Religious Thinkers and the Spread of Islam

Shah Waliullah, Syed Ahmad Barelvi and the Jihad (Mujahideen) movement, and Haji Shariatullah and the Faraizi Movement: the revival of Islam in the subcontinent in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Religious thinkers and the spread of Islam

Background: why a revival was needed

By the early 18th century the **Mughal Empire** was weakening (see chapter 2). Muslims had lost political power and many felt that their religion was in danger. Hindu customs had crept into Muslim life (for example spending lavishly on weddings and funerals, and honouring saints' tombs in ways that went beyond Islam), and the ulama were divided. The thinkers in this chapter tried to **purify Islam**, bring Muslims back to the **Quran and the Sunnah**, and restore their strength.

Thinker	Dates	Main contribution
Shah Waliullah	1703–1762	scholar and reformer; explained Islam in a way that fitted the political situation; urged unity
Syed Ahmad Barelvi	1786–1831	led the **Jihad (Mujahideen) movement** against Sikh rule in the Punjab and the North-West
Haji Shariatullah	1781–1840	founded the **Faraizi Movement** in Bengal

Shah Waliullah (1703–1762)

Who he was. Born in **Delhi**, the son of a scholar, Shah Abdul Rahim. He studied in Delhi and in Makkah and Madinah, and taught at the Madrasa Rahimiyya in Delhi.

His main work and ideas.

- He **translated the Quran into Persian** (the language that educated Muslims read) so that ordinary people could understand it (finished in **1738**). His sons **Shah Rafiuddin** and **Shah Abdul Qadir** later translated it into **Urdu**. His best-known book on Islamic philosophy is *Hujjat Allah al-Baligha*.
- He wrote on the **Hadith** and on how the four schools of law (**Hanafi, Maliki, Shafii, Hanbali**) could be understood fairly (*Al-Insaf*), and on the first caliphs (*Izalat al-Khifa*) to ease Sunni–Shia quarrels.
- He urged Muslims to return to the **Quran and the Hadith** and to use **ijtihad** (independent reasoning) where the texts did not give a clear answer.

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- He tried to **reduce the quarrels between the schools of law and between Sunnis and Shias**, and between the different Sufi orders, so that Muslims could unite.
- He criticised the **un-Islamic customs** among Muslims, and the **luxury of the nobles** and the heavy taxes that were ruining the peasants and merchants. He wanted a fairer economic system.

His role in the political situation. He saw that the Mughal Empire was collapsing and that the **Marathas** were a danger to Muslims. He wrote to **Ahmad Shah Abdali** of Afghanistan asking him to defend Muslim India, and also encouraged the Rohilla chief **Najib-ud-Daula** and the Nawab of Awadh, **Shuja-ud-Daula**, to resist the Marathas. Abdali defeated the Marathas at the **Third Battle of Panipat (1761)**.

His influence. His family and followers carried on his work (his son **Shah Abdul Aziz** led the school in Delhi), and his ideas inspired later movements, including the Jihad movement of Syed Ahmad Barelvi and the **Deoband** school (founded 1866). He is seen as the first of the great Muslim revivalists of the period.

> **Shah Waliullah tried to revive Islam by returning to the Quran and Sunnah, translating the Quran, ending sectarian quarrels, and calling for Muslim unity. He also saw the political danger and asked Ahmad Shah Abdali to protect Muslims.**

Syed Ahmad Barelvi and the Jihad (Mujahideen) movement

Who he was. Syed Ahmad was born in **Rae Bareli** (in present-day Uttar Pradesh) in 1786. He studied in Delhi under **Shah Abdul Aziz**, the son of Shah Waliullah. He then served for a time in the army of **Amir Khan** (a Pathan chieftain), where he learned military skills and saw how the British were taking over.

His aims. To revive Islam, remove un-Islamic customs and practices, and **establish a state governed by Islamic law**. He believed that the Muslims of the Punjab were suffering under **Sikh rule** under Ranjit Singh, and that **jihad** against the Sikhs was a duty.

The movement.

- He travelled widely, preaching and gathering followers, and won the support of many Muslims, including **Shah Ismail Shaheed** (a grandson of Shah Waliullah) and **Maulana Abdul Hayee**.
- In **1826** he set out from Rae Bareli with his followers, on a long journey through **Sindh and Balochistan** to the North-West Frontier. This was the start of the **Mujahideen** movement.
- He made his base in the Frontier region (around Peshawar and the Yusufzai area). In **December 1826** the Mujahideen attacked a Sikh force under **Budh Singh** at **Akora Khattak** and won; the later victory at **Hazro** added to his standing. In **January 1827** he was proclaimed **Imam** and set up an Islamic government. For a time his Mujahideen took **Peshawar** (1830), and he began to enforce Islamic law.
- **Ranjit Singh** won over the Peshawar chiefs (**Yar Muhammad Khan** and **Sultan Muhammad Khan**). Syed Ahmad restored Sultan Muhammad to Peshawar, but he turned traitor and many Mujahideen were killed, which forced Syed Ahmad to move to **Balakot**.

