

Remembering Professor

SERAJUL HAQUE

(B. cir. 1902 - D. 2005)

By Dr Muhammad Abdul Jabbar Beg

Professor Dr Serajul Haque was one of the foremost Arabic scholars of East Pakistan (1947-1971) and Bangladesh (1972-2005). He was a Professor of Arabic at Dhaka University and one of the founders of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan (now Bangladesh). It is worth pointing out that the Arabic word Haqq (literally, 'truth'), is often anglicized as 'Haque' or 'Haq' by the Muslims in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, just as other Arabic words are spelled with a suffix of 'que' and 'qui', as in *Faruque*, *Faruqui*, *Siddique*, *Siddiqui* and *Mushtaque*. There are many Arabic loan-words in Bengali language. Thus the name Serajul Haque (Arabic *Siraj al-Haq*) means 'a lamp of the Truth'.

Serajul Haque hailed from an ancient family of Brahmins in Bengal, just as the ancestors of Sir Muhammad Iqbal came from a Brahmin family of Kashmir. Genealogically, he was the fifth descendant of Ananta Bandopadhdhay, who had converted to Islam and assumed the name of Anta Muhammad. His son, Reza Muhammad, had a son called Mohammad Taqi Patwari, whose son was named Mohammad Hamidullah Patwari. This man was the father of Serajul Haque. According to Mr Ziaul Haque, a son of Serajul

Haque, his father was born in a Bengali-speaking family, but his father and grandfather had acquired a good knowledge of Persian and Arabic.

According to one source, Serajul Haque was born to Hamidullah and Maimuna Khatun on 28 January 1902 in Bholacourt village (P.S. Begamganj) in Noakhali district, while another source gives the date of his birth as 1 April 1905. This discrepancy between the actual birth day and the official birth day is not unfamiliar to biographers and may be explained by an examination of school registration certificates. During Serajul Haque's student days, two systems of education prevailed, namely one inspired by European modernity and another based on traditional Madrasah principles. After completing his early and further education in Arabic, Persian and Urdu in the Madrasah system, Haque attended Dhaka University and obtained his BA in Arabic and Islamic Studies in 1927 and MA degree in the following year. He then joined university as Junior Lecturer and studied Persian language and literature as a private student, thus obtaining a second Master's degree in 1930. In 1935 he was awarded a scholarship to study for a PhD at SOAS (University of London) under the supervision of Professor Hamilton A.R. Gibb. He wrote a thesis titled 'Imam Ibn Taimiyah and his Projects of Reform' for which he was awarded a PhD in 1937. His contribution was based on original Arabic sources as well as Orientalist literature on Ibn Taymiyyah in German, French and English. There is no doubt that the 'ulama' in East and West Bengal had an interest in the lives and thoughts of prominent Islamic scholars like Ibn Taymiyyah. This is evident from the fact that Mawlana Muhammad Maniruddin Anwari, a well known Islamic scholar and editor of a Muslim weekly had written and published a series of essays on the life and work of Imam Ibn Taymiyyah in the weekly Saptahik Ahle-Hadis, which was published from 1 Marquis Lane, Calcutta between September 1932 and April 1933. Writings such as these may have inspired scholars like Serajul Haque to research and write on this topic.

On his return from London, Dr Serajul Haque was promoted as a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies. Then in 1943 he was promoted to the position of Reader (Associate Professor) and, eight years later, was awarded a full Professorship. In many Third World countries, young scholars are often assigned administrative positions (such as Dean of Faculty, Head of Department, Chairman, or even Vice

Chancellor) of their institutions, rather than using their talents to promote advanced academic research. Likewise, when Serajul Haque became Dean of the Faculty of Arts, he, like many other university Professors, had less time to pursue academic research. This had a detrimental impact on the educational progress and development in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Serajul Haque held the position of Professor for 22 years, until his retirement in 1970, after which he was appointed Treasurer of the newly founded Jahangirnagar University in Dhaka until 1975. He also served as acting Vice-Chancellor from time to time. Thus the potential of Serajul Haque as a linguist and Islamic scholar was wasted in non-academic pursuits, even though he earned the respect of his students and colleagues for his dedication. As a result, he was appointed Professor Emeritus in Islamic Studies in 1975. It was only after his retirement that his PhD thesis was published by the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh in 1982. It was subsequently translated into Bengali by Professor Muhammad Mujibur Rahman of the Arabic Department, Rajshahi University. Apart from this book, Dr Serajul Haque produced a number of other academic works (see Professor Serajul Haque Commemoration Volume, edited by Dr Muhammad Akhtaruzzaman of Dhaka University and published by Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2011).

Some of Dr Serajul Haque's noteworthy writings include:

1. 'Ibn Taimiyah' in A History of Muslim Philosophy (edited by M.M.Sharif), volume II, Delhi, 1995.
2. 'A Letter of Ibn Taymiyyah to Prince Historian Abu'l-Fida', in Documenta Islamica , Berlin, 1952.
3. 'Teaching Arabic in Pakistan', in The Teaching of Modern Languages, UNESCO Publication, Paris, 1955.
4. 'Ibn Taimiyyah's Conception of Analogy and Consensus', in Islamic Culture (quarterly journal), Hyderabad, Deccan, India, 1943.

5. 'Ibn Taimiyyah and his Anthropomorphism', in *Dacca University Journal*, Dacca, 1943.

6. 'The German Contribution to Arabic and Islamic Studies', in *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh*, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1974.

Some of his unpublished writings have been published in the *Commemoration Volume* including:

7. 'Some Aspects of Tasawwuf' (pp.309-320).

8. 'Islam's attitude to material Progress' (pp. 333-338).

