

A Comprehensive Appraisal of the Movements aiming at Fostering Sirah Studies in British India during 1857-1947 CE

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Abstract

The study of Sirah stands as a cornerstone of Islamic Studies and related disciplines, having evolved profoundly over the centuries. It offers indispensable historical context and serves as a guiding beacon for Muslims in their faith and conduct. Between 1857 and 1947, Sirah Studies in the Subcontinent underwent a transformative phase that significantly influenced global Sirah scholarship. This period was marked by the emergence of critical works by Orientalists, which spurred robust responses from Muslim scholars in the region, catalyzing the rise of various influential Sirah movements. Traditionally, these movements have been analyzed in isolation, overlooking their collective impact on the evolution of modern Sirah studies. This research aims to bridge that gap by examining the combined effects of these movements, underscoring their unified contributions to the reformation and advancement of Sirah Sciences in the subcontinent.

Keywords: Sirah, movements, orientalism, subcontinent, reformation, Sirah sciences

Introduction¹

The interaction between Hindūs and Muslims in the Indian Subcontinent commenced with the arrival of Muslims in the region in 7th century. Muslims exerted considerable influence across various domains of society, contributing significantly to its social, cultural, political, economic and religious fabric. This factuality has been recognized by many renowned Hindu historians, such as Sir Jadunāth Sarkār² and Dr. Tāra Chand³ (1888–1973) *et al.* Throughout these centuries of cohabitation, two distinct aspects emerged. Firstly, there was a presence of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and tolerance, wherein each community acknowledged and respected the beliefs of the other. However, the flip side of this historical narrative unveils instances of riots, discord, communal tensions, animosity, and conspiracies against one another. Subsequently, with the establishment of the British government, a policy of divide and rule was implemented, exacerbating existing tensions.⁴ Jawāhar Lāl Nehru⁵ notes that the British government made necessary reforms and corrections in the Subcontinent for their commercial and political ambitions and used this territory for the provision of raw materials.⁶ Similarly, Raffīque Zakaria, an Indian politician and Islamic religious cleric of the independence era also expresses his views that this kind of approach by the colonial government affected Hindu-Muslim relations.⁷

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¹ While the details may appear extensive for a research article, documenting the movement is essential to capture the challenges and the evolutionary process through which Sirah Studies movement advanced in the subcontinent in between 1857-1947.

² Jadunāth Sarkār (1870–1958) discussed ten gifts that India received during the Muslim era. See Jadunāth Sarkār (1928), *India through the ages*, Calcutta: M.C. Sarkār & Sons, pp. 68–90.

³ T. D. Chand (1936), *The Influence of Islam on Indian Culture*, Allahabad: The Indian Press, Ltd, pp. 29-48.

⁴ V. L. Pandit (1923), *The Scope of Happiness (A Personal Memoir)*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, pp. 201-202.

⁵ Jawāharlāl Nehru (1889–1964) was an Indian anti-colonial nationalist, statesman, secular humanist, social democrat, and author. Nehru was a principal leader of the Indian nationalist movement in the 1930s and 1940s. Upon India's independence in 1947, he served as the country's first prime minister for 16 years.

⁶ Jawāharlāl Nehru (1948), *The Unity of India (collected writings, 1937–1940)*, London: Lindsay Drummond, pp. 18-19.

⁷ R. Zakaria (1970), *Rise of Muslims in Indian Politics (An Analysis of Developments from 1885–1906)*, Bombay: Somaiya Publications Pvt, pp. 278-279.

Geo-Political Environment Triggering Modern Sirah Studies in the British India

In 1857, the ‘Great War’ broke out in which Hindūs and Muslims jointly fought against the British. It is quite remarkable that, despite their numerous differences and divergences, Hindūs and Muslims united to combat British rule and strive for liberation from its dominance as both communities perceived it as a struggle for freedom. Regrettably, their joint efforts in this war ultimately ended in failure. Hindūs and Muslims had to live in the same land without being able to mix.⁸ However, there were many reasons and occasions that ignited differences, conflicts, and communal riots, including disagreements over their basic theological beliefs, religious festivals of both religions, etc.⁹

The British government considered this struggle ‘a conspiracy’ and a military coup against the British State. In pursuit of a strategy, the British government, alongside local missionaries and Orientalists, significantly influenced the course of events. As part of a grand strategy, the colonial forces took advantage of the mixed society of the Subcontinent and adopted the policy of ‘divide and rule’. This strategy is the aftermath of the war of 1857 and hence a starting point of this subjective study. Sir John Malcolm (1769–1833) expressed this strategy well-before the war in the following words:¹⁰ ‘While they continue divided in this manner, no insurrection is likely to shake the stability of our power.’

Sir Syed Ahmed, a renowned Muslim reformist opined that the foreign conquerors (British) accused the Muslims of being the real motive and responsible for this intrigue and blamed them for inciting and abetting the Hindūs.¹¹ Thus, the Muslims were badly suppressed by the colonial government after the War of 1857.¹² In the same context, Peter Hardy agrees that Muslims had to face social, political, and economic discrimination.¹³ Similarly, Sir Alfred Lyall (1835-1911), states in aftermath of the War of 1857 that the Englishmen turned fiercely on the *Mahomedans* as their real enemies and most dangerous rivals.¹⁴ In the same vein, Dr. Tara Chand described the situation in different ways, noting that Hindus gained trust by colluding with the government and fully utilizing the opportunities for their advancement.¹⁵ The British government’s resentment, bias, oppression, exploitation, and military and political supremacy compelled Muslim leaders and reformers to contemplate and devise strategies to uplift Muslims from this abysmal ordeal. Within this framework, numerous movements were established e.g. *Tehrīk-i-Aligarh*, *Tehrīk-i-Deoband*, and *Tehrīkh Nadwa-tul-Ulamā*¹⁶ etc. The main objectives of these movements were to create awareness among the Muslims to reclaim their lost position and status in different fields of life.¹⁷ These movements differed in their nature, objectives, and methods, but the aim of all was the restoration of Islamic legacy.¹⁸

Tehrīk -i-Sirat (Sirah Movement)

Christianity entered different parts of India many centuries ago for multiple objectives and missions.¹⁹ The impact of Christianity can be elucidated through the words of Jawaharlal Nehru:²⁰ ‘With

⁸ Jadunāth Sarkār (1928), *India through the ages*, p. 69.

