



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
 ISSN Online: 2394-5869
 Impact Factor: 8.4
 IJAR 2020; 6(11): 378-381
www.allresearchjournal.com
 Received: 22-09-2020
 Accepted: 25-10-2020

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Shah waliullah: The pioneer of Qurān study in India

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Abstract

This paper deals with a thorough overview on Shah Waliullah (1703 – 1762 AD) with special reference to his thoughts about the study and the teaching-learning methods of the Holy Qurān and Sunnah. He is an orthodox Sunni, a prolific writer, a well-known social reformer and an Islamic philosopher of eighteenth century undivided India. His father as well as his ancestors had a deep attention and concern with the Islamic learning and sciences. Shah Waliullah studied basically under the proper guidance of his father Shah Abdur Rahim and within a short span of time he became the graduate in almost all fundamental subjects necessary for Islamic learning. After the sad demise of his father in 1719, he started to teach in Rahimiya College, known as *Al-Madrassa al-Rahīmiya*, of Delhi founded by his father. Unlike others, he changed the ongoing method(s) and designed a new curriculum and teaching methodology for Islamic sciences. He deserves in his writing the credit of a good number of important books in Arabic and Persian most of which have been translated and further interpreted into Arabic, English and Urdu languages and also have been still prescribed as reference or/and text books in various government and non-government madrasas and universities all over the world. He is found to be more inquisitive than to be a mere learner of a subject. His books *Al-Fauzul-Kabīr fī Usūl al-Tafsīr*, *Hujjatullāhil-Bāliḡah*, *Fath al-Rahman fī Tarjama al-Qurān* and *Anfāsul-‘Arīfīn* rightly witness this fact. His writings are basically based on two fundamental trends; viz. commentary and philosophical. His books are regarded as the treatise of Islamic sciences which deal with the knowledge of the Holy Qurān, Tradition, *Fiqh* (Jurisprudence), History and *Taşawwuf* (Islamic Mysticism).

Keywords: Raḥīmiya college, commentary, exegesis, revelation, *Ulūmul-Quran*, conversance, divine, obscure, trend, *Tahrīf*

1. Introduction

It is known to all that Islam emphasizes on acquiring knowledge from cradle to grave. The very first word revealed unto the Prophet was ‘*iqra*’ which implies ‘reading’, ‘learning’, ‘seeking knowledge’, ‘being educated’ or ‘educating oneself’, etc. In many Qurānic verses, it is repeatedly given commands, directly or indirectly, for education. The Holy Prophet has also encouraged for the same and strongly suggested that acquiring knowledge is mandatory for each and every Muslims. On the other hand, we find that since the inception of the Quran revelation, the righteous companions of the Holy Prophet, i.e. the Arabs, were always busy themselves to protect the Holy Qurān and they materialized with its commands in their lives without carrying out any further approach for learning its language due to their innate abilities. But when Islam extended more widely even beyond the Arab border, and the non-Arab people started to know about the Qurān and its related matters, it needed to design further course of studies or subjects as the precondition and pre-requisites for acquiring any knowledge about the two fundamental bases of Islam, i.e. the Qurān and Tradition. Keeping all these and to fulfill the obligation imposed by the Supreme Authority, the Islamic thinkers established many centers for studying the Holy Quran and the Tradition throughout the world. Accordingly, various subjects were invented by the wise thinkers and many books have been written through the ages for the respective subjects. These have been also subsequently modified as per need of the hour.

Like other parts of the Muslim countries, there were a good number of madrasas and centers set up in Central Asia including Indian sub-continent. It is observed that the well-known madrasa curriculum *Dars-e-Nezami* was also prevailed in India during the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb comprising the subjects like Arabic Grammar, *Balaghat*, Philosophy, Logic, Theology, *Fiqh*, *Usul-e-Fiqh*, *Tafseer*, *Hadiṭ*, Medicine, *Taşawwuf*, Mathematics and Geometry.

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Just after that period, Shah Waliullah (1703-1762) of Delhi came of a respected family as an Islamic reformer in India. He saw various difficulties in studying the Qurān in this land in respect of the ongoing pedagogic of Islamic learning and sciences. The contemporary people had a concept about the Qurān that it is merely a Book for reading only. So Shah Waliullah paid proper attention to reform the ongoing syllabus for madrasa education giving special emphasize on the study of the Qurān. He evolved a new plan of action for better understanding of the Islamic sciences. He wrote many important books on the Holy Qurān, Tradition and various fields of study about Islamic learning and teaching. We find that he is successful in his endeavor to the Qurān study as a whole through his writings, ideas and thoughts.

2. Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to discuss and analyze how far Shah Waliullah deserves the credit of championship for endeavouring to establish an exemplary way to the study of the Holy Qurān.

