

MEHRAB ALI

(B. 1925 - D. 2009)

Mehrab Ali was a local historian, amateur archaeologist and prolific writer from Dinajpur, Bangladesh. Like his late cousin, Professor Aftab Ahmad Rahmani (Ph.D Cambridge), he was born on 31st December 1925 in the village of Muradpur, in the sub-district (*Thana*) of Biral in Dinajpur. He claimed to have published forty books and booklets, of which twenty titles are well-known. His most outstanding book, *Keri Jakhan Dinajpure*, was a biography of the Baptist missionary, William Carey, who lived during the 18th and early 19th century, with special reference to his sojourn in the district of Dinajpur.

Mehrab Ali was the son of Wakil Ahmad of Muradpur and he was educated in a village school. He then passed his Matriculation with distinction and graduated from Surendra Nath College (previously known as Ripon College) in Dinajpur in 1959. After his graduation he began his working life as a teacher in Dinajpur High Madrasah. After many years of teaching, he joined Surendra Nath Degree College as a full-time librarian. He worked there until his retirement in his 60s. It was during his work as a librarian that he had access to sources and documents relevant to the local history of Dinajpur. He probably received inspiration for writing the history of Dinajpur from the writings of Mawlana Manir al-Din Anwari, the editor of the weekly journal *Ahl-e Hadis* from Calcutta and his essay on 'The Ancient Glories of Dinajpur' (Dinajpurer Prachin Kirtigatha in Jagaran, 1935) and from Syed Musharraf Husain's book, *Dinajpurer Itihas* (History of Dinajpur) published in 1965.

Among his best known works were five large volumes on *The History of Dinajpur* (*Dinajpurer Itihas Samagra*). The titles of these volumes were 1) *History of the Political Movements of Dinajpur (Dinajpurer Rajnaitik Andolaner Itihas)*, which was published by the District Council of Dinajpur in 1965; 2) *A Historical Outline of Dinajpur Town and Municipality (Oitihashik Ruparekhay Dinajpur Shahar -o-Paurasabhar Katha)*, which was published by the Dinajpur Municipality in 1994; 3) *The Aboriginal Tribes of Dinajpur (Dinajpurer Adibashi)*, first edition, Dinajpur, 1980; 4) *A History of the Feudal Landlords of Dinajpur (Dinajpurer Rajbangsher Itihas)*, Dinajpur 2002), 5) *A Collection of History of Dinajpur (Dinajpurer Itihas Samagra)*, which was published in 2002.

Among his other publications, the following were noteworthy: 6) *Keri Jakhan Dinajpur-e* (When William Carey was in Dinajpur), which was published by the Department of Communication and Publication, National Council of Churches in Bangladesh, Dhaka, (first edition 1990; 2nd edition 2000); 7) *An Introduction to the Writers of Dinajpur (Dinajpurer Lekhak Parichiti)*; 8) *Bangarh, the Lost Capital of Bengal and its Relevance to Dinajpur (Banglar Bilupta Rajdhani Bangarh -o-Dinajpur Prasanga)*; 9) *Islam in Dinajpur (Dinajpur-e Islam)*; 10) *The Tomb of 40 Muslim Warriors (Pir Chehelghazi)*; 11) *An Introduction to Dinajpur Museum (Dinajpur Jadughar*

Parichiti); 12) The Name of a Pond - Ramsagar (*Dighir Nam Ramsagar*), sixth edition, Dinajpur, 2004. According to Mehrab Ali, Dinajpur is well known for a number of artificial lakes or ponds called Dighis including Pransagar, Matasagar, Anandasagar, Zulumsagar, Harisagar, Mahipal Dighi, Maharajdighi, Sonadighi and Sagardighi. The most famous was Ramsagar, which occupies an area of one million, six hundred and twenty-eight thousand and 120 square feet (cf. Mehrab Ali's article on Dinajpur in *Islami Biswakosh: The Encyclopaedia of Islam in Bengali*, vol. XIII, Dhaka, 1992, pp.334-342; 13) The Temple of Kantaji (*Kantajiew Mandir*), published in Dinajpur 2006. This was a special monograph on local architecture. Situated thirteen miles to the east of the town of Dinajpur, Kantajiew Mandir is an elegant three-storied building, 70 feet in height, with 12 doors, covering an area of 2,704 square feet. According to an inscription (*shilalipi*), this monument of Hindu culture was begun by a local feudal-lord, Raja Pran-Nath and completed by his son Ram-Nath, in 1752CE, in the style of Indo-Persian art. It is a place of annual pilgrimage for the local Hindus. Its walls depict the stories of the ancient Indian epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in terracotta art and sculpture. This was one of the most attractive buildings of medieval Bengal. According to the English traveller, Bucanon, who visited Dinajpur in 1808 CE, "The temple (i.e. *Kantaji Mandir*) is by far the finest that I have seen in Bengal". Every year an annual fair is held at Kantajiew Temple in the Bengali month of Kartik. It culminates on the night of the full moon called *Ras-Purnima*. (See M. Ali's treatise *Kanta-Mandir*).

