

**Book Review**

## **Farrukh Ahmad's Bengali Islamic Poetry**

***Islam in Bengali Verse: A Selection from Sirajun Munira*, by Farrukh Ahmad, translated into English by Syed Sajjad Husain, Dhaka: BIIT, pp. 53, PB. TK.100**

Farrukh Ahmad was one of the foremost Muslim poets of Bengali literature during the twentieth century along with Kazi Nazrul Islam and Ghulam Mustafa. According to late Professor Syed Sajjad Husain, former Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka and Rajshahi Universities, "Farrukh Ahmad belonged as a poet to the generation that grew to maturity in the 40s. Born in 1918 into a Saiyid family in Jessore he was educated in Calcutta, but did not advance beyond high secondary schooling owing, according to reports, to the Bohemian style of his life in his early youth. A chance encounter is reported to have thrown him into contact with a saintly Muslim scholar, Maulana Abdul Khaleq. The spiritual conversion which followed changed the whole course of his life. He dedicated himself henceforth to the service of Islam." (p16)

Beginning with a rhyme written during his twenties titled *Larke Lenge Pakistan* (We shall fight for Pakistan if we must) he went on to write many well known collections of poetry in Bengali on a range of Islamic themes. Although many Muslim poets of Bengal tried to versify the Islamic past and in so doing celebrate their faith, culture and traditions (such as Ghulam Mustafa, Kaykobad and Shahadat Hussain), but none of them were able to match Farrukh's conviction, fervour, skill and ability other than perhaps Kazi Nazrul Islam.

In the words of Professor Sajjad Husain, "The translations which follow are a selection from the writings of Farrukh Ahmad (1918-1974) who rose to literary notice in the forties as a member of a new generation of Muslim poets in what was then Bengal. Essentially a dreamer, with a romantic temperament, he underwent a conversion to mysticism early in life after a brief Bohemian period, and henceforth dedicated himself to the cultivation of themes from the history of Islam. Islam became to him identified with a personal vision of a social order embodying the highest ideals of moral justice and spiritual enlightenment. By the beginning of the fifties Farrukh came to be celebrated as the greatest Islamic poet after Nazrul Islam, the man who had given Islam a habitation and a name in modern Bengali poetry in the twentieth century." (p1)

Some of Farrukh's most famous works are *Sat Sagarer Majhi* (The Mariner of the Seven Seas), *Nawfil-o-Hatim* (Nawfil and Hatim) and *Sirajun Munira* (The Radiant

Light). Through these and many other collections of writings, Farrukh established his reputation as a leading Muslim poet of Bengal. As Professor Sajjad Husain wrote, "...Farrukh was no imitator. While like Nazrul Islam he tried to use the characteristically Islamic idiom popular among Muslims, he lacked the command of Urdu and Persian which enabled Nazrul Islam to devise melodies out of a fusion of words drawn from such diverse sources as Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Sanskrit. But this was counterbalanced by his personal commitment to religion which Nazrul Islam could not equal. It is true that Nazrul Islam remained at heart deeply attached to the ideal of Muslim internationalism, but he was personally no believer in any narrow doctrine, and could at times surprise people by writing poems which seemed to run counter to the main trend of his verse. Outwardly at least he seemed a cosmopolitan, a poet *per se* to whom freedom of expression mattered more than loyalty to any creed. On this account he laid himself open to the charge of inconsistency, and if one judged him by individual poems instead of seeing all his *oeuvre* in a broad perspective one is apt to be misled." (pp1-2)

However, the writings of Farrukh Ahmad were of a different kind. After his erratic early phase and subsequent conversion to traditional Islam, he "allowed no deviation, aesthetic or literary, to deflect him from the course he chose. This was often misunderstood. Many outside his inner circle criticised him as an extremist, a poet *engage* incapable of compromise. His talents were admired even by those who did not see eye to eye with him, but this did not prevent him from having enemies who thought he had become too dogmatic to be a good writer. This was of course an unjust estimate, for there have been in all ages great writers, poets, dramatists, novelists, who have been able to produce great literature without compromising their religious or political or social ideals. A great or good writer knows instinctively where to draw the line between personal beliefs and wider sympathies. There is no narrowness in Farrukh's interpretation of Islam: it embraces a deep sympathy for the downtrodden, an instinctive recoil against injustice of all kinds, a dream of economic emancipation which transcends parochial boundaries. Here the voice one hears is the voice of a man who is above all a champion of all that is noble and right, a rebel against all that is selfish and evil." (pp2-3)

As expected, Farrukh Ahmad's worldview was heavily influenced by traditional Islamic thought and culture. He idealised the Prophet of Islam and his immediate successors, namely the *Khulafa al-Rashidun* (the four rightly-guided Caliphs of Islam), thus considering them to be outstanding role models for humanity. In fact, to Farrukh, the Prophet of Islam was more than a role model in the worldly sense, he was "an inexhaustible source of spiritual light, the bearer of a message from the unknown, which remained inaccessible to ordinary men....[Thus] Farrukh Ahmad introduces a mystical note implying that by bare reason alone we could not understand the Prophet or the nature of his message. The way to understand him was to surrender to the greatness of his personality, to accept him without reservations. He poured into his panegyric a fervour which is a mixture of devotion, admiration and passion. The four chief companions, he believed, having been the direct recipients of the Prophet's esoteric guidance, helped diffuse among ordinary mortals some of the ecstasy they themselves had savoured." (pp3-4)

In the book under review, late Professor Syed Sajjad Husain has translated selections from Farrukh Ahmad's *Sirajun Munira*, which is arguably one of his best known

collections of Bengali Islamic poetry. What motivated him to undertake this task? He wrote, "...These translations [are] to be a kind of personal tribute to Farrukh Ahmad whom I knew intimately and whose idealism I admired even where I differed with him. We had many commitments in common. To the end of his life, in spite of threats, intimidation and actual suffering, he remained steady in his beliefs and refused to compromise. Controversy surrounding these beliefs sometimes tended to tempt people to deny him the merit he deserved, but it is to be hoped that he will outlive these controversies as a poet who served his mother tongue to the best of his abilities."

Translating from one language to another is never easy. This is even more difficult if the subject matter is infused with emotional, mystical and religious feeling, fervour and spontaneity as was the case with Farrukh's Islamic poetry. However, Professor Sajjad Husain has succeeded in capturing the meaning and import of the original Bengali verses in his translation. Here are few examples; these verses refer to the Prophet of Islam:

"In regal pomp he dwells upon the heights  
Of the blue firmament where swirling winds  
Carry the imprint of his royal name  
To the horizon's edges  
Hail, my Bird of Light,  
Are you awake?  
At night's end now  
Will you pour forth fresh raptures unalloyed  
With sorrows past, as, wings outspread,  
You cross the void?  
What visions will the frenzied sea pursue?  
Will dumb heaven's mute lips be unlocked  
To answer that soft ringing cry which comes  
From regions far away?"

"Long, long were you waited for; blessed was the hour  
Of nativity which drew a veil  
Over past ages of deep sloth and brought life  
Back to where death reigned.  
In your hands you hold  
Promise of dawns unending flaming forth  
From rays your sacred torch diffuses, for  
You carry the elixir which confers  
The gift of endless life."

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research scholar and a Director of Bengal Muslim Research Institute UK.**