

The Status and Political Role of the Ulama in Muslim India: Shah Waliullah and his Successors Up to the War of 1857

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Abstract: *This article examines the status and political role of the ulama in Muslim India, highlighting their reformist mission and their response to the changing political landscape. Islam provides a comprehensive code of life that encompasses religious, social, economic, and political spheres. Throughout Muslim history, the ulama have played a central role in reforming society whenever Islamic principles were undermined. Their efforts have extended beyond religious revival to include social and political transformation in response to changing historical circumstances. In colonial India, the decline of Muslim political authority and the expansion of British rule created unprecedented challenges for the Muslim community. It further analyzes how Shah Waliullah sought to revive Islamic thought and his successors mobilize resistance against colonial domination, culminating in the events leading up to the war of 1857.*

Keywords: Muslim, Political, Religious, Social, Political, Shah Waliullah, Ulama

Introduction

Islam is not merely a name of religious rites but is a complete code of life and takes all of life in its purview; that guide human in all aspects of life whether these are religious, social, economic or political. Therefore, throughout Muslim history wherever and whenever any aspect or field has been departed from one's original, the religious movements have displayed devotion to reformation and transformation in that connection. These movements have renovated not only belief but political and social life as well. For these movements, ulama have been the driving force; who had been abiding by this because Islam directs the believers to act against every single false belief and socio-political system that becomes a constraint for the people to find a right path. Hence, the responsibilities the ulama assumed in this connection and the reformist role they played always have been determined by the world and circumstances they live in.

In the colonial period of India, reformist and socio-political movements whether violent or peaceful must be seen in the situation prevailed and the troubles the Indians in general and the Muslims in particular had to face. Muslims had lost their political power and the political and economic powers rested with the British East India Company whose vicious interests certainly had jeopardized the rights and interest of the indigenous people. Shah Waliullah and his successors sought to preserve Islamic and secure independence from alien British rule.

Status and political role of the ulama in Muslim India before the Mughal period

From the medieval period till the present, the ulama have not kept themselves confined to only religious affairs rather have kept themselves aware of the affairs of the state. With the establishment of Muslim rule in India, the ulama and Sufis considered it their religious duty to present their view about the policies, governance and affairs of the state. Both ulama and Sufis gave prime attention to revolutionary movements, but more frequently extended their support to any ruler who upheld order and provided a solid foundation for the continuation of religious and social life of Muslims (Metcalf, 2014).

This was the reason that the Muslims rulers in India sought the views of ulama and Sufis. From the Ghaznavid till the Mughal's period, the ulama and Sufis have extended their support to those administrative policies which they considered according to the injunctions of Islam. On the other hand they have criticized those rulers and their administrative policies that according to them were against the religious injunctions. Their role and status can be proved from this fact that the Muslim kings in India in any mode, have tried their best to govern the state according to Islamic teachings and injunctions and for this purpose they had established Sharia department, headed by Sadr-us-Sudoor or Sadri Jahan (Khan, 2017).

These portfolio had other names too; Qazi-ul-Quzzat, Sadri Kul and Qazi Mamalik. Qazi-ul-Quzzat supervised various departments like judiciary, assigning of titles, appointment of Imams, religious supervision of officials, appointments of Qazi in provinces, districts and cities and appointments of Muftis and teachers. There are also examples that various ulama instead of official patronage did not accept the portfolios of Qazi.

The Muslim rulers in India conferred a due esteem and prestigious position to the ulama. Beside the religious affairs, they also had attachment with political affairs in different forms. It was held by them as their religious duty to serve the people through observing the administration and policies of the rulers. The Muslim rulers in India had made it obligatory to extend a due respect and prestige to ulama and declared it not only a religious obligation but an essential requirement for a ruler (Khan, 2017).

On accession to the throne, like the allegiance of the commanders and other nobles, the ruler considered it necessary to get the allegiance of ulama. The ulama did not extend their allegiance to Shamsuddin Altumish (1211-1236) on his accession, until he did not expose the proof of his liberty, (Altumish was a slave) (Khan, 2017). It is also important to mention here that there are examples of self-seekers ulama, who lacked courage and curiosity to highlight and criticize the un-Islamic policies of some rulers; rather they have extended their support to the bad governance of rulers for their own interests.

