

‘Allāma Shiblī Nu‘mānī (1857-1914): A Monumental Islamic Scholar

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The nineteenth century is one of the most turbulent periods in the history of the Muslim peoples in the Indian subcontinent, during which they lost their political grip over the region. The flames of the war of independence of 1857 were at their peak and the Muslims struggled vigorously, but in vain and their sun set in political chaos.¹ Bahadur Shah Zafar (1837-1857), the last Mughal ruler, lost his throne and was exiled to Rangoon (Yangon). The lives of Muslims, their property and even honour were no longer secure because of the British hostility towards them. The British occupied Delhi and started a reign of terror in and around the city. Many Muslim villages were raided, homes set on fire and the helpless residents ruthlessly gunned down. A large number of Muslim houses were plundered. On false charges, many Muslims were hanged from trees without trial at the insinuation of their neighbours. The British reaction to the unsuccessful rising of 1857 heralded the systematic demolition of an era and its very basic structure. The entire milieu and the rich Muslim culture sadly ended with the Mughal rule.²

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1 Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent (610-1947)*, The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1962, p.223.

2 *Ibid.*, pp.213, 228-33.

Besides this huge human loss, the subsequent Western cultural invasion threatened the very existence of the Ummah and the fundamentals of its religion. Since the beginning, Shibli was instrumental in defending Islam and the achievements of Muslims through his monograph series 'Heroes of Islam' that included titles like *Al-Faruq*, *Al-Ma'mūn*, *Al-Ghazāli*, *Sīrat al-Nu'mān*, *Swānih-i-Maulānā Rūm*, *Aurangzeb 'Alamgīr par aik Nazar*, *'Adl-i-Jahangīrī* and *Sīrat al-Nabi*, which emphasized the civilizational impact of Islam and its role in enriching the human heritage. Among his other important works that will be studied here are *Ta'rikh-i-Ba'd al-Islām*, *'Ilm al-Kalām*, *Al-Kalām*, *Shi'r al-'Ajam*, *Khutbat-i-Shiblī*, *Maqālāt-i-Shiblī*, *Kulliyāt-i-Shiblī* and *Safarnāma-i-Rūm wa Misr wa Shām*. Shibli was also active in the development of Islamic and modern education for the Muslims of India and worked at Aligarh Muslim University, India. He wanted to modernize the Islamic system of education without damaging its core. With this aim, he worked for the founding of Dar al-'Ulum-i-Nadwat al-'Ulama' in 1898 in Lucknow, India. He was an 'alim, a historian, a writer, a biographer, a critic, an expert on Islamic philosophy and a poet, writing both in Persian and Urdu languages. The drastic socio-political and economic changes in the Islamic world had alerted him to the dangers ahead, as clearly reflected in his prolific writings and stupendous intellectual output.³

Family Background

'Allama Shibli Nu'mani⁴ was a descendant of a noble family of the Rāwat clan of Rajputs. His great-great-grandfather, Shivraj Singh alias Siraj al-Din Chaudhuri, embraced Islam in 1540 during the last days of Emperor Humayun (1530-1556). Shivraj Singh's acceptance of Islam is a fascinating instance of a Rajput's pride. It

3 Muhammad Shibli Nu'mani, *Al-Ma'mun*, (Azamgarh: Dar al-Mussanifin, 3rd edition, 1992), p.8; *Hayat-i-Shiblī*, pp.18, 298-318; Aziz Ahmad, *An Intellectual History of Islam in India*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969, p.108.

4 'Allama,' a very learned person. From the very beginning, Shibli was a staunch follower of Imām Abū Hanīfa (d.150/767). He wrote his biography, *Sīrat al-Nu'mān*, which was published from Aligarh in 1891. Nu'mānī was a title of Shibli, given by his teacher Maulana Fārūq Chirayyākōtī after the said Imām. Later Nu'mānī became part of his own name. Sayyid Sulayman Nadvī, *Hayat-i-Shiblī*, Azamgarh: Matba'-'i-Ma'ārif, reprint 1999, p.69.

is reported that one summer morning he went for his usual business of Zamindari (landownership) and returned home late. On his arrival he rushed into the kitchen without taking off his shoes, an act repugnant to Hindus. His brother's wife burst into anger and passed an insulting remark, calling him a Turk (Muslim). He retorted that he would be one and straightaway went to the nearby mosque of the Khanqah village to declare his acceptance of Islam.⁵

Shibli's grandfather, Munshi Hasan 'Ali and uncle Munshi Waris 'Ali were lawyers in the district court of Azamgarh. His father, Shaikh Habib Allah (d.1900), studied Persian, became an expert in this language and its literature and developed a good taste in poetry. He also studied law and became a leading practitioner in the district.⁶

Shaikh Habib Allah played a leading role in maintaining law and order in *pargana* Sagri during the 1857 revolt and in pacifying the communal violence on the issue of cow slaughter in 1893 in Azamgarh. In 1894 he was once again in the forefront, helping district authorities build a dam on local river to check flooding. He was popular with the people and served as honorary Chairman of the Municipal Corporation of Azamgarh till his death. Apart from this, he had a flourishing business of refining sugar and indigo. Later, he became the disciple of Maulavi Muhammad Kāmil of Walīdpur, Azamgarh.⁷

Shibli's mother was the daughter of Hajji Qurban Qanbar Ansari of Phariha, Azamgarh. She was respected for her piety, particularly for saying the prayers of *tahajjud*. Shibli adored her pious habits and boasted that his habit of early rising was because of her example. In her memory Shibli built Sadr al-Manāzil, a hall in Shibli National College, Azamgarh, in December 1898.⁸

Shaikh Habib Allah's children were Muhammad Shibli, Mahdi Hasan (d.1897), Maulvi Shaikh Muhammad Ishāq (d.1914),

5 *Hayat-i-Shibli*, pp.58-60.

