



Saiyid Rizvi

Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi 1921–1994

DR SAIYID ATHAR ABBAS RIZVI was physically a giant of a man, and had a force of personality to match.

His academic output was prodigious. When appointed to the ANU in March 1966 at the age of 44 he already had to his credit nine volumes of annotated translations into Hindi of Persian language chronicles of the major dynasties of medieval India, six volumes of source materials for the study of the Freedom Movement in Uttar Pradesh, published by the government of that state, and a valuable monograph on Delhi during the Mutiny as well as numerous journal articles in English, Hindi and Urdu. In addition he had recently published a major work *Muslim Revivalist Movements in Northern India in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (498 pp).

He was born in Jampur, India on 10 July 1921, to a well-established Shi'ite family. He undertook the greater part of his university training at the History department of the University of Agra, under the shade of the Taj Mahal one might say. He completed his BA in 1942, his Master's in History in 1945, his PhD on Abul Fazl, the biographer of the mughal; emperor Akbar in 1949, and a DLitt, which was to result in his book on Muslim Revivalist movements, from the same university in 1964.

His academic career began in earnest in 1949 with his appointment as Lecturer in History at Aligarh University, with a special responsibility of postgraduate teaching and research supervision. In 1956 he became secretary on a part-time basis to the History of Freedom Minister, for the government of Uttar Pradesh, at Lucknow, an appointment that lasted for six years. In 1957 he moved to Agra University as supervisor of a number of research programs. In 1965 he was appointed Reader and Head of the Department of History, Jammu and Kashmir University.

In 1966 the late Professor A.L. Basham, who had only recently taken up an appointment at the ANU, suggested to him that he might apply for a position advertised in the Department of Asian Civilisations (now the Asian History Centre of the Faculty of Asian Studies'. His responsibility and challenge was to establish the study of Islam in the Indian sub-continent in the University, and thus complement Professor Basham's primary area of interest in the Hindu traditions of the region.

From then on Dr Rizvi made Canberra his home. He dedicated himself to this task until and beyond the date of his retirement, 30 December 1986, and was still fully engaged on it when he died. Two thirds or more then of

his working life were devoted to scholarship in Australia. He was elected to the Fellowship in 1969. His decision to retire on 30, rather than the mandatory 31 December, which had a significance for the distribution of his superannuation entitlements, shows that despite his dedication to scholarship, he understood the processes of bureaucracy.

He loved teaching, and sharing his encyclopaedic knowledge and was popular with students, his personal warmth and enthusiasm overcoming the occasional idiosyncracies of his English. His high-pitched laugh was a trademark almost, and he was referred to affectionately, although to my knowledge never addressed, as Rizzles. He was a fine colleague, always ready to help, to teach wherever he could, to fill any gap. His readiness to teach Literary Persian was to generate a number of significant doctoral theses in a field nowhere else pursued in Australia. Administration was not a joy for him, but he accepted from time to time the responsibilities of Head of Department, and membership of the Board of Faculties. He was known at times to erupt when irritated, but in general there was no need to wait for sunset for the abatement of his anger, and he never bore a grudge.

He was a great traveller. Hardly a long vacation went by without his undertaking research in libraries in Central and South Asia, Europe and North America. Work was his life. The results of his odysseys were a rich harvest of microfilms and photographic transparencies. His study was frequently in darkness even at high noon, as he spent hours before his microfilm poring over his trophies. The frequency of his travels caused conturbations in the Chancelry, who were often in a quandry as to how to classify his absences from Australia in the pursuit of knowledge in terms that would satisfy Ministerial guide-lines for absence from Australia. His indefatigable visits to libraries gave the term field-work a new meaning. He attended international conferences when and wherever he could, and never visited a new city without burying himself in its libraries in the search for manuscripts.

He had intellectual as well as physical courage. In 1977 he participated in a pioneering conference on Islam in Asia held in Jerusalem. He had no inhibitions about visiting Israel, or learning from the fruits of Jewish scholarship on Islam. For attending this conference he received an aggressive letter of reproach from an Islamic activist in the USA. He responded to it simply with his characteristic high-pitched laugh, quite devoid of malice.

The Islamic revolution in Iran was to effect him deeply. While at first having misgivings about Ayatollah Khomeini, he came to admire him. During the Iran-Iraq war he made a number of visits to Iran, travelling on occasions perilously close to the front line. He was a Shi'a, and could not but be stirred by the Shi'ite inspiration of the Islamic Revolution. His personal response to it is clear in the dedication to his book *Iran: Royalty, Religion and Revolution* (1980): 'To the Memory of the Martyrs of Islamic Revolu-

tion.' In addition it renewed in him a commitment of the faith and practice of Islam. He made the pilgrimage to Mecca, he performed regularly the daily ritual prayers, and adhered to a rigorous interpretation of Islamic dietary laws. This aspect of his religious practice made it impossible for his colleagues to mark his retirement with the form of celebration they would have preferred, but did not lessen the respect in which he was held.

His years in Canberra were enormously productive, and it is not possible to give an account of all his work. He wrote on architecture, town-planning, taxation and local government and administration as well as on the lives of great figures of Medieval Islamic history, for which he presented in summary form much material taken from manuscript sources. His heart, however, belonged to the Sufi traditions of the sub-continent, and the lives, theosophy and spirituality of the holy men who put an indelible mark on the Islamic culture of the sub-continent. His two volumes on the history of Sufism in India are rich in anecdotal wisdom and express values and attitudes that were very much part of his own personality.

One such anecdote that particularly appeals to me is told of the fourteenth-century Sufi of Agra, Shaykh Sharafu'd-Din (d. 1381). It happened that a certain Imam led his followers in prayer while drunk. Complaints concerning the man's behaviour were accordingly made to the Shaikh. The Shaikh replied to the effect that this must have been a lapse, and that probably the man only drank occasionally. When the complainants insisted that he drank all the time, the Shaikh replied that surely he did not drink during the fasting month of Ramadan. 'Rizzles' was always ready to make allowances for human weakness and to think the best of his colleagues and students.

In 1986, the year of his retirement, he was taken ill in India with severe bronchitis while returning from a major conference in Hamburg. He was confined to bed for over a month before he was fit enough to continue his journey back to Australia. A consequence, one would think, of the strain of such constant travelling, and a warning to moderate his search for knowledge. After retirement, however, with the liberation from the day to day chores of academic life, it seems his zest for travel in search of knowledge if anything increased, and he spent six months of every year in the field, and six months as a Visiting Fellow in what was then the Department of Far Eastern History of the RSPacS. He died in his sleep during one of these expeditions to the field on 3 September 1994 in Iran, in the holy city of Mashhad. It was some days before the news reached Tehran and so could be passed on to Australia. Who of his friends on hearing it could deny him the Qur'anic words traditionally uttered on such occasions: *Innā li'llāhi wa innā ilayhi rāji'ūna*—to God we belong, and to Him we return. *Rahimahu'llāh*—May God be merciful to him!

A.H. Johns