

## **A Glance at Indian Writings in English on the Movement of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab**

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### **Introduction**

The paper attempts to highlight some salient features of the Indian Writings in English on Wahhabism. It, however does not present an exhaustive list of the writings on Wahhabism, yet tries to trace the origin and development of writings in English on the subject with special reference to some of the most important writings.

### **Wahhabism—a Misnomer**

At the outset, it is appropriate to state in the Indian context the term ‘*Wahhabi*’ has two connotations, primarily it was used to describe the religious reformative movement led by Sayyid Ahmad Shahid (1786-1831) and Moulvi Ismail Dehlavi (1778-1831), in the now known Indo-Pakistan Bangladesh Subcontinent, which was also engaged in the struggle for liberation from the foreign occupation (Britishers) and against usurpers of Muslims’ rights and dignity (erstwhile Sikh State in North India) and the establishment of Islamic State. The Britishers felt threatened by the movement so wanted to describe and denounce the movement in the most derogatory words.

Britishers by using the epithet “Wahhabi” for their adversaries, on one side wanted to create further cleavage between the common Muslims and those following Sayyid Ahmad, as there was already lot of misgivings among the masses towards the movement of Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab (1703-1792) which had originated in the Najd region of Arabian Peninsula. In the official circles ‘Wahhabi’ was a byword for rebel,<sup>1</sup> notwithstanding the assertions of the profounder of the movement that they called themselves “Mohammaddis” or “Muwahiddun”, and their movement “Tariq-e-Mohammadiya” or the path of Muhammad<sup>2</sup> (Peace and blessings be upon him).

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The second connotation of the term Wahhabi connects to the followers of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd Al-Wahhab b. Sulayman b. Ali b. Muhammad b. Ahmad Ibn Rashid al- Tamini. Musil, an orientalist of repute asserts that Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab” was the name of Muhammad’s family and Abd Al-Wahhab was not his father as stated by others and his father’s name “was Sulayman.<sup>3</sup>

The religious reformative movement of Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab did not want to create a new group or sect in Islam or among Muslims (he himself being Hanbalite scholar), but wanted to purge Islam and Muslim religious practices from what he considered un-Islamic accretions. The movement preferred to be called *Salafi* movement, which tried to make people tread the path of righteous predecessors (*Salaf al-Saliheen*).

### **Beginnings of English Writings**

It is the British officers and scholars who initiated writings on Wahhabism primarily to describe and denounce the movement of Sayyid Ahmad. Around the middle of nineteenth century, among the first printed English Writings are William Hunters’ *Our Indian Mussalmans* (1876), the most valuable single book on the subject;<sup>4</sup> Early Volumes of *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society (J.R.A.S)*, London, Bombay and Calcutta;<sup>5</sup>

The Library of the Institute of Islamic Studies of the Aligarh Muslim University. The long and informative articles of O’ Kinealy in the *Calcutta Review* are invaluable for all students of the subject.<sup>6</sup> Rehatsek made a general survey of Wahhabism in Arabia and India in the *J.R.A.S.*, Bombay.<sup>7</sup> About the military campaigns against the Wahhabi Centre on the North West Frontier there are several works, such as the *Records of Expeditions Against the N.W. Frontier Tribes* by H.W. Paget (Calcutta 1874), *A General Report on the Yusufzais* by H.W. Bellew (Lahore, 1864), and *Sitana* by Colonel Adye (London 1867).<sup>8</sup> Besides these there are the Memoires or biographies of some of the commanders who led the expeditions against the Wahhabis. There works deal primarily with the military aspect of the struggle against the Wahhabis.<sup>9</sup>

The contemporary English newspapers and journals also refer to some aspects or episodes of the Movement. Hunter contributed several

articles on *Mohammadanism* in general and the social position of the Muslims under the English rule in the *Englishman* and the *Pioneer* during 1864-78. The *Englishman*, of 2 May 1864 published along commentary on the judgment of Herbert Edwardes on the Ambala Trial. Some articles on the day today proceedings of the different military expeditions against the Wahabis were published in the *Bengal Harkaru*.<sup>10</sup>

