

Book Review

A Great Historian and Muslim Scholar

Barendra Barenya (Celebrity in Barind): A Felicitation Volume for A.K.M. Yaqub Ali (edited by A K M Shahnawaz *et al*), Time Publishers, Dhaka, Bangladesh 2007, pp. 853

Professor Dr Abul Khair Muhammad Yaqub Ali, who was born at Hatdhuma village in Bogra district in 1939, has been a popular lecturer in the Department of Islamic History and Culture at Rajshahi University in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) for more than four decades from 1963 to 2005. Shortly after passing his Master's degree in Islamic History and Culture in 1962, he was employed by the University where he started teaching 'a history of early Muslim architecture and art' during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods in the Middle East. Because of his close association with the *Varendra Museum* at Rajshahi town he took special interest in local history of North Bengal (which was known in antiquity as *Barind*) on which he wrote his dissertation titled *Aspects of Society and Culture of the Barind (1200-1576 A.D.)* under the supervision of the Harvard-educated historian, Prof. Dr. Safiuddin Joarder, and was awarded Ph.D in 1982. His teaching and research career subsequently flourished and was promoted to full Professorship in 1990.

Author of more than a dozen books in English and Bengali, including *Select Arabic and Persian Epigraphs of Bengal* which was published by Islamic Foundation Bangladesh in Dhaka in 1988 and *Muslim Architecture and Art (Muslim Sthapathaya -o- Shilpakala)* published by Adhuni Prakashan, Dhaka in 2006 and *Arab Historiography (Arab Jatir Itihas Charcha)* which is a translation from the Arabic. Its original author was Professor Abdul Aziz Abdul Karim Duri, the former Chancellor of Baghdad University until 1968. It was published by the Bangla Academy, Dhaka. It was on the basis of his slow and steady academic achievements that Dr Yaqub Ali earned popularity among his students and respect from colleagues. He retired from teaching in 2005 and within a year after that he was re-employed by Rajshahi University as a Professor Emeritus, a position which he still holds and richly deserves. The students and friends of Professor Yaqub Ali have celebrated his life and work by presenting a *Felicitation Volume* in 2007. It is a rare honour for a Professor of Islamic History and Culture at Rajshahi University.

Like all *festchrift*, this volume contains a miscellany of research articles by a number of specialists in various fields of historical and cultural studies of the Middle East and the region of Bengal and North India, including S.M.M. Kamal's 'The Arab Genius al-Khwarizmi' (pp.620-38); Ibn 'Abd al-Barr's Contribution to Hadith Literature in Spain (pp.592-99), M.A. Khan's 'Islamic Cosmology' (pp.560-70), N. M. Nasrullah's 'Freedom of Speech in Islam' (pp.571-81), M.A. Ali's Shah Waliullah and the Concept of

Ijtihad; Muhammad Manazir Ahsan's *Blasphemous Danish Cartoons* (pp.582-91) which was previously published in *Hajj and 'Umra* journal in Saudi Arabia. This last-named article is a significant and brilliant analysis of the recent Western phenomenon of *Islamophobia*. M. Yusuf Siddiq's 'Calligraphy as Cultural Expression in the Inscriptions of Medieval Bengal' (507-20); E. Haque's 'Maritime activities and indigenous traditions of boat-building in ancient and medieval Bengal (465-87)', O. Faruq's 'Epigraphs of Bengal Sultanate (521-37)'; Muhammad Abdul Jabbar Beg's 'Religious art of Islamic civilization'(pp.639-49), which was originally written for an international conference held in Seoul, South Korea in August 1984 and was first published in the inter-faith journal, *Dialogue and Alliance*, in the special issue of 'The Image of the Divine in Art', which was edited by the New Zealand Professor Albert Moore, in New York, 1989; M. Ibrahim's 'Diplomacy for Conflict Resolution' (pp.650-56) and Yaqub Ali's 'Two Undeciphered Inscriptions of Varendra' (pp.798-806).

The felicitation volume is bilingual: Bengali and English; the articles written in Bengali language far outnumber those in English. Some articles by former students like Md. Abdul Latif Mandal and Muhammad Maniruzzaman are purely recollection of 'fond memories' (*smiriti-charan*) when they studied under Prof Yaqub Ali at Rajshahi University, while other essays are personal tributes to Dr Yaqub Ali. As a result, the felicitation volume may be regarded as a less elitist collection of specialist articles and more populist ones establishing old-style teacher-disciple relationship. The volume was oversubscribed by Dr Ali's former students. This volume is a trend-setter, which inspired other senior Professors to aspire for similar *Festschrift*. The publication of this volume has enhanced the prestige and stature of Professor A K M Yaqub Ali among his peers. On the other hand, some of the articles are not well-researched. For instance, it is a mistaken view to treat the world renowned al-Khwarizmi (from Khwarizm in Kazakhstan), the great Muslim pioneer of Algebra and the father of algorism/algorithm to be an Arab. In fact, he was a Khwarizmian Muslim who had lived in Baghdad for a long time and his works on Algebra (*al-Hisab al-Jabr wa'l-Muqabalah*) and arithmetic were translated into Latin and thereby contributed to the development of mathematics in medieval Europe. Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi retained his geographical *nisbah* al-Khwarizmi referring to Khwarizm or Khiva in Central Asia.

The essay on the 'Freedom of Speech in Islam' is thought-provoking but controversial. However, it has educational value. Professor Emeritus A K M Yaqub Ali's felicitation volume is a work of reference for studies related to the history of Bangladesh, Pakistan and India (pre-modern Hindustan). It needs to be mentioned that some printing errors in the volume should be emended, if there is a second edition. This publication is a rare tribute to a historian of Muslim art and craft of Bengal. It contains many useful articles in English for general readers and specialists. It should be added to the collection of University libraries in South and South-east Asia as well as in Australia, Europe and America. We congratulate Dr Yaqub Ali for his outstanding academic achievements and his continued supervision of doctoral dissertations in Islamic subjects.

Professor M A J Beg, Cambridge, UK.