

Remembering Professor

Muhammad Abdur Rahim (B. 1921- D. 1981)

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan

Professor Dr Muhammad Abdur Rahim was one of the foremost Muslim historians and academics of his generation. Author of almost a dozen seminal works on aspects of Muslim history and culture of India in general and Bengal in particular, this renowned scholar and writer did not, however, receive the recognition he deserved in his homeland, Bangladesh, during his life time. This article is a tribute to this remarkable scholar of Bangladesh.

Muhammad Abdur Rahim (better known as M. A. Rahim) was born in 1921 into a lower middle-class Muslim family of Mohanpur village in Matlab (today located in Chandpur district). As a child, Abdur Rahim attended his village Maktab (Qur'anic school) where he received instruction in basic Arabic and Islamic studies. Subsequently, he enrolled at his local primary school where he studied Bengali language, Mathematics, Science, Arabic and aspects of Islamic studies. He was a bright student and successfully completed his further education, thus passing his Matriculation Examination (the equivalent of today's SSC) in 1936 from Chengarchar High English School. Thereafter, young Abdur Rahim enrolled at Dhaka Intermediate College and completed his Intermediate of Arts (equivalent of today's HSC) two years later.

Fascinated by history and culture, Abdur Rahim chose to pursue higher education in this subject. Accordingly, he enrolled at Dhaka University to study for an undergraduate degree in history. At the time, Dhaka University did not have a separate Department of Islamic History and Culture and, as such, he studied general history. Three years later, Abdur Rahim obtained his BA Honours degree in History with flying colours. This encouraged him to enrol for a Master's degree in the same subject and, in 1942 he became one of the few Muslim students to obtain an MA in history from Dhaka University. This was an important achievement so much so that the authorities of Maldah College recruited him as a Lecturer on account of his academic brilliance and devotion to his subject.

Abdur Rahim taught at Maldah from 1943 to 1946 before he moved to Jamalpur AM College where he taught history from 1946 to 1949. While teaching at these colleges, Abdur Rahim read extensively and took copious notes. Using these notes, he then compiled several textbooks for school, college and university students. Given Abdur Rahim's on-going research and commitment to his subject, on 11 January 1950, he was appointed a temporary Lecturer at Dhaka University during which he more than proved his worth. So much so that, in 1952, at the age of thirty, he was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to pursue higher studies in the United States for a year. A year later, he was awarded another Scholarship to go to England to pursue doctoral research in history at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

During his time in London, he researched and wrote a thesis titled *The History of Afghans in India, 1545-163, with especial reference to their relations with the Mughals*. He was awarded PhD degree for this thesis and it was published by the Central Institute of Islamic Research based in Karachi in 1961. The author dedicated this book to Professor Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi, Vice-Chancellor of Karachi University and a renowned historian, who also wrote the Foreword to the book. Professor Qureshi recognised the value of this contribution, praising it in these words, "It is... gratifying that Dr M. A. Rahim's thesis is being published. It fills a gap in our historical literature and I am sure it will be appreciated by the students of this period in so far as it attempts to give an unbroken story of the decline of the Afghan power in the sub-continent." (p.vi)

After completing his PhD, Dr Abdur Rahim left Dhaka and moved to Karachi University where he became a Lecturer in the Department of History in 1954. A year later, he was promoted as Reader (equivalent of the rank of Associate Professor). While teaching at Karachi University, Dr Abdur Rahim continued his research and writing. One of the major achievements of his scholarly career was the publication of the *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, published in two volumes in 1963 and 1967, respectively. Consisting of 453 pages, the first volume was dedicated to Dr Mahmud Husain. The second volume, consisting of 472 pages, was dedicated to Professor I. H. Qureshi. These two volumes established his reputation as an eminent historian and scholar of the Muslim history of Bengal.

If Dr Abdur Rahim's *Social and Cultural History of Bengal* covered the Muslim history of Bengal from 1201 to 1757, then his *Muslim Society and Politics in Bengal* covered the period from 1757 to 1947. This book was written after Dr Abdur Rahim returned to Dhaka University from Karachi following the break-up of Pakistan in 1971. Published in 1978 by the University of Dhaka, in this book, the author presented the history of the Muslims of Bengal during the British rule; the Bengali translation of this book was completed by the author himself and it was published by Ahmed Publishing in 1976 under the title of *Banglar Musalmander Itihas*. Whilst teaching at Dhaka University, Dr Abdur Rahim was offered a number of administrative posts including that of Chairman of Department of History. He successfully combined his roles as a Professor, Chairman of History Department, Member of Asiatic Society of Bangladesh and Member of Bangladesh Itihas Samiti along with that of a dedicated scholar, researcher and writer. One of the most important books he wrote at the time was *History of the University of Dacca* (1981, reprinted 1992). This book is a seminal contribution but unfortunately it is now out of print and therefore it is not readily available (this writer was able to obtain a copy from a senior Professor at a leading university in Bangladesh).

After serving as a Professor and Chairman of the Department of History at Dhaka University from December 1973 to June 1981, Dr Abdur Rahim eventually retired. Keen to retain his services, the university authorities offered him an extended contract. However, a month later, this renowned historian and scholar of Muslim Bengal passed away at the age of sixty. But posterity will remember him for his numerous

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

achievements and contribution to the revival of Muslim history and culture of Bengal for the benefit of the future generations. May his soul rest in eternal peace!

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 2011), and THE MUSLIM HERITAGE OF BENGAL (forthcoming). He is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, Member of English PEN and also a founding Director of Bengal Muslim Research Institute UK. Please Note: BMRI intend to publish a detailed and critical biography of Professor Muhammad Abdur Rahim at a later date, God willing!