### **Salient Features of Earlier English Writings**

- I. The movement of Sayyid Ahmad is considered to be an offshoot of the movement of Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab.
- II. Sayyid Ahmad's pilgrimage to Makkah is considered to be a turning point in his life. It is thought that he returned to India as a fanatic follower of Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab.
- III. *Wahhabism* is considered as a new cult and or a separate religion.
- IV. Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab and Sayyid Ahmad are referred to as the prophets.
- V. *Sirat-i-Mustaqim*, the book penned by the propounders of the Sayyid's movement, was referred to as the new Quran of the sect.<sup>11</sup>
- VI. Main focus was the movement of Sayyid Ahmad and its political and military engagements with the Britishers and the Sikhs particularly in the North West Frontiers.
- VII. Arabian Wahhabi movement finds mention largely in the backdrop of the Indian movement of Sayyid Ahmad.

### **Later English Writings**

Murray T. Titus in his book *Indian Islam*, published in 1930, though continued with the legacy of William Hunter, yet discusses separately the Wahhabi movement of Arabia, Tariqi-Muhammaday of Sayyid Ahmad and Ahl-e-Hadith movement of India. Though he finds more commonalities between the three groups, yet it seems a step ahead in dealing with the subject.<sup>12</sup> See Murray T. Titus, *Indian Islam: A Religious History of Islam in India* New.

### Seminal work in English in the Middle of Twentieth Century

It is around the middle of twentieth century, there seems to be a breakthrough in the nature of writings in English on Wahhabism. Qeyamuddin Ahmad conducts a thorough research on the subject and comes up with a seminal work in English titled, *The Wahabi Movement in India*. He not only surveyed the existing literature in English, Urdu and Persian on the subject, his interest to reconstruct the full history of the Wahhabi movement in India led him to very arduous tasks. He explains: “The work of reconstructing the full history of the Wahabi Movement was arduous and painstaking. Scattered but important pieces of information had to be collected from different government archives, and neglected collections of private papers, old books and manuscripts had to be researched and studied. Besides, some rare, out of print and proscribed Wahabi pamphlets had to be re-discovered before the full picture of the Movement emerged.”<sup>13</sup>

The author considers the word Wahabi a misnomer, but adopts it because of its wide prevalence.<sup>14</sup> He considers Britishers’ use of the term as deliberate and informs about their ulterior motives, thus:

The insistence of the English as also some Indian writers on the use of these appellations seems to be deliberate and actuated by ulterior motives. Some of the early and rather over-zealous acts of the Arabian Wahabis to do away with what they regarded as ‘un-Islamic’ practices had given them a bad name among the general body of Muslims in India and elsewhere. In the eyes of the British government the word Wahabi was synonymous with ‘traitor’ or ‘rebel’. Thus by describing the followers of Syed Ahmad as Wahabis the contemporary government officers aimed at killing two birds with one stone—branding them as rebels in the higher circles of the government and as ‘extremists’ and ‘desecrators of Shrines’ in the eyes of the general Muslims. The epithet became a term of religio-political abuse...”<sup>15</sup>

The work of Qeyamuddin Ahmad has been the most comprehensive and authentic work on the Movement and personality of Sayyid Ahmad and focuses on the accuracy of the facts based on the solid evidence. He posits the movement in its historical and socio-religious

and political circumstances. His discussions in the work include chapters on: Genesis of the Wahabi Movement and Some of its Principle Features, The life and Activities of Syed Ahmad Bareilvi, The Battle of Balakot and the Faraizi Movement, Wilayat Ali and Enayat Ali, The Internal Organization of the Wahabi Movement, The Frontier Campaigns (1852-1863), The Wahabis and the Movement of 1857-59, State Trials of Some Wahabi Leaders (1863-65), The Concluding Phase of the Movement and an Appraisal of the Wahabi Movement. It carries appendices, bibliography and an index. Two maps are also supplied, one illustrating the Frontiers Campaigns against the Wahabis, 1852-63, another is a sketch of the ground-plan of the *Kafila* – the ancestral home of the Sadiqpur leaders.

