

## THE IMPORTANCE OF WORKS OF MUHAMMAD SHIBLI NOMANI

Samee-Ullah Bhat

Government Degree College Thannamandi, Rajouri  
[bhatsamiullah121@gmail.com](mailto:bhatsamiullah121@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

*This article aims at describing and examining life and works of Muhammad Shibli Nomani. With a historical and content analysis, this paper draws several conclusions. First, the prominent scholar of the Indo-Pak subcontinent of the modern times earns global name and fame through his multiple contributions. These include an accomplished tremendous excellence in numerous walks of human knowledge, arts and science, language and literature, research and criticism, philosophy and scholasticism, history and biography. Secondly, in all his eminent writings, Shibli makes full utilization of primary sources. It is because of this full use of the primary sources that his writings are outstanding in nature not only for the wealth of knowledge but also for interpretation and presentation of facts collected from a number of sources. Third, Shibli's historical writings were primarily written to refute the unfounded allegations of the European writers on Islam and Muslim rule, to acquaint the Muslims with their glorious past, and to draw them out of stagnancy and obscurantism.*

**Keywords:** *Muhammad Shibli Nomani; Orientalism; Indo-Pakistan scholar; Counter Islamophobia;*

### **Abstrak**

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan dan meneliti kehidupan dan karya-karya Muhammad Shibli Nomani. Dengan menggunakan analisis sejarah dan konten, penelitian ini berhasil mendapatkan beberapa kesimpulan. Pertama, sang sejarawan terkemuka dari Indo-Pakistan memperoleh nama besar dan kemasyhuran dari beberapa kontribusi yang dia berikan. Termasuk di antaranya, pencapaian yang mengagumkan dalam beragam bidang ilmu pengetahuan manusia, seni dan sains, bahasa dan sastra, penelitian dan kritisisme, dan sejarah dan biografi. Kedua, dalam semua karya tulisnya, Shibli memanfaatkan sumber-sumber utama. Penggunaan sumber-sumber utama inilah yang menjadikan tulisan-tulisan itu sangat mengagumkan bukan hanya karena kekayaan pengetahuan namun juga karena interpretasi dan penyajian fakta yang terkumpul dari beberapa sumber tersebut. Ketiga, karya tulis kesejarahan Shibli utamanya ditulis untuk membantah tuduhan tanpa dasar dari para penulis Eropa tentang Islam dan hukum Islam, untuk memperkenalkan orang-orang Muslim dengan masa lalu mereka yang mulia, dan untuk menarik mereka keluar dari kemandekan dan obskurantisme.

**Kata Kunci:** *Muhammad Shibli Nomani; Orientalisme; Cendekiawan Indo-Pakistan; Melawan Islamofobia;*

## **Introduction**

Muhammad Shibli Nomani has a multi-dimensional personality who by virtue of his biographical and historical writings through the medium of Urdu, Persian and Arabic languages earns name and fame throughout Indo-Pak subcontinent. This position places him among the leading historians of modern times. It was at Aligarh that Shibli got a suitable atmosphere for his educational and intellectual pursuit. There he turned his attention towards historical writings primarily to refute the unfounded allegations of the European writers on Islam and Muslim rule, to acquaint the Muslims with their glorious past, and to draw them out of stagnancy and obscurantism. In this research paper, an attempt is made to provide a general overview of his life and some of his significant works.

## **Some Glimpses of Muhammad Shibli Nomani's Life**

*Allama* Shibli Nu'mani was born in an illustrious and distinguished family on 10 Shawwal 1273 AH/ 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1857, at Bindwal, a village now lying under sub-division Sagri, about fifteen kilometres north-west of Azamgarh city.<sup>1</sup> His father named him Muhammad Shibli, perhaps after the famous Sufi, Shaikh Shibli Baghdadi. He was a very bright child who was brought up with great care. Sheikh Habibullah was Muhammad Shibli Nomani's father. Sheikh Habibullah, a lawyer by profession, was a man of varied interests and tastes and practiced both at Allahabad and Azamgarh. He also looked after his landed property and carried on trade in sugar.<sup>2</sup> However, what distinguished Sheikh Habibullah most was his literary taste and proficiency in Arabic and Persian languages. Sheikh Habibullah had four sons and a daughter from his wife, Begum Hamida. Muhammad Shibli Nu'mani was the eldest son, followed by Mahdi Hasan, Muhammad Ishaque and Muhammad Junaid.<sup>3</sup>

Shibli began his formal education by attending the village Maktabah. He received his early education from Hakim Abdullah

---

<sup>1</sup> Sayyid Sulaiman Nadwi, *Hayat-i Shibli*, 4<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Azamgarh: Ma'arif Press, 1983), 68-69.

