

Allama Shibli and the early Muslim League: A dissenting voice

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Abstract: The All-India Muslim League (AIML) was formed in 1906, with the primary aim to improve the educational and socioeconomic status of Muslims. Allama Shibli Nu'mani (1857-1914) put forward an argument in support of Muslims recovering from the political stupor into which they had fallen after the British suppression of the 1857 uprising. He encouraged Muslims to participate in democratic politics in India, departing from the educational focus of his mentor, Sir Saiyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898). Shibli advanced a strong critique of the Muslim League's limited ambitions in comparison with the Indian National Congress (INC). His critique, notably in ironic and emotive poetry, significantly contributed to the national discussion pertaining to the Muslim League's reform and restructure. Based on Shibli's original writings, this paper analyses his critique of the Muslim League and his efforts to overhaul its structure and policies. It examines the response of the Muslim League to these critiques and studies the extent to which its structure and policies changed.

Keywords: Indian National Congress; Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College; Muslim League; Shibli Nu'mani; Saiyid Ahmad Khan.

Abstrak: Liga Seluruh India Muslim (AIML) dibentuk pada tahun 1906, dengan satu tujuan iaitu untuk memperbaiki status pendidikan dan sosioekonomi Muslim. Allama Shibli Nu'mani (1857-1914) mengemukakan bantahan untuk menyokong Muslim bagi pemulihannya daripada masalah politik yang mana mereka telah jatuh selepas penjajahan British semasa 1857 pemberontakan. Beliau menggalakkan Muslim untuk terlibat dalam demokrasi politik di negara

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India, bertolak daripada fokus pendidikan mentornya, Tuan Saiyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898). Shibli memberi kritikan yang kuat terhadap Liga Islam yang mempunyai cita-cita yang terhad berbanding Kongres Kebangsaan India (INC). Kritikan beliau, terutamanya dalam puisi ironis dan emosi, lebih menyumbang kepada perbincangan negara mengenai pembaharuan dan menyusun semula Liga Islam. Berdasarkan tulisan-tulisan asal Shibli, kertas ini menganalisis kritiknya terhadap usaha-usaha beliau untuk merombak struktur dan dasar Liga Islam. Ia mengkaji tindak balas Liga Islam terhadap kritikan yang telah diberikan dan turut mengkaji sejauh mana struktur dan dasar-dasarnya telah berubah.

Kata kunci: Kongres Nasional India; Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College; Liga Muslim; Shibli Nu'mani; Saiyid Ahmad Khan.

Allama Shibli Nu'mani¹ is among the foremost intellectual figures of modern Muslim India. Over the past century, his thought and intellectual contributions have been the subject of much research. However, despite the significant body of literature on Allama Shibli, it would appear that his role in the political awakening of the Muslims and the Muslim League's reorientation as a mass political organisation, particularly its emergence as a sole representative voice of Muslims in the Indian Subcontinent was overlooked (Zilli, 2006). Shibli's attitude towards Muslim participation in politics and his critique of the Muslim League was outlined in a revealing but brief paper by Zafarul Islam (1958). Since then, the topic has remained somewhat understudied despite its historical significance. Although Shibli did not personally join any political organisation, including the Muslim League, his socio-cultural and political views carried great weight with Muslim intellectuals, political luminaries, and common Muslims. The main thesis of the present study is to prove that Shibli's forthright views on Muslim politics forced the Muslim League to re-orientate its politics. This reorientation greatly resonated with the Muslim masses, which ultimately turned the Muslim League into an organised Muslim political party.

A biographical overview

From the beginning of his career, Shibli was instrumental in defending Islam and the achievements of Muslims through his monograph series "Heroes of Islam", which emphasised the civilisational impact of Islam and its role in enriching the human heritage. Shibli was also active in the development of both Islamic and modern education for the Muslims

of India. He taught in the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (MAO College) or Madrasat-ul-Ulum, Aligarh, founded by Sir Saiyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) in 1875. With a goal to modernise Islamic education without compromising its foundations, in 1894 Shibli succeeded in founding Darul Ulum Nadvatul Ulama in Lucknow, India (Azami, 1994; Shibli Nu‘mani, 1992; Shibli Nu‘mani, n.d.; Troll, 1993).

