Shah Waliullah (1703-62): notes and exam answers for 2059

Shah Waliullah is the first of the religious reformers in the Cambridge O Level Pakistan Studies (2059) Paper 1 syllabus, under the topic of the decline of the Mughal Empire and the efforts to revive Islam in the subcontinent. Questions ask what he did, why he did it and how important his work was.

1. Life and education

1.1 Early life

- Born in Delhi on 21 February 1703, four years before the death of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (1707). His given name was Qutb-ud-Din Ahmad; he is known by the title Shah Waliullah.
- His father, Shah Abdur Rahim, was a respected scholar who founded the **Madrasa-i-Rahimiya** in Delhi.
- He memorised the Quran as a young boy and studied Arabic, Persian, Islamic law (fiqh), Hadith, tafsir (commentary on the Quran), logic and Sufism under his father. He is usually said to have completed his formal studies by about the age of 15.

1.2 Teacher and scholar

- After his father died in 1719, he took charge of the Madrasa-i-Rahimiya and taught there for about twelve years.
- In 1730-31 he travelled to Arabia to perform Hajj and stayed in the Hijaz (Makkah and Madinah) for over a year, studying Hadith under leading scholars, notably Shaikh Abu Tahir Muhammad bin Ibrahim al-Kurdi in Madinah.
- He returned to Delhi in 1732 convinced that Muslims of the subcontinent had to return to the Quran and Sunnah, and devoted the rest of his life to teaching, writing and reform.
- He died in Delhi in 1762.

> **Learn these key dates:** 1703 born in Delhi; 1707 death of Aurangzeb; 1719 takes over Madrasa-i-Rahimiya; 1730-32 Hajj and study in Arabia; 1739 Nadir Shah sacks Delhi; 1761 Third Battle of Panipat; 1762 death.

2. The state of Muslims in his time

2.1 Political decline

- **Weak successors:** after 1707 a series of short-lived emperors were placed on the throne and removed by rival nobles. Wars of succession weakened the empire and drained the treasury.
- **Loss of provinces:** governors of provinces such as Bengal, Awadh and the Deccan became virtually independent.
- **Rising non-Muslim powers:** the Marathas expanded north from the Deccan and threatened

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Delhi; the Sikhs grew powerful in the Punjab; the Jats raided around Agra and Delhi.

- **Foreign invasion:** in 1739 the Persian ruler Nadir Shah invaded, sacked Delhi, killed thousands and carried off huge treasure, including the Peacock Throne.
- **The British:** the East India Company was gaining power in Bengal, especially after the Battle of Plassey in 1757.

2.2 Religious and social decline

- **Ignorance of the Quran:** the Quran was read in Arabic, which most Muslims did not understand, so they did not know its teachings directly.
- **Un-Islamic practices:** many customs had been absorbed from Hindu society and from distorted forms of Sufism, such as excessive veneration of shrines and saints.
- **Sectarian division:** there was bitter rivalry between Sunni and Shia Muslims, and between followers of different schools of Islamic law, which weakened Muslim unity.
- **Moral decline of the elite:** many nobles lived in luxury and pursued their own interests rather than the good of the community.

Shah Waliullah believed that the political decline of the Muslims was a result of their religious and moral decline. Reviving true Islam was therefore, in his view, the first step to reviving Muslim power.

3. His religious and scholarly work

3.1 Translation of the Quran into Persian

- Shah Waliullah translated the Quran into Persian, the language of educated Muslims in the subcontinent at the time. The translation is known as **Fath-ur-Rahman**, completed in the late 1730s.
- **Purpose:** to allow Muslims to understand the Quran for themselves instead of depending on others, so that they could follow its teachings and abandon practices that had no basis in it.
- **Reaction:** some ulema strongly opposed it, arguing that the Quran should not be translated; he faced hostility for it. Over time, however, it was widely accepted.
- **Influence:** it set a precedent. His sons later translated the Quran into Urdu: Shah Rafi-ud-Din produced a literal translation and Shah Abdul Qadir an idiomatic one. This made the Quran accessible to ordinary Muslims as Urdu spread.

