

AFTAB AHMAD RAHMANI

(B. 1925 – D. 1984)

Aftab Ahmad Rahmani, who was a research student at the Faculty of Oriental Studies in Cambridge University (1968 -1970), was personally known to me for many years. According to a curious social custom of post-colonial India, Aftab Ahmad had two birthdays, one unofficial and another official. According to Mr. Mehrab Ali, a local historian of Dinajpur and Aftab Ahmad Rahmani's cousin, Aftab Ahmad was born in 1925. This was his unofficial birthday. It goes without saying that most illiterate Muslim peasants from Bengal had no registered date of birth. Masses of rural Bengal belonged to this category and it is still the case in some parts of Bengal. (I hope that this clarifies the mystery of dual date of birth of Professor Aftab Ahmad Rahmani); Dr Muhammad Mujibur Rahman, was officially born in 1936, but his unofficial date of birth was different. Likewise, Professor Emeritus A K M Yaqub Ali has two contradictory dates of birth (his official date being 1 August 1939, but the unofficial date was March 1938 and even the celebrated Professor Dr. Muhammad Abdul Bari's unofficial date of birth was 1929, while his official date of birth was 1930).

Aftab Ahmad Rahmani had the distinction of studying in a privately-funded Madrasah (i.e. the Rahmaniyah Madrasah) in Delhi, where he obtained his Dars- i-Nizami degree in 1944. Thereafter he studied at the Punjab University and passed his MOL (Master in Oriental Languages) in 1946, and was admitted into the Dinajpur High Madrasah, where he matriculated after two years (1947-1949) from the East Bengal Secondary Education Board (EBSEB). As a mature (advanced) student, he studied at Sirajganj Islamic Intermediate College (1949-51) in the Pabna district of East Pakistan and passed his Islamic Intermediate exam with distinction. He then studied B.A. Honours (1952-1955) in Arabic at Dacca University and graduated with a Gold Medal in 1955. In 1956 he gained his Masters Degree in Arabic in the First Class and subsequently taught at Sukhipur Madrasah from about 1957 to 1960. From December 1960 to September 1962 he taught as a Lecturer in the Department of Arabic at Dacca University under Professor Dr Serajul Haq in East Pakistan. During the next decade (1962-1972), Aftab Ahmad was a Lecturer or an Assistant Professor of Arabic in the Department of Languages under the chairmanship of Professor Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari (The Department of Languages was set up at Rajshahi University under the headship of Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah. When Dr. Shahidullah left Rajshahi University, the Department of Languages was headed by Dr. Muhammad Abdul Bari of the Department of Islamic History and Culture).

In 1962, while serving at the University of Rajshahi (which is affiliated to Cambridge University) Aftab Ahmad Rahmani registered for the degree of Ph.D. and

went on to research a dissertation entitled “Hafiz Ibn Hajar al-’Asqalani and his contribution to Hadith Literature” for which he was awarded a Ph.D. in 1968. Later in 1968 Aftab Ahmad was admitted to the Faculty of Oriental Studies in the University of Cambridge. Under the supervision of Professor A. J. Arberry he was registered for a Ph.D. degree. Half way through his research, however, Professor Arberry died and Professor R. B. Serjeant became his supervisor. He was awarded the Ph.D. degree in 1970 for his dissertation titled “The Life and Work (s) of Ibn Hajar al-’Asqalani Together with a Critical Edition of al-Jawahir al-durar.” On his return from Cambridge he was promoted to Associate Professorship (Reader) in the Department of Languages at Rajshahi University (1972-1981). With effect from 22 June 1981 Aftab Ahmad Rahmani became Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies (1981-1984) at Rajshahi University.

I became acquainted with Professor Aftab Ahmad Rahmani when I was a student (1962-1965) in the Department of Islamic History and Culture at Rajshahi University. It was either late in 1962 or early in 1963 that I met him. Aftab Ahmad Rahmani was a good Islamic scholar who co-operated with Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari to promote Islamic values at the University of Rajshahi. When I was an undergraduate in the 1960s I headed an Islamic Students Organisation at the University and I used to invite Dr M.A.Bari and Aftab Ahmad Rahmani to attend various Islamic Forum meetings and deliver lectures. It was in 1965 that I sought the help of Professor Aftab Ahmad Rahmani to translate parts of the Arabic text of Professor Abdul Aziz al-Duri’s book titled Nash’at ‘ilm al-Tarikh ‘ind al-Arab (literally, The Origins and Growth of Arabic Historiography), which was part of our course in Islamic History and Culture. Thanks to his help, I scored better marks in the paper relating to Islamic historiography. At a later date, I passed on my notes on Islamic Historiography to Professor Mohammad Ghulam Rasul, who used the material to write a book on Muslim Historiography, which was subsequently published by Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf of Lahore.

