

History writing in South Asia and Prof Abdul Karim

AMIT DEY

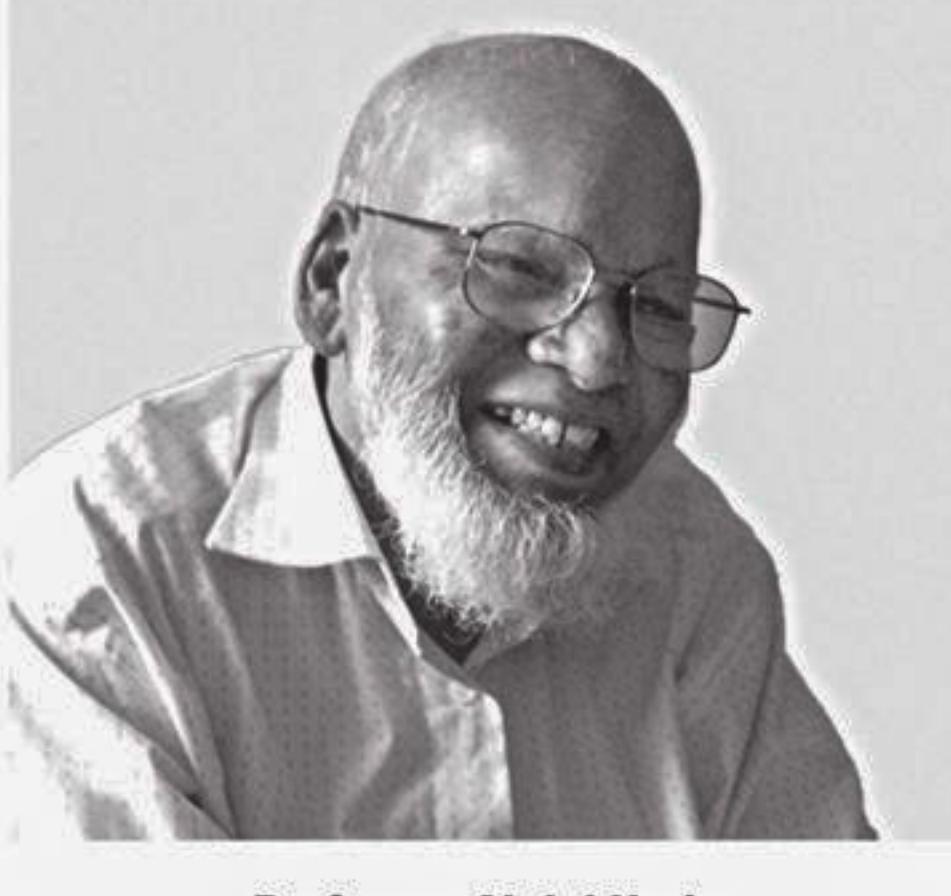
In 1990, when I was striving to enter the world of doctoral research, my father, who was an eminent historian, placed three books on my table with the assurance that if I thoroughly read them, I would be on my way to select a research topic for myself. The book that first drew my attention was a classic by Professor Abdul Karim entitled *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal*. It was accompanied by two other scholarly works, i.e. *Bengal Under Akbar and Jahangir: An Introductory Study of Social History*, by Tapan Kumar Roy Chaudhuri, and *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, by MA Rahim. Eventually, these three seminal works, which were dedicated to the study of medieval Bengal, helped me a lot to select my research topic related to Islam and Islamic mysticism in Bengal. I have no hesitation to admit that an intensive and extensive reading of Professor Karim's scholarly works solved my personal academic crisis in the sense that ultimately, I was able to identify the area of my research interest. I exposed myself to some of the works of Professor Karim during my undergraduate days at Jadavpur University. However, my rediscovery of Professor Karim as a legendary historian occurred during my research days.

