

ROLE OF WAHABI MOVEMENT IN SUB-CONTINENT: A POLITICAL REVIEW

Abdul Aziz Mehranvi
Din Muhammad Jalbani

1. WAHABI MOVEMENT

The term "Wahabi" is derived from the founder of this movement, Mohammad Ibn Abdul Wahhib (1691 -1787). He belonged to the Arab tribe of Tamim in Nejd. As a keen scholar of Islamic Theology and Jurisprudence at Baghdad, he came under the influence of the writings of Imam Ahmed Ibn Hanbal, the founder of the last of the four orthodox schools.(1)

The life of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) was the best example for believers to follow. They were required to regulate their lives in accordance with the Kitab (Quran) and the Sunnah (ways of the Prophet). Any deviation from this "Sirat-e-Mustaqeem" (balanced path) could lead the believer towards evil. Ibn Hanbal's brusque rejection of any middle path soon brought him in conflict with the government and in Baghdad, centuries later, the fanaticism of his followers became a danger to law and order. Again, still later, his doctrine was revived and that gave to Islam a powerful impetus towards further development. It was Ibn Taymiya who refreshed the creed and aroused a new enthusiasm in the movement. Though efforts were made to suppress it, yet the same movement appeared with greater force under the leadership of Abdul Wahhab after a lapse of four hundred years.

Abdul Wahhab, like all other followers of Imam Ahmed Bin Hanbal, believed in the exclusive validity of the Tradition as against the inclination among

the older legal authorities to make concessions to reason. The Taymiya's writings aroused in him the conviction that the dominant form of contemporary Islam, particularly among the Turks, was permeated with abuse. The result was that Wahhabism in Arabia marshalled against the Turkish domination.⁽²⁾ When he attempted to reduce his theory to practice and stormed against the veneration accorded to Saad, a local saint of his native town of Ayinah, he was turned out of the territory. He, however, got the protection of Mohammad Ibn Saud of Dar'iyah who expressed deep sympathy for his doctrines and kept him to flourish under his patronage.

Abd-ul-Wahhab had little veneration for Sufis and saints as he did not consider them following the Kitab and the Sunnah strictly. This led him to raise a call for Jihad against those Muslims who did not act in the ways prescribed by God and His Prophet (peace be upon him). According to him,⁽²⁾ offering of Friday prayers was prescribed as a MUST for all the Muslims. The use of silk and fastidious garments and the adornment of mosques and tombs were strictly prohibited. Smoking was not allowed. So enthusiastic proved Abd-ul-Wahhab in his religious undertakings that he could very easily inspire his followers to the extent of religious belief. Within no time the movement gained power and popularity and "Wahhabism" established itself all over the land.

The veneration of sufi saints was un-Islamic to the Wahhabis. They had, therefore, such institutions demolished to which the people resorted for invoking God's blessings. Karbala, the mausoleum of Prophet's grandson Imam Husain, had also become one of their targets for demolition. In spite of the Shia community's opposition, the Wahhabis attacked it on 29th of April 1797, and the

magnificent domed structure, which covered the grave of Imam Husain, was levelled to the ground.⁽¹⁾ Even graves of the members of the Prophet's family and his celebrated companions in the Jannat-ul-Baqia at Medina were not spared.⁽¹⁾

2. "WAHHABISM" IN INDIA

The Wahhabi Movement as it developed in India seems to have no connection what-so-ever with the movement sponsored by Abdul Wahhab of Arabia. So, how it came to be termed as Wahhabi Movement is difficult to answer. The Indian Wahhabis (Moulvis) seem to have gained no inspiration from the doctrines of Abdul Wahhab either in their social outlook or political ideals. They seem to be more influenced by the teachings of Shah Waliullah of Delhi. It was perhaps the extreme piety of the Indian Moulvis or their rigid attitude towards Islam that the writers on the Arabian revolution, started by Abdul Wahhab, were tempted to add the prefix "Wahhabi" to this movement also.

In austerity, simplicity and organizational matters, Syed Ahmed Barelvi might have followed the ways of Abdul Wahhab but to his followers, this name remained unknown. Some of his disciples categorically denied even the leadership of Abdul Wahhab.

It seems probable that the historians have termed it a "Wahhabi Movement" because of its similarity to the movements started by Abdul Wahhab and others. Even the disciples of Shah Ahmed do not like to be called Wahhabis. They are better known as Ahl-e-Hadith,⁽³⁾ followers of the Traditions of the Holy Prophet.