9. 'Islam's potential contribution to world peace' (pp.315-320).

10. 'Sir Hamilton Gibb and his contribution to Arabic' (pp.321-332).

In the latter, Dr Haque provides a first-hand account of the life and works of the British Orientalist, Sir Hamilton Gibb, who was born in Alexandria on 2 January 1895, the son of Alexander Graford Gibb of Scotland, who was the Manager of the Abukir Land Reclamation Company in Alexandria. After his father's death in 1897, his mother took a teaching position in the Church of Scotland Girls' School in Alexandria. At the age of five, Hamilton Gibb was sent to Scotland to be educated. After completing his schooling, he enrolled at Edinburgh University where he studied Aramaic, Hebrew and Arabic. His study was interrupted by the First World War in which he served in France as an artillery officer until the armistice of 1918. After the armistice, he returned to Edinburgh where he obtained a degree in 1919. He then moved to London School of Oriental Studies as a research student in Arabic and in 1921 was appointed a Lecturer in 1921 even before he had obtained his Master's degree in Arabic, which he did in 1922. He worked as a research assistant to Sir Thomas W. Arnold, the celebrated author of *The Preaching of Islam*, who had served at the Aligarh University and was one of the teachers and mentors of Sir Muhammad Iqbal. During 1926-27, Gibb visited Middle Eastern countries to study contemporary Arabic literature. He was appointed Reader in Arabic, History and

Literature at London University in 1928. After the death of Sir Thomas Arnold in 1930, Gibb was appointed Professor of Arabic and succeeded Sir Arnold as the resident British editor of the Encyclopaedia of Islam (first edition). According to Serajul Haque, he then left London University and moved to Oxford to succeed D.S. Margoliouth as the Laudian Professor of Arabic and was elected a Fellow of St John's College. He retired in 1955. After his retirement, he suffered a stroke and returned to Oxford. His wife passed away in 1969 and he himself died on 22 October 1971.

Sir Hamilton Gibb was a great Arabist and medievalist, who wrote many books on Islam, Muslim history, culture and society. He also translated two books from Arabic. In March 1958 he attended a conference in Karachi on 'Research and Advanced Teaching in Humanities in the Universities of Pakistan'. According to Serajul Haque, from 26th to 28th February, Hamilton Gibb visited Dacca where he addressed members of the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies at that university and also the Asiatic Society of Pakistan (Dhaka). Here he met the polyglot, Dr Muhammad Shahidullah and Mawlana Muhammad Akram Khan, a famous Islamic scholar and journalist, among others. The latter offered him Green Coconut water and Gibb thanked him for this hospitality. At a later date, Dr Serajul Haque visited Sir Hamilton at Harvard University where he attended his classes in Islamic History and Comparative Religion. He was also a guest at the Gibbs family home and received a warm reception. Many students of Dr Serajul Haque were supervised by Professor Gibb at Oxford including Professor M A Bari. Dr Haque was very fond of his teacher and paid him the following tribute:

'Gibb was not only an Orientalist or Professor of Arabic, but also an institution by himself. A great scholar, a devoted student of Arabic and Islamic Studies, a wonderful organiser, a keen researcher with a deep understanding of his subjects, a powerful mind whose sympathy encompassed all. Professor Gibb was, above all, a great man and a great teacher. I remember him as one who was my teacher, friend, philosopher and guide.'

(p332).

Dr Serajul Haque had a pleasant personality; he also held the non-academic post of General Secretary and President of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan and then Bangladesh

(1954-55 & 1979-80). He attended many conferences abroad in the UK, USA, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Bokhara, Belgium, India and Pakistan, and was a member of the delegation of scholars who were welcomed at the White House by President Jimmy Carter. He also visited China with his father-in-law, Dr Muhammad Shahidullah, and dozens of other Muslim scholars from Pakistan. Dr Serajul Haque had the honour of leading the funeral of Kazi Nazrul Islam, the national poet of Bangladesh.

Dr Serajul Haque was awarded Sitara-i-Imtiaz in 1969 and the Independence Award of Bangladesh in 1983. He also received Ekushe Padak in 1997 and the Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah Gold Medal in 2002. Dr Serajul Haque's actual age at the time of his death in 2005 is a matter of disagreement. According to Dr Anisuzzaman, he was more than 103 years old (p40) at the time, while according to Dr Osman Ghani of Calcutta University, he died at the age of 105 (p23). He was laid to rest in the graveyard of the Sobhanbagh Mosque Complex in Dhaka.

Dr Haque had many distinguished students including Mr Abdur Rahman Biswas, a former President of Bangladesh; Dr Muhammad Ishaq, a Professor of Arabic at Dhaka University; Dr Saghir Hasan Masumi, a teacher of philosophy at Quetta University; Dr A.K.M. Ayub Ali, a principal of Madrasah-i-Alia, Dhaka, Sylhet and Rajshahi; Dr M. A. Bari, Vice-Chancellor of Rajshahi University and Chairman of the University Grants' Commission; Dr Ziauddin, Director of the Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad; Dr Mustafizur Rahman, Vice-Chancellor of the Islamic University of Kushtia in Bangladesh; Dr Habibur Rahman, a Professor of Arabic, Dr. A.N.M. Raisuddin, among others. *A Quest for Islamic Learning: Essays in memory of Serajul Haque* has been rectly published as tribute to Professor Dr Serajul Haque.

Professor Dr Muhammad Abdul Jabbar Beg is a graduate of Rajshahi University and obtained his PhD in Islamic History from University of Cambridge in 1971. He taught at several prominent universities and has authored many books. He is a regular contributor to BMRI website.

<http://www.bmri.org.uk>