Shibli Nu‘mani was born on Wednesday Shawwal 10,1273/June 3, 1857, on the day when freedom fighters broke open gates of Azamgarh district jail, freeing many of its prisoners and capturing the district treasury, setting the scene for the troubled political times Shibli was to live through (Arshad Islam, 2005; Nadvi, 1999). After studying with well-known scholars, Shibli joined MAO College in 1883 and remained there until Sir Saiyid’s death in 1898 (David, 1978; Nadvi, 1999). He was a renowned oriental scholar on the staff of the College, and Sir Saiyid had great respect for his scholarship and academic skills, giving him access to his personal library. Although Shibli had close association with Sir Saiyid, he was at loggerheads with him on political matters and supported the Indian National Congress (INC) from its inception in spite of Sir Saiyid’s hostility. Shibli’s interest in the study of the early history of Islam and the democratic structure of the Pious Caliphate may explain his inclination towards the INC (Engineer, 2009; Nadvi, 1999). In a debate at the Students’ Union of the MAO College in 1892 on the theme “Is democracy a better form of government than autocracy?” Shibli emphatically supported democracy and his forceful advocacy won the majority of students’ support. Shibli argued his case by citing examples from the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and dwelt on the selection methods of the early caliphs. In this, Shibli considered the second Caliph, ‘Umar al-Fārūq (634-44), the ideal caliph. His magnum opus, *The Biography of the Caliph, Umar al-Fārūq*, published in 1898, remains incomparable for the brilliance of its historical narrative and literary style. In this work, Shibli argued that the democratic setup and participatory nature of the governmental institutions during ‘Umar’s rule was remarkable. He considered democracy to be an integral part of the Islamic heritage. Secondly, as a scholar who had a special interest in history, Shibli realised that sovereignty and freedom prosper only in a democratic system, and the Indian Muslim community had been excluded from political influence by the dissuasion of the traditional religious establishment. Shibli held that the Muslims in India could only hope to survive and prosper under a democracy. Sir Saiyid strongly

opposed this idea. Refuting Shibli's arguments, he wrote an article published in the *Institute Gazette* on June 28, 1892 entitled *Ashiyai Aur Islami Tarz-i-Hukumat* (The Asiatic and Islamic system of government) in which he outlined his own vision of the primary importance of education as opposed to democratic rights in obtaining rights for the Muslim community (Azim, 1968; Khan, 1892; Nadvi, 1999).

The Indian National Congress and modern education

To promote modern education, Shibli founded the National School in Azamgarh on June 20, 1883. Approximately two years after joining the MAO College, Shibli published his most radical Urdu poem *Subh-i-ummid* (Morning of Hope) at the first session of the All India Muhammadan Educational Conference held at Aligarh on December 27, 1886 (Arshad Islam, 2005; Nadvi, 1999; Shibli Nu'mani, 2007). It emerged around the same time as the INC was founded in 1885. Shibli was in full accord with the aims of the Aligarh Movement for the advancement of Muslims. In political matters, however, he endorsed the nationalist ideas of the INC. While he never attended INC sessions or joined any political group, he was in total agreement with INC objectives. In a letter to Shakir Meeruti (1880-1956), editor of *Al-Asr* (The Age), Lucknow, on September 23, 1912, Shibli wrote:

I always remained independent in my opinion. I worked with Sir Saiyid for sixteen years but in political matters I constantly disagreed with him and continued to support the [Indian National] Congress. I had many discussions with him on this issue (Nadvi, 1999, pp. 39, 297, 610).

With regard to these disagreements, Maulana Habibur Rahman Khan Sherwani (1867-1950) made the following observation:

One reason for the displeasure of Shibli with the College was the disagreement on political matters. He was now a supporter of the new political movement [the Indian National Congress] (Nadvi, 1999, p. 298; Qureshi, 1999).

It would seem that the nationalist idea was embedded in Shibli's psyche even before the establishment of the INC. Based on the arguments presented in his *The Biography of the Caliph*, the study of history appears to have helped shape his view of the current political situation. Shibli named the school that he founded in Azamgarh as the "National School" (Nadvi, 1999; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000). Shibli's

political outlook was contrary to the general atmosphere of Aligarh. Sir Saiyid's antagonistic attitude towards the INC may have been due to the influence of British professors, like Sir Thomas Walker Arnold (1864-1930) and Theodore Morison (1863-1936) as well as his own perceptions regarding the needs of the Muslim community at that particular juncture. In this context, Shibli was apprehensive of the prevalent Muslim approach to politics and regretted the Muslim coldness towards the INC (Khan, 1985; Nadvi, 1999; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000). He was a great orator and even attached to the MAO College, he used to express his ideas freely and forcefully. A student during Shibli's professorship at Aligarh, Khwaja Ghulam Saqlain (1870-1915) wrote on December 17, 1914 in *Asr-i-jadid* (The New Age), after Shibli's death:

Sir Saiyid Ahmad Khan was quite independent minded in religion but in political matters he was very conservative. This was the cause why Shibli did not agree with his political outlook from the very early days of his professorship (Shibli Nu'mani, 2000, pp. 138-39; Troll, 1993).

Shibli's students and associates like Maulana Muhammad Ali (1878-1931), Maulana Zafar Ali Khan (1873-1956), and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958) were influenced by his ideas. His far-reaching views helped shape their future political viewpoints. However, at the time Shibli's politics was confined to private discussions. In these meetings, the INC manifesto excited Shibli and he lamented over what he believed was the political ignorance of the Muslims (Nadvi, 1999; Parveen, 2011; Robinson, 1993).

Critique of the policies and political attitude of the Muslim League

It was during his stay at Lucknow that Shibli was said to have started disseminating his ideas on Muslim participation in politics more forcefully and openly. He felt that his political ideas should be made public. To this end, in 1912 Shibli coaxed Saiyid Mir Jan to publish the *Muslim Gazette*, an independent Muslim newspaper, highlighting Muslim issues under the editorship of Maulvi Wahiduddin Salim (1867-1928). Shibli wrote articles and notes for this newspaper under his own name and anonymously. So numerous were his contributions that the newspaper became regarded as a vehicle for Shibli's own views (Muhammad, 1991; Nadvi, 1999).