6 *Ibid.*, pp.61-62.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 63; Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp.24-25, 60-61.

8 *Hayat-i-Shibli*, pp.61, 65.

Muhammad Junayd Nu‘mani (d.1933) and a daughter. He had another son Muhammad from his second wife. Shibli was the eldest in his family, whose all members became leading advocates of Islam and famous judges in Allahabad High Court.⁹

Birth and Early Education

Shibli Nu‘mani was born on 10 Shawwal 1273/ 3 June 1857 which coincided with the very day on which some Indian soldiers had broken into Azamgarh jail, freed many of its prisoners and captured the office of the district treasury. This was the peak of the war of independence when the whole of India rose against British the rule.¹⁰ His father named him Muhammad Shibli, perhaps after the famous Sufi Shaikh Shibli Baghdadi (d.334/945). He was a very bright child who was brought up with great care. His parents wanted him to specialize in religious education and he started his early education in his village with the recitation of the Qur’an and the rudiments of Persian under the guidance of Hakim ‘Abd Allah Jayrajpuri (d.1890) and subsequently Maulavi Shukr Allah Sabrhadi (d.1897). Hakim ‘Abd Allah noticed signs of brilliance in Shibli who used to write chronograms. Shibli studied under a number of very able teachers in and around Azamgarh also. He noted the greatness of his teacher, Maulana Fārūq Chirayyākōtī (d.1909) and acknowledged that he taught him books of philosophy like *Risala-i-Mīr Zāhid*, *Mīr Zahid Mullā Jalal*, *Hamd Allah*, *Sharh-i-Sadrā* and *Shams-i-Bāzigha*. Shibli also studied logic under his guidance in Madrasa-i-Islamiyya, Azamgarh, founded by his father. Maulana Faruq also developed in Shibli a love for Persian poetry.¹¹

After completing his early schooling Shibli decided to move to Rampur and Lahore respectively, in 1874 and 1875, for higher studies. Now he planned to look for distinguished teachers of *Hadith*, *Fiqh* and Arabic literature. In those days, Lucknow, Rampur, Saharanpur, Deoband and Lahore were well-known

9 *Ibid.*, pp.65-66.

10 *Ibid.*, p.68.

11 *Ibid.*, pp.68,70-71,77; Akhtar Waqar ‘Azīm, *Shibli Bahaihiyat-i-Mua’rrikh*, Lahore: Sang-i-Mil Publications, 1968, p.49.

centres of Islamic scholarship. Shibli’s father was not ready to send him far from home for higher studies, but his bold mother allowed him to join the centres of his choice. Shibli went first to Lucknow to see Maulana ‘Abd al-Hai Farangi Mahalli, but he could not stay there long. He moved to Rampur where he met Maulana ‘Abd al-Hai Khairabadi and Maulana Irshad Husain Rampuri, then prominent scholars in the field of rational sciences and Islamic jurisprudence respectively. Shibli stayed with ‘Abd al-Hai Khairabadi for one year before he joined the circle of Maulana Irshad Husain, an expert in *Fiqh* and *Usūl-i-fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). Subsequently, he went to Deoband for about a month, where he mastered the *Risala-i-Farā’iz* (treatise on Muslim law).¹²

Next, Shibli decided to move to Lahore to join the circle of Maulana Fayz al-Hasan Saharanpuri (d.1887), Professor of Arabic literature in the Oriental College, Lahore. Due to his busy schedule, Maulana taught Shibli only during his daily commute from home to College. Shibli happily agreed to this allocated time and learned Arabic literature. When Maulana Fayz al-Hasan decided to spend his two months summer vacations in his home town of Saharanpur, Shibli also accompanied him. Fayz al-Hasan instilled in Shibli a good understanding of the Qur’an. On his teacher’s death Shibli wrote an elegy.¹³

Following the normal sequence in education, Shibli then joined the circle of Maulana Ahmad ‘Ali Muhaddith Saharanpuri (d.1297/1879) for the study of *Hadith*. This was the last centre, where he studied *Sunan-i-Tirmidhi*. Meanwhile, Shibli’s parents were embarking upon a Hajj trip to Makkah in 1876 and called him to join them in Bombay. He did with the permission of his teacher. During his stay at Makkah and Madinah, he visited many libraries and consulted numerous books of *Hadith*.¹⁴

After completing his studies, Shibli spent four years (1878-82) in teaching and took part in various debates against the group of

12 *Hayat-i-Shibli*, pp.78-80; Waqar ‘Azim, p.50.

13 *Hayat-i-Shibli*, pp.80-4; Waqar ‘Azim, p.50.

