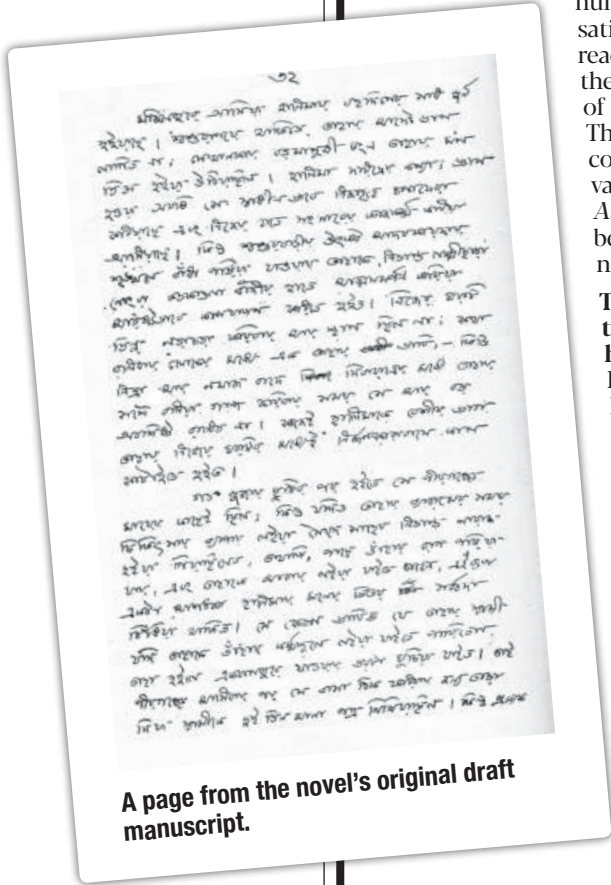


Abdullah: The novel that pioneered a new era in Bengali literature

Much discussion revolves around the significance of *Abdullah* as a modern novel, where female characters are not vividly portrayed. However, the meticulous storytelling and detailed depiction of social realities stand out. Most critics interpret the novel as illustrating the contradictions between the declining, backward-looking older aristocratic Muslims and the emerging, modern, liberal-minded Bengali Muslims who were striving to lead the way towards modernity in Bengali Muslim life.



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Kazi Imdadul Huq's novel *Abdullah*, written nearly a century ago, is regarded as one of the first modern novels by a Bengali Muslim writer. Initially known for his poetry and children's literature, Huq transitioned into a notable prose writer, offering profound insights into history, culture, and society. *Abdullah* was his only novel, published posthumously, and it has since become a milestone in Bengali literature, earning enduring acclaim from readers.

Abdullah is a social realist novel. Huq began writing it during the final phase of his life, infusing the work with mature reflections, imagination, and a realistic portrayal of Bengali Muslim life. Before embarking on the novel, he was deeply engaged in writing history, forming opinions, and participating in literary debates within the Bengal intellectual circle of his time. While not a social reformer, Huq was an artist whose hopes and ideals were vividly expressed in the novel. According to Syed Murtaza Ali, *Abdullah* was Imdadul Huq's greatest accomplishment and a significant contribution to Bengali literature. He writes:

Abdullah's character mirrors the writer's own life. Both the writer and Abdullah were ideal educators. Abdullah is depicted as an exemplary human being, never overwhelmed by danger or confused about his duty. As a writer, Huq envisioned Hindu-Muslim unity and created idealised characters from both communities. The novel contains many elements of humour, and Huq's satire is evident to readers through the descriptions of various events. Through a successful combination of various *Rasas*, *Abdullah* has become a delightful novel.

The writer and the moment in history

Born on 4 November 1882 in Godaipur village, Khulna district, Kazi Imdadul Huq was a prominent educationist, thinker, and writer in early 20th-century colonial Bengal. His father initially worked in the Survey Division in Assam before becoming a mukhtar in the Khulna Criminal Court.

Imdadul Huq completed his BA at Presidency College, Kolkata, in 1900 and earned his BT in 1914. He gained extensive experience in the educational sector, starting as a temporary teacher at the Calcutta Madrasa in 1904.