Among the contentious political issues of the time were the partition of Bengal and its annulment, the Balkan wars (1912 and 1913), the demand for a Muslim university, the tragedy of the Kanpur Mosque (1913), the reform of the Muslim League, and fostering political awareness among Muslims. On all these issues, the newspaper was quite outspoken, and its stance was determined by Shibli. Through this paper Shibli wanted to instil what he called the correct political attitude among Muslims (Hasan, 1991; Nadvi, 1999; Shibli Nu'mani, 2007). In the *Muslim Gazette*, he wrote his most stirring article concerning the Indian politics at the time entitled *Musalmanon ki Political Karwat* (Political Reorientation of the Muslims). He launched the first issue of the magazine on February 12, 1912. It was written at the time of the annulment of the partition of Bengal, an event that highlights the formative period of politics in India. His simple yet forceful articles urging Muslims to participate in politics had a tremendous impact on Muslim politics in India. According to Saiyid Sulaiman Nadvi (1884-1953), it changed the direction of Muslim politics from *Simla* to *Qibla*. The use of the term *Qibla* for *ummatic* politics (politics pertaining to the Muslim *ummah*) outlines the core of Shibli's legacy in this regard. Here, *Simla* alludes to the Simla Deputation of 1906 for securing separate representation for the Muslims, which led to the founding of the All India Muslim League on September 30, 1906, in Dhaka (Al-Mujahid, 1990; Noman, 1942; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000). Subsequent to the growing self-awareness of their position in Indian society due to the trend represented by Shibli, in the League circles, it was commonly believed that if:

immediate steps were not taken, the Muslims, on account of their growing fear of the majority [community] would ultimately join the [Indian National] Congress, which would, in the end prove fatal to their existence (Noman, 1942, p. 71).

Musalmanon ki Political Karwat begins with Shibli's appraisal of the Muslim League's policies:

If it is a fact that the slap of the [annulment of the] partition of Bengal has re-orientated the Muslim politics, then we [the Muslims] are even willing to sacrifice things dearer than Bengal at this joyful moment. Nonetheless, the noises emanating from the very centre of the politics [Muslim

League] are not only misleading but are destined to soon die away (Shibli Nu'mani, 2000, p. 137).

Shibli then quotes an article by a Muslim columnist published contemporaneously in *The Pioneer*:

It seems that as a result of the weakening of Turkey and Iran, the Muslims would not be able to uphold their exalted position in the politics of the country and therefore they should join the Hindus (Nadvi, 1999, p. 615; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000, p. 137).

Taking serious exception to this argument, Shibli maintained that:

To join up with the Hindus is a good idea and it has always been good and will remain good and will continue to remain so. But the fresh rationale that the columnist has advanced for this is nothing less than a matter of utter insult to Islam. Should we take shelter with our neighbours since we do not have backing any more? If Turkey and Iran had been strong would they have come to our aid against our Hindu neighbours; and did the British government believe Simla Deputation's boast that Muslims' political weight is greater than our neighbours'? (Nadvi, 1999, p. 615; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000, p. 137).

Shibli praised Waqarul Mulk's (1841-1917) serious and fearless article *Hindustan Mein Musalmanon ki A'indah Halat* (The Future of Muslims in India) in the *Aligarh Institute Gazette* on the annulment of the partition of Bengal, but disagreed with his view and said that this would have been the voice of a courageous Muslim if it had not been illogical. Mulk argued that the Muslims would be wiped out if they joined the Indian National Congress Party as a river loses its identity when it falls into the ocean. Shibli asked how 100,000 Parsees can maintain their separate identity in the midst of 190 million Hindus and 50 million Muslims. Shibli argued that if Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917), a Parsee, became the first Member of Parliament and Gokhale (1866-1915) alone launched the reform movement, there should be no basis for the Muslims to be concerned about their future (Azami, 1994; Muhammad, 1991; Murad, 1996; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000; Zuberi, 1938).

During Shibli's time, Muslims considered politics as deceit and hoax. Representing this attitude, Shibli evoked the imagery that from

birth the politics whispered into the Muslim's ears was analogous to the *Kalimat al-Shahādah* (Islamic declaration of faith), enticing them to believe that the time was not yet ripe for Muslims to take a place in Indian politics, and that they should be content to continue in the long slumber that had contributed to the disintegration of Islamic governance in the Subcontinent. In this view, many Muslims believed that they were not prepared for politics, and that education was the only way out of their social and political backwardness. They incorrectly assumed that since they were a minority, they were not suited for governance after the British departure (Murad, 1996; Nadvi, 1999; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000).

