

Jihad, Reform, and Ideology: Shah Ismail's Political Thought in the Context of Sayyid Ahmad Barelvi's Movement

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Abstract: This study explores the political thought of Shah Ismail Dehlavi (1779–1831) as a central ideological force within the reformist and militant movement led by Sayyid Ahmad Barelvi in early 19th-century India. Situating Shah Ismail's ideas within the broader framework of Islamic revivalism and resistance against colonial and indigenous non-Islamic domination, the study examines how his theological doctrines informed a distinct vision of Islamic governance, moral reform, and collective jihad. Drawing upon key texts such as *Taqwiyat al-Iman* and *Mansab-i-Imamat*, the paper analyzes Shah Ismail's advocacy for Tawhid (monotheism), Shari'ah-centric social order, and rejection of Bidah (innovations) as foundational principles for sociopolitical renewal. It further investigates how these ideas were operationalized through the militant campaign of Sayyid Ahmad Barelvi against Sikh rule in Punjab, portraying jihad not merely as armed struggle but as an instrument of spiritual purification and political reformation. The paper also considers the movement's attempt to establish an Islamic polity (Dar al-Islam) amidst colonial encroachment and sectarian fragmentation. By situating Shah Ismail's political ideology within the context of anti-colonial resistance and Islamic reform, this study highlights the synthesis of theology and activism that characterized one of the most significant indigenous Islamic movements of pre-modern South Asia.

Keywords: Shah Ismail Dehlavi, Sayyid Ahmad Barelvi, Islamic reform, Jihad in South Asia, Political thought, Anti-colonial resistance, Islamic revivalism

Introduction

The initial decades of the 19th century represent a significant inflection point in the evolution of Indo-Muslim political thought. The degradation of Muslim political authority, which commenced in the early 18th century, culminated in its nadir during this epoch, coinciding with the extensive proliferation of British imperialism throughout the subcontinent. The Red Fort, which had once epitomized the grandeur of India akin to Versailles, was relegated to a deplorable state, such that according to Bishop Heber, who visited it in the early 19th century, the Shah Burj appeared filthy, desolate, and miserable, with its bath and fountain rendered dry, the inlaid pavement obscured by debris, and gardeners engaged in sweeping, while the walls were marred by the excrement of avian and chiropteran inhabitants.¹