While highlighting some important features of Wahabism in India, he clarifies: The Wahabis are not essentially different from the rest of the Muslims. They, however, lay greater emphasis on certain points among which the following may be mentioned:

1. Monotheism
2. *Ijtihad*
3. Intercession (denial of it on someone's behalf by some intermediaries)
4. Innovation<sup>16</sup>

He presents '*Comparative Estimate of the Arabian and Indian Wahabi Movements*',<sup>17</sup> and traces the genesis of the movement of Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab and the role of the Britishers towards it. He strongly rejects the claims of the British writers that while on pilgrimage Syed Ahmad had been influenced by Wahabism. He says:

“As for the theory of the influence of Arabian Wahabism on its Indian counterpart there is no documentary evidence or authoritative proof.”<sup>18</sup>

He asserts on the basis of evidence that before going for Hajj Syed Ahmad had formulated his ideas and course of action: Syed Ahmad had already been convinced of the necessity of campaigning against the prevailing socio- religious state of things and of waging war against the foreigners much before he proceeded for Haj. The *Sirat-i-Mustaqim* bears testimony to this contention.<sup>19</sup> About the similarities between the two movements, Qeyamuddin explains:

The fact is that there are certain similarities between the two movements owing to their, both, being inspired by the common sense of the Quran and the Hadis. Similar set of circumstances were prevailing in both the countries on the eve of the growth of the respective movements and both stressed the necessity of reasserting certain principles of Islam, the chief of which were the emphasis on the Oneness of God and abstinence from “innovation”. The *Al-Tauhid* of Abdul Wahab (Muhammad Ibn Abd Al- Wahhab) and the *Taqwiatul Iman* of Shah Ismail are unanimous in stressing these cardinal features.”<sup>20</sup>

Qeyamuddin looks for the point of difference between the two movements and argues:

“...there are certain points of difference between the two. The first was the markedly political aspect of the Movement in India. As a corollary, there was a greater emphasis on the struggle for the political emancipation of the country. This aspect was absent in Arabia owing to the different circumstances prevailing there. There was no loss of political power in Arabia and Arabian Wahabis represented essentially an attempt for socio-religious reformation. Another distinctive feature of Indian Wahabism was its identification at one stage, with the *Mahdawi Movement*. The death of Syed was followed by the production of a copious literature by the Indian Wahabis on the doctrine of the coming of a saviour or Mahdi. This process of identification with the *Mahdawi Movements* was never in evidence in Arabia”.<sup>21</sup>

He concludes; ...“that the apparent similarity between the two movements was the result of a common source of inspiration and a similar set of prevailing circumstances and not necessarily the result of one following the other.”<sup>22</sup>

### Articles in Journals

Among the journals in India, *Islamic Culture*, Hyderabad, had been carrying articles in English on Wahabism, the Arabian and Indian. An article on ‘The Wahhabis in Western Arabia in 1803-4 A.D. [Translation of a Persian manuscript] is written by Dr. R.B.

Serjeant and Dr. S.M. Wickens, and is incorporated in Vol. XXIII, No.4, October 1949. Aslam Siddiqui's articles on Syed Ahmad titled 'Syed Ahmad Shahid' appeared in vol.19, April 1945 and 'Syed Ahmad Shahid's End' appeared in vol. 22, October 1948. Sir Hafiz Wahaba's article titled "*What actually is Wahabism*" appeared in the Islamic Culture, December 1949 (Discusses in detail the essential feature of Wahhabism). Muhammad Abdul Bari's article titled, '*The politics of Sayyid Ahmad Barelvi*', appeared in vol. 31, April 1957. K.A. Nizami's article titled, "*Socio-Religious Movements in Indian Islam (1763-1898)*" appeared in Vol. 44, July 1970.