3. Material resources and Methodology

Both the primary and secondary sources of data available in Arabic, English and Urdu languages will be consulted for the study of this topic. As to follow up the methodology to this article, both descriptive and historical analysis research design will be accepted.

4. Results and Discussion

Abul Faiḍ Qutb al-Din Ahmad bin Abdur Rahim Al-Faruqī Al-Dehlawi Al-Hindi, popularly known as Shah Waliullah, came of a respected family on 4th Shawwal 1114 AH / 21st February 1703 AD at Phulat of Muzaffarnagar just before four years of Alamgir's death. His ancestors had migrated from Arabia to Iran and then to India due to the Tatar's invasion. His grandfather was a deep lover of the Holy Qurān and his father Abdur Rahim was also famous for his profound knowledge in Hadith and Islamic Jurisprudence. In the proper care of such a famous, pious and learned father, Shah Waliullah was brought up to great heights of eminence.

In fact, Shah Waliullah was one of the most outstanding glaring stars in the history of Islam in Indian subcontinent and also an Islamic reformer of the 12th century Hegira in Islamic history. He is compared with Imam Al-Ġazzali and Šeikhul-Islam Ibn Taimiya in Islamic India. Almighty Allah provided in his mind the power of motivation for starting the educational spirit and reformative movement in this land which had no other alternative still now as well as in Indian Muslim history.

Shah Waliullah had the golden chance to learn the Holy Qurān by heart at an age of 10 years, alternately 7 years, and at the age of 15 he got the graduation in Islamic knowledge from the *Al-Madrasa al-Rahīmiya* (Rahimiya College) of Delhi already founded by his father Abdur Rahim (1644-1719 AD). Since the syllabus of the Madrasa had a little stress on Qurānic study, it did not give any importance to its translation and commentary. So Shah Waliullah had a great opportunity to deliver lectures on the lessons of the Holy Qurān which opened its knowledge for him. After being appointed as a teacher in that College, Shah Waliullah taught various Islamic Sciences and he had brought about many important tasks for the general good of the contemporary Muslim *Ummah* that enabled them to fulfill

the curiosity and deficiencies in religious education to the practical need of the people. At that time, Shah Waliullah reformed the wrong belief and customs related to Islamic behaviours to guide the Muslim community properly on the due path of Islam disclosing true belief and faith for a Muslim according to the opinion of the *Ahl al-Sunnat wal-Jama't* sect. And at the same time, he tried to remove the belief of the suspicious false sects. Accordingly, he wrote the book *Izalatul-Kafa'an Kilafatil-Kulafa'* (إزالة الخفاء عن خلافة الخلفاء) in Persian language. This book basically deals with the traditional and historical themes regarding Islamic Caliphate also.

Shah Waliullah has vital contribution to the field of the Holy Qurān. At the time of this scholar, most of the people believed that the Qurān is a sacred religious Book only for reading or reciting. They did not give much importance to the meaning and mysteries of the Book. So, Shah Waliullah called the people to pay much attention to the theories and principles of the Qurān commentary spreading its original teaching and wrote for the interest of the thirsty Muslim community a perfect and very much reliable book on the theoretical study of the Qurān Commentary *Al-Fauzul-Kabīr fī Usūl al-Tafsīr* (الفوز الكبير في أصول التفسير) in Persian language. This book witnesses his eminence on the subject concerned. He taught himself this at that Madrasa due to the reason that it has so much deep secrets and sciences which could not be disclosed more clearly except the author himself, though the book is concise and has a few pages only. The book discusses the interpretations of the Abbreviated Letters, the secrecy of the stories of the Messengers and the theories of the abrogation, etc. It consists of five chapters.

The first chapter deals with the five sciences proclaimed in the Holy Qurān in the style of the well-prepared quotations. These five sciences are as follows:

1. ***Ilm al-Ahkām* (علم الأحكام):** The Science of Injunction. This deals with *Halāl, Harām, Farḍ, Wājib, Mustahab, Makrūh*, etc.; i.e. the matters which are to be mandatorily or mildly carried out and refrained from.
2. ***Ilm al-Jadal* (علم الجدل):** The Science of Disputation, i.e. the Science of Scholastic Theology. It deals with the establishing protest over the false religions and to criticize the belief of Christians, Jews, etc.
3. ***Ilm al-Taḍkīr bi Ālā-illah* (علم التذكير بآلاء الله):** The Science of reminding about Divine Favours. It deals with the Divine Signs available in this universe and in human souls until the Truth becomes manifest to them and to remind them of His innumerable favours toward them.
4. ***Ilm al-Taḍkīr bi Ayyāmillah* (علم التذكير بأيام الله):** The Science of reminding about the Events that God had caused to take place in the past ages which indicate the Power and Sovereignty of Allah (SWT) and with of the fact which prove that nobody shares with Him in creation and action.
5. ***Ilm al-Taḍkīr bil-Maut wa mā Ba'dahu* (علم التذكير بالموت وما بعده):** The Science of reminding the Human Being of Death and all about Thereafter.

