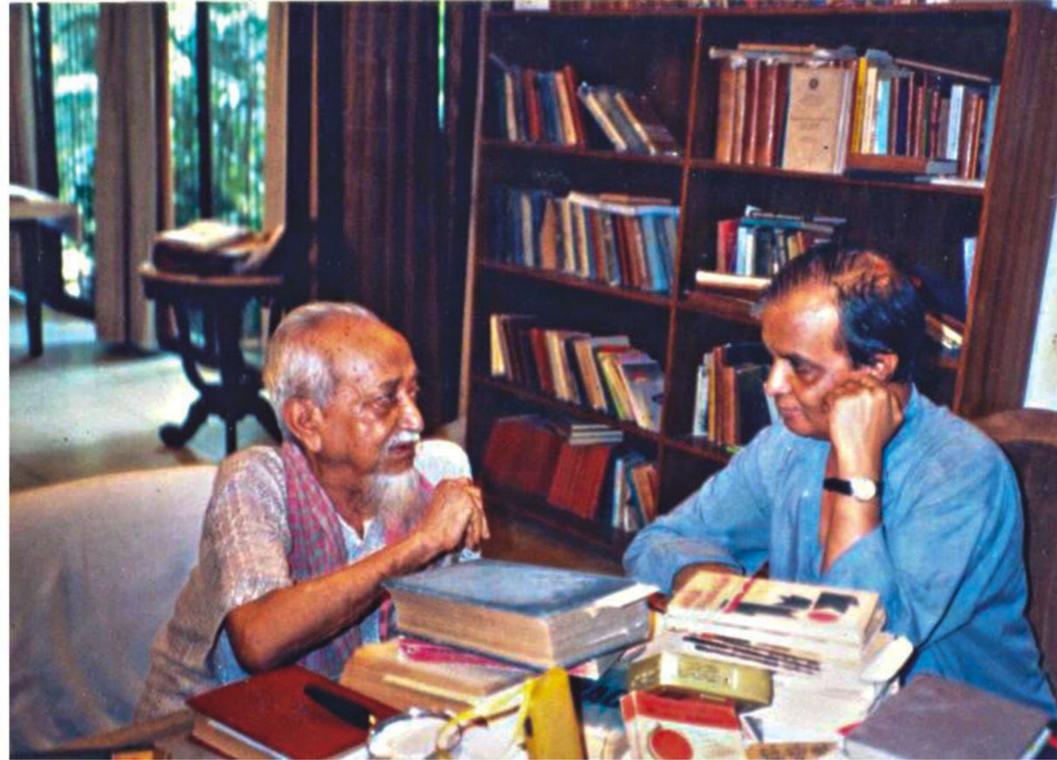


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ABDUR RAZZAQ THE MYTH AND THE MAN

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Ahmed Sofa with his mentor, Professor Abdur Razzaq, among his books.

PHOTO: NASIR ALI MAMUN

In an article titled *The Mind of the Educated Middle Class in the Nineteenth Century* published in 1957, Professor Abdur Razzaq wrote about the divergent political thoughts, built on the foundations of religious difference, of the Hindus and Muslims in India. Before the late eighteenth century, the interaction of the locals of India and their colonisers was limited to the needs of the latter: the East India Company needed men, the “Kazis and Pandits”, who would be able to interpret Muslim and Hindu law to the European judges. Beyond that, they remained sceptical of the need to introduce English education in India.

Professor Razzaq traces the birth of English education, and ultimately the middle class in India, in the evangelising zeal of the missionaries. Introduction of English education and patronage of local vernaculars as well, to gain wider reach, would help them to convert the natives to the true faith, or so they believed.

What actually happened was the advent of religious revivalism. In the class which lapped up English education as a means to economic improvement, questions of religion and reform dominated. In the works of Raja Rammohan Ray to Bankim Chandra, the question of politics and society was not that of India, but of the Hindus of India. The same was true for the Muslims, although for them, this started earlier, and was probably intensified in the economic competition in which they were at the losing end. As such, Professor Razzaq writes, the “introduction of English, which could have been a wholly secular affair, became instrumental in bringing forth a revivalism in the educated class”. It is not the fanatics of religion that Professor Razzaq points to, but the normalisation in thinking of the society in terms of religion after the debates had settled.

