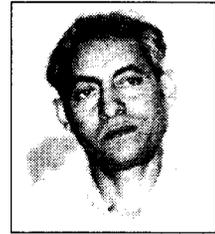


Obituary

Professor Aijazuddin Ahmad

(1932-2006)



Professor A. Ahmad, fondly addressed by his colleagues and students as Aijaz Saheb, was born in Faizabad, a small town in western U. P. (Uttar Pradesh, India) on 12th January 1932. After his schooling, he joined Aligarh Muslim University, from where he graduated with geography major, finished his Master's degree in geography, and finally obtained a Doctorate in 1962. He started his career as a geography teacher with a lectureship at Aligarh Muslim University, from where he subsequently moved to Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, where he spent two decades of his most productive academic life before relinquishing his office on superannuation in 1997.

To write this obituary for a teacher with whom I had been associated for more than four decades is indeed a difficult and painful task. I will begin on a personal note to indicate the environment in which Professor Aijaz and I were chiselled as Geographers, and will then give the context in which we first met and the circumstances through which we nurtured a relationship which we both treasured. My reminiscences are very personal and in their limited ambit many aspects of Aijaz Saheb's personality and his various other relationships are not recounted. I do not consider these aspects unimportant. I just want this to be a personal tribute to a man who contributed in his own way in making me what I am today.

The year is 1964. The locale is the old Geography Department of the Aligarh Muslim University. I have enrolled as an M.A student and Professor Aijazuddin Ahmad has recently been inducted into the faculty. This decade was perhaps the last phase of a period when women in Aligarh, though encouraged and welcomed, were still to some extent restricted and protected, even if this occasionally required that they be considered a 'breed apart'. The first day that I cycled down to the department, I did not realize that I had been put in the 'rare species' category. My act was reported to Professor Shafi, the Head of the Department. I was summoned and was asked why I preferred to cycle rather than use a cycle rickshaw and then, after perhaps an 'unsatisfactory' answer from me, I was asked where I had parked my cycle. I informed that my cycle was at the only stand near the Department that I could see. I was told that in future I was not to go to the boy's stand and should park my cycle where the faculty parked theirs in the Department's verandah. The second thing I discovered was that I was not to use the staircase near my newly designated cycle stand but the one behind the building meant only for the girl students to get to the first floor where the class rooms were located. This staircase was specially constructed when the first girl student, the legendary Sayeeda Apa, joined the department in the early 1940s. The third

set of instructions came from the senior 'apas / didis'. There was a protocol to be followed in the classrooms. We girls were to enter the classroom only after the teacher had taken the podium and, preferably with heads covered, were to sit in the front rows. We were to leave the classroom immediately after the teacher finished lecturing and were to get back to the small cloister next to our separate staircase.

I was quite intimidated. But soon to my amazement, in this almost surrealistic world, created not by any brand of fundamentalism but through tradition and a culture all its own, Geography at its best was taught by the most affectionate and friendliest of teachers. Some of them were extremely radical even by the standards of those days. Others were progressive and liberal. Dissent was fully tolerated if expressed within the limits of propriety. Debate was encouraged. Girls were not only led but could lead. And all this happened under the watchful protective eyes of Professor Shafi, the Godfather of the Department, respected by all. Professor Aijazuddin Ahmad and I learnt our Geography in this atmosphere.

Our first class for the "Geography of the Indian Desert" began with the usual protocol. We generally avoided looking at the teachers but I tried to figure out this one, called Aijaz Saheb, because he was almost hidden by the podium: A very young face, small built, unimposing, the youngest in the faculty. Born in 1932, he was just about thirty-two years then. He could easily go unnoticed if he was not positioned where he now was. This course was based on his thesis we were told. The first time such a thing had happened in the Department. We were naturally curious to know what this little genius was all about.

Suddenly measured, almost poetic words, started pouring out of him, effortlessly, in melodious ripples. The class was initially startled and then gradually mesmerized. The mystery and the personality of the Great Indian Desert were gradually unfolded before us. It was Regional Geography at its best. This young man's style was influenced by his teacher, Professor Anas, who had himself been a very treasured student of O.H.K. Spate, the regional geographer *par excellence*. To what Aijaz Saheb had imbibed from his teachers, he had added his own brand of wisdom and a very grounded, earthy understanding of regions. I consider it my great privilege to have been taught regional geography by both Professor Anas and Professor Ahmad. They made regions come alive like heroes and heroines in a bewildering drama created by nature and shaped by man. Regions transcended their physicality. Be it the Nile Valley, the tribal Papua, New Guinea, or the diverse monsoon washed South Asia. These teachers made you become one with their society, their culture and the joys and sorrows of their inhabitants.

We students soon found that this diminutive man that was Aijaz Saheb, was multifaceted. On the one hand he was an acclaimed literary critic of Urdu literature and a well-known Urdu poet. On the other, he could play sports at the theoretical and philosophical level and was a perfect guide to students during "wall practices" at the hard courts behind the Geography Department. He had the instinctive ability of the good teacher to identify and rectify mistakes in game and style. He had a rare sense of wit and charitable sarcasm. With few words he could cut you in pieces. I remember he had given us a sessional on

some aspects of the Indian desert. One of my classmates copied almost verbatim from his thesis. The sessional was returned with the wry remark “True Attested Copy”. If any teacher we feared it was Aijaz Saheb because we did not know when and how he would catch you with a remark capped with a half smile which would make you wish you were momentarily dead.