It would be easier to understand a scholar of Professor Karim's stature if we locate him on a larger canvas. Largely due to the influence of colonial historiography, the pioneering medievalists of the subcontinent revealed a North India-centric or Mughal-

centric approach, if not bias, in their writings as if the geo-cultural regions beyond the epicentres of Northern India constituted the periphery of our historical engagements relating to South Asia. If we analyse the evolution of history writing in South Asia remembering this perspective, we can hardly miss the representative role played by the academic trio mentioned above. Indeed, Professor Karim marked a shift in history writing from a North India-centric approach to regional history writing and, in our case, that region happened to be Bengal.

In fact, Professor Karim was not merely writing history, he was creating history as his scholarly contributions with its major shift have to be understood in the larger context of the identity formation process of the Bangla-speaking people. Eminent historian Nihar Ranjan Ray, in his monumental work on Bengal and the Bengalees, written in Bangla, confined his focus to ancient Bengal. Since he did not master Persian, he inflicted this constraint upon himself. But Arabic and Persian knowing Abdul Karim traversed the world of Medieval Bengal with ease as that linguistic expertise enabled him to tap the original sources related to that period. However, Nihar Ranjan and Abdul Karim shared one or two things in common in their research engagements.

Firstly, both endeavoured to emancipate historical research from an obsessive commitment to political, administrative or military history and demonstrated the



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

significance of spilling over to social and cultural history of the Bangla-speaking people. Nihar Ranjan and Abdul Karim's research experiences in Holland and England, respectively, made them aware of this trend which engulfed Europe largely due to the pioneering efforts of the French historians.

Secondly, both of them, along with other greats such as Sir Jadunath Sarkar, Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, Enamul Huq, Jagadish Narayan Sarkar, and Amalendu De, had realised the importance of writing history in vernacular Bangla, in order to reach out to a larger circle of readers beyond the confines of classrooms or seminar rooms

of leading academic institutions. Indeed, historical consciousness should not be monopolised by a few academic institutions. Thus, Abdul Karim and the above-mentioned historians did not merely get involved in the act of history writing in South Asia, but also became an integral part of a historical movement aimed at communicating with a larger audience. A sense of history is essential for the sustenance of vibrant democracies, dynamic economies and pluralistic societies.

The third major contribution of Professor Karim was to challenge the colonial periodisation of South Asian history. To provide an ideological base for the divide-and-rule policy, the British administrator cum Indologists divided Indian history into three distinct periods, i.e. Ancient or Hindu golden age, Medieval or Muslim dark age, and Modern or British period. Many scholars such as Sir Jadunath, Jagadish Narayan Sarkar, Habibullah, MR Tarafdar, NK Bhattacharya, Tapan Roy Chaudhuri, Abdul Karim and some others implicitly challenged such colonial historiographical stance by carrying out research on topics related to medieval South Asia.

Fourthly, there is a saying that historians are notorious for their confinement to the libraries and archives and anthropologists are notorious for their field works. Abdul Karim was one of the pioneers amongst South Asian historians who combined both. His intensive and extensive fieldworks culminated in the publication of his magnum opus, entitled *Corpus of The Arabic*

and Persian Inscriptions of Bengal.

Fifthly, he belonged to that rare brand of historians who could successfully reconcile academic and administrative responsibilities. This rare quality he demonstrated during his tenure as the Vice-Chancellor of Chittagong University where he had to negotiate with various high commissions, particularly German and British, to elevate the upcoming university in the international academic map. Professor Karim's liberal, spiritual and human outlook is manifested in the brilliant chapter on the sufis in his famous book with which we began this essay. His faith in cultural pluralism acquired a new dimension when he entered into a significant family tie with "Banglar Rumi" Syed Ahmedul Huq.

