Reformism and revivalism in Indian Islam basically concentrates on the way the Indian Muslims came to engage with western culture and tried to come to terms with British rule after a certain period of defiance against it. It requires an understanding of the language of political Islam in modern India, particularly when we see that Muslims since the late 18th century felt that establishment
of British rule had destroyed the world of Islamic kingship within which they had lived for so long.

**Political Islam in Modern India**

The displacement from power of the Muslim rulership also implied over time the displacement of the Muslim aristocracy from positions of power and influence, accentuated by the replacement of Persian as an official language by English. The Muslim service gentry understandably nursed grievances against this decision. Indeed, these were more tangible grievances which could easily contribute to their feeling of alienation from British rule on the one hand, and to a strong aversion, on the other, for western culture represented by the English language and Christianity, which came as a threat to the purity of Islamic communities in what they usually described as the land of Islam or Dar-ul-Islam.

**Reform and Revival**

But reform and revival are more complex questions and they have to be studied at different levels. The problem concerned the elite Muslims mainly,- people who had held
positions of power and felt that their position was threatened by the emergence of British rule. Yet there were popular dimensions as well, where puritanical ideas borrowed from Islamic movements in West Asia energized the peasants in many instances. There are complexities in the relationship between reform and revival in the Indian context where Islam actually had been implanted on a polytheistic culture. In the Bengal countryside, for example, popular Islam did not entirely reject idolatrous practices. Practices like the worship of the sufi saints, or of the pirs, that one observed in the rural areas of the Punjab and Sind, reflected a kind of idolatry that the purists would look upon as un-Islamic.

The reformists insisted on purging these idolatrous practices from popular religious practice. There were two different dimensions of reformism. At one level was the initiative of reform which would purge Islam of the corrupting practices which had crept into Islamic religious practice through its interaction with a polytheistic culture, with the usual emphasis on making the practice of Islam more consistent with the fundamental religious precepts. Yet there were
reformers who went a step forward to move beyond this limited sphere by accepting modernism. In this we find two different dimensions of reform. One is reform of the religious practice in line with the theological precepts of the religion, and the other actually takes one to a very different world where the Muslim elites in India supported by some Islamic scholars, tried to come to terms with modernity by accepting features of western modernism. Some of the reformist initiatives in the sense of adoption of a purer version of Islam destroyed in the long run the syncretic culture in the rural areas.

**The Lineages of Revivalist Thought**

There is a particular argument which tries to trace the kind of revivalism, where reform of the religion was contingent on the more systematic and purist adoption of theological premises of the religion, to the Mughal Empire. This is associated with the name of Sirhindi, who was critical of the manner in which the Mughal emperors were actually trying to work out compromises with the Hindu nobility and Hindu practices. The kind of syncretic tradition that the Mughal Empire created, became the butt of criticism of the more
purist theologians like Sirhindi. This strand of Indian Islam began to gain significant numbers of supporters from the late eighteenth century onwards in order to cope with the problem of displacement from power. Once they realized that they were no longer living under Muslim rule, they saw the threats to the existence of Islam as the ideology of governance at the moment of displacement from power. Some of the 18th century thinkers like Shah Waliullah, a theologian from Delhi, for example, started emphasizing the Arab connection of Indian Islam and the need for Indian Muslims to stick to a pure Islamic identity to negotiate with such threats. What was implied was that for Indian Muslims, Indian identity seemed to have been less important than Muslim identity. Yet they were confronting a religious world where syncretic traditions had evolved through centuries, since the time when Islam came in touch with these large communities of rural people and local priests had allowed the continuance of older practices. It was therefore important for some of these thinkers, to challenge the existing religious leadership by claiming the right to interpret religion freely in order to reform it. They became involved in a certain kind of confrontation with
orthodoxy which did not bother about whether these practices actually conformed to the theological foundations of the religion.

But the right to interpret religion in a new fashion and to make it more consistent with the theological foundations of the religion, as they actually featured in some of the foundational texts, was called Ijtihad implying the freedom of interpretation. In the first instance at the time when Shah Walliullah was anxious to achieve a purer form of Islam when its existence was apparently threatened by foreign Christian rule, Ijtihad actually enabled men to think of strengthening Islam with a certain kind of puritanism, which they found lacking in Indian Islam. The emphasis therefore was placed on the connection with the Arab world on the one hand, the land where Islam originated and also on the requirement of the Muslim communities to follow the religious texts more faithfully.

Yet over time the right to interpret religion freely would enable sections of the Muslim leadership, to come to terms with modernity more effectively. Once they realized that the
world had changed, and it was important for Islamic communities to accept science, rationality and technology, men liked Syed Ahmed Khan, tried to reconcile these changes with their religion by claiming the right of free interpretation.