Professor Ahmad continued to enliven the Geography classes at Aligarh while I left the Department after completing my M.A in 1966 for IIT Kharagpur where I studied and taught for five years. But the charisma of the AMU Geography Department was such that it always remained my second home. I visited the Department frequently to attend seminars. Aijaz Saheb would now meet me on a different plane and gradually my fear of him waned. I was now part of his inner circle which he regaled with his poetry sessions held secretly after the seminar job was done. These mischievous poems were written by him and his friends from other universities, all respectable geographers. One of them eventually became a Vice Chancellor. No one was spared. All the contemporary stalwarts of Geography were observed keenly in each seminar session and then ‘commented’ upon in hilarious poetry but no disrespect meant. Since this obituary is being printed by the Geography Department at Pune I wish I had kept a copy of the poems on Professor Gananathan and his imperious cigar. We loved him and his style.

To complete the circle of people who impacted on Aijaz Saheb’s personality I must now bring in his illustrious teacher, Professor Moonis Raza. I unfortunately had not been taught by Professor Raza, because when I joined the Aligarh Department he

had left to become the Principal of the Kashmir Engineering College. An unthinkable position for a Geographer but that was Professor Raza. Circumstances, however, did bring us three together in the early 1970s in another context at the Centre for the Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University. It was a great opportunity for us to work together and do what each one of us had thought should be done to Indian Geography. Though we belonged to three different generations we were linked through a common ideology, a common value system and a mind set which tried to do away with what was obsolete while respecting the ‘old fashioned’ traditions of learning and teaching. In the true ‘guru-shishya parampara’, the student was considered family, his demands supreme and missing a class by a teacher, a sacrilege. It was the prime duty of the faculty to make a family out of the CSRD and then strive to keep this family together.

Aijaz Saheb made the first effort to add some spice to this onerous task and organized the first faculty picnic. The site he chose was on the tors of the Aravallis in the yet uninhabited New Campus and the menu consisted of a Hyderabad dish which he was going to make. In a big vessel, sealed with wheat dough a ‘*pulao*’ was to be cooked slowly in the juices flowing out of the ingredients. The fire was to be made out of the wood and twigs available on the site, so some of us younger ones were on the run to keep the fire going. With Professor Raza and Aijaz Saheb around, the afternoon was filled with repartee, jokes and poetry. The cooking period, however, gradually turned into an endurance period. At four in the evening Aijaz Saheb meekly declared that perhaps the dish was ready. With bated breath when

the vessel was de-sealed we faced a half cooked '*pulao*'. In the name of 'solidarity' we ate it in varying portions, the quantity perhaps indicating how much we could sacrifice ourselves for this solidarity. The event remained a joke with us for many years. Aijaz Saheb's justification for the fiasco was that one had to think of the historical importance of the event because no human beings had ever cooked '*pulao*', on the tors on which we did. And surely no human beings but us would eat a *half* cooked '*pulao*' on those tors ever again. It was the first and the last event of its kind on that location. We had created history. That was important.

This was Aijaz Saheb's personality: To take life as it came and with a pinch of humour. He perhaps adopted this attitude because, the extremely sensitive person that he was, he would have wilted otherwise. He eventually did wilt. He had to face problems in his personal and professional life. Betrayal from trusted ones, sometimes a lack of recognition for the arduous tasks thrust on him and an indifferent health.

His sensitivity, however, was professionally a boon as it made him a profound analyst of the social reality of India. He will be remembered for his seminal books "The Tribal Atlas of India", "The Social Geography of India" and the four volumes on "Muslims of India". Based on extensive primary surveys, a deep theoretical understanding and written with a lucidity which was his hallmark, These books will enlighten social scientists for a long time to come. He had a deep interest in Historical Geography and devoted a considerable time to studying man-environment relationships in arid and hilly regions. Aijaz Saheb had been a recipient

of the Senior Fulbright Fellowship and was based at the University of Washington, Seattle, USA. He had been a member of the IGU Commission on Population Geography and served as the Chairman of the National Committee of India for the IGU. He was also the Honorary editor of the ICSSR Journal of Abstracts and Reviews (Geography). He was a member of the panel on Geography of the University Grants Commission for two consecutive terms. He became a National Lecturer in Geography in 1984-85. For several years he edited the Journal of the The National Association of Geographers, India and eventually became its President.

Aijaz Saheb's obsession with Geography was so intense that he inspired his wife to do a Doctorate in the subject and also one of his sons to follow suit. His eldest son studied Japanese language and his daughter did a Doctorate in bio-technology from the prestigious Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore. It was unfortunate that Aijaz Saheb developed some respiratory problems while he was attending a conference in London in June 2006. He took it in his stride in his characteristic manner. After the conference he went to visit his daughter in Bath. By now his condition had deteriorated and he was hospitalised. On June 9, 2006 he breathed his last. His mortal remains were brought to India by his children and on June 15, 2006 he was buried in the Nizamuddin Cemetery in Delhi where he now rests in peace. Aijaz Saheb is survived by his most loving wife and life long companion Naseem, elder son Naved, daughter Saima and his younger son Rumi.

Aijaz Saheb's decency and humility were exemplary. He served the institutions where he worked with total dedication. He

will always be held in great esteem for the brilliance of his scholarship and the firmness of his convictions. Loved for his warmth and adored for his lectures, he will be fondly

remembered by generations of students both at Aligarh and at JNU as an extraordinary teacher and an outstanding scholar.

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