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Abdur Rahim Khan Corner

To sir, with reverence: A humble tribute to Mr A. Rahim*

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When thou shall stand with him face to face,
Do not lift thine eyes;
For sight is vain in that holy place,
And the vision dies.

Iqbal. Zabur-i Ajam
(A.J. Arberry's translation)

It was with considerable hesitation that I accepted to write something about Mr A. Rahim when Mr Afzal Haq Qarshi approached me for this. Mr A. Rahim has been my chief, my teacher, my mentor, and my guide. I have always regarded him as my role model in professional and personal life. It is very difficult to do justice to an undertaking like this when the subject is so venerable a personage as Mr A. Rahim.

In this tribute to Mr A. Rahim and the role played by him as the leader of the profession of librarianship, in the Punjab, during its years of phenomenal growth and development, I will draw upon, firstly, his work as the University Librarian, Head of the Department of Library Science, and Registrar of the University of the Punjab; secondly, my experience of working under his supervision for around sixteen years and that of being his student in the Department of Library Science during the 1963-1964 session; and, thirdly, my encounters and discussions with him during the period following the parting of our ways with my joining the Institute of Education and Research as its Librarian in January 1972.

My association with Mr A. Rahim started in April 1956 (around a year after he had taken over as University Librarian), when I joined the University Library as what was then known as Arabic-cum-Urdu Assistant. My job was to work in both Arabic Section and Urdu Section, which were separate at that time, and assist the semi-trained undergraduate professional librarians holding charge of their respective sections. During the next ten years the University Library and the library science training facility run by it—called PULTC, i.e. Punjab University Library Training Class—were to see a miraculous transformation under the able guidance of Mr A. Rahim. In place of a heterogeneous professional staff, in 1956, of five persons, some of them not holding baccalaureate degrees—designated officially as First Assistant, Second Assistant and so on, the Library had by 1966 more than twelve trained graduate librarians. The library collection was growing more rapidly and the physical facilities and services had been greatly improved. PULTC, the oldest library science training facility in Asia (established in 1915 as library training class within the University Library) had metamorphosed into a separately-budgeted university department (the Department of Library Science) in 1963, though the University Librarian remained the ex-officio head

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of that department for around ten more years. The PULTC trainees used to receive a certificate in library science until 1959, which year saw it being renamed diploma in library science. This was the period during which the Department of Library Science turned into an impressive teaching institution, most of its teachers holding the master's degrees in library science. At least three Fulbright professors from the United States had remained associated with the Department or the earlier PULTC—each in one different session—and done teaching work during this period. By 1973 the Department had been transformed into an independent teaching department with its excellent separate physical facilities and its foreign-trained teachers, one of them holding a doctorate degree in library science from the United States, and was ready to start the second master's degree course in library science in the country. I do not know the extent of the credit that goes to Mr A. Rahim for all this unprecedented development. Someone who has access to all the relevant records will someday shed light on this. Nevertheless, it can be said that the development took place during Mr A. Rahim's tenure of office. Mr A. Rahim held the interests of the institution and profession supreme and encouraged his subordinates to rise above him in respect of academic qualifications. I should add here for the record that he himself holds the master's degree (in English) from the University of the Punjab (through FC College, Lahore) and the Bachelor of Library Science degree from Toronto, Ontario, Canada, the latter being recognized as equivalent to the master's degree in library science by the American Library Association.

When he took over as University Librarian, Mr A. Rahim found that the statutes relating to the constitution and functions of the Punjab University Library Committee were framed in a way that the Librarian was not even a member of the Committee; he was only *ex-officio* secretary. This gave the Committee far too wide powers and denied the Librarian the status and authority which he deserved and which was required by him for the proper functioning of the Library. He was able to persuade the authorities to rectify the situation. This was his first step towards the enhancement of status of librarians in the country. Later on, with the active support of his staff, he was able to convince the university authorities to amend and improve the entire structure of job designations of the librarians serving the University and to grant them pay-scales comparable to, or better than, those being given to librarians in government service. The salaries of the professional librarians in the University were thus brought on a par with those of the teaching staff.

