

## The Centenary Volume on Abul Fazal: a treat for thinking readers

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*Manobtontri Abul Fazal: Shatobarshik Shmarankgrantha (Abul Fazal, a Humanitarian: Centenary Commemorative Volume)*

**Editors: Prof Anisuzzaman et al**

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Nothing is more in need at this critical time, when political democracy has restarted an all but limping journey, than the publication of a centenary commemorative anthology on Abul Fazal (1903-1983), the foremost humanist of the country. He was considered the conscience of the nation in his time. Though primarily a writer, but lifelong this has been a trademark with Fazal that he participated in and led almost all intellectual and civil movements against the pseudo-religious Pakistani autocratic regimes. At the advent of the Bangladesh movement Abul Fazal became a truly national figure guiding the progressive forces with courage and high morale.

The anthology, appropriately entitled as *Manobtontri Abul Fazal: Shatobarshik Shmarankgrantha (Abul Fazal, a Humanitarian: Centenary Commemorative Volume)*, has been edited by a competent team led by Professor Anisuzzaman, and, in its 576-page thick size, has accommodated thirty-eight essays, of which the first five are based on personal reminiscences by a group of litterateurs who were his contemporaries and were conversant with his ideas and writings when Fazal was emerging on the literary scene of the undivided Bengal in the early thirties (Annadashankar Roy and others); fourteen more essays follow on Fazal's life and literature, written by a later generation of writers most of whom happen

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to be Fazal's erstwhile students, who later on became his colleagues, literary friends and admirers (Prof Anisuzzaman, Prof Serajul Islam Chowdhury and others), then the remaining nineteen essays (Profs Amlan Datta and Jamal Nazrul Islam and others), are dedicated to various social topics, mostly factual and well-documented, published, as it is to be understood, to highlight issues that were close to Fazal's line of thinking.

Now, what was Fazal's line of thinking? From reading the essays anthologized one can understand that Fazal had imbibed a liberal mode of thinking, non-communal and secular, but at the same time following a tradition of liberal Islamism that took deeper roots in the subcontinent than the fundamentalist Islam which seems to have become widespread now. Fazal was willing to give a wide berth to religious conformity (Mafidul Huq, p. 209). Moreover, says Poet Abdul Kadir, a distinguished contemporary of Fazal, in his essay, "Shahityacharya Abul Fazal," Fazal's father, Moulavi Fazlur Rahman, who was the Pesh Imam (chief priest) of the central mosque of Chittagong, Anderkillah Jam-e-Masjid for thirty years, had played an important part in Fazal's formative years. (Justice) Muhammad Habibur Rahman, a versatile man of letters of the country, sees no contradiction in Abul Fazal's coming from a traditional Muslim family and yet aspiring after secular and progressive ideas and joining the Shikha (flame) Group in Dhaka, the members of which were promoting ideas of liberal humanism and questioning religious bigotry and communal thinking. The title page of the group's literary organ "Shikha" had an inscription announcing that the letters of the Holy Koran were being blazoned by the flame of liberal human thinking (Rahman, p. 49). Yet then, though, in his personal life Fazal was a non-practising Muslim, his avowed persistence, however, for keeping the Madrasha education in place (spotted by many, including Prof Anisuzzaman and Wahidul Huq, as an unpleasant contradiction) is an expression of his realization that social and religious reforms were not possible by deracinating a system unless a substantial alternative was found. Abul Fazal, like Tagore, did understand political and social reforms not as to come from a divisive thinking but to be necessitated by a wider intellectual view where the society's basis was to be agreement in disagreement. The second factor that many contributors in the anthology have again noted, though perfunctorily, as another act of opportunism is his joining the cabinet of the army general President Ziaur Rahman, which again needs to be seen as Fazal's holistic approach towards life. Reaching the fag-end of his life, Fazal might have felt the necessity to serve the nation in more concrete terms rather than deny the responsibility on vaguer reasons. The editorial perception of this anthology has failed in this one regard that instead of facing the controversial issues the editors have elided them altogether, thereby giving the impression that as if they had implicitly concurred with the criticisms, whereas in-depth probing essays explaining why Fazal made some certain moves in his life that contradicted with his basic ideological premise could have given a fuller substantiality to the anthology.

His contention with Tagore about what should be the right perspectives of literature, which developed when he was just emerging as a fictionist, however, gives clues to Fazal's quest of life. He sent his recently published novel *Chouchir* (The Cracking) and two other books to Tagore, when the latter was nearly failing in eyesight. Yet Tagore read the novel and wrote back an encouraging letter saying that if Muslim writers were not coming forth then half of the Bengali life would remain hidden in the dark like the half hemisphere of the moon that never receives the sunlight. But Tagore also cautioned him not to unwarrantedly introduce Islamic words into the Bengali language, which Fazal in his letter of 31<sup>st</sup> August, 1940 aptly countered by saying that words such as 'dastarkhana' in place of tablecloth, and 'nasta' (breakfast) for 'jalkhabar' were used in the Muslim community so naturally that Bengali synonyms were redundant. But Tagore was not to be undone, and replied in a much longer letter on 6<sup>th</sup> September, 1940 that language has a natural capacity to accept or reject non-indigenous words. Tagore explained that the word 'khunkharabi' (murderous activities) has been used in Bengali since long, but that is no reason to take 'khun' (which in Hindi means both 'murder' and 'blood', but only 'murder' in Bengali) as 'rakta' (blood). To this letter even Abul Fazal prepared a reply but refrained from sending it to Tagore, who was then severely ill. In that letter Fazal expressed his disappointment that though the world was lighted by Tagore's 'sun', that is, genius, but one part of Bengal had, unfortunately, remained out of its purview. And pointing to the communal politics thriving in both Hindu and Muslim sects, Fazal wrote that the way was to reconcile the positive aspects of both religions together and create a harmonious identity based on Bengali nationality, otherwise, as he so very rightly predicted, there will be a Hindu Bengal and a Muslim Bengal.

Annadashankar Roy, whose essay, "Rabindranath o [and] Abul Fazal," is the source of my discussion in the paragraph above has his own share of comments on this dialogue. Roy, referring to Tagore's image of 'the half moon', says that Bengal today is divided into two halves, and interestingly enough, intellectuals like Fazal, who were advocating for non-communal politics, became a supporter of the Lahore resolution (1940), which sought a separate state for Muslims in the name of Pakistan. So, Roy claims that the logical conclusion that Fazal and other Muslim writers' thinking had to come to was that because Pakistan was created, Bengal got divided like the two halves of the moon, an outcome much feared by Tagore.

The cover so well done by artist Abul Mansur, Fazal's third son, is a splash of soothing green against which is etched a pen-drawn portrait of Fazal in a yellow oval. There's a portrait-photograph of a thoughtful Fazal on the first inner, but the photographer is not named. The price is Tk 750/-, may be reasonable by today's standard. Somoy Praokashan deserves thanks for such an excellent publication. The book will surely sell well.

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