

SYED ALI ASHRAF'S CONTRIBUTION TO ISLAMIC EDUCATION AND LITERATURE

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I met Dr Ashraf many times in the United Kingdom and in 1993-1994 attended some seminars at Homerton College and Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge on "Faith-based education" sponsored by the Islamic Academy in Cambridge. I also interviewed him several times in January and April 1996. Ali Ashraf was the Founding Director of the Islamic Academy in Cambridge, which published a quarterly journal, Muslim Education Quarterly. He also founded Darul Ehsan University in Bangladesh, a private institution of which he was Vice-Chancellor for a few years before his death and where he was buried.

Ali Ashraf was born to Ali Hamid, an Inspector of Schools, and his wife Qamrunnigar Khatun. About his parents he confessed, 'As far as my mother is concerned, she was not a scholar. The only thing I can say so far as my mother is concerned was that she never beat her children. We (i.e. Ali Ashraf and his brothers, who included Ali Ahsan, and Ali Naqi) always had tremendous reverence for her. As regards my father, he was very reserved and we were very afraid of him. He was very straight forward, honest and a highly confident person.'

Ali Ashraf also said, 'Our forefather, Shah Ali Baghdadi, who came to India, and who is now buried in Dhaka, belonged to the Sufi line (i.e. order).' Following his claim of a genealogical link to Shah Ali Baghdadi, I discovered the following in A History of Sufism in Bengal by Muhammad Enamul Haq, 1974:

'In the village of Mirpur in Dacca lies the tomb of this saint (i.e. Shah Ali Baghdadi, who died before 1480 A.D.). His title indicates that he was an inhabitant of Baghdad, but otherwise nothing definite is known about him. According to Mr. B. C. Allen, this saint died in 1577; but in the absence of reliable historical evidence, we are unable to accept the accuracy of this date. Adjoining the present shrine of the saint there is an old mosque, which according to an inscription in it, dates its foundation to the year 885 A.H. /1480 A.D., which was during the reign of Yusuf Shah (1478-82 A.D.). It is a well-known fact that almost all mosques adjoining dargahs (i.e. tombs of Sufis) in Bengal were built after the death of the saints or during their life time. So, it can be fairly presumed that the saint Shah Ali Baghdadi died before the year 1480 A.D.' (1)

There is some confusion concerning Ali Ashraf's date of birth date. According to an essay in a book dedicated to his memory titled Barenya (2), he was born in the house of his maternal grandfather in Dhaka on 30th January 1924. However, Ali Ashraf personally told me that he was born on 31 December 1924. According to a published obituary by Dr. S. A. Mabud, and Akbar S. Ahmed (3) in The Independent dated 13 August, 1998, Ali Ashraf was born on 1 January 1925. Ali Ashraf also claimed that his great-grandfather studied Islamic subjects at Al-Azhar University in Cairo. He passed his B.A. Honours and M.A. in English Literature from Dhaka University in 1945 and 1946 respectively. According to one of his admirers, he came to Cambridge University in 1952 and graduated with a degree in English literature. In 1964 he gained a Ph.D. degree in English Literature from Cambridge University with a thesis entitled 'Poetry and its audience' (1914-1945).

Ali Ashraf was a Lecturer and Reader in English Literature at Dhaka University from 1947 to 1955. During the 1955-1956 he taught English literature at Rajshahi University. When, in 1956, his elder brother, Ali Ahsan became Director General of Bangla Academy at Dhaka, Ali Ashraf replaced him as Professor in the English Department of Karachi University where he remained until 1973. After the break-up of Pakistan in 1971, Ashraf had tried to leave the University where he also taught in the Department of Bengali. He left Pakistan eventually and took up a research Fellowship at Clare Hall, Cambridge, during 1973-74. From 1974 to 1982 he served as Professor of English at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah and simultaneously at Ummul Qura University in Makkah. He went on to teach in the Department of Education at Cambridge from 1982 to 1992, during which period his salary was paid by the Muslim World League (Rabitah al-Alam al-Islamic, Makkah).

