

THE PEN AND THE PAST: MUSLIM HISTORIANS AND HISTORICAL WRITING IN 18TH-19TH CENTURY INDIA

Mahnoor Khan^{*1}, Aroosa Alvi², Dr. Kalsoom Hanif³

^{*1,2}PhD scholar

³Assistant Professor, LCWU

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15867549>

Keywords

Historiography, intellectuals, historical

Article History

Received: 10 April, 2025

Accepted: 15 June, 2025

Published: 12 July, 2025

Copyright @Author

Corresponding Author: *

Mahnoor Khan

Abstract

The development of Muslim historiography in South Asia throughout the 19th century a time of colonial dominance, cultural change, and intellectual awakening is examined in this book. Muslim scholars and intellectuals used history as a tool for critique, identity creation, and reform in response to political decline and the breakdown of conventional authority. They used a variety of approaches, including as literary analysis, historical critique, theological contemplation, and rational inquiry, to interpret the past and deal with current issues rather than depending on myth or passive record-keeping. Their publications show a deliberate attempt to reevaluate the reasons for civilizational decline, reestablish a connection with early Islamic beliefs, and provide avenues for social and spiritual rejuvenation. This literature-based review highlights the complexity and originality of these approaches, illustrating how history was transformed into a strategic tool for communal introspection and resilience. The findings reveal a rich intellectual tradition that responded creatively to modern challenges while remaining rooted in Islamic epistemology.

INTRODUCTION

Historical writing underwent substantial modifications throughout the British colonial era in India, impacted by both indigenous intellectual traditions and Western methodology. This change was greatly aided by Muslim historians in particular. Their writings attempted to preserve and reconstruct Islamic history within the framework of colonial subordination, in addition to challenging colonial narratives. For Muslims on the Indian subcontinent, the 19th century was a time of significant political and intellectual change. Muslim studies began to focus on issues of identity, historical legacy, and change as colonial control grew more intense and old Muslim power institutions weakened. A group of Muslim intellectuals arose in this setting with the goal of critically engaging with the past in order to reconstruct Islamic history, revive intellectual

traditions, and address the challenges of modernity. Syed Amir Ali, Maulana Shibli Nomani, Shah

Abdul Aziz, Shah Waliullah, and Altaf Hussain Hali are notable for their varied but related contributions to the developing conversation of Islamic historiography. Although their writings were influenced by a variety of approaches from theological to literary to rationalist they all aimed to provide Muslims a better knowledge of the course of their civilization and to encourage moral and cultural renewal. The scholarly interpretations of these individuals are examined in this literature study, together with their enduring influence on the intellectual and historical traditions of South Asian Islam. This study focuses on four Muslim historians whose works had a major influence on

British India's historiographical trends in the 19th century.

Literature Review

Completed in 1781, Ghulam Husain Tabatabai's *Siyar-ul-Mutakhkherin* (History of the Later Periods) offers a thorough analysis of Mughal India and the sociopolitical climate of the era. Despite being published a little before the 19th century, Tabatabai's writings were nonetheless widely used and regarded as important resources for learning about the history of the time. Even though he was pro-British, his works are a great way to learn about the history of the time. By reflecting the historiographical fads of the day, Tabatabai's work helps preserve and comprehend local histories. Tabatabai's book was analyzed by K.M. Aziz (1961) as a useful resource for comprehending the sociopolitical dynamics of Bengal in the 18th century. Sarat Chandra Roy (1912) talked about how Tabatabai depicted Mughal rule and how it affected local government. Tabatabai's contributions to historiography were emphasized by Sushil Chandra Sen (1965), who cited his thorough descriptions of Bengal's history and governance. *Asbab-e-Baghawat-e-Hind* (1858), a historiographical treatise by Syed Ahmad Khan, is essential reading for anybody interested in the 1857 rebellion. He disagreed with the British account that reduced the uprising to a simple plot by Muslims. Khan provided a more complex interpretation of the incident by attributing the uprising to British cultural insensitivity, economic exploitation, and administrative shortcomings. Khan's method, which placed an emphasis on sociopolitical circumstances and empirical study, was a break from conventional Islamic historiography. He promoted a logical and scientific approach to education by founding the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College and the Aligarh Movement in 1875, laying the groundwork for contemporary Muslim education. In his 1949 analysis of Sir Syed's religious beliefs and reforms, Johannes Marinus Simon Baljon emphasized his attempts to harmonize Islamic principles with contemporary science and reason. In his 1957 study of Sir Syed's religious philosophy, Bashir Ahmad Dar emphasized his support for a logical

reading of Islamic writings. With particular reference to Sir Syed, Shah Waliullah, and Allama Muhammad Iqbal, Saeeda Iqbal (1984) examined Islamic rationalism on the subcontinent, highlighting Sir Syed's contribution to Muslim intellectual reform. A critical analysis of Sir Syed's religious ideas was presented by Shahnaz Shabbir (2015), who also examined his perspective on modernity and its effects on Muslim society.

