

Muslim Nationalist Historiography in Modern South Asia: Three Representative Historians

(i) Shibli Naumani

Shibli Naumani (1857-1914) was born at Azamgarh, U.P., India. He taught at Aligarh College founded by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. Later, he founded the famous religious seminary Nadvat al-Ulama at Lucknow in 1894. His most renowned historical work is a comprehensive biography of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) titled *Sirat al-Nabi*. He died after writing its first two volumes, so the remaining five volumes were written and published posthumously by his student, Syed Suleman Nadvi. Other famous biographical works of Shibli include *Al-Mamun* (1889), *Sirat al-Nu'man* (1891; on the life of Imam Abu Hanifah), *Al-Faruq* (1898), *Al-Ghazali* (1902), *Sawanih Maulana Rumi* (1906), and a series of essays on the Mughal Emperor Aurengzeb Alamgir (between years 1906-09). He had scholarly command over many languages such as Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Urdu and Hindi. He is considered the first Muslim historian produced by the Aligarh School.

Through his writings, Shibli tried to highlight the glories of medieval Islam. He saw a noble purpose in history-writing, and through his works, tried to establish the utility of history as a discipline. He tried to reconcile history with philosophy by presenting a philosophical view of history, and searching for universal truths in it. He undertook a critical study of the rise and fall of civilizations, and while doing so, he particularly highlighted the significance of causation in history. He was conscious of the fact that many factors adversely influence history-writing. Therefore, in his monumental work, *Sirat al-Nabi*, he argued that the most important factor that adversely influences historiography is the political factor, since the ruling elite always try to pressurize the historians for producing historical narratives that serve the political interests of the former.¹ He not only tried to revive the historiographical tradition among the Muslims in South Asia through his historical works, he also tried to revive the heritage, culture and traditions of the Muslims in pre-partition India.

Though Shibli praised the efforts of the Orientalists in collecting, collating, editing, and printing rare manuscripts dealing with the history of Islam and Muslims, he was critical of the Orientalist scholarship as well. He argued that their writings and approach reflect prejudices against Islam and the history of the Muslims, and that they interpreted the Muslim history with a missionary bias.² Shibli is considered the real exponent of the Traditionalist school of historiography

(ii) I. H. Qureshi

¹ Shibli Naumani, *Sirat al-Nabi*, vol. I, 4th edn. (n.p.: National Book Foundation, 1985), p. 66.

² Muhammad Aslam Syed, *Muslim Response to the West: Muslim Historiography in India, 1857-1914* (Islamabad: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 1988), pp. 81, 93.

Dr. Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi (1903-1981), better known as I. H. Qureshi, was a renowned historian and educationist, who was born at Patiali, U.P., in pre-partition India. He taught history at Delhi University, University of the Punjab, and Columbia University, New York, and also served as Vice-Chancellor at the University of Karachi. His most famous works include *Administration of the Sultanate of Dehli* (1942), *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent* (1962), *The Struggle for Pakistan* (1965), *Administration of the Mughal Empire* (1966), and *Ulema in Politics* (1972).

In his work *Administration of the Sultanate of Dehli*, Dr. Qureshi stressed more on the Islamic character of the Sultanate of Delhi than on its local Indian nature. Being a proponent of Muslim nationalist discourse, he projected two-nation theory on the basis of Hindu-Muslim differences, and provided a historical basis for it. He argued that Islam and Hinduism are poles apart. In pre-partition India, the Hindus and the Muslims lived as two completely separate and identifiable nations or communities, though they had lived as neighbours for centuries.³ He highlighted the notion of separate identity of the Muslims in India, and argued that fearing a complete assimilation of the Muslims in Hindu majority, the Muslims leaders such as Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624), popularly known as Mujaddid Alf Thani, strived to preserve their separate identity. Dr. Qureshi interpreted the war of succession between Dara Shikoh (executed 1659) and Aurengzeb Alamgir (r. 1658-1707), the sons of Mughal Emperor Shahjahan (r. 1628-58), as a conflict between the forces of heterodoxy and orthodoxy respectively. In his opinion, the victory of Aurengzeb Alamgir, who was orthodox and puritanical, proved to be the 'political culmination of the Mujaddidi movement'.⁴ In short, the Muslims were never completely assimilated into the Indian environment and had evolved their own distinctive traditions.⁵

Further expanding his Muslim nationalist perspective in historiography, he defended the All India Muslim League's demand for a separate Muslim state, and emphatically stressed on the role of Islam or the ideological factor in the Freedom Movement. After studying the historical development of the Muslim community in Indian Sub-continent, he interpreted the emergence of Pakistan in 1947 as a natural outcome of the historical processes.

(iii) S. M. Ikram

Sheikh Muhammad Ikram (1908-1971), better known as S. M. Ikram, was a renowned Pakistani bureaucrat, educationist and historian, who was born at Lyallpur (now called

³ I. H. Qureshi, *The Struggle for Pakistan* (Karachi: University of Karachi, 1965), pp. 3-5.

⁴ I. H. Qureshi, *Ulema in Politics* (Karachi: Ma'aref, 1972), p. 98.

⁵ I. H. Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent (610-1947): A Brief Historical Analysis* (Karachi: Ma'aref, 1977, first published 1962).

Faisalabad). He was a prolific author, who wrote a number of books on history. His most important works on history include *Makers of Pakistan and Modern Muslim India* (1950; later republished with the title *Indian Muslims and the Partition of India*), *Ab-i Kausar*, *Rud-i Kausar*, *Mauj-i Kausar*, *Muslim Civilization in India* (1964), *Muslim Rule in India and Pakistan* (1966), and *Modern Muslim India and the Birth of Pakistan, 1858-1951* (1970).

Like I. H. Qureshi, S. M. Ikram also tried to trace the roots of Hindu-Muslim separatism in the history of the Indian Sub-continent. He tried to reconstruct the history of the Muslims in India by assuming a neat demarcation between the Hindu and Muslim communities in political, religious, social and cultural terms. Writing from the Muslim nationalist perspective, he argued that Pakistan had come into being the day when the Arab-Muslim armies landed in Sindh in early eighth century. In his words, “the ground for Muslim separatism was prepared when Islam entered the subcontinent, and all efforts to provide a bridge between the Hindus and the Muslims failed.”⁶

He glorified the efforts of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi and Mughal Emperor Aurengzeb in crystallizing the separate Muslim identity in India, while he condemned the efforts of religious syncretism in India, and the role of personalities like Mughal Emperor Akbar (d. 1605) in this regard, who tried to bring the two supposed communities together. Like I. H. Qureshi, he also tried to de-emphasize the local South Asian roots of the Pakistanis.

⁶ S. M. Ikram, *Modern Muslim India and the Birth of Pakistan (1858-1951)*, (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1965), p. 1.