3. SHAH WALIULLAH

Shah Waliullah, the founder of the Muslim revivalism, inspired a large number of his people with radical ideas. Among those who had been directly under his influence were his son, Shah Abdul Aziz, and Syed Ahmad Barelvi, followed by their staunch converts, the Wahhabi Moulvis of Patna. Shah Waliullah appeared with a constructive programme for the reconstruction of the Muslim State based on the teachings of the Holy Quran and the Sunnah.

Shah Waliullah had very well understood the cause that led to the downfall of Indian Muslims. According to him,⁽⁴⁾ they had forgotten what was vital in Islam. He wanted to see unity developed in all aspects of life, sectionalism eradicated and the downtrodden uplifted. He insisted ⁽⁴⁾ upon an equitable distribution of the national wealth so that a sense of community feeling could prevail. This is how, a National State with the Ijma (will) of the people could be shaped. Such a state alone could be truly called a State of God where everyone could live in peace and prosperity. A man with such revolutionary ideas emerged to rule the destinies of his people. Mulla Shibli,⁽⁹⁾ writing about the emergence of such a person, says: "After the intellectual deterioration in the Muslim world that started after Ibn Taymiya and Ibn Rushd, it was hardly conceived that any man would again appear to rejuvenate Islam. But in the end a man did appear whose name was Waliullah. His critical studies even surpassed the achievements made by Ghazali, Razi and Ibn Rushd". He brought the Holy Quran to the understanding of the common man of average education by translating it with the name of Fateh Al-Rehman in 1150 A.H. for the first time into Persian, a language then com-

monly understood by all. For this he had to face no less a persecution than Martin Luther,⁽⁶⁾ the reformist of the Christian Church who translated the Bible into German. It is said that the Mullas took out their swords to butcher the "heretic" who was forced to leave Delhi for some time. The study of the Hadith (Tradition of the Holy Prophet) was made common by him and the Holy Quran was interpreted in a way that could bring the desired revival in the Muslim social order.

Born off a learned family of Ulema in the year 1703, only four years before the death of Aurangzeb, Shah Waliullah played an important part in the history of the Muslims of India which brought about a revolution in the religious, social and political fields. Shah Waliullah received his early education from his father and at the age of fifteen became a disciple of Shah Abdur Rahim. At the early age of seventeen, he succeeded his father and took to teaching in his father's place in the same school for twelve years. Later, he went to Arabia. It was at that time that Abdul Wahhab was also taking lessons at Medina. Both Shah Waliullah and Abdul Wahhab of Nejd might, there, have availed themselves of the opportunity of meeting each other. It is also possible that both of them might be having common teachers.⁽⁷⁾ It is said that he dreamt at Mecca the Holy Prophet telling him that an organisation would come into existence through him.⁽⁷⁾

Shah Waliullah had witnessed the historical events passing before his very eyes. The Kings of Delhi had changed like kings on the chessboard. He had himself encountered the Marathas, the Jats, and the Sikhs who had high hopes of seeing the end of the Mughal Empire. He saw the new power of the English gushing out like a flood from the lower provinces; the power of a people

quite foreign in language, culture, religion and even in complexion. He had seen the society becoming a handmaid of power politics, taking refuge in religion and developing itself into a deadly sectarian organisation. That was the picture of the eighteenth century India when it was fenced round with troubles all over. There was a bitter clash of ideas in almost all fields of human activity. Shah Waliullah was not a politician, but he desired a revival of the Muslim power for which he tried to infuse the spirit of Islam among the Muslims.

Shah Waliullah has drawn a true picture of his period, of the kings and of the people. That bond of Islam which had bound the Muslims together had relaxed and the people had lost piety. Every thing that was present broke up from within, and then appeared a new powerful race possessed of greater public spirit and the result was that there appeared a new state appropriate to the material and intellectual wealth of the old culture; that was the British.

Thus, with Shah Waliullah started a revivalist movement of the Muslims in India which was carried forward by his illustrious son Shah Abdul Aziz (1746-1845) with the help of his three brothers Shah Rafiuddin, Shah Abdul Qadir and Shah Abdul Ghani and a host of his friends and comrades.

