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Research Article

The Political Philosophy of Shibli Nomani: A Critical Study

Razia Sultana

Aligarh Muslim University, India; razia4357@gmail.com

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Abstract. This paper discusses the political thought of Allama Shibli Nomani, a distinguished scholar, historian, and reformer of colonial India, whose ideas reflect a deep concern for the socio-political decline of Muslims under British rule. Shibli envisioned the revival of the Muslim community through intellectual awakening, moral reform, and modern education rooted in Islamic values. His political philosophy combined faith and rationalism, drawing inspiration from the early Islamic model of governance while engaging critically with Western political ideologies. The paper discusses his emphasis on unity among Muslims, the importance of self-reliance, and his advocacy for educational institutions that could produce morally upright and politically conscious individuals. It also explores Shibli's efforts to redefine the relationship between religion and politics, highlighting his belief that Islam provides a comprehensive system guiding all aspects of life. Through an analytical study of his writings, particularly his historical works and letters, this research seeks to present Shibli Nomani as a visionary thinker whose political ideas contributed significantly to shaping Muslim intellectual and political discourse in modern India.

Keywords: Shibli Nomani, politics, India, Muslim, British rule.

INTRODUCTION

Maulana Shibli Nomani was not only a distinguished scholar and historian but also a visionary political thinker who profoundly influenced Muslim thought in colonial India. Living during a period of political subjugation and social decline, Shibli sought to redefine the role of Indian Muslims in public life. His political philosophy combined deep faith in Islamic principles with a rational and reformist outlook suited to modern realities. For him, politics was not a struggle for power alone but a moral and intellectual discipline rooted in justice, unity, and self-awareness.

Shibli Nomani emphasized that political success could not be achieved without education, organization, and moral strength. He argued that Muslims must first reform themselves intellectually and socially before aspiring to political independence. Unlike the extremist voices of his time, Shibli rejected confrontation with the British government and advocated a cautious, strategic approach built on wisdom and long-term planning. His concept of “political awakening” aimed to prepare Muslims for responsible participation in governance and to restore their lost confidence as a nation.

He was also a strong supporter of inter-communal harmony. While recognizing the distinct and blind imitation — and promoting a balanced path between tradition and modern reform.

Shibli Nomani’s writings reveal a consistent effort to guide his community toward self-reliance, unity, and political consciousness. His vision was not confined to India alone; he viewed the Muslim world as one moral and cultural entity and supported the idea of Pan-Islamic solidarity. In this way, Shibli’s political philosophy emerged as both national and universal — a blend of religious conviction, pragmatic wisdom, and reformist zeal that continues to hold relevance in modern political discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Shibli Nomani (1857–1914) was a distinguished scholar, researcher, and writer of the Indian subcontinent who played a significant role in promoting the educational, political, and social awakening of Muslims. His political ideas were deeply rooted in the issues faced by Muslims of his time and in his efforts to find solutions for them.

Allama Syed Sulaiman Nadvi, commenting on Shibli Nomani’s political thought, writes that Shibli’s deep attachment to Islam, Islamic civilization, Islamic history, and Islamic sciences naturally inclined him to support the idea of an Islamic government and to oppose those who sought to harm Islam. In fact, this was the essence of his political philosophy.¹

By the time Shibli Nomani reached adulthood, the storm of the 1857 uprising had subsided, and the British had established such a firm and stable rule over India

¹ Syed Sulaiman Nadvi, *Hayat e Shibli*, Azamgarh, Darul Musannefin, 1970, p58

that its downfall seemed unimaginable. During this period, various organizations, parties, and associations were formed to demand the rights of the Indian people. These bodies made humble appeals to the British government for justice and equality. Among these was the Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, which Shibli Nomani appeared to support.

Shibli Nomani's involvement in practical politics became evident in 1877 when he began raising funds to support Turkey. After arriving in Aligarh, he started expressing his views on political matters more openly. During this period, he wrote an article about the events in Armenia, which was published on February 21, 1896, in *Azad*, a newspaper issued from Allahabad.