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Ikram, *Shibli Namah* (Lucknow: Nasir Maktabah, n.d.), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Ikram, *Shibli Namah*, 17.

Jairajpuri and Mawlvi Shukrullah.<sup>4</sup> Thereafter, Mawlvi Faizullah taught Shibli at an Arabic Madrasa in Azamgarh which had been started by some of the elites of the town. Shibli then went to Madrasa Han'fiyah at Jaunpur for higher education from Mawlvi Hidaytullah Khan Rampuri. It appears that he also studied for some time from Mawlana Ali Abbas Chiryakoti.<sup>5</sup> Thus, quite early in his life Shibli travelled intensively in quest of knowledge. He studied *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *Usul* (Islamic principles), *Hadith* (Prophetic Traditions), *Munazra* (Religious debates), *Maqulaat* (Rational Sciences), *Manqulaat* (Sciences of Hadith) and Astronomy. He did not receive English education, but during his stay at Aligarh, he seemed to have acquired some elementary knowledge of it.

However, the real formative period of Shibli's education, as well as the maturity of his thought, began when he entered the study-circle of Maulana Faruq Chiryakoti first at Madrasa Chashma-i Rahmat, Ghazipur and then at the Arabic Madrasa, Azamgarh. It was sterling guidance of Faruq Chiryakoti that sharpened Shibli's wit and intellect. It was the life as well as his teaching and thought which instilled into the impressionable mind of Shibli a great zest for Islamic learning; in particular, it generated his interest in Mu'tazilite theology.<sup>6</sup> Then in order to enrich his knowledge, Shibli joined the study-circle of Abdul Hai Firangi Mahli at Lucknow. He then left for Rampur where he remained for about a year in the study-circle of Mawlana Irshad Hussian, a distinguished scholar of Islamic jurisprudence and principles. He also stayed at Deoband for about a month and made full use of its library. Thereafter, for further advanced studies in Arabic, he went to Lahore and studied under the guidance of Mawlana Faizul Hasan Saharanpuri who was a professor at the Oriental College, Lahore.<sup>7</sup> Finally, he took up the study of *Hadith* from the renowned scholar, Mawlana Ahmad Ali *Muhaddith* Saharanpuri. This was the last center where he studied *Sunan-i-Tirmidhi*. This marked the culmination of his education in traditional Islamic sciences. Soon after at the age of nineteen he,

---

<sup>4</sup> Akhtar Waqar 'Azim, *Shibli Bahaihiyat-i-Mua'rrikh* (Lahore: Sang-i-Mil Publications, 1968), 49.

<sup>5</sup> Nadwi, *Hayat-i Shibli*, 70–72.

<sup>6</sup> Nadwi, *Hayat-i Shibli*, 74.

<sup>7</sup> Nadwi, *Hayat-i Shibli*, 80–84.

along with his father, left for Hajj in 1876. The journey of Hajj provided Shibli with an opportunity to visit different libraries of Makkah and Madinah where he saw rare Islamic literature in abundance.<sup>8</sup>

After completing his studies, Shibli spent four years (1878-82) in teaching and took part in various debates against the group of *ghair muqallid* (those who declined to follow any of the four authentic *madhab* or schools of Islam and relied entirely on the Qur'an and *Hadith*) in Azamgarh. In the beginning, he defended the Hanafi sect against this group and wrote a number of works, *Zill al-Ghamam fi Mas'alat al-Qir'at Khalf al-Imam* in Urdu (1875) and *Iskāt al-Mu'tadi 'ala Isnat al-Muqtadi* in Arabic (1881). Shibli's scholarly Urdu writings elucidated the core issues like the minor differences between various sects in a very simple manner but without compromising the Islamic ethos. At his father's urging, Shibli read for the law degree in 1879-80 and successfully completed it. However, when he set up his law practice, he failed to attract litigants.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Works of Muhammad Shibli Nomani**

Shibli Nu'mani has a distinguished personality which earns name and fame for his various activities, but it was his biographical and historical writings that have carved a niche for him and places him among the leading historians of modern times. It was at Aligarh that Shibli got a suitable atmosphere for his educational and intellectual pursuit. There he turned his attention towards historical writings primarily to refute the unfounded allegations of the European writers on Islam and Muslim rule, to acquaint the Muslims with their glorious past, and to draw them out of stagnancy and obscurantism. Initially, Shibli was ambitious to undertake the writing of a comprehensive history of Muslim dynasties of the world, but he gave up the idea because the task was too difficult for a single person. Consequently, he narrowed his project to the writing of the history of the Abbasids. But later on, he realized that this was also an arduous task, and hence confined his project to the writing of some of the important figures of Islam.