⁹ For the history and causes of Hindu-Muslim communal problems, please see Agarwāla Ratish Mohan (1943), *The Hindu-Muslim riots: Their causes and cures*, Lucknow: International Social Literature Publishing Company, p. 232

¹⁰ Basu Major B. D. (1867), *History of education in India under the rule of the East India Company*, Calcutta: R. Chatterjee, p. 187

¹¹ S. A. Khān (1858), *Asbāb-i-Baghāwat-i-Hind*, Aligarah: Aligarah University Publishers, p. 35

¹² “While anti-Muslim sentiment preexisted this formative resistance, it prompted British administrators to more specifically claim that the subcontinent’s Muslims were in essence violent and singularly obsessed with jihad”. Please see Michael, J. A. (2024), “Introduction: Centering Islamic Studies in Asia,” *International Journal of Islam in Asia*, Vol. 4, No. 1-2, pp. 1-19.

¹³ Peter Hardy (1922–2013) was a Lecturer and later Reader at the School of Oriental and African Studies from 1947 to 1983. A specialist in the history of Islam, the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal India, he had particular expertise in Indo-Persian historiography. See P. Hardy (1972), *The Muslims of British India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 61-79.

¹⁴ S. A. Lyall (1882), *Asiatic Studies: Religious and Social* (Vol 1), London: John Murray, Albemarle street, pp. 239–240.

¹⁵ T. Dr. Chand (1967), *History of the Freedom Movement in India* (Vol 2), Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting India, pp. 349-351.

¹⁶ For a detailed study of these movements, please see: Kenneth W. Jones (2008), *The New Cambridge History of India*, (Vol III.I), Cambridge University Press, pp. 234.

¹⁷ Such movements were not initiated only by Muslims; there were many Hindu reformers who also tried to revitalize and transform Hindu society. For such movements, read: J. N. Farquhar (1915), *Modern religious movements in India*, New York: The Macmillan Company, p. 471.

¹⁸ For the history, objectives, and effects of these movements on the religious, social, and political lives of Muslims in the Subcontinent, see also: Barbara Daly Metcalf (1982), *Islamic revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 386.

¹⁹ For history of Christianity and the Muslim-Christian relations in India, please read: F. B. A. Stephen Neill (1985), *A History of Christianity in India, 1707–1858*, London: Cambridge University Press, p. 578; F. Ali (2023), “Christian-Muslim Relations in the Second Half of 19th Century India in View of Syed Nāšir-ul-Dīn Muḥammad Abūlmanšūr Dehlī (d. 1903),” *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 153-163.

²⁰ Jawāharlāl Nehru (1948), *The Unity of India (collected writings, 1937–1940)*, pp. 50-51.

the coming of the British power, a new type of missionary came to India. He was attached to British officials and the British army of occupation and represented British imperialism far more than the spirit of Christ.’

The British government’s targeting of Islamic beliefs inflicted wounds upon the religious sentiments of Muslims. Above all, the focal points for them, was the personality and teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Since Muslims deeply revered Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), they faced significant challenges, primarily because most objections from opponents of Islam revolved around his persona. In this changing environment, the real motive and challenge of traditional Islamists in the subcontinent was to promote a Sirah that is fully compatible with the modern era.

Sirah Studies Prior to 1857

Upon scrutinizing the techniques and approaches employed in Urdu Sirah writing in the subcontinent before 1857, it becomes apparent that the Sirah literature of that era predominantly focused on *Maulud Namās*, *Merāj Namās*, and *Wafāt Namās*. Moreover, the Sirah events elucidated and narrated in these events were hinged on non-authentic traditions. Before the arrival of the British in the subcontinent, Muslim biographers didn’t encounter the objections from Orientalists, or the negative portrayal found in Orientalists works. However, due to the influence of Orientalism, Sirah biography in the subcontinent had to depart from its traditional styles and methods. This study will focus on the catalyst orientalism to formulate conclusions on how this era paved the way for transformation of Sirah studies. Muslim thinkers endeavored to create enthusiasm among Muslims for the defense of allure and magnanimity of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that was put on trial by the opponents. In this context, *Taharīk-i-Sirat*, were initiated by different Muslim scholars by adopting different methods to promote the teachings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) as *Uswa-i-Hasanah* (role model). The Muslim scholars considered that promoting the Sirah in the light of authentic traditions, was the only way, to regain their glory and defend Islam in the Subcontinent peninsula. This period witnessed the establishment of numerous educational institutions, the printing and distribution of Sirah literature, and the organization of Sirah conferences and gatherings. Furthermore, in response to the objections raised by the Orientalists, the duty of defense was performed, and weaknesses found in Muslim biographies were identified and scrutinized. Muslim scholars such as Sir Syed Ahmed Khān²¹ and Shiblī Naumāni redeveloped the principles of Sirahwriting. The following movements are important in this regard and shall be discussed with an aim to arrive at certain conclusions:

- Syed Ahmad Khān and Movement of Anti Orientalism writings in Subcontinent
- Movement of Oral Tradition of Sirah (*Tehrik-i-Sirat Bayani*)
- Establishment of Centre for compilation of the Sirah (*Majlis-i-Talīf-i-Sirat-i-Nabvi*)
- Modern Movement of Sirah (Sirat Committee Patti)
- Movement for the Observance of Prophet’s Birthday

The primary aim of this research is to gather, analyze, and juxtapose the objectives and impacts of Sirah movements in the subcontinent. Many authors have penned books on written history of Sirah in the subcontinent, in this regard; a comprehensive book by Dr. Anwar Mahmūd Khālid entitled ‘*Urdu Nasr mein Sirat-i-Rasūl*’ is an important addition. However, the collective work contains limited information about the Sirah Movements that emerged between 1857 and 1947. Fundamental details about these movements are fragmented across various sources. Therefore, primary sources from Eastern and Western academia are equally explored and analyzed. In this context, this study represents a pioneering effort, necessitating further exploration and examination of this topic.