In 1906, he briefly worked in the Education Department in Shillong, Assam, before joining the Dhaka Madrasa as a teacher the following year. He became a professor of Geography at the Dhaka Teachers' Training College in 1911, was appointed Assistant School Inspector of Muslim Education for the Dhaka Division in 1914, and served as headmaster of the Calcutta Training School in 1917. By 1921, he was the superintendent of the newly established Dhaka Education Board, a position he held until his death. Imdadul Huq passed away in Calcutta in 1926, at the age of just 44. Notably, he was president of the Publication Committee of the *Bangiya Mussalman Sahitya Patrika* in Calcutta. In recognition of his contributions, the British Government honoured him with the titles '*Khan Sahib*' in 1919 and '*Khan Bahadur*' in 1926.

The novel is set during the first partition of Bengal in 1905, a time when the Swadeshi movement was in full swing, marking the first systematic political opposition to the British Raj. The novel vividly portrays the intense antagonism between Hindus and Muslims, capturing the social milieu of the era. It highlights how cities in Bengal were dominated by Hindus, who also held the majority of economically and socially significant positions and services.

The protagonist of the novel, Abdullah, resists continuing his family's religious legacy of *Prism*, choosing instead to focus on completing his BA exam and becoming an ideal schoolteacher with a modern education. He is deeply committed to uplifting his community through education and strongly supports women's emancipation.

Meanwhile, his brother-in-law, Abdul Kader, also pursues reform by striving to modernise madrasa education, introducing Bengali, English, and mathematics into the curriculum.

The main antagonist of *Abdullah* is his father-in-law, Syed Sahib, a staunch representative of Muslim aristocracy and a zamindar who fiercely clings to tradition, even as his rigid policies lead to his gradual decline. Abdullah's wife, Saleha, is a devoted follower of her father and shows little interest in Abdullah's progressive ideas. However, during a visit to town to care for Abdullah's ailing sister, she briefly questions her father's rigidity. Despite numerous challenges, Abdullah ultimately overcomes the obstacles in his path and fulfils his mission, guided by his uncle, Mir Saheb, a new type of entrepreneur in the Bengali Muslim community with practical ideas.

The creation process

The creation of the novel *Abdullah* was a lengthy process. Kazi Abdul Wadud stated that in 1918, after a critical operation, Imdadul Huq had to stay in the hospital for an extended recovery period, around six months, during which he wrote the novel. Two years later, it began regular serialization in the newly established literary magazine *Moslem Bharat* in Calcutta, edited by poet Mozammel Haq and published by Mohammad Afzal ul Haq. The magazine serialized 30 chapters of *Abdullah* before it ceased publication.

Abdul Quadir, the editor of Kazi Imdadul Huq's works, mentioned that two additional chapters were drafted for the magazine but were never published due to its sudden disappearance. The complete version of *Abdullah* was finally released in 1933 by the Muslim Press in Calcutta. To finish the book, Anwarul Haq wrote chapters 31 to 41 based on the original draft, while poet Shahadat Hossain reviewed the entire manuscript. The whole process spanned over 15 years.

Kazi Abdul Wadud further mentioned that the entire drafts (chapters 31-41) written by Kazi Imdadul Huq should be included in the novel's appendix to understand the difference between Huq's intended ending and the one completed by Anwarul Qadir. However, Abdul Quadir only included chapters 31 and 32, which were written by Kazi Imdadul Huq for *Moslem Bharat*, in the appendix of Huq's works.

Notably, a dictionary was included at the end of the novel to explain



Kazi Imdadul Huq (1882-1926)

In his unofficial farewell speech to his students, Abdullah's mindset was clearly reflected. He said:

I bless you—be a human being, a true human being. If you are truly human, you will not hate each other. Hindus and Muslims should see one another as amicable beings. This is your mission. Remember, my brothers, as I have told you many times and will continue to say: do not allow discrimination between Hindus and Muslims. All the misfortunes and sufferings of our country stem from this discrimination. If it disappears, we will become truly human and make the face of our country shine.