Shibli argued that the time had come for the Muslims to awaken from their political slumber. The second installment of *Musalmanun ki Political Karwat* (published on March 4, 1912) outlined what Shibli believe to be the correct political scheme for Muslims by pointing out inconsistencies in the Muslim League's political stance. This installment underscored the importance of Hindu-Muslim unity. As for Shibli's idea of correct politics, he argued that the political scheme adopted by the Muslim League was not only incorrect, but detrimental to the community. According to Shibli, Muslims occupied two distinct positions in the current scenario: first, they were subjects of the British Government; and second, they were Muslims. These two ingredients were essential to any scheme of Muslim politics in India. Additionally, the British system of governance was not monarchical, but democratic. In this type of government, people have the right to express their views and are free to criticise the administration. They (the people) are both rulers and the ruled. It is the people who pass the laws that govern their society (Nadvi, 1999; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000). Shibli sarcastically remarked:

No one denies the role of the Liberal and the Conservative parties in England, but in India the British system of governance becomes monarchical and autocratic.... Should a good parliamentary system, a good democratic system, and an ideal judicial system be distorted only because it is foisted onto a people who have skin of different pigment? It is farfetched to assume that Indians are unable to shoulder essential duties. Didn't this soil produce great rulers and intellectuals in the past? (Nadvi, 1999, p. 618; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000, pp. 140-41).

Shibli pointed out that despite the difficulty in protecting basic rights; on the whole, Indians were making progress. It was impossible that Muslims alone would remain unaffected by the important developments taking place in the country. Although a few enterprising Muslims in Indian politics such as Badruddin Tyabji and Rahimatullah M. Sayani (1847-1902) from Bombay, Saiyid Muhammad (d.1919) from Madras, and Saiyid Ameer Ali from Calcutta stressed the importance of Muslim involvement in Indian politics, the majority of Muslim intellectuals in the united provinces of Agra, Delhi, and Punjab remained cut off from politics. Ironically, the region had once been a centre of political activities, and Muslims were more advanced in education there than in the other parts of the country, but by the time Shibli was writing, he observed that people were scared to talk about politics. Shibli found it difficult to understand the reason for their political retardation. According to Shibli, this abnormality developed chiefly due to Sir Saiyid's efforts to discourage the Muslim masses from taking part in the active politics of the day (Nadvi, 1999; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000).

In Shibli's third instalment, he made a passing remark on the wrong policies practiced by the Muslim League. From his criticisms Shibli then proposed what he believed to be the correct practice of politics. Shibli maintained that:

To describe the current politics as incorrect is indeed the key to realize the right politics. The germs of the incorrect politics are so deeply implanted in the minds of the Muslim community that they prevent them from looking towards the correct politics. If there is any discussion on politics then a set answer is given that the time has not yet come. We should focus on education and this phrase cascades cold water on the political thought and ambitions. And one returns to the spot where one was standing thirty years ago (Nadvi, 1999, pp. 619-20; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000, pp. 150-51).

Shibli claimed that the greatest blunder was the futile *ek farzi bekar cheez* (a useless and fake entity, i.e. the Muslim League), which masqueraded as a political force before the Muslims but which in fact was a paper tiger. For the past thirty years (since the beginning of the Muslim educational movement), Shibli argued that the community had been mesmerised as if by a conjuror's show; people believed whatever they were told, to the extent that thousands of well-educated people considered this illusion to

be a fountain of life. He argued that the Muslim League was not politics today and would never be so. The ineffectiveness of the Muslim League according to Shibli caused him to question its formation and purpose. He argued that it had a poor grasp of the meaning of politics and as such failed to function as a political organisation should (Nadvi, 1999; Shibli Nu‘mani, 2000).

The basis of the formation of the League was the Simla Deputation of 1906, and the spirit of the Simla Deputation continued to haunt it, whatever shape it took. The primary aim of the League was to claim a share for the Muslims in those political privileges, which the Hindus had won through their thirty-year struggle for the civil rights of the people. In Shibli’s view, the Muslim League took up any issue as a routine matter to save face to Muslims, but day and night they raised the slogan of the fear of Hindu supremacy and the need for safeguarding Muslims’ identity against the Hindu assault, and posed as the champion of the Muslim cause. This comprised the main motto of the League, and the rest was mere colouring according to the situation (Engineer, 2009; Nadvi, 1999; Shibli Nu‘mani, 2000).

Shibli did not deny the importance of the Simla Deputation for securing separate representation for the Muslims, but he considered it to be the biggest *tamasha* (show) played on the national stage. Subsequently, he enquired whether it was appropriate to call the disagreement between two sections (Muslims and Hindus) of the people “politics”. If that is the case, then daily disputes between Muslims and Hindus would turn into political events. According to him, the point from which politics starts is in the pursuit of meeting the needs of the government and the people, and not of the people’s conflict with the government over their demands from it, in contrast to the League’s position on the Simla Deputation, which was the focus of the Muslim League (Nadvi, 1999; Shibli Nu‘mani, 2000).

Based on his independent study of the INC and Muslim League, Shibli performed a comparative analysis of the resolutions passed during 1885-1910 from which he pointed out that there was a clear difference in the aims of the two parties. He observed that from its inception, the INC embarked on a campaign to secure their political rights and achieve Indian autonomy, and he questioned the League’s contrastingly limited aims (Shibli Nu‘mani, 2000; Zafarul Islam 1958).