Ali Ashraf was bi-lingual and expressed his ideas as effectively in Bengali as he did in English. At the same time, his knowledge of Arabic and Persian was very limited. He had no professional education either in Qur'anic Studies ('ulum al-Qur'an), the Hadith (lit. Traditions) of the Prophet, nor was he acquainted with Islamic Jurisprudence (Fiqh). He had no expertise in the Sirah (biography) of the Prophet, or Islamic History (ta'rikh). Yet he was sympathetic towards the Islamic Heritage of Bengali Literature as is demonstrated in his Bengali book, Muslim Traditions in Bengali Literature (Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, Dhaka, 1982). His poetic talent was recognized in Bangladesh and Pakistan (cf. Saiyad Ali Ashrafi Kabita, 1991). Moreover, he belonged to the mainstream Muslim poets of Bengal such as Kazi Nazrul Islam, Farrukh Ahmad, Muffakharul Islam and Al-Mahmud. Ashraf did not belong to the class of 'Ulama' (Islamic theologians) but acquired some knowledge of Islam by his own efforts. He was a member of the mystic group and learned some Du'a' (lit. supplication) and Dhikr (lit. contemplation of God) from some Pirs who taught mysticism. For Ali Ashraf the tomb of Shah Ali Baghdadi was the focus of inspiration. Bengal is littered with such attractions including the tombs of Shah Jalal in Sylhet, Karamat Ali in Rangpur, Shah Makhdum in Rajshahi, Chehel Ghazi (tomb of 40 warriors) in Dinajpur, and the alleged tomb of Bayazid Bistami in Chittagong.

In the course of my interviews with him in 1996, I reminded him that my former Cambridge professor, Dr. R. B. Serjeant, had written a book on the Sayyids of Hadramawt (c.1957). I asked him whether he would like to write a book on the Sayyids of Bangladesh. He showed an interest in the subject but confessed that although he did not have the time to write such a work himself, he would like some of his colleagues at the Darul Ehsan University to supervise either an MPhil or PhD thesis on the History of the Sayyids of Bangladesh. When I asked him again, he told me that the subject was being seriously considered by scholars. I sensed that he was not

particularly enthusiastic about the project. I also suggested to him that the Muslims of Bengal would be grateful to Ali Ashraf if he would consider penning an autobiography. I reminded him of Carlyle's dictum that 'history is the biography of great men'. I argued that a scholar of his standing should share his life experience with others. Hence an autobiography would be his important legacy. He told me with humility that as nobody would be interested in his life it would be a waste of time to write about it. I am sad that he did not take up my suggestion as we shall never know the full story of his life. I then proposed that it would be one of his major contributions to Qur'an studies if he would translate the whole Qur'an into simple English, something that no person from East Bengal had ever achieved. After some persuasion, he agreed to translate the Qur'an into English provided at least two competent Islamic scholars (Ar. 'ulama) would work with him. At the end of the interview, I asked him again what would be his ultimate legacy: a history of the Sayyids, an autobiography or a new translation of the Qur'an. He told me that he intended to do the latter project. Unfortunately, Ali Ashraf died within two years of my interviews. His wife, Asiah Khatun, who was disabled, followed him to the grave within a short time. Alas, he did not write an autobiography or a history of the Sayyids, nor did he translate the Qur'an. When he died leaving behind neither children nor an autobiography, I was broken-hearted. I kept quiet for a while before writing anything about him.

In the early 1990s I met Ali Ashraf at Friday prayers in Corpus Christi College. Occasionally, he used to lead the Jum'ah prayers. Mr. Massoud Shadjareh, an Iranian political activist, who had lived in Cambridge for many years and worked at Cambridge Community Centre, used to attend Friday prayers and served Shish Kebabs to some of the attendees. I enjoyed some of these social and spiritual gatherings that followed the Prayer service. I also attended some of his Sermons (Ar. Khutbah) at the 205 Gilbert Road Mosque.