In the period of Delhi Salateen, there were ulama who truly performed their role according to the Islamic teachings and Sharia. They, in the light of Sharia, either criticized the policies and actions or supported the rulers. There were also a group of ulama who kept themselves aloof from the courts of the kings. Beside these ulama, there were also some ulama who without keeping into consideration the Islamic teachings and Sharia, supported the un-Islamic policies and actions of the kings. Despite the presence of these ulama, there is no evidence in history that the Muslim rulers created obstacles to the implementation of Islamic sharia, dictated to the ulama in interpreting the Sharia, or influence their legal decisions.

Plainly, the role of ulama can be concluded as, where the Muslims generals, commanders and rulers have given services in conquering of Indian lands and established a fair rule, there the ulama and Sufis have made these lands convenient for them, by truly interpreting Islam as a savior and guidance, not only for the Muslims but for the non-Muslims as well.

2.1. Political and religious services of ulama during Mughal period

Similar to the period of salateen Delhi, in the Mughal period too, both the rulers and ulama rendered their services for the consolidation of Muslim rule and presenting the true image of Islam in India respectively. The Mughal rulers had established cordial relations with ulama and scholars which resulted in the expansion and consolidation of Mughal rule in India. The founder of Mughal rule, Zaheer-ud-Din Muhammad Babur (1483-1530) was assisted by Maulana Qazi And Jan against his opponents, likewise, Babur, when he detected about the strength and huge army of Rana Sanga, he regretted for his sins from God in front of Shaikh Zain-ud-Din (Khan, 2017).

Babur's son, Hamayun (1508-1556) held the ulama and Sufis in high esteem and treated them with great respect. The Mughal kings took the advices of them into consideration in making policies and laws. During Akbar's period (1556-1605), the ulama and Sufis were directly or indirectly involved in laws and policies regulations. There was a split among ulama and Sufis about the socio-political and religious reforms, introduced by Akbar in India. Shaikh Mubarak Ali (1551-1602), who was an Islamic scholar and Sufi, has declared Akbar as King of Justice and shadow of God on earth, while Mullah Abdul Qadir Badayuni (1540-1615) was great opponent of Akbar's reforms (Khan, 2017). There is no misgiving in saying that whatever reforms introduced by Akbar, which today either are considered according to Sharia or not, had the consent of ulama and Sufis.

A prominent scholar and Sufi, Mujaddid Alf-i-Sani (Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi) (1564-1624) closely observing the impacts of reforms introduced by Akbar, struggled to rectify these during Jahangir's period. He was called upon by Hamayun to mention his view in the court. On account of his courage and devotion, he mentioned his stance wisely and arguably. As mentioned earlier, the Muslims kings could not dare to set aside their views, Jahangir acknowledged the mistakes. Mujaddid on his release from Gawaliyar fort remained in close association with the army and administrators of the court for the purpose to rectify the reforms and preach the true teachings of Islam.

Muhi-al-Din Muhammad, commonly known as Aurangzeb (1618-1707), like his predecessors extended great reverence and honor to the ulama and Sufis. The ulama also did not keep themselves aloof from the state affairs and held this as their religious duty to serve the people and the country. His period is regarded renowned and ideal for the ulama and Sufis and during his period the institution of justice was entirely dealt by them (Khan, 2017). The role of ulama and Sufis in the politico-religious affairs of the country can be revealed from the fact that under the supervision of Shaykh Nizam-ud-Din Burhan Puri, the expert of Islamic jurisprudence composed the, "Fatawa Alamgiri" which acted as a law and constitution in India.

2.2. The response of Shah Waliullah to the decline of Muslims in India

After the death of the last competent Mughal ruler; Aurangzeb, there emerged two religious schools, named Farangi Mahal Lucknow and Delhi School. Farangi Mahal School mainly dedicated to academic teaching-learning and fostered mystic learning. The Farangi Mahal, like other people in that period, introduced more than one mystic order and esteemed mystic experience (Metcalf, 1982). Its main contribution were the systemization of a new curriculum, came to be known as Darsi Nizami, after the name of Mullah Nizamuddin, integration of writings and mystic traditions. Under the patronage of the rulers of Muslims courts, the Farangi Mahallis in the then down falling situation strived to create an important place for the religious scholars.

Shah Waliullah (1703-1763) held a prominent position among the Delhi ulama because of his profound analyses of the causes of the decline of the Muslim rule and his proposed solutions to those problems. He was born in a period, in which he witnessed the prosperity and progress of India and the power held by the Muslims. He also remained a witness to the loss of Muslims power and its collapse. He critically analyzed the socio-political and economic conditions of other Islamic countries. During his stay at Hijaz, he was ensured by his spiritual observation that God has given him the responsibility of procuring the future of Muslims (Khan, 2017). Therefore, he devised an educational, reformist and revolutionary program and presented two fundamental principles for achieving this objective. Firstly, the Quranic strategy and philosophy aim to reform human beings in the practical matters of life; secondly, he regarded economic inequality as the root cause of all moral degradation in society, government and all evil deeds in humanity (Sindhi, 2016). According to him, comprehensive and far-reaching socio-political and reforms were the only means of eradicating these evils (Khan, 2017).