During his professional career Mr A. Rahim actively participated in the affairs of the association of librarians in the country, the Pakistan Library Association. With his academic background and professional standing, it was not difficult for him to assume the leading position in the Association, in the province and at times in the country. On many occasions he held a responsible office in the Association. On several occasions he held the top executive position in the Association. He is currently a life-member of the Association. During his working life he was a member of the Canadian Library Association and American Library Association. Professional activities remained in full swing throughout his tenure, and numerous gatherings were held from time to time, in addition to the annual conferences of the Association, many sessions of which were presided over by him or enlivened by him with his wise comments.

Mr A. Rahim has great executive talent. As an administrator he had an aura of awe about him. By the sheer force of his personality—by this word I mean "the sum of the patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving that are characteristic of a person"—he commanded great respect of his subordinates. He would make a round of the different sections of the University Library quite often. Usually he would pass by silently, but at times he used to ask what task was in hand. Occasionally, he could come at such odd hours as five minutes to closing time in the evening shift, thus cautioning his staff that they could be checked at any time. No one from among the staff ever thought of absenting from duty without permission. All staff members tried to give a good account of themselves because they knew that dereliction of duty would result in quick punishment. None was favored or enjoyed any special privileges. A personal instance would be in point here: though I was in his good books, I had to explain at length in writing why I refused to avail of the Colombo Plan scholarship after once having given my consent to my nomination as the principal candidate.

As a teacher Mr A. Rahim was one of the most methodic. From among my teachers of library science, I found him the ablest in teaching technique. (It would be enlightening for some to know that he is the son of a teacher, and, as he once told me, it was on the advice of his father that he changed his career from administration to librarianship.) In the class-room he used to have with him his well-prepared brief notes, from which he would talk at length, but not in such rapid-fire a way as to deprive the students from taking their own notes. Where some definitions and core descriptions were involved, he would not mind dictating them. We never found him coming to the class unprepared and then wasting time in talking of

extra-curricular matters. Throughout my life I have not come across a teacher who was so regular and punctual as Mr A. Rahim.

To throw light on the personality of Mr A. Rahim, I would like to take the reader thirty years back in time and begin with the description of the replica of a large-sized painting that greeted the visitors who entered his office in the ground-floor corner of the Department of Social Work, at a few meters from the old University Library building. This painting showed two central European kings (I do not recall their names and countries) of some past era standing face to face, one victorious in the war that had just ended and the other vanquished. The background showed their respective armies behind each king, the army of the vanquished king shown utterly destroyed. The victorious king is shown leaning forward with an arrogant and contemptuous look on his face whereas the vanquished king is shown with his head held high and a defiant expression on his face. The writing under the painting read something like the following:

The victorious king: "Now what is left of your country, your army, and yourself?"
The vanquished king: "My soul."

I have no doubt in my mind that this painting was put there purposely. In its graphic representation and its few words, it gave to the visitor an idea- of what type of man he had come to meet: a man who would try to save his soul at any price, a man who would not compromise his principles under any circumstances. (In these days of rampant corruption and self-serving people, most of us do not know how much price one has to pay at times to retain the captaincy of one's soul—I for one know better than most others.)

The impression that Mr A. Rahim left (and still leaves) on his subordinate colleagues, his students, and those who have had any official or private dealings with him is that of honesty, honor, dignity, decency, kindness, moderateness, and purity of heart and soul, on the one hand, and intelligence, intellectual ability, wittiness, and sagacity, on the other—the list could easily be extended. I do not recall ever hearing any principled man talking about Mr A. Rahim in a derogatory manner.

Mr A. Rahim is well-known for his linguistic ability and precision. None of his peers in the profession of librarianship throughout the country or his contemporaries in the administrative staff of the University could ever aspire to be his equal in respect of precise speech and writing, especially in the English language. This precision has been his hallmark not only in his office notes and correspondence but also in his teaching work.

The precision in his speech and writing reflects a very precise mind, from which springs his attention to detail, his seeing to it before undertaking any new venture that every needed element is in place, and his careful reading of office notes and letters before affixing his signature—things cited by his detractors against him. (Of course, I do not see even the need to give any exonerating remarks.)