Ali Ashraf believed in spiritual healing. On one occasion when I visited his house in Cambridge I saw him practising his healing craft. When a man arrived complaining of a severe headache, Ali Ashraf would silently recite some verses of the Qur'an and blow air from his mouth on to the top of the patient's head. A few minutes later the headache had gone. This surprised me. I learned Ali Ashraf was a scholar with a profound religious outlook who prayed five times a day. In this respect there was something special in his character and personality. It is known from eye-witnesses that he never missed his daily prayer. I was with him on a double-decker bus when he performed his late afternoon prayer. He always maintained his Ablution (Ar. Wudu). It was a credit to his upbringing, and later to his discipleship of a Pir named Zahir Shah Taji in Karachi, that these devotions made him a proper Muslim. One of my friends told me that at one occasion they were descending in a lift from a multi-storey car park in Cambridge, when it got stuck. It was then early evening prayer time (Maghrib) and Ali Ashraf performed his ritual prayer inside the confined space of the lift. It would be no exaggeration to say that Ali Ashraf always performed his prayer (Ar. Salah/ Salat) on time, whether he was on a bus, train, boat or plane. Although he was a highly intelligent person, he lacked charisma. He was unwilling or unable to smile at friends and strangers in order to impress or charm them. He was an ascetic person. He lacked charm and at times could appear very morose.

Ali Ashraf has been one of my mentors. He published half a dozen of my articles on the Sahabah, aspects of architecture, Islamic science and on King 'Abd al-Aziz ibn Sa'ud, a dozen reviews of books on Islam, History, minorities and education, four obituaries of Dr Muhammad Hamidullah, Majid Khadduri and Muhammad Mohar Ali. I liked him as a scholar, writer and poet. He was a Hanafi Muslim, a follower of Imam Abu Hanifah's madhhab (School of Law). Ali Ashraf was a keen photographer and left an album which is now being looked after by his sister-in-law, Selina Ali and her husband Mushtaque Ali of London.

Ali Ashraf was a prolific writer and the founding editor of a journal titled Muslim Education Quarterly, which was published in Cambridge from ca. 1982 to 2006. He also edited an anthology of poems by Ghulam Mostafa (1897-1964), a well-known poet of Bengal, who was born at Manoharpur in the district of Jessore and was a school teacher by profession. A graduate of Ripon College in 1918, Ghulam Mostafa began teaching at Barakpur Government School in 1920. He received his Bachelor of Teacher's Training (BT) from David Hare Training College in 1922 and after a long career, retired as Headmaster of Faridpur Zila School in 1949. Ghulam Mostafa was a prolific writer and poet, and Ali Ashraf was an admirer of his distinctive literary works, and paid him the following tribute:

