CHAPTER VI

CONFLICTING REFORMIST TRENDS IN INDIA: ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

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I: A Re-evaluation of Reformist Trends and their Sources

(i) DIVERSITY OF RACES AND INTERESTS

Under the banner of Islam India witnessed the arrival and settlement of various Muslim communities belonging to diverse racial backgrounds. In the first place Muslim traders of Arab origins reached coastal India much before the Muslim conquest of the northwestern part of the Indian Subcontinent. These early Arab traders were generously allowed to settle there. They had their faith closer to their hearts and with their characteristic simplicity, honesty and integrity they became a source of inspiration and conversion to new faith for many local indigenous inhabitants, particularly in the wake of social inequalities and the paganistic ideas. The Islamic concept of Tawhid as well as social equality widely influenced the downtrodden among the Indian society.¹

In the beginning of the eighth century A.D. the Arabs conquered the Northwestern parts of India under Mohammad bin Qasim. Here too the early Arab character grounded in Islamic faith influenced many indigenous people to embrace the new faith. However in the years following the political turmoil's in the central Caliphate disrupted this process and with the fall of the Umayyad's Sindh became almost independent. The following centuries witnessed turbulent changes in the ruling class and the continued political disturbance sapped the Muslim society

of its earlier Islamic integrity. Consequently there were instances of many converts returning to their original faith.²

At the turn of the tenth century A.D. the Turkish rulers had replaced the Arabs. Earlier the Iranian influence in the Abbasid court and proximity of Iran to Sindh had brought many Iranians from among the learned and the official elite to Sindh and the Punjab. The Ghaznavid rule was not only extended to include almost all northwestern parts of India but their raids repeatedly reached central and southern parts of the country. The Turks originally had no culture of their own and very often were inhumanly rude and savage. They had largely embraced Islam and nominally followed its broad fundamentals. However the new faith had not gone deep into their veins. Although the drastic inequalities of the Indian social order were alien to them, nonetheless they kept themselves aloof in their royal life from the indigenous population.³ They were chiefly interested in ruling the land rather than to make any efforts to propagate their faith. During the following centuries the ruling clans and dynasties changed one after the other and finally the Mughals succeeded in establishing their rule, which lasted more than three centuries. The process of assimilation was largely very slow, yet it was visibly there, influencing both, the rulers and the ruled.⁴ The great Mughal ruler Akbar was the first to realize the need and importance of bringing the rulers and the ruled closer so he introduced a new religion with a new religio-political policy aimed at bringing not only

the ruling class closer to the Hindu nobility but also to evolve grounds between the Muslim and non-Muslim faiths and culture. However this radical religious idea was based not on Islamic principles but was wholly grounded in political considerations. Religion was used as a ploy to accomplish political solidarity and cultural unity. The name of this religion was *Din-i-Ilahi*, which aimed at being mainly a mixture of Islamic, Hindu and Christian teachings.

The early Turkish culture and language of the rulers gave way to a highly persianized as also an Indianized Muslim society.\(^5\)

(ii) *MA’QULAT* (Rationalism):

Under the Central Asian and Persian influences the intellectual and educational spheres gradually changed to a new rationalist tradition and during the Sultanate and early Mughal periods rational sciences found greater stress on Ma’qulat. This included Astronomy, Mathematics’, Greek logic, Philosophy and Islamic jurisprudence. At the same time both poetry and literature of Persian and Arabic languages became important parts of the Syllabi. Islamic jurisprudence or Fiqh, a rational legal science was also important in as much as it was needed by the rulers for legal settlements as also for the Islamic requirements of social and commercial contracts.

These rational sciences and literary studies were essentially conventional in nature, acquired with a sense of ostentation and had long been deprived of its earlier originality and dynamism. It became more a source of

verbosity and self-conceit than a genuine rational quest for knowledge and wisdom. The chief objective was finding a respectable place in the government or the courts of the rulers and the nobles. The resultant influx of Persia’s linguistic and cultural influence brought in its folds many good and also bad elements which in the educational and intellectual spheres added many inconsequential requisites like high-flown rhymed use of language, un-realistic imagery and fanciful exaggerations. Soon all of it became a part of cultural traditions and educational system which confined not only all rational views to conventional limitations but also served to remove the Indian elitist society from the original sources and ethical enlightenment of Islamic.