4. SHAH ABDUL AZIZ

Shah Abdul Aziz was the eldest of the three brothers. His father had brought a new outlook in the social order and the son culminated the same having devoted his entire life to it. At the age of seventeen, he stepped in the place of his father where he served as a teacher for about sixty years. He was chiefly devoted to the dissemina-

tion of the Hadith in which he excelled his contemporaries. Because of his erudition, he was invited to fill a teacher's vacancy at the Calcutta Madrassa but he declined to accept it.⁽⁸⁾ He led a very simple life and reserved himself for the propagation of Islam. He wrote a number of books and also a commentary on the first and last two parts of the Holy Quran in the Persian language. Among his writings Tuhfa-e-Ithna Asharia and Fatawa-e-Azizi have become very famous. A large number of students used to take lessons from him, the prominent among them being Syed Ahmed Barelvi. His Madrassa had the good fortune of having on its staff eminent persons like Shah Rafiuddin, Shah Mohammad Ishaq, Mufti Sadruddin of Delhi, Shah Ghulam Ali, Moulvi Makhsus Ullah, Moulvi Abdul Haq and Maulana Fazl-e-Haq Khairabdi.⁽¹³⁾

It seems that Shah Abdul Aziz was influenced by the Sudanese revolt led by Mōhammad Ahmed, the Mehdi of Sudan. In his writings we come across a poem on this subject, and that strengthens our belief. Similarly, it is also probable that Syed Ahmed Barelvi might have been actuated to form an organization of fighting dervishes to overthrow the rule of the Sikhs.

With the occupation of India by the British a new problem had cropped up. It was to determine the position of the Muslims under an alien rule as, according to the Shariat of Islam, a Muslim cannot be governed but by a Muslim. The only way open, therefore, was that the country be declared an enemy territory, i.e. Dar-ul-Harb. Shah Abdul Aziz made a bold declaration to this effect and announced fearlessly that since the territory lying between Delhi and Calcutta had passed into the hands of the Christians, it had to be reconquered.⁽¹⁴⁾ The only alternative for a Muslim in the "Dar-ul-Harb" is either to leave

the country and migrate to a free Muslim land or declare Jihad. The Shariat does not believe in subordinate co-existence as the Muslims are born to live free. So there was no question of compromise of befriending the British, according to Shah Abdul Aziz. If Jihad was not possible immediately all efforts had to be made to overthrow the foreign yoke by other means.

5. SHAH SYED AHMED BARELVI

Among all those brilliant students of Shah Abdul Aziz, Syed Ahmed Barelvi took up the cue and organised the Muslims to combat the alien power. If Shah Waliullah and Shah Abdul Aziz were the philosophers of revivalism, syed Ahmed Barelvi was an executor of that philosophy. He took upon himself to bring back the lost glory and create in India conditions which could secure peace and security and an honourable existence for the poor and the rich alike. Shah Syed Ahmed Barelvi had the extra ordinary capacity of inspiring the people to the extent of religious belief and like Abdul Wahhab of Arabia and Mohammad Ahmed of Sudan led his followers as fighting derveshes to the north-west frontier for waging Jihad against the enemies.

Syed Ahmed was born on Friday, 29th of November 1786, in the city of Rai Bareli.

Syed Ahmed, as is usual with the Muslims, was initiated to education at the age of four.⁽⁹⁾ But he was not so keen on his studies. From his very childhood he had a liking for swordsmanship and displaying of the martial spirit. It is said that even in his games he used to organise an "Islamic regiment" and attack the regiment of unbelievers.⁽¹⁰⁾

Attaining the age of a young man he started taking much interest in social work and used to pass his time in serving the downtrodden.(11)

The conditions prevailing in the country during his time were such that Islam was only in name and the Muslims, incapable of coping with the situation, had resigned themselves to their fate. Syed Ahmed thought of three ways for getting out of this catastrophe.(18)

- (i) Say goodbye to Truth and forget oneself;
- (ii) Not to leave Truth but suffer all persecutions quietly;
- (iii) Fight the cause of Truth like brave people and come to the right path and be saved from being lost.

Shed Ahmed Brelvi preferred to follow the third way which he considered the best.