Maulana Shibli was overjoyed when he heard about the establishment of a constitutional government in Turkey under the leadership of Ghazi Anwar Bey. In 1911, when Italy unjustly occupied Tripoli, Shibli expressed deep sorrow over the incident. Later, in 1913, when the Balkan states declared war against Turkey, the event moved him profoundly and inspired him to write a very emotional poem titled *Shahr Ashoob-e-Islam* (The Turmoil of Islam).

Shibli Nomani strongly opposed Aga Khan's suggestion that Turkey should cut its ties with Europe and restrict itself to Asia. During the Turco-Balkan War, a medical relief mission was sent under the leadership of Dr. Ansari. In 1912, Maulana Shibli was present to extend his best wishes to this mission. He also appealed to Indian Muslims to donate the money they would normally spend on Eid al-Adha sacrifices to help Turkey in its time of need.

In 1913, a major incident occurred in Kanpur when a part of the famous mosque in the Bazaar locality—including its restroom and roof—was demolished by the local administration. This act sparked intense outrage among the Muslims of Kanpur, leading to widespread protests. The government, however, suppressed these protests with great force. Deeply affected by the event, Shibli Nomani wrote several articles condemning the incident.

Maulana Shibli also wrote about various political issues of his time, such as the Partition of Bengal, the Balkan War, reforms in the Muslim League, and the political awakening among Muslims. He contributed numerous essays and articles on contemporary political affairs to the *Muslim Gazette*, which was a popular Muslim periodical of that era.

In his essay "*Musalmānon kī Siyasī Karwat*" (The Political Turning Point of Muslim), published in four consecutive issues of the *Muslim Gazette*, Shibli Nomani discussed his political views in detail. Many of his poems addressing political matters were published in *Al-Hilal* (Calcutta), where he used several pen names, including Kashaf, Wasaf, and Naqqad. Through his poetry, he not only criticized the stance of the Muslim League but also reprimanded a newly formed party, Ahrar, for its policies and actions.

It is also important to note that besides his articles and poems, Shibli Nomani discussed political matters extensively in his personal letters and private conversations. A significant portion of his *Kulliyat* (Collected Works) consists of poems reflecting his political sentiments and his deep concern for the future of the Muslim community.

In his most famous article on politics, “Musalmānon kī Political Karwat” (“The Political Turning Point of Muslims”), Shibli Nomani strongly emphasized that Muslims should take an active part in politics.

According to Shibli, the true meaning and scope of politics begin with the participation of the people in the functioning of the government. Politics, in his view, is not mere rhetoric or speech-making; rather, it emerges from the energy of religious strength combined with intense patriotic feelings, for which all kinds of sacrifices are necessary.²

Shibli Nomani’s political ideas and writings revolved around three major objectives. The first was to awaken political consciousness among Muslims, who, in his opinion, were politically inactive at that time. The second was to guide them in the right direction regarding their political activities. Finally, he aimed to promote the establishment of a common platform for both Muslims and Hindus.³

Shibli Nomani was a strong advocate of Hindu-Muslim unity. He was a moderate and farsighted scholar who believed that followers of all religions in India should live together in peace and harmony. He maintained that Hindus and Muslims could work together not only for India’s freedom but also for its social progress and collective development.

In many of Shibli Nomani’s writings and speeches, one finds clear reflections of his strong opposition to sectarianism and religious intolerance. At the same time, he consistently emphasized the importance of unity among Muslims. According to him, the success of Muslims depended entirely on their solidarity and mutual harmony. He believed that sectarian divisions and internal conflicts had greatly weakened the Muslim community. Shibli stressed that unity was essential for the success of any political movement, asserting that no struggle could achieve its goals without collective strength. He urged Muslims to set aside their differences and unite, as only through unity could their political efforts bear fruit.⁴

Shibli Nomani also firmly believed that Muslims should preserve their religious and cultural identity while striving for educational and social advancement. He advocated for the establishment of their own institutions to promote these goals. His ideas reflect a balanced perspective that valued both unity and the preservation of identity. In his view, Muslims should maintain their individuality while working toward national and social progress, for their true identity, he said, lies in their faith and civilization — and safeguarding it is their duty.