Lubna Irfan (2020) emphasized Sir Syed's groundbreaking contributions to historical archaeology, especially his *Asar-us-Sanadeed*, which used historical sources and surveys to record In his 1949 analysis of Sir Syed's religious beliefs and reforms, Johannes Marinus Simon Baljon emphasized his attempts to harmonize Islamic principles with contemporary science and reason. The architecture of Delhi. Sir Syed's support for modernization and his complex relationship with British colonialism were highlighted in Tanjeel Ahmed & Muhammad Amin's (2023) analysis of his nationalist and political beliefs.

A Critical Exposition of the Popular 'Jihād' by Chiragh Ali (1885) critically examines the Islamic notion of jihad. Ali contested the conventional wisdom that supported jihad as a strategy for expansion by arguing that the wars fought by Prophet Muhammad were defensive in nature rather than aggressive. A scientific and contextual view of Islamic teachings is advocated by his work, which shows a modernist approach to Islamic thought. During the colonial era, Ali's criticism of the accepted interpretation of jihad helped the Muslim community undergo intellectual transformation. An analysis of Chiragh Ali's *A Critical Exposition of the Popular 'Jihād'* by Ghulam Muhammad Sadiq (1987) focused on his challenge to conventional conceptions of jihad and his rationalist approach to Islamic jurisprudence. Muhammad Iqbal (1930) referenced Chiragh Ali's works in his own writings, acknowledging his contributions to Islamic thought and reform. Abdul Rashid (2001) discussed Chiragh Ali's advocacy for women's rights and education, highlighting his progressive views within the context of 19th-century colonial India.

The Muslim scholar Mearajuddin Ahmad, who was from Bengal, concentrated on social changes and the value of education for Muslims in colonial India. His writings, like *Tuhfatul Moslemin*, which sought to educate Muslim women, demonstrate his dedication to social transformation and intellectual advancement. Ahmad's focus on education, particularly for women, brought attention to how crucial information is to the advancement of society. With a focus on the importance of education in societal transformation, his publications helped preserve and comprehend local histories. In an attempt to educate Muslim women and advance social changes, Ahmad translated Urdu articles into Bengali, as observed by Kazi Abdul Wadud (1975). Ahmad played a significant part in the Bengali Renaissance, according to Abdul Karim (1982), who emphasized his support for women's education and social advancement.

Muslim intellectual thinking underwent tremendous change throughout the Indian subcontinent in the 19th century, especially in reaction to religious reform, colonial domination, and social downturn. During this time, Maulana Shibli Nomani, Altaf Hussain Hali, Syed Amir Ali, Shah Abdul Aziz, and Shah Waliullah were some of the most well-known practitioners of Muslim historiography. These scholars and intellectuals provided a range of perspectives on how to write and understand Islamic history, from theological critique to poetic reflection and rationalist analysis.

Academic scholarship has universally acknowledged Maulana Shibli Nomani as the pioneer of South Asian Islamic historiography that is narrative and critical. Shibli established historical biography as a legitimate academic field in Urdu literature, as Troll (1978) and Robinson (2001) have pointed out. His writings, including *Sirat-un-Nabi* and *Al-Farooq*, demonstrate how traditional Islamic knowledge is combined with new historical-critical approaches. By focusing on chronology, source dependability, and sociopolitical context, he reexamined traditional texts like Tabari and Waqidi through the prism of contemporary study. His contribution is seen by academics as essential to establishing a balance

between contemporary historical research and orthodox theological scholarship.

