

ISLAM IN BENGALI VERSE

A selection from
Sirajun Munira

by
Farrukh Ahmad
Translated into English
by
Syed Sajjad Husain

BANGLADESH INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT

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**Bangladesh Institute
of
Islamic Thought**

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**Bangladesh Institute of
Islamic Thought
Kataban Mosque, Dhaka**

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Price:

Taka 100.00

U S \$ 10

Printed at:

Paper Converting and Packaging Ltd.

Karim Chamber (Ground Floor)

99, Motijheel Commercial Area

Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh.

Phone: 233294, 239863

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Publisher's Foreword

We hope this slim volume, *Islam in Bengali Verse*, which presents to English-speaking readers a selection of Farrukh Ahmad's poetry in translation, will give the outside world some idea of how Islam has reacted on the creative imagination of writers in Bengali. It will help them understand what aspects of Islam as reflected in the life of the Prophet (may Allah bless and exalt him) particularly appeal to the Bengali Muslim mind. Farrukh Ahmad, as Dr. Husain has explained in his introduction, was the greatest modern Muslim poet after Nazrul Islam who wrote in Bengali, but is much less known.

The Institute of Islamic Thought, Bangladesh is grateful to Dr. Syed Sajjad Husain for undertaking to translate Farrukh Ahmad into English. We trust this publication will serve to further the aims and objects of the Institute which is aiming to bring to the notice of the outside world the contributions of Bengali Muslims to Islam and also to educate the younger generation in the basic values of Islamic culture.

We are also thankful to The International Institute of Islamic Thought, USA, the counter part of BIIT in USA for their all out co-operation in the publication of this illustrated Poem.

September 19, 1992

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Secretary General,
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Introduction

The translations which follow are a selection from the writings of Farrukh Ahmad (1918-1974) who rose to literary notice in the forties as a member of a new generation of Muslim poets in what was then Bengal. Essentially a dreamer, with a romantic temperament, he underwent a conversion to mysticism early in his life after a brief Bohemian period, and henceforth dedicated himself to the cultivation of themes from the history of Islam. Islam became to him identified with a personal vision of a social order embodying the highest ideals of moral justice and spiritual enlightenment. By the beginning of the fifties Farrukh came to be celebrated as the greatest Islamic poet after Nazrul Islam, the man who had given Islam a habitation and a name in modern Bengali poetry in the twentieth century.

But Farrukh was no imitator. While like Nazrul Islam he tried to use the characteristically Islamic idiom popular among Muslims, he lacked the command of Urdu and Persian which enabled Nazrul Islam to devise melodies out of a fusion of words drawn from such diverse sources as Arabic, Persian,

Urdu and Sanskrit. But this was counterbalanced by his personal commitment to religion which Nazrul Islam could not equal. It is true that Nazrul Islam remained at heart deeply attached to the ideal of Muslim internationalism, but he was personally no believer in any narrow doctrine, and could at times surprise people by writing poems which seemed to run counter to the main trend of his verse. Outwardly at least he seemed a cosmopolitan, a poet *per se* to whom freedom of expression mattered more than loyalty to any creed. On this account he laid himself open to the charge of inconsistency, and if one judged him by individual poems instead of seeing all his *oeuvre* in a broad perspective one is apt to be misled.

The case of Farrukh Ahmad was different. Having once given his heart to Islam he allowed no deviation, aesthetic or literary, to deflect him from the course he chose. This was often misunderstood. Many outside his inner circle criticised him as an extremist, a poet *engagé* incapable of compromise. His talents were admired even by those who did not see eye to eye with him, but this did not prevent him from having enemies who thought he had become too dogmatic to be a good writer. This was of course an unjust estimate, for there have been in all ages great writers, poets, dramatists,

novelists, who have been able to produce great literature without compromising their religious or political or social ideals, A great or good writer knows instinctively where to draw the line between personal beliefs and wider sympathies. There is no narrowness in Farrukh's interpretation of Islam: it embraces a deep sympathy for the downtrodden, an instinctive recoil against injustice of all kinds, a dream of economic emancipation which transcends parochial boundaries. Here the voice one hears is the voice of a man who is above all a champion of all that is noble and right, a rebel against all that is selfish and evil.

It is this vision that Farrukh Ahmad identified with the Prophet (may Allah bless and exalt him) and his Four Companions. The Prophet was not only a worldly model, but an inexhaustible source of spiritual light, the bearer of a message from the unknown, which remained inaccessible to ordinary men. At this point Farrukh Ahmad introduces a mystical note implying that by bare reason alone we could not understand the Prophet or the nature of his message. The way to understand him was to surrender to the greatness of his personality, to accept him without reservations. He poured into his panegyric a fervour which is a mixture of devotion,

admiration and passion. The four chief companions, he believed, having been the direct recipients of the Prophet's esoteric guidance, helped diffuse among ordinary mortals some of the ecstasy they themselves had savoured.