Shibli Nomani aimed to awaken political awareness among Muslims so that they could organize themselves and fight for their rights effectively. He was convinced that no nation could progress without political consciousness, and that only through awareness and organization could a community advance on the path of development and success.

²Maulana Shibli Nomani, *Maqalat-e-Shibli*, Vol. VIII, Nadwi, ed by Maulvi Masood Ali, Dar al-Muṣannifin, Azamgarh, 1972, p199.

³ *Ibid.*, 180

⁴ *Ibid.*, 185-187

According to Shibli Nomani, education is the fundamental means of progress for every nation. He regarded both religious and modern education as essential for Muslims, emphasizing that without education, neither political nor social development is possible. Education, he believed, is the only tool through which Muslims can regain their lost glory. Without educational and social advancement, political struggle becomes meaningless.

He repeatedly advised Muslims that before seeking political success, they must first strengthen their intellectual and academic foundations, for political struggle without education is like constructing a building without a foundation.

Shibli Nomani also stressed the importance of leadership, stating that only an educated, enlightened, and dedicated individual with a sincere desire to serve the community can guide the nation in the right direction. For true progress, he believed, a nation needs a sincere and capable leader who possesses both wisdom and integrity to lead his people toward prosperity and unity.⁵

Shibli Nomani was not in favor of direct confrontation with the British. He believed that Muslims first needed to address their educational and social weaknesses before striving for political autonomy. According to him, political struggle should be conducted with careful strategy and prudence; a rash or emotional approach, he warned, could prove even more harmful to the community.

He thought like a wise and practical statesman, insisting that before engaging in any political movement, Muslims must strengthen their educational, social, and economic foundations. Shibli repeatedly advised Muslims to avoid emotional reactions and emphasized that political success requires patience, wisdom, and careful planning. He believed that long-term strategic thinking should take precedence over temporary enthusiasm or impulsive action.

Shibli Nomani also viewed Islamic history and the glory of the past as a guiding light for Muslims. He argued that by learning lessons from their history, Muslims could improve their political and social life.

He stated: "If Muslims understand their history, a new strength can arise within them."⁶

According to Shibli Nomani, Muslims must first overcome their economic and social weaknesses to establish a strong footing in the political arena. He considered social and economic development essential for successful political struggle, warning that political action without addressing these foundational weaknesses would be futile.

According to Shibli Nomani, the political struggle of Muslims can only succeed if it is guided by strategy, patience, and education. He considered emotional and reckless actions to be harmful and repeatedly advised Muslims to first address their internal weaknesses before stepping into the political arena. His views continue to serve as a source of guidance for Muslims even today.

Supporters and critics of Shibli Nomani have taken extreme positions regarding his role and standing in the field of politics. His followers present him as a

⁵ *Ibid*, 180

⁶ Maulana Shibli Nomani, *Al-Mamun*, Darul Musannefin, Azamgarh, 1957, p.10

masterful political philosopher, arguing that he possessed independent political thought and confidence, was opposed to British rule, and faced attempts to be expelled from the country. On the other hand, his critics have labeled him as timid and opportunistic. In reality, both views exaggerate his position. Shibli Nomani was genuinely interested in both Indian and international politics and held nuanced perspectives on various issues.

On the international level, he believed that Islam had created a global community encompassing all Muslims, and that every individual who professes “La ilaha illallah” is part of this community — the core belief of Islam. Based on this principle, he regarded all Muslim countries as part of a single collective. He fully supported the idea of Pan-Islamism. At that time, Turkey was the most powerful Muslim country and held the distinction of being the seat of the Caliphate. Its strength made it a target of European powers. Motivated by Islamic sentiments, Maulana Shibli took a deep interest in international matters concerning Turkey and gave it his full support.

Mehr Afroz Murad observes that Shibli Nomani’s attitude toward Ottoman Turkey was so romantic and emotional that he never attempted to understand the actual conditions within the empire.⁷ Anyone studying his views on Turkey through his letters and articles can confirm this emotional perspective.

