

Book Review

The Muslim Heritage of Bengal: The Lives, Thoughts and Achievements of Great Muslim Scholars, Writers and Reformers of Bangladesh and West Bengal by Muhammad Mojlum Khan Markfield, Kube Publishing Ltd., 2013UK

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Bengali Muslims constitute the second largest linguistic group in the Muslim world, the first being the Arabs. Though living as a minority in the Indian Subcontinent, the Bengali Muslims can hardly be referred to as a minor group in the Muslim *Ummah*. Throughout the course of Islamic history of Bengal, the Bengali Muslims have displayed an unyielding determination in “promoting a culture of learning, exchange and understanding between different communities of Bengal”(p.1), as the author of the book under review has put. However, most historians have ignored the remarkable contributions made by the Bengali Muslim intellectuals, rulers, social activists, scholars, philanthropists etc. in Bengali history. Muhammad Mojlum Khan contends that the available literature regarding Bengali history and culture seems to have been dominated by the “oriental list theoretical framework” and “secular, nationalist, sectarian or political perspectives” that reflect the Islamic history of Bengal “as no more than a footnote to a greater India-centric view of the subcontinent” (p.2). Thus, there is an urgent need to apply an Islamic approach for understanding the history and culture of Bengali Muslims. Fortunately, Khan’s *The Muslim Heritage of Bengal* makes a crucial stride in this direction. To this end, the author deliberates over the life and contributions of forty-two prominent Muslim personalities of Bengal, including scholars, rulers, intellectuals, etc.

The introductory part of the book provides a perspective for understanding the main theme of the work. The author highlights the current gaps in existing works on the theme, evaluating the significance of the current study on Muslim contribution to the “development, progress and regeneration of the Muslim community” (p. 3)of Bengal.

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The main part of the work begins with a discussion on Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji (d.1206 C.E.), the first general to establish Muslim rule in Bengal around 1204 C.E. His conquest of Bengal is termed as “a remarkable military feat” that was “achieved without any collateral damage” (p.17). Unlike the previous Hindu regime, the Senas, Khalji, with his “open and welcoming approach”, managed to foster a “culture of respect and mutual understanding” among diverse religio-cultural denominations in Bengal (p.17). The author eulogizes Khalji for his “achievement and legacy” that “has continued to inspire the Muslims of Bengal to this day” (p.19).

The author’s discussion on Khalji is followed by an account on Makhdum Shaykh Jalal al-Din Mujarrad (c.1271-1347), popularly known as Shah Jalal of Sylhet. He was a renowned Sufi and scholar credited for his role in disseminating the message of Islam throughout Bengal. Shah Jalal is discussed vis-à-vis other Sufi/Muslim preachers of Bengal. Khan eulogizes Shah Jalal’s contributions and achievements within the context of the Islamization of the province of Bengal, and hails the latter as one of “the real pioneers of Islam in East Bengal” (p. 26).

Khan further examines the academic and literary contributions of the Sufi writer and poet, Syed Sultan (c.1550-c.1648), who “contributed to the Islamization and Persianization of Bengali culture and society” (p.37). This is followed by a discussion on Syed Alaol of the late medieval period (c.1607-c.1680), Hayat Mahmud (c.1680-c.1760), Rahimunnesa (c.1763-c.1800), Khan Bahadur Abu Muhammad Abdul Ghafur Nassakh (1833-1889), and Mir Musharraf Husayn (1847-1912), the influential writer, novelist and Islamic scholar. The author then highlights the contributions of Taslimuddin Ahmad (1852-1927), a socio-cultural activist, a lawyer, leader, scholar as well as a prolific writer, who left an impressive mark on modern Bengali literature. Abdul Karim Sahityavisharad (1869-1953) is then discussed by Khan, with remarks on his efforts while reviving the “rich tradition of medieval Muslim literature of Bengal” (p.291). Likewise, Muhammad Daad Ali (c.1852-1936), a religio-spiritual, literary and intellectual figure of Bengal, Kazim Al-Qurayshi Kaykobadi (1858-1952), the most “outstanding Muslim scholar, writer, and poet” (p.208) of modern Bengal, Muzammil Haq of Shantipur (1860-1933), “a gifted poet, prolific writer, and an equally devout Muslim” who was an “outstanding journalist, editor and translator” (p.221) are discussed. Further, the author mentions the contributions made by the scholars, writers and journalists from the early parts of the 19th and 20th centuries, respectively, Munshi Shaykh

Abdur Rahim (1859-1931) and Mawlana Muhammad Akram Khan (1868-1968), all of whom dedicated their lives to reforming and revitalizing the Muslim community through literary efforts.

Next, the author discusses Khan Jahan Ali (c.1375-1459), a notable political ruler, Islamic reformer as well as Sufi. This is followed by the 19th century Islamic scholar, social reformist, educationist and Sufi, Pir Abu Bakr Siddiqi (1846-1939) popularly known as Furfur Pir Sahab, whose contributions lie in revitalizing genuine practices of Islamic spirituality and reviving the Prophetic norms and practices in Bengal, besides championing the process of Islamic learning and education in Bengal (p.166).