**Revivalism and Puritan movements: Shah Waliullah and his followers**

Certainly it has certain long term relevance for the evolution of modern Islam in India, but at the time when Shah Waliullah in the late eighteenth century claimed this right to interpret religion freely, the intention was to strengthen Islam with puritanism in a seemingly hostile environment, when India had become a land of the infidel. Shah Waliullah was based in the Madrasa-i-Rahimia in Delhi, and Delhi was an important centre of Islamic scholarship since the 16th and 17th centuries. His main concern was to ensure the protection of Islam in a land which had become a land of the infidel, Dar-ul-Harb, where Islamic rule was no longer prevailing.
In this context Shah Walliullah felt the need for the restoration of the purity of Islam. But some of his followers like for example Syed Ahmed Barelvi, known as Syed Ahmed of Barreilly, made a transition from this right of free interpretation of Islam freely in order to make it more pure, - to jehad. Syed Ahmed Barelvi was the progenitor of the movement called Tariqa-i-Mohammadiya. And the connection between the right of interpretation and Tariqa-i-Mohammediya implied a reassessment of orthodoxy, and of existing practices in terms of the proper knowledge of Islam. The intention was to remove the errors which had crept into Islamic religious practice. Abdul Aziz, the son of Walliullah, issued a fatwa that every Muslim in India was required to pursue this purer form of Islam in order to bring back the Dar ul Islam in this country. Syed Ahmed Barelvi’s innovation in this movement was the idea of jehad, a point of distinction between the master and the disciple. Syed Ahmed Barelvi started a militant movement in the North Western Frontier Provinces, to realize Walliullah’s expectation that people from the North Western Frontier Provinces would intervene in India to restore Dar-ul Islam. Ultimately these resistance movements did not succeed.
After his death in 1831 the movement began to peter out. Some of his followers who were located in Patna, Vilayat Ali and Enayat Ali, tried to continue with this tradition but without much success.

**Revivalism and Popular Movements**

Tarîqua-i-Mohammaddia however managed to create certain long term trends. One of these was the more scholarly trend. Once the more assertive jehadi kind of movement that Syed Ahmed Barelvi organized collapsed, the concentration was once again on the scholarly legacy of Abdul Aziz and others, resulting in a movement called Al Hadid. The leadership of this puritanical movement came from a man called Syed Nasir who rejected Sufism and all forms of pir worship, and insisted on perfect conformity with the text, holding a fundamentalist position on religion. This kind of textual fundamentalism which was an integral part of this reformist initiative was as much critical of the kind of corruption which came as a consequence of the interaction with polytheism as it was of orthodoxy which was mainly interested in maintaining the hold of the priestly classes over the communities. A popular dimension of this
movement in the countryside of Bengal was seen in the Faraizi movement in eastern Bengal.

**The Faraizi movement**

The name actually was derived from the idea that every Muslim had the obligation or the faraz, - to follow the religious precepts faithfully. Bengal was a fertile ground for such purist theologians to come up with their criticism of popular religious practice. Pir system was one of the main targets of their attack. But the faraizis are also described by scholars like Peter Hardy as Islamic Lollards who combined with their religion an element of peasant radicalism. The leadership of the movement came from a man called Haji Shariatullah who went to Mecca, and studied in the Al Azar University in Cairo where he imbibed his fundamentalist puritanical ideas.

But the point is that apart from the insistence on Puritanism the movement of Haji Shariatullah managed to spread its influence among the peasants by asking Muslim peasants not to pay subscription for the Durga Puja festival and to withhold payment of illegal taxes to the Hindu landowners.
Apart from the religious ideology which was to alter the regular practice of the ordinary peasants, they came up with a certain emancipatory message by way of asking them to avoid paying the rent and other demands to the land owners. The movement turned more militant under the radical leadership of Shariatullah’s son Dudu Mian. Dudu Mian actually radicalized the entire movement by mobilizing opinion in favour of non-payment of taxes to the landlords, comparable to the Lollardy, a powerful and radical movement among the peasant communities in England during late medieval period against the landlords and the church. Similar things were happening in Bengal as this trend was noticed among the protagonists of Tariqa-i-Mohammadia. Apart from Dudu Mian, we have evidence of similar radical approach in the activities of Titumir in South Bengal or even among the Moplas at Malabar in present day Kerala.