---

<sup>8</sup> Nadwi, *Hayat-i Shibli*, 84-87; 91-94.

<sup>9</sup> Nadwi, *Hayat-i Shibli*, 88-90; 96-97; 100-116.

## 1. *Al-Ma'mun*

Shibli embarked in 1887 upon his 'Heroes of Islam' series with *Al-Ma'mun*, a brief history of the Abbasids. It was one of his most popular books in Urdu and very favorably reviewed. Shibli maintained that Urdu was a fast-growing language that had become the language of scholarship. Although a large group of intellectuals produced history books in Arabic and Persian, Urdu had almost become the national language of India. With this in mind, Shibli planned to write a comprehensive Islamic history in that language.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike earlier historians, Shibli tried to trace the original sources of information to prove his thesis. In fact, this work is not only a biography of Caliph Al-Ma'mun, but also an account of the Abbasid dynasty. It was published by Aligarh. In it, he wrote that after thirteen centuries of Islam, there was not a single Muslim ruler who equaled Al-Ma'mun.

*Al-Ma'mun* is the first biographical work which brought Shibli into the limelight. Written on the life and achievements of the seventh Abbasid Caliph, Abdullah Al-Ma'mun bin Harun (813-833), it has all the charms of historical flavour, which a modern student of history would like to have. Shibli received rich compliments for this work. He was described as the rising star on the Indian horizon. The book is divided into two parts. The first discusses Al-Ma'mun's early life, education, coronation, internal conflicts, conquests and death. The second explains the socio-economic conditions of the period, sketches the character of Ma'mun al-Rashid and sheds light on the cultural activities of his time. The style is simple and attractive. The events are recounted in a detached manner and without being coloured by prejudice or partiality.

## 2. *Al-Farūq*

*Al-Farūq* is Shibli's magnum opus for which he exerted all energy to collect data from the libraries of India, Istanbul, Beirut, Damascus and Cairo. It is a complete historical biography of Caliph 'Umar the Great, published in two parts in 1898. The first part consists of a prologue, his early life, conquests and political achievements. The second gives an account of his broad

---

<sup>10</sup> Nadwi, *Hayat-i Shibli*, 172.

administration, socio-economic, cultural and intellectual attainments. Shibli wanted to start working on this book just after completing *Al-Ma'mun* in 1887, but the unavailability of some important sources forced him to delay this great task as stated in the preface of *Al-Ma'mun*. For writing *Al-Farūq*, Shibli consulted some works like Al-Mawardi's *Al-Ahkām al-Sultaniyah*, Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah*, Qādī Abū Yūsuf's *Kitāb al-Kharāj*, Abī Hilal al-'Askari's *Kitāb al-Awā'il*, Ibn Sa'd's *Tabaqāt Ibn Sa'd*, Ibn 'Abd Rabbah's *al-Iqd al-Farīd*, Al-Midani's *Majma' al-Amthāl*, Al-Jāhiz's *Kitāb al-Bayān w'al-Tabyīn*, Ibn Rashīq al-Qairwānī's *Kitāb al-'Umdah*, Imām Ibn al-Jauzī's *Sīrat al-'Umra'in*, Ahmad Ibn Yahyā al-Balādhurī's *Ansāb al-Asbrāf*, Muhammad bin Khalaf al-Wakī's *Akhhār al-Qudāt* and Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlavi's *Izālat al-Khafa* 'An-Khilafat al-Khulafa'.<sup>11</sup>

Shibli begins *Al-Farūq* with historical analysis and thorough discussion of the merits, demerits, and authenticity of the ancient sources. He also stresses their comparative value. In his commentary, he scrutinizes the available historical material on the life and time of 'Umar and commends the early historians of Islam for serving the cause of authentic Islamic historiography.<sup>12</sup>

Shibli thought that the spiritual, religious, and personal life of 'Umar were universally known, but his socio-political and administrative achievements needed to be equally noted. 'Umar laid the foundation of a democratic style of government and made a great impact on the civilized world some thirteen hundred years ago. His style of calling public assemblies in the Prophet Mosque was a role model for the civilized world. Hearing these announcements, members of the community rushed to the mosque and after saying two *raka'ah* of prayers the proceedings opened. After an introductory speech, the discussion began and if any crucial matter came up, the Ansar and Muhajirun were called and decisions were taken by consensus. Apart from the members of the *Majlis-i-Shurā* (consultative council), the ordinary public could take part in the processes of local administration like the appointment of provincial governors and district officials. A general mandatory order was issued to all governors and administrators to join the annual Hajj gatherings where the people were given full freedom to air their

---

<sup>11</sup> M. Yasin Mazhar Siddiqi, *Al-Farūq Ek Mutali'a* (Aligarh: Institute of Islamic Studies, 2002), 6; 7; 32.