The second chapter of the book deals with the reasons for observing secrecy in the arrangement of the Qurānic Verses. This also includes the Meaning of the Qurān, Supersession, Occasion of Revelation, points of the Obscurity, etc.

The third chapter deals with the beauties of the arrangement, elucidation and its wonderful style, etc.

The fourth chapter includes the exegesis in the subject of the commentary and a solution to the differences between commentaries of Prophet's companions and of their immediate followers.

The fifth chapter relates to the Rarities (غرائب) of the Qurān and to the reasons of the Revelation of various Verses to a great extensive necessity. This chapter is in the form of a separate treatise.

This valuable asset in the field of theoretical study of the Holy Qurān is written by the scholar in Persian – the contemporary language of the period. Its original Persian text, for further need of the people has been translated into other languages. Allama Muhammad Muneer al-Dameshquee approached for its Arabic translation. But he had left the fifth lesson of its fourth section which was translated later on by an Indian scholar A'jaz 'Ali, former Professor of Darul-Ulūm Deoband. Besides, the Arabic translation work of Muneer al-Dameshquee has also been explained in Arabic elaborately by Moulana Sa'īd Ahmad Palanpuri, a reputed repository of Darul-Ulūm Deoband.

It is a fact that the Holy Qurān is a complete guide and code of life, a perfect universal and common Law; and the main source of many sciences and subjects. Somebody has rightly commented:

جميع العلم في القرآن لكن * تقاصرت عنه افهام الرجال

All sciences are available in the Qurān, yet the understanding of the people shrinks of it.

Accordingly, the Islamic scholars have founded many subjects to understand the Book, and they have also written various books in particular subjects the collection of which is known as *Ulūmul-Qurān* (the Sciences of the Qurān or the Principles of the Quran Commentary). So to share in this holy task and make understand the people generally and the Muslim community especially of undivided India of that age comprehensively, Shah Waliullah stood for. Every Indian whoever wants to say or write something about the Holy Qurān he must follow Shah Waliullah directly or indirectly in this respect.

Another important work of Shah Waliullah in the field of Qurān study is *Fath al-Kabīr bima lā Budda min Hifẓihī fī Ilm al-Tafsīr* (فتح الخبير بما لا بد من حفظه في علم التفسير). Written in Arabic, this book articulates the important exegesis of the Holy Qurān especially in accordance with the Mohammadan Traditions reported by the *Hibrul-Ummah* Ibn Abbas. Further, the author has solved in this book various Mysteries, Obscurities of the Holy Qurān and also expanded the reasons of *Wahi* (Revelation). This booklet, though brief, is a very comprehensive and extra-ordinary commentary on the Qurān. It is the first work of its kind written in Arabic language in India.

The people of Shah's contemporary India were lacking of a pure translation of the Qurān. They did not know the Arabic language to understand the meaning of the Qurān. So the well-versed scholar of that age, Shah Waliullah translated the Holy Qurān into Persian language naming *Fath al-Rahman fī Tarjama al-Qurān* (فتح الرحمن في ترجمة القرآن). This work was done during his taking charge of Raḥimiya College of Delhi. He is considered as the first of all Indian scholars to stand for this holy work. This is a very comprehensive translation work of the same. The scholar

has also given important footnotes and anecdotes along with it which are very useful and helpful for a reader to comprehend the Holy Book.

He has other contributions to the field of Qurānic studies; like *A'rab al-Qurān* (إعراب القرآن) and *Al-Zahrāween* (الزهراوين) which is the commentary of the two *Sūras* (Chapters) of the Holy Qurān; viz. *Al-Baqara* and *Āle 'Imran*.

In addition to these valuable works, Shah Waliullah has also written in Arabic *Ta'weel al-Ahādīṭ* (تأويل الأحاديث), a booklet for his own study. It deals with the orientation of the stories of Messengers (PBUT) of God and also with the discussion of the elements originated from the ability of both the messengers and the peoples; this book also deals with the devices which the Divine sagacity has concerted in the period of the Messenger concerned.

