

**Book Review**

**TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR ABU IMAM**

***SELECTED ESSAYS ON HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY: PAPERS PRESENTED IN MEMORY OF PROFESSOR ABU IMAM***, edited by M. M. Hoque, A.T.M. Atiqur Rahman and Seema Hoque), Dhaka: Centre for Archaeology and Heritage Research (CAHR), Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh, 2010, pp405.

The book under review was published in honour of late Professor Abu Imam (1928-2007), an archaeologist and historian of ancient Bengal, who, in 1985, had the unique distinction of founding the Archaeology Department in Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh, the only Department of its kind at any university in Bangladesh.

Abu Imam was born on 9<sup>th</sup> September 1928 at Howrah in Kolkata (Calcutta) to Azizah Khatun and Ali Muhammad, and had an early education at Howrah Zilla (District) School and Scottish Church College in Calcutta until 1947, when he migrated with his parents to East Pakistan. He graduated from the History Department of Dhaka University in 1950 and passed his Master's Degree (MA) the following year. His brilliant results won him the Merit Scholarship to study abroad for a PhD Degree. He went to London University and was awarded an MA in Archaeology from University College London (UCL) in 1956 and a PhD in Archaeology from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, in 1963. Abu Imam was fortunate to have among his tutors some eminent British archaeologists and Professors such as Sir Mortimer Wheeler, Arthur Llewellyn Basham, V. Gordon Childe and K. de B. Cordington. He subsequently taught at the History Department of Dhaka University, initially as a Lecturer, then as a Reader; he was promoted to a Professorship in the History Department at Rajshahi University, and thereafter at Jahangirnagar University.

In addition to his teaching at Dhaka University, he also served as an Assistant Curator at Dacca Museum (1956-58) and subsequently became Curator of the Varendra Research Museum in Rajshahi town (from 1964 to 1966). From 1966 to 1970, he was the Senior Research Fellow in Pakistan Studies at St. Antony's College, Oxford. He was then appointed Head of the Department of History in Jahangirnagar University, where he founded the Archaeology Department in 1985 with special grants from the Ford Foundation. He retired from the university in 1990. He was closely associated with the Archaeology Department of Jahangirnagar University until his death on 27 February, 2007. He had the unique distinction to serve as a consultant to the UNESCO project on the History and Archaeology of Central Asia and was elected a member of the Pakistan National Committee for International Council of Museums (ICOM), UNESCO.

Well-versed in many languages, including Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali, French and English, Abu Imam was a brilliant researcher and supervisor of research projects in Archaeology and Museology in Bangladesh. Among his published books are "Sir Alexander Cunningham and the Beginnings of Indian Archaeology", which as his amended doctoral thesis was published by the Asiatic society of Pakistan, Dacca in 1966; another notable book was, 'Excavations at Mainamati: An Exploratory Study', it was published by the International Centre for the Study of Bengal Art, Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2000.

Besides these books, Professor Abu Imam had published many research articles in learned journals including (1) 'Sir Alexander Cunningham (1814-1893): the First Phase of Indian Archaeology, in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (JRAS) in 1963; (2) 'The role of Museums in National Reconstruction', in *The Museums Journal of Pakistan* (1957); (3) 'Origin of the Name Dhaka (Dacca): A Note' and 'An Analysis of the Material Content of the Sculpture of Sanchi' in *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan* ( vol. III, pp. 135-172;199-201; 1958; (4) 'Some Aspects of Muslim Politics and Personalities in India in the Later Nineteenth Century' in the *Journal of the Institute of Bangladesh Studies* ( vol. 2: pp. 59-71; 1977); (5) 'Itakhola Mura Temple: its Date', and '1943 and After: History of Ancient Bengal' in the *Journal of the International Centre for the Study of Bengal Art* ( Dhaka ,2000); (6) 'Paharpur Sahitya Patra', in the *Journal of the Jinnah Muslim Institute* (1960); Abu Imam had also contributed chapters to several books including (7) 'Ram Raz: An Early Indian Antiquarian' in *Bhattasali Commemoration Volume* (edited by A.B.M. Habibullah), Dhaka 1964; (8) 'Bengal in History of India: History and Thought'

