



Shahidullah's tomb at Dhaka University campus.



Shahidullah with his youngest son painter Murtaja Baseer.



Shahidullah in early days.

SHAHIDULLAH'S SADHANA

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

"Archimedes once made the remark: give me a farm spot to stand and with a lever I will move the whole world. Archimedes strived for the impossible. But I am making a realistic claim to you: Give me a dozen writers imbued with fresh thoughts and I will move Bangladesh"

This is an excerpt from Muhammad Shahidullah's speech delivered at Chittagong Conference in 1918. He urged the predominantly young Muslim audiences of the Conference to devote their creative energy to the nourishment of Bangla language and literature. This is just one example of his life-long belief that the diffident Bangali Muslims can build their future only through their mother tongue. He fully devoted himself to this endeavour.

Shahidullah was born at a time when communalism was rife in the society. The

'Shahidullah Affair'. Maulana Muhammad Ali Jauhar, one of the leading figures of the Khilafat Movement, vehemently protested the incident and wrote in the *Comrade*: "While we hope that Muslim scholars would learn Sanskrit in larger numbers than we do at present, we trust such incidents as the "Shahidullah Affair", when a pundit of Calcutta University refused to teach Sanskrit to a Muslim student, would not recur." Later, the university authority resolved the issue by establishing a separate department of comparative

Muslims. It will be the foundation of Hindu-Muslim fraternity" (3rd Annual Lecture at Muslim Literary Society, 1928). To attract Muslims in the pursuit of Bangla language and literature, he led the effort in the establishment of the Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Samiti (Bengal Muslim Literary Society) in 1911. It was the first of its kind in East Bengal. It played the role of the renaissance in Bangali Muslim society.

Besides creating new literature, Shahidullah had to fight against the communal propaganda, fed by Hindu communalists and Muslim elitists, that Bangali Muslims have very little contribution to the treasure trove of Bangla classics. In this effort he was inspired by the pioneering works of Abdul Karim Sahitya Bisharad who roamed around the country sides and collected *puthis*, the laurels of Bangla literature. Sahitya Bisharad established that Muslim litterateurs had no less a contribution to old Bangla literature. He compiled and edited Alaol's *Padmavati*, now recognised as a gem of early modern Bangla literature. Shahidullah too edited a version of *Padmavati*.

Shahidullah formed a folklore collection society in Dhaka University with the aim of collecting the folk elements of Bangla literature. Though it could not achieve much success at that time, later during his time at the Bangla Academy, he renewed the collection project and achieved some success. In his 'Traditional Culture in East Pakistan' (1963), he wrote extensively about the richness of dance, music, craft and various tradition of folkloric Bangladesh. In the model of Bangla Academy he planned for a Folk Lore Institute. But his dream is yet to be realised.

One cannot grasp the richness of Bangali language without taking into account the dialects of the language. With this view, Dr Shahidullah embarked on the gigantic task of collecting words from Bangali dialects to prepare dictionaries in the model of English Dialect Dictionary. It might also have been a part of finding the vernacular elements of the language, as he was against both the attempt of using Sanskrit-dominated Bangla and imposition of Persian and Arabic words on the language. He headed the advisory committee who supervised the effort of 500 word collectors who roamed around and collected words. In his life time, two volumes of the dictionary were published by Bangla Academy.

When the great divide of India was imminent, Vice Chancellor of Aligarh

Muslim University Ziauddin Ahmad propagated the idea of making Urdu the national language of the would be Pakistan. Shahidullah protested this proposal and penned 'The Language Problems of Pakistan' in the *Weekly Comrade*: "To surrender Bengali to Urdu or Hindi as the language of the court and university will be a shameful surrender to outsiders, which will be as bad as—if not worse—political subjugation". He felt that, if necessary, Bangalis should revolt against the imposition of any language other than Bangla as the medium of

BORN

10 July 1885, Peyara, 24 Pargana, West Bengal, British India
 (now in India)

DIED

13 July 1969 (aged 84), Dhaka, Bangladesh

ALMA MATER

Sorbonne University, University of Calcutta

MAJOR WORKS

Les chants mystiques de Kânha et de Saraha (The Mystic songs of Kanha and Saraha, 1928), Bhasa O Sahitya (Language and literature, essays, 1931), Bangala Byakaran (Bangla grammar, 1936), Diwan-i-Hafiz (Poems of Hafiz, translation, 1938), Essays on Islam (1945), Padmavati (Volume I ed, 1950), Bangla Sahityer Katha (History of Bangla literature, Volume I in 1953, Volume II in 1965), Vidyapati Shatak (Collection of Vidyapati's songs, text analysis, 1954), Bangla Adab Ki Tarikh (History of Bangla literature, essays, in Urdu, 1957), Bangla Sahityer Itihas (History of Bangla literature, 1957), Bangala Bhasar Itibritta (History of Bangla language, 1959), Amarkabya (Unforgettable poetical works, 1963).

AWARDS

Chevalier De L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (1967), Independence Day Award (1980, Posthumously)

instruction. To him the imposition was tantamount to 'genocide'. He played a prominent role in the language movement. Besides literary works, his active role in defending the rights of Bangla language made him the organic intellectual of Bangali nationalism.

Shakespeare's England is more famous than England herself. Same is true for Tolstoy's Russia and Goethe's Germany. Dr Muhammad Shahidullah was such an icon whose invaluable contributions evoked the spirit of Bangla language and literature, and guided the Bangali nation to its glorious destiny. The works and thoughts of this 'walking encyclopaedia of oriental lore' demand proper attention and extensive research. When will Shahidullah Studies begin in Bangladesh?

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Hindu-Muslim divide reached to an extent where learning of Sanskrit by a student of Muslim origin was despised by both the communities. But Shahidullah went against the tide and completed his BA in Sanskrit. He took admission in the Sanskrit department of Calcutta University for pursuing further studies in the language. But the professors of the department could not accept the idea of teaching a Muslim the holy book, *Veda*. This incident gave rise to the

philology for this distinguished student.

Shahidullah had the conviction that Hindus and Muslims can reach across the communal divide through nurturing the spirit of Bangali nationalism. To do that, the prime task would be the formation of a national literature. And it would require the contribution from both the Muslim and Hindu communities. According to Shahidullah, "Bangla Literature is not like a Temple or a Mosque; not the communal property of Hindus and