The presence of this mystical strain makes Farrukh Ahmad difficult to understand, even more difficult to translate. Images drawn from different sources interpenetrate in ways in which logic and consistency seem to be sacrificed to the need for self-expression unfettered by rule. In the poem on the Prophet, for instance, light is used as a symbol whose exact meaning changes from passage to passage. The poem on Usman opens with a reference to stars, camels and coral islands which apparently have no bearing from the point of view of logic on what follows, a characterisation of Usman as a great giver.

These inconsistencies are easy to condone in Bengali or at least they create no insuperable obstacle to understanding, because the rhythms of the verse carry the reader along: he is made to feel that there is an underlying sense in the apparently illogical juxtaposition of metaphors and images testifying to the poet's emotion.

But when I attempted to translate, I could not help feeling that a verbatim rendering would produce a result from which

no one could extract any sense. The only possible solution, I thought, was to offer the essence of each poem in translation, in language which would not violate the idiom of English. I had to compress passages, exclude what I felt was incapable of transmission in a foreign medium in order that the poet might not be thought to be ranting.

I thought sometimes of the obscurity of Blake's prophetic poems. But on reflection I rejected them as a model. Blake was writing in his own language, and his visions are anchored to Christianity which is part of the West's intellectual heritage. How could one expect that the generosity extended to Blake would be shown in the case of a poet who belonged to a completely different cultural and linguistic milieu?

Translating poetry is a difficult business, particularly so when one translates from a language which represents a strange ethos. Translation in such cases involves interpreting one culture in terms of another. The translator should give only what will be assimilable. The apparent liberties I have taken may appear unacceptable to some, but I console myself by thinking of wide differences in English versions of Greek poetry and drama. Nearer home I have the example of Arthur Waley's translations from the Chinese or Ezra Pound's

Cathay, where the essence of the poetry of Li Po and others has been presented in a dress which is compatible with the demands of the logic of the English language. Consider again Fitzgerald's Omar Khayyam. Many including such scholars as Robert Graves have criticised him for his inaccuracies. But Graves' own translation done in collaboration with a Persian scholar fails to convey the magic of Omar Khayyam's hedonism, despite all the care the translators took to keep close to the original.

The differences between Bengali and English are not a matter of differences of syntax alone. They emanate from differences of psychological outlook, mythological associations, and cultural values. What passes for good sense in Bengali would sound ridiculous in English, and *vice versa*. A simple lyric which does not go beyond the expression of simple sentiments may prove capable of literal translation easily, but a long poem which depends for its meaning and appeal on a wide range of allusions is a different proposition. Translating Bengali into Urdu and Hindi is so much easier. I remember reading a translation in Hindi of a narrative poem by Rabindranath Tagore 'Sannyasi Upagupta'. The translator was able to reproduce the exact rhythms of the original and retain

most of the vocabulary by taking advantage of similarities between the two languages, a feat that would have proved impossible even in Urdu because it relies on a different kind of vocabulary, although the grammar is the same.

The same conclusion will be forced upon one if one compared translations from French into English or from English into French. Both are European languages, deeply coloured by Christian cultural values and their Graeco-Roman legacy. Consequently all that a translator has to do is to mind the slight differences of word-order; no rethinking beyond this is ordinarily called for, unless one wanted poetic effects which require greater readjustments. Compare the following passage from Cocteau with its translation:

Mon ange, vois, je te loue,
Après t'avoir oublié.
Par le bas je suis lié
A mes chaussures de boue.

English translation:

My angel, see, I praise you,
After forgetting you.

I am tied to the earth below

To my shoes of mud.

Except that the English passage lacks rhyme, they are virtually the same, without even any major change in syntax.

It will, I think, be agreed, that what matters above all is that the translation should be both acceptable and palatable in its new dress. This is easier said than done. The ideal translator should be a native speaker of the language into which he translates, an attribute I cannot claim. The question then is: why attempt a translation? The fact is that Bengali has attracted so few translators that to wait for a native English speaker to come forward to learn Bengali and translate would be to condemn such poets as Farrukh Ahmad to indefinite obscurity. Tagore is the only poet in Bengali to have attracted foreign translators, but even he in spite of the Nobel Prize he won, has had fewer translators than, say, Iqbal. The recent Penguin volume by William Radice is perhaps the first book of its kind dedicated entirely to the work of a foreign translator. The best Tagore translations are those in his *Gitanjali* which contains revisions by famous poets of drafts produced by

Tagore himself. Yeats himself is believed to have had a hand in them.

Radice's translations are far less successful from the point of readability. They are however a step forward and tread practically virgin ground. Not daring to go to the lengths that Tagore himself did in pruning away from the English matter which however sweet in Bengali would not harmonise with the rhythms of the English language, Radice has been literal at the cost of the logic of his native tongue.

A mastercraftsman is sometimes able to create an idiom which has an exotic flavour without ceasing at the same time to be genuinely English. The best instances in our age are the translations from Chinese by Ezra Pound and Arthur Waley. The following passage is from *Cathay* by Pound:

The narrow streets cut into the wide highway at Choan,
Dark oxen, white horses,
drag on the seven coaches with outriders
The coaches are perfumed wood,
The jewelled chair is held up at the crossway,
Before the royal lodge:
A glitter of golden saddles, awaiting the princess;

They eddy before the gate of the barons.
The canopy embroidered with dragons
drinks in and casts back the sun.

