Kamaludddin Ahmed Khan: Keen, unconventional, relevant

Remembering the writer and translator on his 111th birth anniversary

AHRAR AHMAD

EING married to Begum Sufia Kamal was certainly an impor-tant part of Mr Kamaluddin Ahmed Khan's life. He derived much joy and meaning, and perhaps some recognition, from this. But he never derived his identity from this relationship. In that, he was fiercely independent, and quite unique. This singularity was evident in

several ways. First, in a compulsively oral culture where people are used to, and perhaps are expected to, being loquacious, he was a very quiet person. In some ways he would be the exact antithesis of the "Argumentative Indian" that Amartya Sen has made famous—the skilled and passionate interlocutors for whom debates and disputations were not an occasional engagement but a lifestyle. As Francis Bacon had indicated, knowledgeable people may talk, but it is only the wise who can listen. Being an "active" listener, he exemplified wisdom for us.

Second, in a society where patriarchy is so endemic and enduring, he chose to be different. He married a young widow with a child from a previous marriage (a child he brought up as his own daughter), and remained a doting husband to a woman who became one of the most celebrated and accomplished cultural/social personalities in the entire country. He had encouraged her education, supported her creative endeavours, took pride in her achievements, and translated many of her poems into English with much subtlety and authority. He could serve as an example to many husbands who do not allow their wives to reach their full potential because of their own insecurities and fragile egos. Equally, she could be an example of a woman who did not permit her considerable fame and moral authority to subvert or distract her from finding her own

maternal and wifely fulfillment.

Third, in a country where one's location in the social hierarchy is often defined by conspicuous consumption, aggressive and relentless self-merchandising, and capitalising on complex networks of power and privilege, he had remained stubbornly, self-consciously, heroically humble and self-erasing. He never cultivated the rich and powerful, never sought any favours from anybody, and undertook to perform all his familial responsibilities without bringing attention to himself.

It is largely because of his unpretentious and unfussy persona that we knew so little about his own intellectual contributions. This needs to be explored because they are so wideranging, they indicate an informed and engaging mind wrestling with the issues of the times in insightful ways, and remain quite relevant today.

It is worth remembering that he was directly involved in the movement for the intellectual emancipation of the Muslims in the subcontinent. A rich tradition of Muslim thought in Bengal had been initiated through the writings and speeches of Nawab Abdul Latif, Syed Ameer Ali, Delwar Ahmed Mirza and others in the latter part of the 19th century, followed by Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain a little later. It was not exactly comparable in scope, intensity and drama associated with the earlier Young Bengal movement pioneered by the students of Hindu College and inspired by the brief, charismatic and iconoclastic leadership of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (who was only 17 when he joined the faculty of the College when it was established in 1817, and died when he was 22).

Nonetheless, it provided the context for the intellectual stirrings among the Muslims in Bengal which led to an unprecedented organisa-



Kamaluddin Ahmed and Sufia Kamal, after they tied the knot, in Kolkata, 1939.

tional and publishing liveliness in the beginning of the 20th century. Literary publications such as Moslem Bharat, Bangiya Mussalman Sahitya Patrika, Nawroz, Mohammadi, Saogat, Dhumketu, particularly Shikha (the influential magazine brought out by the newly formed Muslim Literary Society in 1926), and finally Bulbul in 1933 (under the editorship of Muhammad Habibullah and Shamsun Nahar), and provocative thinkers such as Abul Hossain, Kazi Abdul Wadud, Abdul Qadir, Abdul Huq, Abdul Karim Sahitya Bisharod, Mohammad Wazed Ali, Mohammad Imdadul Huq, Muhammad Shahidullah, Qazi Motahar Hossain, Abul Fazl, Qudrat-e-Khuda, Abul Mansur Ahmed and others, indicated

a community in intellectual ferment, eager for knowledge, open-minded and sophisticated in debate and deliberation, and passionate about breaking out of the shackles of superstition, backwardness and stagnancy which were suffocating their own community.