'Though Ghulam Mostafa had started writing just before Nazrul Islam came into the field, he continued to produce poetry after independence. Five of his poetry books were published before 1947: Raktarag (1924), Khosraj (1929), Kavya-Kahini (1932), Sahara (1936) and Hasnahena (1938). After 1947 his translation of Mosaddas-e- Hali (1949), Shikwa, Jawab-e- Shikwa (1960), Kalam-e- Iqbal (i.e. the poems of Muhammad Iqbal) and al-Quran (in parts) (1957) kept the tradition of translations of Urdu, Arabic and Persian literature alive. These were successful translations. In 1958 his philosophical poem Bani Adam was published. His Tarana-e-Pakistan (anthem of Pakistan) came out in 1948. He also brought out an anthology of his poetry selected by him called Bulbulistan. A selection of his best poems edited with a critical introduction by Syed Ali Ashraf was published by Bengali Academy in 1967. Three different facets of human sensibility had a great impact on his poetic consciousness: the Muslim mind as it was evolving during his life-time, love and the vivacity of youth. The impact of the first type of sensibility led to the production of two types of poems - the occasional poems which reflected the ephemeral and transitory socio-political events of the Muslim world and their impact on the Muslim mind of the Sub-continent and those good poems which presented the universal themes, ideals and myths affecting Muslim life, and also permanently influencing all human beings. In the first category fall such poems as 'Shadhin Mishar' (Independent Egypt), 'Hindu-Muslim', 'Vijoy-Ullash' (the joy of victory), 'League-Vijoy' (the victory of League). These had occasional value and appeal to the Muslim community only. To the second category belong such poems as 'Eid-Utsab', Manush (Man) and Bani Adam (the sons of Adam). Some of the narrative poems in the Kavya-Kahini written on Muslim themes in imitation of Tagore's Katha-o-Kahini, in which incidents and situations drawn from Hindu myths and history are depicted, can also be placed in this category because in spite of their typical Muslim perspective they deal with eternal human problems. Ghulam Mostafa succeeded in universalising the situations and themes in the other poems such as 'Eid-Utsav' by presenting it as a symbol of purity, love and joy. Similarly in 'Manush' (Man) he depicts the Quranic concept of Man's creation, his choice between good and evil and his fall. Thus the story deals with the universal problem of Man caught in the eternal conflict between the forces of Good and Evil. Bani Adam is a long poem that deals with this problem. But what is precise and concise in 'Manush' (Man) becomes rather diffuse in this poem. In spite of this limitation this is a bold attempt. He succeeds better as a love-poet. His love-poems depict the sorrows of separation, the joy of the consummation of reciprocal love and the peace and happiness of domestic life. 'Pasher Barir Meye' (lit. the girl in my

neighbour's house), 'Bhushan', 'Kurano Manik', Premer Joy, poems in Sahara and Hasnahena deal with these aspects of love. In another type of love-poem the poet explores the source of love and finds human love only as a reflection of Man's love for Beauty. Sometimes the poet finds this love for Beauty in conflict with his love for a specific individual. This theme was explored by Tagore and Nazrul Islam before him and he seems to be imitating them. The third type of poems written by Ghulam Mostafa deals with youth and its glory. The total performance places him in the category of good poets. His acute observation, accurate and adequate presentation and command over rhythm prove his craftsmanship. But he did not seem to respond to the cultural conflict through which East Bengali educated community was passing since 1947.' (Literature, Society and Culture in East Pakistan 1947 to 1971).

Ali Ashraf's critical evaluation of Ghulam Mustafa's poems evolved from his own commitment to poetry in general and Bengali poetry in particular. Besides his anthology Syed Ali Ashraf Kabita, (1991) he also published Ruba'iyat-e Zahini (Dhaka, 1991), which was dedicated to his spiritual mentor Pir Tasin Shah Zahin Shah Taji; another anthology of his Bengali poems was Prasnouttar (lit. question and answer), Dhaka, 1996. Ali Ashraf also published Kavya- Parichay (Introduction to poetry), Dhaka, 1957. Ali Ashraf's other books include Bengali Bangla Sahitye Muslim Oitijya (Dhaka, 1962) and its improved English version was titled Muslim Traditions in Bengali Literature (Dhaka, 1981-82). His two other books on Kazi Nazrul Islam were Homage to Nazrul Islam (English), Karachi University, 1972 and Nazrul Jibane Premer Ek Notun Adhaya (lit. A new chapter in the love-life of Nazrul Islam), second edition, 1995. It is also worth mentioning that Ali Ashraf wrote two notable articles, namely 'Bengali poetry since independence' in Pakistan Quarterly, vol. XV, parts 1 and 2, 1967, and an essay 'Bengali Drama' in The Reader's Encyclopaedia of World Drama, New York, USA.