There is nothing here which is not authentic English; yet the tone is Chinese, an effect created by the use of imagery which one would not normally associate with English poetry.

A better known example is the following much anthologised piece, also from *Cathay*:

The River-Merchant's Wife : A Letter

When my hair was cut straight across my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts playing horse,
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
And we two went on living in the village of Chokan:
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.
I never laughed being bashful.
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
I desired my dist to be mingled with yours
For ever and for ever and for ever.
Why should I climb the look-out ?

At sixteen you departed,
You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling eddies,
And you have been gone five months.
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away !
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the West garden;
They hurt me. I grow older.
If you are coming down through the narrows the river Kiang,
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you
As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

By Rihaku

Only Sinologists will be able to tell what liberties Pound took with the original. But there can be denying the beauty of the translation or the charm of the idiom Pound has used.

Plain literalness is permissible only when the translator handles a poet whose meaning he cannot fully penetrate, but whose fame demands that he be made known to those who do not read his language.

Take the following couplet from Hafiz done by Clarke:

From the Friend's (luminous) face, what gaineth the dark
heart of enemies? The dead (extinguished) lamp, where ? The
candle of the resplendent sun,

..... where ?

No one would be willing to pass this off as English. All it does is to make clear to those with some idea of Persian the literal sense of the words employed by Hafiz. Clarke had scholars in mind, not the general reader who wishes to savour poetry, and is not looking for a crib.

The translations I have presented are definitely not cribs. They are intended, as far as lay in my power, to introduce Farrukh Ahmad to those who do not read Bengali in a version which while not being the work of a native speaker will at least help them to form some notion of the kind of ideas in which he dealt.

He set himself to create in modern Bengali a poetry which would be calculated to convey to the reader the glories of Islam, its essence as a great religion, and its potential as a system which promised salvation to humanity. It was I presume this which led him to attempt a systematic series dealing with the life of the Prophet first and next his chief Companions known in history as Khulafa-i-Rashidin or the Rightly Guided Successors. Ideas are however not to be equated with poetry, and an impartial reader cannot help feeling that there are passages in this series where religious emotion rather than poetic effect is what is aimed at. This is less so in the first poem on the Prophet than in the ones on the Companions. Biography not being his object, Farrukh must have found it difficult to sustain himself at the level he intended by merely relying on the fact that these Companions were devoted followers who accepted the Prophet's guidance

without question and became each in his own way a beacon in the early history of Islam. Their shortcomings notwithstanding, these poems are the only ones in modern Bengali of their kind. Nazrul Islam wrote some superb pieces on the Prophet, unequalled for both religious fervour and lyric grace, but they deal with episodes, his birth and death, and they attempt no systematic exploration of the entire range of the early history of Islam as Farrukh does, a distinction which sets them apart.

The poems I have translated are all in rhymed verse, in traditional metres handled with great freedom, with lines contracted and lengthened for the sake of variety. I confess it would have been impossible for me to attempt a translation in rhyming English verse. The most daring feat I attempted was to put the first poem on the Prophet into blank verse. This called for great care lest I should depart inadvertently from the essence of the original. Some exclusions have been necessary but I think the outcome gives a fairly adequate impression of the deep fervour Farrukh Ahmad poured into this panegyric. I do not claim that the English rendering is poetry; few translations are.

The translations on the Companions are in free verse. I

however tried in the first three to conform as far as possible to the rhythm of Old English accentual metre, with four stresses to each line. In the case of the poem on Ali I was obliged to give up all pretensions to any kind of rhythmic pattern. I was able to return to metrical verse in Martyrdom at Karbala in which I used the iambic pentameter with an extra syllable at the end of each line to give it a lilt or resonance. I thought this would represent better the horror of death and suffering.

May I say in the end that I mean these translations to be a kind of personal tribute to Farrukh Ahmad whom I knew intimately and whose idealism I admired even where I differed with him. We had many commitments in common. To the end of his life, in spite of threats, intimidation and actual suffering, he remained steady in his beliefs and refused to compromise. Controversy surrounding these beliefs sometimes tended to tempt people to deny him the merit he deserved, but it is to be hoped that he will outlive these controversies as a poet who served his mother tongue to the best of his abilities.

Farrukh Ahmad

Farrukh Ahmad belonged as a poet to the generation that grew to maturity in the 40s. Born in 1918 into a Saiyid family in Jessore he was educated in Calcutta, but did not advance beyond high secondary school owing, according to reports, to the Bohemian style of his life in his early youth. A chance encounter is reported to have thrown him into contact with a saintly Muslim scholar, Maulana Abdul Khaleq. The spiritual conversion which followed changed the whole course of his life. He dedicated himself henceforth to the service of Islam. The celebration of Islamic principles, history, legends and symbols became the aim of his poetic career. No Muslim poet after Nazrul Islam has written on Islamic themes with the same conviction and the same fervour. During the late forties a rhyme written by him beginning with the words *Larke Lenge Pakistan* (We shall fight for Pakistan if we must) acquired the currency of a slogan. He saw in Pakistan an embodiment of Indian Islam's political aspirations. The Bangladesh movement of course saddened him, and after the establishment of Bangladesh in 1971, he was ostracised and thrown out of his job in Radio Pakistan which now became Radio

Bangladesh. He died in straitened circumstances in the early 70s.