A reading of his essays indicates that he was unable to accurately assess the situation. It is worth noting that when Atiya Begum returned from Turkey, she informed Shibli, “Turkey is a plaything of European powers, moving only according to their strings. Modern debts have drained it, and it continues to give and give.”⁸ However, Shibli Nomani did not agree with her assessment. In a letter to his friend Mehdi Hasan, he expressed his opinion of Turkey in the following verse:

"Naalon se bulbul ko main ne daba liya,
Bhaari hoon, laagri mein bhi tanha hazaar par."⁹

This verse reflects that Shibli still considered Turkey a powerful nation, despite its evident weaknesses. In another letter to Mehdi Hasan in 1908, he expressed hope in these words:

"... Some provinces have formally detached from Ottoman (or Turkish) authority; however, once internal stability is restored, these territories are likely to be regained. The Young Turks are well aware of this point ."¹⁰

These statements indicate that Shibli Nomani was unable to fully grasp the true condition and weaknesses of the Ottoman government, as he continued to believe in its strength and resilience.

Maulana Shibli Nomani took a keen interest in Indian politics and expressed his views on various occasions. He disagreed with some of his contemporaries who

⁷ Mehr Afroz Murad Shibli Nomani ke Siyasi Afkar, *Asr e jadeed* (Delhi) vol. 20, no. 4, 1988

⁸ Maulana Shibli Nomani, *Makatib e Shibli*, vol. II, ed by Syed Sulaiman Nadwi, Darul Musannefin, Azamgarh, 1971, p.220

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.222

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.219

believed that Muslims would lose their identity if they joined the Indian National Congress. In his opinion, the Congress was a dynamic force with many commendable programs.

Shibli held Gopal Krishna Gokhale in great esteem and supported his demand for the inclusion of local councils to assist local administration. He described Gokhale as a selfless man, a sincere politician, and a hardworking individual who was deeply engaged in Indian political life. Shibli urged Muslim politicians to emulate Gokhale's qualities.¹¹

He advised Muslims to choose capable and diligent leaders who could effectively represent their political needs and stand firmly for the rights of their community. He emphasized that ordinary people should not become mere puppets of the elite, who often sided with British policies to protect their personal interests.

According to one of his statements, "Muslims have two identities: first, as subjects of the British Government, and second, as followers of Islam. Therefore, Muslim politics is a combination of these two elements — with the first taking precedence over the second."¹²

Amin Zubairi criticized Maulana Shibli Nomani, suggesting that Shibli never truly understood Indian politics and that his harsh objections to Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's policies demonstrated his ineffectiveness as a politician.¹³ However, since Maulana Shibli had independent opinions on political matters, it can be said that both Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Maulana Shibli served as guiding lights for future generations. Both played an important role in shaping the direction of political thought and action in India.

While Sir Syed believed that Muslims should, for the time being, focus solely on education, Shibli Nomani advocated cautious participation in practical politics. To label Shibli's ideas as ineffective would be unfair, as a large section of Muslims was influenced by his thoughts.

Critics of Shibli Nomani also accused him of supporting the Indian National Congress due to his association with Atiya Begum.¹⁴ It is true that Atiya Begum was related to the Congress leader Badruddin Tyabji; however, there is no reliable evidence that she herself supported the Congress. On the contrary, Shibli's supporters claimed that Atiya Begum was inclined towards the Muslim League.¹⁵ But it seems not true because in a letter to his friend Mehdi Hasan, Shibli himself wrote, "My friend (Atiya Begum) says that both the Congress and the League are mere pretenses, run by cowardly and ignorant people."¹⁶

¹¹ *Maqalat e Shibli*, vol- VIII, *op cit.*, 183-184

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 183

¹³ Mohammad Ameen Zuberi, *Dhikr e Shibli*, Lahore, Maktabah Jadeed, 1953, p29

¹⁴ Shaikh Mohammad Ikram, *Shibli Nama, Ek Fankar ki Dastan e Hayat*, Bombay, Kutub khana Taj Office, (n.d.) p.220

¹⁵ Shuhabuddin Disnawi, *Shibli Moandana Tanqeed Ki Roshni Mein Anjuman e Taraqi Urdu*, Delhi, 1987, p.38

¹⁶ *Makatib e Shibli* vol II, *op cit.*, p.225.

