

## *Remembering Professor*

### **Sir Abdullah al-Ma'mun Suhrawardy** (B. 1877 – D. 1935)

**By Muhammad Mojlum Khan**

Allama Sir Abdullah al-Ma'mun Suhrawardy, MA, Bar-at-Law, PhD, D.Litt (Oxon), LL.D, Iftikhar al-Millat, was one of the most brilliant Muslim scholars of his generation. One of the first students to obtain a PhD Degree from Calcutta University, Abdullah was an outstanding Islamic scholar, skilled linguist, eminent academic, influential politician and also a prolific writer. Unfortunately, the life and works of this remarkable Muslim personality of Bengal is not widely known today. If any nation aspires to make progress and develop, it will need to pay due respects to its true patriots and preceptors: Sir Abdullah was one such personality of Bengal.

According to the *Banglapedia* (National Encyclopaedia of Bangladesh), Abdullah was born in 1870 at Medinipur in West Bengal, while according to his brother, Lt. Col. Sir Hasan Suhrawardy, he was born in Dhaka in 1882. However, in his unpublished Persian autobiography, *Dastan-i-Ibratbar*, Mawlana Ubaidullah Suhrawardy, the father of Abdullah, stated that his son was born at his Dhaka Madrasah residence (present-day Nazrul College) on 31 May, 1877 (Needless to say, the editors of *Banglapedia* had failed to do their home-work properly – though not for the first time, I hasten to add). Mawlana Suhrawardy was the first Superintendent of Dhaka Madrasah, which was the first and only institution in East Bengal offering further and higher Islamic education with a dedicated English Department at the time.

Abdullah was a prodigious child who swiftly mastered Arabic, Persian, Urdu, English and Bengali, obtaining first class honours and master's degrees in Arabic, English and Philosophy. He then became one of the first two students to receive a PhD from Calcutta University in 1908. Thereafter he was called to the Bar at Gray's Inn and qualified as a Barrister and, at the same time, he studied for another MA degree from London University. His academic record was so impressive that very few other Muslim students of his generation were able to match him in this respect.

Like his father, Abdullah was a true seeker of knowledge and an equally devout Muslim. As early as 1905, he had translated a collection of Prophetic traditions (ahadith) from Arabic into English which was published for the first time in February 1905. Although during his long and distinguished career as an academic, lawyer, politician and author Abdullah had written many books, edited several journals and founded a number of organisations, it was his *The Sayings of Muhammad* which remained his most famous contribution. Being one of the first collections of Prophetic traditions to be translated by a Muslim into English, this pioneer work subsequently inspired many other Muslim scholars and writers to produce their own anthologies of hadith literature in English.

On the political front, Abdullah served as Chairman of Medinipur District Board, President of Khilafat Committee, as a Member of the Bengal Legislative Council from the Bengal Praja Samiti and founded the Pan-Islamic Society in London during the early years of the twentieth century. He was also elected to the Indian Legislative Assembly and continued to serve in this capacity until his death; this great Muslim scholar died in 1935 at the age of around fifty-eight. For his wide-ranging contribution and achievements, Abdullah was knighted by the British Government in 1931. Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, his motherland, Sir Abdullah has been virtually forgotten. May his soul rest in eternal peace!

**Please note: BMRI intends to publish a more detailed and critical biography of Sir Abdullah at a later date for the benefit of scholars and general readers. Watch the space!**