I watched the progress of Aftab Ahmad’s research in its final stage. In those days I was a student and I prayed to God for a change in my destiny and my prayer was answered when I began to receive favourable responses from foreign universities to undertake research. While staying in Aftab Rahmani’s house, I tried to be helpful to my host by reading chapters of his Ph.D. thesis and putting diacritical marks on the Arabic terms in the text. While helping Aftab Rahmani I was offered a place at the University of Cambridge. In the last week of October 1967 I left Rajshahi University for England to pursue my doctoral research. My host, Professor Aftab Ahmad Rahmani, bid me farewell. Professor Rahmani’s kindness to me at a difficult time in my life was a boon. He came from the same district (Dinajpur) and therefore he was very kind to me. We had many things in common. Like me, he came from a poor background. We also belonged to the same school of Islamic religious thought (i.e. the Ahl-e-Hadith movement). He knew my famous uncle, district Ansar Commander S.M. Mahtab Beg, who was a local politician and a nationalist who was well-known throughout the district of Dinajpur. However, when I came to Cambridge University in the last week of October 1967, Professor Rahmani had submitted his Ph.D. thesis at Rajshahi University and was subsequently awarded the doctoral degree at the beginning of 1968. Shortly afterwards, he was admitted to the University of Cambridge to study for a Ph.D. degree under the supervision of A. J. Arberry, Sir Thomas Adams Professor of Arabic at Cambridge.

It was customary for me to accompany Aftab Ahmad Rahmani to the University Library and the library of the Faculty of Oriental Studies in Cambridge. From the very beginning of his sojourn in Cambridge Aftab Ahmad Rahmani was industrious and single-minded in advancing his research. He was humorous and recited some romantic poems in Urdu and colloquial Bengali to entertain young friends like me. Normally, he was pleasant in private conversation and had a broad outlook. He resided at 16 Walkworth Street at Cambridge and he had an Indian friend, namely Mr. Gopal Datta, who occasionally invited both of us to dine with him. I used to dine with him at the beginning of his time at Cambridge University. In the evening, after dinner, we discussed the progress of our research projects. In 1969, when Professor Arberry died, Aftab Ahmad Rahmani was transferred to the supervision of Dr. Robert Bertram Serjeant. It was under his supervision that Rahmani completed his Ph.D. thesis. In 1970, Professor Dr Muhammad Abdul Mu'id Khan of Hyderabad, Deccan, India came to Cambridge as a visiting Professor of Arabic. Aftab Rahmani showed some chapters of his thesis to him for comments. One day, Dr. R. B. Serjeant invited his old friend, Abdul Mu'id Khan, Aftab Ahmad Rahmani and I went for dinner in his house at Linton, south of Cambridge. Thus we became close to him and learnt more about his academic achievements. Mrs. Marion Serjeant, who had cooked an Oriental (South Indian) dish for us, talked about their visit to Hyderabad. We saw many Arabic manuscripts in Professor Bob Serjeant's private library. We had a very pleasant evening out with the Serjeants.

At the beginning of 1971 Aftab Ahmad Rahmani returned to his old job at the University of Rajshahi and was promoted to the rank of Associate Professor of Arabic. He held this position from 1972 to June 1981 and on 22nd June 1981 he was promoted to full Professorship of Arabic and Islamic Studies. He held this position till his untimely death caused by bone-marrow disorder in April 1984. I have many fond memories of Professor Aftab Ahmad Rahmani. He was a good man who was kind to the young and respectful to his elders. This reflected his profound knowledge of Islam and Prophet Muhammad's teachings on Islamic ethics. He was a man of tremendous self-restraint, which is a sign of hilm (literally, equanimity/sagacity). He never displayed anger to anyone and handled tricky situations with wisdom. He never offended anyone in order to avoid an adverse reaction from the other party. He walked slowly and did not overtake anyone on the road. He talked politely to everyone, young and old, did not fail to greet others first and did not expect any one to greet him first. He was a gentleman and a hard-working scholar who always had a sense of duty to his family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. He always thought before he spoke to anyone. He made every one comfortable before his presence. He was fluent in Arabic, Urdu, Persian and Bengali. He also knew English. A man of short height, he sported a goatie beard, and used to wear Harris Tweed coats. He was a careful observer of other people's behaviour and was eager to make a good impression on others.

In 1997 when I went to New York to attend an International Conference of the American Historical Association I stayed at the Head Office of the ISNA (Islamic Society of North America). It was on this occasion that I contacted Dr. Muhammad Mujibur Rahman, who worked in New York. Dr Mujibur Rahman told me that he was present during the last moments of Dr Rahmani's life; he was seriously ill and bed

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ridden. He saw Rahmani's lips moving and he was reciting the Kalimat al-Shahadah (the credo of Islam) moments before his death. Dr. Mujibur Rahman noticed that when Professor Rahmani passed away, the lantern or candle in his room suddenly died out. Dr Rahmani had many tragedies in his life. His first wife was killed by a stray bullet fired by the Indian army at the Biral (Thana) border in Dinajpur district in 1971. According to the Dinajpur historian, Mehrab Ali, Dr. Rahmani was a great Islamic scholar and for this reason Professor Dr. M.A. Bari appointed him as his deputy in the Jam'iyyat-i-Ahl-i Hadith of East Pakistan.

It goes without saying that Dr Aftab Ahmad Rahmani was one of the world's leading authorities on the life and works of Ibn Hajar al- Asqalani. When he died I lost a friend, a man of profound knowledge even though he wrote only a few books. He was a torch-bearer of the wisdom of the Prophet Muhammad.

By **Professor M. A. J. Beg, MA (Rajshahi), PhD (Cambridge University).**