

Remembering Professor

Syed Sajjad Husain (b.1920 – d.1995)

Late Professor Dr Syed Sajjad Husain was one of the leading Muslim scholars, writers and academics to have hailed from Bengal during the twentieth century. An acknowledged expert in English literature, he served in his capacity as a Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka and Rajshahi Universities during the turbulent years of early 1970's. He published many books and hundreds of articles in Bengali and English on a wide-range of subjects. Professor Husain was a man of principles, commitment and unshakeable faith in Islamic unity and solidarity.

He was born in village Alokdeya in Magura district (in Greater Jessore), Bangladesh. His father, Syed Ahmad Husain, was a notable local Muslim personality. His mother, Khurshida Talat Banu, died when he was around five. He began his formal education at the age of six at Dhaka High Madrasah and then successfully completed his Matriculation and Intermediate examinations at Islamia Intermediate College. In 1941 he obtained his BA (Hons) Degree in English and, a year later, passed his MA examination in the same subject from Dhaka University. He then moved to Calcutta in 1944 and joined Islamia College as a Lecturer in English. During this period he wrote widely and published articles in many local newspapers and magazines including the *Statesman*, *Morning News* and *Star of India*. As a devout Muslim, he became a firm believer in the ideology of Pakistan as a separate and united Muslim nation; he remained true to his political beliefs throughout his life.

From Islamia College, Professor Husain moved to Sylhet where he taught English at MC College before joining Dhaka University in 1948 as a Lecturer. As a true seeker of knowledge and voracious reader, he was keen to pursue higher education. Accordingly, he proceeded to England to study for a PhD Degree in English literature. In 1952 he prepared and submitted a dissertation on *Kipling and India*, for which the University of Nottingham awarded him a doctorate in English literature. He then return to East Pakistan and resumed his teaching career at Dhaka University. Ten years later, in 1962, he was promoted and became a Professor of English at the same university.

After serving as a Dean of the Department of English for several years, in 1969, he became a Vice-Chancellor of Rajshahi University and then in July 1971 he was promoted as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Dhaka. However, due to his political beliefs he was imprisoned by the new rulers of Bangladesh and it was during this period of incarceration that he wrote his memoirs titled *The Wastes of Time: Reflections on the Decline and Fall of East Pakistan* (Dhaka, 1995). On his release, Professor Husain left his motherland and moved to England where he taught at Cambridge University for a period before joining Umm al-Qura University in Makkah

as Professor of English in 1975. After teaching for nearly a decade in Saudi Arabia, Professor Husain eventually retired and returned to Dhaka. During the next ten years of his life, he read and wrote extensively so much so that he was rarely seen without a book in his hand. As an eminent academic and educationalist, Professor Husain taught and mentored many students who later became some of Bangladesh's leading scholars, academics and writers including Professor Muhammad Abu Tahir Majumdar, Professor Razia Khan and Professor Reazur Rahman, among others.

Professor Husain was a prolific writer who authored, edited or translated no less than a dozen books on aspects of English literature, religion, poetry, Bengali literature and Islam. His notable publications include

1. *Crisis in Muslim Education* (written in collaboration with late Dr Syed Ali Ashraf, Hodder and Stoughton, 1979).
2. *Mixed Grill* (collection of essays on religion and culture, Orient Longmans, 1963).
3. *Descriptive Catalogue of Bengali Manuscripts* (translation from Bengali, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1960).
4. *A Young Muslim's Guide to Religions in the World* (Dhaka: BIIT, 1992)
5. *Civilization and Society* (collection of essays and articles on religion, culture and literature, Dhaka: BIIT, 1994).

His other contributions included an entry on Bangladesh for The Encyclopaedia Britannica; two-volume history of English literature in Bengali, an anthology of English Poetry for Arab students, and a series of books on the future of Bangladesh in collaboration with late Dr Matiur Rahman. In addition to the above, Professor Husain published numerous articles and reviews in *Bangladesh Observer*, *Morning Sun*, *New Nation*, *The Telegraph*, *Bangladesh Times*, *Daily Inqilab*, *Sangram*, *Millat*, *Mashik Digest*, *Concept*, *Impact International* and *Muslim World Book Review*. During this period he wrote under many different pen-names including Altaf Ali, Jamal Arshad and Nasim Haidar. However, even those who disagreed with his political conviction and beliefs had to acknowledge that Professor Husain was a great scholar who had an unusual command of the English language and literature – his regular columns in the *Bangladesh Observer* soon acquired a mass readership!

Professor Husain died on the 12 January 1995 while he was busy writing a biography of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him). At the time of his death, he was holding a copy of Mawlana Abdul Khaliq's *Sayyid al-Mursalin* (Life of the Prophet of Islam). *Dr Syed Sajjad Hussain Memorial Volume* was edited and published by Mesbahuddin Ahmad from Dhaka in 1999 as tribute to him.

Muhammad Mojlum Khan is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and author of *The Muslim 100: The Lives, Thoughts and Achievements of the Most Influential Muslims in History* (reprinted 2010; Kindle edition 2011) and *The Muslim Heritage of Bengal* (forthcoming, summer 2012).