Farrukh Ahmad's chief works are *Sat Sagarer Majhi* (The Mariner of the Seven Seas); *Naufel o Hatem*, a poetic drama; and *Siraj-un-Munira*, a set of poems on the Prophet and his companions and some famous Muslim saints.

Fortunately, there has, recently, been a slight change in Bangladesh's attitude to Farrukh. It is increasingly recognised that he was a major poet, who by virtue of his diction, imagery and imagination deserves to be remembered.

Siraj-un-Munira or The Radiant Light

In regal pomp he dwells upon the heights
Of the blue firmament where swirling winds
Carry the imprint of his royal name
To the horizon's edges. Hail, my Bird
Of Light, are you awake ? At night's end now
Will you pour forth fresh raptures unalloyed
With sorrows past, as, wings outspread, you cross
The void? What visions will the frenzied sea
Pursue? Will dumb heaven's mute lips be unlocked
To answer that soft ringing cry which comes
From regions far away?

There comes the Bird,
Arrayed in glorious sparkling plumage which
Rainbow-like casts on earth and sky a light
Whose radiance drives night's shades away; like beasts
Wounded and scared, those shadows vanish as
Flashes of captive lightning score the skies.

O Bird Unknown, whence do you come ? What depths
Have you scaled? Thought and language blossom where
Your wings beat, trailing chains of purple isles;
Your pennons mark the mind's high reach; your plumes
Are heavy with tears shed by briny seas;
Wherever your shadow crosses grows a shrine
For youth to consecrate. Unbarred to you
Are all the casements of blue heaven; new dreams
Unfold where your footsteps are heard. No night
Or gloom can claim you; nor do you belong
Where life's wheels have all ceased to turn. You've flung
All bolted doors and portals open.

Long,

Long were you waited for; blessed was the hour
Of your nativity which drew a veil
Over past ages of deep sloth and brought life
Back to where death reigned. In your hands you hold
Promise of dawns unending flaming forth
From rays your sacred torch diffuses, for
You carry the elixir which confers
The gift of endless life. You roused Siddiq,

Ali, Zinnurain and Faruq from sleep
And stupor. If the world had known you not
It would no sweetness know nor love nor hope,
And flowers their loveliness want, night and gloom
Perpetual never yield to light and day.

With wondering eyes the world saw you appear
Out of a mountain cave, dust- smeared but clad
In light unearthly, stern but tender like
A rose, dispelling terror, fear, despair,
A King in pauper's guise, a steady guide,
Unlettered, but endowed with kindness and
Compassion, enveloped in fragrant musk.

Flowers sprang from barren sands where your steps fell
As blossoms fell in showers upon the pyre
Lit round Abraham, and your magic touch
Turned desert into rain-drenched pasture green.

But ignorance and blindness rule the world
Yet, hunger, pain and ugliness abound,
Red tongues of flame from dragon's maws are seen

To darken the skies. And can I forget
The ritual slaughter of the new-born, blood
And drunken brawls, the worship of false gods,
The tale of God denied, and women scorned,
Dishonoured, men prostrate on the Kaaba floor
Before a row of grisly idols? And
I hear the voice of orphans roaming through
The streets unfed, the groans of infants slain
At birth, their slayers roaring in wild glee.

I see those herds of slaves, female and male,
Led chained to markets, whipped like cattle, Where
Lay Truth amid these bestial scenes ? A pall
Of dark barbarity hung over men.

Into this gloom you came, a ray of light
Cradled in Amena's arms, heralded
By signs and portents: blazing fires, age-old,
Died down in heathen hearths; the ancient throne
Of Persia felt a tremor; sheep and goats
At grass stopped in their tracks; they paused to lift
Their heads and stare; a sudden mystic thrill

Shook them. One order had closed, a new age
Was dawning; waning moons fear to confront
The rising sun which hides their pallid glow.

The orphan child, his mother's darling, was
Twice orphaned, doomed to spend his tender years
Tending sheep, lone and friendless, as he drove
His Meccan flock from field to rocky field.
Commerce in youth taught him a harsher tale
Of man's strange inhumanity to man.

The youthful trader, Syria bound, is seen
To follow winding, dusty desert tracks,
Scorched by hot winds, parched, hungry, bleeding. torn,
His head pillowed on hard palm-trunks for rest
At night .

What power was it devised such tests
Again and yet again as smiths test tools
In forges ?

But the pain he meekly bore
In patience moulded the young bleeding heart
Till it shone like a polished gem, blood-dyed,

Hunger revealed the pangs of starving souls
Languishing in cells; tears welled up when he
Was wracked by thought of suffering women, and
The desert sky, unclouded, gave his heart
A breadth much greater than its own. He would
Refuse food that the morsels might be lent
To hungrier mouths.