Hussain Altaf South Asian literary criticism talks a lot about Hali's historical and literary works, particularly because of their reformist and emotional content. Metcalf (1982) asserts that Hali's *Musaddas* was a potent social commentary that employed history as a moral instrument to arouse the Muslim conscience in addition to being a poetic elegy. Sayyid Ahmad Khan is portrayed as a symbol of Muslim rebirth in his hagiographic and reformist biography, *Hayat-e-Javed*. His capacity to infuse historical awareness into popular Urdu fiction, particularly for those outside the religious elite, is frequently highlighted in literature about Hali. His distinctive contribution is the way he influences cultural reform by combining historical understanding with literary tradition. According to Hourani (1983) and others, Syed Amir Ali exemplifies a clear modernist and apologetic trend in Islamic historiography. Amir Ali's historical works, including *The Spirit of Islam* and *A Short History of the Saracens*, are framed around defending Islamic civilization against colonial criticisms. He was trained in Western legal and intellectual traditions. Though his writings sometimes criticize the inflexibility and stagnation of Muslim communities, his emphasis on reason, ethics, and civilizational ideals is a reflection of an Enlightenment viewpoint. According to scholars, he was a key intellectual bridge between the East and the West because of his manner, which notably appealed to Western audiences and Muslims with an education in English.

Together, these academics helped South Asian Muslims develop a culture of intellectual reformism and historical consciousness. In order to gain understanding of how Muslim cultures dealt with decline, reform, and the difficulties of colonial modernity, scholars today still examine their writings. Despite having different approaches and writing styles, each person helped to reframe Islamic history as a source of critique, identity, and rebirth.

Objectives

- To examine the historiographical methodologies employed by Syed Ahmad Khan,

Chiragh Ali, Mearajuddin Ahmad, and Ghulam Husain Tabatabai, focusing on their sources, narrative techniques, and analytical frameworks.

- To assess the impact of their historical writings on the construction of Muslim identity and the promotion of social and educational reforms in 19th-century British India.
- To analyze their responses to British colonialism and how their works reflect their engagement with colonial structures and narratives.

Research Questions

- What were the primary sources and methodologies utilized by these historians in their works, and how did these choices influence their historical narratives?
- How did their historical writings contribute to the development of a distinct Muslim identity and the promotion of educational and social reforms among Muslims in colonial India?
- In what ways did these historians engage with or challenge British colonial narratives, and how did their works reflect their perspectives on colonialism?

Data Analysis

When writing about history, Syed Ahmad Khan used a methodical and logical approach. In his book *Asbab-i Baghawat-i Hind* (The Causes of the Indian Revolt), he critically examined the 1857 insurrection and attributed its causes to administrative shortcomings and British policy rather than only religious feelings. To support his claims, he consulted a range of original sources, such as government records, reports, and firsthand recollections. Compared to traditional narratives that mostly depended on religious scriptures, this approach represented a substantial divergence. Syed Ahmad Khan established the Scientific Society of Aligarh in 1862 with the goal of translating Western literature and science into regional tongues. His dedication to advancing rational thought among Muslims and reforming education is demonstrated by this project.

A new intellectual awakening among Muslims in India was made possible by his founding of the Aligarh Muslim University and his advocacy of

contemporary education. The methods used by Syed Ahmad Khan impacted later generations of academics and historians, promoting a more critical and fact-based approach to writing history. Regarding Chiragh Ali, he took a critical stance. Chiragh Ali questioned conventional understandings of jihad in his book *A Critical Exposition of the Popular 'Jihad'*. He maintained that the ancient teachings of Islam placed a strong emphasis on justice and peace, and that later jurists had misunderstood and abused the idea. A reformist viewpoint is seen in Chiragh Ali's publications, which seek to harmonize Islamic principles with modern concerns. He attempted to reframe conventional ideas in light of contemporary issues by taking a critical approach to Islamic jurisprudence. His writings supported a more progressive view of Islam and prompted a reexamination of conventional views, which helped to intellectually change the Muslim community. Muslim modernist thought evolved as a result of Chiragh Ali's theories, especially in the context of colonial India.

Mearajuddin Ahmad supported social reform and education for women. In his book *Tuhfatul Moslemin*, he discussed the necessity of educating Muslim women and emphasized the role that education plays in advancing society. He translated papers written in Urdu into Bengali with the intention of making educational materials more widely available. This endeavor demonstrates his dedication to advancing literacy and information. His support of women's education helped to highlight the value of education in the advancement of society and fueled larger social reform movements within the Muslim community. Mearajuddin Ahmad helped to bridge linguistic and cultural divides by translating, which made it easier for people to share ideas and information. In *Siyar-ul-Mutakhkherin*, Ghulam Husain Tabatabai chronicled Bengal's history during the 18th century. His story sheds important light on the sociopolitical climate of the area at the time. His narrative approach offers a distinct viewpoint on the events he recounts by fusing personal perceptions with historical occurrences. This method offers a sophisticated comprehension of the historical background. The writings of Ghulam

Husain Tabatabai are a valuable resource for learning about Bengali history, especially that of the 18th century. His thorough narrative provides a thorough understanding of the history of the area. His methods and storytelling style had an impact on other historians and helped shape the field of historical writing in the area.

