

Book Reviews

Tribute Volume for Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer: Striving for Peace and Harmony, by (eds.) Ram Puniyani, Irfan Engineer, Mumbai: Bhashya Prakashan, 2014

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Asghar Ali Engineer, an Indian Bohra Muslim, was a foremost social activist and reformist who not only investigated and examined the root causes of communal violence prevalent in India, but also commented on other important social issues. He also laid the foundation of reform movement in the Bohra community. He devoted his entire life for the preservation and promotion of peace, non-violence, communal harmony and human rights in the society, which is evident from his plethora of works dealing with a wide range of social and religious issues. Moreover, he is known internationally for his ‘liberation theology’ in Islam. Consequently, with his both writings and praxis, he left an indelible influence on a large section of society—social activists, reformists, journalists, academicians to name but a few. Although, this great renowned scholar-activist left this world on 14th of May, 2013, at the age 74; but he left behind a great legacy to follow. The book under review, in fact an edited volume, is a collection of the tributes of his many scholar-activist friends; besides the book highlights his potential contribution in various areas of human rights.

The introductory essay, “Asghar Ali Engineer: Crusader for Peace and Justice” (pp. 11-27), by Ram Puniyani, begins with a brief background of Engineer’s life; his struggle for reform in the Bohra community. Engineer was shocked to see, writes Puniyani, that the violence being perpetuated at the cost of religion as Engineer believed “no religion teaches

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violence” (p. 13). Therefore, according to Puniyani, he spent most of his time and energy in investigating and analyzing communal violence in India. Puniyani also records Engineers’ observations and his dealing with other areas of great interest: religion, gender issue, secularism. For Engineer, “Religion must be discussed in the socio-political context to comprehend it properly” (p. 20). Puniyani says that in all his writings on the religion, the most prevalent themes which come to the fore include the ‘morality of religion’ and the social welfare of the deprived and weaker sections of the society. With this, in the words of Puniyani, AA Engineer was “a sincere, honest and committed scholar-activist” (p. 24).

Second essay, “Legacy of Dr. Asghar Engineer”, by his son Irfan Engineer reflects and recounts the legacy which he inherited from his father—Dr. Asgahr Ali Engineer. Irfan recalls us about Engineer’s pursuit and understanding of truth: “the difference between a prophet and a philosopher” according to Engineer, writes Irfan, “was that prophet communicated his message in language that people could easily understand whereas often philosophers spoke in language comprehensible only to the privileged few....made carriers, the former brought about the social change and left a lasting impact and legacy” (pp. 29-30). For irfan, Engineer was highly disciplined, easily understandable, approachable, humble, and a person in search for freedom. Engineer would often say, writes Irfan, the freedom requires an environment of three Ds—“Democracy, Dialogue and Diversity” (*ibid*).

Next tribute, “Asgharbai as I Knew Him: Some Personal Reminiscences”, is from a US settled scientist and a close associate of Engineer, Vinod Mubayi, who also comments and praises Engineer’s lifelong endeavor particularly in the area of communal harmony. According to Mubayi, Engineer meticulously pointed out that the root cause of the communalization of Indian history: ingrained in the socio-economic or socio-political struggles which later got transferred in the religious antagonism (p. 41). Further Mubayi comments on his religious understanding like Engineer’s critic, for me though arguable, on Muslim personal laws formulated by ‘conservative’ theologians; Engineer’s views on triple talaq; women’s rights in the Qur’an to name but a few. ‘Universal brotherhood’, ‘equality’ and ‘social justice’ were the areas, says Mubayi, toward which Engineer laid much emphasis on. In the words of Mubayi, Ashagar Ali Engineer was “very secular, progressive, and rational person with a deep and abiding philosophical interest in Marxism” (p. 40). What else could be said about this great personality than in the words of Mubayi “People of Asgahr Ali’s caliber are rare” (p. 46).

Harsh Mander, a social activist, in his tribute to Engineer “The Courage of Love”, wherein he says Engineer spent his whole life in the pursuit of love; for Engineer believed

“true religion could never teach you hatred, prejudice or violence against people of other faiths” (pp. 47-48).