It would be intriguing to wind up by citing an event in the research career of Professor Shahnawaz of Jahangirnagar University. During his doctoral research, he appeared before his teacher Professor Amalendu De of Jadavpur University with his chapter on numismatic sources and mentioned that in spite of his busy schedule, Professor Karim had gone through that chapter and expressed his satisfaction. Gladly accepting that chapter, Professor De said that Professor Shahnawaz got the approval of the highest authority on the subject. Today, through this humble essay, late Professor De's son is also paying his deep respect to the insightful prolificity of Professor Abdul Karim.

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Signing a meaningful Teesta Treaty

The first step towards effective water diplomacy in India's eastern neighbourhood



Gauri Noolkar-Oak

By signing water sharing agreements which are economically efficient, socially just and environmentally sustainable, India can spur all-round economic development in its neighbourhood.

LAST month, shortly after the new Modi government came to power, the External Affairs Minister of India, Dr S Jaishankar, met his Bangladeshi counterpart AK Abdul Momin on the sidelines of the CICA (Conference of Interaction and Confidence measures in Asia) in Tajikistan. AK Abdul Momin invited Dr S Jaishankar to direct Indian investments to almost 100 Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in Bangladesh. He also wasted no time in emphasising the need to sign the Teesta Treaty.

Teesta, the 400-km-long river shared by India and Bangladesh, has been, if not a bone of contention, a source of friction between the two neighbours for almost half a century now, especially since the construction of the Gajaldoba barrage upstream of the Teesta in West Bengal, India. However, negotiations on the Teesta picked up steam only after the Ganga Treaty was signed in 1996 and culminated into a draft treaty which was to be signed in 2011 by the erstwhile PM Manmohan Singh of India and PM Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh during the former's visit to Dhaka. However, the last-minute refusal of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee to support the provisions of the Teesta Treaty disrupted the negotiations and the treaty was not signed. Bangladesh has been trying to get the treaty signed ever since. The UPA-led coalition government under Dr Manmohan Singh could do little to reverse CM Banerjee's stand as her party, the Trinamool Congress (TMC), was the second largest in the UPA at that time. The NDA government which came into power three years later did not face any such limitation, yet political and ideological differences between the centre and a strong CM Banerjee left the Teesta Treaty unsigned.

However, Bangladesh has been persistent in pursuing the signing of the treaty; after all, Teesta is the principal river of Rangpur, the poorest and most backward division of Bangladesh, as well as a large part of drought-prone north-western Bangladesh, and provides sustenance, directly and indirectly, to over 21 million Bangladeshis. At its highest levels, the Indian government recognises the role of an operational water sharing agreement over the Teesta in maintaining the strength and success of Indo-Bangladeshi relations. However,

whether it recognises the potential role of the agreement in furthering its larger "Act East" policy remains to be seen.

By signing the Teesta Treaty, India can embark on the adoption of water as a tool of foreign policy in its immediate and extended neighbourhood. India shares rivers with four of the other six BIMSTEC members—Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. While it has various river agreements with all four countries, these agreements are limited in scope, technocentric, and lack a basin-wide and comprehensive approach.

The current draft of the Teesta Treaty is no different; there are no provisions for management of shared groundwater aquifers, disaster

"hydro-hegemon" among its riparian neighbours. India would be able to expand its soft power, and at the same time, check the aggressive expansion of China in its neighbourhood.

By signing water sharing agreements which are economically efficient, socially just and environmentally sustainable, India can spur all-round economic development in its neighbourhood. While the gains would come at a slower pace, they would be more substantial; inclusivity would raise purchasing power across communities, and expand markets in the process; focus on environmental sustainability would help mitigate natural disasters, secure primary sector livelihoods, and build climate change resilience among communities, and economic efficiency



Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (L) and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (C) listen to West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee during an agreement signing ceremony after a meeting in New Delhi on April 8, 2017.