14 *Hayat-i-Shibli*, pp. 84-87, 91-94; Waqar ‘Azim, p.50.

ghair muqallid (those who declined to follow any of the four authentic *madhāhib* 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 Isnāt 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.¹⁵

Pan-Islamism

After returning from the holy land, Shibli responded to Jamal al-Din Afghani's (1838- 1897) call for Islamic unity in the face of the Russian aggression against Turkey in 1877. Shibli was instrumental in collecting donations in Azamgarh for the Ottoman Sultan 'Abd al-Hamid II (1842-1918). As the secretary of the Anjuman-i-Islam, Shibli admired the valour and heroism displayed in the *jihad* against the Russians by Ghazi 'Usman Pasha. He raised three thousand rupees which he handed over to Husain Habib Efendi, the Turkish counsellor in Bombay.¹⁶

Visit to Aligarh and Meeting with Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan

The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed the drive of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's (1817-1898) educational movement that had a noticeable impact on the attitude of a large segment of the Muslim community to modern education. His appeal to the educated Muslims of the eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh was warmly welcomed. Shibli's father was much influenced by this call and became a great supporter for the movement. He sent his son, Mahdi Hasan, to Aligarh in 1876 for higher education and in 1881, along with Shibli, visited Aligarh to see him. Subsequently, Shibli wrote a eulogy (*qasida*) in Arabic in which he commended Sayyid

15 *Hayat-i-Shibli*, pp. 88-90, 96-97, 100-116.

16 *Hayat-i-Shibli*, pp. 94-96.

Ahmad for his successful project to promote modern education among the Indian Muslims which was published in the *Aligarh Gazette* of 15 October 1881. Meanwhile, Shibli met Sayyid Ahmad Khan for the first time and was immensely impressed by him.¹⁷

Teaching Career at Aligarh

In 1883, Maulana Fayz al-Hasan recommended Shibli for the position of an Assistant Professor of Arabic at Aligarh. Thus he moved to Aligarh as a guest of Muhammad Karim, the Deputy Collector of Aligarh. Meanwhile, Shibli met Maulvi Samī' Allah Khan, a friend of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who appointed him as an Assistant Professor of Arabic and Persian in Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (MAO College). Shibli joined the College on 1st February 1883 and was subsequently promoted to full professorship. At Aligarh Shibli found a conducive environment that triggered him to be productive. Apart from teaching he wrote poems and published a *dīwān* (collection of poems). At Aligarh, he realized the importance of English education and wrote letters to relatives and friends urging them to send their children for modern education.¹⁸

To promote the English education, Shibli founded the National School in Azamgarh on 20 June 1883 and asked for donations from family and friends. Though this school was started modestly with one teacher and three students, yet by 1887 it had developed into a junior secondary school and by 1895 a high school. Similarly, he founded another school in his hometown of Bindwal, but it could not continue due to lack of support. Shibli's campaign for the promotion of English was due to his conviction that the inability of Muslim religious teachers to communicate in this language made it impossible for them to explain any religious concept to the Westerners. In the 1899 Nadva meetings, he unsuccessfully pleaded that English should be formed part of the curriculum. However, from 1903 onward English came to be taught in Nadva. Shibli correctly maintained that bilingual Muslims could serve Islam better than monolingual ones. For

17 *Ibid.*, pp.117-20; Waqar 'Azim, p.51.

18 *Hayat-i-Shibli*, pp.120-24, 128-32.

example, in British courts incorrect versions of *Hidaya* were cited by non-Muslims.¹⁹

Soon the British government of India recognized Shibli's talent and in 1894 honoured him with the title of "Shams al-'Ulama'" (literally 'the sun of the *ulema*). Shibli was the first person in the country to receive this exalted honour at the early age of thirty-six. Many special gatherings were organized in his honour to celebrate the occasion.²⁰ Meanwhile, Shibli was simultaneously appointed a Member of the Board of Studies in the Faculty of Arts and a Fellow of the University of Allahabad in 1895.²¹

Shibli and History of Islam

Right from the very beginning, Shibli was keen to study the history of Islam. During his student days in Lahore, he developed this taste through his reading of various books on Islamic history. His stay in Aligarh gave him a good chance to fulfil this dream, particularly through access to the well-stocked personal library of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, which included many books on Islamic history and geography published in Europe, Egypt, Syria and Constantinople. Soon Shibli began writing books on different subjects, particularly so after studying a translation of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and Edward Henry Palmer's (Professor of Arabic, University of Cambridge, at that time) *Life of Haroun al-Rashid*.²²

After gaining power in India, the British authorities tried to impress the Indian Muslims by emphasizing their presumed supremacy in every walk of life. Hence a large number of the Western-educated Muslims assumed that Europe was the only source of intellectual excellence. On the other hand, the British distorted Muslim history in a planned and calculated manner. As Shibli put it, "The hostile writers of Europe proclaimed to the world incidents of Muslim rulers' negligence, profligacy and

19 *Ibid.*, pp.133-35.

20 *Ibid.*, pp.237-38.

