

Remembering Professor

Ahmad Hasan Dani
(B. 1920 – D. 2009)

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan

Professor Dr Ahmad Hasan Dani was arguably the most prominent historian and archaeologist to have emerged from the subcontinent during the twentieth century. Author of more than 25 books and originator of what I prefer to call the ‘Dani School of History’ at Dhaka University, Professor Dani was a pioneering researcher, prolific writer and an outstanding linguist, yet his life and works are hardly known in Bengal where he lived for more than a decade and contributed so much.

Dani’s ancestors hailed from a prominent Kashmiri Brahmin family before they embraced Islam. He dedicated his *Muslim Architecture in Bengal* with these words, “To my ancestors who left Kashmir about 1850 and settled among the Gonds in Chhattisgadh to spread culture and are now lying buried in Basna – the village of my childhood.” As indicated by Dani himself, he was born on 20 July, 1920 in Basna, a village located close to Raipur in central India. He hailed from a respected but not a very educated family and, as such, Dani was one of the first in his family to receive further and higher education. A gifted student, he successfully completed his early and further education in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, English and Hindi before enrolling at Banares Hindu University to study Sanskrit. In 1944, when he was in his early twenties, he became the first Muslim student to obtain a Degree in Sanskrit from that university.

A voracious reader and researcher, he then pursued higher degrees in history and archaeology under the supervision of many prominent British scholars, obtaining a PhD Degree from London University with a thesis on the prehistory of eastern India in 1955. While pursuing his doctoral studies, Dani also worked in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) as a Reader and Professor of History at Dhaka University, Superintendent of Archaeology and as Curator at Dhaka Museum from 1950 to 1962 (he moved to East Pakistan as early as 1947). During this period he researched and wrote extensively on the history, architecture and inscriptions of Muslim Bengal and also trained up a new generation of Muslim historians who subsequently went onto research and write seminal works on Islamic history, culture and heritage of Bengal.

Although Professor Dani wrote many books and research articles on aspects of Muslim history and architecture of Bengal, his two most valuable contributions on the subject were *Muslim Architecture in Bengal* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1961) and *Bibliography of the Muslim Inscriptions of Bengal* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1957). In his Introduction to the former, Dani wrote:

“The victory of Muhammad Bakht-yar Khalji at Nadiya in A. D. 1204 marks a new epoch in the history and culture of Bengal. The history henceforth turns on to record the onward march of the Muslim arms from West Bengal to South and East until the entire Gangeto-Brahmaputra delta was brought under their complete sway. This region, which henceforth bore the name of *Sultanat-i-Bangala* or *Subah-i-Bangala*, was in the past surcharged with Hindu-Buddhist spirit, but now it felt the impact of Islam. The early Arab contact with the Bengal coast has left no recognisable remains on the surface, except a faint memory in “Buddermokan” associated with the Muslims as recorded by Harvey. The influence of Islam in the cultural field was gradual but definite, and as a result of the clash of its ideals with those of the earlier forces we find the people of this region coming within the fold of Islam in such a great number that the whole atmosphere of this humid land today breathes in the spirit of the desert-born Islam.” (pp1-2)

By meticulously researching and deciphering the architectural and inscriptive evidence of Muslim rule in Bengal, Professor Dani proved (if proof was required) that more than six centuries of Muslim rule in Bengal was a remarkable period of progress

and development in the history of that whole region. Having been trained in historiography and archaeology by prominent British scholars like Sir Mortimer Wheeler, Dani pursued a critical but evidence-based approach to history, architecture and archaeology. That means he was in favour of a holistic approach to history where people and cultures featured prominently in the study of past as opposed to specific military actions or political events dominating the historical narrative. Even if that meant he had to reject over-specialisation in favour of synthesis in order to reconstruct and make sense of history, then he felt it was necessary to do that to develop a comprehensive but accurate picture of the past. Being fluent in more than a dozen languages including Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Bengali, English, French and Turkish, Dani's pioneering research laid the foundation for a new and innovative approach to the Muslim history and heritage of Bengal.

While teaching at Dhaka University and writing on Muslim history of Bengal, Dani became aware of the rich Islamic heritage of that region and how this important historical and cultural legacy of the Muslims had been misinterpreted (if not deliberately distorted) by some Muslim and many non-Muslim historians of Bengal. Accordingly, during his time at Dhaka, Professor Dani worked with a group of young scholars who subsequently became some of Bengal's most gifted and outstanding Muslim historians of modern times. They included Professors Muhammad Abdur Rahim, Abdul Karim, Muhammad Mohar Ali and Muin-ud-Din Ahmad Khan, among others. He encouraged these scholars to pursue research in aspects of Muslim history and culture of Bengal and rectify any prevailing misconceptions through factual, documentary and evidence-based analysis, and in so doing they repudiated the misinterpretations of their non-Muslim predecessors.

Professor M A Rahim thus focused his attention on the cultural history of the Muslims of Bengal, while Professor Abdul Karim wrote on the social and political history of Muslim Bengal. By contrast, Professor Muhammad Mohar Ali produced several volumes on Muslim rule in Bengal and Professor Muin-ud-Din Ahmad Khan undertook systematic research on Islamic revivalist movements in Bengal especially focusing on the role of Haji Shariatullah, Titu Mir and Mawlana Karamat Ali Jaunpuri (for more information on this topic, readers may consult my forthcoming book, *The Muslim Heritage of Bengal*, to be published in England in late summer, 2012).

In addition to this, Professor Dani edited and published Munshi Shyam Prasad's Persian treatise titled *Ahwal Gaur wa Panduah*, which, in the words of Dani himself, provides the "earliest topographical descriptions of the monuments of Gaur now available. It is only in this manuscript that we get an account of Rajmahal in some detail." (pp.i-ii). It is true that this manuscript consists of only thirty-two pages in Persian, however it is a very important historical document which he had preserved for posterity.

After living in Dhaka for more than a decade, Dani eventually moved to West Pakistan where he became the founder of Department of Archaeology at Peshawar University and also helped establish and became Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad. After his retirement in 1980, he founded Islamabad Museum in 1993. During his long and distinguished academic career, Professor Dani authored and edited more than 30 books including *Founding Fathers of Pakistan* (1981) and *A History of Pakistan* (2007). The former consists of nine biographies of the founding fathers of Pakistan but, for some unknown reason, Nawab Sir Salimullah of Dhaka, the founder of All-India Muslim League, does not feature in this book; this is a major oversight on the part of Professor Dani. However, his *A History of Pakistan* is a very important contribution, being the result of more than half a century of research on the topic.

It is also worth highlighting that Dani not only wrote for specialists but he also contributed countless articles in newspapers and magazines, and in so doing he helped to popularise historical and archaeological themes and topics, in addition to questioning and reinterpreting received wisdom on a continuous basis.

Professor Dani died on 26 January, 2009 at the age of 88 although his legacy will continue to inspire future generations for a long time to come. The Muslims of Bengal in particular must pay their respects to this great scholar of history and archaeology for helping to revive the Muslim history and culture of Bengal for the benefit of posterity. This tribute is a small step in that direction.

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M M Khan is an internationally acclaimed author, literary critic and research scholar. He has published more than 150 essays and articles worldwide and is author of the widely acclaimed book, THE MUSLIM 100 (reprinted 2010; Kindle version 2011), and THE MUSLIM HERITAGE OF BENGAL (forthcoming, late summer 2012). He is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, Member of English PEN and also a founder of Bengal Muslim Research Institute UK.