

Book Review

Inclusive approach to the study of history

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan

Approaches to Global and Islamic History by Muhammad Gholam Rasul, Dhaka: Jatiya Grontha Prokashan, pp122, 2012, \$10.

Dr Muhammad Gholam Rasul was a prominent Muslim scholar, author, teacher and historian. He was born in his maternal grandfather's house on 9 March, 1921 in Calcutta and died on 29 May, 1997 in Rajshahi, Bangladesh. His father, Muhammad Gholam Akbar, taught at Rangoon University College in Burma, while Gholam Rasul grew up and received his early education at Salar Edward High School in Murshidabad. As a devout Muslim, he became interested in Islamic history from an early age and went onto obtain his B.A. Degree from the Presidency College in 1940 and a Law Degree in 1942 as well as a Master's in Islamic History and Culture from the University of Calcutta in 1944.

Dr Gholam Rasul began his teaching career in 1945 at Azizul Haque College in Bogra and thereafter taught at several other institutions including Harganga College, M. Madhusudan College, Carmichael College and Rajshahi University. After a long and chequered career as a Lecturer and Reader (Associate Professor) of Islamic History, he eventually retired in 1992. As a seeker of knowledge, Dr Gholam Rasul was able to successfully combine his teaching career with research and writing. He was a prolific writer in both Bengali and English. In addition to several biographers of prominent Muslim scholars, he translated Muhammad Hamidullah's *The Muslim Conduct of State* and Reuben Levy's *The Social Structure of Islam* into Bengali in

1981 and 1995 respectively. His numerous essays, articles and reviews were published in local and regional journals and magazines.

However, Dr Gholam Rasul is best known for his following two contributions: *The Origin and Development of Muslim Historiography* and *Chishti-Nizami Sufi Order of Bengal*. The former was a collection of essays on aspects of Muslim historiography and it was published in 1967 by the renowned publisher, Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf of Lahore. It was arguably his most widely read book. By contrast, his *Chishti-Nizami Sufi Order of Bengal* earned Gholam Rasul a PhD from the University of Calcutta in 1982. It is an important work on the role of Sufism in Bengal from the early times up to the mid-fifteenth century; this book was later published by Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delhi in 1990.

The book under review is another important contribution by Dr Gholam Rasul. It consists of six essays on the meaning, scope and significance of history in the context of Islamic worldview as well as Western perspectives on the subject. According to the author, 'History writing has gradually evolved with the advancement of civilization, when civilized society emerged with the achievement of human progress in arts, science, administration, law and ethics. History records the intellectual achievements of men and thereby restores the connection between the past and the present.' (p12)

Although the author's approach to history is multidimensional, it is however coloured by his sociological understanding of culture and society. He wrote, 'The proper study of history is a sociological understanding of history. In other words, history should be studied in a sociological context. No historical work would be useful unless it reflects social trends and tendencies.' (p7) While this is true, it is equally important to focus on the political, economic, legal, philosophical, literary and spiritual dimensions of human culture in order to develop a critical but balanced understanding of history and civilization.

The last two essays are very interesting as the author explains aspects of Eastern and Western notions of civilization. Whilst many Muslim scholars, in the past, had defined 'history' and 'civilization' mainly from a theological perspective, Dr Gholam Rasul moved away from an ideological interpretation to develop a new, universal

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understanding of ‘history’ and ‘civilization’. Living as we do in an age of instant communication, unprecedented cultural interaction, economic interdependence and political multilateralism, pursuing one-dimensional approach to human history is no longer a viable option. The author, therefore, deserves credit for his depth of understanding and foresight.

In addition to the author’s six essays, the book includes the editor’s foreword by Dr Muhammad Abdul Jabbar Beg, a former student of Dr Gholam Rasul, and three appendices compiled by Beg. The third appendix is the most useful, being a select bibliography of Dr Gholam Rasul’s writings. This book was published by the author’s son with Dr Beg’s editorial support. If the book is reprinted in the future, it needs to be re-arranged and thoroughly re-edited.

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 widely acclaimed book, THE MUSLIM 100 (reprinted 2010; Kindle 2011), and THE MUSLIM HERITAGE OF BENGAL (forthcoming, Spring 2013). He is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland and a Founding Director of Bengal Muslim Research Institute UK.