



SHAH WALIULLAH DEHLAWÎ'S WRITINGS AND THEIR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS IMPACT ON INDIAN SOCIETY

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36713/epra25410>

DOI No: 10.36713/epra25410

ABSTRACT

Shah Waliullah Dehlawi (1703–1762) occupies a seminal position in the intellectual, religious, and social history of India. His writings emerged at a time when Indian Muslim society was experiencing political decline, moral degeneration, and religious stagnation. This paper examines Shah Waliullah Dehlawi's major writings and analyses their socio-religious impact on Indian society, with particular emphasis on religious reform, social ethics, and intellectual revival. Through a critical study of his works, such as *Hujjah Allâh al-Bâlighah*, his Qur'anic translation into Persian, and his contributions to Hadith studies, the paper highlights his effort to reconcile revelation with reason and spirituality with law.

The study reveals that Shah Waliullah sought to purify Islamic practices by opposing blind imitation (*taqlîd*), sectarian rigidity, and un-Islamic customs, while simultaneously promoting unity among the Sunni schools of jurisprudence. His emphasis on the objectives of Shariah (*maqâsid al-sharî'ah*) underscored the ethical and social dimensions of Islam, presenting religion as a comprehensive system aimed at justice, social harmony, and moral discipline. By making the Qur'ân accessible to non-Arabic-speaking Muslims, he democratized religious knowledge and strengthened individual religious consciousness.

Furthermore, the paper explores Shah Waliullah's balanced approach to Sufism, where he upheld spiritual purification but rejected superstition and excess. His ideas profoundly influenced later reform movements in India, including the Deoband school and Ahl al-Hadith, shaping Islamic education, religious thought, and social reform during the colonial and post-colonial periods.

Overall, the study argues that Shah Waliullah Dehlawi's writings played a foundational role in revitalizing Indian Muslim society by fostering intellectual awakening, religious moderation, and socio-moral reform. His legacy continues to inform contemporary discussions on Islamic reform and social justice in South Asia.

KEYWORDS: Shah Waliullah Dehlawi; Socio-Religious Reform; Indian Muslim Society; Islamic Thought; Qur'anic Translation; Intellectual Revival, etc.

INTRODUCTION

The eighteenth century marked a critical phase in the history of the Indian subcontinent, characterised by political fragmentation, social instability, and moral decline, particularly within the Muslim community. The disintegration of Mughal authority after the death of Aurangzeb, repeated foreign invasions, and the rise of regional powers created an atmosphere of uncertainty and decline. Alongside political decay, religious life among Indian Muslims was increasingly marked by sectarian divisions, ritualism, blind imitation (*taqlid*), and the spread of un-Islamic customs and superstitions. Scholarly engagement with Islamic sources often remained confined to theoretical learning, leaving a widening gap between religious knowledge and social practice. It was within this complex socio-political and religious context that Shah Waliullah Dehlawi (d.1762) emerged as one of the most influential reformers in the intellectual history of Indian Islam.

Shah Waliullah Dehlawi was a distinguished scholar, theologian, jurist, Sufi thinker, and social reformer whose writings sought to revive Islamic thought by reconnecting Muslims with the Qur'ân and Sunnah while addressing the realities of his time. Educated initially at *Madrasah Rahimiyyah* and later exposed to the broader Islamic scholarly world in Mecca and Medina, he developed a comprehensive vision of reform that combined religious authenticity with intellectual balance. His scholarship spanned diverse fields including Qur'anic exegesis, Hadith studies, jurisprudence, philosophy, spirituality, social ethics, and political thought. Writing primarily in Arabic and Persian, the principal scholarly languages of his age, he addressed both the learned elite and the wider educated public of India.¹

One of Shah Waliullah's most significant contributions was his effort to make Islamic teachings accessible to ordinary Muslims. His Persian translation of the Qur'ân was a revolutionary step that enabled direct engagement with the divine message at a



time when Arabic proficiency was limited. Alongside this, his major works, such as *Hujjah Allâh al-Bâlighah*,² *Al-Fawz al-Kabîr fî Uşûl al-Tafsîr*,³ and *Al-Inşâf fî Bayân Sabab al-Ikhtilâf*,⁴ offered a rational and purposive understanding of Islamic law, emphasising the objectives (*maqâsid*) of Sharî'ah, social justice, moral reform, and unity among Muslims. He consistently opposed sectarian rigidity and encouraged reconciliation among different schools of thought, advocating *ijtihâd* to address changing social conditions.