Followed the vigils in
Hera where, now bound on a quest for truth,
Behind men's eyes in meditation, he
Spent sleepless days. Outside life flowed, power changed
Hands, planets whirled in space, and desert sands
Flew, but nor thirst nor hunger turned the seer
From his pursuit.

He probed the distant skies
And nearby hills in search of Truth Divine,
The One behind all shadows, Real where
All else is false, Creator, Source of all
Man knows. No thought of home or shady haunt
Tempted him; heat seemed not to burn him, for
The fire inside convulsed him like a storm.

He waited hour by hour for vigil's end,
Restless, exhausted by his trials; loath
To give it up. he watched and prayed.

A flash

Which smote the skies from end to end, a clap
Of soundless thunder ended his long trance.
Before him stood a huge angelic form
Demanding, 'Read in thy Lord's name'. The seer
Was struck dumb with surprise; the awful lore
Of mysteries stunned him; revealed to him
Were secrets man had never known before.
He saw afresh how sin and ignorance
Had led to worship of barbaric gods,
How loathsome idols stared from Kaaba's walls
Down upon crowds of prostrate men.

He lit

A lamp fed by a sweet oil redolent
Of heaven. From Safa's rocks his voice rang loud
Urging his fellowmen to turn to God,
The One *sans* peer. His message struck them dumb

Like thunder. They struck back to silence him
Exposing him to hurt and pain. But he stood firm,
Undaunted by what wiles About
Jehel employed or what ordeals he faced.

Meanwhile his vigils ceased
Not while he sought an answer to the quest
Of ever deeper truths. Then came the night
Of nights when Buraq-borne he journeyed far.
Beyond men's ken, returning with gifts which
The world will forget not.

But Mecca still
Refused to listen. So on to Yathrib
He went pursued by Meccans, hatred, firm
In his resolve to stand by Truth, not damped
By Badar and Ohud. Hamza as well
As Ali now discovered in the seer
A soldier who outshone the others, strong
And steady, guided by an inner light
Whose glow suffused his limbs. The desert forts
Fell one by one, the enemy drew back

As he advanced till Mecca itself was
Won and Belal's call echoed from precincts
Once the chief sanctuary of pagan gods.

Steady and firm and patient, you brought light
To thousands of dark dungeons: sailors saw
New heavens where fresh harvests could be reaped;
The barren nights were gone; birds found their mates
Long lost; the moon poured its soft rays upon
The orchards of Jerusalem which bore
Golden pomegranates. Injustice, wrong
And inhumanity now vanished, and
All chains and shackles fell away; fear left
The mothers bearing infants in their arms.

Echoing from hills and valleys came the cries
Of joy as thousands gathered to affirm
Their faith in God and Prophet Muhammad,
His servant who brought tidings of a life
Eternal which the wheeling stars confirmed
As did the trembling leaves of trees. A calm
Descended on storm-tossed seas; springs gushed forth

From sterile rocks, and roses called to birds
In dulcet voices. Waais Karani,
The hermit, felt his heart throb with such unrest
As he had never known in all his life

The days you spent as cobbler mending shoes.
As hodman lifting bricks, as porter hired
By mocking Jews... witnessed how, unperturbed,
You served your Lord in meek obedience, and
Bore trials for humanity's sake. And
Moons rose and waned, year slowly followed year,
Your cottage home became an empire's hub,
But poverty deserted you not, and
Hunger's pangs were your daily fare. The flames
Of love burnt in your heart, e'en though your house
Remained unlighted.

But onward they marched,
The fellowship of men who gathered round
You, crossing what hurdles they faced,
Siddiq, the faithful whom no turbulence
Could shake, Umar, the cynosure of crowds,

Usman, the bountiful, Ali, the brave,
Wielder of swords, and warriors many like
Khalid and Tariq carrying their flags
Before them, voyagers and seamen bound
For distant ports to break new frontiers, find
New lands beyond the seas, impelled as though
By a new tide which stirs old stagnant streams.

The day arrived when, mission ended, you
Appeared outward bound, ready to depart,
Awaiting the great Lover's call. There were
For you fresh pastures to explore, bestrewn
With fadeless rose and myrrh. You moral coils
You shuffled off, but left a trail undimmed.

Your message lives among the verdant grass
Of swards as in the midst of arid sands,
Yours is the beacon pointing to heaven's joys,
Your shrine the source of perfumes which have bound
Sages from Gilan to India's shores
Into a mystic fellowship of knights
Resolved to keep their torches burning bright.

Hail, Prophet mine, hail, chief of men who gave
Mankind new realms to view and conquer, may
God's benedictions be yours. May I join
The ranks of those who down the corridors
Of time have marched with you, rapt-eyed, towards goals
Dimly descried by common mortal sight.