The study of these Sirah movements is an important subject that will also help in understanding the political, social, and religious conditions of the subcontinent under the British Empire. An effort will be made for:

²¹ For his biography, works and services to the British government, see G. F. I. Graham (1885), *The Life and Work of Syed Ahmad Khān*, London: William Blackwood and Sons, p. 412.

1. A comparative and analytical study of the background, aims, and objectives of the Sirah movements will be presented.
2. The effectiveness of the movements will be discussed in the context of the religious, political, social, and cultural conditions of the subcontinent.

The subsequent pages will feature an introduction and analysis of these movements.

Contribution of Syed Ahmad Khān in Sirah Movements

In 1861, William Muir²² wrote a book titled ‘The Life of Mahomet’ in four volumes. In this book, he raised many objections to the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This book stirred up turmoil, sorrow, and indignation amongst the Muslims of the Subcontinent and posed a serious academic challenge to global Islamic scholarship. Syed Ahmad Khān undertook the challenging task of addressing the objections raised by Sir William Muir, demonstrating his rational and scientific approach to the issue. Sir Syed was notably progressive in his outlook though his religious beliefs and thoughts were unacceptable for traditional and orthodox Muslims. Fatwas were issued against him.²³ Orthodox Muslim scholars depicted him as a nationalist; therefore, his role as a theologian stayed under shadow and his interpretations were not acknowledged by the orthodox religious authorities. However, Hafiz believes that his religious exegesis was more than a century ahead of his time.²⁴ C.W. Troll expressed views and fear of Sir Syed in these words:²⁵ ‘if they (people) are going to prove unable to confront religion with present-day scholarship and science, then Islam will disappear from India’. Tariq Hassan says that according to Allama Iqbāl (1877–1938), Sir Syed was the first Indian Muslim who felt the need for a fresh orientation of Islam and was also the first to react to the modern age.²⁶

Al-Khutbāt al-Ahmadiyyafī al-Arab wa Sirah al-Muhammadiyah

The *Khutbāt* (essays) on the life of Muhammad served as Syed’s rebuttal to William Muir’s book. Syed was very restless and uneasy and felt regret that Islam was being attacked and Muslims were unaware of it.²⁷ He traveled to England in search of sources, encountering financial hardships and language barriers. Despite these challenges, he managed to publish his essays in England, Sir Syed responded to the Western criticisms in a language familiar to them. He evolved a new methodology to defend Islam and the personality of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Sir Syed Ahmad Khān as Founder of Anti Orientalism Movement

The missionary activities in the Subcontinent, the failure of the 1857 war of independence, the publication of William Muir’s book, scientific and rational movements, and other factors compelled Muslim leaders to act proactively. Sir Syed was a pioneer in tackling the challenge head-on and proactively. He approached it with logical arguments rather than solely relying on emotions, unlike certain other Muslim writers. Sir Syed introduced a new methodology to defend the Sirah of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). He criticized William Muir for using unauthentic sources and traditions. In the preface to his *Khutbāt*, Sir Syed wrote:²⁸

Sir William Muir writes that to the three biographies by *Ibn-i-Hishām*, by *Wakidi* and his secretary, and by *Tabari*, the judicious historian of Mahomet will, as his original authorities, confine himself, but he does not mention how many traditions²⁹ are contained

²² Sir William Muir (1819–1905) was a Scottish orientalist, born in Glasgow. He served as Lieutenant Governor of the North-West provinces of India. He was a great supporter of the Christian mission in India.

²³ Tariq Hassan (2006), *The Aligarh Movement and the Making of the Indian Muslim Mind (1857–2002)*, New Delhi: Rūpa Publications, p. 47

²⁴ M. Hafiz (1980), *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khān and Muslim Modernization in India and Pakistan*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 271-273.

²⁵ C. W. Troll (1978), *Sayyid Ahmad Khān: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology*, London: Oxford University Press, p. 128

²⁶ Tariq (2006), *The Aligarh Movement*, p. 47.

²⁷ A. H. Halī (1939), *Hayat-i-Jawed* (Vol. 2), Delhi: Anjuman-i-Taraqiy-i-Urdu, pp. 120-121.

²⁸ Syed Ahmad Khān (1870), *A series of essays on the life of Mohammed*, India: Idarah-i-Adabiyāt-i-Delhi, p. xiii

²⁹ William Muir, in the preface of his book, has examined the sources of Islam (the Quran, Hadith, and traditions of the biography of Muhammad PBUH) and has shown reservations regarding their authenticity and compilation. His following words will help to understand his views: “We see, then, how entirely tradition, as now possessed, rests its authority on the memory of those who handed it down, and how dependent it must have been upon their convictions and their prejudices... To form an adequate conception of the value and defects of tradition, the nature and extent of these influences must be thoroughly understood, and for this purpose, the reader should possess an outline of the political aspect of the empire of Islam from the death of Mohammed to the period at which our return authorities commence.” William Muir (1861), *The life of Mahomet* (Vol 1), London: Smith, Elder and Com, p. xxxvi.

A Comprehensive Appraisal of the Movements aiming at Fostering Sirah Studies in British India in these books that have not been traced up to Mohammed, how many there are whose chains are broken, how many there are whose narrators are of suspected character or impeached veracity.

William Muir was not alone in propagating this theory about Sirah traditions; he was accompanied by numerous writers who promoted similar theses³⁰ utilizing Islamic sciences, Sir Syed played the role of a defender of Islam, addressing misconceptions about slavery, Jihad, polygamy, divorce and many other objections. He offered a fresh orientation of Islamic teachings, though many of his views, such as those on miracles and night journeys, were severely criticized by traditionalists. Sir Syed laid the foundation of the new *Ilm-al-Kalām* in the Subcontinent³¹ and sought to dispel myths in the Sirah of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). Sir Syed cautioned his coreligionists, stating that “senseless statements attributed to the Prophet and all kinds of fantastic stories about his life only expose Islam to contempt and ridicule.”³² Sir Syed emphasized the role of reason, logic, and nature in religious matters. In this pursuit, he adopted an apologetic approach while defending many Sirah traditions. Azīz Ahmad writes about this aspect of Sir Syed:³³ ‘By 1870, he began to apply something like a westernized methodology, partly scientific and partly speculatively apologetic, to the history of Arabia at the birth of Islam and to certain aspects of the Sirah, or the traditional biography of the Prophet.’