21 *Ibid.*, pp.264-65.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 136-39.

immorality so loudly that even we [Muslim] became influenced and followed the Western lead.”²³

It was necessary to be free from this mindset and to reject this inferiority complex through familiarity with the golden epoch of Islamic history that amply illustrated the great Muslim legacy. Now Shibli was all set to write books on Islamic history and later narrowed his interest to the Abbasids. He pursued this ambitious project in a high spirit, but stopped with Caliph Mu’tasim Bi’llah (833-842). However, he later modified his plan and decided to choose only one hero of Islam from each dynasty. This resulted in his ‘Heroes of Islam’ series in which he studied the contribution of matchless personalities from various dynasties, like ‘Umar Fārūq (Pious Caliphate), Al-Walīd bin ‘Abd al-Malik (Umayyads), Al-Mā’mūn bin Hārūn al-Rashīd (Abbasids), ‘Abd al-Rahmān Nāsir (Umayyads of Spain), Sayf al-Dawlah (Banū Hamdān), Malikshāh (Saljuqs), Nūr al-Dīn Zangī (Nūriyyah), Salah al-Din Ayyubi (Ayyubids), Ya‘qub bin Yusuf (Muwahids) and Sulayman the Magnificent (Ottomans). In 1885, he published in Persian his first *mathnavi*, *Subh-i-Ummid*, that discussed the decline of Muslims, but saw a silver lining in the Aligarh-based educational movement.²⁴

In Aligarh Shibli had a good opportunity to share his ideas with a European professor, T. W. Arnold. Soon they became close friends and taught Arabic and French to each other. Shibli learned and adopted in his books the modern style of writing, while Arnold mastered Arabic and soon published his famous book *The Preaching of Islam*.²⁵

Shibli learned French because in those days many scholarly books on Islam were written in this language. He acquainted himself with those works and responded in writing to their biased views on Islam. He also developed good relations with Maulvi

23 Sayyid Sulayman Nadvi (comp.), *Maqalat-i-Shibli*, Azamgarh: Matba‘-i-Ma‘ārif, 3rd edition, 1956, Vol.IV, p.82. Waqar ‘Azim, pp.96-97.

24 *Hayat-i-Shihli*, p.139; *Al-Ma‘mun*, pp.8-9; ‘Allama Shibli Nu‘mani, *Sirat al-Nu‘mān*, Azamgarh: Dar al-Musannifin Shibli Academy, 1998, p.2; Waqar ‘Azim, p.86.

25 *Hayat-i-Shibli*, pp.140-41; *Al-Ma‘mun*, p.66; *Sirat al-Nu‘man*, p.4.

Sayyid Ali Bilgrami, an expert in European languages, who helped him in translating some relevant passages of reference books. In his *Life of Haroun al-Rashid*, Palmer had, for example, accused Muslim rulers of prejudice against other faiths, but Shibli refuted these allegations in his book *Al-Ma'mun* and convincingly responded in *Sīrat al-Nu'mān* to Sheldon Amos's charge that Islamic *Fiqh* is derived from the Roman civil law. This scholarly drive soon popularized Shibli, as an expert in Islamic scholarly circles and in Europe as well and he started receiving complimentary copies of many books, journals and magazines from Egypt and Europe.²⁶

Shibli's Influence on MAO College

MAO College was an institution whose students and teachers were a mixture of Europeans, Hindus and Muslims. It was a cultural confluence of east and west in which Shibli comfortably accommodated himself. Unlike those of many other 'Ulama', Shibli's presentations in scholarly and cultural gatherings were well received. Some European scholars commended his outstanding position and mastery of Islamic scholarship. Shibli gave Qur'anic lessons to students in an attractive style and inculcated the love of the Prophet among them. Besides, he gave a series of lectures at his house that covered different aspects of the life of the Prophet (SAW) and arranged his birthday celebrations at his own residence. Similar functions were also organized in Sālār Manzil and later, on 30 October 1891, in Strachey Hall. Soon these became the official functions of the university. In the westernized atmosphere of Aligarh, Shibli turned students towards Islam and they themselves organized different religious functions and activities in the College. They founded *Majlis Bakht al-Salāt* to call students for the five daily prayers on time. Besides, most of the members of the College community enthusiastically participated in the construction of the proposed *Jami' Mosque* on the campus.²⁷

By now Shibli had seriously undertaken research and authored many books. Soon he changed the entire culture of Aligarh where

26 *Hayat-i-Shibli*, pp.144-5; *Al-Ma'mun*, p.97.

27 *Hayat-i-Shibli*, pp.147-50.

teachers and students could now produce good works in Urdu, Persian and English. Due to Shibli's writings, Aligarh became well known in India and overseas. To develop the taste for Arabic among the students, he founded Arabic and Urdu literary circles, like *Bakht al-Adab* and *Ikhwān al-Safā*. He also arranged annual literary activities on the campus.²⁸

These student bodies later grew into the "Students' Union" in which Shibli actively participated, particularly by delivering lectures on Islamic issues. Shibli's *Al-Jizya* (1889) and *Kutubkhana-i-Iskandriyya* (1892) left a great impact in Europe and cleared hostility and prejudice against Islam and Muslims. He wrote *Ta'rikh Ba'd al-Islam* as a textbook for graduate students. Shibli was appointed editor of the Urdu section of *The Aligarh Institute Gazette* and the *MAO College Magazine* where he published a series of articles on socio-cultural and political activities of Muslims that were later compiled in a book form.²⁹

Shibli was very keen on the advancement of Muslim education and actively involved himself in the Muhammadan Educational Conference founded by Sayyid Ahmad Khan in 1886. During the summer vacation of 1887, Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Shibli visited Nainital, a hill station, where being impressed by the amazing scenery and natural beauty of the place, Shibli occupied himself there and then in writing books on different issues.³⁰

Literary Activities

In the beginning Shibli's literary activities in Aligarh were confined to poetic compositions, but he soon turned to the *da'wah* issue also. He noticed that some European intellectuals were propagating negative views on Islam and its historical leadership, which incited the Muslim youth against their own history and religion. Shibli took up this challenge by authoring works that stressed the role of Islam as a saviour of humanity. On 27 December 1887 at the second Muhammadan Educational Conference held at Lucknow, he presented his famous paper

28 *Ibid.*, pp.147, 158-59.

