

# MUHAMMAD ABDUL BARI

(B. 1929 – D. 2003)

A prominent Muslim educationalist, Professor Dr. Muhammad Abdul Bari was an inspirational Professor of Islamic History and Culture at the University of Rajshahi in East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). He died on 4<sup>th</sup> June 2003 after a short illness. His eloquence as an orator, humility and integrity had a profound influence on his students and endeared him to the nation.

Known for his charming smile and courtesy, he never spoke ill of others, held those learned in Islam in great respect and was always a truthful and honest Muslim, and an ideal teacher of Islam. He taught us, among other things, that the Prophet Muhammad (Salla Allahu ‘alayhi wa-Sallam) was a family man and a statesman of the Islamic Community (Ummah), yet there was a mystical dimension in his life.

Besides being a University Professor, Dr. Muhammad Abdul Bari had been the leader of the reformist Jam’iyyat Ahl -I Hadith movement in East and North Bengal since 1960, a position that endowed him with an aura of sanctity and respectability, which he could not have earned otherwise, and for which some of his academic colleagues envied him.

Indeed, one of his academic colleagues, Dr. Muhammad Enamul Haq, was critical of his dual role. According to Ahl-i-Hadith doctrine of strict monotheism (*tawhid*), all forms of associationism (*shirk*) and innovative religious practices (*bid’ah*), went against the tenets of Islam. Professor Enamul Haq thought it was odd to teach Islam in modern Western-style dress, while wearing the traditional religious garb outside the University campus. Such a charge was baseless and in no way did it diminish Dr. Muhammad Abdul Bari’s stature at the University; in fact, it rather enhanced his prestige as a sincere Muslim thinker who valued the Islamic imperative of *Da’wah* (literally, propagation of Islam).

Among other things I learnt that he used to read the Qur’an regularly after morning (Fajr) prayer throughout his life. It is known from a reliable first-hand source that his uncle Mawlana Abdullah al-Kafi (d.1960) taught him Arabic grammar, the Qur’an, and its tajwid. In the course of such lessons, Dr. Abdul Bari became very good

in Arabic grammar and in Tajwid. In 1976 while visiting Dacca after ten years staying abroad, I attended the Birthday Celebration of the Prophet (on 12<sup>th</sup> Rabi' al-Awwal ) at the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh. A Mawlana recited verses of the Qur'an at the beginning of the function and Dr. Abdul Bari corrected the Qari's faulty recitation of the Qur'an. I was impressed by Dr. Bari's knowledge of Arabic grammar and the text of the Qur'an. This was due to the rigorous training he had received at the feet of his uncle, Mawlana Abdullah al-Kafi.

Muhammad Abdul Bari's parental home was at the village of Nurul- Huda (otherwise known as Khula-Hati) near the famous Railway Junction Town of Parbati-Pur in the district of Dinajpur; he was born on 1 September 1930 (though another report claimed he was born in 1929) in the house of his maternal grandfather, Mawlana Mir Syfullah at Syedpur in the North Bengal district of Bogra. It was customary among the aristocratic Muslims of Bengal for their pregnant daughters to return to their parental home shortly before the birth of their first child. Professor Abdul Bari's father, Mawlana Abdullah Baqi al-Qurayshi (d.1952) was a Muslim community leader and a member of the Bengal Legislature, who had campaigned against British colonial rule in India. He was twice elected the Vice-President of the East Pakistan Muslim League. Abdul Bari's celebrated uncle, Mawlana 'Abdullah al-Kafi al-Qurayshi had a non-political profile as a leader of the Ahl-i- Hadith reform movement in the former Indian province of East Bengal and Assam (the former leaders being Mawlana Babur Ali and Mawlana Muhammad Maniruddin Anwari (d.1942), having guided the Anjuman-i- Ahl -i- Hadith, the precursor of Jam'iyat Ahl-i- Hadith of East Pakistan).

Under the influence of his maternal uncle, Mawlana Mir Abdus Salam, a Qur'anic scholar, he passed his B.A. (Honours) in 1949 and M.A. in 1950 (in Arabic and Islamic Studies) from Dacca University with distinction. He then studied at Oxford University under the supervision of the celebrated British Orientalist, Hamilton Alexander Roskin Gibb (d.1971) and in 1954 was awarded a doctorate (D. Phil.) for a thesis entitled "A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE EARLY WAHABI DOCTRINES AND THE CONTEMPORARY REFORM MOVEMENTS IN INDIAN ISLAM". On his return from Oxford, Dr. Abdul Bari was appointed Professor of Arabic at Dacca Government College in 1955. Between 1956 and 1957 he was attached to the Rajshahi Government College. In 1958 he joined the staff of the Faculty of Arts at the newly founded Rajshahi University, with special responsibility for setting up and organising the Department of Islamic History and Culture. In 1961 he was offered a Nuffield Foundation Fellowship for post-doctoral research at Oxford University. He returned to the Department of Islamic History and Culture at Rajshahi University in 1962 as a Reader (equivalent to an Associate Professor). Within a few years he had been promoted to a full Professorship.