(iii) MANQULAT (Traditionalism):

As a result of preeminence of Maqulat in the educational system and among the intelligentsia, the Manqulat were over-shadowed, the holy Quran had come to be considered as a source of divine blessings only and as such it was kissed and reverentially place on heads at ceremonial occasions.

In the Madrasas and Maktabs it was meant to be learnt for the bare minimum of ritualistic requirements. No translation of the holy book in Persian or other languages was available nor was deemed appropriate for the non-Arab masses.

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The situation regarding the books of Hadith was almost no different. Only one book of Hadith *Mashariq al-Anwar* was considered more than sufficient for this science. The *Sihah Sitta* was completely unknown in the Subcontinent.

All these factors had combined to produce a general decadence in the Muslim society. The frequent political turmoils were only adding to this process of socio-religious degeneration.  

(IV) SPIRITUAL SIDE

A net result of this disconnection with the basic sources of faith i.e. Quran and Hadith was the overemphasis on spiritual training and keen interest in the stories of miraculous deeds of those considered close to God. It was almost obligatory to become the disciple of spiritual mentor for ultimate salvation. Those who did not have a spiritual guide were often taunted at as disciples of the devil. The most influential and popular were the four sufí orders – Chishti, Qadri, Suhrawardi and Naqshbandi. Gradually all the sufí orders came to be closely associated with various shrines and tomb cults rather than with the founders and their original teachings and proscriptions.

In addition to the spiritual mentorship and the various ceremonies like Sama, Urs, etc associated with some of the shrines, Ibn al-Arabi’s sufí theory of Wahdat-al-Wujud (Unity of Existence) was widely held in the sufí circles. The concept of the unity of existence was seen to be antagonistic to the concept of the Unity of God by some

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7 Mohammad Ishaq, *India’s Contribution to the Study of Hadith Literature*. (Dacca, 1955)
who hold that it had a close resemblance with the vedant or
the vedic philosophy which saw divine presence in all
creations.®

(V) MUSLIM INTER-ACTION WITH THE LOCAL
POPULATION

The overwhelming majority of the population
consisted of the Hindus, most of them idolators but having
simultaneously a vague idea of the ultimate Supreme
Being. This concept was clearer among the learned class
or the Brahmans. However the concept of equality of the
humans was wholly absent except among the Buddhists
who had long lost their ground in the Subcontinent. The
prolonged presence of the upholders of Islam, which held
uncompromising faith in the Unity of God, and the equality
of the humans gradually produced a closer affinity on
conceptual levels and in the social realm, however limited
the scale.

With the passage of time the ruling class of Muslims,
which till then had kept the general populace at a distance
developed a certain level of conceptual affinity. Cultural
and political relationships began to emerge as a result of
mutual contacts and influences, political or otherwise.©
Among the Hindus the appearance of Bhakti movement
during the 14th and 15th centuries was a testimony to the
Islamic influence. This definitely, marks the beginning of
the later reformist and puritanical ideas. The emergence of
Din-i-llahi presented a modified version of Islam in the

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8 Barbara Daly Metcalf, op. cit.
early days of the Mughal Dynasty. This indicated an increasing influence of the Hindu faith and culture. No doubt that the main consideration of Mughal Emperor Akbar in introducing *Din-i-Ilahi* was to bring about a political and cultural stability for the Mughal rule which, he thought, could be best ensured through this process of harmonizing of disparate religious teachings.

Such considerations could not have been possible in earlier times, as this mutual influence through closer relations was largely absent. There is no doubt also that some of the fundamental principles of faith and practice were compromised in the name of *Din-i-Ilahi*. It may therefore be safely said that Akbar's religious policy turned out, apart from other factors, as discussed above, the single most important factor in giving rise to trends of Islamic revivalism in India.¹⁰

(VI) APPEARANCE OF REFORMIST TRENDS

Evidently the ground was now ready and the time was ripe for the appearance of reformist thoughts in the Subcontinent. A feeling of doubt and a sense of distortion regarding an undefined change in the religious structure began to surface and stir several minds. This inner anxiety was the beginning of a reformist trend seeking to curb the deficiencies of the Islamic structure in India on the basis of authentic sources. It needed understanding of the socio-religious changes and an indepth knowledge of the original Islamic teachings, as also, an intelligent and practical analysis of the ailments and prescription for the process of

¹⁰ Mohammad Miyan, *op. cit.*
reform. The person most suited to address the malignancy was Shaykh Ahmad of Sirhind. He was well versed in Islamic learning and fervour and also had a method in proscription.