"The object of the movement", as he himself explained in one of his letters,(12) "was not acquisition of fame or wealth, or territory or self-aggrandizement or carving out a kingdom for self, but to please Allah, and eradicate the evils that have crept into the Muslim society". As to his anti-British feelings they are quite evident in one of his letters written to Hindu Rao (12) the Ruler of Gwalior, where he says: "Uncongenial foreigners of a distant land, merchants and tradesmen, have become kings of this country assuming the dignity of the Sultan. They have destroyed rulers and great chiefs by dishonouring them. They have now gone into oblivion. The time has come when this band of Fakirs and paupers, inspired by service to Allah, desire to clear the country from the foreigners. They are not worldly men. They do not desire

power either now or even in the distant future. When Hindustan will be cleared of these tradesmen, the high offices and rulership shall be for those who want it and are able to keep it with dignity. Their power will be strengthened with mutual support. The rulers who come forward will strengthen the foundation of their own states". A similar letter was also written by him to Ghulam Haid-er Khan, a high military officer stationed at Gwalior.(12)

Syed Ahmed now started a regular organization and developed it into a powerful political creed which could aim at the destruction of the Sikh and British power in India.(13) He declared himself as Imam and Amir-ul-Muslimin (13) (Commander of the Faithful). Muhammad Ismail (D.1813), of the family of Shah Waliullah, was brought in the organization as the chief lieutenant who got it fully disciplined on purely military lines. Trusted agents (Khalifas) were appointed in all the important towns of India.(13) Recruits (Mujahids) were enrolled. Camps were opened and a regular Wahhabi government was established,(13) first at Peshawar and later at Sittana. (13) A network of organization was set up to collect funds. A system of regular reporting to the headquarters was maintained. In short, a regular secretariat was established. (13) All the sub-headquarters from Bengal to Sittana were kept in the know of all important matters through trusted and experienced agents. As the British had become suspicious of their activities all these things were kept in extreme secrecy. Most of the workers had to pass as business men to avoid suspicion. A code language was also adopted (14) by them for mutual understanding.

In 1820 Syed Ahmed Barelvi, alongwith his entire group encamped at Sadiqpur where Vilayat Ali lived.

Every member of Vilayat Ali's family including women became his disciples. Patna was made the centre of the Wahhabi organization with Syed Ahmed as its Imam. Four vice-regents (Khalifas) were appointed here: Maulvi Vilayat Ali, Mohammad Husain, Enayat Ali and Farhat Hussain.⁽¹¹⁾

Hunter⁽¹³⁾ has rightly remarked that the Wahhabi system was "essentially adapted to the hopes and fears of a restless populace". The movement aroused in India a new political sense to free itself from the bondage of the British and the economic exploitation of vested interests. The class distinction which had taken a strong root in the decadent Muslim society was uprooted. It inspired the intelligentsia to forge unity with the common man. Religious revivalism led to political unity of the Indian mind, both Muslim and Hindu, on a fixed point, i.e. to free India from the British yoke and reconvert it to "Dar-ul-Islam" (Land of Peace).

Shah Ismail was no less an important figure in the Wahhabi Movement of India. If Shah Waliullah and Shah Abdul Aziz were the philosophers of Muslim revivalism, if Shah Syed Ahmed Bareilvi was the blood, heart and soul of that body which was named Wahhabi, Shah Ismail served as its most fertile brain.

Shah Ismail was born on 29th of April 1779,⁽¹⁵⁾ in village Phulat of the district of Muzaffarnagar. The only son of Shah Abdul Ghani and the grandson of Shah Waliullah, he received his early education from his father and later from Shah Abdul Qadir, who even adopted him as his son and married him to his grand-daughter, Kalthum, and gave him a portion of his property.⁽¹⁶⁾ He had shown great intelligence since his very boyhood. He came

under the influence of Shah Abdul Aziz having completed his education. Sir Syed Ahmed described Shah Ismail (16) as "one of the great brilliant men seldom born".

He started his weekly preaching in the Jame Mosque at Delhi. It is said that his sermons attracted so many people that the gathering went beyond the capacity of that big mosque.

After coming in contact with Syed Ahmed, he had to undergo many changes. On January 13, 1826,⁽¹⁶⁾ he left his hearth and home to migrate to another place but fell fighting at Balakot alongwith his Imam.

He was the real organiser and the most important person of the Wahhabi organization. He used to dictate notes, orders and letters at a time to half a dozen scribes without any confusion.⁽¹⁶⁾ He had a strong retentive memory. Besides being a Hafiz of the Holy Quran, he had memorised 30000 of the Hadith with their exact references.⁽¹⁶⁾

He was a great writer. Among his many writings, the following have become very famous:⁽¹⁶⁾

- (i) Mansab-e-Imamat.
- (ii) Usul-e-Fiqh.
- (iii) Taqwiat-ul-Imam.
- (iv) Abquat.

Most of his writings were lost during the war of independence in 1857 when Delhi was sacked.⁽¹⁶⁾ To Shah Ismail goes the credit of putting the "Wahhabi Doctrine" on a permanent footing.

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