Mehr Afroz accused Shibli of holding Muslims primarily responsible for the lack of Hindu-Muslim unity.¹⁷ Indeed, in one of his essays, Shibli made certain remarks that, as he later admitted, seemed to tilt the scales of justice towards one side. However, in the concluding part of that essay, he made sincere efforts to correct and clarify his earlier statements.¹⁸

Mehr Afroz believes that Maulana Shibli Nomani was a liberal-minded democrat in the sphere of Indian politics. She further states that Shibli considered the establishment of religiously shared political relations between Muslims and Hindus to be a positive step, yet he did not clarify why he regarded it as such.¹⁹ A careful study of Shibli's writings, however, reveals that he advocated the separation of religion from politics; therefore, he offered no religious justification for this approach.

Mehr Afroz further argues that Shibli Nomani could not fully accept the logic behind the demand for a separate political platform for Muslims.²⁰ Although he opposed the Muslim League—which claimed to be the sole representative body of Muslims—he desired several reforms in its structure and functioning. Nevertheless, in one of his essays, he wrote:

“...We must stand on our own feet; we must determine our own path. Our needs are both common with the Hindus and distinct from theirs, and therefore, we require a separate political stage.”²¹

In another statement, Shibli remarked, “To cooperate with the Hindus is a good thing; it has always been good and will always remain so.”²² Such expressions, found throughout his writings and speeches, suggest that Shibli's views on this subject were complex and, at times, seemingly contradictory.

Ameen Zuberi asserts that Shibli Nomani strongly disliked the politics practiced at Aligarh and its loyalty toward the British government. According to Zuberi, this aversion led Shibli to distance himself from the prevailing political atmosphere of his time. He further questions what policy Shibli adopted when he assumed a position of authority at Nadwat-ul-Ulama in Lucknow.²³

Moreover, Zuberi points out that although Shibli repeatedly criticized Aligarh's policies and labelled its stance as hypocritical, he himself adopted a similar approach while serving at Nadwa. To prove his loyalty to the British administration, Shibli even wrote a letter affirming his allegiance to the colonial government.

In his essay titled “*kyun Muslamamon ko Ghair Madhabi Qomon ka Mahkum ho kar rehna Chahiye?*”, Shibli emphasized that the British rule in India was, in many ways, comparable to the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir. Therefore, he argued that Muslims should remain obedient to the British rulers, viewing such submission as consistent with Islamic teachings.²⁴

¹⁷ Mehar Afroz Murad, *op.cit.*, p.21

¹⁸ *Maqalat e Shibli* vol VIII, *op.cit.*, p.200

¹⁹ Mehar Afroz Murad, *op.cit.*, p.21

²⁰ *Ibid*, p10

²¹ *Maqalat e Shibl*, vol. VIII, *op.cit.* p.219,

²² *Ibid* 179

²³ *Dhikr e Shibli*, *op.cit.*, p139

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 139

In short, it can be said that despite the contradictions in his political views, Shibli Nomani's ideas played a significant role in nurturing the political consciousness of Indian Muslims. His writings continue to be regarded as an important source of intellectual and political guidance for Muslim society even today.

CONCLUSION

Shibli Nomani emerged as one of the most profound intellectuals of modern Indian Muslim thought, whose political ideas reflected balance, wisdom, and foresight. He envisioned a society where Muslims could regain their lost dignity through education, unity, and political consciousness. Unlike the emotional and reactionary tendencies of his time, Shibli Nomani advocated a rational and strategic approach to political participation. He believed that true political strength could only be achieved through intellectual and moral reform, rather than confrontation or extremism.

Maulana Shibli's emphasis on harmony between different religious communities and his belief in Hindu-Muslim cooperation placed him among the pioneers of inclusive politics in colonial India. His moderate stance, rejection of sectarianism, and insistence on education as the foundation of national progress remain highly relevant today. Although his contemporaries often misunderstood him, his writings reveal a deep concern for the collective awakening of the Muslim Ummah and for India's political future as a united and progressive nation.

In essence, Shibli Nomani's political thought serves as a timeless reminder that wisdom, unity, and education form the true pillars of any successful political movement. His ideas continue to inspire those who seek a balance between faith, intellect, and national responsibility.

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