This research paper seeks to examine Shah Waliullah Dehlawî's writings and analyse their socio-religious impact on Indian society. By situating his intellectual contributions within their historical context, the study highlights how his reformist vision influenced religious revival, educational reform, social ethics, and later Islamic movements in South Asia. The paper argues that Shah Waliullah's balanced synthesis of tradition and reason played a decisive role in shaping Muslim intellectual and social life in India, leaving a legacy that continues to inform Islamic thought and reform discourse in the region.⁴

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The present study is significant in understanding the intellectual, religious, and social reformative role of Shah Waliullah Dehlawî in eighteenth-century Indian society. At a time when Indian Muslims were facing political decline, moral disintegration, and religious stagnation, Shah Waliullah's writings provided a comprehensive framework for revival rooted in the *Qur'ân* and Sunnah, while remaining responsive to social realities. By analysing his major works, this study highlights how his thought functioned not merely as theological discourse but as a practical guide for socio-religious transformation.⁵

One of the key significances of this research lies in its emphasis on the accessibility of religious knowledge. Shah Waliullah's Persian translation of the *Qur'ân* marked a turning point in Indian Islamic scholarship by enabling non-Arabic-speaking Muslims to engage directly with the divine text. This contribution democratized religious learning and reduced excessive dependence on the religious elite, thereby strengthening individual religious consciousness and ethical responsibility.⁶

The study is also important for its exploration of Shah Waliullah's reconciliatory approach to Islamic jurisprudence. By advocating harmony among the four Sunni schools of law and opposing rigid sectarianism, he promoted unity within the Muslim community. His emphasis on the objectives of Sharî'ah (*maqâsid al-sharî'ah*) underscored Islam's concern for justice, social welfare, and moral balance, making his ideas socially relevant beyond purely legal debates.⁷

Furthermore, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Islamic reform movements in India, as Shah Waliullah's thought laid the intellectual foundation for later movements such as Deoband and *Ahl al-Hadîth*. His influence on Hadith studies,

madrassa education, and socio-religious reform continued well into the colonial period and beyond.⁸

Finally, the study holds contemporary relevance by presenting Shah Waliullah as a model of moderate, rational, and ethically grounded Islamic reform. His balanced synthesis of tradition and reason offers valuable insights for addressing modern challenges related to religious extremism, social justice, and communal harmony. Thus, the study is significant not only as a historical inquiry but also as a meaningful contribution to ongoing discussions on Islamic thought and reform in South Asia.⁹

Biography of Shah Waliullah

Imam al-Dehlawî was born on Wednesday morning, 21 February 1703 A.D., at the house of his maternal relatives in the village of Fulth, in the district of Muzaffarnagar.¹⁰

His father, Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahîm, was a highly accomplished scholar in various disciplines and was sixty years old at the time. His mother, Fakhr al-Nisâ', was a noble, pious, and God-fearing woman who cared for her children with exceptional devotion and raised them under the guidance of Islamic law. She possessed outstanding proficiency in the religious sciences, including a level of learning rarely found among women of her time.

This learned and affectionate mother played a significant role in the upbringing of Imam al-Dehlawî, and it was her earnest wish that her son should become a great scholar. His father likewise nurtured him in the tradition of Sufism, training him in the spiritual paths of the Qâdiriyyah, Chishtiyyah, and Naqshbandiyyah.¹¹ He later completed his spiritual training under the guidance of Khwâjah Khurd ibn Khwâjah Bâqî Billâh, the celebrated reformer and spiritual master of the second Islamic millennium.

The ancestors of al-Dehlawî had migrated from the Arab lands to Iran for reasons that are not clearly known. Later, his forebears travelled to India and settled in the village of Rohtak, following the Tatar invasions of Iran and Iraq and the widespread corruption, bloodshed, and destruction they caused. His grandfather was a brave soldier in the Mughal army and a devoted lover of the Qur'ân after the martyrdom of 'Abd al-Rahîm's father. His upbringing and education were undertaken by his elder brother, the eminent Shaykh Abû al-Riqâ Muḥammad.