Mr A. Rahim never compromised his honor to the slightest degree. Once (in the early 1970s), in a light mood, Mr A. Rahim reminisced before me of an incident that had occurred when he was working as the Registrar of the University during the tenure of the late Professor Hamid Ahmad Khan as Vice-Chancellor. I would repeat it here since it is relevant to the point in hand. Professor Khan, while sitting in his office in the company of a friend, was going through some official papers submitted personally by Mr A. Rahim. He came across something which did not catch his fancy, and he criticized Mr A. Rahim for that in the presence of his friend. Mr A. Rahim could not say anything in his defense because of the delicacy of the situation. When Professor Khan's friend had left, Mr A. Rahim entered Professor Khan's room and told him that he had never accepted such treatment in his life nor would he do so in future, and that he would rather like to be repatriated to his original position, i.e. the University Librarian. Professor Khan, though for once taken aback by this unexpected response from a subordinate, realized his mistake and expressed his regrets.

Then Mr A. Rahim took out a certificate from a personal file and showed it to me. It was from Professor Hamid Ahmad Khan. On reading it I found that Professor Khan had developed a great liking for Mr A. Rahim. Since the certificate is a real piece of literature, I requested Mr A. Rahim to allow me to have its copy, which was granted and has been with me. This, in my humble opinion, is the most appropriate occasion to make this certificate public. I present it hereunder:

SENATE HALL, LAHORE
31 May 1968

One of the most pleasant men to meet in the University is my friend Abdur Rahim Khan, the Librarian. I have known him for a much longer period than might appear from my official connexion with the University. But the eighteen-year-old image of a suave young man anxious to uphold the daily decencies of civilized life has never tended to be blurred, or bleached, by the passage of time. Rather the contrary. The contours have become sharper, and the outline brighter, as the years have gone by. Even today you feel a glow of friendliness as Mr Rahim enters your room.

In November 1965 an unexpected set of circumstances conspired to bring me and Mr Rahim much closer to each other than we ever had been before. Mr Rahim was asked temporarily to take over as Registrar, and I must confess that for a while I wondered if such a soft-spoken and genial person as he could really prove equal to the exacting duties of an onerous and invidious position. All doubts were, however, dispelled as Mr Rahim's integrity and courage rose splendidly to the occasion. This situation lasted for over ten months. Early in 1968 Mr Rahim again acted as Registrar, so that his services as Registrar were actually available to me for a total period of over a year. Throughout this time no personal equation projected itself into his official advice to the Vice-Chancellor: he was always fearlessly authentic and unbiased in his presentation of facts.

Another quality which distinguishes Mr Rahim's work as Registrar was his diligence. His was a strenuous job, but he never spared himself, and always put his work above everything else. His notes on office files were characterized by an unusual sensitivity to neatness. He picked his words carefully, and saw to it that what he wrote was clear and readable.

After what I have said above, I need not, perhaps, add that Mr Rahim is a man with a strong sense of loyalty. He is a good colleague—affectionate and absolutely dependable.

Signed
(Hamid Ahmad Khan)
Vice-Chancellor

I dare not gloss what Professor Hamid Ahmad Khan, one of our most illustrious and scholarly Vice-Chancellors, has said about Mr. A. Rahim; I, therefore, feel that I should hasten to conclude this humble presentation after adding a few more lines.

Those who have known Mr A. Rahim since his leading a retired life after his return in 1984 from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (where he had worked for around five years as a librarian in the Central Library of King Abdulaziz University after seeking retirement from the service of the University of the Punjab in 1978), know well a facet of his personality that had been dormant during his earlier life, that is his extreme piety.

Mr A. Rahim has left his indelible mark in library development in this country through his teaching and guidance and by raising standards and setting examples worthy to be followed by all. His students and his students' students are serving the nation in all corners of the country. On behalf of all his students, colleagues and friends and on my own behalf, I conclude this humble tribute with a salute to Mr A. Rahim, wishing him a very happy long life. May God be his *Hami*, *Nasir* and *Muwaffiq*, and also of those dear to him. Amen.