Shah Waliullah perceived that his idea of reforming the society could only be realized by the learned and committed people to his philosophy and program. Firstly, he tried to convince the noble class of the Mughal government about his mission but they did not awake from the deep slumber. Then he started a movement by conveying his message to the common people. After the death of Aurangzeb, the central authority reigned by incompetent Mughal rulers, were unable to subdue the resurgent elements. By getting power, and instigation by the British, the Marhats started maltreatment to the Muslims during the life of Shah Waliulla. By the invitation of Shah Waliullah, the ruler of Afghanistan, Ahmad Shah Abdali suppressed the power of the Marhats.

After the death of Shah Waliullah in 1762, his reformist movement was led by his son; Shah Abdul Aziz (1746-1824). The East India Company after its success in Plassey War of 1757 had got the control of Bengal, Orissa and a large territory of the United provinces. The ruler of Oudh was a British collaborator and Hyderabad was virtually ruled by a British resident. The defeat of Sultan Tepe in 1799 threw Deccan into the company's hands. The Maratha were forced to come to British's terms and the defeat of Sindhia of Gawalior at the battle of Delhi in 1803 paved the way for the company to appoint its resident at Delhi. The Sikhs by their occupation of Punjab had concluded a peace treaty with the company and targeted the Muslims population and made their life miserable.

Shah Abdul Aziz, who was deeply observing the political situation in India, issued a fatwa in 1803, in which he declared India as Dar al-Harb (دار الحرب). From the religious and political

point of view, this fatwa is a milestone in the history of India because it induced the Indian in general and the Muslims in particular to rise in defiance of the alien power. The British made every effort to mislead the people through its hollow and false proclamation and treaties, but this did not misguide and impressed the followers of Shah Waliullah (Khan, 2017).

A distinguished characteristic of the heirs of Shah Waliullah was that they guided the people not only in the matters of faith but in the material aspects of life as well. Observing the growing power of the British, Shah Abdul Aziz encouraged the Muslims to secure economic opportunities in the changing circumstances. He wanted a community considerably self-contained not only in matters of faith but in everyday behavior. Shah Abdul Aziz, when he was asked about learning English language and getting employment of British, issued a fatwa, and declared it legitimate, subject to the condition that learning of English is purposeful and employment is not a hurdle in the way of practicing the Islamic religion. He held it appropriate for the Muslims to learn English and get employment under the British so long as they did not thereby oppress other Muslims (Metcalf, 1982).

To carry out his mission, Shah Abdul Aziz went further and organized a resistive movement under the leadership of Syed Ahmad Barelvi (1786-1831). He was sent to the camp of Amir Ali Khan in Rajputana; the last ray of hope for resistance to the British. After his departure from Mecca in 1824, Syed Ahmad Barelvi succeeded in establishing government in Peshawar. But soon he had to wage a war against the Sikh government in Punjab. It is of certain importance to recall that the Sikhs government in Punjab was the ally of British and acted as a constraint in their way to oust the British from India. Their Jihad first aimed against the Sikhs but intended for the British as well (Metcalf, 1982).

The second phase of the movement founded by Shah Waliullah that named by Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi as, “ Waliullahi Movement”, starts at the death of Shah Abdul Aziz. Shah Muhammad Ishaq acted as the Chief of this movement. Prof. Amjad Ali Shakir says that Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi considered the fatwa Darul Harb of Shah Abdul Aziz as the basic thought and Madrasa Rahimia was doing the work of strengthening and providing personnel to the Mujahadeen movement (Shakir, 2021).

After establishing their rule in 1826 at Peshawar; that continued till 1831, the Jihadi struggle of Waliullahi organization came to an end with the martyrdom of Syed Ahmad Barelvi and Shah Ismail at Balakot in 1831. Owing to an unfavorable situation in India, the Waliullahi organization transformed their strategy; Shah Muhammad Ishaq went to Mecca for establishing relations with Turkey. In this period; India's king had become ineffective; no change was foreseen at Kabul and due to the presence of English Resident at Delhi, work was getting difficult for them, therefore, Shah Muhammad Ishaq opted to establish relations with Turkish Caliphate and went to Mecca for this purpose (Shakir, 2021).

