Abstract

Long ago, the British Orientalist H.A.R. Gibb (1895-1971) discussed ‘the atomism, the discreteness, and the intensity of the Arab imagination, its resistance to synthetic constructions and, above all, its aversion to rationalism.’ His conception of the ‘Arab imagination’ is untenable, for the reformist and traditionalist strands are so mingled that any period in history must be considered and judged as a whole. This is best illustrated by the expression of deep-seated convictions by sections of the Muslim intelligentsia in nineteenth-century Delhi. Even though 1857 left indelible scars and ruins and the best men were seized with despair, the second half of the nineteenth century appears to be fairly creative in the evolution, articulation, and dissemination of ‘modernist’ thinking. While the cramped sphere in which its proponents moved stifled intellectual activism, the historian must recognize that it was due to them, and to their impressive scholarly output, that upper India’s Muslim communities, notably in Punjab and UP, were held together.

The noteworthy point is that there was amongst them, with the notable exception of a few writers, no quest for a lost or submerged past, whose ideal images and exemplars would serve as prototypes and models for social and cultural innovation. Whether it is the poet Ghalib or the historian Zakaullah, there is no attempt to establish the Mughal glory of the past to evoke in Muslims a parochial consciousness. Instead, they explained the reasons for Europe’s strength to demonstrate that Muslims could adopt European concepts and methods without being untrue to their faith. They stubbornly maintained, while exalting the place of reason and freedom in Islam, that true Islam teaches the family virtues, the application of reason, and true equality. So that they argued that it was important to restore the rights, not of an outward and fossilized orthodoxy, but of the inward reason of Islam, and to reaffirm Islam’s social values and cultural ideals in a world in which science and technology progressed. This could be done in such a way as to build a stable society endowed with a rigorous social order capable of playing an active and constructive role.

The breadth of their appeal lay in their ability to reflect the aspirations of their time, as much as of their own people and to speak in their own terms, both to the Urdu readers in their thousands and to educated elites of the cities. Let us consider for a moment the kind of intellectual temper and inclinations that were widely diffused through the writings of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad.

About the Speaker

Professor Mushirul Hasan is Jawaharlal Nehru Fellow based in New Delhi. He has been Vice Chancellor of Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi and Director General of the National Archives of India. His books span a wide range of subjects on India’s Partition, the country’s contemporary history, the plurality and syncretism of Indian social life, and the multiple Islamic traditions in South Asia. His recent books are Islam Pluralism Nationhood—Legacy of Maulana Azad (New Delhi, 2014), Faith and Freedom: Gandhi in History (New Delhi, 2011), M.A. Ansari: Gandhi’s Infallible Guide (Delhi: Manohar, 2010) and Between Modernity and Nationalism: Halide Edip’s Encounter with Gandhi’s India (Oxford University Press, 2010).

He is also Honorary Professor for The World Institute for Advanced Study, New Delhi; Chairperson of the Indian Congress of Asian and Pacific Studies (ICAPS), 2009; President for the Indo-Iran Society, New Delhi; and Additional Chairman for the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, New Delhi. He was awarded Mahatma Gandhi National Fellowship by the Indian Council for Social Science Research, 2009-2011 and ‘Officer of the Order of Academic Palms’ (Officier dans l’Ordre des Palmes Academiques) by the Prime Minister of the French Republic in 2008 and the Padma Shri by the President of India in 2007.

Date

Wednesday, 5 February 2014

Time

4.00pm to 5.30pm

Venue

Malay Studies Seminar Room, AS7 #04-13, Kent Ridge Campus, NUS