

Personality

The Legendary Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan

Shah Abdul Halim

A German scientist when asked whether he believes in God replied: I am seeing God. At that time the scientist was keenly observing how tiny ants are carrying food in the hole. In truth some people can see their Lord with the eyes of the hearts. Al Quran states: ... Truly it is not the eyes that are blind, but the hearts ... [22:46].

In my estimation Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan, our national professor, was one of those fortunate persons who could see God in the eyes of the hearts. Somebody might question why I am eulogizing our national littérateur with such an ornamental statement. Why he is so great in my estimation. I shall recount here several incidents from my personal encounter with Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan with whom I closely mingled during the last days of his life, during the formation of the Center for National Culture (C. N. C.) of which he was the founder chairman.

I still vividly remember that I met Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan for the first time at the festschrift ceremony on 26 March 1985 at Hotel Purbani International, Dhaka wherein he narrated the story of his birth. His illustrious mother dreamt that she is approaching Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him) and then she handed over her son Syed Ali Ahsan to Prophet Ibrahim so that the great Prophet takes care of his upbringing. The dream only throws light on the later life of Syed Ali Ahsan, how great he will be in later life and the literary contribution he will make for onward march and progress of Islamic literature, culture and civilization in Bangladesh. Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan was born in 1920 in an eminent family of spiritual masters in Jessore, Bangladesh.

One day at his residence he expressed his desire that some of his books need to be translated in English. I pointed out to him that it would be almost impossible to translate his vast literature in English. I told him: If one book is to be translated in English, what is that book. He immediately without any hesitation replied that if only one of his books is to be translated in English it should be the 'Mahanabi' (The Great Prophet - peace and blessings be upon him) published by Ahmed Publishing House, Dhaka in August 1994. The instant reaction of Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan only shows his deep love for the noble Prophet.

He used to say, quoting eminent Iranian journalist Zeinolabedin Rahnema, who himself wrote a monumental book on the life of the Prophet Muhammad titled 'Payambar: The Messenger' published in three volumes in 1964 by Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore that has been translated into Bangla by Abu Jafar and published by Al-Ameen Prokashon, Dhaka under the title 'Biswa Nabi Muhammad', that no writer's life is complete without writing a piece on the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Earlier part of this book has been published in Bangla first by Srijan Prokashoni Ltd., Dhaka and then by Wadud Publication, Dhaka.

Although I could not translate Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan's book on the noble Prophet, it was translated by distinguished scholar Muhammad Alamgir, now residing in Australia. The first edition of the English version was simultaneously published from Malaysia and Bangladesh under the new title 'Muhammad: Seal of the Prophets'. The Malaysian edition has been published in 2002 by A. S. Noordeen, Kuala Lumpur. Special Dhaka publication of the English version of the book was made available in September 2002 after Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan passed away and all copies of this edition were distributed as complimentary. Brother Muhammad Alamgir by adding footnotes and annotations has indeed made the English version more authentic and valuable. Muhammad Alamgir consulted, while adding footnotes and annotations, such books as 'Muhammad' by Martin Lings that he considers as the best biography on Prophet Muhammad in English, 'Siratun Nabi' by Shibli Numani and Sulayman Nadvi, 'Sirat Rasul Allah' by Ibn Ishaq and 'Sayyedul Mursalin' by Moulana Abdul Khaleque. I understand a second edition of the English version is now available in Bangladesh market.

One of the distinguished styles of his work was that Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan could absorb religious values in his literary writings in such a way that the reader will feel, while reading his book, as if he is reading a literary piece and not a book on theology. He would speak and give dictation for writing so eloquently as if words coming out from his mouth like *tasbih-dana* (pearls of chains), one linked with the other. Although Muhammad Alamgir while translating the book in English made painstaking efforts to make the book authentic, we can however say that he landed in a difficult arena and made an impossible attempt to keep in tact the literary style of Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan.

'Hey Provu Ami Upochthith' (O Lord I am Here), a journey to Holy Kaaba is another impeccable work of Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan. The third edition of the book has been published by Wadud Publication, Dhaka in 1998. The first edition of this book was published by Srijan Prokashoni Ltd., Dhaka in February 1988.

The other incident I want to mention here is something very important in the life of any Muslim nation. Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan and his friends - poet Benazir Ahmed, poet Farrukh Ahmed and poet Talim Hossain made a solemn vow, a *bayah* immediately after 14 August 1947 that they will work together for the resurgence of Islam in the new country. The result was that poet Benazir Ahmed wrote *Islam O Communism*. Poet Farrukh Ahmed composed *Shat Sagarer Majeyi*, poet Talim Hossain composed

Shaheen and Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan composed *Chahar Darvesh*. All these contributions made mark in our literary history. These are undeniably landmark contributions. Indeed these litterateurs kept their promise and made great contribution to Bangla literature depicting Islamic values, culture and civilization. Brother Masud Majumder, editor of now defunct Weekly Bikram, narrated this story to me as told by Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan.