'Abd al-Rahîm was also a student of the great scholar and ascetic Sufi al-Harawî,¹² as well as of other renowned teachers, from whom he studied Arabic and Islamic sciences along with lessons in Sufism and spiritual discipline. He refined and perfected the knowledge and skills he acquired from his teachers through his intelligence, insight, sharp intellect, and continuous effort. As a result, 'Abd al-Rahîm became well known for his profound learning and exceptional mastery of the religious sciences. Owing to this reputation, the government appointed him to the post of revising the *Fatâwâ al-'Âlamgîrî*, a



responsibility he discharged in Delhi in accordance with his mother's instructions.

He later became renowned through the *Madrasah Rahîmiyyah* in Delhi, which is regarded as the precursor of the present-day *Dâr al-'Ulûm* Deoband. Shah Waliullah was born and raised in the household of this distinguished and learned father, whose guidance and care elevated him to high intellectual and spiritual levels.

His father enrolled him in a maktab at the age of five, and within two years, he had learned to read and write. By the end of that year, he had memorised the Holy *Qur'ân*. He then began studying Persian texts and introductory Arabic books. At the age of fourteen, he married his cousin, the daughter of Shaykh 'Abd Allâh al-Siddîqî al-Fulhî. In the same year, he completed the standard curriculum taught in India at the time, covering various sciences and disciplines. He received formal authorisation (*ijâzah*) from his father to teach and instruct, and he began teaching at his father's well-known institution, the *Madrasah Rahîmiyyah*.¹³

When Shah Waliullah reached the age of seventeen, his father fell ill and subsequently passed away. Before his death, his father authorised him to accept disciples and granted him permission to guide and instruct others spiritually. Shah Waliullah himself states:

"After my father's death, I devoted myself to teaching the religious and rational sciences for nearly twelve years, during which I attained deep mastery in various branches of knowledge. Alongside this, through spiritual meditation and contemplation at my father's grave, the mysteries of divine unity were unveiled to me, the paths of spiritual conduct were opened, and I attained an abundant share of true knowledge. Experiential sciences crowded my mind. After studying the four schools of jurisprudence, their foundational texts, and the Hadiths upon which they are based, I came to realise, through the light of inner insight, that the true path is the path of the jurists who are also scholars of Hadith."¹⁴

When he reached the age of thirty, he travelled to the Two Holy Sanctuaries in the year 1730 A.D. In that year, he performed the obligation of *Hajj*, and again in the following year. He remained in the Hijaz for approximately two years, during which he had extensive opportunities to study, particularly Hadith, under highly accomplished scholars, as well as other branches of knowledge. He became a student of Shaykh Abû Tâhir al-Madânî,¹⁵ from whom he read portions of the six canonical Hadith collections (*al-Sihâh al-Sittah*), the *Muwatta'*, the *Musnad* of al-Dârimî, and *Kitâb al-Âthâr* by Imâm Muḥammad. He also received authorisation (*ijâzah*) from him for the remaining books.

He further studied under Shaykh Wafîd Allâh and under Shaykh Tâj al-Dîn al-Qal'î al-Hanafî, who was the Mufti of Mecca and a deeply learned authority in Hadith, Qur'anic exegesis, and

jurisprudence. From him, Shah Waliullah heard the six canonical collections, the *Muwatta'*, and other works. Shaykh Tâj al-Dîn permitted him to transmit Hadith, not merely through an oral *ijâzah*, but also in written form in his own handwriting. This act reflects both his piety, meticulous scholarship, and his intense eagerness to acquire knowledge.

After two years, Shah Waliullah returned from the Two Holy Sanctuaries in Rajab 1145 AH / June 1732 CE and resumed teaching at the *Madrasah Rahîmiyyah*. He continued teaching the Prophetic traditions for a long period with a method marked by distinction and excellence. He devoted himself to teaching students with great effort and passion, leaving only minimal time for other activities such as preaching, issuing legal opinions, and settling disputes. Alongside instruction, he provided his students with spiritual training, cultivating in them the etiquette of moral conduct and the spiritual path.¹⁶

His principal concern and exclusive focus during this period were the formation of character and the making of men. As a result, after his return from the Two Holy Sanctuaries, the number of students flocking to him increased significantly, even from distant regions. This remarkable fact naturally evokes admiration and wonder. The stature of al-Dehlawî can be measured by the large number of his students, the depth of their learning, their ability to write and compile scholarly works, and their excellence in teaching and dissemination, just as a tree is known by the quality of its fruit. After the age of thirty in the later phase of his life, he gradually withdrew from public teaching and instruction.