Shibli fundamentally challenged the Muslim League's understanding of true politics for the members of the Muslim League, the concept implied disloyalty to the government. At that time, the League was in fact largely limited either to the educated class or to landowners. They did not appreciate the relevance of politics. According to Shibli, politics is a persuasive national sentiment and when it arises in the heart it works as a self-stimulating force that encourages people to great enterprise, effort, and hard work. In contrast, Shibli characterised the League's attitude as trivial:

The League persists in its demand for separate elections at the municipal level, but this principle has been accepted for the Viceroy's Council and the Provincial Legislative Councils. However, the League has not yet utilized these opportunities for any significant purpose. What sorts of questions have been asked by the Muslim representatives in these councils? What types of reform proposals were introduced? Did the Muslim representatives waste their time on irrelevant issues or did they offer expert opinion? On the other hand, a well-organized Hindu member equipped with all vital data asked relevant questions which are beyond the perception of the common man. Thus, Muslim political representatives resolutely asked irrelevant and insignificant questions (Shibli Nu'mani, 2000, pp. 154-55).

An important medium through which Shibli expressed his political thoughts with the aim of influencing the public of his views was poetry. Poetry was always a powerful means of expressing political sentiments in Islamic civilisations, and it continues to be a strong emotive force in modern South Asia. Shibli's poems are often scathing criticisms of the Muslim League, employing sharp and exquisite irony by contrasting familiar League slogans with their supine behaviour. The study of these poems offers a vivid picture of the early days of the Muslim League. Keeping in view its policies, no one could predict that this organisation would one day manage to create a separate homeland for Indian Muslims. In his poem *Kufrān-i-ni'mat* (Ingratitude), Shibli ironically elucidated the objective of the Simla Deputation (Shibli Nu'mani, 2007, p. 82).

When Hindus secure some rights through great struggle,
We should also get some share in it in the name of *Panjitan*;²

When the lion hunts some prey and brings it home,
The fox rushes there and says "Me too, my master."

After mocking the League in its early days, Shibli remarked ironically that if anyone asked about the virtues of the League, in brief it could be said that it was simultaneously a benefactor of the community but a slave of the rulers (Shibli Nu'mani, 2007, pp. 72-73):

I do not deny the greatness and power of the League,
The country rings with sensation, with noise,
Government also casts on it a benign look
The rich and famous as well give it a sweet smile,
It's the training ground of the new leaders,
Stepping stone of pride and public exhibition too;
In brief, its merits, if someone asks, are that
It is at once patron of the community and servant of the
rulers.

In the same poem, Shibli related that Moses used to visit Mount Sinai and express his dissatisfaction with the deteriorating condition of his people before the Almighty. In like manner, Shibli advised leaders of the Muslim League to go to Simla to explain the plight of the Muslims (Engineer, 2009; Shibli Nu'mani, 2007, pp. 73-74).

I told the Leaguers, come on, sirs,
For once say something about us too,
As Moses on Mount Sinai used to convey the community's
condition,
You should say something about us in Simla.
Place before them our ocean of troubles and sufferings,
Next put forward the lapses of our captain,
Dare once in a while to criticize and blame,
Rather than say "yes sir" every time!
The Leaguer heard everything patiently, and said:
"My habit is to tell the truth whenever I open my mouth."

Shibli was undeterred in his continued bold criticism of the Muslim League's politics by the risk this posed to his own person. For instance, around the time he was criticizing the Simla Deputation, as in the poem above, he was informed that the Raja of Mahmudabad, Sir Mohammad Ali Mohammad Khan (1877-1931), had threatened to destroy him. Shibli's prompt retort was that he was not a large tree that could be knocked down by a thunderstorm; he was a grass over which many

storms could blow without uprooting it (Murad, 1996; Nadvi, 1999; Smith, 1966).

Critique of the Muslim League's structural flaws

At the end of his discussion in "*Musalmanun ki Political Karwat*" (Political Turn of the Muslims), Shibli draw attention to some of the more notable flaws in the structure of the Muslim League, and queried whether it could ever be improved:

The essential nature of the Muslim League is to seek wealth and rank, with dignitaries bearing symbolic titles but not risking anything for the sake of their followers. The Hindus have wealthy landowners, but the INC has not appointed them to important positions by virtue of their wealth and titles. The Muslim League appoints incompetent people who are ignorant of politics, English, Arabic, Persian or Urdu. When a proxy read the League's presidential address, the President was astonished by what language he was speaking. The unaccountability of finances means donors, not members, run the League (Nadvi, 1999, pp. 620-21; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000, pp. 157-58).

Shibli maintained that the basic structure of the Muslim League was defective because of the ineffectiveness of its local branches. Due to a scarcity of competent office bearers who properly understood the meaning of politics, the Muslim League has a policy of appointing affluent notables. For Shibli, this meant that only a crude form of political organisation could be devised in which leaders were formed who would sap the enthusiasm of the people for personal political interests, as reflected in the limited and parochial manifesto of the League described above. The majority of office bearers in the Muslim League were from the upper classes who were more interested in protecting their personal interests rather than pursuing the common good for all Muslims. Furthermore, the Muslim League could not justifiably claim for itself the status of a representative political party (Nadvi, 1999; Pandey, 1991; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000).