By the time the revivalist phase died down, the bases of thought from which the political concerns of the Hindus and Muslims would spring forth were set. The philosophy, outlook on life and the literature of the two communities were either hostile, or in less extreme cases, ignorant of and detached from the lives of the other. Even as the reformist movements of the likes of Syed Bareilvi for Muslims or the Brahmo Samaj for Hindus failed to attract the educated class completely, they in turn failed to dissociate themselves from the basic assumptions of thinking along religious lines.

The minds of the middle class of India, both Hindu and Muslim, were compartmentalised into neat boxes of religion. It seems, “educated” India did not have to be hard pressed to adopt the British line of thought when it came to the matter. As Professor Razzaq writes:

“The inability of the Hindu and Muslim to sit round a table and devise a common programme in the political field was the inability of the educated Hindu and the educated Muslim to do so. This failure was conditioned by the early manner of the intellectual development, a development which is continuous down to our day.”

Gandhi’s support of the Khilafat movement—with the hope that “political

progress and Hindu-Muslim unity would gain by making the Muslim and the Hindu more religion conscious”—is both a symptom of this trend and a foreboding of its future consequences. Professor Razzaq in conclusion springs a question, which is at odds with those who seek to unquestionably glorify the Bengal Renaissance:

“The intellectual heritage which distinguished the educated Indian, leading the political movement, from the uneducated Indian, was a very doubtful asset.”

Professor Abdur Razzaq’s critical thinking when it comes to the issue of Hindu-Muslim relations in the subcontinent is measured and impassionate to the reader of the article discussed above. He shines as someone who understood the folly of this sectional line of thinking and its eventual consequences. Yet, surprisingly, speaking of him, Ahmad Sofa, in his book *Joddopi*

Amar Guru (Albeit my teacher...), would write that Abdur Razzaq was a man of his time, dedicated solely to the problems of the Bengali-Muslim society, who could never fully go beyond the social and historical contexts which shaped him. What Professor Razzaq explains so precisely in the article above, is used as the excuse of a devoted student to explain Razzaq’s once support for the creation of Pakistan and life-long respect for Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

Ahmad Sofa’s prose in *Joddopi Amar Guru* is that of a star-struck student. Since his first interaction with Professor Razzaq, when he asked him to become his PhD supervisor, Sofa had maintained contact with him regularly. The book is a recollection—blurred by the fragility of memory, as Sofa admits—of the regular discussions that the two had over the years on issues ranging from literature, politics, philosophy, religion and art. Professor Razzaq here emerges as a Socratic figure, with his love for

discussions, recommending books, springing questions and encouraging new lines of thought in the young Sofa. Yet, it is another Greek thinker that he was more closely identified with in his time as a teacher in the University of Dhaka: Diogenes the Cynic.

From Sofa’s respect filled pages, it is easy to see why. The Professor was a man who loved questions and was unafraid to go against the prevalent view of things. From the merit of Rabindranath and the importance of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar to his stubborn views about contemporary writers and artists, Abdur Razzaq held unconventional views. And even as we see a young Sofa, with his love for the Nobel Laureate, struggle to argue with his teacher, the latter’s breadth of knowledge easily overpowered the student.

Yet, till the last pages, Sofa’s love for his mentor stops short of complete

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Professor Abdur Razzaq (extreme left), at the convocation in Delhi University, after being awarded an honorary D.Litt. degree. Next to him is Satyajit Ray, sixth from left is artist Zainul Abedin and in the centre, the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi. Source: *Gyantaposh Abdur Razzar Commemoration Volume*, Bengal Publications

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deification. As a brilliant writer and thinker in his own right, Sofa was shaped by the Liberation War, and that made him question Professor Razzaq’s views constantly, especially about his high esteem of Jinnah as a politician. But, for Sofa, the two-nation theory was a proven mistake; for his teacher it was the inevitable. Yet, Abdur Razzaq’s contribution to the six point movement is undoubted. He foresaw that the economic disparity of the two wings of Pakistan would ultimately be its downfall, and in 1971, he had to spend time hiding in the villages to escape the fate that befell many intellectuals.