Mehrab Ali's other works included 14) An Inscription of 123 Hijrah (*Ekshata Teish Hijrir Ekti Shilalipi*). However, this claim of an early Islamic inscription is probably a misreading of the *Shilalipi*, although this needs to be clarified by the researchers; 15) *Pir Shah Nekmard* (The story of a Muslim Saint); 16) One Hundred Years of Journalism in Dinajpur (*Dinajpure Sangbadikatar Ek-Shaw' Bachhar*), which was published by the Journalists' Association of Bangladesh in Dhaka; 17) The Songs of Kalimuddin Faqir (*Kalimuddin Faqirer Gan*); 18) Dinajpur on the Bank of the Kanchan River (*Kanchan tire Dinajpur*); 19) Al-Hadith (A Scientific Discussion of the Prophetic Traditions), which was probably inspired by Dr Aftab Ahmad Rahmani, who was frequently visited by Mehrab Ali; and (20) Principles and Guidance of Islam (*Islamer Niti -o- Nirdeshana*), etc.

These diverse books attest to the fact that Mehrab Ali was not only a prominent local historian but also a man of considerable learning and culture.

I became aware of Mehrab Ali in around 1966, when my cousin, Salahuddin Beg ibn Mahtab Beg bought a copy of his book on the literary writers of Dinajpur. In this work he devoted a page to my early literary works which had been published in periodicals like the monthly *Nawruz ; al-Mujahid* of Dinajpur and *Tarjumanul Hadith* of Dhaka. I met Mehrab during my visit to Dinajpur in 2006, when he gave me half a dozen complimentary copies of his books. We spoke for an hour about his first cousin, Dr Aftab Ahmad Rahmani, who studied with me at Cambridge University and became Professor and Head of the Department of Arabic at Rajshahi University, before he died of leukaemia (or bone-marrow disorder) in 1984. Mehrab told me that his cousin was a gifted Islamic scholar who should have become the national leader of the *Ahl-e Hadis* movement in Bangladesh. He was very fond of his cousin and claimed that late Dr M. A. Bari (D.Phil. Oxon) was more of a politician than a scholar. However, I did not agree with Mehrab on this matter as he was expressing a personal opinion about two great Islamic scholars of Dinajpur.

I took a photograph of Mehrab Ali (along with my uncle, Professor Md. Aftab Uddin Sarkar (MA) and a Professor of English at Adarsha College Dinajpur. After that I thanked him and bid

farewell. Mehrab Ali, an octogenarian when I met him, was a tireless writer who recorded the history of Dinajpur in a meticulous way. He wrote more than two thousand pages of local history and was an authority on the history of Dinajpur. Thus he was invited by the editors of the *Islami Biswakosh* (*Encyclopaedia of Islam* in Bengali) to contribute an article on “Dinajpur” to the 13th volume of the Encyclopaedia (pp.334-342) published by the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, Dhaka in 1992. A summary of his article is provided below.

Mehrab Ali claimed that Dinajpur was an ancient place which is located on the *Barendra-Bhumi* in North Bengal, in which there are many small rivers, including Karatowa, Atrai, Punarbhaba, Tepa, Yamuna, Tangon, Mahananda, Ichhamati and Nagar Tarnai. Dinajpur is inhabited by mixed races, including Arab, Turkish, Pathan, Afghan, Mongol, Tibetan, Burmese, Malay, Hun and Bhut-Chinese. They came during the rule of many dynasties - Maurya, Gupta, Sanga, Barman, Sena, Sultanate and Mughal. Turkish warrior Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji conquered Dinajpur in 1204 or 1205CE. *Devakot* was chosen as the first capital by Bakhtiyar Khalji. Islam came to Dinajpur under the Turkish conquerors. The forty warriors (*Chehel Ghazi*) preached Islam peacefully in Dinajpur in the 14th century. Sher Shah Suri’s influence was very strong there. In the garrison town of Ghoraghat, where many Pathan chiefs settled including Majnu Khan, Dustam Khan, Baba Khan, Khaledi Khan, Masum Khan and Zaberi Khan. During the Mughal period, many famous administrators, including Sayyid Muhammad Khan, Mir Isfindiyar Khan, Mir Ebadat Khan, Mir Nasrullah Khan, Mir Ebrahim Khan, Mir Qasim Ali Khan, and Mir Sadat Khan were based at Ghoraghat. Many inscriptions have been preserved at the Museum in Dinajpur. According to a Gazettier of 1912, 48.8% of the population of Dinajpur was Muslim. According to a 1951 census, 873,907 out of a population of 1,354,432 were Muslims.