<sup>12</sup> Siddiqi, *Al-Farūq* 24–29.

grievances. If a complaint was levelled against any official, the latter had to defend himself. In the end, after a thorough enquiry, suitable action was taken against him. ‘Umar also took a keen interest in maintaining a high standard of morality and honesty among the government officials by giving them high salaries. Europeans learned this culture quite late.<sup>13</sup>

The smooth running of the administration of a well-organized government needed well-established departments. ‘Umar introduced different departments according to the need, like departments of Revenue, Justice, Public Treasury, Criminal Courts, Police, Public Works, Defence, Education and Religion. He introduced the Hijra calendar to mark the beginning of the Muslim era from the date of the Prophet’s migration to Madinah. During the time of ‘Umar, people were treated equally under the law without discrimination due to blood ties or wealth; so much so that like all other offenders his own son was also punished for a crime and he died because of lashings. Similarly, Shibli believed that Europeans picked up the idea of democracy from Islam.<sup>14</sup>

The work was much awaited long before its publication. It was hailed as a masterpiece of historical writing. Until now, it still enjoys the reputation of being among the most sought after books of Urdu language. On account of its popularity, it has been translated into several languages such as English, Persian, Arabic, Pashto, Turki and Malayalam.

### 3. *Sirat al-Nabi*

But in the realm of biographical writings, the *magnum opus* of Shibli is *Sirat al-Nabi*, the biography of Prophet Muhammad PBUH. Primarily written to acquaint the Urdu knowing readers with the teachings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH, it is also an expression of Shibli’s deep understanding of the Prophet’s PBUH message and historic role. Judged by its content, presentation, investigation, and elevation of the merit of historical sources, it holds a unique position to this day; so much so, that such an excellent biographical account is not to be seen even in Arabic.

---

<sup>13</sup> Siddiqi, *Al-Faruq*, 241–44; 258–59.

<sup>14</sup> Siddiqi, *Al-Faruq*, 247–51; 263–64; 369; 413–14.

The first inspiration to the writing of *Sirat al-Nabi* may be traced to Shibli's writing of *Badi al-Islam* in Arabic which was written in 1891, at the behest of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan for the graduate students of Anglo-Mohammedan Oriental College. About this time, Shibli received a request from all corners of the country to write a full-fledged account of the Prophet PBUH. In 1905 Professor Margoliouth's biographical work entitled *Muhammad* PBUH further aroused the spirits of the Muslims.

It was increasingly felt necessary to answer the unfounded allegations and misunderstanding spread by European writers on certain aspects of the biography of Prophet Muhammad PBUH. Shibli, who had devoted considerable attention to the study of Islamic scholasticism, was of the opinion that religion no longer remained confined to the understanding of God and His creation, but it also included Prophethood and Prophet Muhammad PBUH who had a special place in His creation and special relation with God. This was of universal importance and necessary for all mankind to acknowledge. In 1912, Shibli set up a committee for the writing of the biography of Prophet Muhammad PBUH.

The distinguished Islamic scholars such as Mawlana Sayyid Sulaiman Nadwi, Hamiduddin Farahi, Mawlana Abdus Salam Nadwi, Mawlana Abdul Majid Daryabadi and others were selected to assist in this project. However, before the project could be completed, Shibli died after having written two volumes. The task was later completed by his student, Mawlana Sayyid Sulaiman Nadwi. The two volumes written by Shibli are an outstanding piece of writing. He has masterfully expounded at length the beginnings of biographical writings in Islam, the essential difference and finer aspects of *Sirah*, *Maghazi*, *Hadith* literature, the shortcomings of earlier biographical writings about Prophet Muhammad PBUH, and many other significant aspects, which constitute the elements of early Islamic history.

