

## Book Review-1

**Mrityunjoy Paul, *Itihaser Aloke Sir Azizul Haque: Jiban Karma o Samakalin Muslim Samaj* (In Bengali), Biswakosh Parishad, Kolkata, 2022, p. 223, Rs. 300**

'Sir Azizul Haque in the Light of History: His Life, Work and Contemporary Muslim Society' written in Bengali is a byproduct of Mrityunjoy Paul's PhD dissertation at the University of Kalyani. Sir Azizul (1892-1947), one of the leading figures in Bengal, particularly in Indian society from the 1920s to 1940s, is now almost a forgotten name. Mrityunjoy Paul has a commendable credit in reminiscing him most objectively. On the one hand, he has described different phases of his life and his contributions in the various fields and on the other hand, he has contextualised him in the larger perspective of Bengali society and politics. Azizul's contribution was manifold and the author has rightly devoted different chapters dealing with different aspects of his life. The book divided into five chapters besides Preface, Introduction, Conclusion, Appendix, Photographs and a rich bibliography is a significant addition to the study of the socio-political history of undivided Bengal. As for Sir Azizul, we have only two biographies: Bhuniya Iqbal 'Sir Azizul Haque 1892-1947, (Dhaka, Bangla Academy, 1994), and Shahanara Alam and Husniara Huq (ed) - Azizul Huque: A Biographical Account of his Life and Work (Dhaka, 1996) and a handful of articles written on him. Mrityunjoy's work, in this sense, is a completely new subject of study from West Bengal.

In Chapter I, the author describes Azizul's role as an educationist. His 'History and Problems of Moslem Education in Bengal (1917) may be regarded as a masterpiece on this topic. Azizul especially stressed primary education, eradication of illiteracy, and rectification of the deficiencies of the Madrasa System of education and tried to connect it with the broader modern education system. As a Muslim leader with strong farsightedness, he rightly understood that the larger interest of the Muslims will be served only by educational uplift. This, however, does not mean that he was indifferent to collegiate and higher education. He was the Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University (1938-42). But his deep understanding of the educational problem of the Bengali Muslims is best illustrated by his deep and far-reaching ideas about the Madrasa education in Bengal. He believed in coordinating modern institutional education with the traditional Madrasa education in Bengal. He earnestly believed that it was the only way to ameliorate the wretched conditions of the Bengali Muslims who were mostly poor and illiterate. He

also stressed Bengali as a medium of instruction at the school level. This introduction should be regarded as a revolutionary step. Azizul's contact and conversation with Rabindranath Tagore, not only a great literati but also a great educationist, is an important phenomenon in his thought of academic reconstruction. The author analyses in great detail that as an Education Minister of Undivided Bengal (1930-36) to what extent he could translate his ideas into the practical realm, the extent of his success and its relevance in the contemporary context.

In the second chapter, the author narrates the socio-economic condition of the Bengali Muslims the classification within the Muslim community of Bengal, the general underdevelopment among them and the emergence of a newly rising middle class among the Bengali Muslims with all its far-fetched ramifications. He contextualises the thought and activities of Sir Azizul under these circumstances. Throughout the 19th century, one notices the prominence of the upper caste Hindus in the East India Company and government services, the indifference of the British government towards the Bengali Muslims, the anti-Muslim policy of the British and the anti-government revolts of the Muslims which took together created an unenviable situation of animosity between the rulers and the ruled. But more or less from the late 19th and more from the early 20th century, the Muslim leadership tried to come out of this complex imbroglio and began to think of different avenues. Azizul's relevance and contributions, the author holds, are to be analysed within this context.