As previously mentioned, Shah Waliullah married his cousin at the age of fourteen; she bore him a son named Muḥammad. After the death of his first wife, he married a noblewoman from the family of Sayyid Thanâ' Allâh of Sonipat, known as Sayyidah Irâdah.

His Death

'Abd al-'Azz al-Dehlawî, the son of Shah Waliullah al-Dehlawî, said regarding the death of his father:

"My noble father was seldom afflicted by illness, but he fell ill at the beginning of Dhû al-Ḥijjah 1175 AH / late June 1762 CE, and his condition worsened. The illness first struck him in the village of Budhānah, in the district of Muzaffarpur. When the illness became prolonged, he was brought to Delhi on the ninth of Dhû al-Ḥijjah 1175 AH / 1 July 1762 CE, where he stayed in the house of one of his disciples named Bâbâ Faḍl Allâh al-Kashmîrî, within the walls of Jâmi' Roshan al-Dawlah. Physicians exerted every effort to treat him, but the illness continued to intensify. Finally, the appointed time arrived, and he breathed his last around midday on 29 Muḥarram 1176 AH / 20 August 1762 CE."¹⁷



His Major Works

Shah Waliullah al-Dehlawî authored a very large number of works, exceeding seventy books, covering almost all branches of the Islamic sciences. Some of these works were written in Arabic, while others were composed in Persian; later, many of them were translated into both languages. Among his most notable works, without limiting the list, are: *Fath al-Rahmân fi Tarjamat al-Qur'ân*, *Al-Fawz al-Kabîr fi Uṣûl al-Tafsîr*, *Fath al-Khabîr fîmâ Lâ Budda min Hifzih fi 'Ilm al-Tafsîr*, *Ta'wîl al-Aḥâdîth fî Rumûz Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyâ'*, *Al-Durr al-Thamîn fi Mubashshirât al-Nabî al-Amîn*, *Al-Nawâdir min Aḥâdîth Sayyid al-Awwalîn wa'l-Âkhirîn*, *Al-Musawwâ* and *Al-Muṣaffâ* (commentaries on *al-Muwaṭṭa'*), *Al-Inṣâf fi Bayân Sabab al-Ikhtilâf*, and *Hujjah Allâh al-Bâlighah*, among many others.¹⁸

His Role in Political Renewal and Reform

The Hadith scholar Shah Waliullah al-Dehlawî was a leading authority in both transmitted and rational sciences. His sharp intellect, insight, high ambition, and sound judgement were clear. He lived in a period marked by chaos and unrest, during which Delhi suffered repeated invasions and tragic events. In response, he addressed letters to rulers and leaders, advising them to uphold righteousness, remain steadfast upon truth, cooperate in resisting aggression, and defend Islam and the Muslim community.¹⁹

His Role in Intellectual and Scholarly Renewal

There is no doubt that Shah Waliullah greatly enriched the Islamic intellectual tradition through his numerous valuable works, distinguished by clarity of expression and a sound understanding of the objectives of Islamic law, derived from the *Qur'ân* and the Prophetic Sunnah. This intellectual maturity resulted from his long engagement in study and teaching, as well as the many scholars under whom he studied, chief among them his father, Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥîm al-Dehlawî.