The twists and turns of time did not divert the heirs of Shah Waliullah from their mission but compelled them to adopt a new strategy in accordance with the changing situation. As indicated earlier, their mission was to overthrow the British from India. Shah Muhammad Ishaq chose to work from Mecca and made a board at Delhi, composed of Maulana Qutbuddin Dehlvi, Maulana Zafar Hussain Kandeharvi and Maulana Abdul Ghani Dehlvi under the leadership of Maulana Mamlook to propagate the mission and organize the movement (Sindhi, 2016). Babra Daly Metcalf in his work *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*,

says in this connection that in 1841, either due to their own spiritual wishes or because of their uneasiness at alien rule, both brothers migrated to Mecca, leaving behind a devoted group of students who continued their work in the coming decades (Metcalf, 1982).

Analyzing the political development, aroused in India: the war of independence of 1857, and establishing Madrasa Deoband in 1866, it could rightly be asserted that the heirs of Shah Waliullah did not depart from their goal: the liberation of India from the foreign occupation, but perceiving the changing circumstances, transformed the movement accordingly. They could be seen in constant struggle against the British either through armed struggle or peaceful political struggle. In the objectives of the movement, one was also to revive the movement started by Shah Waliullah, renaissance of Islam and reforming the society, therefore, through argumentation, debates and preaching, they combated the Christian missionaries who had plunged into the Indian society (Khan, 2017).

2.3. The war of independence of 1857 and the role of the successors of Shah Waliullah

As time passed, the injustices of the company appeared in new forms, and the miseries in all aspects of life were the fate of the Indians. Discussing the background and reasons of the uprising is not topic of discussion here but in actuality it must be examined in the company's long rule, since the Plassy war of 1757. Brief accounts about the economic exploitation, social degradation and political dispossession of the Indians by the company have been discussed in chapter I.

To understand the uprising in the scenario of the situation, in which it occurred, it seems important to mention here the immediate causes. The company promised the Mughal's ruler to maintain the sharia laws, supervised by the chief Qazi. Initially it was maintained but with increase in their power and dominance, it was disturbed and finally the company, in 1856, abolished the Islamic sharia judicial system. With the introduction of so called western education in India, the indigenous education which contributed much in educating the common people was replaced by the western education system. Instead of increasing the literacy and education in India, it reversely led to ignorance and illiteracy in India. It would be ironical to know the study of a British historian, Prof. Max Muller who says that before the British, in Bengal, there were 80000 educational institutions (Khan, 2017). Another British, Capt. Alexander Hamilton writes in his travelogue that during the period of Aurangzeb, in Thatha city, there were 400 colleges of various branches of knowledge and art (Khan, 2017).

For these institutions, the Delhi Sultans and kings had established the department of Auqaf, which provided financial aid to the students and teachers that continued during the Mughal rule. The company, in 1835, confiscated the Auqafs which resulted in the devastation of these educational institutions. The Christian missionaries under the company's patronage propagated the Christianity in India and through financial support the poor people were converted to Christianity. This increased the apprehensions of the Indians to such an extent that the people thought about the protection of their religions. Discriminative and biased policies of the company with Indians in general and with Muslims in particular greatly perturbed both the communities respectively. Besides, the Hindus were preferred as compared to the Muslims; the

reason behind this might be their political importance and British apprehensions about their role in future.

The political and economic order of the Indian society though was transformed by the company but patriotism was still alive. The people, employed in the company's army, exposed their sympathies and patriotism for their mother land. In 1806, soldiers at Vellore (south India) showed visible sympathy for Tipu Sultan. In 1824, soldiers in Barrackpore (Bengal) refused to serve in the campaign against Burma because incentives for past service were not being offered. The induction of greased cartridges for the regulation of Enfield rifles caused the uprising. It was widely whispered that these cartridges were incruised with the fat of pig and cow, so that both Muslims and Hindus were dishonored because the soldiers were required to bite the cartridges before loading. The soldiers had apprehensions about their low salaries as compared to the high salaries of Europeans. This was a cause of dissatisfaction, which eventually led to the war of 1857.