While Ali Ashraf was employed as Head of the Department of English at King Abdul Aziz University at Makkah (1974-77) that he proposed to King Faisal the idea of holding a World Conference on Muslim Education. This project was approved by the Saudi Government and, as a result, the First World Conference on Muslim Education was held in Makkah in 1977. Over three hundred scholars attended the conference and Ali Ashraf was appointed Secretary of the follow-up Committee. He was appointed chief editor of a proposed six-volume edition of the conference papers titled Islamic Education. The importance of this first series of its kind 'lies in the exposition of basic educational problems in the Muslim world, in the formulation of the methodology for the solution of these problems and in making the readers of the East and the West appreciate that modern Muslim mind which is also devoutly religious.' The Makkah Conference on Muslim Education was a turning-point in the new collective re-thinking on the education system in the Muslim world. Ali Ashraf played an important part in awakening the reform of the Muslim educational order. The books are titled as follows:

1) Aims and Objectives of Islamic Education by S. Mohammad Naquib al-Attas (1979), 2) Crisis in Muslim Education by S.S. Husain and S.A. Ashraf (1979); 3) Education and Society in the Muslim world edited by Muhammad Wasiullah Khan (1982); 4) Philosophy, Literature and Fine Arts edited by Seyyed Hossain Nasr; 5) Social and Natural Sciences: the Islamic Perspective edited by Ismail R. al-Faruqi (1980) 6) Curriculum and Teacher Education by A. Afendi. The whole series was published in London by Hodder and Stoughton in collaboration with King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah and Makkah. There were other books relevant to this series such as New Horizons in Muslim Education by Ali Ashraf (1984). Ali Ashraf also contributed an erudite article titled 'Universities' to The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World (edited by John Esposito), New York, 1995. This article was largely based on another book titled 'The Concept of Islamic University', which he wrote jointly with H. H. Bilgrami (1984).

Ali Ashraf's only book for children was titled The Prophets (Hodder and Stoughton, 1980). It draws our attention to the Messengers of God from Adam to Jesus. Another lesser known work was a booklet entitled The Qur'anic Concept of History, which was published by the Islamic Foundation in Leicester. According to him "... Adam is a completely new creation endowed with spiritual knowledge and blessed with the duty of a Prophet for his children. We do not get any details about his life. We are informed of his two sons, Abel and Cain. The next picture is of human corruption and the destruction of all unbelievers by a great flood at the time of another Prophet, Noah.

From the Qur'an it appears that there was a time when all people were of the same colour. But Allah divided them into different groups having different colours because he wanted that they should know each other and through that knowledge understand the purpose of creation and the glory of Allah. From Noah till the last Prophet there is a continuous line of Prophethood and human history, with the rise and fall of nations integrally related to faith and man's behaviour, his acceptance or denial of the Message that Allah has sent through His Prophets. Political authority is shown to have been linked up with the moral and spiritual conduct of man. The life of the last Prophet, peace be upon him, proves beyond all doubt that all authority ultimately belongs to Allah. He chooses those who obey Him and fight for His cause. When a nation disobeys Allah and upsets the code of life granted by Him then Allah sends warnings to that nation in the form of natural calamities. But if the nation does not repent and becomes more hard-hearted then He sends human beings to destroy those people. He also sows the seeds of discord among those nations which give up His code and proudly and arrogantly pose to be self-sufficient.

There is thus a Divine plan in history. Increase in wealth or a higher standard of living does not mean real happiness. Real happiness consists in pure living, in humility, in resignation to the Will of Allah, and in fighting in His path in order to establish His kingdom on the earth. Any nation that becomes morally degenerated is bound to fall and lose its greatness."

¹ M.Enamul Haq, A History of Sufism in Bengal, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1974, ., p.233;

² Syed Ali Ashraf Smarok Grantha (Commemoration Volume (in Bengali), published by Darul Ehsan University, Dhaka, September 1999, p. 202;

³ The Independent (London) dated 13 August, 1998;