Like all great reformers, Shah Waliullah's influence continued long after his death. Not only did his writings survive and be translated in many languages, but the Madrassa Rahimiya continued to flourish as his sons carried forward his work and teachings. Many future Islamic leaders were inspired by him to fight for the good of the Muslim community.

## Syed Ahmad Barelvi (1786 - 1831)

### Early Biographical Details

Syed Ahmad was born near Lucknow in the small town of Rai Bareli in 1786. His father died whilst he was still young and in 1806, he moved to Delhi and enrolled in the Madrassa Rahimiya.

For two years he studied under the sons of Shah Waliullah learning the Quran and the Hadith.

But Syed Ahmad was more a man of action than a scholar and in 1810 joined the forces of Amir Khan, a Pathan military leader. It was at this time that Syed Ahmad learned how to use European weaponry. He showed himself to be so able that he was given command of a group of soldiers. However, because of his piety he was also made responsible for leading the troops in prayer. In 1817 Syed Ahmad returned to Delhi, where his work became important in trying to restore Islam to its original purity.

### Beliefs

- As a man of action, Syed Ahmad was an ideal person to act as a leader to work against British power in India and to try to ensure that Muslims were ruled by fellow Muslims. He believed that the freedom of Muslims could only come as a result of armed struggle against the foreign and non-Muslim forces which were oppressing them.
- Syed Ahmad wanted to improve the lives of Muslims. Consequently, even when he served as an army officer he surrounded himself with men of great piety who were prepared to reject worldly wealth and work for improving the moral and intellectual lives of Muslims.
- The British had ensured that the Mughal Emperors had little real power and the Sikhs were dominant in the Punjab. Syed Ahmad founded the Jihad Movement, which called for armed struggle to overthrow non-Muslim oppression and restore Muslim power. He believed that once this was done, Islam could be rejuvenated and rescued from beliefs and customs contrary to Islamic beliefs which had crept into every day life.

### Work

- In 1821, Syed Ahmad went for Hajj; before going he travelled across India and held meetings in order to spread his beliefs about *jihad*. When he returned from Arabia in 1823, he was ready to take action.
- At this time the Punjab was under the control of the Sikh regime of Ranjit Singh, who had also extended his authority into the North West Frontier. Syed Ahmad thought that the Punjab was the place to launch his *jihad* against non-Muslim rulers.
- Syed Ahmad toured the Punjab and the North West Frontier to enlist men to fight the Sikhs. He travelled many hundreds of miles to raise a *mujahideen* force. His travels took him through Rajasthan, Sindh, Balochistan and into Afghanistan.

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original form

However, he found that the Afghan troops were suspicious of each other and not always prepared to join him in his *jihad*.

- In 1826, Syed Ahmad established his headquarters near Peshawar. He sent a message to Ranjit Singh telling him that he must allow Muslims freedom of worship or face the *mujahideen*. Ranjit Singh dismissed the ultimatum, so Syed Ahmad was forced to attack first at Akora on 21 December 1826, and then shortly afterwards at Hazrothe; the Sikhs suffered defeat.
- Syed Ahmad's victories established him as a successful military leader and encouraged other tribes to join the *mujahideen*. Soon the army numbered over 80,000 strong. A major problem for Syed Ahmad, however, was that his army consisted of men from many different communities which disagreed over how the campaign was fought. The Sikhs tried to exploit these differences by calling his army un-Islamic. They claimed that by following the teachings of Shah Waliullah, Syed Ahmad's forces were not true Muslims.
- This view was not accepted by the Muslim leaders. In 1827, they agreed unanimously that Syed Ahmad should assume the authority of an *Imam*. His word on religious matters was considered binding and his increased authority helped to unite the various Muslim groups forming the *mujahideen* force.
- Syed Ahmad was preparing to attack the fort of Attock when he encountered an army of 35,000 Sikhs near Akora. What he did not know was that Yar Muhammad Khan, a Pathan chief who had joined his army, had been bribed by the Sikhs. First one of his servants tried to poison Syed Ahmad, then Yar Muhammad Khan deserted the battlefield along with his men thus creating confusion and chaos in the ranks which ultimately led to the defeat of Syed Ahmad's forces. He had no other option but to move his headquarters to the safety of Panjtar near Kashmir.

- Although, Yar Muhammad was later killed in battle against the *mujahideen*, his brother, Sultan Muhammad Khan also waged war against Syed Ahmad. This constant campaigning against fellow Muslims was not what Syed Ahmad wanted, so he moved his forces to Balakot, hoping to liberate Kashmir and Hazara. Balakot was thought to be safe as it was protected on three sides by mountains. But once again Syed Ahmad was betrayed when local leaders told the Sikhs of a way through the mountains. They made a surprise attack on the forces of Syed Ahmad.

The Battle of Balakot (1831) was a fiercely

contested one. Though the *mujahideen* had been taken by surprise by a much larger Sikh army they fought bravely but were heavily outnumbered and unable to resist the Sikhs. Six hundred *mujahideen* soldiers were killed, including Syed Ahmad and his commander, Shah Ismail.

### Influence

The defeat of the *mujahideen* in the Battle of Balakot, was a serious setback for the Jihad Movement and it struggled to survive in the following years. The movement continued on in the hills of the North West Frontier until 1863 when the British sent a large army to deal with the *mujahideen* threat. Even then the movement survived through the determination of its followers. The work of Syed Ahmad had been very influential because:

- It was the first example in Indian history of a movement formed to free the Muslims from the non-Muslim or foreign rulers.