One of his distinguished contributions was the Bangladesh National Cultural Commission Report 1989. Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan was the chairman of this commission. The commission was formed in 1988 and it submitted its report when H. M. Ershad was president of the country. But due to parochial mentality and outlook, the next government in 1991 did not care to see what is in the report just because the commission was formed when H. M. Ershad was the president. So is the case when Sheikh Hasina formed the government in 1996 as prime minister. But when Begum Khaleda Zia formed government for the second term in 2001, the then education minister Dr. M. Osman Farruk took some interest in the report. Government then reviewed the report to find out the remaining recommendations of the report yet to be implemented. The 13-member Review Committee headed by Prof. Dr. Mansur Musa submitted its report on 25. 3. 2004. The committee came out with significant 14 recommendations. The Bangladesh National Cultural Commission Report 1989 has subsequently been published by *Oitijhya*, Dhaka. The report is in Bangla. Interested readers may benefit by reading the report.

The government formed after one-eleven is again trying to formulate a new cultural policy. When this writer was consulted by the concerned people in the government responsible for formulating the new policy I brought to their notice about the Bangladesh National Cultural Commission Report 1989. I advised them to consult the report of the commission headed by Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan. The people who are working behind the scene to formulate the new cultural policy wanted to know from me whether the report is controversial. My response was that some people like the report and others may not, but while formulating the new cultural policy they can consult all past reports including the one headed by Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan. Our narrow mentality stops us from taking a broad outlook and considering that what Bangladesh achieved has been accomplished by our successive national governments. Such mentality no doubt creates obstacles in our progress as a nation.

This piece shall not be complete and I shall not be doing justice on the subject I am dwelling in unless a word is said about the formation of C. N. C. in 1996 (registered in July 1998) and how myself (Shah Abdul Halim), A. W. M. Sanaullah Akhunji, M. Mahbulul Huq, Hasan Abdul Quiyum Selim, Kazi Mortaza Ali, Mohammad Abdul Hannan, Dr. Shah Muhammad Bulbul Islam and Ariful Haque – the core group came close to Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan. We friends were thinking for launching afresh a cultural movement in Bangladesh in continuation of our effort in 1969 when some of us established 'Muktabuddhi Shahittaya Sangha'. We thought the new organization like the Muktabuddhi will work as nucleus for socio-cultural transformation. M. Mahbulul Huq as Managing Director of Srijan Prokashoni Ltd.,

Dhaka was known to Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan from before. In fact Srijan Prokashoni Ltd. earlier published several books of Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan. We therefore approached Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan to chair the new organization – Center for National Culture (C. N. C.) and he readily accepted the offer. Brother A. W. M. Sanaullah Akhunji, the first Executive Director of C. N. C. played important role in maintaining liaison with Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan and further improving the core group's relations with him. The core group became so close with Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan that he not only became the founder chairman of C. N. C. but it became his dream. He approached a good number of philanthropists-industrialists to raise funds for the C. N. C. Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan with a delegation of C. N. C. even met the then prime minister Begum Khaleda Zia and tried to convince her to extend helping hand to this cultural organization. No doubt today's C. N. C. is the dream and vision of Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan and the core group. During the sojourn others namely Dr. R. A. Ghani, M. Asafuddowlah, Dr. M. Shamsheer Ali, Dr. Mohammad Moniruzzaman, Dr. Razia Khan, poet Abdul Mannan Talib, M. A. Malaque, Siddiq Jamal, Prof. Md. Fazle Azim, Moulana Abul Kalam Azad, principal Muhammad Habibur Rahman, Nurul Azam Chowdhury, Advocate A. K. M. Badurduza, Muhammad Ashraful Islam, Sofia Husne Jahan, Dr. Mira Momtaz Sabeka, Muhammad Mokhlesur Rahman to name a few have joined C. N. C. as Trustees and some others have left but the march of C. N. C. under the new chairman Dr. R. A. Ghani and new Executive Director M. Mahbubul Huq continues. In the meantime eminent writer and social worker Prof. Abdul Gafur, Prof. Muhammad Motiur Rahman, Prof. Muhammad Sirajuddin, Abu Jafar Md. Iqbal, Dr. Shamuddowla, Mohammad Abdul Mannan, Ata Sarker, Muhammad Jahangir Chowdhury, Prof. Mir Kamal Chowdhury, Prof. Abul Basher Khan, Dr. Nazmul Huq Robi, poet Hasan Alim, poet Jakir Abu Zafar to name a few have joined C. N. C. as life-members.*

The article is the summary of the lecture in memoriam of Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan organized by the Center for National Culture - C. N. C. on 26. 07.2007.