Many may not agree with the harsh criticism of increasing Hindu – Muslim relations and closer affinity which according to Shaykh Ahmad was the major cause for the distortion of Islamic principles and faith. However there is no denying of the fact that the process of an unbridled dilution of Islamic faith was to be arrested. 11

(VIII) SIRHINDI’S WAHDAT AL-SHUHUD

But of still greater importance was the intellectual contribution of Sirhindi in the Sufi philosophy where Wahdat-al-Wujud had come to stay and accepted widely as the only underlying interpretations of the cardinal Islamic concept of Tawhid. Sirhindi critically examined the conceptual fallacies of Wahdat-al-Wujud and came out with a parallel sufistic philosophy of Wahdat-al-Shuhud which provided a clearer and closer sufi explanation of Tawhid and vividly differentiated between the creator and the created. If Wahdat-al-Wujud was nearer to vedant the concept of Wahdat-al-Shuhud was closer to the concept of Tawhid in the Quran. 12

At the same time this reformist resurgence also marks the inner dynamism of Islam as a faith. That is, Islam being

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not confined to Indian Subcontinent only, this revivalist ideal was also finding expression in other parts of the Muslim world. An important factor in the advent of this reformist and revivalist phenomenon was the universal Islamic institution of Haj, which brought together at Mecca and Medina all the different and diverse Muslims of different nationalities from around Asia, Africa and Europe.

The institution of Haj obviously had a significant role in energizing the reformist tendencies for many of those who visited the Holy Cities for pilgrimage. They developed a closer and deeper faith in the universality of the Islamic message, as also a desire to propagate an authentic version of their faith, based on the original sources.

This can be seen in the case of Shaykh Abdul Haq Muhaddith of Delhi who, on his return from Haj developed a zeal to promote the science of Hadith, and also Shah-Waliullah, whose comprehensive reforms are seen essentially based on and authenticated by the Quran and Hadith.

Haji Shariatullah of Bengal is another example who returned after twenty years from Mecca to become the founder of the Faraizi movement aimed at reinforcing and reviving the fundamental pillars (duties=faraiz) of Islam. Outside India similar revivalist trends appeared about the same time in parts of the Muslim World viz. Arabia, and North Africa.13

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Apart from the factors, which reflect the inherent urge of Muslim society for reform in critical conditions, there were several extraneous reasons, which combined to generate revivalist tendencies and ideas. The Shia-Sunni cleavage that began to show up from the early days gradually became a powerful factor in later Mughal period in pushing the Sunni majority in India and its representatives towards a revivalist discourse. The emergence of Shia rule in various pockets of Southern and Northern India and their predominance at times in the Mughal court itself frequently provoked academic discussions as well as political strifes throughout the length and breadth of the Indian Subcontinent. This again provided a venue for a revivalist reference to the authentic sources. This discourse became prominent during the 18th and 19th centuries.\textsuperscript{14}

The post- Aurangzeb period saw political anarchy giving rise to individual ambitions and territorial adventurism in the wake of socio-political and moral degeneration which sapped the Muslim rulers and the community of all their vigour and vitality. The degree of this deterioration can be seen in the comprehensive set of reforms of Shah Waliullah. The degeneration of the Muslims on the religious front and the rapid decline of Muslim rule in India, forced him to rethink the whole range of innovations that had crept into the Islamic teachings and the contemporary situations. He was a thinker and

theologian par-excellence. He was critical of the callous attitude of the *ulama* for their, misconceptions and inattention to the basic sources of Islamic faith and condemned their selfish ends in material life.\textsuperscript{15} His books and writings were as revolutionary as they were balanced in their analysis. He translated the Holy Quran into Persian for the common man to understand. The understanding of the Quran to him was very important to eliminate the misconceptions surrounding the Muslim society and mind. For a more precise understanding of not only the Islamic postulates and practices but also for the moral upliftment and a clearer ethical view, he considered the teaching and study of Hadith in the Madrasa system of education as highly pertinent.\textsuperscript{16}

He emphasized on the inclusion of the fundamental sources in the general syllabi went a long way in producing a new awareness of classical and original teachings of Islam. In addition to this he wrote several books in which he made a new effort to reevaluate the principles governing the study of Quran and Hadith.