The contributions of Mannujan Khanum or Maryam Khanum (c.1717-1803) and her step brother, Haji Muhammad Muhsin (1732-1812), the founder of Muhsin Fund, Sir Abdul Ghani (1813-1869), a leading public figure and philanthropist, his son, Nawab Sir Ahsanullah (1846-1901), Faizunnesa Choudhurani (1834-1903), a social worker, poet, writer and a philanthropist, are then discussed by Khan. Their activities were mainly focused on raising the socio-economic and educational standard of the Muslims of Bengal. Next, Khan also discusses Maulvi Abdul Karim (1863-1943), the scholar, leading educational reformer and writer, Nawab Syed Nawab Ali Chowdary (1863-1929), a leading philanthropist, educationist, politician and a great landholder of East Bengal, Sir Abdur Rahim (1867-1952), a prominent Bengali Muslim leader and politician, focusing on their contributions in the reformation and regeneration of Bengal's Muslim society (p.245).

The activities and contributions of eminent Bengali Muslim scholars, religious reformers and social activists, particularly the proponents of the *Wahhabi* approach like Haji Shariatullah (1781-1840), the founder of Faraidi movement, Titu Mir or Sayyid Mir Nisar Ali (1782-1831), the renowned scholar Mawlana Karamat Ali Jaunpuri (1800-1872), known as "*Hadi-i-Zaman*" (p.101) and his son Mawlana Abdul Awwal Jaunpuri (1866-1921), are comparatively examined by the author. This examination includes their diverse approaches of striving for socio-economic fairness against the Hindu-aristocratic class, and of their endeavors to launch religious reform in the context of European imperialism. This is followed by a treatment of Mawlana Ubaydullah Suhrawardi (1834-1885), who was referred to as "Sir Sayyid of Bengal" and titled by the government of India as "*Bahr ul-Ulum*," or the sea of knowledge (p.139).

Apart from reformers who challenged British imperialism, Khan also examines the contributions made by those who established cordial relations with the British and adopted a moderate and modernist approach, such as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. Others include Nawab Abdul Latif, or Khan Bahadur (1828-1893), “the father of Islamic modernism and reformation in Bengal” (p.111), Abdur Rauf Wahid (1828-1893), “the influential Muslim scholar, poet, journalist and political leader of West Bengal” (p.119), and Dilawar Husayn Ahmad (1840-1913), a modernist and rationalist Islamic thinker and a political visionary of Bengal. Syed Ameer Ali (1849-1928) is applauded by Khan for his acumen in the religious knowledge, particularly in Islamic legal thought. Like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, he “refuted the charges levelled against the Prophet” (p. 186) by the Orientalists. Inspired by the educational philosophy and reformist ideas of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Syed Ameer Ali and Nawab Abdul Latif, another Muslim scholar and leader of outstanding repute was Sir Syed Shamsul Huda (1863-1922).

In addition, the author highlights the contributions of Munshi Muhammad Meherullah (1861-1907) and his student Munshi Shaykh Muhammad Zamiruddin (1870-1937). Both of them led an unyielding campaign against the charges leveled against Islam, the Prophet and the Qur’an by Christian Missionaries during 19th and 20th centuries in Bengal.

To add vigor to the political, economic and educational renaissance of the Bengali Muslim community, many leading and influential personalities dedicated their wealth as well as energy. In this regard, the author highlights the contributions of Wajid Ali Khan (1871-1936) and others, as well as Sir Salimullah Khan Bahadur (1871-1915), the man who was, according to the author, “destined to transform the political, economic, cultural and educational fortunes of the Muslims of Bengal” (p.309). Likewise, Mawlana Abu Nasr Wahid (1872-1953), “a renowned Islamic scholar and educationalist” (p.329), is credited for bringing reform in the *madrasah* system and for materializing the concept of “educational synthesis” on practical grounds. The author then eulogizes Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah (1873-1965), the most significant “Muslim educationalist, reformer, writer, religious scholar and spiritual luminary of Bengal” (p.338). Apart from deliberating over other Muslim women luminaries of Bengal, the author provides a special description of the literary and educational achievements of Ruqaiyyah Khatun or Begum Rokeya, who acted as the torch-bearer of the female education in the province of Bengal.

The conclusion, explicating the author's interest in laying out this book, is beautifully followed by a brief chronology of Islamic history of Bengal, an extensive list of further readings regarding each part/chapter of the book, a select bibliography and an index. The striking feature of the book lies mainly in the fact that each chapter includes a contextual statement of historical, cultural and religious importance regarding the particular personality under discussion, making the rest of the subjects easy to understand. With a straightforward and lucid style of language, the book is highly informative and beneficial to students, general readers as well as to research scholars and academics. However, having said off that, the text overlooks the usage of transliteration

Though the book carries the title "Muslim Heritage of Bengal" yet the period brought under study covers a limited period and reflects a gloomy age rather than a glorious period (late 18th and early 20th century). Muslims during this period had lost their political authority and were passing through a despicable situation by being hounded by the agents of East India Company and the Calcutta based Hindu clientele-*Banniyas* (merchants and money-lenders). There occurs a significant missing link in the chain of biographies which brings a gap in the chronology of events narrated to enhance the understanding of the historically important period of Nawāb Sirāj al-Dawlah. Lacking a contextual and proper understanding Sirāj al-Dawlah's treacherous defeat by the English, a reader would hardly be able to appreciate the period of study that covers almost 36 biographies out of 42. Some other figures of considerable importance, besides Nawāb Sirāj al-Dawlah have not been mentioned which makes the study incomplete. Such personalities include Sultan Shah, Mir Jumla and Shaista Khan. In addition to glossary, the book needs to be supplemented with maps within the text to add to its readability. There should have been also the usage of the transliteration of the non-English terms especially names of the personalities.