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Why it failed.

- Some Pathan chiefs and tribes, who disliked the strict rules (including changes to local customs, and the demand for taxes), turned against him. Some betrayed the Mujahideen to the Sikhs.
- The Sikh army was **better organised and armed**.
- The Mujahideen were short of money and supplies.

The end. Syed Ahmad Barelvi and Shah Ismail were killed in the **Battle of Balakot** on **6 May 1831**, fighting the Sikhs. The movement continued under his followers for many years, with a base at **Sittana**, and it played a part in later resistance to the British.

Importance. It showed that Muslims were ready to fight for their faith, kept the idea of jihad and Islamic government alive, and inspired the Muslims of the North-West. It also helped to revive Islam and **create a sense of separate identity**, which was important to the later Pakistan Movement.

> NOTE
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> If a question asks how successful the movement was, argue both ways: it **failed** to set up a lasting state and its leaders were killed at Balakot, but it **succeeded** in reviving religious feeling and keeping resistance alive.

Haji Shariatullah and the Faraizi Movement

Who he was. Born in **Faridpur** in Bengal in 1781. He went to **Makkah** (about 1799) and spent some 20 years there studying Islam (where he met the strict reforming ideas of the **Wahhabi** movement), then returned to Bengal in about **1818** to preach.

The Faraizi Movement. The name comes from **faraiz**, meaning the **obligatory duties** of Islam. He told Bengali Muslims to follow these duties strictly (prayer, fasting, zakat, Hajj) and to give up un-Islamic practices that they had picked up from **Hindu** neighbours (such as certain festivals, rituals and the worship of saints).

Its social and economic side.

- Most Muslim peasants in Bengal were poor and were exploited by **Hindu landlords (zamindars)**, who charged illegal taxes (including for Hindu festivals) and indigo planters. Haji Shariatullah told peasants that the **land belonged to God** and that they should not pay illegal taxes.
- He taught that India under the British had become **Dar-ul-Harb** (a land of war), so Friday and Eid prayers could not be properly held. (His followers later disagreed about this.)

Leadership after him. After his death in **1840**, his son **Dudu Miyan** (Muhammad Mohsin, 1819–1862) took over. He organised the peasants into a **well-disciplined group**, appointing **khalifas** (local leaders) who reported to him, mainly in the **Dhaka, Faridpur and Pabna** districts. He opposed the illegal taxes,

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such as the one charged for **Hindu festivals** (for example the Durga puja), and led resistance to the zamindars and indigo planters. He was arrested several times, including in **1857**, and died in 1862.

Titu Mir (Bengal)

Mir Nisar Ali, known as Titu Mir (1782–1831), was another Bengali Muslim reformer. After the Hajj he preached against un-Islamic customs and defended poor Muslim peasants against the Hindu landlord **Krishna Deva Rai** and the indigo planters. His base was a bamboo fort at **Narkelbaria**, near Calcutta. When his followers resisted, the British sent troops and he was killed in **1831**. He is remembered as a martyr who stood up for the peasants.

Importance. The movement **awakened Bengali Muslims** to their religion and to their rights. It was the first mass movement in Bengal that was also **religious and social**. After the death of Dudu Miyan, the movement lost strength, and many followers joined the **Ahl-e-Hadith** or other movements. It was less political than the Jihad movement.

How successful were the religious thinkers?

Successes	Limits
revived **religious feeling** and a sense of Muslim identity	none of them **restored Muslim political power**
purified some customs; **Quran** made more accessible	the **Jihad movement** was defeated at Balakot
inspired later movements (Deoband, Aligarh, Khilafat)	**ulama remained divided**; some opposed reform
raised the economic problems of the **poor peasants** in Bengal	the Faraizi movement faded after Dudu Miyan

> **TRY IT**
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> How important were the religious reforms of Shah Waliullah?

Outline. He translated the Quran into Persian, called for a return to the Quran and Sunnah, tried to unite the schools of thought, and criticised luxury and un-Islamic customs. He also looked at the **political and economic causes** of decline and called for help from Ahmad Shah Abdali against the Marathas.
Judgement: very important, as he gave the basis for later movements, although he could not stop the **political decline** of the Mughals.

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