in *A.L. Basham Felicitation Volume*, Sydney, Australia, 1979; (9). ‘Ancient Sylhet: History and Tradition’ in *Sylhet History and Heritage* (edited by Sharifuddin Ahmed), Bangladesh Itihas Samiti, Dhaka, 1999; (10) ‘Wari-Bateswar and Archaeology of Bangladesh in Kalhar (white water-lily) Studies in Art, Iconography, Architecture and Archaeology of India and Bangladesh’ in *Dr. Enamul Haque Felicitation Volume* (ed. Gauriswar Bhattacharya *et al*), New Delhi, 2007.

Although Professor Ahmad Hasan Dani was the pioneer in the teaching of Archaeology in the History Department of Dhaka University, his worthy successor was Professor Abu Imam especially in the archaeological exploration of Bangladesh. It was in recognition of his brilliant contribution to archaeological research that his colleagues and friends planned to present to him with a *Felicitation Volume* during his last years at Jahangirnagar University, but his sudden death has transformed the Felicitation into a Commemoration Volume. It is no mean credit for Abu Imam’s friends, students and admirers to have gathered 25 articles (of which 18 are in English and 7 in Bengali) be published in his memory.

Among the recent flurry of activity among scholars to publish Festschrifts, Felicitation Volumes and Memorial Volumes in Bangladesh, the Abu Imam volume represents the highest number of articles in the English language. Shortly after the Abu Imam Commemoration Volume was published (2010), another Commemoration Volume was published in honour of another veteran archaeologist, *Dr. Nazimuddin Ahmed* (edited by Professor Syed Mahmudul Hasan) and it was published in 2011, which will also be reviewed in the near future. The 25 papers in the Abu Imam Commemoration are arranged by its editors into 5 sections as follows:

section 1: Ancient History and Society of Bengal and West Asia,

section 2: Epigraphy and Numismatics of Bengal,

section 3: Art and Architecture of Bengal

section 4; Museum studies and archaeological explorations of Eastern India and Bangladesh,

section 5: Colonial and post-colonial History of Bengal.

Thus it would seem that the arrangement of articles in this volume is of some complexity. This gives the reviewer a wide choice to examine some of the more interesting articles. In the section on ‘ancient history and society of Bengal and West Asia’ there are two essays. The volume begins with

an article titled ‘Ancient Bengali Women: Glimpses from Contemporary Sanskrit Anthological Literature’ by Professor Shahanara Husain, who specialises in the ancient history of Bengal. The article is fascinating, perceptive and an original approach to a complicated subject. Dr. Husain argues that Bengali women of ancient times, as far as the sources reveal, were dominated by Bengali men. Women were then forced to live as inferior beings in society. She blames the inferior social status of women mainly down to two factors, namely patriarchy and polygamy. She also states, “Bengali women of ancient period had hardly any independent status as an individual. Following the dictum of Manu... the society expected her to be always under the guardianship of a male relative.”(p.23) What Dr Husain criticises is the way the pre-Muslim period of Bengal society denied all freedoms to women, who lived a life subservient to their husbands and relatives. Her criticism merits serious consideration by her colleagues and students. On the other hand, Dr M. A. J. Beg, the author of the article titled ‘Historical Notes on Social Responsibility and Public Welfare in Islam’ presents a different image of women in West Asian Arab society. This paper on early Islamic society was originally presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual AMSS (Association of Muslim Social Scientists, UK) Conference held at University of Westminster, London, on 21<sup>st</sup> October 2000. This paper was subsequently incorporated in the revised editions of Dr Beg’s title (ed.) *The Image of Islamic Civilization*, Cambridge, 2004, 2006).