3.2 Hujjat-Allah-il-Baligha

> **Hujjat-Allah-il-Baligha** ("The Conclusive Argument of God"): Shah Waliullah's best-known book, written in Arabic, which explains the reasons behind Islamic teachings and laws and argues that Islam provides a complete system for the moral, social, economic and political life of individuals and society.

- It discusses the purpose of religious duties, the principles of a just society and the duties of rulers.
- It includes economic ideas: he criticised heavy taxation of peasants and workers, the luxury of the nobility and the concentration of wealth, and argued that a just economy was necessary for

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a healthy society.

3.3 Other writings

He is usually credited with more than 50 books (often given as 51) in Arabic and Persian. The ones most often named are:

Work	Subject
Izalat-ul-Khifa an Khilafat-il-Khulafa	The caliphate and the lives of the first four (Rightly Guided) Caliphs, presented as a model of government
Al-Fauz-ul-Kabir fi Usul-it-Tafsir	The principles of interpreting the Quran
Al-Musawwa and Al-Musaffa	Commentaries on the Muwatta, the Hadith collection of Imam Malik
Al-Insaf fi Bayan Sabab-il-Ikhtilaf	The causes of differences between the schools of Islamic law, written to reduce conflict between them

3.4 Teaching and training scholars

- He reorganised teaching at the Madrasa-i-Rahimiya, giving more importance to the Quran and Hadith.
- He trained students who spread his ideas across the subcontinent and carried his reforms forward after his death.

3.5 Promoting unity among Muslims

- He tried to reduce sectarian conflict. He respected all four Sunni schools of law and urged scholars to concentrate on what they shared rather than on their differences.
- He accepted the use of **ijtihad** (independent reasoning by qualified scholars) to apply Islamic principles to new circumstances, rather than rigidly following one school (taqlid) in every matter.
- He tried to bring Sufism back in line with the Shariah, rejecting practices he considered un-Islamic, and sought to reconcile the competing Sufi doctrines of Wahdat-ul-Wujud and Wahdat-ul-Shuhud.

4. His political role

4.1 Letters to rulers and nobles

Shah Waliullah believed that the revival of Islam needed political strength as well as religious reform. He wrote letters to Muslim rulers and nobles urging them to unite, lead moral lives, govern justly and defend the Muslim community. These included the Rohilla leader **Najib-ud-Daula** and, most famously, **Ahmad Shah Abdali**, the ruler of Afghanistan.

4.2 Ahmad Shah Abdali and the Third Battle of Panipat (1761)

- By the 1750s the Marathas were the strongest power in northern India and controlled much of the area around Delhi. Shah Waliullah saw them as the main threat to the Muslims.
- He wrote to Ahmad Shah Abdali inviting him to come to India and break Maratha power.

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- Abdali invaded and, with the support of Muslim allies including Najib-ud-Daula, decisively defeated the Marathas at the **Third Battle of Panipat on 14 January 1761**.
- **Results:** Maratha expansion in the north was halted and they never fully recovered their position there. However, Abdali soon returned to Afghanistan; he did not restore Mughal power, and the Sikhs and later the British filled the gap. The victory removed one threat but did not revive Muslim political power.

5. Legacy for later reformers

- **His family:** his son **Shah Abdul Aziz** continued the Madrasa-i-Rahimiya and his work, and in the early nineteenth century issued a fatwa declaring that India under British control had become Dar-ul-Harb (a land where Islam could not be freely practised). His other sons, Shah Rafi-ud-Din and Shah Abdul Qadir, translated the Quran into Urdu. His grandson **Shah Ismail Shaheed** became a leader of the Jihad Movement.
- **The Jihad Movement: Syed Ahmad Shaheed Barelvi** was a pupil of Shah Abdul Aziz and was inspired by Shah Waliullah's ideas. His movement against the Sikhs in the north-west, which ended at the Battle of Balakot in 1831, grew out of the Waliullah school.
- **Deoband:** the scholars who founded the Darul Uloom at Deoband in 1867 regarded themselves as heirs of Shah Waliullah's tradition of teaching the Quran and Hadith.
- **Ideas:** his insistence on returning to the Quran and Sunnah, his use of ijtihad, his concern for Muslim unity and his belief that religious and political revival went together influenced Muslim thinkers for the next two centuries.