Before the outbreak of the 1857 uprising, the movement started by Shah Abdul Aziz, was engaged in propagating the message of independence. When the uprising was started in the surrounding, particularly in Delhi, this re-energized the spirit of Shah walullah's followers and they considered it their duty to take part in the war of independence (Madani, 1956). They were well aware of the company's past policies and deeds, as well as the existing situation of that period. Those ulama, who at that time were present at Delhi, came together and issued a fatwa of Jihad (Mian, 2005). Except some ulama, majority favored this fatwa and then they started preparation for the war. According to H.B. Khan, 33 ulama gave their signatures in favor of the fatwa, the names of these ulama has been given by H.B. Khan, in his book, titled, Barsagheer Pak-o-Hind main ulama ka Siyasi Kirdar. He also says that later on, one of the opponents also extended his approval. With issuing of the fatwa, they also announced hoisting of green flag in the country.

To organize the war activities and its preparation, it was necessary for the movement to be led by someone. Keeping in view its importance, Haji Imdadullah Mahajir Maki (1814-1899) was appointed as Imam, Muhammad Qasim Nanautavi (1833-1880) as commander of the forces and Mawlana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (1826-1905) as Qazi. For preaching and propagating the need of the war, the ulama, who had religious influence in their respective areas, were assigned responsibilities. It resulted in joining of people in thousand in the war of independence.

Delhi became the most important center of the war but the war spread to other places too and the ulama established centers in other places where they performed important role in the war. As a leader of the war, Haji Imdadullah Mahajir Maki; the follower of the Hazrat Shah Waliullah, whose own followers were mainly consist of the ulama, flocked to the movement of war (Madani, 1956). In the beginning, the Mujahedeen were so successful that they occupied the British artillery. The people, who had conventional weapons, occupied Thana Bhoon and established Muslim government in its surrounding. In this expedition, Hafiz Muhammad Zamin, who was the close trustee of Haji Imdadullah, got martyrdom. Thana Bhoon was one of the important centers, established by Haji Imdadullah and his companions for war purposes.

The war was not only limited to Delhi, but it also spread to others places, including Lucknow. After the occupation of Delhi by the British forces on September 19, 1857, the warriors

gradually shifted to Lucknow. In Lucknow, Maulana Ahmadullah Shah Madrasi (1787-1858) played an active role in the war against the British. He was appointed as sarparast (guardian) for her son by Hazrat Mahal; the mother of the Lucknow prince because the prince was of little age and inexperienced. The warriors at Lucknow accepted him as the leader of the Mujahedeen, where they, instead of giving tough time to the British, finally were defeated. Maulana along with the prince and others companions, shifted to a town: Muhammadi, where they established an interim government (Khan, 2017). Lack of resources and unorganized struggle, could not compete the mighty British, Maulana, though fought zealously, was defeated and killed when the area was attacked by the British.

The analytical description, make it known that the changing situation of India; increasing influence of British company, was readily responded by the followers of Shah Waliullah. The issuance of fatwa Darula Harb by Shah Abdul Aziz in 1803 was in reality, the initiative and proclamation of freedom struggle against alien rule. The martyrdom of Syed Ahamd shaheed and Shah Ismail shaheed in 1831 was the first phase of the movement. The failure did not distract the followers of Shah Waliullah from their goal. Under the leadership of Haji Imdadullah Mahajir Maki, the followers of the movement, presented sacrifices in the war of independence of 1857, for ousting an alien rule.

Conclusion:

The study concludes that the ulama occupied a significant position in Muslim India not only as religious scholars but also as influential socio-political leaders who responded to the challenges of their respective times. From the Delhi Sultanate to the Mughal period, they guided rulers supervised religious and judicial affairs, and sought to ensure that governance remained consistent with Islamic principles. With the decline of Mughal authority and the expansion of British colonial rule, their role evolved from advising the state to leading movements of religious reform and political resistance.

The reformist vision of Shah Waliullah laid the intellectual and ideological foundation for the revival of Muslim society by linking religious renewal with social, economic, and political reform. His successors transform this vision into an organized movement that adapted its strategy according to changing political circumstances. Their responses ranged from educational and intellectual reform to armed resistance, while maintaining the objective of protecting Islam and securing the political and religious rights of Muslims.

The Article further demonstrates that the war of independence of 1857 was not an isolated uprising but the culmination of long process of ideological preparation and resistance in which the successors of Shah Waliullah played a pivotal role. Through religious guidance, the issuance of fatwas, organizational leadership, and direct participation in the struggle, they mobilized the people against colonial domination. Although the uprising was ultimately suppressed, it reflected the continuity of the Waliullahi movement and its commitment to the liberation of India and the preservation of Islamic identity. Thus, the political role of the ulama up to 1857 was characterized by a dynamic combination of religious leadership, social reform, and anti-colonial resistance, leaving a lasting legacy that continued to influence subsequent Islamic and political movements in British India.

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