PHOTO: AFP

mitigation, socio-economic development of riparian communities, demand management, combating climate change and management of natural and cultural heritage of the Teesta basin. The Indian government and its Bangladeshi counterpart could do well by revisiting the draft treaty and refining it to make it more comprehensive, sustainable and effective. Signing a thus improved treaty could very well pave the way for reforms in other water sharing agreements which India has signed with Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar. These, in turn, would certainly help inculcate a sense of fairness and mutual benefit and take the edge off India's perception as a

would enable conservation of resources, increase productivity across all economic sectors, and boost growth and exports. Linking all this solely to comprehensive water sharing agreements would be simplistic. However, given the centrality of water in human health, society, economy, environmental health and our very survival, agreements which take proper cognisance of the fundamental and multidisciplinary role of water would provide a framework within which we could redesign our economies and societies to realise the gains mentioned above.

India has enough economic, political and cultural clout to lead its eastern riparian

neighbours towards a model of joint development based on water. Unlike China which is aggressively expanding into the economies of Nepal, Myanmar and Bangladesh, India would be taking a softer and less aggressive approach, which would make the countries look at India more favourably. Systematic planning and use of water to boost economic and political relations with its neighbourhood would also project India as a country with an articulate foreign policy; something which has not been apparent through its struggles to balance its non-aggressive, pacifist image with its aspirations to be a formidable global power.

India has traditionally made use of tools such as trade, economic growth, military clout, development and humanitarian aid, and the ideology of non-alignment to achieve foreign policy objectives in the short and long term. In the 21st century, water promises to be a tool of great potential in fulfilling India's global aspirations. It needs to be wielded carefully and well, balancing ably the interests of society, economy and the environment with diplomatic interests and geopolitical aspirations.

The task is herculean, but like all other tasks, it begins with a single step. That step can be the Teesta Treaty—re-drafted and refined to boost economic efficiency, social justice and environmental sustainability across the Teesta basin. By signing such a treaty, India will have won over its most trusted friend and neighbour in South Asia. The move could also benefit India's own eastern states and the north-eastern region which, due to years of neglect and/or landlocked geography, has been unable to taste the fruits of India's economic successes. It would also pave the way towards better water sharing arrangements, joint development programmes and better political relations with Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar. And it would enable India to maintain its stronghold over its eastern neighbourhood despite the advances made by China.

The year 2020 marks the centenary of the birth of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It would be a fitting occasion for India to sign a fair, meaningful and sustainable Teesta Treaty with Bangladesh, and embark on its quest for realising its geopolitical destiny through effective transboundary water diplomacy.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