While Sir Syed may have made mistakes in numerous instances, it is undeniable that he was the pioneer in the subcontinent who restrained the advance of Orientalism and cleared the path for those who followed. His efforts paved the way for subsequent scholars.

Since then, scholars of the subcontinent have produced remarkable Sirah literature, in both quality and quantity. Adopting various modes and methodologies, these styles and approaches in Sirah writings were influenced by the circumstances of that era. The anti-Orientalism writings movement, initiated by Sir Syed influenced prominent contemporary writers and after his demise, figures like Syed Amir Ali, Shiblī Naumānī, Syed Sulaymān Nadvī, Abdul Rauf DānaPūri and many others belonging (after partition) to India and Pakistan continued his legacy. Some of them diverged from Sir Syed’s principles of internal and external criticism of traditions and developed their own theories.³⁴

Movement of Oral Tradition of Sirah (*Tehrīk-i-Sirat Bayānī*)

The founder of this movement was Shah Sulaymān Hādhiq³⁵ bin Hakīm Daūd Phulwārwi (born 1859).³⁶ He received his education from eminent academics and distinguished intellectuals of his times such as Abd al-Hai Firangi Mahal, Ahmad Ali Saharanpūri, and Nazīr Husain Dehlvi.³⁷ He had a different and very impressive style for the recitation of ‘The Mathnavi’ by Rūmi (1207-1273).³⁸ The writer Abul Hassan Nadvī writes:³⁹ ‘In mysticism, he was attached to the Qadiriya and Chishtiya orders. He was among those scholars who supported the establishment of Nadwa-tul-Ulamā at Lucknow.’

The movement of oral tradition of the Sirah started with a certain background. On one occasion, he attended a gathering organized to celebrate the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). During the event, the traditions narrated by the preacher concerning Sirah were unauthentic and did not meet the standards of internal and external criticism.⁴⁰ In this sensitive and critical situation, Shah Sulaymān decided to start the *Tehrīk-i-Sirat Bayānī* based on authentic traditions and various incidents of the life

³⁰ For the views of such scholars, see: Ibn-Warraq (2000), *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, New York: Prometheus Books, p. 554.

³¹ In a speech in Lahore in 1884, he asserted, “Today we are, as before, in need of modern *Ilm-al-kalām* [theology], by which we should either refute the doctrines of the modern sciences, undermine their foundations, or show that they are in conformity with the articles of Islamic faith.” See B. A. Dār (1957), *Religious Thought of Sayyid Ahmad Khān*, Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, p. 139.

³² Hafīz (1980), *Sir Sayyid and Muslim Modernization*, p. 270.

³³ Azīz Ahmad (1967), *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan*, London: Oxford University Press, p. 39.

³⁴ Shiblī Naumānī is one of them. He wrote 11 principles to evaluate the Sirah traditions in the preface of his famous book “*Sirat-un-Nabi*.” Shiblī Naumānī (1979), *Sirat-un-Nabi, India* (Vol: 1), Delhi: Idārah-I-Adabiyāt-i-Delhi, p. 14

³⁵ Hādhiq was his *nom de plume* i.e. pen name.

³⁶ Phulwār is a village adjacent to Azīmabād Patna in Bihār, India, which produced many great personalities. Shah Sulaymān also belonged to this land and was the man who kept alive and honored the traditions of his ancestors. See also Syed Sulaymān Nadvī (1986), *Yād-i-Raftgān*, Azamgarh: Dār al-Musannefin, p. 154.

³⁷ Syed Qyamuddīn Nizāmī (1995), *Shurafā Ki Nagri (Tazkirah Sūfiya-i-Bihār)* (Vol.1), Karachi: Nizāmī Academy, p. 298.

³⁸ Muhammad Tanzīl al-Siddīqī Al-Husainī (2005), *Ashāb-i-Ilm wa Fadhl*, Karachi: Al-Muslimin Publishers, p. 101

³⁹ Abul Hasan Nadvī (2019), *Contributions of Muslims to the Indian Subcontinent*, Muhammad Āsif Kidwāi trans.), Turkey: South Asian Youth Organization Ankara, p. 176.

⁴⁰ Some segments of society regard this practice as innovation and against the spirit and teachings of Islam.

of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Shah Sulaymān aimed to foster spirituality, reverence, and love for the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) through such gatherings. Therefore, he stressed the importance of replacing *Milād* gatherings with Sirah gatherings. He felt this need and started to describe the Sirah in his mosque at Phulwār Sharīf.⁴¹ He delivered lectures in the light of primary books of Ahādith and Sirah and refrained from describing unauthentic traditions.⁴² According to Shah Muhammad Ja'far Phulwārwi, Shah Sulaymān laid the foundation of this movement in 1885.⁴³ He established a center dedicated to the Sirah movement and numerous subcommittees to advance the mission of the Sirah movement. After his death, his son, Hassan Mian, continued his mission.⁴⁴

Centre for Compilation of Sirah (*Majlis-i-Talīf-i-Sirat-i-Nabvi*)

Allama Shiblī Naumāni (1857-1914) had a profound influence on his successors as a Sirah writer. '*Sirat-un-Nabi*' by Naumāni set a trend not only in the subcontinent but also in the Arab world. Dr. Kausar opines that colonial domination had restrained the thoughts of people but he was free in his own thinking.⁴⁵ Shiblī Naumāni was impressed with the vision of Sir Syed in religious, political and social matters while differing on many matters and established his independent opinion.⁴⁶ Shiblī Naumāni wrote many books but the care and arrangements he made for his '*Sirat-un-Nabi*' are extraordinary due to the importance and status of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in Islam.⁴⁷ Once he said:⁴⁸ 'If I do not die and even my one eye remains healthy,⁴⁹ I will give such a Sirah book to the world which would not be expected in coming hundred years.'