29 *Ibid.*, pp.149, 160-61.

30 *Ibid.*, pp.162, 168; Waqar 'Azim, p.64.

“Muslim Education in the Past” that opened the eyes of Muslims throughout the country. It was the beginning of the intellectual writing of Shibli and was circulated by the organizers of the conference all over the country.³¹

With Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Shibli was nominated in 1891 a member of the second educational delegation to Hyderabad to seek donations for the MAO College. In this trip Shibli met important personalities and received an audience with Nawwab Mir Mahbub ‘Ali Khan (1869-1911), the ruler of Hyderabad also. Consequently, Shibli became well-known in the intellectual circles of Hyderabad and was honoured there by various educational and literary bodies. Finally after achieving considerable success the mission returned to Aligarh via Bhopal.³²

Visit to Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1892

The climate of Aligarh had become unsuitable for Shibli’s health because of the malaria endemic. He wanted to visit Kashmir valley for a change, but could not. Meanwhile, Arnold, a close associate of Shibli, planned to travel outside India in May 1892 for the summer vacations. Thus the latter also decided to visit Turkey to consult Arabic books and manuscripts for his *magnum opus*, *Al-Fārūq*. While in Istanbul, Shibli visited many libraries to collect research material, including some rare Arabic manuscripts and extensively studied the Turkish educational system and Islamic *madāris* (religious schools). He visited schools, colleges and academies and met many famous scholars in the country. He admired their educational system, residential and technical colleges and was very much impressed by the religious zeal of the Turkish students. He was very glad to see different specialized colleges in various disciplines, though he was rather disturbed by the deteriorating conditions of the Islamic seminaries. He maintained that all these good developments were the result of the good policies of the government, though he dismissed the Turks themselves as lethargic and unenthusiastic, just like the Indian Muslims and anticipated the decline of the Ottoman caliphate in

31 *Ibid.*, p.163; Waqar ‘Azim, p.64.

32 *Ibid.*, pp.182-88.

none too distant a future. Shibli also learnt the Turkish language there.³³

Sultan 'Abd al-Hamīd used to say Friday prayers in the Jami' Hamidiyyah, after which ceremony of *resm-i-salāmlīq* was performed in which a grand procession of government officials also took place. Shibli was very much impressed by the ceremony, which was held on Fridays and Eid occasions. The sumptuous scene of the Sultan's departure between columns of army officers was particularly memorable for Shibli. During this trip, he also met Ghāzi 'Usmān Pāsha, who admired Shibli's valour and asked him to see him again before returning home. Meanwhile, at the suggestion of the Pasha, the Ottoman Sultan awarded a gold medal, "Tamgha-i-Majidi" to Shibli on 13 Muharram 1310/7 August 1892. After a three-month's stay in Constantinople, Shibli left for Cairo, on 26 Muharram 1310/ 20 August 1892.³⁴

On his way to Egypt, Shibli stopped in Beirut where he met Shaikh Tāhir al-Jazā'iri and visited many educational institutions. He went to Damascus and on 8 Safar 1310/ 1 September 1892 left for Jerusalem where he stayed in the Indian *Zāwiyya* (hermitage), met Mufti Sayyid Tahir and attended some intellectual gatherings. Finally he reached Cairo and stayed at Al-Azhar for a month, during which he studied the Egyptian educational system. During this trip, he realized that Muslims in India, Istanbul, Beirut and Egypt, face similar educational problems, which needed to be urgently addressed and he was particularly upset by the deteriorating condition of Al-Azhar at the time.³⁵

Shibli, the Historian

Before moving to Aligarh, Shibli was an active, *maulvi*, always ready for debate on religious issues. His stay at Aligarh was a crucial phase in his life that later influenced the shape and course of his history writing. 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

33 *Ibid.*, pp.188-202.

34 *Ibid.*, pp.204

35 *Ibid.*, pp.212-15.

“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 translated into Arabic and, which on the initiative of Sayyid Ahmad Khan was later translated into English as well.³⁶

Similarly, Shibli wrote in 1892 *Kutubkhana-i-Iskandriyya* to challenge another false accusation widely accepted in Europe, that the Muslims had always been 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 in 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. Of particular significance were his articles on topics like Muslim Sultanates and Public Hospitals in Muslim countries (1895), Libraries in Muslim countries, Muslim Engineers and Islamic Religious Schools.³⁷

One of Shibli’s outstanding works was a critical review of Jurji Zaidan’s book *Islamic Civilization*. In this book also, Zaidan, an Egyptian Christian and the editor of *Al-Hilal*, attacked Islam

36 *Ibid.*, pp.161-63; Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan 1857-1964*, London: Oxford University Press, 1967, pp.77 80-81; *Maqalat-i-Shibli*, Vol.I, 1999, pp.175-209; *Maqalat-i Shibli*, Vol.III, 1955, pp.1-36 Waqar ‘Azim, p.64.