Syed Sahib, a staunch upholder of his family's noble *Ashraf* legacy and a declining zamindar, resisted any change in social dynamics. During a visit to the city, he attended a mosque where he discovered that the Imam, though educated in religious traditions, came from a lower social stratum. Refusing to participate in *Namaz* under this Maulavi's leadership, he remarked:

He is the son of a *Zola* (Muslim weaver), now an *Alem*. His family has carried our shoes for 14 generations, and now he stands before us to lead *Namaz*? How can we pray under his leadership?

This incident underscores his refusal to accept social upliftment or equality, even within the realm of Islam.

The character of Mir Saheb was portrayed as a new type of Bengali Muslim entrepreneur, representing an emerging segment of Muslim society that adopted modified working ethics compared to the traditional Muslim community. He transformed his fortune by engaging in money lending with interest and the jute business. Needless to say, involvement in business with interest is considered prohibited according to Islamic ethics, leading to his near ostracism by his village and his own Islamic community.

Thus, although the interest rates charged by Mir Saheb were lower than those of Hindu lenders, the villagers preferred to borrow money from the Hindu lenders despite the higher interest, as interest is not a prohibited practice in Hinduism. This led Mir Saheb to leave his village, visiting only occasionally. However, whenever someone from the village sought his help, he would try to assist them with money or advice. While discussing the need to strengthen the position of the Muslim elite with Abdullah, he said:

Suppose those who were peasants two or three generations ago are now advancing through education, improving their economic conditions, and exhibiting good behaviour. If they are now interacting as equals with the upper section of our society, there should be no issue in associating with them. It is completely unreasonable to hate someone's pedigree indefinitely, even if they were once peasants. Instead, it would be wiser to integrate these newly developed individuals into the current elite class, as their hereditary line will also benefit from this contact. This will be advantageous to both parties.

Mir Saheb sought to broaden the traditionally narrow approach of maintaining the Islamic aristocracy through bloodlines. He did this not only by challenging conventional conservatism but also by adopting

practical measures to attain economic capital, such as education and wealth. Additionally, he utilised marriage as a means of transforming the social structure of Muslim society in Bengal. Significantly, Mir Saheb's vision of upward mobility allowed for the inclusion of previously lower-status individuals into the aristocracy, provided they met the necessary qualifications.

The first partition of Bengal was largely perceived by middle-class Hindus as a British conspiracy against them, designed to favour Muslims in the region. Hindu characters in government jobs and schools often discussed this perceived Muslim appeasement by the British Raj. For example, the Hindu headmaster at Rasulpur was quickly replaced following incidents involving Hindu students, and a British school inspector recommended appointing Abdullah to the position. This was seen by Hindus as patronising Muslims rather than recognising Abdullah's merits. The novel reflects the gradual increase of Muslims in education and public services, highlighting the social reality that Muslims were also entering these fields. Abdullah's approach to the school inspector was not for his individual benefit but also in response to demands from the Muslim community. He stated:

Sir, the number of Muslim students is increasing day by day. Two years ago, there were only 23, but now there are 38. However, there is no teacher for Persian. Therefore, *Anjuman* hopes a Maulvi will be appointed.

The fictitious district of Barihati is predominantly Muslim, but its town is overwhelmingly dominated by Hindus. In one corner of the city lies 'Muslim Para', a neighbourhood where a few Muslims live and work in lower-status jobs. Abdullah and his brother-in-law, Abdul Kader, faced significant challenges in finding a house to rent, as Hindu landlords were reluctant to rent to Muslims. This narrative effectively captures the housing discrimination and difficulties that Muslims encountered in the cities of Bengal.

When Abdullah's sister urgently needed to be sent to the city, where they lacked adequate housing, a Hindu doctor known for his liberal ideas stepped in, offering his home to Abdullah's sister and her relatives. This gesture highlights how the rigidity of the Hindu Bhadrakol began to soften through interactions with Muslims, and it underscores the doctor's deep commitment to his duty of service.

Appreciation and legacy

Much discussion revolves around the significance of *Abdullah* as a modern novel, where female characters are not vividly portrayed. However, the meticulous storytelling and detailed depiction of social realities stand out. Most critics interpret the novel as illustrating the contradictions between the declining, backward-looking older aristocratic Muslims and the emerging, modern, liberal-minded Bengali Muslims who were striving to lead the way towards modernity in Bengali Muslim life.