One of the most significant aspect to be found as a running theme in his writings is the harmonization of differences concerning faith and practice in the Muslim society at large whether relating to the schools of Fiqh or sufi orders or sufistic philosophies. In this effort he tried to eliminate the exaggerations cut short verbosity and

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Maryam Jameelah, *op. cit.*
\item K.A Nizami, *Shah Waliullah Ke Sityasi Maktubat.*
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highlighted the acceptable common features. The Waliullahi ideas crystallized the rudimentary reformist trends stimulated earlier by the reformist efforts of Abdul Haq Muhaddith Dehlavi and Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi. Shah-Waliullah provided new and wider directions and dimensions to the revivalist efforts which were bound to take shape during the 19th century in particular as also in the following 20th century.

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II. The Milieu of Conflict and Divergent Reformist Ideas.

The turbulent political conditions during his lifetime and afterwards demanded political action and not as much the ideological discourse. The Mujahidin movement headed by Sayyid Ahmad Barelvi and Shah Ismail Shahid had far greater emphasis on a political agenda than on the wide ranging and more pertinent reformist aspects of Waliullahi thought.

However among his descendants and disciples there were still many others who had dedicated themselves to propagate and carry forward his critical reformist ideas in a purely educational environment.

A parallel to Waliullahi revivalist ideas is seen in the Wahhabi movement of Arabia which also stimulated the dormant Islamic world in the Arab lands and North African tribal society to revivalist awakening, with its special stress on pure Islamic teachings including Ijtihad. It was however through its overemphasis on abolishing unauthentic and popular superstitious practices around the tombs which provided its opponents an easy and strong weapon. Curiously in India this was picked up on grounds of political considerations by the British government and was used against some rebellious religious reformers pointing out parallel puritanical ideals and naming them as Wahhabis. The Wahhabi movement however had neither the depth nor the wide range of Waliullahi reformist ideas.  

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The tumultuous conditions and political adventurism had made the Indian Subcontinent during the eighteenth century an easy prey to the foreign powers among whom the British colonialists succeeded in consolidating their rule and gradually extending it through tactical and manipulative measures to the rest of the country.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century almost the whole country had come under their direct rule or strong influence. However the British colonial power had not only effected a radical political change but it also brought in its folds many other social, economic and religious strains patterned on the revolutionary ideological changes taking place in western Europe. The Muslims found themselves in a more vulnerable position. Nonetheless they were hardly ready to concede the change as compared to their other compatriots. Apart from their other politically suspect status in the emerging pro-British society they also offered far greater resistance than others to adapt to the new legal, linguistic and cultural milieu. The Muslim psyche during the nineteenth century was highly complex. They were utterly confused and unable to visualize what the future held for them. They doubted every move of the British, just as the British were suspicious of their intentions in every sphere.

The Fatwa about India being *dar-ul-harb* by Shah Abdul Aziz had added to this confusion, while the Muslim participation in the 1857 War of freedom had largely

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20 A.K. Pasha, "South India and the Gulf Trade and Diplomacy During the Late Eighteenth Century" in *History Culture and Society in India and West Asia*, ed. by N.N. Vohra, (Delhi, 2003), p. 238.
exposed the Muslim nobility, and more particularly the learned class, to the persecutive policies of the British. This complex Muslim mentality soon began to find expression in a rather over simplified religious defensiveness against the Christian rulers. The Muslim elite did not try to realize the gravity of the comprehensive change that was sweeping the country, unleashing partially yet definitely the rapid intellectual developments taking place in the west and now reflecting upon Indian soil and society.

No doubt Christian missionaries were entering India in large numbers and being patronized by the rulers for the sake of consolidation of their rule here. "The real change however was coming more stealthily and gradually in all other walks of Indian life". Now the language of the country, the law structure, the economic order, the intellectual norms the educational system and the social classes were witnessing drastic changes albeit slowly. All this needed to be evaluated with an open mind and open eyes.²²

Had the real purport of Shah Waliullah's reformist ideas been more comprehensively contemplated, keeping in view the great modernistic changes coming in the folds of colonial rule, the Muslim elites would have been in a far better position to understand, evaluate and adapt to the new situation.