In another tribute by an academician Hilal Ahmad, “Asghar Ali Engineer (1939-2003): Emancipatory Intellectual Politics”, highlights the intellectual activism and political legacy of Engineer. According to Hilal, two unique features make his political legacy extraordinary: his ‘political hermeneutics’ and his ‘technique of argumentation’. In the words of Hilal, Engineer was very critical to: the elite Muslims, and the prevalent Islamic theology; for he believes “theology has been an ally of establishment and the theologians benefactor of status quo” (p. 54), while as elites propagated a ‘pro-upper’ class view of Islam. However, as I see one can easily find Engineer’s radical ideas in his liberation theory on some theological issue on which Muslim scholars have consensus. Engineer was of the view that “Islam is not a way of life” and we cannot find “everything” in it; for Engineer, to get a comprehensive understanding of the religious text like the Qur’an, it is necessary to “recognize the ways in which it is understood by the poor and marginalized sections of the Muslim religious communities” (p. 55). By saying this, for me, Engineer was writing based on his encounter with his society. In the end, Hilal says that Engineer introduced us for the first time “the distinctiveness of intellectual politics” (P. 58).

“A Hero who is no more!” a tribute from a Mumbai based journalist and civil rights activist, Javed Anand while explaining the differences which he had with the Engineer over women and gender equality issues, Javed acknowledges Asghar Saheb’s role “in canvassing the case for tolerant, pluralistic, humane, human rights friendly, gender just Islam” as outstanding.

Further, in his tribute to Engineer, “The lamp has gone leaving behind a bright glow: a tribute to Dr. Ashar 'Ali Engineer”, Prof. M. Hasan—a human rights and environment activist—expresses his experience with Dr. Engineer; how Hasan took great pains to invite Engineer to deliver lectures in Rajasthan University. Hasan recounts that Engineer encouraged him to continue the fight for justice for the victims of communal violence in Rajasthan especially the Gopalgarh tragedy in which ten Muslims were brutally killed leaving scores injured. Expressing his deep sorrow on Engineers death, Hasan says “I feel a rope of strength has suddenly slipped from my hand in a deep, dark well” (p. 106).

In the tribute of Dr. Ishtiyahq Ahmad, “Remembering Asghar Ali Engineer”, wherein he raises some important points related to Engineer belief. For Engineer, says Ishtiyahq, the second caliph Hazrat 'Umar bin Khattab ^(R) was the founder of the reform movement in Islam as he brilliantly acted with the changing circumstances of his times. Engineer also believed, writes Ishtiyahq, that Hazrat Ali should have succeeded the Prophet. Furthermore, according to Ishtiyahq, Engineer was of the view that politics should be kept away from the religious faith.

In spite of the contradicting views Engineer hold toward which Ishtiyag explicitly mentions; nevertheless, Ishtiyag expresses his tribute in the words as “Engineer Sahib’s departure marks the closure of a role model combining erudition with street activism and a will not to surrender to the forces of reaction and brute power” (p. 133).

Zakia Soman, co-founder of Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan, in her tribute, “Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer, a Champion of Equality for Muslim Women”, expresses her indebted to Dr. Engineer for understanding her that Women are in equal standing in front of the God. Soman also highlights Engineers understanding of Qur’anic discourse on women rights; for Engineer believed Qur’anic discourse about women is right-based while as about the men it is duty-based. Here it would not be wrong to say that Engineer’s interpretation was at par with the feministic interpretation of the Qur’an. Nonetheless, Engineer’s efforts for Muslim womens’ rights are an important endeavor as mass discrimination against women at the domestic level is unabated.

More to say Engineer was ‘on a mission for a just, equal and harmonious world’ (Swami Agnivesh); ‘Stood for tolerance, communal harmony and inter-faith dialogue’ (Meena Menon); ‘was a spectacular star of hope’ (Dr. Rohila); ‘a walking encyclopedia’ (Zarina Patel).

The present volume has indeed aptly covered, though briefly, the lifelong experience, thought and contribution of Ashar Ali Engineer as seen and experienced by his close associates. The book definitely will prove helpful tool for those who want to get introduced with the great personality of Ashagr Ali Engineer; for his contribution particularly in the field of communal harmony, peace and justice will continue to be highly acclaimed across the globe.
