Shah Wali Ullah Reform Movement [1707-1762]

In the 18th century, Islam in the Sub-continent was faced with menacing problems. Sectarian conflict, low moral tone of the society, poor understanding of the Holy Quran, and general ignorance of Islam were just some of the issues which gave rise to fear that political collapse would be accompanied by religious disintegration. This did not happen; rather an era of religious regeneration was inaugurated, which was due more than anything else to the activities of one man, Shah Wali Ullah.

Shah Wali Ullah belonged to a religious family. He was educated at Madrasa-i-Rahimiyah by his father Shah Abdul Rahim. After finishing his education, he went for pilgrimage and higher studies to Saudi Arabia. At this time, Muslims in India were divided into Hanfia, Sufi, Shia, Sunni and Mullah sects. While in Hijaz, he decided to launch a campaign to popularize Islamic values amongst the Muslims and to present Islam in a rational manner. On his return to the Sub-continent, he started working towards the achievement of these goals.

Shah Wali Ullah's singular and most important act was his translation of the Holy Quran into simple Persian, the language of the land, so that people of the Sub-continent could understand and follow it. He studied the writings of each school-of-thought to understand their point of view, then wrote comprehensive volumes about what is fair and just in light of the teachings of Islam. He worked out a system of thought, beliefs, and values, on which all but the extremists could agree. He thus provided a spiritual basis for national cohesion.

Shah Wali Ullah trained students in different branches of Islamic knowledge and entrusted them with the teaching of students. He recommended the application of Ijtihad against blind Taqlid. He also interpreted Quran and Hadith according to the context of the times.

Shah Wali Ullah directed his teachings towards reorienting the Muslim society with the concepts of basic social justice, removing social inequalities, and balancing the iniquitous distribution of wealth. He established several branches of his school at Delhi for effective dissemination of his ideas. In his book "Hujjat-ullah-il-Balighah", he pinpointed the causes of chaos and disintegration of Muslim society. These were:

1. Pressure on public treasury, the emoluments given to various people who render no service to the state.

2. Heavy taxation on peasants, merchants, and workers, with the result that tax evasion was rampant. According to Shah Wali Ullah, a state can prosper only if there were light and reasonable taxes.

He wrote open letters to:

1. Mughal rulers, to give up their corrupt and inefficient practices.

2. Soldiers, to inculcate within them the spirit of Jihad.

3. Artisans, workers, and peasants, to remind them that the economic prosperity of the state depended on their labors.

4. The Emperor, asking him to teach a lesson to the Jats threatening the Mughal Empire. He also wrote and advised him not to give jagirs (land) to mansabdars who were not loyal to the state.

5. Masses, to be conscious of their duties and not to indulge in the accumulation of wealth.

Shah Wali Ullah tried to reconcile the basic differences amongst the different sections of the Muslims and considered the government as an essential means and agency for regeneration of the community. He wrote to Ahmad Shah Abdali; "...give up the life of ease. Draw the sword and do not to sheath it till the distinction is established between true faith and infidelity...".

His efforts resulted in the defeat of the Marhattas at the hands of Ahmad Shah Abdali and Najib-ud-Daula, in the third battle of Panipat in 1761.

Shah Wali Ullah was responsible for awakening in the community the desire to win back its moral fervor and maintain its purity. To rescue a community's conscience, belief and faith from destruction was no small achievement. Even after his death in 1762, his sons and followers carried on his work. Many future Islamic leaders and thinkers were inspired by his example.