One of the most important Muslim scholars of the late 19th century in India was Maulana Shibli Nomani, who profoundly altered Islamic historiography on the subcontinent. Shibli brought analytical rigor to Islamic history and biography writing, in contrast to conventional scholars who depended on credulous accounts. He blended traditional Islamic sources with contemporary techniques including literary refinement, source verification, and chronological organization. His writings, including *Sirat-un-Nabi* and *Al-Farooq*, demonstrated a well-balanced combination of critical analysis and devotion. Shibli's works are both inspirational and intellectually convincing since he focused on the practical aspects of historical individuals, particularly the leadership traits and governance styles of early Islamic caliphs. His influence came from his ability to unite tradition with modernity, establishing a standard for future researchers to approach Islamic history with respect and academic rigor.

In contrast, Altaf Hussain Hali approached historical reflection with a more literary and sentimental tone. *Musaddas-e-Hali*, his best-known composition, was a poetic lament detailing the moral and social decay of Muslims. Despite not being a trained historian, Hali was instrumental in influencing Urdu readers' awareness of history. His historical writing was distinguished by its moralistic tone, which emphasized virtues like solidarity, wisdom, and moral leadership. His dedication to presenting history as a tool for awakening and reform was further demonstrated by his biography *Hayat-e-Javed*, which was based on the life of Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Hali made a significant contribution by transforming history into a literary and emotional force for social transformation that inspired Indian Muslims to reflect and resurrect.

When writing Islamic history, Syed Amir Ali used a uniquely modernist and logical approach. He wrote books like *The Spirit of Islam* to defend Islamic civilization against colonial and orientalist critiques. He was educated in Western philosophy and law. Islam was presented in his historical account as a morally upright, logical, and progressive religion. Amir Ali examined Muslims' cultural and intellectual contributions to world history rather than just retelling events. In order to further reform and reframe Islamic philosophy in the context of contemporary ideals like equality, justice, and reason, he employed historical argumentation. His work established the groundwork for apologetic yet academic Islamic historiography during the colonial era and was groundbreaking in that it spoke to both Muslim and Western audiences.

Conclusion

A varied range of scholars and reformers created the intellectual landscape of Muslim South Asia in the 19th century. They responded to colonial disruption and the collapse of civilization with inventiveness, critical thinking, and a strong desire for resurrection. They all helped to reawaken Muslim consciousness during an uncertain period by means of logical investigation, historical reinterpretation, literary reflection, and educational reform in some capacity. They reinvented Islam's intellectual underpinnings to meet the difficulties of modernity, going beyond the simple preservation of religious heritage. Their combined efforts established a solid basis for contemporary Islamic philosophy in the area, one that still shapes discussions about identity, reform, and the role of history in determining the future, whether through legal reasoning, historiography, or lyrical moralism.

Reference

- Ali, C. (1883). *A critical exposition of the popular "Jihad"*. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co.
- Ali, S. A. (1891). *The spirit of Islam: A history of the evolution and ideals of Islam*. London: Christophers.

- Hali, A. H. (2007). *Musaddas-e-Hali* (S. Sadiq, Trans.). Karachi: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1879)
- Metcalf, B. D. (1982). *Islamic revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900*. Princeton University Press.
- Nomani, S. (2004). *Al-Farooq* (M. A. Nadwi, Trans.). Lahore: Dar-ul-Isha'at.
- Rahman, F. (1982). *Islam and modernity: Transformation of an intellectual tradition*. University of Chicago Press.
- Robinson, F. (2001). *The Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic culture in South Asia*. Permanent Black.
- Sayyid Ahmad Khan. (2000). *Asar-us-Sanadid* (Y. Husain, Trans. & Ed.). New Delhi: Oxford University Press (Original work published 1847).
- Troll, C. W. (1978). *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A reinterpretation of Muslim theology*. Vikas Publishing House.

