

**Book Review**

# *Great Historian of Twentieth Century Muslim Bengal*

**By Muhammad Mojlum Khan**

*Abdul Karim Commemoration Volume* edited by Shamsul Hossain, Dhaka: Adorn Publications, pp248, 2008, HB, Taka 500.00

Late Professor Dr Abdul Karim was a truly great Muslim scholar and historian of Bengal. Born in 1928 in Chapachari village, located in Banskhali in Chittagong district of Bangladesh, Abdul Karim studied at Islamic Intermediate College. After completing his Intermediate of Arts (I.A.) in 1946, he moved to Dhaka University where he obtained his BA (Hons) and MA degrees in History in 1949 and 1950 respectively.

As a gifted student, he was recruited as a Lecturer at the same university where he worked closely with Professor Dr Ahmad Hasan Dani, who was one of Asia's leading authorities on archaeology and history. Under the guidance of Professor Dani, Abdul Karim pursued doctoral research on the *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal* which earned him a PhD degree from Dhaka University in 1959. Published by the Asiatic Society of Pakistan in the same year, Professor Dani rated this book very highly. In his Foreword to the book, Professor Dani wrote:

“From the mere tale of wars and conquests and those events that centre round a few personalities, it is pleasing to go over to the people's history and view in broad perspective the interaction of different civilisations, the mingling of the peoples of diverse races and qualities, and the social adjustments that accrue from the complexities of human life. In this unfolding of man's history, the passions of war

cool down to the necessities of human existence. Man appears as an individual – a part of the social group that is being created out of the chaos resulting from wars and conquests. It is precisely this aspect of the history of Bengal that has been attempted in the following pages by Dr Abdul Karim. Away from the political bickering he is concerned here with the problem of the fundamental change that the medieval society of Bengal was undergoing as a result of the impact of Islam. How was it possible for the flooded plains of Bengal to absorb the desert-born Islam, and what were the circumstances that led this far-flung area to become a Muslim majority pocket? What forces were acting and reacting in the formation of the Muslim society in Bengal? Finally the attempt is made to analyse this social overgrowth on the planes of orthodox Islam and local beliefs and practices. The history traced here on the basis of the Persian chronicles, inscriptions, coins, foreign travellers' accounts, Persian and Bengali literature and the local traditions, mirrors the individual and the groups of individuals as taking part in the social phenomena that constitute the foundation of East Pakistan [now Bangladesh].”

Abdul Karim's early training in Arabic and Persian enabled him to access original sources in those languages, in addition to English, Urdu and Bengali books and manuscripts. Encouraged by Professor Dani and others, he then proceeded to England where he joined the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, for another PhD degree on *Murshid Quli Khan and His Times*, which was also published by the Asiatic Society of Pakistan. Then returned to Dhaka University where he continued to teach until 1966. After the establishment of Chittagong University in the same year, Abdul Karim joined its History Department as Reader and Head of Department. He later became Vice-Chancellor of Chittagong University and was also associated with Rajshahi University, in addition to many other affiliations and memberships of professional bodies and organisations.

Although he was entrusted with many administrative jobs, he always found time to pursue research and wrote prolifically on different aspects of Muslim history and culture of Bengal. In addition to publishing hundreds of articles and essays in numerous journals, home and abroad, he authored more than twenty major studies in English and Bengali, not to mention dozens of smaller books and booklets. Some of his major titles include

1. *Samaj-o-Jiban* (Autobiography of Abdul Karim), 2 vols, Dhaka: Jatiya Sahitya Prakash, 2008.
2. *Banglar Itihas (Sultani Amal)*, Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1977.
3. *Banglar Itihas (Mughal Amal)*, Dhaka: Jatiya Grantha Prakashan, reprinted 2005.
4. *Corpus of the Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of Bengal*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1992.

After more than fifty years of continuous research and writing, Professor Abdul Karim died in July 2007 at the age of seventy-nine. He died of age-related complications in his native Chittagong and was laid to rest in Gharibullah Shah Mazar. In recognition of his contribution and achievements, he was awarded ‘Ekushey Padak’ in 1995 by the Government of Bangladesh. Although Abdul Karim hailed from East Bengal, his writings on the Muslim history and culture of Bengal were of such a high quality that his works became important sources of reference for students and scholars alike. According to Professor Anupam Sen, Abdul Karim’s “work on the Sultani reign is still considered a masterpiece. His works became part of the academic syllabus in many Indian universities. In fact, he was more popular in West Bengal than in Bangladesh.”

The book under review was originally designed as a felicitation volume but due to his sudden death it had to be published as a commemoration volume – a well deserved tribute to one of Bangladesh’s, indeed, Asia’s great scholars of medieval history and archaeology!

Divide into four parts, in the first, Professors Tapan Raychaudhury and Richard Eaton had paid their tributes to this great Muslim scholar and historian of Bengal. Part two consists of ten contributions on diverse topics including useful articles by Professor AKM Yaqub Ali, a former student of Abdul Karim, Professor Mohammed Yusuf Siddiq and M. Patwari’s insightful essay on ‘Professor Abdul Karim’s Thoughts on History’. Parts three and four are in Bengali, comprising of tributes and related

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

articles by Professor Abdul Karim's many distinguished former students, colleagues and other scholars. This book is well worth reading.

**M M Khan is an internationally literary critic, research scholar and author of *The Muslim 100: The Lives, Thoughts and Achievements of Most Influential Muslims in History* (reprinted 2010; Kindle edition 2011) and *The Muslim Heritage of Bengal* (forthcoming, summer 2012). He has published more than 150 essays and articles worldwide and is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland and Member of English PEN.**