Shah Waliullah appeared at a time when the Islamic polity was suffering fragmentation, weakness, and domination by hostile forces, not unlike conditions faced in later eras. Foreign powers sought to divide Muslim lands and seize their resources, while Muslims themselves were weakened by internal discord. With exceptional determination, Shah Waliullah called both common people and rulers to hold firmly to the rope of God, abandon division and sectarian fanaticism, and adhere to correct belief and sound jurisprudence. He strove tirelessly to restore Islam to its proper course, at a time when Muslim authority in India had severely declined, and Hindu and Sikh forces had gained dominance.²⁰

Emphasis on Creed ('Aqîdah) and Reform

Shah Waliullah placed special emphasis on the Islamic creed, believing that sound belief derived from the *Qur'ân* and Sunnah formed the strongest foundation for unity among Muslims. Without correct belief, unity was impossible. Consequently, *tawḥîd* became the central pillar of his reform movement. His students later continued this mission, implementing movements

of reform and jihad led by figures such as Sayyid Aḥmad Shahîd and Shaykh Muḥammad Ismâ'îl Shahîd, who resisted colonial forces, confronted false beliefs, rejected innovations, and stood firmly against ideological distortion and superstition.²¹

Contribution to Qur'ânic Studies

Shah Waliullah devoted great attention to the *Qur'ân*, both in memorisation and interpretation. His Persian translation, *Fath al-Rahmân fi Tarjamat al-Qur'ân*, was the first of its kind in India and opened a new era in the dissemination of *Qur'ânic* sciences. Following his example, his students translated many Islamic texts into Persian and later into Urdu.²²

Contribution to Hadith Studies

He also paid exceptional attention to Hadith and the authentic Sunnah, insisting that any reform movement must remain firmly grounded in Prophetic traditions. He emphasised memorisation of texts, precision in chains of transmission, and familiarity with Hadith collections. Scholars across the region transmitted Hadith through him, and he established a renewed methodology of Hadith study based on the practices of early scholars, combining narration and critical analysis. Many of the insights he received in Hadith sciences were recorded in his seminal work *Hujjah Allâh al-Bâlighah*.²³

Reform of Sufism

Shah Waliullah sought to reform Sufism by rejecting excesses, false claims, and superstitious practices. He refuted deviant Sufi doctrines and urged adherence to the *Qur'ân* and authentic Sunnah, promoting a purified form of spirituality centred on ethical self-discipline, asceticism, and sincere devotion free from innovation and superstition.²⁴

Jurisprudence and Sectarian Harmony

He also addressed legal rigidity and sectarian fanaticism. Although he followed the Ḥanafî school, which was prevalent in India, he consistently emphasised adherence to textual evidence and encouraged engagement with *ijtihâd*. He authored several works in this field, including *Al-Tafhîmât al-Ilâhiyyah*, *Al-Inṣâf fi Sabab al-Ikhtilâf*, *'Iqd al-Jîd fi Aḥkâm al-Ijtihâd wa'l-Taqlîd*, and his commentaries on *al-Muwaṭṭa'*. He called for tolerance in juristic differences and insisted that legal schools should facilitate ease rather than division among Muslims.²⁵

Views on the Caliphate and Islamic Governance

Shah Waliullah also discussed the institution of the Caliphate, defining it as the general leadership responsible for establishing religion, reviving religious sciences, enforcing Islamic law, organising jihad, commanding good and forbidding evil, and removing injustice. He regarded the establishment of the Caliphate as a fundamental principle of Islam, analysed the causes of Muslim decline after the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, and addressed tribulations and end-times narrations found in Prophetic traditions.²⁶



His View on Shi'ism

He critically examined Shi'î doctrine, arguing that it contradicted core Islamic beliefs, particularly through its treatment of the Companions and the doctrine of infallible Imams. While acknowledging Shi'î claims of devotion to the Prophet's family, he contended that such beliefs undermined the finality of Prophethood.

In conclusion, although Shah Waliullah's contributions extend far beyond what can be captured in a single article, the present discussion outlines the most significant aspects of his reformist legacy. Indeed, the best speech is that which is concise yet meaningful. And God knows best.²⁷

FINDINGS

The study finds that Shah Waliullah Dehlawi's writings constituted a comprehensive programme of socio-religious reform aimed at revitalising Indian Muslim society during a period of political decline and moral stagnation. His intellectual project was not confined to theology but extended to social ethics, education, jurisprudence, spirituality, and governance. One of the most significant findings is his effort to democratise religious knowledge, especially through his Persian translation of the Qur'ân, which enabled non-Arabic-speaking Muslims to engage directly with scripture.

The study further reveals that Shah Waliullah consistently opposed blind imitation (*taqlid*) and sectarian rigidity, while advocating unity among the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence. His emphasis on the objectives of Sharî'ah (*maqâsid al-sharî'ah*) foregrounded justice, social welfare, and moral discipline as the core purposes of Islamic law.