Islam aimed at establishing an egalitarian society, where the welfare of the poor and the needy was the collective responsibility of society. Hence, the welfare of men, women, children and orphans was attended to by the State through the distribution of the *Zakat* (Welfare tax) among the poorer members of society. We may agree with the argument of Professor Husain that polygamy and patriarchy are unfavourable conditions for women in society. Indeed, Islam allowed limited polygamy in Arab society and patriarchy was also prevalent among the Arabs. Despite these factors, when Islamic society instituted the system of pension (‘*ata*’ pl. ‘*ataya*’) during the period of the early Caliphate (632-661 A.D.), men as well as women and children, including orphans, and chronically sick received welfare money without discrimination.

Unlike ancient Bengali society, where women lacked individual status in society, Arab women, both in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic period, had an individual identity of their own; she composed poems, took part in battles with men, and received *nihlah* (marriage portion or money) from her husband and kept it, and could engage in trade through a partner or manager, and own and inherit

property in her own right. Her individual rights and duties were fairly well-defined in Islamic society in West Asia/ Middle East. She had spiritual equality with men; they prayed together in the mosque, and raised their children in a family atmosphere. Women were also propagators of *Hadith* (Prophetic Traditions) during the formative period of Islam, as well as in later periods (cf. M. A. J. Beg, *Essays on the origins of Islamic Civilization*, Cambridge, 2006, chapter 4: ‘*Women of Arabia during the first Islamic Century*’, pp. 98-127). Women were not only wives but also educators, philanthropists and queens. There was freedom of movement, individual rights and duties among men and women in Arab-Islamic society. The contrast between ancient Bengali women and the early Muslim women in West Asia could not be greater.

The bulk of the articles in the Abu Imam Commemoration Volume are devoted to archaeological themes. To indicate the richness and variety of articles in the volume one has only to cite the titles of some of the essays. For some reasons, Bijoy Krishna Banikh wrote in his article on “The Sundarbans: an archaeological exploration” (pp.332-346) that the Sundarbans were so named because of the existence of *Sundari* trees in the largest mangrove forest in the world in southern Bangladesh. In the words of the author, ‘The demarcation of the forest is on the west by the river Bhagirathi, on the east by the broad channel of the river Meghna, on the north by the southern limits of the districts of Satkhira, Khulna, Bagerhat, Patuakhali and 24 Parganas and on the south by the Bay of Bengal.’ The Sundarbans were mentioned in the ancient epics of India, Ramayana and Mahabharata. Some archaeologists claim that there are some archaeological remains in the deep forests of Sundarbans (p.335), which used to be known as prime tourists’ attraction for sighting of the Royal Bengal Tigers. However, modern researchers have found a number of monuments, ruins of structures, ancient bricks and different kinds of cultural materials scattered in the Sundarbans.

This Commemoration volume also contains an article titled ‘A Tribute to Rani Bhavani of Natore’ by Md. Manirul Haque (pp. 363- 67). Mr. M. Shamsul Alam contributes a controversial article entitled ‘Declaration of Independence of Bangladesh: Facts and Documents’ to this book. It is claimed that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman wrote down an ‘Independence declaration sometime after midnight of March 26, 1971 (sic.), which was broadcast on the day of March 26, 1971 from Kalurghat transmitter in Chittagong. However, very few people heard that broadcast. On the other hand, Major General Ziaur Rahman broadcasted a declaration on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on March 27, 1971 from Kalurghat transmitter of Radio Pakistan in Chittagong, and this clandestine

broadcast was picked up by the foreign press, and the world would come to know about Bangladesh's declaration of Independence'. (pp.375-86). This article is bound to generate controversy among readers of this volume due to the political nature of its claims and counter-claims.

Finally, it remains to be cited here that Professor Emeritus A. B. M. Husain has contributed an article in Bangali titled 'The History of Architecture in Bangladesh: its trends and features'. The learned author indicates the evolution of Bengal architecture over a millennium. The major building types including Forts, Buddhist Viharas, the narrow Hindu temples made of stones and bricks with no windows and light in the interior, the influence of Sultani and Mughal architecture on Muslim buildings with plenty of windows and flood of light inside are cited by the erudite scholar. Professor Husain's article has enriched this volume and would serve as a valuable reference article for university students in Bangladesh. Although this is a valuable reference book for university students in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and elsewhere in the world, however it is very poorly edited but profusely illustrated.

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