According to Shibli, the Muslim League needed to reposition itself and adopt a correct political stance. First, Shibli wanted the Muslim League to widen its area of activity beyond those petty problems belonging explicitly to a particular community. Shibli argued that the

League should embark first upon those tasks on which the future of India itself depends. Among the most prominent of these issues that went largely ignored by the League was the problem of land settlement on which the nation's agriculture depended. It was an established fact that due to excessive revenue demands, peasants laboured under heavy debt, which led to penury and starvation. The pasture lands were always converted into agricultural land, which led to scarcity of grazing for livestock. If a single crop failed, the peasants faced starvation and fled to other places. Thousands of peasants were forced to abandon their homes in pursuit of a livelihood. During times of revenue collection, poor peasants pawned their valuables to moneylenders. In spite of all this misery, land settlement was conducted only every thirty years. Shibli persistently argued that if permanent land settlement (*Istimrari Bandobast*) was implemented in other parts of India as it was in Bengal, it would be much more beneficial to the common people than the League's demand for the reservation of a few jobs for Muslims in government services. He argued that the League had to include the demand for permanent land settlement in order to achieve a more representative political status (Nadvi, 1999; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000; Zilli, 2006).

Shibli further argued that it was important to ensure that such strategies were adopted in which all Indians had greater chances of participating in all administrative matters. Gokhale introduced a bill for the creation of district councils comprising of six members working under the guidance of the District Magistrate. Shibli considered allowing the people to resolve their own problems, an excellent measure for the wellbeing of the country. However, this bill was turned down by the government. In brief, it was crucial that the resolutions adopted by the INC pertaining to the national agenda be incorporated into the political programme of the Muslim League (Nadvi, 1999; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000).

The prominent intellectual Syed Ameer Ali (1849-1928), the author of the classics *The Spirit of Islam* and *A Short History of the Saracens*, an eminent Muslim judge of the Calcutta High Court and a significant force in the political history of modern India, was a promoter of Hindu-Muslim unity and uniformly cherished by both communities. He had just proposed the formation of a joint Hindu-Muslim national front, so that when a deputation was sent to the viceroy, the number of both Hindu and Muslim delegates should be equal. It was a step in the right

direction, and Shibli urged that it should be adopted without delay by the Muslim League (Nadvi, 1999; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000).

In a move to ensure the quality of League members, Shibli proposed that the working committee of the Muslim League should have excluded big landowners as representatives and appoint, instead, only bold and courageous persons who could express their opinions without fear or favour (Nadvi, 1999; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000).

According to Shibli, the League needed to inculcate an appreciation of politics among the public as means to ensure their will is represented and to strengthen the voice of Muslims. To this end, a range of political literature should be made readily available and accessible to the public. Furthermore, a competent team of learned individuals should tour the country explaining the merits of political involvement (Nadvi, 1999; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000).

Shibli argued that the League did not support their claims and requests with solid facts derived from field data. To this end, he suggested that both explorative and statistical studies be conducted on a wide range of issues, which would be useful when arguing their case for or against something. This would have added greater credibility to the League by illustrating that it had an ear to the ground and was aware of public needs and requests (Nadvi, 1999; Shibli Nu'mani, 2000).

The impact of Shibli's critique on Muslim League politics

Although Shibli himself never participated in any of the Muslim League meetings, his impact on Muslim League politics is clearly deducible from: a) the temporal sequence of the changes in the Muslim League's political orientation; and b) through unflinching intermediation of his ardent disciples, who loyally represented and echoed his ideas from within the League's forum (Pirzada, 1969).

Soon after the publication of Shibli's first article in the *Muslim Gazette* on February 12, 1912, which generated considerable discussion and debate in the Muslim League circles, the Muslim League's fifth session, held on March 3-4, 1912, at Calcutta, completely changed its draft resolutions (Mujahid, 1990; Pandey, 1991; Pirzada, 1969). However, Shibli still criticised Muslim League in his poetry. His poems would not only give constructive criticism of its political strategies, but would also suggest a different course of political action to the Muslim

League. Additionally, his political poetry was very popular among Muslim intellectual elites and the masses, which added to its impact. According to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Shibli's poetry became, as it were, a torchbearer for the politics of the Muslim League. In his long poem "the Muslim League," Shibli remarked:

People say the League is open to reform,
If so, I have no quarrel with it,
With the difference certainly obvious that,
Cringing on every occasion is not the same now,
The followers who used to be mere captives
They are still slow paced, but not lame-footed.
(Shibli Nu'mani, 2007, pp. 76-77)

Under Shibli's sustained influence and prompting throughout 1912, the League passed a resolution of self-government on December 31, 1912 in their Council meeting at Bankipur, Patna. This was clearly influenced by Shibli's criticism that the League avoided real politics (as outlined above), focusing on issues that were trivial compared to those of concern to the National Congress:

... the attainment of a system of self-government suitable to India by bringing about, through constitutional means, a steady reform of the existing system of administration; by promoting national unity and fostering public spirit among the people of India, and by cooperating with other communities for the said purpose (Pirzada, 1969, p. 164).