Another key finding is his balanced approach to Sufism, wherein he upheld spiritual purification while rejecting superstition and excess. The research also establishes that Shah Waliullah's ideas profoundly influenced later reform movements such as Deoband and Ahl al-Hadith, shaping Islamic education and reform discourse in India.

DISCUSSION

The discussion highlights that Shah Waliullah Dehlawi's reformist vision was deeply rooted in the Qur'ân and Sunnah while remaining responsive to the socio-political realities of eighteenth-century India. His writings demonstrate a rare synthesis of tradition and reason, allowing Islamic teachings to address changing historical conditions without compromising doctrinal authenticity. Unlike purely revivalist or conservative scholars, Shah Waliullah adopted a methodological flexibility, encouraging *ijtihâd* where necessary and tolerance in juristic disagreement.

His critique of sectarianism and insistence on unity among Muslims reflect a keen awareness of how internal divisions weakened the community in the face of external political threats. Similarly, his reform of Sufism shows an attempt to preserve

spirituality while purging it of un-Islamic practices, thereby restoring its ethical and moral function.

The discussion also underscores his role as an intellectual bridge between classical Islamic scholarship and later reform movements. His emphasis on Hadith studies and sound creed ('aqidah) laid the foundation for nineteenth-century revivalist efforts. Thus, Shah Waliullah emerges not merely as a scholar of his time but as a transformative thinker whose ideas transcended his historical context.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that Shah Waliullah Dehlawi played a foundational role in shaping the socio-religious consciousness of Indian Muslims through his writings and reformist vision. By addressing theological, legal, ethical, and social issues in an integrated manner, he provided a holistic framework for religious renewal. His efforts to make Islamic knowledge accessible, promote juristic harmony, and reform spiritual practices significantly contributed to the moral and intellectual revival of Muslim society in India.

The enduring relevance of Shah Waliullah's thought lies in his balanced approach—firmly grounded in revelation yet open to reason and contextual understanding. His influence on subsequent Islamic movements demonstrates the long-term impact of his ideas on education, reform, and religious discourse in South Asia.

In contemporary times, marked by challenges such as sectarian conflict, extremism, and social fragmentation, Shah Waliullah's emphasis on unity, moderation, and ethical reform remains highly relevant. The study affirms that his legacy continues to offer valuable insights for addressing both historical and modern challenges within Muslim societies.

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10. *Al-Dihlûwî, Al-Shâh Walî Allâh Anfâs al-'Ârifîn. Pp. 403 – 404*
11. *This means that Shah Waliullah acquired most of his learning from his father. Apart from his noble father, he had very few teachers. Among them were Shaykh Muhammad Fâdil al-Sindî, from whom al-Dehlawî read the complete text of the Holy Qur'ân; Shaykh Muhammad Afâdal al-Siyâlkotî; and Shaykh Abû Tâhir al-Madanî, from whom al-Dehlawî received instruction in Hadith and other related disciplines.*
12. *According to another account, he was an ascetic and a distinguished teacher, well known as a logician and a theologian.*
13. *About a ten-minute run on foot from the New Delhi railway station.*
14. *Al-Dihlûwî, Al-Shâh Walî Allâh Anfâs al-'Ârifîn. Pp. 404 – 406*
15. *Abû Tâhir used to say about Shah Waliullah: "He (Shah Waliullah) would transmit the wording from me, while I would correct the meaning for him," or words to that effect. Shah Waliullah, in turn, said about Abû Tâhir al-Madanî: "He was the main support of Abû 'Abd al-'Azîz among his teachers and the one from whom he derived the greatest benefit." (al-Yâni' – al-Jâmi')*
16. *Prof. Abdul Rahim Kidwai. Shah Waliullah Dehlawî. An Introduction To His Illustrious Personality. And Achievements (Translation of Prof. Muhammad Yasin Mazhar Siddiqui's Urdu Book) Shah Wali Allah Dehlavi Research Cell, Institute of Islamic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh. 2001. pp. 14-15*
17. *On the same day, his body was taken in procession and buried near his father's grave in the Mehndiyân Cemetery in Delhi.*
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