6. Model exam answers

6.1 A 4-mark answer

Question: Describe Shah Waliullah's work to make the Quran better understood by Muslims. [4]

Model answer: Most Muslims in the subcontinent could not read Arabic, so they recited the Quran without understanding it. Shah Waliullah translated the Quran into Persian, the language of educated Muslims at the time; his translation was called Fath-ur-Rahman. Some ulema opposed the translation strongly, but it became widely used. He also wrote Al-Fauz-ul-Kabir on the principles of interpreting the Quran, and he taught the Quran and Hadith at the Madrasa-i-Rahimiya. His sons Shah Rafi-ud-Din and Shah Abdul Qadir continued his work by translating the Quran into Urdu.

6.2 A 7-mark answer

Question: Why did Shah Waliullah work to revive Islam in the subcontinent? [7]

Model answer: One reason was the political decline of the Muslims after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707. Weak emperors, wars of succession and independent governors left the Mughal Empire unable to protect Muslims, while the Marathas, Sikhs and Jats grew stronger. The sack of Delhi by Nadir Shah in 1739 showed how helpless Muslim rule had become. Shah Waliullah believed that

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this political collapse was a result of religious and moral decline, so reviving Islam was the way to restore Muslim strength.

A second reason was that Muslims did not understand their religion. The Quran was in Arabic, which most people could not understand, so they could not follow its teachings directly. As a result, many un-Islamic customs borrowed from Hinduism and from corrupted Sufi practices had spread. He wanted Muslims to return to the pure teachings of the Quran and Sunnah, which is why he translated the Quran into Persian.

A third reason was the division among Muslims. Sunni and Shia Muslims, and followers of the different schools of Islamic law, were in bitter dispute. This disunity weakened the community at a time when it faced serious threats. He wanted to reduce these quarrels so that Muslims could act together, and he wrote works such as Al-Insaf to show that differences between the schools of law need not divide them.

6.3 A 14-mark answer

Question: "Shah Waliullah's translation of the Quran into Persian was the most important part of his contribution to the revival of Islam." Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer. [14]

Model answer: The translation of the Quran was very important. Before it, most Muslims in the subcontinent could not understand the Quran because it was in Arabic, and so they relied on religious leaders who were not always reliable. Fath-ur-Rahman made the meaning of the Quran available in Persian, the language of educated Muslims. This allowed people to understand Islamic teachings for themselves and to recognise customs that had no basis in Islam. It also set an example that his sons followed when they translated the Quran into Urdu, which reached far more ordinary people. The translation therefore went to the root of the problem as Shah Waliullah saw it: ignorance of the true teachings of Islam.

However, his writings were also very important. Hujjat-Allah-il-Baligha explained the reasons behind Islamic laws and presented Islam as a complete system covering moral, social, economic and political life. Books such as Izalat-ul-Khifa, Al-Fauz-ul-Kabir and his commentaries on the Muwatta strengthened the study of Hadith and tafsir. These works reached scholars, who then taught others, so their influence spread widely and lasted.

His work for Muslim unity was also significant. By encouraging respect between the schools of law, accepting ijtihad and trying to reduce sectarian conflict, he tried to remove the divisions that weakened the community. A divided community could not be revived however well it understood the Quran.

His political work was important too. Through his letters to Ahmad Shah Abdali he helped bring about the defeat of the Marathas at the Third Battle of Panipat in 1761. This removed the immediate threat of Maratha control over Delhi. However, Abdali returned to Afghanistan and Mughal power was not restored, so the political side of his work had only limited and short-term results.

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Perhaps his most lasting contribution was the scholars he trained and the family tradition he founded. Shah Abdul Aziz, Shah Rafi-ud-Din and Shah Abdul Qadir carried his work forward, and Syed Ahmad Shaheed Barelvi, a pupil of Shah Abdul Aziz, led the Jihad Movement. The founders of Deoband also saw themselves as continuing his tradition.

In conclusion, I agree that the translation was the most important part of his contribution, because it addressed the central problem he identified, ignorance of the Quran, and made all his other aims possible. Unity, good government and revival of Muslim power all depended on Muslims first understanding their religion. His writings and students then spread and preserved this understanding, while his political efforts, although bold, had the least lasting effect.