It is easy to see Abdur Razzaq’s influence on the writers and thinkers who would come after him. In Ahmad Sofa’s *Bangali Mosulmaner Mon*, the question of Hindi-Muslim relations surfaces again. While Sofa in this book showed a nuanced and deeply perceptive understanding of the root of insecurity and alienation that plagues Bengali-Muslims and seeks to address that, others who followed, such as Farhad Mazhar, seemed to have reverted to the condition that Abdur Razzaq spoke of in 1957. Failing to take into account the changed political landscape and the fact that Muslims today are the majority in the country, these thinkers sought to define the problems in the communal Hindu-Muslim dichotomy using the same line of thought the development of which Abdur Razzaq once critiqued.

That a man such as Professor Abdur Razzaq can give rise to contention is no surprise. He had been a teacher in some way or another to almost every brilliant mind in this country since independence. Badruddin Umar, Anisuzzaman, Rehman Sobhan, Nilima Ibrahim, Rounaq Jahan, Sardar Fazlul Karim, Shamsur Rahman,



Even in his twilight years, Professor Razzaq’s time was spent in reading. Source: *Gyantaposh Abdur Razzaq Commemoration Volume*, Bengal Publications.

Serajul Islam Choudhury, Hameeda Hossain—to name only a few—have all written of his influence with unabashed respect. His teachings, to put it in another way, have influenced the intellectual minds, from the celebrated to the controversial, of a generation.

But, he himself left precious little in the form of writing. So what is known of the man through these people is almost mythical in proportions. The first thing one hears of him is how, at the London School of Economics, he was a PhD student of the celebrated thinker and professor Harold Laski. That after Laski’s death, he came back to teach at his alma mater, without a PhD, is widely known. Other stories about him, such as those in Sofa’s book, speak of him as an eccentric, who would dress in threadbare clothes, speak in a Dhakaiya accent and spend

days in old bookshops. Married to his collection of books, he would spend hours discussing them with students who would come to his residence to talk to him.

This reveals a man who—despite whatever faults and contradictions one may find in his thinking—was dedicated to knowledge and learning. Even in his twilight years, with failing eyesight, visitors would find him bent over a book with a magnifying glass. Asked once by Ahmad Sofa what was to happen to his books after his death, he had replied that he wanted them stored in a place where others could use them to conduct research on Bengal. Pressed by Sofa about what he meant, he replied that research on any aspect of Bengal, from its politics and economy to history and music, would

do. Today, a portion of his prodigious collection is housed in Dhanmondi 7/A in Bengal Foundation’s Gayantapas Abdur Razzaq Bidyapeeth.

It was Ahmad Sofa’s reminiscences in *Joddopi Amar Guru* that prompted my interest in the man. He was a student of Dhaka University in the first decades of its establishment, and had since taught and influenced almost every notable writer and thinker in the country. He lived through and thought critically of the major events that shaped this nation. His wit, charm and the rarity of the anecdotes he shared drew me in: who knew Claude Lévi-Strauss was once a lecturer at the sociology department of the University of Dhaka?

But, as someone who approached him through an intermediary, my interest was not that of unquestioned admiration like that of his students. One need not agree with him on everything, and I will probably come to change my ideas about him many more times before I can fully comprehend his thoughts. But in one thing, in his complete dedication and love for knowledge, he deserves only respect. To illustrate, one needs only to go back to Ahmad Sofa’s first interactions with Professor Razzaq.

Ahmad Sofa went to Razzaq and told him that he wanted to do his research work on the middle class of Bengal in the nineteenth century, and asked him about recommendations for where he should start his studies. Laughing, Professor Razzaq replied,

“I had asked Mr. Laski the same thing. He showed me the library and said, ‘My boy, go and soak.’” Till the end of his life, Professor Abdur Razzaq followed this advice, and encouraged others to do the same.

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