Professor M. Abdul Bari's academic career evolved gradually. A period as a teacher of Arabic was followed by one in which Islam and Islamic thought was taught in the context of Islamic History. In 1969 he received President of Pakistan's Gold Medal for his performance as the best Professor. Later, until he left the Department of Islamic History and Culture at Rajshahi University in 1977, he devoted his time and energy to the management of educational institutions. He had served Rajshahi University as Head of

the Department, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Provost of Jinnah Hall (1969-1971). Developing countries shamelessly exploit the talents of academic scholars for non-academic purposes at the expense of academic research and intellectual development. The career of Dr. Muhammad Abdul Bari is a typical example of this. Instead of employing him to promote research in Islamic History and Historiography, he was inveighed into tedious administrative and managerial work as Vice-Chancellor, Chairman of Educational Reform Committees, and Advisory Chairman of the University Grants Commission. As a result, developing countries now lag behind their counterparts in the developed world.

Thus Professor Abdul Bari assumed the responsibility of Vice-Chancellor of Rajshahi University in 1970 or July 1971, according to Professor Ershadul Bari, Vice-Chancellor Bangladesh Open University, which he had to relinquish in January 1972 almost immediately after the creation of Bangladesh. However, he returned to teaching on 7 July 1977 and was reappointed Vice-Chancellor by President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh. After Ziaur Rahman's assassination in 1981, Professor Abdul Bari was appointed Chairman of the University Grants Commission, serving two four-year terms (1981- 1989). By 1990 Professor Abdul Bari had effectively retired from academic life when he conceived the idea of founding a 'National University of Bangladesh' modelled on the Open University of the United Kingdom. In 1992 the retired Professor M.A. Bari became Vice-Chancellor of this new university for four years (1992-1996). Under his wise administration, it emerged as the largest university in the country. Its huge success was largely due to the enthusiastic support of the public as well as the pro-Islamic elements in Bangladesh.

Professor Muhammad Abdul Bari's incorruptible character and helpful nature benefited the careers of many of his colleagues and students to achieve distinction as researchers, professors and educationalists. Some of his most noteworthy students are (i) Dr. Safiuddin Joarder, a historian of the modern Middle East and author of many books including Syria under the French Mandate (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 1977). (ii) Dr. Muhammad Manazir Ahsan, Director General of the Islamic Foundation, Leicester, UK; and author Social Life under the 'Abbasids (Macmillan, 1976); (iii) Dr. Muhammad Abdul Jabbar Beg (M.A.J. Beg), an Associate Professor at the National University of Malaysia and University of Brunei Darussalam; (iv) Dr. Muhammad Mujibur Rahman, Professor of Arabic at Rajshahi University and author of Studies on the Qur'an in Bengali (Bangla Bhasay Qur'an Charcha, Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, Dhaka 1986); and Dr. Aftab Ahmad Rahmani, Ph.D. Cambridge, and author of The Life and Works of Ibn Hajar al- 'Asqalani, Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, Dhaka, 2000, and Dr. Sikandar Ibrahim, Ph.D. Rajshahi and author of a study on the life of Mawlana Karamat Ali Jaunpuri (Rajshahi, 1980s), etc.

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During his glittering career, Professor Muhammad Bari helped establish several educational institutions including Islamic University of Bangladesh in Kushtia (1977); he also served as Chairman of the governing body of Shah Jalal University of Science and Technology in Sylhet (1983). He was elected Chairman of the Madrasah (Islamic Institute) Educational Reform Committee in 1990 and advised the Government on how to manage the collection and disbursement of Zakat (Welfare-Tax). In addition, he served as President (leader) of the Jam'iyyat Ahl-i Hadith Organisation for more than four decades (1960-2003). It is no wonder that the news of his death was greeted with great national grief. Among the prominent mourners were the nation's politicians, intellectuals, trade unionists, mayors of cities, writers and poets, linguists and fellow academics. President Professor Iyaj uddin Ahmad and the then Prime Minister Begum Khalida Zia, the heads of political parties proclaimed that the Bangladeshi nation had lost an honest, efficient, patriotic person and an internationally recognised Islamic scholar.

By **Professor M. A. J. Beg, MA (Rajshahi), PhD (Cambridge University).**