Why it scores well: it explains the factor in the question, explains at least three other factors with specific detail, and reaches a supported judgement that says why one factor was more important than the others. A different judgement (for example, that his students had the greatest long-term effect) would earn equal credit if equally well supported.

Quick check

1. State the year and place of Shah Waliullah's birth.
2. Name his father and the madrasa his father founded.
3. Where did Shah Waliullah study between 1730 and 1732, and why was this important for his later work?
4. Describe two religious problems facing Muslims in the subcontinent in the early eighteenth century.
5. Name his translation of the Quran and state the language into which it was translated.
6. Explain why some ulema opposed the translation of the Quran.
7. What is Hujjat-Allah-il-Baligha? Describe two of its themes.
8. Describe Shah Waliullah's efforts to unite the Muslim community.
9. Why did Shah Waliullah write to Ahmad Shah Abdali? [7]
10. Explain why the Third Battle of Panipat did not restore Muslim political power.
11. Name three members of Shah Waliullah's family who continued his work, and state what each did.

1. 1703 (21 February), in Delhi.

2. His father was Shah Abdur Rahim, who founded the Madrasa-i-Rahimiya in Delhi.

3. He was in the Hijaz (Makkah and Madinah), where he performed Hajj and studied Hadith under leading scholars such as Shaikh Abu Tahir in Madinah. This deepened his knowledge of the Hadith and convinced him that Muslims of the subcontinent needed to return to the Quran and Sunnah, which shaped his translation, writings and teaching after he returned to Delhi in 1732.

4. Any two: most Muslims could not understand the Quran because it was in Arabic; un-Islamic customs from Hindu society and distorted Sufi practices such as excessive veneration of shrines had spread; Muslims were divided between Sunni and Shia and between schools of law; the

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nobility had declined morally and neglected religious duties.

5. Fath-ur-Rahman, translated into Persian.

6. Some ulema believed the Quran should not be translated from Arabic, fearing its meaning could be changed or that it would lose its sacred character. Translation also reduced ordinary Muslims' dependence on religious leaders to explain the Quran, which threatened the authority of those leaders.

7. It is Shah Waliullah's best-known book, written in Arabic, whose title means "The Conclusive Argument of God". Themes (any two): it explains the reasons behind Islamic teachings and laws; it presents Islam as a complete system for individual and social life; it sets out the principles of a just society and the duties of rulers; it discusses economic justice, criticising heavy taxes on peasants and workers and the luxury of the nobility.

8. He urged respect for all four Sunni schools of law and encouraged scholars to focus on what they shared; he wrote Al-Insaf to explain why the schools differed so that the differences would cause less conflict; he accepted ijtihad by qualified scholars instead of rigid adherence to one school; he tried to reduce Sunni-Shia hostility; and he tried to reconcile competing Sufi doctrines and bring Sufism back in line with the Shariah.

9. First, the Marathas had become the strongest power in northern India and threatened to take control of Delhi; Shah Waliullah saw them as the greatest danger to the Muslims and wanted their power broken. Second, the Mughal emperor and nobles were too weak and divided to defend the Muslims themselves, so help had to come from a strong Muslim ruler outside India; Ahmad Shah Abdali of Afghanistan had the army to do this. Third, Shah Waliullah believed that religious revival needed political protection: without Muslim political strength, the reform of religion and society could not be secure, so he looked to Abdali to restore that strength.

10. Although Abdali defeated the Marathas in 1761, he soon returned to Afghanistan and did not stay to rebuild Muslim government. The Mughal emperors remained weak and divided, so no strong Muslim authority filled the gap. The Sikhs grew stronger in the Punjab, and the British East India Company continued to expand from Bengal. The battle removed one enemy but did nothing to cure the internal weakness of Muslim rule.

11. Shah Abdul Aziz continued teaching at the Madrasa-i-Rahimiya and issued a fatwa declaring British-controlled India Dar-ul-Harb. Shah Rafi-ud-Din produced a literal translation of the Quran into Urdu. Shah Abdul Qadir produced an idiomatic Urdu translation of the Quran. (His grandson Shah Ismail Shaheed, a leader of the Jihad Movement, is also acceptable.)

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