37 *Ibid.*, pp.162-63; Aziz Ahmad, p.79; *Maqalat-i-Shibli*, Vol.VI, 1989, pp.113-51; Waqar ‘Azim, p.92.

and the Arabs and accused them of burning the great library of Alexandria. He also claimed that the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs blasphemed their own religion and that Caliph al-Mansur (754-775) built a dome in Baghdad imitating the Ka'ba. He also asserted that al-Mu'tasim Bi'llah duplicated at Samarra in Iraq Safa and Marwa, two revered places in the Hajj rites. Shibli particularly exposed Zaidan's deceptive way of making these accusations and tore apart his sneaky method of levelling charges against Muslims. Interesting enough, the third volume of Zaidan's book *Islamic Arts and Sciences* was entirely based on Shibli's research articles on Muslim contributions to the Islamic sciences.³⁸

To continue his task of writing history, Shibli founded in 1910 a research unit for the "verification of errors of historiography," and appointed Sayyid Sulayman Nadvi as its first secretary. Shibli wrote letters to different universities and contacted Muslim scholars regarding distortions in history books. He tried to find out the names of such books through newspaper advertisements and wrote to the authorities to exclude these books from the syllabus of their universities. The books which needed corrections were revised and he took a bold stand against Marsden's and Delafoce's histories of India. The untiring effort of Shibli made him a great historian of Islam.³⁹

Shibli was very careful in his approach to history and historical incidents, in the sense that he carefully examined the chain of reporters tracing them back to the original witnesses. He followed the principles of scientific research and was the first writer to use the following criteria in Urdu historiography:

1. Was the event treated amenable to reason or not?
2. Were the habits and inclinations of the people of the period to which the event referred in agreement with the event?
3. If the event was extraordinary, was the evidence in support of it strong enough to be acceptable?

38 *Ibid.*, pp.230, 578-81; Aziz Ahmad, p.81; *Maqalat-i-Shibli*, Vol.VI, p.285; *ibid.*, Vol.IV, 1956, pp.113-77.

39 *Hayat-i-Shibli*, pp.524-25; Waqar 'Azim, p.67.

4. To what extent did the witness' conjecture and opinion/bias interfered with his report?
5. Did the witness to the event overlook any aspect of the event?
6. What changes did succeeding ages make in the accounts of the same event?

Shibli's opinion was that impartiality was the lifeblood of historiography and he advised historians that they should write the truth and not compromise on facts even if they were in conflict with their religious beliefs. Shibli complained that early historians focused on political history to the neglect of analysing the socio-cultural, moral, religious and economic conditions of a period. They paid much attention to describing the wars of succession, conquests and rebellions. On the contrary, Shibli wanted people to see the present-day world as the result of developments in the past.⁴⁰

Shibli does not accept the lengthy accounts of coronation ceremonies as history. In his opinion the historical description of socio-cultural and religious life of the common people were actually far more important. He argued that the author on historical theme should adopt a multidimensional approach to historiography and ensure that the events described were compatible with the era to which they belonged.⁴¹

A Critical Analysis of Shibli's Works

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 favourably 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

40 Shibli Nu'mani, *Al-Fārūq*, Delhi: Murid Book Depot, n.d., pp.15-16,30,38-93; Muhammad Shibli Nu'mani, *Sīrat-al-Nabi*, Azamgarh: Dar al-Musannifin, 1996, Vol.I, p.45.

41 *Ibid.*, p.10; Waqar 'Azim, p.67.

planned to write a comprehensive Islamic history in that language.⁴²

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, published from Aligrah. In it he wrote that after thirteen centuries of Islam, there was not a single Muslim ruler who equalled Al-Ma'mun. The book is divided into two parts, of which the first discusses Al-Ma'mun's early life, education, coronation, internal conflicts, conquests and death, while 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 and the events are recounted in a detached manner and without being coloured by prejudice or partiality. Shibli compared Al-Ma'mun with Al-Amin and expressed his views regarding the latter's many qualities and gave details of Amin's cold-blooded murder at the behest of his brother. Similarly, Shibli acknowledges the greatness of Zubayda, the mother of Caliph Amin, in the following words: "When 'Ali bin 'Isa was going to arrest Al-Ma'mun his stepmother Zubayda gave him a chain of silver to handcuff Ma'mun and instructed him to be gentle with him, after all he was also her son, being the son of Harun al-Rashid and the brother of her own son Amin." On the other hand, Shibli records that "When Amin asked his slave Ahmad bin Salam for news about Ma'mun and was told that he was alive, Amin cursed those who had spread the false report of Ma'mun's death." By contrast, notes Shibli, "When Amin's head was brought to Ma'mun, he rejoiced over it and thanked God." Shibli does not suppress or decorate this regrettable act of his 'hero.' He tells the truth.⁴³

Similarly, Shibli refutes the misunderstandings created by some historians against Muslim rulers. For instance, Palmer claims in his *Haroun al-Rashid* that the courtiers of the Caliph spread the notion that unbelievers could not be called the creation of God.