Maryam Jameela (formerly Margaret Marcus) has written elaborate articles titled, "*The Movement of Muhammad Bin Abdul Wahhab*", Sayyid Ahmad Shahid among others which nullify the wrong perceptions about these movements owing to the writings of the Britishers in English.<sup>23</sup>

Abdul Hameed Siddiqui's article on the movement of Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab, is refreshing and Lucid in presentation on the topic. It is now included in the M.M. Sharif edited, "*A History of Muslim Philosophy.*"

### **Research Dissertations on the Subject**

With the establishment of Islamic studies departments in some universities, Wahhabism has been made not only a subject of special studies, even Ph.D. thesis have been submitted on the subject. In the department of Islamic Studies of Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh (India), a Ph.D. thesis by Sayyid Ahsan under the supervision of Prof. Mahmudul Haq was completed in the early eighties on '*Life and Thoughts of Muhammad Ibn Abd Al Wahhab.*' It discusses in detail ideological background, Arabia on the eve of the Wahhabi Movement, Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab: the founder and his doctrines. The author concludes:

"They believed in a moral and political renewal of Islam. They expressed great deal in defence of their conception of Sunnah and adopted intransigent and occasionally intolerant strictness. No doubt the Wahhabis played an important role in the evolution of modern man. Moreover, they deserve a place among "the first of those who worked together towards the Arab renaissance".<sup>24</sup>

The work depends largely on the printed works in English on the subject by Orientalists and echoes some of their peculiar views on Wahhabism, like the one in which it is held that the movement raised Arab consciousness and became a precursor of Arab nationalism.<sup>25</sup> Another Ph.D. thesis submitted towards the close of nineties of the twentieth century and now published (2008) by the Institute of Islamic Studies of Aligarh Muslim University is titled *Saudi Arabia : Religious and Political Origins* by Bilal Ahmad Kutty under the supervision of Prof. Abdul Ali. There is an exclusive Chapter titled, “The Wahhabi Movement: Religious-Political Aspirations”. The work heavily depends on the earlier works in English on the subject. A survey needs to be conducted regarding the nature of Ph.D. thesis on the subject in other universities, more particularly of the Shah-e-Hamadan Institute of Islamic Studies, University of Kashmir (where Ph.d. Thesis have to be in English only), Jamia Hamdard, Delhi, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi and other Universities and institutes of Islamic studies and oriental learning in India.

### **Contemporary Writings in English on Wahhabism**

Bashir Ahmad Khan in his well researched article, *The Replacement of the Term Wahhabi by the Ahl-I-Hadith: A Historical Analysis*<sup>26</sup> demolishes many myths and half-truths regarding the subject. He clarifies that the term ‘Wahhabi’ was first coined not by the English officials or writers as it is generally believed (they nonetheless had their hand in popularizing it), but by a nineteenth century theologian Moulana Fazl Rasul Badauni (a tutor of Ahmad Raza Khan barelvi, the founder of Barelvi movement in India....)<sup>27</sup> He traces the development of the so-called Wahhabis in India in the post 1857 scenario, spurning physical *Jihad* and terming it a suicidal exercise. Among them he notes Moulana Syed Mohammad Nazir Husain Muhaddith Dehlavi (1805-1902), Syed Mohammad Husain Batalavi (d. 1338/1919) and Syed Ahmad Khan (d. 1898). He illustrates how the ‘Wahhabi’ term was officially replaced by the term ‘Ahl-e-Hadith’ with the efforts of the group’s leaders led by Moulavi Husain Batalvi, the editor of the first Ahl-i- Hadith periodical *Ishatu Sunnah*, who entered into correspondence with the British Officials in Punjab.<sup>28</sup> Bashir Ahmad observes, “the dropping of the word ‘Wahhabi’

in official correspondence by the British government heralded a new phase in the ideological as well as socio-religious reformatory activities of Ahl-i-Hadith of India.”<sup>29</sup>

Tracing the group’s development to the present times, he writes, ‘The *Ahl-i-Hadith* in the Indo-Pak sub-continent now prefer to be called Salafis rather than *Ahl-i-hadith* and indeed designate their mosques, madrasas and seminaries with an additional term ‘*Salafi*’, such as Dar-ul-uloom Salafia, Benaras. The Ahl-i-Hadith in the final analysis added one more group to the already schematically organized Muslim community....’<sup>30</sup>

Yoginder Sikand in an article on “Wahabism in India” explains in detail the term and its usages in the Indian context and traces the genesis and the development of the group and says:

“In the Indian context, broadly speaking the term ‘Wahhabi’ is loosely used by a group of Muslims known as the Barelavi and other defendants of the cults of the shrines of the *sufi* saints, to refer to two other groups who also claim to be Sunnis, the Deobandis and the *Ahl-i-Hadith* (Hence forth A.H.). Many Deobandis also refer to the A.H. as Wahhabis”<sup>31</sup>