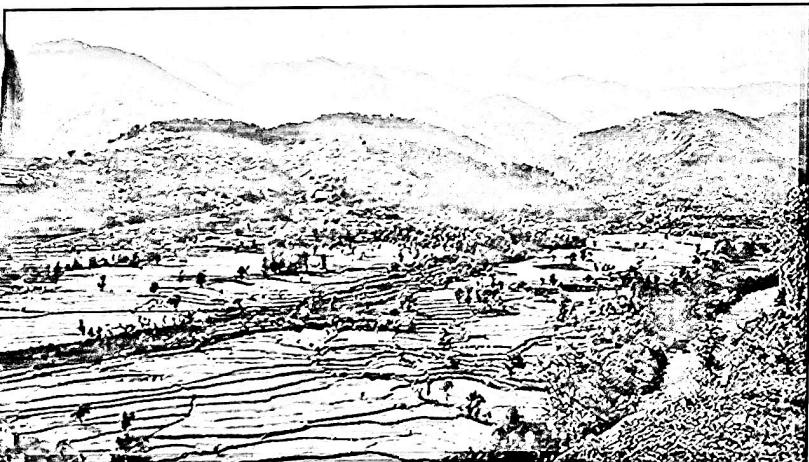


Fig. 1.2: The valley of Balakot

### AID TO LEARNING

- Why was Syed Ahmad Barelvi a very suitable person to lead opposition to the British?
- What role did he play in opposing the Sikhs?

- It was not a movement in order to place a particular leader in power but, instead, to achieve religious and spiritual freedom.
- The Jihad Movement was a uniting force for Muslims. Many of Syed Ahmad's soldiers had been spiritual leaders or teachers. The fact that they were prepared to die for their cause was an inspiration to all Muslims.
- The Jihad Movement is regarded by many historians as the fore-runner of the Pakistan Movement in India. Syed Ahmad's efforts were an inspiration to all Muslims in defending their religion, their culture and their freedom. Those Muslims who later campaigned for their own homeland saw Syed Ahmad as an example of a Muslim fighting for the Muslim cause in much the same way, since he too wanted to see a state which was based on the principles of Islam.

## The work of Haji Shariatullah (1781-1840)

### Early Biographical Details

Haji Shariatullah was born in 1781, in Faridpur district in East Bengal (today part of Bangladesh). His father was a farmer and his family was not very well off. In 1799, he travelled to Arabia on pilgrimage and stayed there for the next nineteen years. He became greatly influenced by the beliefs of Sheikh Muhammad Abdul Wahab.

On his return to East Bengal, he started his own reform movement designed to purify Islam of the Hindu influences. Haji Shariatullah died in 1840, but his work was carried on by his son Mohsin-ud-Din.

### Beliefs

- Haji Shariatullah believed that the Muslim community had moved away from true Islamic practice. He wanted them to return to what he thought was the proper observation of Islamic duties called *faraiz*. This was why his movement was called the Faraizi Movement.

### Work

- Haji Shariatullah found that the Muslims of East Bengal had been oppressed both by the Hindus and by the British. Previously the Muslims had been the ruling class in Bengal, but when the British took over, they worked with the local landowners (zamindars), who were mainly Hindus. The Muslims had also been given few opportunities in education and employment. As a result, many important Muslim families had been reduced to near poverty. Haji Shariatullah started the Faraizi Movement to restore the pride of the Muslims and remove what he thought were the Hindu practices which had crept into their worship.
- Emphasis was placed on praying for past sins and on promising to lead a righteous life in the future. An important part of this reform would be to follow the religious obligations of a true Muslim.

**EARNING**

What did Haji Shariatullah's movement aim to do?  
What was the name of the movement?

**eous**  
and virtuous

- The success of Haji Shariatullah's movement caused great concern amongst the Hindus of East Bengal. In that region Hindu and British landlords had carried out economic oppression of the Muslim peasants. The landlords did not want Haji Shariatullah creating difficulties for them and were very alarmed that the Muslim cultivators were uniting in a desire to improve their lives and purify their religion. They drove Haji Shariatullah out of the region to Nawabganj in Dhaka district, where he died in 1840.
- His work, however, was carried on by his son, Mohsin-ud-Din, who continued to work to improve the position of Muslims in East Bengal and introduced important economic measures.
  - (i) He divided East Bengal into areas called circles, each under the control of Khalifas. They were responsible for the social and spiritual welfare of the people in their area.
  - (ii) He helped the peasants to oppose the excessive taxes imposed by the Hindu and British landlords.
  - (iii) Mohsin-ud-Din's opposition to the payment of taxes led to unrest in East Bengal, but he went even further and threatened to declare a jihad against the British government.

The British arrested him and put him in prison. After his death in 1860, the Faraizi Movement declined.

## Influence

The Faraizi Movement was influential for a number of reasons:

- It gave encouragement to Muslims at a time when they were demoralised by the oppression they suffered from the Hindus and the British.
- It brought about a spiritual revival which led to a revival in the Islamic religion in East Bengal. Hindu influences were removed from Islamic practices.
- It also had an important political and economic impact. The Bengal peasants became united in their opposition to the harsh treatment they received. They became more aware of their rights and a political unity began to grow amongst them. This was to prove important in later years as the Muslim demands for their own homeland grew. It might be said that some of the seeds of the Pakistan Movement were sown by the Faraizi Movement.