Translator's Note

The original of Siraj-un-Munira runs to over 300 lines in Bengali. Ambitiously conceived it offers a survey of the Prophet's life and career in language which is fervid and is often declamatory. The dominant symbol used is that of light employed in more senses than one, a fact which makes the meaning of some portions of the poem rather obscure. The constant recurrence of the same imagery also tends to produce an effect of monotony, which in Bengali is however redeemed by the intensity of the poet's devotion to the Prophet.

Abu Bakr the Faithful

Behind you lay the old caravan routes,
the shady olives, and groves of date-palms,
as the sad hour struck for you to depart
from Mecca, your familiar native city.
It was the hour when away in Yathrib
the Pleiades glowed in the desert sky
and shades of evening were cascading on tree-tops.
Ahead was a lone road with only God to guide
two travellers on whom the stars smiled.

Islam was destined to sail safely past
many perilous shoals in stormy seas.
The dark nights of fear still haunt the memory;
I hear echoes of prisoners' wails
from behind dungeon walls in unfriendly lands.

You faced a torrid friendless desert,
but Medina beckoned with promise of hope.
The palms, you knew, would flower again.

Let your banner flutter on Medina's orchards,
friend and companion, symbol of confidence,
steadfast in peril, firm in your faith.
Hold your pennon aloft high in the sky.

You stood steady when Umar shook;
you were a Pacific to his Atlantic,
a haven from storms, a shielded cove.
Your heart was great, calm, imperturbable,
a fortress impregnable, proof against turmoil.

You lent new wings to the Prophet's standard.
Full open to you were the portals of heaven.
Your doorway was crowded with countless seekers,
but you sought no wealth beside his friendship.
Famed are you for passionate sympathy,
indomitable in the service of truth,
relentless in the fight against falsehood,
a picture of meek submission before the Almighty,
head and knee bowed in the sands,
refusing allegiance to any but Allah.

High was the spiritual honour you won,
radiant the circle of light you spread,
heavy the burdens your broad shoulders bore.
A deadly terror to the wicked and the vicious,
to vile Tulaihas and sinful Musaillemas,
you unmasked Saja the hypocrite,
like the moon which clears all mist away
and shines serene after a storm.

Your love was oceanic, deep, unbounded;
you suffered in silence even the agony of snake-bite
lest you awaken the sleeping companion
whose tired head rested upon your caring knees.

No higher status did you claim as Caliph
than is the fate of a common workman.
Your greastest title to renown was loyalty.
The Pleiades beheld you in open wonder:
No night had seen a more faithful friend.
Beyond the gloom of Mecca's pathways
shone a signal light on Medina's palms,
where peace reigned like a white pigeon

nestling away from rough winds.
Your magic touch melted the stoniest,
the track you trod led to the Kaaba.
The rust-soiled world now gained a new brilliance,
and pilots heard a new symphony,
while clouds spread a shady canopy
over deserts from end to end.
A new music thrilled the old earth,
and stars, spell-bound, stared at you,
as far away a fresh day dawned.

Your heart glows with a golden light,
from which springs of love burst forth,
and seas heave and swell as the skies unfold
new doorways to knowledge.
The veils of fog and mist have been blown away,
and the desert sky has flowered into a thousand lights
in an endless chain across the horizon.

What mystic lore taught you to be selfless and humble,
earned you laurels from the man whose memory
fills the eyes with rare light

and awakens in the heart undying echoes
of Allahu Akbar ?

A new pulse of delight is felt in rock and plant,
a new loveliness behind waning moons,
causing nightingales to sing in chorus,
dyeing the earth the colour of heaven,
filling it with the odour of roses.
You have reduced seas to placid lakes,
made forests grow where desolation reigned.

Seeker of truth, you possess the mien
of the silent sky whose sudden flashes
reveal depths unfathomed, unknown.
Mystic great, what regions have you explored?
I would love to know though I dare not ask.
Was this a quest which can have no end?
Is silence the only answer
to obstinate questionings of the heart?
Lover of God, your journey lights up the path
of those who seek the same truth.

You exude an aroma which is resistless,
of musk and rose and ambergris,
which the winds carry all around
inspiring dreams of wondrous splendour,
causing song-birds to forget their cries
and join men in silent meditation
on the mystery of life.

The watches of the silent night ring
with chants of Allahu Akbar.

Never have the Pleiades seen a night
like the one when you companioned the Prophet
out of murky Mecca towards the light which shone in Medina.

Translator's Note on Abu Bakr

My translation is an abridgement of the Bengali original which for poetic effect contains numerous repetitions which I thought would be indefensible in English.

Umar the Large Hearten

There he is, journeying in the lifeless desert,
on his back a load, his eyes on the horizon,
moving towards Jerusalem, past rock and plain,
behind him a trail of burning sand,
resistless as he advances, all obstacles melting
to wind blown dust; Umar the great.

His slave rides a camel, he, mindless of the heat,
pulls the animal along, happy at his work.

His diet was frugal, naught else but dried dates,
but truth and justice he served with devotion
to free man from the chains of sin and darkness.

What a sight our age is, so shackled and so dark,
filled with lamentation, exhausted like corpses,
remembering with sadness Umar's glory,
drawing comfort from nostalgic memory.