Shiblī Naumāni founded the *Majlis-i-Talīf-i-Sirat Nabvi* (Center for compiling the Sirah of the Holy Prophet (PBUH)) with the aim of addressing the following objectives in his book:

- To refute the objections of Orientalists.
- To compose a book which is based on authentic and sound traditions about Prophet's life like *Sahīh al-Muslim* and *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*.⁵⁰
- To develop philosophy of Sirah or *Kalāmiyāt-i-Sirat* in the light of modern issues.
- To compile a comprehensive Sirah book to overcome the educational, religious, cultural and moral challenges of Muslim society.
- To derive lessons and practical wisdom from the Sirah.
- To compile an encyclopedia of Sirah containing all aspects of Islam and the life of Prophet (PBUH).⁵¹

Shiblī Naumāni's objectives were varied and comprehensive. He held himself to the strict standard that not a single unauthenticated word or tradition would be included in his Sirah book.⁵² Given the enormity of this project, Shiblī announced the establishment of a center named '*Majlis-i-Talīf-i-Sirat-i-Nabvi*' dedicated to the compilation of the Sirah. He formed a committee composed of members possessing diverse skills relevant to the Sirah project. He publicized the committee's proposal in the monthly journal *Al-Nadwa* (1912) and outlined the structure of this *Majlis*.⁵³ People fervently responded to the project and Nawāb Sultān Jahān Begum (1858-1930) of Bhopāl⁵⁴ promised for financial assistance and fixed a stipend for two years.⁵⁵ Shiblī set up an office for this *Majlis* and commenced writing after

⁴¹ S. S. Nayer (1947), *Aathārāt-i-Phulwāri Sharīf*, Patna: Dārul Ishā'at, p. 369.

⁴² Ghulām Husnain Phulwārwi (1936), *Khatm-i-Sulaymāni (Biography of Syed Shah Sulaymān, Part-I)*, Patna: Qaumi Press Limited, pp. 64-68.

⁴³ S. M. Phulwārwi (2006), *Paighambar-i-Insāniyyat*, Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, p. 2.

⁴⁴ Anwar Mahmūd Khālid (1989), *Urdu Nasr Meīn Sirat-i-Rasūl*, Lahore: Iqbal Academy, p. 637.

⁴⁵ A. H. Kausar (1984), *Urdu ki Taraqqī meīn Sir Syed Aur Un Ke Rūfāqā-i-Kār ka Hissa*, Karachi: Library Promotion Bureau, p. 290.

⁴⁶ Azīz Ahmad has done a comparison and highlighted the differences of Syed Ahmad Khān and Shiblī as far as response to tradition and modernism is concerned. See: A. Ahmad (1967), *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan*, London: Oxford University Press, pp. 77-86.

⁴⁷ S. M. Ikrām (1994), *Yadgār-i-Shiblī*, Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, p. 421.

⁴⁸ Nadvī (1986), *Yād-i-Raftgān*, p. 242.

⁴⁹ Once he said this, he was suffering from a serious eye ailment.

⁵⁰ Naumāni (1979), *Sirat-un-Nabi* (Vol. 1), pp. 49-50.

⁵¹ For the details of objectives see also: Al-A'zmi, Muhammad Ilyās (2002), *DārulMusannefīn ki Tarīkhi Khidmāt*, Patna: Khuda Bakhsh oriental public library, pp. 138-141; Raudlvi, Khurshīd Naumāni (2003), *DārulMusannefīn ki Tarīkh aur Ilmi Khidmāt* (Vol.1), Azamgarh: Shiblī Academy, pp. 138-140.

⁵² Syed Sulaymān Nadvī (1923), *Hayāt-i-Shiblī*, Azamgarh: Dārul Musannefīn, pp. 701-708.

⁵³ Shiblī Naumāni (1972), *Maqālāt-i-Shiblī*, Azamgarh: Maktba Ma'ārif, pp. 40-41.

⁵⁴ For her life history, and religious and social services, please read Muhammad Amīn Marhervi (1918), *Beigmāt-e-Bhopāl* (Vol 1), Bhopāl: Hamīd art press, p. 52.

⁵⁵ Syed Sulaymān Nadvī (1923), *Hayāt-i-Shiblī*, Azamgarh: Dārul Musannefīn, p. 708.

A Comprehensive Appraisal of the Movements aiming at Fostering Sirah Studies in British India making all these arrangements. However, he tragically passed away in 1914 due to his ailment. The first two volumes were written until his demise and were still unpublished. After his death, Syed Sulaymān Nadvī, Hamīduddīn Farāhi and Masūd Ali Nadvī completed the Sirah book according to Shiblī's wishes.⁵⁶ Syed Sulaymān Nadvī published the first two volumes in 1918 and 1920 respectively. In his life, Shiblī Naumāni also suggested the establishment of *Dār-ul-Musannefīn* (a house of writers). A department dedicated to Sirah studies was also established within *Nadwatul-Ulamā* premises, which produced remarkable work on Sirah. Syed Sulaymān Nadvī completed this encyclopedia in seven volumes, adhering to the methodology of Shiblī Naumāni. Shiblī successfully rebutted the objections of Orientalists⁵⁷ and explained the true spirit and essence of Sirah.

Modern Movement of Sirah (Sirat Committee, Patti)

The committee (Movement) was established in 1920 under the guidance of Qāzi Abdul Majīd Qarshi in Patti, District Lahore. Some scholars referred to this movement as the 'Modern Movement of Sirah'.⁵⁸ The basic idea behind this movement was the promotion of Sirah in the context of the subcontinent's objective conditions. The primary Committee was formed in Patti, and several subcommittees were established in various cities across United India, including Bombay, Madrās, Rangūn, Kanpūr, Ahmadabād, and many other places. This movement published extensive literature on the Sirah of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the form of books and pamphlets and *Akhbār 'Emān'* was issued especially to meet the financial requirements. They addressed objections raised by non-Muslims by publishing special issues and books.⁵⁹ Qarshi invited numerous scholars from various regions of the world to participate in this movement by contributing writings on Sirah. He received numerous articles from Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. Additionally, several esteemed local writers also contributed their writings.⁶⁰ One of the primary features of this movement was to conduct the gatherings regarding Sirah. Several prominent non-Muslim figures were invited to chair such gatherings for which this movement received many objections e.g. Muhammad Hashmat Ali deemed this practice *Harām* and labeled the Sirah committee as seditious.⁶¹ Despite gaining significant popularity in the subcontinent, it unfortunately couldn't be sustained for an extended period. Abdul Majīd Qarshi migrated to Pakistan during the partition and passed away soon and the spirit of the movement died with it.⁶² Abdul Majīd Qarshi outlined three primary objectives.⁶³

- Preach the teachings of Qur'an as law of life and to act upon it.
- Present Holy Prophet (PBUH) as role model for mankind and promote the Sirah.
- Unite Muslims based on pillars of Islam and prepare them to lead the world.