In his letter to Munshi Muhammad Amin, the Chief Secretary of Bhopal on January 5, 1913, Shibli expressed that his political articles are the prose commentary on his political poems (Shibli Nu'mani, 1966). Shibli wrote sarcastic poems on the Muslim League's activities and his comments and ideas forcefully affected its political course of action. Although the radical changes introduced by the League may have been the outcome of many factors, undoubtedly Shibli's constructive criticism played a very direct role in the Muslim League's political reorientation. Maulvi Nizamuddin Badauni, editor of *Zulqarnain Badaun*, published a magazine *Kusuf al-Shamsain* (Eclipse of the Two Suns) in 1915, a collection of the *marsiyas* (elegiac poetry) on the occasion of the deaths of Maulana Shibli in 1914 and Maulana Altaf Husain Hali (1837-1914), in which he wrote that Shibli was considered one of the architects of the resolution on self-government. For many years, Shibli was very

much active and well-known on the national political stage because of his poems. Saiyid Tufail Ahmad Mangalori's remark in *Musalmano ka Roshan Mustaqbil* (The Bright Future of the Muslims) on Shibli's stature rings very true:

Until now the active role played in politics was mostly by the modern educated people. It is surprising to note that after the Muslims left communal politics and entered national politics, the role of the *ulama* trained in the traditional system of education certainly increased. Indeed, they played a leading role in taking out Muslims from the mire of communalism; the most important among them was Maulana Shibli Nu'mani, who used the might of his pen to change the perception of the Muslim League. Shibli successfully turned Muslims to the mainstream of politics with the help of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (Badauni, 1915, p. 27; Mangalori, n.d., p. 386).

Saiyid Vazir Hasan (1872-1947), the League secretary, also remarked that:

The ideal of self-government which the All India Muslim League has placed on its programme is an important step towards the formation of the great nation for the building of which all Indians are aspiring (Muhammad, 1991, p. 146; Noman, 1942, p. 129).

During the 1910s, Shibli's radical ideas were more pervasively propagated throughout the entire nation through newly launched newspapers like *Comrade* (English, 1911), *Al-Hilal* (Urdu, 1912), the *Zamindar* (Urdu, 1903), and the *Hamdard* (Urdu, 1913). His students were in the forefront in disseminating his message throughout the country. Under his influence, many *ulama* supported the INC and openly opposed the Muslim League. For example, the Ahrar were in open opposition to the notion of "self-government". Shibli wrote a number of poems both counselling and reprimanding the Ahrars. Shibli's role as guide and patron of the Ahrar is clearly visible in his poem *Radd-i-'Amal* (Nadvi, 1999, pp. 628-30; Shibli Nu'mani, 2007, pp. 107-8):

Moderation has neither arrived nor will it arrive,
Like you I have the same misgiving,
Of course, as the fire flares up,
The force with which you had knocked down the community
rises

I spent a whole lifetime in loving pursuit,
 Let me now remain cut off from everyone.
 For long you have seen me as a wise one,
 Now for a spell let me alone as a loony.

Poems like the one cited above carried great influence with the Ahrar luminaries. For instance, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad became very critical of the Muslim League-led deputation to the Government that aimed to dilute the government disapprobation of the Muslim stance on issues like Tripoli and the Balkan wars, the Kanpur riots, the Muslim university, and League-Congress unity. Reflecting Shibli's view of the League's timid stance, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad criticised the deputation in the strongest of terms. Shibli's own remarks on this strange delegation, *Muslim ki Wafadari* "Wafd ka address", are quite pertinent (Nadvi, 1999, pp. 631-32):

The truth is that we are loyal forever,
 We do not complain about the type of governance,
 The pledge of loyalty we gave you in writing,
 It is a reflection of the lines of our foreheads
 We are versed in following the path of obedience,
 The others can never pass us along this road,
 We read out to them the pledge of loyalty
 Since the writing was too faint for them to make out.

Another identifiable strand of Shibli's influence on the Muslim League's political reorientation may be said to be his success in bringing the Muslim League, the Ahrar, and the INC closer together. The brief period of cooperation between the League and the Congress was largely inspired by Shibli, but due credit is not given to him. However, it did not remain entirely unnoticed. Shibli's efforts were not wasted. According to him, the buffetings of the time led to a Muslim awakening. The Ahrar continued to increase in strength due to people like Abul Kalam Azad, Muhammad Ali, Shaukat Ali (1873-1938), Zafar Ali Khan, Hasrat Mohani (1877-1951), Dr. Mahmud (1889-1971) and Dr. Mukhtar Ahmad Ansari (1880-1936). These young remarkable men marched ahead leading the older generation like Hakim Ajmal Khan (1863-1927), Nawab Ishaq Khan (1860-1918), Major Saiyid Hasan Bilgrami (d.1915), and Muhammad Ali Muhammad Khan (1889-1931), and the Raja of Mahmudabad who were ready to move step-by-step with the younger generation. Mohammad Ali Jinnah (1876-1948) himself and

Mazharul Haq led the joint group of Ahrar and the Muslim League. Seeing this, Shibli remarked in *Afsun Hurriyat Mu'tadlin se Khitab* (Nadvi, 1999, pp. 625-27):

I resisted the call for freedom as best I could,
 Yet this magic casts its spell on everyone.
 The others were impertinent for ages,
 Now you also sometimes utter a rebellious word or two.
 Success is only a year or two away
 League-Congress unity is coming.
 Even now the [MAO] college gives a cringing word,
 The caravan has departed, its bells can still be heard in the
 distance.