#### **4. *Kutubkhana-i-lskandriyya***

Shibli wrote in 1892 *Kutubkhana-i-lskandriyya* to challenge another false accusation widely accepted in Europe, that Muslims are uncivilized and ignorant. In order to support this claim, they maintained that during the conquest of Alexandria in 21/641-42 and on the directive of the then Caliph 'Umar ibn Khattāb (634-44),

Muslims burnt the city's ancient Greek library. Shibli's researches showed that half of this library, founded by an ancient Egyptian emperor, had, in fact, been burnt many centuries before by Julius Caesar (102/100-44 BC) and the rest of its books were dispersed. This unfounded charge, Shibli continued, was propagated by a Christian writer namely, Abū al-Farj (b.1226). It is interesting to note that the article was translated into different languages and obliged many European scholars to admit the fallacy of this assumption. These and other writings drew attention to Shibli's serious scholarship during the period 1892-98.<sup>15</sup>

### 5. *Alamgir Par Ek Nazar*

Shibli wrote a series of articles on Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb, in the journal *Al-Nadwa*, Lucknow, during the period 1906-1908. These articles were later published in the form of a book entitled *Alamgir Par Ek Nazar* in the year 1911. In these articles, Shibli examined some of the charges against Aurangzeb made by the European historian. He tried to absolve him of the accusations. The significance of the work is that it was the first attempt by an Indian to study Aurangzeb, and more significantly, the first elementary effort to study the character of Mughal nobility during Aurangzeb with particular reference to the participation of the Hindus.

### 6. *Al-Jizya and Huqūq al-Zimmīn*

Shibli wrote in 1889 his well-researched article, "*Al-Jizya*", to counter a popular, but erroneous charge propagated by non-Muslim historians that Muslims imposed this "unjust" tax to force non-Muslims to accept Islam. He argued that the *jizya* was not a symbol of oppression but a sign of mercy and that Muslim rulers had given minorities easy terms to pay this small tax and exempted them from military service. They could not have possibly got such concessions from any government other than a Muslim one. To support his thesis, Shibli wrote in 1898, *Huqūq al-Zimmīn* (the rights of the *Zimmīs*, the non-Muslims under Muslim rule), which he personally

---

<sup>15</sup> Nadwi, *Hayat-i Shibli*, 161-63.

translated into Arabic and, which on the initiative of Sayyid Ahmad Khan was later translated into English as well.<sup>16</sup>

## **Conclusion**

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that Shibli as a historian holds a distinct position among the prominent scholars of Indo-Pak subcontinent. He started his writing career under the inspiration and guidance of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan who himself has written on *Sirah* of the Prophet PBUH. At Aligarh, at a time when Sayyid Ahmad Khan had started paying more attention to political and social activities, Shibli carried forward the historical mission of the former and through his prominent works refuted the unfounded allegations of the European writers on Islam and Muslim rule and acquainted the Muslims with their glorious past, and tried to draw them out of stagnancy and obscurantism.

He is thus among the earliest historians who pointed out some of the generally accepted but incorrect historical notions and rejected many of the false allegations of the European writers. Shibli claims that the advent of Islam and the rise of Muslims was a boon to mankind. Islamic sciences and learning contributed to the growth of human knowledge. He states that the early Muslims showed no discrimination towards the work and knowledge of other races and communities.

## **REFERENCES**

- Akhtar Waqar 'Azīm. *Shibli Babaithiyat-i-Mua'rrikh*. Lahore: Sang-i-Mil Publications, 1968.
- Aziz Ahmad. *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan 1857- 1964*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- M. Yasin Mazhar Siddiqi. *Al-Faruq Ek Mutali'a*. Aligarh: Institute of Islamic Studies, 2002.

---

<sup>16</sup> Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan 1857- 1964* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 80–81. Muhammad Shibli Nu'mani, *Maqalat-i-Shibli*, ed. Sulaiman Nadwi, vol. I (Azamgarh: Ma'arif Press, 1999), 175–209. Muhammad Shibli Nu'mani, *Maqalat-i-Shibli*, ed. Sulaiman Nadwi, vol. III (Azamgarh: Ma'arif Press, 1955), 1–36. Akhtar Waqar 'Azīm, *Shibli Babaithiyat-i-Mua'rrikh*, 64.

- Muhammad Ikram. *Shibli Namah*. Lucknow: Nasir Maktabah, n.d.
- Muhammad Shibli Nu'mani. *Maqalat-i-Shibli*. Edited by Sulaiman Nadwi. Vol. III. Azamgarh: Ma'arif Press, 1955.
- . *Maqalat-i-Shibli*. Edited by Sulaiman Nadwi. Vol. I. Azamgarh: Ma'arif Press, 1999.
- Sayyid Sulaiman Nadwi. *Hayat-i Shibli*. 4rd ed. Azamgarh: Ma'arif Press, 1983.

*The Importance of Works...*