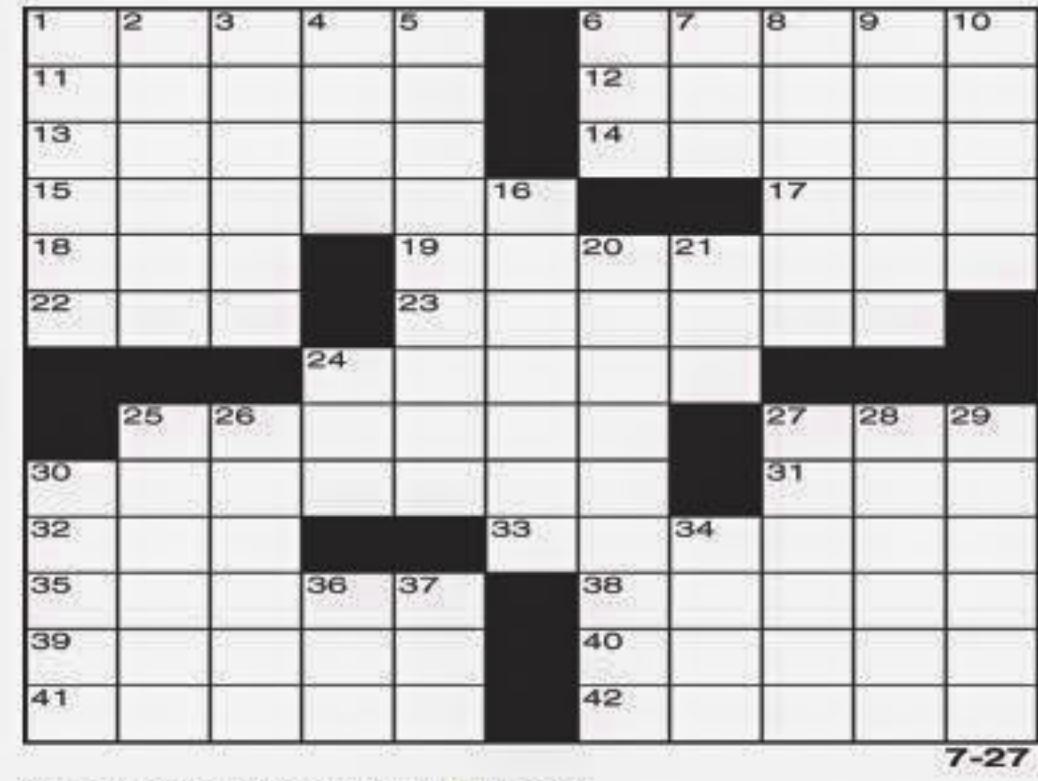


JULY 24, 1969
THE APOLLO 11 ASTRONAUTS SPLASH DOWN SAFELY IN THE PACIFIC OCEAN.

The three-man crew of NASA's Apollo 11 splashed down in the Pacific Ocean—successfully concluding Earth's first journey to land humans on another world and return them safely to our home planet.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Company division
 - 6 Like lovebirds
 - 11 Bear out
 - 12 "Hello" singer
 - 13 Indy entrant
 - 14 Caesar, for one
 - 15 Mistreats
 - 17 — Now or Never"
 - 18 Frank McCourt book
 - 19 Oscar hopeful
 - 22 Was inactive
 - 23 Singer Morissette
 - 24 Bedeck
 - 25 Money, in slang
 - 27 Yak it up
 - 30 Seventh pres-ident
 - 31 Gorilla, e.g.
 - 32 Museum focus
 - 33 Asian's place
 - 35 Fuming
 - 38 Hamlet's followers
 - 39 Antisocial one
 - 40 Toss out
 - 41 Take an oath
 - 42 Fills completely
 - 44 Small herrings
 - 45 Mideast peninsula
 - 46 Crop pest
 - 47 Times for prepa ration
 - 48 Yak it up
 - 49 Lover's songs
- DOWN**
- 2 Stellar twins
 - 9 Brightens
 - 10 None too smart
 - 16 Wise king
 - 20 Meat tenderizers
 - 21 Travel stop
 - 24 Bible boat
 - 25 Scopes trial lawyer
 - 26 Pump rating
 - 27 Diving sea bird
 - 28 Each
 - 29 Wild ones
 - 30 Lockups
 - 34 Eastern prince
 - 36 Caffeine source
 - 37 Slip



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

B	A	W	L	S	R	A	W	E	R
A	G	R	E	E	A	M	A	Z	E
R	E	I	G	N	P	A	I	R	S
G	R	I	T	O	S	T	A	T	
L	E	N	R	E	V	E	N	G	E
A	N	G	L	E	E	G	E	D	
D	O	T	E	D	O	N	T	E	D
A	T	O	P	O	A	K	Y		
A	L	B	S	T	O	M	B		
S	O	L	O	S	P	E	L	T	S
A	L	E	U	T	A	G	E	N	T
P	A	S	T	Y	L	A	S	T	S

BEETLE BAILEY



by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES



by Kirkman & Scott



JULY 24, 1969
THE APOLLO 11 ASTRONAUTS SPLASH DOWN SAFELY IN THE PACIFIC OCEAN.

The three-man crew of NASA's Apollo 11 splashed down in the Pacific Ocean—successfully concluding Earth's first journey to land humans on another world and return them safely to our home planet.

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