The formation of committees required a minimum of seventeen members in city, eight members in town and five members in a village.⁶⁴ Numerous other steps were also taken to promote Sirah and solve the current social and religious issues. On its popularity, W.C. Smith (1916-2000) writes:⁶⁵ 'In the Punjab, a movement actually called the 'Sirat Movement' was started in the 1920's to distribute pamphlets, sermons, and the like, about Muhammad, and has been remarkably successful among the middle classes. It is, however, but one aspect of the general trend which might itself well be termed a Sirah movement'

⁵⁶ Dr. Mahmūd Ahmed Ghāzi writes in *Muhāzrāt-i-Sirat* that in fact it was Shiblī who tasked Syed Sulaymān Nadwi et al to complete the task.

⁵⁷ Sir Syed reacted in the form of *Al-khutbāt al-Ahmadiyya* when William Muir wrote his book "Life of Mahomet". In 1905 D. S. Margoliouth published his book "Mohammedanism". This time Shiblī decided to answer, and he did it in his afore said book.

⁵⁸ Dr. Anwar Mahmūd Khālid called this movement as "Modern movement of Sirah". Before this, Shah Sulaymān had started Sirah movement in 1885. That is why this movement was called "Modern Movement of Sirah". See Mahmūd Khālid Anwar (1989), *Urdu Nasr Meīn Sirat-i-Rasūl*, p. 637.

⁵⁹ M. J. Phulwārwi (2006), *Paighambar-i-Insāniyyat*, p. 10.

⁶⁰ Syed Manāzīr Ahsan Gilāni (1892-1956) was a distinguished writer. *Al-Nabi al-Khātīm* (The last Prophet) is one of the best books published in Subcontinent on Sirah. This book (according to writer) was written on the request of Qāzi Abdul Majīd Qarshi. See Manāzīr Ahsan Gilāni (1950), *Al-Nabi al-Khātīm*, Karachi: Islami Kutab Khāna, p. 7.

⁶¹ M. H. Ali (2018), *Rāz Sirat Committee*, UP India: Maktabah Hashmatia, pp. 12-13.

⁶² Mahmūd Khālid Anwar (1989), *Urdu Nasr Meīn Sirat-i-Rasūl*, p. 637

⁶³ Abdul Majīd Qarshi (n.d.), *Islāmi Khutbāt*, Lucknow: Idāra-i-Āliya Tablīgh-o-Ishā'at, pp. 32-33.

⁶⁴ Abdul Majīd Qarshi, *Hādi-i-Ālam*, Lahore: Sirat Committee Patti, "Back flap page".

⁶⁵ W. C. Smith (1943), *Islam in India-A social analysis*, Lahore: Minerva book shop Anarkali, pp. 68-69.

Movement for the Observance of Prophet's Birthday

The third decade of twentieth century was exceedingly judgmental for Hindu-Muslim relations. Communal clashes and religious tensions were at their peak.⁶⁶ The catalyst incident was the publication of a book against the marital life of the Prophet of Islam entitled '*Rangīla Rasūl*'⁶⁷ (The Amorous Prophet) in 1924 by an anonymous writer. Mahāshe Rājpal published this book and was later acquitted by the court. In 1929, a young Muslim man killed him for the same offence. Circumstances further fueled by the publication of '*Sair-i-Dozakh*' (A walk through Hell), an article which published in magazine called '*Risāla-i-Vartmān*' by Devi Sharan Sharma. Consequently, many people were killed and injured on both sides. Ambedkar states that some of the most serious of these outrages were perpetrated in connection with the agitation relating to *Rangīla Rasūl* and *Risāla Vartmān*.⁶⁸ Muslims highlighted the shortcomings of blasphemy laws, and while the government made some changes, they were not satisfactory to the Muslim community.⁶⁹

Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamā'at⁷⁰ (AMJ) also took advantage of the situation and wrote a pamphlet. Hindu community considered this pamphlet inflammatory, and Governor of Punjab Mr. William Malcolm Hailey (1872-1969) confiscated the pamphlet and registered a case against the writer.⁷¹ Mirza Bashir conducted the Sirah gatherings in his sphere of influence with following objectives:

- To hold Sirah gatherings on the day of twelfth *RabiulAwwal*.
- To select some aspects of Sirah each year for lectures.
- To ensure Sirah gatherings are open to all religions.⁷²

This movement was declared "*Tehrīk-i-youm-un-Nabi*" or the Movement for the Observance of Prophet's Birthday.⁷³ There were objections within the Muslim community regarding this movement, as some believed its latent objective was to spread the Ahmadiyya faith globally.⁷⁴

Some eminent Muslim scholars like Abul-Kalām Azād (1888-1958) had great concern about speeches delivered by Muslim leaders, in response to Rājpal's book; Abul-Kalām emphasized to react through legal ways.⁷⁵ Differences between Muslims and Ahmadis were also underscored, with Ahmadis being declared non-Muslims; common people were cautioned against participating in Sirah gatherings involving Ahmadis.⁷⁶

Effects of Sirah Movements on Sirah Writings in Subcontinent

A historical study of these movements has revealed many important aspects of Sirah writing in Subcontinent. These movements awakened the Muslims from deep slumber, created confidence in their primary sources and helped them to reject the objections raised by non-Muslims about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). These movements spanning from 1857 to 1947, started a new era and set

⁶⁶ R. Symonds (1950), *The Making of Pakistan*, London: Faber and Faber, p. 49

⁶⁷ According to Ambedkar '*Rangīla Rasūl*' was written in reply to '*Sitāka Chināla*' a pamphlet written by a Muslim alleging that wife of Rama, the hero of Ramāyana was a prostitute. See B. R. Ambedkar (1941), *Thoughts on Pakistan*, Bombay: Thacker and Company, p. 165.