42 *Hayat-i-Shibli*, p.172; *Al-Ma'mun*, p.7.

43 *Al-Ma'mun*, pp.48-43, 59-60.

Shibli absolutely rejected this and argued that if it had been so, Muslim rulers would not have made proclamations for the protection and safety of churches and other places of worship in Islamic lands. ‘Umar bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz (717-720) ordered the demolition of the extension to a Damascus mosque which had been unlawfully built by Caliph Walīd bin ‘Abd al-Malik (705-715) on the site of a church, which was rebuilt by the Caliph. In fact, hundreds of churches were constructed in and around Baghdad during the Abbasid rule.⁴⁴

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, while the second gives an account of his broad administration, socio-economic, cultural and intellectual attainments. Shibli wanted to start work 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-Fārūq*, Shibli consulted some works like Al-Mawardi’s *Al-Akhām al-Sultāniyya*, Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddimah*, Qādī Abū Yūsuf’s *Kitāb al-Kharāj*, Abī Hilal al-‘Askari’s *Kitāb al-Awāi’l*, 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-Qairwani’s *Kitāb al-‘Umdah*, Imām Ibn al-Jauzī’s *Sīrat al-‘Umrain*, Ahmad Ibn Yahyā al-Balādhurī’s *Ansāb al-Ashrāf*, Muhammad bin Khalaf al-Waki’s *Akhbār al-Qudāt* and Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlavi’s *Izālat al Khafa’ ‘an Khilafat al-Khulafa’*.⁴⁵

Shibli begins *Al-Faruq* with a historical analysis and thorough discussion of the merits, demerits and authenticity of the ancient sources and stresses their comparative value. In his commentary he scrutinizes the available historical material on the life and time of

44 *Ibid.*, pp.159-63; Aziz Ahmad, p.82.

45 *Hayat-i-Shibli*, pp.230, 336-7; *Sīrat-al-Nu‘man*, p.3; M. Yasin Mazhar Siddiqi and Ubayd Allah Fahd, *Al-Faruq ek Mutali‘a*, Aligarh: Institute of Islamic Studies, 2002, pp.6,32,7.

'Umar and commends the early historians of Islam for serving the cause of authentic Islamic historiography. Shibli criticizes the 12th century historians, who, in his opinion, took the first steps towards the decline of the art of history writing. The scholars of the earlier period were Ibn al-Athīr, Sam'ānī, Dhahabī, Abū al-Fida', Nuwairī, Suyūtī and others. They attained eminence in the discipline but failed to provide any service to it as a science.⁴⁶

Shibli thought that the spiritual, religious and personal life of 'Umar was 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'* 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 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 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.⁴⁷

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

46 *Al-Faruq*, pp.24-29; Waqar 'Azim, p.98.

47 *Ibid.*, pp. 241-44, 258-9; Waqar 'Azim, pp.114-15.

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 Madina. 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.⁴⁸

Shibli started his monograph series at a critical juncture when Muslims of India were treated badly by the British. Their life, honour and property were at stake and the doors of torture were always open for them. At this stage, Shibli took the lead by his writings, a *jihad* through his devotion, commitment and active participation in scholarly activities. Shibli wanted to stress the benign deeds of our ancestors and compared their victories with the British conquest of India. He emphasized how 'Umar gave peace, protection and freedom of belief to non-Muslims and compared this to the harsh British treatment of their Muslim subjects in the 1857 revolt. His writings reminded Muslims of the draconian punishment meted out to the women, children and elderly persons and the confiscation of their properties by the British authorities. On the other hand, he showed the civilized Muslims' treatment of the *Zimmis* who were given safety and security. Shibli wrote: "If *Zimmis* were involved in a conspiracy or rebellion, they were still given a second chance and treated fairly. For example, the people of the city of Mradas on the Syrian border were constantly conspiring with the Romans. When 'Umair bin Sa'd reported their activities to Caliph 'Umar, he instructed him to assess the value of their properties, including livestock, pay them a compensation at double the actual price and ask them to emigrate. If they did not agree, they should be given a one-year grace period and after that be exiled. But they did not stop their fissiparous activities and finally they were exiled. Muslims' just treatment won the hearts and minds of Jews and Christians during the battle of Yarmūk when Muslims evacuated the city of Hams due to their

48 *Ibid.*, pp. 247-251, 263-4, 369, 413-14.

war strategy. Jews and Christians swore by their scriptures that the Romans would never return there.”⁴⁹

Shibli also emphasized in this regard the Muslim treatment of prisoners of war in Alexandria. “As a large number of Copts and Romans were taken prisoner”, he wrote, ‘Amar bin al-‘As referred their case to Caliph ‘Umar. ‘Umar ordered them to be freed regardless of the fact that they embraced Islam or stuck to their own faith. If they accepted Islam they would be entitled to all the privileges the Muslims enjoyed; otherwise they would have to pay *Jizya* as levied on all non-Muslims. In compliance with the Caliph’s instructions, ‘Amar gathered the prisoners, thousands in number, and invited the Christian dignitaries also. The Muslims and the Christians were seated in opposite rows and the prisoners assembled in an open area. The Caliph’s order was read out for them, many prisoners who had observed the purity and tenets of Islam promptly accepted Islam, while others remained true to their own religion. When anyone of them embraced Islam, the Muslims rejoiced and cried “Allahu Akbar”. On the other hand, when someone announced his loyalty to Christianity, the Christians cheered him, while Muslims felt sad. This continued for a long time and each party received their share.”⁵⁰

