

# *Samaj O Jiban* (*Society and Life*)

by Abdul Karim, (Dhaka: Hashi Prakashani, 2003),  
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His pupils know late Professor Abdul Karim as a mentor with profound capability of an active man, who can incite students' creative ability by his constant care and lively association. His research and writings on the mediaeval history of Bengal brought him many laurels, and he is considered to be the national historian of Bangladesh for his outstanding contribution to this subject. His books and research papers on numismatics, epigraphy and other sources of history broke new paths and have paved the way for further research. His recently published autobiography *Samaj O Jiban* has laid bare the making of a historian with all its potentialities and shortcomings provided by a down to earth social situation in which he was brought up. He has confessed very honestly that by leading the life of a simple man he did never nurture the idea of writing an autobiography of his own and consequently never kept a diary of his activities. But the feelings of a mature age to share his vast experiences with the new generations induced him to venture into writing the story of his life and time. He has witnessed many social and political events in his lifetime that has cast an immense influence in changing the prevailing structure of the society. The turmoil of World War II, the famine of the fifties, the Pakistan movement, partition of the subcontinent and the birth of Pakistan, Liberation War of Bangladesh and its successful completion - all these historical occurrences moulded his own life along with the people around him. He has narrated many contemporary events in his biography, which may ultimately become the source of social history of the period he deals with and be easily available to the new generation of scholars.

The teaching career of Dr. Karim is primarily connected with two public universities of our country, Dhaka and Chittagong, though he was associated with the University of Rajshahi for a brief period as a Fellow. The present volume of his autobiography has depicted mostly the episodes from the Dhaka University and his early life in Chittagong. It started in a typical Chittagong-village named Chapachari in the Banskhal *upazila*, a coastal area on the Bay of Bengal. The vivid pen-picture of the rural life and living of the thirties and forties drawn by a sensitive historian contains information on geography, habitat, housing and household, social environment, food habit, game and recreation, health and education, superstition, conveyance, litigation and the dispensation of justice, culture of folk literature etcetera. The strengths and weaknesses of the rural society and the local initiatives for progress observed by the author finds due place in a meticulous

detail. Even without the help of a diary Dr. Karim could remember many events of his life and he thinks that this was possible due to his own lifelong association with the study of history. The descriptions are occasionally enriched with analysis and related historical information, even with incidental sharp comments.

The autobiography of Dr. Karim is divided into twenty sections – each devoted to a particular theme. Sections One and Two delineate rural settings and the information on his own family and ancestors. The return of a Deobandi Moulavi to his paternal village in Section Three is an event of paramount importance in this autobiography as it pivoted on the life of infant Karim. Moulavi Muniruzzaman facilitated the cause of education in village Chapachari and himself established a Madrasa in his own house. Abdul Karim received his first lesson from this benevolent Moulana with a pinch of sweets. Many of the educated gentry of the bygone days used to stay in their village home or at least culture some sort of relation with it and shoulder responsibility of social progress in their neighbourhood. The elderly people also preferred to pass retired life in their own village. This biography records many initiatives of Moulavi Muniruzzaman for the moral advancement of his fellow men. But he faced opposition from the well-to-do people and the Khondkars living in the village. Dr. Karim opines that the teachers in the school established by the Moulavi, specifically the Moulavi himself did not take teaching as a mere profession; on the contrary, they engaged themselves as fulltime educators, even of the guardians. To them teaching was a way of life.

Most of the period of Abdul Karim's early educational life was spent in one or other lodging house. It started in 1937 when he got himself admitted into Purba Baharchara Primary School in Class Four. The new situation, away from the lap of his mother, gave him opportunity to have a firsthand knowledge of the village life and living. He was attracted to the natural bounty of a village, the simple lifestyle of its people and the element of cordiality in each person in the rural society. Dr. Karim states that like Bibhuti Bhusan's Apu he also started gaining new experiences that had cast a deep imprint on his own life. But he does not mention that his mother also acted like Sarbojaya in loving care for her child Karim.

The advice and initiative of Ahsanullah Master to admit Abdul Karim in Islamic Intermediate College paved the first step to his higher education. In March 1940 he left his village for Chittagong town to study in Class Seven in the secondary section of the said college from where he passed his High Madrasa and Intermediate Arts examinations with distinctions. His alma mater, popularly known as *Bura Madrasa*, impressed him with all its qualities – environment, historical structure, sympathetic teachers and classmates. During this period he saw the catastrophe of World War II associated with the miseries of famine and the woes of the Burmese refugees, and he was personally moved by these events. The deep impact of a multi-cultural war gave birth to new values and vices. He evaluates from a historical perspective the socio-political predicament of a war that befell on a traditional society. Dr. Karim also brings to focus the contemporary political activities in the town along with some comments on the leaders and his own

participation in the Muslim League activities. The autobiography provides antiquarian details about Shahi Jame Mosque and Mullah Miskin Mosque – two Mughal monuments of Chittagong.

Abdul Karim came to Dhaka on 30 June 1946 and settled to study History in the University of Dhaka. He resided in this city for a period of twenty years upto 1966 with a break when he was in England for his second Doctor of Philosophy degree from School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). The period was vibrant with many events that shaped the ultimate fate of the populace of the region. As a student of Salimullah Muslim Hall he himself saw and took part in Hall union activities and his frank narration of these episodes in the *Samaj O Jiban* brought to light the initial makeup of the Muslim Bangali intelligentsia. An appreciation of the architecture of the Hall building and its environs is an added attraction of this autobiography. Pecuniary problem shortened his hall life and again compelled him to leave in a lodging house in Nawabganj, but this association gave him opportunity to mingle with Dhaka social life - the experience was later fruitfully utilized in his book *Dacca: The Mughal Capital*. He also visited Joydevpur as a student-activist working for Direct Action Day programme of 16 August 1946; where he came to know about the *Bhawal Sanyasi* case. As a first year student of the University he saw the partition of India and the birth of Pakistan. His comments on the situation prevailing before and after the partition along with the working of the Radcliff Commission have enriched the autobiography. The marriage of an honours final examinee with a premature bride and their later happy conjugal life is another interesting episode added to the book.

Section Sixteen of the autobiography contains narrative of the initiation of Abdul Karim's active service life. It started at Murapara in Rupganja *thana* in Narayanganja as a schoolteacher. His stay at this village and his subsequent visits to the surrounding areas also contributed to his later historical pursuits. From here he joined the University of Dhaka as a lecturer in History in 1951. Within a few days of his teaching career Karim sought the audience of Dr. Ahmad Hasan Dani at his Dhaka Museum office to begin his research career under Dani's guidance. Abdul Karim was instantly provided with some facilities there at the Museum with advice to prepare a thesis on the Independent Sultans of Bengal. The budding scholars in historical research will get ample inspiration by reading Section Seventeen of the book as it is laden with accounts of odds and receipts of the pursuits. The following Sections of his book are also rich in information on the development of teaching and research in the University of Dhaka in the fifties and early sixties. The activities of the Aligarh-background historians in the Pakistan Historical Society in Karachi and the formation of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan in Dhaka have been adequately provided in the autobiography. All the readers may not agree with the viewpoint of Professor Karim as expressed in the book but it will surely serve as a source for further study. The publication needed a minor editing to shun some linguistic errors.