Shibli's impact on the reorientation of the Muslim League became abundantly clear when the Muslim League and the INC decided to join hands in December 1915, a year after Shibli's death. In the Muslim League's annual session in Bombay, a joint programme of political cooperation between the Muslim League and the INC was decided upon. The success of this session was mainly due to the drive of Mohammad Ali Jinnah who succeeded in formulating a scheme of reforms through mutual consultation between the League and Congress that was approved at Lucknow in 1916. According to Saiyid Sulaiman Nadvi, INC leaders like Ghandhiji (1869-1948), Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya (1861-1946), Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), Sir Satyendra Prasanna Sinha (1863-1928), the INC President Annie Besant (1847-1933), and B. G. Horniman (1873-1948), editor of the *Bombay Chronicle*, had all been welcomed at the meeting of the Muslim League. In that year, on December 25-27, a League-Congress joint meeting was held in the historic city of Lucknow, under the leadership of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, which resulted in the Lucknow Pact and League-Congress unity (Mirza, 2010; Nadvi, 1999; Naidu, 1917; Qureshi, 1962).

In his earlier articles, Shibli took up the current condition of the Muslim League and the issue of mutual harmony among Indians. He was very much pleased to learn from some prominent Muslim leaders that in the annual general assembly, the leaders of the Muslim League would restructure the organisation based on Shibli's guidelines. Maulana Mohammad Ali wrote the Muslim League's constitution with an emphasis on Muslim rights and Hindu-Muslim unity.

In his presidential address at Lucknow, Mohammad Ali Jinnah said that the positive outcome of this communal harmony began with its first Hindu-Muslim joint meeting in Bombay. He expressed his full satisfaction at the fact that the Muslim League was accepted and recognised as the sole representative organisation of Muslims by the INC (Naidu, 1917; Pandey, 1991).

Conclusion

In summary, Shibli's denunciation of the League's policies had a salutary effect on the Muslim League as a viable political party. Two readily identifiable effects of Shibli's writings were, first, INC recognition of the Muslim League as the sole representative of the Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. Second, after its political reorientation under the weight of Shibli's criticism, the Muslim League managed to better relate with the Muslim masses.

In addition to the general Muslim public, Shibli's passionate critiques and pleas influenced many *ulama*. Under his guidance, many educated Muslim youths (later intellectuals and leaders), like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Muhammad Ali, and Zafar Ali Khan, played a significant role in Indian politics. Even Darul Musannifin, a premier research institution founded by Shibli, became a nerve centre and a hub for Muslim politics. In addition, Shibli's successor, Saiyid Sulaiman Nadvi, had a considerable influence on Muslim politics in India for a sustained period of time.

By nature, Shibli was bold, democratic, anti-imperialist, and a pan-Islamist. He endeavoured to instil these qualities among the Muslims through his writings. He had a great vision of the glory of Islam and Muslims due to his vast knowledge of history, particularly of the early caliphate and the Abbasids.

Shibli's constructive criticism forced the leaders of the League to think afresh about internal reform of the organisation. Shibli was not interested in communal politics. He showed more interest in bridging the Hindu-Muslim gap. His criticism compelled leaders of the Muslim League to take an active part in mainstream national politics. He was the first renowned Muslim scholar to oppose the separatist policy of the early League, and pleaded for Hindu-Muslim harmony. In short, Shibli's legacy may be said to reside in the fact that, on the one hand,

he succeeded in kindling political interest in the Muslim masses, and on the other, he induced the Muslim League to serve the Muslim masses and succeeded in unifying the two. Shibli's dissent, beginning as a lone voice crying in the wilderness in the late nineteenth century, had by the early twentieth century (following the demise of Sir Saiyid Ahmad Khan), precipitated a fundamental change as seen in the politicisation of the Muslim League, which was to guide the direction of Muslim politics in India in the following decades.

Endnotes

*All excerpts from Shibli and other Urdu writers are translated by the author.

1. "Allama" means a very learned person. From the very beginning, Shibli was a staunch follower of Imam Abū Ḥanīfah al-Nu'mān (d. 150/767). He wrote his biography, *Seerat-un-No'man*. Nu'mani was a title of Shibli, given by his teacher Maulana Faruq Chirayyakoti (d. 1909) after the said Imam. Later Nu'mani became part of his own name.

2. Panjitan-e-Pak, the "Five Pure Ones", a reference to the mainly Shi'ite belief in the ceremonial importance of the family of the Prophet and the inherited holiness and right of their descendants; Shibli here is suggesting Muslims expect a share of the rights the Hindus win because of their ceremonial importance as descendants of Muslims, which he then compares to a fox begging a lion.

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