Much would I love, Umar, to know you at close range,
fathom the secret which let you carry
such a multitude to a distant goal,
what power helped you to restore colour
to colourless deserts and usher in a new dawn?

Friend of the oppressed, equality for all
was the hallmark of your caliphate,
your tattered dress the symbol of purity.

Your firmness caused the desert to be swept
by a storm which ended years of inertia,
as the dead earth awakened to a new life, trembling.

Fearless and sturdy, towering in height,
he spread a light which lit countless lamps:
the world stared at him with wondering eyes.

You belong where the sky knows no frontiers,
where each day dawns clothed in vermillion.
Gleaming sword in hand, undaunted, bold,
you scaled mountains and crossed deserts,

while the wicked fled in terror before you
like bird's feathers blown by gusty wind,
and Wrong and Error quaked and vanished
and Truth triumphed over ancient Falsehood.

You struck boldly where the citadels of sin
were firmly entrenched like strong fortresses.
They crashed and crumbled, defenceless before you
and Truth's edifice rose where they had stood.

Your shining sword humbled the tyrants,
the arrogant champions of deceit and injustice.
Like a golden eagle, brilliant wings outspread,
you spread the light received from your Master.

The same Umar could tend the hungry,
nurse the starving, bear food on his shoulders,
sleepless and vigilant in his care of the poor,
a true inheritor of the Prophet's legacy.
a humble servant of men in distress.

Neither the child he cared for nor his widowed mother

knew of his status as Amir-ul Muminin
as they watched him engaged in menial chores.

He searches for a camel in the heat of the noonday,
the faithful guardian of the Baitul-Mal.

But he lived on what wages his people paid him
and lacked means to purchase honey.

Welcome to you were the waifs and strays,
the needy and the poor with their plaints and woes,
who were met with a smile, with kind words and deeds
and found you ready to go without food
that the starving and the hungry might appease their hunger.

You were known to the stars in the evening sky
as a haven of peace, a friend to millions,
kind but ruthless against the unjust.

Umar, we need a strong hand like yours
to end the misery of our corrupt lives,
this bestial inhumanity which darkens our horizon.
We need you to revive and regenerate our soil,
to vanquish the enemies who oppress our souls.

We need men fired by courage like yours,
a zeal and stamina none could repress.

May the darkness of our piteous nights
vanish in the glare of your blazing sunlight.
May the lies and deceits which hold us in a tight grip
be shattered by the lashes of your merciless whip.
May the narrow greed which fetters and enslaves us
make way for broader dreams and wider visions.

Usman the Giver

The sleepless skies have watched for ages
lines of camels crossing the desert;
they have also seen the rise and fall
of countless men as, like coral islands,
they have shaped their dreams into visible symbols
while the firmanent changed from colour to colour.

A name that they remember through these processes
is the name of Usman, the peerless giver
whose devotion and sacrifice outshone the feats
of people in Arabia and lands beyond.

A true disciple of the great Prophet
he found in Islam ample recompense
for the wealth he sacrificed in the cause of Truth,
and won peace of heart and serenity of soul.

His palaces were set in shady gardens
in which rose and rhododendron bloomed in profusion;

they lacked no treasure the earth could provide,
emerald, onyx and other stones.

But he found a light which outdazzled diamonds
which he threw away without a thought.

Usman, you nurse in your fearless breast
the quenchless rays of love divine.

Brighter than the hue of the loveliest rose,
stronger than the glare of the noonday sun,
it was an effulgence which gave off an aroma
that hung over the whole of Medina.

The voice you raised in song and adoration
as your heart perceived this unearthly glory
reverberates still across the ages.

It's a memory that lightens the pain of existence
in the dark world in which we live.

Your bounty supplied parched Medina's needs;
you assured its citizens of safety and security.
The Prophet honoured you, so did the angels.

You live in history as the great Compiler

who collated the scattered texts of the Quran.

You would rather risk your life than distrust any.

It's a shame and irony that you have been the victim of false accusations against your integrity.

The liars who utter these malicious libels do not even know that you took not a copper from the Baitul Mal of which you were guardian.

How dare they charge Usman with greed--- the man who never favoured a relation or flatterer?

Have the accusers forgotten how it was he who humbled the pride and power of Rome and widely extended Islam's dominions?

That is the man cowardly Marwan slew by a stab in the back as only a traitor can, finding him engaged piecing together the sacred pages of the holy Quran.

He fell and died. What he left behind is the memory of a saint and martyr which no calumny will ever tarnish.

Ali the Brave

The thunder of his voice shook mountains and deserts;
sparks from his horses' hooves flew like sunrays;
his sword in its sheath concealed a star's brilliance;
lightning flashed from his double-edged scimitar.

Fire blazed from the horizon
and clouds rumbled
as the Lion of God swooped on the enemy.
Irresistible he advanced
as his foes scattered like sheep in fear.

The earth trembles, the palms sway violently,
as though struck by a dreadful tempest.
The eye is dazzled as by the midday sun.

But where is Ali, where is the great warrior?
I miss him in the darkness of our lives
made immobile by ages of inertia.