⁶⁸ B. R. Ambedkar (1945), *Pakistan or partition of India*, Bombay: Thacker and Company, pp. 159-160.

⁶⁹ For the history, development and enactment of blasphemy laws in united India and Pakistan. See Muhammad Nafis (2013), "Blasphemy laws in Pakistan-A historical overview," *Islamabad, Center for Research and security Studies*, accessed at <https://crss.pk/blasphemy-laws-in-pakistan-a-historical-overview/> on 2 May 2024.

⁷⁰ The founder of this movement was Mirza Ghulām Ahmad Qadyāni (1835-1908) who claimed to be, entirely deviating from orthodox Islam, a prophet, messenger, Messiah, Mahdi and redeemer for Muslims. The finality of Prophet (PBUH) is decided in Islam and any idea, in opposition to this notion, is not acceptable for Muslims. In the numerous fatwas, he is called Kāfir (unbeliever), Dajjāl (Anti-Christ), Mulhid (heretic), Murtadd (apostate), Kazzāb (liar), be-imān (faithless), Daghābāz (deceitful), etc. For the history, beliefs, and Mirza's claims see also: H. A. Walter (1918), *The Ahmadiyya Movement*, London: Oxford University Press, p. 185; Anne Marie Schimmel (2003), *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent*, Lahore: Sang-i-Mil Publications, pp. 211-213; J. N. Farquhar (1915), *Modern religious movements in India*, pp. 137-148.

⁷¹ D. M. Shāhid (2007), *Tarīkh-i-Ahmadiyyat, Qadyān* (Vol. 4), India: Nazārat Nashro Ishā'at, pp. 596-599.

⁷² D. M. Shāhid (2007), *Tarīkh-i-Ahmadiyyat, Qadyān* (Vol. 5), pp. 29-47.

⁷³ The observance of the Prophet's PBUH birthday has a controversial status in Indo-Pak as well as other Muslim countries. For one such instance, please read: M. As'ad (2020), "The Dynamics of the Indonesian Hadramis on the Maulid Celebration," *Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 389-430.

⁷⁴ In the beginning, the followers of Mirza Ghulām Ahmad Qadyāni were called "Qādyānīs" or "Mirzāīs" but in 1900, members of the community registered themselves in official Census of government of India as Muhammadan sect by the name "Ahmadiya" See H. A. Walter (1918), *The Ahmadiyya Movement*, p. 111.

⁷⁵ Ghulām Rasūl Mahar (1963), *Tabarrukāt-i-Azād*, Delhi: Adbi Dunya, p. 57.

⁷⁶ Mirza Tāhir Ahmad (2005), *Khutbāt-i-Tāhir* (Vol.4), n.p., p. 178, accessed at <https://www.alislam.org/urdu/pdf/Khutbat-e-Tahir-Vol-4-1985.pdf> on 2 May 2024.

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new trends in Sirah writing in the Subcontinent. The following are some important points regarding the effects of Sirah movements (1857-1947) on the Sirah writing in the Subcontinent.

Promotion of Oral and Written Sirah Traditions

In the Subcontinent, these movements played a major role in strengthening the oral and written traditions of Sirah, both existed and were well-known in the Subcontinent before, but these movements provided an impetus and altered the trends for times to come. The subject matter of vibrant oral tradition was the poems i.e. *Nāt Sharīf* (exalted poetry) composed in the honor of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). In such *Nashīds*, it was difficult to express the life history and teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Shah Sulaymān Phulwārwi realized this lacuna and focused on intellectual content while endorsing and continuing the oral tradition. In this vein, his '*Tehrīk-i-Sirat Bayāni*' contributed a lot to altering the contents of oral tradition of Sirah. As far as writing tradition is concerned it also found its correct direction through *Majlis-i-Talīf-i-Sirat-i-Nabvi* and Sirat Committee, Patti.

Development of Sirah Sciences

Development of Sirah sciences and their application to Sirah traditions in the Subcontinent is an outcome of the movement initiated by Syed Ahmad Khān. This movement perpetually changed the methodologies and styles of Sirah Writing. The demythologization process was started, and the elimination of all mythical elements from Sirah traditions was understood and executed. Internal and external criticism was applied on classical sources of Sirah, and they were examined and re-evaluated critically. Sir Syed's approach made its way through, and later Sirah writers were compelled to espouse this methodology. Shiblī Naumāni also took up this practice with a different viewpoint and principles.⁷⁷ This movement slithered into the Arab world and influenced the Sirah writings of many Arabic scholars.⁷⁸ These movements paved the way for a branch of knowledge in the name of "Sirah Sciences" and specific books have been written and taught worldwide.⁷⁹

Foundation of New *Ilm al-Kalām* (Dialectics)

In the nineteenth century, Islamic doctrines were confronted with the intellectual currents of rationalism, liberalism and scientific advancement. This period saw an apparent conflict between science, often championed by non-believers, and religion, traditionally upheld by Madrasa graduates. There was a pressing need of advanced *Ilm al-kalām* (Dialectics) to defend the Islamic fundamentals and adopt them to the contemporary challenges. Syed Ahmad Khān adopted the rational approach interpreting Islam through the lenses of reason and scientific principles. The fact stays as tall as Himalāya that he introduced a new *Ilm al-Kalām* for Islamic theology which he applied in his book *Al-khutbāt*. Shiblī also added impetus in this movement from another paradigm.⁸⁰ Shiblī's book '*Sirat-un-Nabi*' is written in the light of modern *Ilm al-kalām*. This branch of knowledge has always been part of Muslim philosophy, but in the Subcontinent, Sirah movements (1857–1947) reshaped the *Ilm al-kalam* to meet the needs of the hour.⁸¹

Counter Orientalism Force

A notable positive impact of these movements was their refutation of allegations leveled against Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Islam by Orientalists. In all Sirah movements this objective was achieved utilizing different methodologies and various approaches. Sir Syed and Shiblī countered the allegations of Orientalists by applying *Ilm al-Kalām* through writing Sirah books and instilled confidence in the Islamic scholarship to tackle modern challenges. Thus, Sirah movements (1857-1947) attempted to broaden Sirah and raised mass awareness through diverse approaches.