During the period of Shah Waliullah, as the general condition of India was being badly continued, the educational and institutional situation of the Muslims was extremely backward. The books on Logic, like *Ṣadra*, *Quaḍī Mubārak*, *Shams-e-Bazīḡa* and their footnotes, explanations were attentively taught in the institutions; no attention was paid to the original wisdom of the learning of the Qurān and Sunnah. There was no more instruction on *Deeniyaat* (Fundamentals of Islam) except some books on *Fiqh* (Jurisprudence). Only the *Miškāt al-Maṣābeeh* and *Maṣāriq al-Anwar* were taught as the sacred relics. And the Holy Qurān was almost out of their curriculum. So the scholar Shah Waliullah paid attention to that condition after returning from his pilgrimage. He did not accept that kind of instruction in the then Islamic institutions; rather he argued that the curriculum of Islamic institutions must include the teaching of the Holy Qurān as a compulsory subject. He started to teach in the Madrasa in a new style changing the old curriculum of the institutions of that age; and put the original Islamic instruction giving more emphasize on the teaching of Qurān and Sunnah. He firmly believed that the instruction of an Islamic institution should provide the materials of Qurān study as basic learning on it; and it should begin with its accurate translation together with a brief explanation in the vernacular language itself. So to reach this goal and to implement the programme, Shah Waliullah tried his best and stood for that work.

Whoever intends to have a thorough study on the personality of Shah Waliullah, he must find two remarkable trends in his writings. Accordingly, he can be regarded as a great interpreter in one hand, while he is found as a philosopher on the other. His philosophical trend of writing is sometimes found set with his interpretative trend, and sometimes the both trends exist independently without any contradiction. His basic attitude toward the Holy Qurān is that it is a Book compiled of some small speeches or sermons in a single chapter with well-connected, symmetrical and harmonious order. This was done by the Holy Prophet exactly in accordance with the great intention of God in conformity with the expression of the contemporary Arabs.

And the idea of Shah Waliullah regarding the teaching of the Holy Qurān was of two standards for three stages of books; one is for the beginners and another is for the specialists. So he opines that the more illustrative or explanatory books are not useful for the students of primary stage. A teacher should teach the students – who have knowledge of fundamentals of Arabic language – the text of

the Qurān directly with help of dictionaries or a little illustrations of the vocabularies. And for the students of subsequent stage, it is feasible for a teacher to teach them such books which deal with more linguistic illustrations of vocabularies and literary styles. Then for the students of advanced stage, Shah Waliullah suggests that there is no objection to take use of the books of commentary nature on the Qurān, rather it is important to have such books while teaching them.

Regarding the Obscure Verses of the Qurān (*Mutašābihāt*), Shah Waliullah's viewpoint is like the opinions of the earlier *Ulamā*, like Imam Malik, Tūri, Abdullah bin Mubarak, etc. So unlike the opinion of the masses, he says that the interpretation of the Obscure Verses is possible for a person having thorough conversance in Qurānic knowledge which is termed as *Rusukh fi al-'Ilm*, and it is never a digressive talking. Further, his view about the *Tahrifāt* (Alterations in the commentary occur in Divine Books) is that it is semantic or explanatory which was done by the Christians and the Jews. The Divine Books, according to him, appeared as the tantamount to the Divine speaking, the meanings of which were the instincts or inspirations to some selected peoples; *i.e.* Prophets / Messengers, and they interpret it in their own words or languages. Accordingly, he says in favour of survival of the earlier Books, however he regards this as like as the two famous canonical books of Tradition; Bukhari and Muslim.

The most *Ulamā* of Shah Waliullah's contemporary period were well-versed in Greek Philosophy, they were not bothered with the Sharia Sciences originated from the Holy Qurān and Sunnah. They spoke everyday with the Greek Philosophy and with the sciences originated from the arguments. Their minds were covered with those subjects forgetting the fundamental sciences – Qurān and Sunnah. Shah Waliullah realized the dangerous defects. He disclosed the mysteries of Shariah so that they might be able to accept it willingly. In this regard, Shah Waliullah wrote the valuable book *Hujjatullāhil-Bāliḡah* (حجة الله البالغة). This is the masterpiece of the scholar in the field of the fundamental principles of Islamic disciplines including the mysteries of the Islamic sciences; like, *Fiqh*, *Kalām*, *Taşawwuf*, Philosophy, and History based on the Holy Qurān and Sunnah. It had a vital role to turn away the 18th century Muslim intellectuals from the dangerous influence of the Greek and other non-Islamic philosophy and ideology. This work, along with his another important work *Al-Budur al-Baziġa* (البيدور البازغة), witness the great contribution of the author to the study of the Qurān.

The scholar Shah Waliullah believed that the interpretation of the teaching of the Islamic principles should be comprehensively imparted in the contemporary academic and literary styles for the better interest of the people. So the author for this goal too began writing in local language Persian with local idioms.

5. Conclusion

To conclude we may say that Shah Waliullah has an unforgettable important position in the field of surviving the teaching and learning of the actual facts implicit in the Holy Book and Sunnah. All the Islamic readers belonging to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are always in debt to the scholar. So they should be ever grateful to him.

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