

Kasim Uddin Ahmad - A True Humanist

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IN 1946, I was a student of Class VI at Pabna Zilla School. That was an era of slogans like *Ladke Lenge Pakistan* or *Bande Mataram*. In the midst of the year, a new head *Mawlana* (Islamic teacher) joined our school, perhaps, having transferred from Jalpaiguri. His name was Kasim Uddin Ahmad.

Having seen his attire, we were a bit bemused: He had no beard but a thin moustache and wore a half sleeve shirt over his trousers, with a wool cap in his head. He taught Urdu. Back then, apart from English, one had to choose a second language among urdu, arabic, persian or sanskrit languages as early as in Class VI. I had chosen Sanskrit but later switched to Arabic. When Mawlana Aziz, the teacher of Arabic language, was absent, Mawlana Kasim Uddin would show up.

Our school was located in Zillapara at Pabna, near was our home. Kafiluddin sahib, the elder brother of Kasim Uddin, was our neighbour. Mawlana sahib himself also started to live there soon afterwards.

As far as I remember, two-three months after he joined our school, Kolkata saw the infamous communal riot of August 16. In our Zillapara, Muslims outnumbered Hindus by a small margin, but the two communities had long co-existed peacefully. In order to maintain peace and calm, Mawlana sahib, my father, Sachin Chowdhury, Matu Sanyal, Aziz Khan Ukil sahib, and many other elders from both the communities visited localities across Zillapara and adjacent areas and held meetings. Mawlana sahib was youngest of all, but he took it upon himself to organise all the meetings.

The same year, probably in September,

an unpleasant incident took place in Zilla School. Munsef sahib's son, who was studying in Class X, had chosen Sanskrit as his second language. One day he wore 'Jinnah cap' in his Sanskrit class. Irritated by this political statement, the Sanskrit teacher asked him to leave the class, but he refused. In no time, the situation became so tense that it looked like a Hindu-Muslim riot was about to begin. Azim, Wares, the Muslim student leaders, and Bhabotosh Bhattacharjee and other Hindu student leaders came to the school premise. All of them looked furious. In fact, it was the reason why my father asked me to abandon Sanskrit as my second language and choose Arabic instead.

I can still remember Mawlana Kasim Uddin's role in the incident. He, along with some other teachers including Tasadduk Lohani, Sanyal, Brajbihari, confronted the extremist student leaders of both sides. Furious, Mawlana sahib even shunned the headmaster Nabi Nawaj Khan. By then, the police from the nearby station arrived at the scene, and we left. Later, we heard that Mawlana Kasim Uddin sahib rode a bicycle to meet DM (the equivalent of present-day deputy commissioner or DC) Abdul Halim Chowdhury, the father of Munier Chowdhury and Kabir Chowdhury. He then brought the DM and ADM, who is a Hindu, to the scene. Leaders from Muslim League and Congress also came to the school. Eventually, the incident was calmed. Even when Pakistan became independent on August 15, 1947, Pabna saw no communal riots owing to the efforts made by Hindu and Muslim leaders including Mawlana sahib.

As I said earlier, we were shocked to see him not keep a beard and not wear



Mawlana Kasim Uddin Ahmad

Pajama-Panjabi as per Islamic tradition. It was even more shocking to see him wear shorts. Once he joined our school, he took over the charge of the school Scouts. As per the scouting rules, he had to wear shorts. Later, he was given the responsibility to oversee the whole scouting activities of Pabna district. He was a lifetime member of the then-East Pakistan Scout Association and an instructor of civil defence. In other words, Mawlana Kasim Uddin was not a typical *Mawlana*. He made us conduct parades. He also encouraged us to play football, cricket and even *dariabanda*. At times, he himself supervised us. During the annual sports competition, most of the organising responsibilities were bestowed upon himself.

Because of his fondness towards sports, he had to take the responsibility of the district's sports association. When the students performed their annual drama, he never missed enjoying them. Even, at times, he turned up in rehearsals. I saw

him at various events organised by Banamali Institute.

He was a devoted and dedicated soul when it came to social work. He built the foundation of Red Cross Society in Pabna. He cared for Muslim causes, too. It was Mawlana sahib who resurrected the dying Muslim Institute. His enthusiasm towards education was exemplary. He was the founder secretary of Islamiya College (currently, Government Shaheed Bulbul College). He also served as secretary of Pabna Night College, Madhabpur College. Notably, he did not push for segregated educational institutions like *Maktab* or *Madrasa*. He favoured the idea of teaching religious education within the normal school curriculum. I know this because we discussed the matter. I asked him why a cosmopolitan person like him built an 'Islamiya' college. He replied that the most of the members of the committee were in favour of it. Then he, laughingly, said, "I'm a Mawlana. I cannot abandon Islam."

All students of Mawlana sahib, regardless of their religious backgrounds, would admit with one voice that he was very warm-hearted towards his students. He was their friend, guardian—one who was respected immensely.

On 21st February 1952, students in Pabna, like in Dhaka, held district-wide strikes to demand that Bengali be made a state language. Mawlana sahib was accused of inciting students. I heard that Kamal Lohani had hidden in Mawlana sahib's place for a few days before eventually being arrested in 1954. In 1955, after I was released from jail (because I, too, had participated in the language movement), he took me to his home and served me homemade juice. I also heard he was actively involved in non-cooperation movement in March 1971.

Mawlana Kasim Uddin used to fast on a regular basis. If not compelled, he usually did not want to attend any *mahfil* (congregation). There was a reason, as we heard, why he did not like going to such congregation. At a *mahfil*, he found the interpretations of Holy Qur'an and Hadith by some clerics so disturbing that he fiercely opposed them. Many Moulvi sahibs in Pabna used to call him *Kaffir* (or infidel). Nonetheless, that did not stop him from organising all *milad-mahfils* in schools. He taught us about Allah, the Prophet, Qur'an and Hadith. We were too young to understand his teachings, but one thing we understood for sure: his teaching of Islam and that of most contemporary religious clerics were at complete odds.

Mawlana Kasim Uddin was very popular to all, minus some radical mawlanas. He was a 'real humanist.' In 1971, the Pakistani army arrested him after having received a tip from a *Jamaat* activist. I don't know whether that activist is still alive, but one thing I know for sure: If Pakistani military had not killed our Mawlana sahib that day, perhaps that *Jamaat* activist would have killed him by now.

The original piece was written by Zia Haider in Bangla Academy's publication, *Smriti*: 1971 Vol. IV, and translated by Nazmul Ahasan, a member of Editorial Team at The Daily Star.



Kasim Uddin Ahmed dormitory, Pabna Zilla School.

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