He was situated within this exciting milieu. He was directly involved in the Muslim Sahitya Samaj, contrib uted to many journals of the period (including Shikha), and assumed a leadership role in Bulbul, becoming its co-editor in 1936 and presiding over its emergence from a quarterly to a monthly. He was deeply troubled about the role of religion in public life and lamented its cynical political uses. In the pages of Gonobani (edited

by Comrade Muzaffer Ahmed) he pointed out that while "all civilised societies" are rejecting "religious extremism and communal divisiveness", India was doing the opposite. He briefly flirted with the ideas of democratic socialism and had once opined that India would be best served if it "rejected all obscurantist illusions about its past and accepted socialism for its future." Central to his thinking were his

concerns and commitments regarding Islam. He had spoken out against religious dogmatism, the dangers of "blind faith" indoctrination, the emphasis on empty ritual without real religious commitment, the marginalisation of women and a perverse prudishness regarding human sexuality, and oppressive social practices in some Muslim (Middle Eastern) countries. He deplored their lack of "humanity and sensitivity" in their dealings with the less fortunate, condemned polygamy among the males, and denounced some awkward penal practices (such as beheadings and amputations). It must be emphasised that he never disparaged Islam, or Muslims, per se.

Islam, to him, meant a faith that was based on forgiveness, justice and inclusiveness, and quite compatible with science and modernity. He noted the nonjudgmental aspect of Islam (in his words almost a "secular orientation") in terms of its approach to different faiths, cultures and practices where Islam could "co-exist" with others, even with those manifestly different. Some of his ideas on the subject were contained in his book Kothay Kothay (Conversations) published in 1968.

It may be possible that Sir Muhammad Iqbal's writings on religion may have influenced him towards a spiritually rich direction. He translated several of the chapters, and wrote the introduction to Iqbal's celebrated The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, when it was published in Bangla in 1957. His translation of Iqbal's doctoral dissertation (submitted to the University of Munich in 1908) on "The Development of Metaphysics in Persia" was published in 1965. However, he was absolutely indifferent to Iqbal's writings on politics.

It is worth noting that he pursued a remarkable eclecticism in his tastes and tendencies. He translated Robert Browning's playful Pied Piper of Hamelin, wrote authoritatively on technical issues of science (e.g. "The Mysteries of Matter"), composed romantic poetry, referred to the sensuality in the relationship between men and women, and explored the political and philosophical tensions between the "East" and the "West". But beyond everything else he had

remained a man of letters, a Renaissance man nurtured in Enlightenment ideals and trained in the sciences. He read widely, thought deeply, and wrote with precision and conviction. Like many thinkers of his time he had struggled with the complexities, confusions and contradictions of an intellectual and political environment in flux. But, on some issues he had remained constant—his commitment to the principles of equity and justice (including gender equality), his belief in reason, progress and the common humanity of all, and his deep love for family.

If living a full life is a measure of a person's success, he was a very successful person. However, I suspect, knowing him as I did, that he would probably have dismissed that characterisation with a shy wave of the hand, and a vague smile.

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ENDING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Let's start with engaging men in a caregiving role



 EXUAL violence including rape of girls and women is a serious concern in our society today. Recently, several cases of rape in public transport have made the headlines. What are the root causes? One has to understand

the overall status of women in society to unpack this problem. There is a tendency to tolerate violence against women. A culture of impunity means very few perpetrators are brought to justice, and the vicious cycle continues. Women are less empowered—socially, economically, and politically-which makes them more vulnerable.

Our societal attitude regarding gender roles is one of the reasons for sexual violence. There are traditional beliefs about masculinity and femininity. The majority of the people think that men are more powerful, and they will control sexual relationships to the extent that they are also able to apply force. This imbalance of power means that men are able to maintain their dominance over women. Rape is about power and control. Men with dominant attitudes are more likely to rape women. Sexual violence stems from a mentality which makes men

think that they have rights over a woman's

According to research, men's childhood experiences are linked to perpetration of sexual violence in adulthood. Men who have been exposed to physical or sexual violence, or experienced neglect in childhood become perpetrators of violence at a higher rate compared to men who have not been exposed to these risk factors. Men who have witnessed violence against their mothers are more likely to perpetrate sexual violence (The Making of Sexual Violence: How Does a Boy Grow Up to Commit Rape? Evidence from Five IMAGES Countries, International Center for Research on Women and Instituto Promundo, 2014).

As a society, we are yet to learn how to respect women. If we do not treat women as human beings then it will not be possible to end sexual violence. Many even have a tendency to blame women's clothing or behaviour for rape. The fact that people ask women why they went out at night (when the rape happened) reflects the patriarchal mindset. This must change.

Media fuels traditional gender norms. Women are portrayed in such a way that they are only obsessed with physical beauty and are dependent on men. There is a disproportionate emphasis on their responsibilities related to household work and childrearing. But the reality is totally

different. Women are excelling in all types of professions, and making significant contributions to national development. There is a need to highlight strong and successful women role models.

Usually parents give more importance to their sons than their daughters. In all cultures,

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girls and boys are viewed differently; this becomes more prominent in adolescence-while boys' social circle begins to expand around this time, the lives of girls become restricted. Boys start to enjoy privileges of being a man while girls begin to face the challenges that women endure. While

growing up, boys gradually gain more control over their own lives including sexuality and also have increased mobility. On the contrary, girls get used to the socially defined role ascribed to women. As a result, it becomes difficult for them to assert themselves.

Gender stereotyping affects both men and women in negative ways. For example, men's risk-taking behaviour impacting their health and well-being (e.g. smoking and drinking, driving fast, multiple sexual relationships) could partly be attributed to the traditional concept of masculinity which depicts men as "strong". At the same time, women are thought to be "weak". In many cases, this misconception affects women's ability to lead their lives confidently.

The state must ensure that perpetrators of sexual violence are brought to justice. Positive masculinity should be promoted. Violence reduces when men are engaged in a caregiving role, which includes paternity leave, parenting training for both parents, presence of the father during the birth of the child, and involvement of fathers in raising children. All of these foster a strong bond between fathers and children ultimately contributing to a violence-free home environment. Bangladesh is lagging behind in engaging men in caregiving and nurturing roles as fathers and husbands, and initiatives should be taken in this regard.

It is important that children grow up

parents. Girls and boys should be treated equally by parents/caregivers. If we can bring positive changes in the attitudes of girls and boys from a very young age, then prevention of violence will be possible. Boys need to be taught that being violent or exercising force does not mean that they are strong. Both men and women should be freed from traditional notions of masculinity and femininity that are harmful for them. In various countries, school-based programmes for boys that teach them how to be respectful towards women are proving to be successful.

seeing a respectful relationship between their

It is critical to empower girls and women—socially, economically, and politically. Men should be engaged in the journey to empower women, as that brings positive outcomes. Experience shows that there is backlash against women's progress when men feel insecure and fear that they are losing out as governments and development organisations focus on women's

empowerment. Women and men should challenge gender stereotyping. If they become friends and support each other in the fight to build a society based on equality then our girls will be able to live in security, and both girls and boys will grow up to realise their full human potential.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



NELSON MANDELA SWORN IN AS SOUTH AFRICAN PRESIDENT

Nelson Mandela, an antiapartheid activist, lawyer, and former political prisoner, was sworn in as South Africa's first non-white president

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

35 Brood watcher

38 On the go

41 Physique

43 Spur on

attzchment

16 Calendar box

18 Land in the sea

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42 Comely one

1 Fair 5 Depth charge, in slang 11 Not fooled by 12 Cube face 13 Order to Spot 14 Castle part 15 Long time 16 Slimming plan 17 Goddess of the hunt 19 Place to relax 22 Singer Cline 24 Paint base

30 Syrup choice

34 Walk unevenly

31 Bud

32 Puts on

ACROSS

DOWN 1 Tenor Carreras 3 Be proud 26 Spoken 27 Young horse 7 Insulted 28 Odometer 8 Sedan or SUV 9 Is for two reading

44 Feeling friendless 45 Proofing note 29 Rotate 2 Golden Rule word 34 Prefer 4 Gift from Santa 5 Sean of "Rudy" 6 Sound of delight amount 41 Tour carrier 10 Hoop

20 Ring out 21 Wheel connector 22 Pageantry 23 Opera feature 25 Miles off 30 Travel aid 33 Abrasive powder 36 Advantage 37 Russian denial 38 Maximum 39 Dove sound 40 Great weight

19 Slam on the

brakes

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