I miss the glint of his sword;
I find myself imprisoned in a blind alley.

But the distant echo of his voice
stirs my blood;
I see his sword mirrored in the sky;
or is that a streak of lightning?

A long time ago
when the world lay sunken in darkness,
this young man rose, sword in hand,
to lead a revolt against oppression.
Fearless, his heart filled light divine,
he battled the forces of evil,
and ushered in the dawn of emancipation for man.
His cries resounded across earth and sky.

The Lion of God was a constant companion to the Prophet.
The enemy were blown off like cotton wool before him.

His foes came in hordes
shouting Ozza! Hobal!

Their looks were ferocious,
their cries were blood-curdling,
they threatened Islam with destruction.
But Ali beat them off,
and shattered their skulls like pebbles.
His Allahu Akbar drowned, their shouts
and brought promise of universal peace.
You, Ali, were not a mere warrior.
Your humanity would not let you tarnish your honour.
You served none but Allah
and asserted boldly
that refusing to bow to God is to tie oneself up in endless chains.
You blazed a trail that men in succeeding ages
loved to follow.
You were a model of courtesy and compassion,
Your conscience was a safeguard against insults to old men
and harshness to enemies.
You employed the sword only in God's service;
you never thought of personal revenge
whatever the provocation from the enemy.
You could control anger,
and your self-discipline was greater than that of angels.

You were indeed a peerless, unique mystic.

The esoteric knowledge that was yours
is a legacy that helps unchain
countless Muslims,
a legacy that brings a heavenly glow
to every particle of desert dust,
nourishes dreams of the eternal fountains of Paradise,
drenches flowers with soft celestial dew,
causes nightingales to burst into song about roses,
breathes lightly on buds,
guides the desert sun to oases
where reveries flow from scorching rays.

The wild Bedouin who knew nothing but
the torment of hell in his heart
learnt from you the soft airs of love,
and, like a weary eagle, searched for peace and rest
while the earth smiled.

Absorbed in contemplation on the prayer-mat
you drank of the wine of heavenly love,

and, lost to the world outside,
your soul flew to distant horizons
like a blue pigeon.

The light that made you spurn
diamond and pearl
gave your soul a power
which helped you discover
precious secrets in rotting garbage,
caused moonlight to pour in streams
and strains of music to issue from desert-drums.

The Sinai had outwardly the semblance of hard rock
but its inside was filled with divine light.
You too seemed granite-hard on the outside,
but your heart was a fountain of endless energy.

Your spirit strewed flowers
as it moved towards an unknown, endless sea.
Your quest was boundless;
you sought objects which no diver could reach on the sea-bed,

where all movement ends in an unbroken stillness,
where silence itself is music unheard.

Divine love was yours;
the doorways of heaven were open to you,
but the houris had no charm for you,
for the Eternal One absorbed all your thought.
Rapt in God, you had no fear of any mortal foe,
and you were equal to any challenge.
The enemy's fortresses collapsed before you
like sand dunes in a storm.

Ever eager to respond to calls for action
you pounced on the Qureish
with your gleaming sword
and laid them low,
and set an example
followed later by Khalid, Tariq and Musa.
Your deeds helped spread Islam world wide
from Iran to distant China and black Africa.

The Crescent flutters triumphantly today
in every part of the earth,
and from the minars of mosques come
cries of Allahu Akbar
as crowds sing praises of Ali the Brave.

Martyrdom at Karbala

Amid this arid plain sun-scorched and barren
I hear a myriad sullen voices wailing,
Laments arising from earth, rock and sand-dune,
Mourning Husain who fell, betrayed and friendless.

Red foaming blood poured in a stream unending,
Flooding the landscape, colouring my vision.
I saw the glint of knives Yazid's men wielded,
And heard echoes of grim blood-curdling curses.

The Millat's standard lay obscured, dishonoured;
The tyrant's flag flew proudly from the turrets,
And the believers groaned, oppressed and panting,
Beset and threatened by dark bestial forces.

If you listened you'd hear the sound of footsteps
As Husain's foes advanced, their lances glistening,
Massing on Tigris banks, in dense formation,
Bringing death nearer, harbingers of evil.

Outmatched, outnumbered but not scared or daunted,
The brave Mujahids stood their ground in challenge.
Their cowardly foes let fly at them with arrows
Lacking the courage to meet them any closer.

At end of day Husain's men lay all fallen,
Their leader left alone, with weeping women
And thirsty children, the Tigris no nearer,
And shades of night descending on the desert.

Wounded and bleeding, he set forth, all reckless,
Marched to the river-front now veiled in twilight;
An arrow hit him as he reached the Tigris
And cupped his palms for a draught cool and soothing.

No moisture touched his lips, as he fell tumbling
Like an enormous boulder down a mountain.
Simar cut his head off to mark his triumph,
The sky responded with a shriek of horror.

Islam suffered a rout by Yazid's forces,
And numb in grief lay Karbala's vast spaces.
Ya Husain ! cried the earth in anguished accents,
The sun went down, the world was wrapped in darkness.