However the reformist and revivalist views of Shah Waliullah were often analyzed rather defensively and frequently adapted by later reformers subjective ideals, which caused loss of direction in the socio-religious realm. This was particularly true regarding the new western ideals of modernism, secularism, and scientific thought. These ideas were not un-Islamic but often were made out to look like that. Certainly the Muslims in their defiant attitude did not try to objectively see through its implications whereas they were intellectually in a position of realistic understanding and genuine appraisal of both and were capable enough to harmonize between reformist thoughts and western knowledge. In the Waliullahi line of reformers Sir Sayyid stands out as a lone example during the 19th century who had the courage and the calibre to think of the new direction that Islamic reform and western thought could take together. In the process however he too was caught between the community’s medievalism and his own radicalism.23

Infact looking to the sectarianism and schismatic ideals of the Muslim movements of the 19th century and even the 20th century, we cannot escape the realization that originally the reformist ideology was a unified, integrated and moderate concept in the Waliullahi thought. It disintegrated in various sectarian ideals in later movements while some of the later reformers narrowed

down to take the root of jihad, others stressed and even over stressed a traditional learning and mode of education, while still others overemphasized in education the modernistic ideals. Some characterized their reform with total rejection of all conformism while yet others not only continued but began to stress on total conformism and left no room for Ijtihad. The emanating conflict was frequently all futile as these and other reformist features mark out Waliullahi thought with far greater balance and broader vision.

In between these reformist ideas there were many others adapting thoughts from both sides i.e. traditional and somewhat modern. However all of these ideas and ideals appear clearly on the defensive side of Islam and none appears to champion a comprehensive and positive statement of either Islam or of the modern western values, without which a compatible evaluation of both was impossible. At the same time most upholders of this sectarian reformism claimed to having hailed from the Waliullahi school of thought.24

This divergence of reformist lines into various schools of thought simply indicates the utter confusion of the 19th century atmosphere where the socio-political and religio-intellectual climate was rather hazy. Abhorrence of foreign overlordship, political catastrophe, and perception of imminent threat to religious and cultural identity under the western and Christian domination served to define the reformist thoughts and measures during the 19th century

rather than an overall assessment of Islamic reform and contemporary reality. It was only natural then that the course of reform frequently came to be subjected to impulsive and eclectic ideas and fixed and narrow directions, acquiring in later decades a time honoured weightage of sectarian ideology. The resultant dogmatic approach often began to involve and identify itself with trifling issues and futile polemics in public discourse.

Inspite of this polemical trivia, the intellectual and reformist thought bequeathed by Shah Waliullah had stimulated and stirred many reformist minds. This is particularly true in the case of Deoband and Aligarh.  

The founders of Deoband and Aligarh were also the founders of a new al-Kalam, for which the latter is notoriously well known while the former is hardly known, which is largely due to his un-usual depth and the ambiguity of thesis. Sir Sayyid has evolved some new principles of his modernistic al-Kalam and based it on a wide understanding of both the modern western values and Islamic concept of faith while Maulana Qasim founded his new approach to al-Kalam on a deeply logical understanding of Islamic faith-structure yet in full conformity with the Quran and the Sunnah. Both were in need of a reappraisal before being classed as 'westernist' or 'orthodox', for both have struck new rational grounds and remarkable methodologies.  


Apart from the reformist tensions between the modernists and the orthodox, represented mainly by Aligarh and Deoband, there were strong undercurrents of differences regarding the approach and ideology, which influenced the reform scenario in the wider circle of orthodoxy. Thus if Deoband stood for Waliullahi reforms and total conformism, the Ahl-i-Hadith of the same Sunni school of thought stood for total non-conformism. Similarly Deoband and Ahl-i-Hadith were one in their adherence to Hadith and classical syllabi Nadwat-ul-Ulama debated for long as a votary of revisionism all classical syllabi and traditional methodology of religious education. This does not simply show the preference of one aspect over the other but the variance and even contrast of these approaches surfaced from a deeper conviction of their eclectic understanding of the reformist ideology often centered around an articulate and patriarchal figure.27