Sikand considers Saudi funding responsible for the development of *Ahl-e-Hadith* in the contemporary times. He says: “The AH remained, as it still does, a small minority among the Indian Muslims. Yet, from the mid 1970’s it saw a major boost in terms of infrastructural development and propaganda networks. This owed, in large measure, to liberal funding by Saudi and other Gulf sources, keen to export their conservative, literalist, pro-Saudi monarchical version of Islam across the world....”<sup>32</sup>

Sikand, however, rejects the thesis that ‘Wahhabism’ equates ‘terrorism’. He says: ....

“The simplest notion that equates ‘Wahhabism’ with ‘terrorism’ is flawed. ...By and large, and despite the grave challenges that the Indian Muslims, the A.H. in general included, have faced, their response has been to steer away from counter-violence, recognizing this as counter-productive, and insisting on better relations between Hindus and Muslims.”<sup>33</sup>

**Conclusion**

The subject offers best opportunities to further understand the nature and scope of the Indian writings in English not only in the bygone days but in the contemporary scenario as well, where most of the allegation and insinuation of the nineteenth century are repeated with renewed stress to eclipse the better understanding of the issues concerned. Hence research scholars of good intentions and competence can avail of the opportunity to reveal the truth in the most befitting academic traditions to pave the way for better understanding among the humans.

## Reference and Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Bashir Ahmad Khan, "The Replacement of the Term Wahhabi by the *Ahl-l-Hadith*: A Historical Analysis" in *Islam and the Modern Age* volume XXXIX No.2, May 2008, New Delhi, p.124; Also fn 4 therein.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.124, fn 5.
- <sup>3</sup> Musil, Alois, *Northern Negd*, New York, 1928 quoted by Dr. Bilal Ahmad Kutty, *Saudi Arabia Religious and Political origins*, The Institute of Islamic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, 2008, p.20, fn 4.
- <sup>4</sup> Quyamuddin Ahmad, *The Wahhabi Movement in India* (Calcutta, Firma K.L.Mukhopadhyay, 1966), p. xviii.
- <sup>5</sup> The Library of the Institute of Islamic Studies of the Aligarh Muslim University has preserved the copies of J.R.A.S., Calcutta from the beginning, so a good reservoir to look into the relevant subject.
- <sup>6</sup> Qeyammuddin, *op.cit.* , p. xviii
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. xviii.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. xviii.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. xviii.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid. pp. xviii, xix.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 16.
- <sup>12</sup> See Murray T. Titus, *Indian Islam: A Religious History of Islam in India* (New Delhi, Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1979), second edition, chapter IX, pp. 178-205.
- <sup>13</sup> Qeyamuddin, *Op. cit.* p. v.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. V.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid, pp. V, VI.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid, P. 17.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 18-22
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 21.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, pp. 21-22
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid , p. 22.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 22.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 22.
- <sup>23</sup> These articles are now incorporated in his the book of Maryam Jameelah, titled, *Islam in theory and Practice*, (New Delhi, Taj Company, 1997).
- <sup>24</sup> Sayyid Ahsan, *Life and Thoughts of Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab* (Aligarh, Institute of Islamic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, 1988). P.114.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, preface p. III and P. 114.

- 26 *Islam and the Modern Age* New Delhi, Zakir Husain Institute of Islamic  
Studies, Volume XXXIX, No. 2, May 2008, pp. 123-145.
- 27 Bashir Ahmad Khan, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 132-133.
- 28 Ibid, pp. 135-139.
- 29 Ibid. 139.
- 30 Ibid, p. 140.
- 31 The American Muslim (TAM), [http: //www.theamericammuslim.org/  
tam.php/ features/articles/wahhabism-in-india/](http://www.theamericammuslim.org/tam.php/features/articles/wahhabism-in-india/) Accessed on 04/10/ 2009.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid. The paper was presented by the author at a Conference on Indo-  
Iranian Relations, held in 2007, organized by Shahid Beheshti University  
Tehran, Iran.