Shibli remarkably succeeded in explaining in a very simple manner difficult and controversial issues like the terminal illness of the Prophet and the issue of *qirtās* (paper) relating to the three days prior to the Prophet’s death. The Prophet, according to one tradition, asked for paper and pen to give instructions for the Muslims that would guard against their going astray. But ‘Umar reminded the people that the Prophet was in an agonizing pain and that the Qur’an was a sufficient guide for them. Some of them said that the Prophet was in a delirium.⁵¹

In fact, this incident is a matter of great astonishment and a critic might question the bold attitude of ‘Umar in declaring that they did not need the Prophet’s directives and the Qur’an was a

49 *Ibid.*, pp.156-7, 235, 373-85.

50 *Ibid.*, pp.219-20.

51 *Ibid.*, pp.59-60.

sufficient guide for them. It was at a time when the Prophet was lying on his deathbed and was so concerned about his followers as to say, "Let me write for you directives which will save you from going astray." It is very clear that these directives were intended to be written with the intention of saving people from going into heresy. They would emanate from him in his capacity as the Prophet and would thus be inspired and infallible. Even some of the traditions go to the length of asserting that it was 'Umar who declared the words of the Prophet to be ravings.⁵²

This issue remained a subject of great controversy among the Muslims for a long time, but the principles of ratiocination were never followed. Thus, the actual issue remained unresolved, while many insignificant points were discussed. Thus it was argued that it is possible for a prophet to rave, for raving is one of the problems of human beings and the Prophet was not free from human maladies.

The core issue which needs careful scrutiny is whether it is possible to draw any positive or sound conclusion from an incident recorded in *Hadith* books. The following points are raised for discussion:

1. The sickness of the Prophet continued for thirteen days or so.
2. According to Bukhari and Muslim, the incident of paper and pen happened on Thursday and the Prophet died on the following Monday, i.e. after four days.
3. No single *Hadith* reported any mental aberration in this period.
4. During this period a large number of Companions were present, but none of them reported this particular incident except 'Abd Allah ibn 'Abbas. Even Bukhari reported it in seven different ways.
5. At the time of the alleged incident 'Abd Allah ibn 'Abbās was only 13 or 14 years old.

52 *Ibid.*, pp.61-62.

6. ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Abbās was not present in person at the time of the incident and his source of information was unknown.
7. All the traditionists are unanimous that when the Prophet asked for paper and pen those present said that the Prophet was delirious.

It is important to note that all traditions are silent regarding any other incident or sign of mental aberration shown by the Prophet, his just asking for paper and pen could hardly have led the people to imagine that he was not in his senses. We can assume that prophets are liable to delirium, but it does not mean that even their usual conversation should be twisted and draped into the ravings of crazy persons. We cannot believe that there was anything incoherent in the Prophet’s saying on his deathbed, “Bring paper and pen that I may dictate for you guidelines which will keep you from going astray in the future.”⁵³

If this tradition is true, the fact still remains that the narrator omitted mentioning those symptoms which gave people the idea that the Prophet was not in his senses and was asking for paper and pen in a state of delirium. Therefore, how can we draw any positive conclusion from a tradition about an incident the principal features of which were omitted by the narrator? On the other hand, is it possible that such an unusual event would be recorded by a single narrator, ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Abbās, a merely thirteen or fourteen year old boy, who was not even an eyewitness to it? Thus, the authenticity of the tradition becomes gravely doubtful. People understandably questioned the genuineness of a tradition recorded in authoritative sources like Bukhari and Muslim, but we should bear in mind that it is easier to doubt any report on which Bukhari and Muslim have based their accounts than to admit mental aberration on the part of the Prophet or irreverence on the part of ‘Umar.⁵⁴

Moreover, the Prophet lived for four days after this alleged incident, during which he gave several instructions and directives.

53 *Ibid.*, pp.62-63.

54 *Ibid.*, p.63.

On the very day of his death, the Prophet felt better and the people thought that he had fully recovered, so much so that Abu Bakr had returned to his house, a distance of two miles from Madina. 'Umar, however, was with the Prophet till the end. The Prophet breathed his last on Monday, 12 Rabi' al-Awwal 11/8 June 632, at noon in the house of 'Āyisha and was buried in the afternoon the following day. The Muslims felt grieved at his death. It is said that 'Umar was so shocked that he went to the Prophet's mosque and exclaimed, "Whoever will say that the Prophet is dead, I shall kill him." Other accounts of the death do not support this tradition. Shibli contends that 'Umar may have considered it tactful to suppress the news, as Madinah was full of hypocrites who were anxiously waiting for the Prophet's death to incite trouble. This incident assumed different forms in different sources. The problem, however, is that the *Sahih Bukhari* and other early sources include references to this event which do not fit in with our expectations.⁵⁵ Shibli ventured to sift through the heaps of Traditions, on the death of the Prophet with critical acumen and free from bias. His version of the event therefore has generated more light than heat.

55 *Ibid.*, pp.63-64.