One of the celebrated poets of Dinajpur during the Fort William College was Burhanullah of Nawkhair who wrote *Ahkamul Islam* and ten other books. One of the great Islamic scholars of this district was Mawlana Abdullah Kafi (1900-1960), author of *Nubuwwat-e- Muhammadi* (The Prophethood of Muhammad) and *Ahl-e-Hadis Parichiti* (An Introduction to Ahl-e Hadis). In 1933 an intellectual from Dinajpur, Muhammad Hemayet Ali, founded the town’s public centre of learning, Khwaja Nazimuddin Hall and Public Library. The Dinajpur Museum was established in 1968 by Mehrab Ali and his friends, where more than 100 swords of the Mughal period and many Islamic inscriptions have been preserved. Some of the holdings were donated by Mehrab Ali. He sadly passed away in 2009. His date of death is disputed by two scholars, namely Professor Md. Maniruzzaman, the author of *History of Dinajpur (Dinajpurer Itihas)*, who stated that he died on 9th December 2008, while Professor Md. Aftab Uddin Sarkar contends that Mehrab Ali died on 26th November, 2009.

Below is a short review of Mehrab Ali’s *Keri Jakhan Dinajpur-e (When William Carey was in Dinajpur)*.

One of the more significant works of Mehrab Ali was *Keri Jakhan Dinajpur-e*, which was published by the Department of Communication and Publication, National Council of Churches, Bangladesh, in 1990. The book was commissioned to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the founding by William Carey and his associates the Baptist Missionary Society. William Carey, who was

credited with publishing the earliest prose literature in Bengali and for translating the Bible into Bengali language, arrived in Bengal in 1793, but could find suitable employment in Calcutta. He then proceeded to Mandabati village, on the banks of the Tangan River in 1794, as an employee of the indigo planters.

He learnt the Bengali from a private tutor, Ram Ram Basu (Bose), and while working at the indigo factory, he secretly started missionary work in the back room of the Indigo Company. Mehrab Ali made contradictory statements regarding the success of Carey's missionary work. On page 43, he claimed that two Hindus, namely Nanda Kishor Bairagi and Heda Ram Bairagi, were converted to Christianity in Dinajpur, while on page 51, he stated that Carey failed to convert either a Hindu or a Muslim to Christianity. Undeterred he started his translation of the Bible into Bengali while working in Dinajpur. It took him twenty-five years to complete the task. It has also been claimed that he worked on a Bengali-English Dictionary while living in Madanbati in Dinajpur, though it was completed much later. Carey's Dictionary was published in 1825.

Dr Carey was famous not only for his linguistic work but also for inventing a Bengali typeface for printing purposes. His name was also associated with the first Printing Press in Bengali and the first newspaper in India (p24). Charles Wilkins, while staying at Badal Kuthi in North Bengal (1772-78 AD), invented the Bengali typeface. However, the manufacture of Bengali letters in lead was assisted by Pancanan Karmakar (lit. blacksmith) and Mr. Shepherd of Tribeni (p27). Mehrab's research on Carey was important, but his book made little impact on the local readers. Despite this, according to Pansi Chhaya Ghose, "in 1794 Carey started his first school there (i.e. Dinajpur) with a few local boys, teaching them reading, writing, arithmetic, the local accounting system and Christianity" (p52). Thus Carey is credited with many things including learning Bengali, founding a school to teach Western ideas and Christianity to primary school boys, besides starting to write a Bengali-English Dictionary, translating the Bible into this language, and buying a Printing Press for £40 to print books. Mehrab Ali's book on *William Carey's Sojourn in Dinajpur*, is a very interesting but not a scholarly assessment. It is a hagiography than a meticulously researched work. It was a useful contribution in Bengali to remember William Carey's early activities in Dinajpur, which paved the way for his historic achievements at Sri-Rampur and Fort William College in Calcutta.

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