Traditional to Multi-Dimensional Sirah Writing

The activities of Missionaries and Orientalists appeared a new era of Sirah-writing. Muslims, in objective conditions of Subcontinent's context, re-evaluated their approach to Sirah compilations

⁷⁷ S. Naumāni (1979), *Sirat-un-Nabi* (Vol. 1), p. 74.

⁷⁸ Dr. Akram Diyā al Umari can be presented as an example from Arab world. He wrote two books (Madinan Society at the Time of the Prophet & Sahīh Sirah al-Nabawīyah) on the same pattern.

⁷⁹ For this branch of Sirah Studies see Muhammad Humayūn Abbās (2020), *Ulūm al-Sirah*, Lahore: Progressive Books, p. 488.

⁸⁰ He has written two books about this branch of knowledge entitled "*Ilm al-Kalām*" and "*Kalām*".

⁸¹ Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's thoughts and theory of reconstruction influenced the scholars of the Muslim world directly and indirectly, and the effects of Sir Syed can be seen on the current Muslim intelligentsia. For such effects, please read: G. S. Butt (2022), "Theory of Deconstruction: A Comparative Study of the Views of Western and Muslim Theorists and Philosophers," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 60, No. 1, pp. 131-166.

integrating consideration of contemporary social, political, economic and religious issues. This shift saw Historical and Panegyric style of Sirah-writing evolved into *fiqh al-Sirah*. Shiblī's Sirah book is not only a historic description of life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) rather an encyclopedia of Islamic teachings and prophetic message. Along with Sulaymān Nadvī, Shiblī changed the traditional trends of Sirah writing and introduced a different and unique style. The *Majlis-i-Talīf-i-Sirat-i-Nabvi* played a crucial role and functioned as a movement in the publication of this significant work. This *Majlis* inspired and motivated the members of *Dārul-Musannefīn* regarding Sirah compilation. These movements paved the way for transformation in Sirah studies achieving a level of unmatched distinction in the previous 1300 years.

Orientalism: From Confrontation to Reconciliation

These movements facilitated a paradigm shift in the Orientalists' response to Muslim writings. A hostile writing behavior gave way to a more reconciliatory and positive engagement until it was academically responded. These movements created a conducive atmosphere for change through literature, public gatherings and dialogues. Access to the original sources, responses of Muslim theologians, enlightenment and freedom of expression reconciled some Orientalists and Hindu Sikh writers, to accept the facts and later presented, to some extent, a true picture of Islam and Prophet of Islam.⁸² When William Muir studied the reply of Sir Syed (Al-khutbāt al-Ahmadiyya) in response to his book, he was compelled to say:⁸³ 'I did not object the Islam of Sir Syed; I objected the Islam which Muslims have been practiced'

Therefore, it can be concluded that due to these movements there was change in methodologies and modern trends of Sirah writing of Orientalists "but the old prejudices have continued even into modern times".⁸⁴ This in other words also manifests that a continuity of the movement is the perpetual necessity to repel never ending anti-thesis against Sirah studies.

Apologetic Approach

An apologetic approach is explicitly visible in these movements to prove the notion that Islam has the ability to accept all kinds of modernism. Scientific advancement, rationalism, modern theories of humanity were embraced and attempted to be interpreted and incorporated within the realms of Islamic teachings. According to Dr Humaira Ahmed, Sir Syed is the man who is considered the pioneer of this apologetic behavior.⁸⁵ Shiblī Naumāni also adhered to this pattern, but he did not surpass the boundaries of traditional concepts and upheld traditional values in responding to the queries.

Amendments in Blasphemy Laws

In the third decade of nineteenth century blasphemy cases, in an environment of animosity, increased tremendously. The existing laws were not sufficient to deal with the offences committed. The incidents of blasphemy necessitated the government's direct action for the amendments in blasphemy laws. The British government made a few necessary changes, but these efforts did not satisfy the Muslims in general.⁸⁶

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the Sirah movements were a reaction to the circumstances created by the East India Company, the British government, and the activities of missionaries and Orientalists after the failure of 1857 war. Although, the nature and methodologies were different in achieving their targets, the aim was the defense of the personage of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the promotion of His prophetic message. The main focus of Sirah movements was on the reconstruction and reorientation of Sirah studies which they achieved. These movements played a major role in changing the negative thoughts of the West, Orientalists, and other hostile forces about the Prophet (PBUH) of Islam. All movements faced objections from different corners of Muslim community regarding their objectives

⁸² For such examples see Nisār Ahmad (1985), "Mustashriqīn Aur Mutala-i-Sirat," *Naqūsh Rasūl Number*, Vol. 11, No. 130, pp. 517-526.

⁸³ A. H. Hāli (1939), *Hayāt-i-Jawed* (Vol. 2), p. 168.

⁸⁴ F. Gabrieli (1968), *Muhammad and the conquests of Islam*, V. L. Luling and Rosamund Linell (trans.), London: World University Library, p. 15.

⁸⁵ D. H. Ahmad (2022), "Pioneering Apologetic Rationalism in the Sub-Continent: Syed Ahmad Khān and Syed Amīr Ali," *Nuqtah*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 203-223.

⁸⁶ For the history and causes of amendments in blasphemy laws see: Muhammad Nafīs (2013), "Blasphemy laws in Pakistan-A historical overview," pp. 13-19.

A Comprehensive Appraisal of the Movements aiming at Fostering Sirah Studies in British India and methodologies. The study conclusively determines that these movements contributed to the Sirah Studies despite of all hurdles and objections in the Subcontinent under British rule from 1857 to 1947 and set new paradigms and standards.

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