Saleha's role was initially insignificant, as she remained deeply obedient to her father's dogmatic rules and showed little interest in her husband's enlightened thoughts. However, by the end of the novel, her character gained some prominence, particularly in the sections completed by Anwarul Quadir. Kazi Abdul Wadud noted this difference significantly:

Kazi Imdadul Huq is primarily a painter, whereas Anwarul Quadir is more of a psychologist, a difference

reflected in their writing styles. Notably, Quadir's contributions shine in two chapters: one depicting Saleha's death and the other describing Mir Sahib's final days. While Imdadul Huq portrays Saleha as nearly lifeless, overly constrained by her father's rigid principles, Quadir introduces a touch of compassion to her character and adds a hint of novelty and affection to Abdullah's otherwise mundane life.

At the time, Bengali literature was predominantly shaped by Hindu writers, resulting in portrayals of Muslim characters that many Muslims found objectionable and hurtful. These depictions were viewed as ahistorical and damaging to the Muslim community. In 1900, Rabindranath Tagore appreciated the increasing involvement of Muslims in Bengali literature in an article. He drew a parallel to how the French frequently depicted the British negatively in their literature, yet the English read French works with enthusiasm. Tagore suggested that Muslim objections to Hindu writers could be seen in a similar context.

Kazi Imdadul Huq critiques the comparison, arguing that the relationship between Hindus and Muslims is fundamentally different from that between the British and the French, as Hindus and Muslims are not only two parts of the same nation but also close neighbours. He contends that if Hindu writers maintain a hostile attitude towards Muslims, and Muslims similarly harbour hostility towards Hindus, then the blame for discord cannot rest solely on Muslims. Instead, Imdadul Huq asserts that writers, regardless of their religion, have a collective responsibility to engage in thoughtful reflection and pursue justice in the interest of a united India—the ultimate political aspiration of that era.

The novel can also be seen as a reflection of his lifelong commitment to the principles he embraced in his engagement with Tagore in 1903, which he further developed in this final work before his death. Wadud sent Anwarul Qadir's *Amader Dukkha* and *Abdullah* to Tagore. After reading *Abdullah* he remarked:

I am pleased to have read *Abdullah*, particularly because it offers valuable insight into the lives of Muslim households. This book prompted me to reflect on a societal aspect of our country. I observe how the lack of intellectual engagement has progressively hindered Hindus through rituals. This same blindness is evident in Muslims adopting *lungis* and *fezzes*, which, like the *dhoti* and *chadar* for Hindus, support the earnings of mullahs. Is this a reflection of the inherent qualities of our land? How long will this disease poisoned wind of barbarity continue to blow across our country? Will we persist in hurting and insulting each other until mutual destruction? The generosity of the author's writing adds a unique value to the book.

Towards the end of the novel, it takes on a somewhat utopian tone, suggesting an idealistic vision of peace between Hindus and Muslims. This is evident when the Hindu moneylender forgives the debt of the late Syed Saheb upon witnessing Abdullah's virtue—a scenario that seems overly idealistic, as if aiming to convey a message of unity between the two conflicting religions through literature. Abdul Qadir remarked that the novel might have been more compelling if Imdadul Huq had the chance to finish it, while Syed Murtaza Ali observed that Abdullah's resolution felt somewhat contrived, with events unfolding more by the author's design than by natural progression. It may have been the 'generosity' that Tagore noted after reading *Abdullah* that inspired the author to continue crafting stories with such imagination.

After Imdadul Haq's death, Anwarul Haq, who completed the novel, made a significant remark that sheds light on the historical development of the region. He said:

With the passing of Qazi Imdadul-Haq, a new era may dawn upon the Muslim society of Bengal. He lived with a degree of freedom and an appreciation for beauty, introducing several innovations. If Muslim society recognises and embraces these advancements, they could make significant strides towards progress.

Indeed, many changes occurred in the social and material life of Bengali Muslims after *Abdullah* was published, yet the novel's value remains vital in the literary scene for its visionary depiction of social reality.

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