

Maulvi Shamsuddin Ahmed

(b. 1889 – d. 1987)

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan

Maulvi Shamsuddin Ahmed was a great Muslim epigraphist, numismatist and scholar of Bengal. His pioneering research and writing on epigraphy inspired many other prominent scholars of modern times including Nazimuddin Ahmed, Ahmad Hasan Dani, Abdul Karim and A. K. M. Yaqub Ali. These scholars pursued their research and inquiry into Islamic epigraphy, numismatics and architecture of Bengal knowing only too well that the real pioneer in this field was none other than Shamsuddin Ahmed. Unfortunately, like so many other great Muslim scholars of Bengal, this important researcher and writer has been virtually forgotten today. This does not bode well for the future.

Shamsuddin Ahmed was born in 1889 in Diwanpara in Murshidabad District (located in present-day Indian State of West Bengal). As a bright student, his father, Muhammad Ghulamuddin Sarkar Diwan, encouraged his son to continue his further and higher education at Rajshahi Government Madrasah. As a dedicated student, he passed his junior and senior Madrasah examinations from that institution at the age of 16 and 19, respectively. Then in 1911 he passed his Matriculation exam, followed by his Intermediate exam in 1914. Thereafter, he became a teacher at Burdwan Municipal School and continued to study for his BA Degree, which he obtained in 1922. Keen to pursue advanced education in Arabic, in 1925 he obtained his Masters' degree in that subject.

On account of his academic achievements, in 1927 Shamsuddin Ahmed was promoted as

an Assistant Curator of the Indian Museum in Calcutta. It was during this time that he was able to study Muslim epigraphy and numismatics in a systematic way for the first time as the Museum had a large collection of Arabic and Persian manuscripts. He soon became a skilled and competent Curator. Unsurprisingly, he was promoted and served as an Assistant Superintendent in many locations in India although it was in Hyderabad (Deccan) that he received a thorough training in deciphering epigraphy and numismatics under the tutelage of Dr Ghulam Yazdani, who was India's foremost authority on the subject at the time. After two years of study under Yazdani's supervision, he was promoted as Superintendent of Archaeology and returned to Calcutta in 1946. This was a politically turbulent time in the history of the subcontinent as a year later India was divided into two separate nations by the departing British officials.

Shamsuddin Ahmed left Calcutta and moved to Pakistan, settling in Rajshahi where he established his new office. In due course, he was appointed the Director of Archaeology by the Government of Pakistan and he moved to Karachi. He continued to serve in this capacity until his retirement in 1954. He returned to Rajshahi in the following year and thereafter the Management Committee of the Varendra Research Museum approached him to collect and prepare all the Muslim inscriptions of Bengal into one volume for publication. In Shamsuddin's own words,

“I yielded to the charm of the work but soon I discovered that it was an uphill task amounting in many cases to ‘breaking a fresh ground’, since some of the essential books of reference were not available in the local libraries. The local Museum authorities however came forward with helping hands and arranged to procure for me some important and rare books of reference from the National library and from the library of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, both of Calcutta, thus minimising my difficulty to a great extent.” (Inscriptions of Bengal, volume IV, 1960, p.xxii)

Shamsuddin Ahmed dedicated the next two years of his life to this important task and prepared a manuscript titled *Inscriptions of Bengal: Being a Corpus of Inscriptions of the*

Muslim Rulers of Bengal from 1233 to 1855 A. C. He completed the first draft during the mid-1957 and sent a copy to Dr Ghulam Yazdani, his former mentor and guide, who resided in Hyderabad. As expected, Yazdani was impressed so much so that he wrote a foreword to this book. He stated,

“From the draft of Maulawi Shams-ud-din’s monograph, I can say that he dealt with the subject in a very thorough manner and has tried not only to set aright the inaccuracies of the readings of the previous scholars but thrown ample light on the historical, literary and artistic merits of the inscriptions. Maulavi Shams-ud-din’s monograph exhibits painstaking research, combined with sound judgement and refined taste, and I hope his work will be appreciated by all those who are interested in the political and cultural history of Bengal during Muslim rule. It may also prove an incentive to the compilation of similar monographs on the inscriptions of other provinces by competent scholars, particularly of the Punjab which is rich both in inscriptions and masters of Oriental learning.” (Inscriptions of Bengal, volume IV, 1960, p.vi)

Based on Yazdani and other scholar’s comments and feedback, Shamsuddin revised his manuscript several times during 1957 and 1958 before the Varendra Research Museum published this pioneering work in 1960. In addition to his *Inscriptions*, Shamsuddin Ahmed prepared the *Supplementary Catalogue of Coins in the Indian Museum* into 2 volumes, the first volume covered the period of the Sultans of Delhi, while the second volume covered the reign of the Sultans of Bengal. He also contributed more than 50 research articles on aspects of epigraphy and numismatics in various journals and was awarded a medal by the Indian Numismatic Society for his important contributions.

Likewise, the Varendra Research Society awarded him a medal, just as the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh recognised his contribution and gave him the Islamic Foundation Prize in 1980. Though this great Muslim scholar, epigraphist and researcher died on the 7 June, 1987, it is hoped his legacy will inspire a new generation of scholars to emerge in

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the future.

M M Khan is an internationally acclaimed author, literary critic and research scholar. He has published more than 150 essays and articles worldwide, and his writings have been translated into several languages. He is author of *The Muslim 100* (reprinted 2010; Kindle 2011) and *The Muslim Heritage of Bengal* (forthcoming, Spring 2013) and he is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland.