

# Professor Abdul Karim: Remembering a great historian

MOHAMMAD ZAHIDUR RAHMAN

ABDUL Karim was born in Banshkali, Chittagong on June 1, 1928. He passed his school final in 1944 and intermediate in 1946 from Islamic Intermediate College, currently Haji Muhammad Mohsin College. He earned his BA Honours (1949) and MA (1950) in History from the University of Dhaka. He started his career as a teacher at Rugganj Victoria High School, Naryanganj, where he began his research in history, at the very outset of his joining.

Abdul Karim started to collect material for research by roaming around Sonargaon, the historical place famous for Isa Khan, the Muslim chief who led the Baro Bhuiyans. The style of Abdul Karim's search for materials is comparable with that of Vincent Smith, ICS (1848-1920). This British Indologist, art historian and civil servant was known to always keep himself busy in collecting historical material wherever he was posted. It is said that he had a strong fascination for ancient structures of the early age, and he tried to imbibe the essence of history even from a piece of old brick. Abdul Karim was exactly the same—a person with an indomitable thirst for historical research.

In 1951 he joined the History department of the University of Dhaka as lecturer. He obtained his first PhD from the University of Dhaka in 1958 on "Social History of the Muslims in Bengal," with the eminent archaeologist Professor AH Dani as his supervisor. Then in 1963,



**Professor Abdul Karim**  
(June 1, 1928 – July 24, 2007)

Abdul Karim received his second PhD from SOAS, University of London as a commonwealth scholar. The dissertation, this time, was "Murshid Quli Khan and His Times." Both of his theses were published by the Asiatic Society.

For fifteen years he served as a very competent teacher and researcher at the University of Dhaka. Abdul Karim left Dhaka University in 1966 and joined the then newly established Chittagong University as a reader in the Department of History. Later on, he became the fifth Vice Chancellor (1975-1981) of the University of Chittagong.

In his lifetime, Abdul Karim authored about forty books in Bengali and English and also published innumerable research articles on the history of Bengal. Being a student of madrasa background, he was very proficient in Persian and Arabic, which helped him to excavate

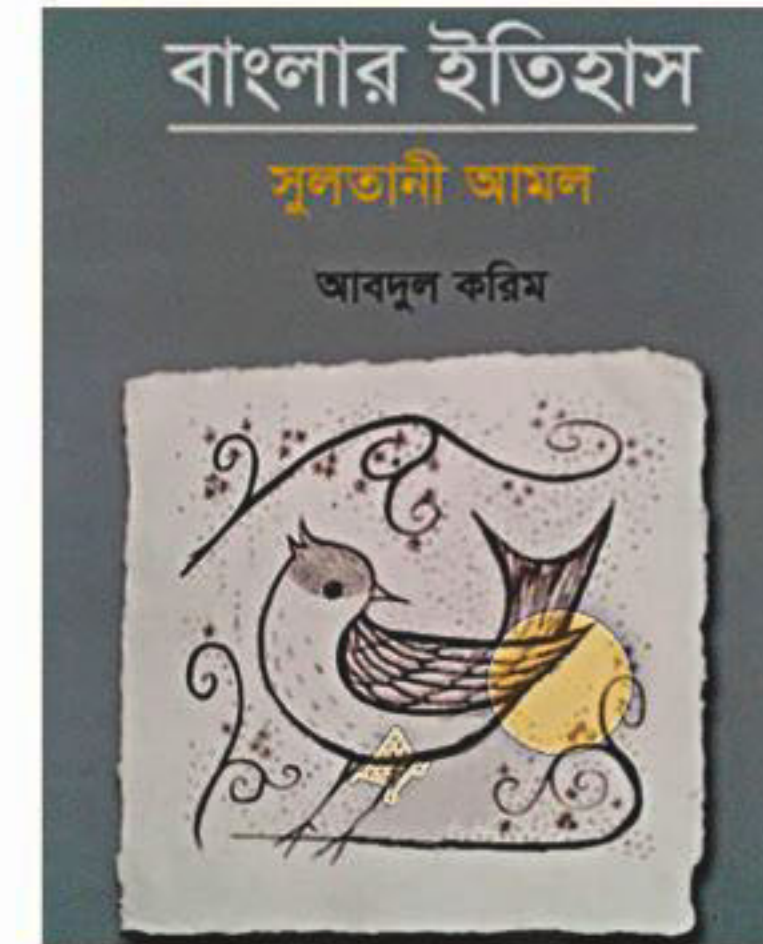
and investigate original source materials of medieval history. His language skills also made him a master in interpreting Muslim coins and inscriptions.

As a result, most of Abdul Karim's research work was based on first hand primary sources. His contributions to the history of medieval Bengal were absolutely original. For this, he attained prominence at home and abroad rapidly. He was awarded the Ekushey Padak in 1995 for his outstanding contribution to historical research.

Abdul Karim's research focussed on the history of medieval Bengal. To construct the social and political history of medieval Bengal, he collected material from Arabic and Persian texts, coins and inscriptions, biographies of Sufi-saints and from the ocean of medieval Bengali literature.

Paucity of source material did not disappoint Abdul Karim from his journey towards medieval Bengal. After reviewing innumerable coins of Muslim rulers, Karim penned his *Corpus of the Muslim Coins of Bengal*, for which he was awarded the Akbar Silver Medal by the Indian Numismatic Society. The outcome of his relentless research on inscriptions became the *Corpus of the Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of Bengal*. When Professor Karim was Vice Chancellor of Chittagong University, he produced the *Catalogue of Coins in the Cabinet of the Chittagong University Museum*. *Bangla Sahityer Kalokrom-Moddhojog* was the result of his vast work on medieval Bengali literature.

*Dacca: The Mughal Capital* was another of his ground-breaking work. During data-mining for this, he had to learn the Dutch language in London. In addition to his second PhD thesis, he wrote "Dhakai Muslim", the original research on the history of the Muslim industry in Bengal, during his stay in London. But, according to some researchers, *Banglar Itihash: Sultani Amal* is one of the most fundamental works of Professor Karim. As a fellow of the IBS, Rajshashi University, he pub-



lished *History of Bengal: Mughal Period* in two volumes.

In fact, it is impossible to delineate a complete picture of Karim's academic production in such a small canvas. But his contribution was not only to research but also as a teacher. Because of his incredible command on the subject matter, even tough and uninteresting courses such as "The Constitutional History of England"

would turn into a most interesting subject in his classroom. How does one become a good teacher? In answer to this question by Professor Mahmudul Huq of Chittagong University, Professor Karim once said that to be a successful teacher, one has to attain mastery on the subject matter; and to achieve that, a teacher should study at least forty-five hours for taking a class of forty-five minutes.

I asked him the same question when I joined university teaching in

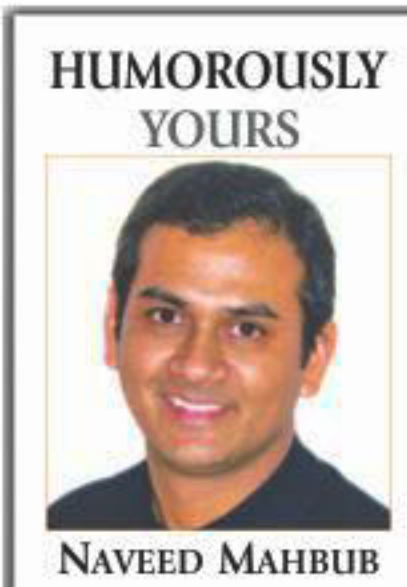
colleagues, and asked him whether it was so. Mohar replied in the negative and added that he took it as a challenge to go beyond the number of books Karim went through to discuss a topic. So, to face Mohar Ali's challenge in the classroom, Karim had to study a lot. This Muhammad Mohar Ali, who was a brilliant student according to Professor Karim, later became a famous historian.

Professor Karim was an authority of the field of medieval Bengal and could recognise from a distance if a mosque was from the Sultani or from the Mughal period. He never maintained any diary but aided by his sharp memory, at his old age he wrote his biography, *Somaj O Jibon*, in two volumes. This will surely remain a constant source of inspiration for researchers, teachers and general readers for years to come.

Professor Karim's work remains as suggested texts in many prominent universities across the world. In his lifetime, despite opportunities of publishing his books from famous publishing houses of the western world, he published all of them from Bangladesh. His argument was that books published from foreign reputed publishers, being so expensive, always remain out of the reach of our researchers and readers. He did not deprive our readers of enjoying our own history. Professor Abdul Karim died on July 24, 2007 leaving behind a treasure trove of history for other historians.

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## My Own Hat Trick



NAVEED MAHBUB

for posting Facebook statuses on the games.

We reflect after one great party. The 2014 World Cup final sees Argentina's Lionel Messi while the 2018 World Cup final sees Argentina's Néstor Pitana, both referee and French striker rolled in one. The 1986 final presents Argentina's Diego Maradona with the "Hand of God" while the 2018 final presents Argentina's Néstor Pitana with the "Hand of Perišić", thus introducing Perišić as the new capital (ok, financial jargon too) of France. I wonder if the picture of Maradona pops up as a guiding light when Mr Pitana consults the MAR (Maradona, Assistant Referee), er, VAR (Video Assistant Referee).

The final match is as much a competitive game as it is a friendly one—Mario Mandžukić scores two goals in two goal posts while the gift of Hugo Lloris provides ample comic relief.

But, by Toutatis, there is all out jubilation among the indomitable Gauls. Pogba trolls: "It's coming home," the French kiss the trophy, thus exhibiting a collective French kiss. Who knows, France may see a spike in its population in a year, not just from the mass conjugal jubilation, but also from warmly welcomed mass migration from Africa and Muslim countries, based on the



France's Paul Pogba holds the trophy as he celebrates winning the World Cup 2018.

ethnic make-up of the French squad. Trump, take heed—you can *Make America Great Again* with the best football, I mean, soccer team.

But let's focus on the climax—the award ceremony. With Presidents galore in the front row, the Qatar Airways flight attendants in the back row stand smartly with *dalas* as in a *gaye holid* ceremony.

But the man, or should I say, the woman of the hour is no doubt President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović leading Bangladeshis (mostly men) to comb the Tri-State Area (Gulshan, Baridhara, Banani) for the Croatian Embassy while elevating Coco Austin to a presidential status. The Croatian president has to be happy that her boys have come this far. Many Bangladeshi turn coat Croatian

supporters are heartbroken—the same clan who only a few days ago were "ic"-ing to swallow alive this very squad for beating Argentina 3-0.

Like a Hindi movie, the rain starts by which President Emmanuel Macron and President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović remain undeterred while shedding off their presidential protocols. I bet President Vladimir Putin felt like joining in the party, like being on a horse bare-chested. But he's the boss as he is the only one under a huge *shamiana* sized Sharif umbrella. But he is a happy camper nevertheless for successfully hosting one of the greatest sporting events on the planet and for seeing his own team, after its elimination, not having to return home.

Of all those who return home, we still

can't forget the big names like Brazil, Argentina and Germany. They should contemplate cricket. After all, the ICC ensures that World Cup Cricket finals have only the big names.

The Koreans, who make Asia proud, go home to eggs being pelted at them. Thank Heavens it's not North Korea—instead of eggs, it would have been ballistic missiles.

Tut, tut! We in Bangladesh would never throw eggs at our national football team even after any crushing international defeat. That's because our team, our FIFA ranking and our players are all unknown to us. Besides, eggs aren't exactly Taka three items.

But if eggs are really to be thrown, why not at Neymar? He needs the extra protein to help him from falling to the ground. Ok, no more Neymar jokes. Brazil's former star Ronaldo (Luís Nazário de Lima) says that Neymar still has a lot to learn. That's right, from Shah Rukh Khan...

Well, we are already ready for Qatar 2022. With France the 2018 champs, comes the guarantee of it being out in the first round in 2022, looking at history. Meanwhile, Bangladesh's ranking is speeding up in the other direction. In 1986, we were ranked 116 and in the same year Maradona said, "It's the Hand of God." In 2018, we are ranked 194 and Bangladesh Football Federation shrugs: "It's IN the Hand of God".

Oh well, till the day our boys in green and red are in the FIFA World Cup, we, in Bangladesh, will remain loyal fans of our own choosing and most of all, of the game itself.

Naveed Mahbub is an engineer at Ford & Qualcomm USA and CEO of IBM & Nokia Siemens Networks Bangladesh turned comedian (by choice), the host of ATN Bangla's *The Naveed Mahbub Show* and the founder of Naveed's Comedy Club. E-mail: Naveed@NaveedMahbub.com

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