All these movements became blended with a certain kind of agrarian discontent to become a popular movement among the peasantry. They did not, however, survive for long. In the latter half of the 19th century, the purification
movement under the leadership of people like Keramat Ali for example, accepted British rule, but insisted on purification of Islam. In an important work Rafiuddin Ahmed has suggested that this kind of purification movement continued as Islamic theologians moved in the countryside, held debates, published religious books in vernacular language, for the people to practise religion in a proper Islamic manner. These texts, called Nashihatnamas, were written in a kind of Islamic Bengali for the consumption of the co-religionists. Bahas and waj mehfils were organized. Basically these were debates in the local communities about what was the true nature of Islam and the extent to which religious practice had deviated from the norms calling forth the people to restore its purity.

**Coming to terms with British Rule**

Keramat Ali of course represented an important trend whereby the Muslims were actually trying to come to terms with the existence of British rule while trying to preserve the sanctity and purity of their religion. How to practise pure religion in a land where they were no longer rulers? This was inscribed in the activities of Keramat Ali in the
latter half of the 19th century. In this regard the revolt of 1857 was an important point of departure. After the revolt of 1857, the British stereotyped the Muslims as rebels and there was an urgency on the part of the Muslim elites to convince the British about the fact that the Muslims were also loyalists. Such concerns were manifest also in the activities of a person like Syed Ahmed Khan of Aligarh. Keramat Ali who was a purist and carried on the legacy of early 19th century purification movement, accepted British rule arguing that India was not a Dar-ul-Harb. Muslims could easily live within this world and practice purer forms of Islam. Similar things were happening in the Punjab among a sect called the Ahmadiyas where there was an insistence on purification but there was also a readiness to accept the fact of western rule. Sind and Punjab, the land of **sajjadasheens**, and very powerful pirs were regions where the practice of pir worship was quite strong. Ahmadiyas, like the Shariatullah movement in Bengal, insisted on the practice of a purer form of Islam, by distancing themselves from such popular practices.
**Islamic Modernism: Deobandis**

After 1857 however, we see a different kind of reformist initiative by which Islamic communities were asked to come to terms with modernity, western modernity to start with, but modernity had a much larger implication. One of the examples is Deoband which was once again a reformist initiative inspired by revivalist ideas. Its founders Mohammed Qasim and Rashid Ahmed were trained in Delhi in the same institutions which produced people like Abdul Aziz and his descendants. Eventually they set up a seminary at Deoband, near Lucknow where they adopted features of modern education. They devised a curriculum which was based on classical Persian education, claiming once again the right to interpret religion freely in order to make religion more consistent with the modern world.

Around the same time there was a different kind of initiative where the right to interpret religion was no longer seen as the right of a select group of theologians like the men who assembled in the Deoband seminary. The Deoband believed that only the theologians were actually entitled to interpret religion. Others were excluded from this. But for the Muslim
communities to come to terms with modernity, Ijtihad ought not to remain the privilege of a minority of theologians assembling in religious seminaries. The right needed to be exercised by others too. Syed Ahmed Khan represented this trend. Deoband was adopting modernity by creating a modern institution but at the same time Deobandis were not willing to allow others to exercise this right.

**Islamic Modernism: Syed Ahmad Khan**

On the other hand, Syed Ahmed Khan did not confine this initiative within the limited domain of religion. He went a step forward by holding a brief for modern science. That is where the most important contribution of Syed Ahmed Khan actually lies. Syed Ahmed Khan wanted to see Islam becoming a modern force where Islamic communities would continue to adhere to the very basic precepts of Islam, but at the same time would be ready to get out of their grooves and accept modernity by responding creatively to western science and technology. With this objective he conducted discussions all over India. He came to Calcutta and found a man with similar views in Syed Amir Ali. During his visit to
England, he developed a sense of modern culture. It is in this context that one observes a creative engagement among Islamic scholars with the west. And in the later half of the 19th century there was an urgency for men like Syed Ahmed Khan to engage in this kind of a discourse because the position of the Muslim aristocracy in northern India was increasingly threatened by the upwardly mobile Hindu trading classes who had forged links with local Hindu potentates. There was a movement for adoption of Nagri Script as an official language by replacing Urdu. In this context there was an additional urgency for men like Syed Ahmed Khan to adopt an appropriate strategy whereby Muslim elites would be able to acquire enough strength to compete with the Hindu elite. Acceptance of science and technology was dovetailed with a competitive spirit. In this story 1875 was an important date, as it was in that year that the Aligarh College was established which precisely tried to work out some of Syed Ahmed’s ideas. He gathered around him a group of committed followers and Aligarh College became the harbinger of modernity in India. But, revivalism in the sense of purging religion of corrupt practices contributed to a certain kind of communal
mobilization at the turn of the century. In the same way Syed Ahmed’s initiative produced so much of competitiveness in professional and political spheres that it would become in the long term the foundation of separatism. But that’s a different story, which does not belittle the important contribution that Syed Ahmed Khan made to the evolution of modern Islam in India.