The third chapter is devoted to the condition of peasants in Bengal incidentally majority of whom were Bengali Muslims whereas the zamindars, *jotedars* and several other landowning classes in hierarchical order were mostly Hindus. The land-settlement issues and money-lending (or Mahajani) system which were controlled mostly by the affluent classes, who were generally Hindus affected greatly the Muslims. The Bengal economy was dependent upon the agrarian sector mostly. It was the peasantry who were called upon to increase the agricultural production but it was the peasantry who were mostly neglected. Azizul has delved deeply into this intricate issue in his 'The man behind the Plough' (1931). The book impressed even Tagore so much that he wanted to translate the book into Bengali. Azizul tried to argue that empires come and go but these hardly changed the condition of the downtrodden and their daily lives. The conditions of the peasants and their movements in the then Bengal were described in this book in great detail and he also sought to analyse the relevance of these issues in the present context. The fertility of the land and the increase in production are the twin issues which drew the attention of Azizul who he thought could change the everyday life of the peasants mostly Muslims. Despite natural advantages why the peasants could not get two square meals a day and remained immersed in continuous indebtedness and what were the ways to come out of this were some of the issues that drew the attention of Azizul. The present author critically analyses the thought of Azizul on these issues in great detail.

In chapter 4 the author discusses the role of Azizul in Bengal politics. His booklet "A Plea for Separate Electorate in Bengal" (1931) was a welcome and thought-provoking addition to huge literature published in the 1920s and 30s on the issue of joint versus separate electorate, seat reservation in the legislatures based on the religious community. He was a member of the Bengal Legislative Council (1927-34). On the first Assembly election of 1937 held under the new Government of India Act of 1935 he was elected unopposed from the Nadia Mohammedan reserved constituency. He was elected the first speaker of the Legislative Assembly. In the days of heated debates between Congress, Muslim League, Krishak Praja Party and Hindu Nationalists when the Assembly often became, heated, he conducted the proceedings of the House impartially and with a strong hand. Azizul was connected with Muslim League and was close with different and often antagonistic factions of Muslim politicians, still, he was never a part of any petty politicising. He was concerned more with better administration and general development. Moreover within the Bengal Muslim League, while most of the leaders came either from aristocratic backgrounds or up-country Urdu-speaking sections, only Azizul Haque and A.K. Fazlul Huq came from newly rising Bengali Muslim educated middle class and spoke in favour of the interest of common man. He left the field of Bengal politics to be appointed as Indian High Commissioner in London (1942). Coming back he was offered the post of the premiership of Bengal by the then Bengal governor which he politely refused. Then he became a member of the Executive Council of the Viceroy, an exalted post that no Muslim from Bengal before him held (1943-1946). Then he became a member of the Constituent Assembly on behalf of the Bengal Muslim League.

In Chapter 5, Mrityunjoy discusses the cultural activities of Azizul. In the syncretic culture of Bengal, Nadia and particularly the town of Santipur had a special place, born in an affluent and educated family in Santipur, Azizul was a highly educated personality. A reputed lawyer by profession, he was also greatly interested in various branches of literature and protagonist of progressive Muslim literature. As the Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University (1938-42), he established the Department of Islamic History and Culture (1939-40) was one of his great achievements which paved the way for Islamic studies in Bengal in a secular scientific way.

Throughout his life, Azizul received many honours. He was given Knighthood by the British government. Generally, he was a Pro-British politician, who did not generally believe in agitational politics but in constructive and conciliatory politics. His political ideas, economic views, social philosophy and cultural values - all were interrelated and were parts of his grand vision of development particularly of Bengali Muslims. In his lifetime, he occupied many exalted positions and his views were generally received with great attention by all sections of the population. He died in March 1947, in Calcutta on the eve of Indian Independence and Partition. Though born in Nadia in West Bengal, his family migrated to East Pakistan.

Within a short time after his death and birth in Pakistan, his memory began to fade out gradually. The author of the book has referred to this fact, but if he seeks to make an in-depth analysis of this tricky question the book would have been much more valuable. But still, both historians and the public should remain grateful to Mrityunjoy Paul for presenting before us the life sketch of such a great personality. If he would have lived longer might have changed the course of the history of the subcontinent to some extent. The birth of Bangladesh (1971) indirectly paid homage to his thought though by this time he was almost a forgotten figure.

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