During the 20th century examples of this partial understanding and halfcooked reformist zeals have not been too rare to find. The emergence of Tablighi Jama’at seems to have simplified the whole reformist and revivalist discourse into a six point agenda while a little later Jama’at-i -Islami appears to have intellectually and practically politicized it completely through its idealization of the struggle for divine rule.28

Looking back to the reformers and their reformist ideas from Shaykh Abdul Haq to Shah Waliullah and his

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disciples we need to distinguish between the immediate and the ultimate. The prevailing political and social conditions around the reformers provided the immediate stimuli and also a momentary obsession to respond and rectify the urgent problems or issues. For instance Shaykh Sirhindi's reformist letters condemning the affinity and closer relation between Hindus and Muslims and proposing for this purpose a harsh treatment of the former and exhortation to the latter. Another example was the Jihad movement led by Sayyid Ahmad Barelvi and Ismail Shahid on the reformist lines left by Shah Waliullah and Shah Abdul Aziz. Such actions and responses had an immediate rationale and none of the ultimate reformist values. Obviously with the changing times such transitory ideas also change.

On the other hand those reformist ideas as essentially are directed inward and seek authentic grounds to redress the inner ailments of the Muslim society itself carry a lasting value, and understanding of the ultimate purpose of all reformist ideologies.

In order to have a clearer picture of reformist thoughts seeking a restatement and revival of purer teachings of Islam, we can broadly enumerate it as follows.

(1) **Reference to the original sources** which had become long overdue for the Muslim world at large including the Indian Muslim society and a long neglect had brought up practical and indigenous considerations to obscure the basic teachings of the faith.
(2) **Purification of basic Islamic teachings** from Un-Islamic thoughts, superstitions, customs and practices prevalent in the Muslim society so that the prophetic mission and ideal may be restored entirely in its full purity.

(3) **Harmonization of Shariat and Tariqat**: This was also a persistent question in Islamic history, which needed reconciliation as how to bring about a harmonization of the two trends. During the Sultanate period the cleavage between the upholders of Shariat and Tariqat had become too wide as if they had no meeting points. The reformers had a moderate view of both and considered the question not as two separate roads but as two sides of the same coin.

(4) **Importance of Ijtihad vis-a-vis conformism**: Inspite of the prevalence of the so-called rational sciences during the Muslim period, conformism to any of the four schools of fiqh was considered unavoidable and essential. This pre-eminence of Islamic jurisprudence had caused complete neglect of the basic sources i.e. Quran and Hadith, on the one hand, and suppression of all new questions, on the other, leading the Muslim community backward to medievalism rather than forward. Thus the door of the institution of Ijtihad was tightly closed Fiqh which originally meant to understand and revise the changing and existing conditions and give due weightage to new considerations on the basis of
the sources, had now become a captive of conformism. Therefore a revival of this legal institution or Ijtihad had become necessary more than ever before.

(5) **Promotion of Unity and Affinity**: Sectarian thoughts had divided the Muslim society and sapped it of its actual vigour as a natural and universal faith. The reformist ideas, which found a highly vivid and clear expression in Shah Waliullah's writings, seek to eliminate to a maximum possible extent the more superficial and verbal differences of the Muslim community through moderation and tolerance, whether concerning the schools of fiqh or schools of sufi ideologies, or between Shariat and Tariqat or the Shia-Sunni rift.

Setting aside the issues of the reformers immediate obsession at times for questions arising from the transitory contemporary conditions and pressures, the above appear to be the chief ingredients of the reformist ideologies.

Looking again to the 19th and 20th centuries, we cannot neglect the impression and conclusion that all the reformist movements of the period have at best simply fulfilled which probably was suited most to their own inclination only a particular aspect of this comprehensive reformist ideology. The great followers of Shah Waliullah who sooner or later became the founders of various reformist movements, inspite of their wide range of learning, did not try to visualize the broader and ultimate
significance of the fast changes coming their way or the far wider scope of the reformist ideas they had inherited. For the most part they confined their vision to the immediate pressures of the facing and passing reality rather than look beyond their times. The piece-meal treatment of reforms and revival contributed no doubt to partial reforms in several special spheres but left out a greater vacuum which was filled often by tolerance and polemical debates of little consequence.