

“Sheikh Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore”

For nearly fifty years his imprint has been on the most popular books on Islam. But now the oldest and truly international Muslim publishing house needs fresh ideas to play an adequate role in the dissemination of Islamic literature.

MOST titles in many Islamic bookshops, almost anywhere in the world, would carry the imprint of Shaikh Mohammad Ashraf of Lahore. Indeed, for over half a century his name has been synonymous with Islamic literature. Books carrying his imprint would be instantly recognisable. They would be titles like *Sayings of Muhammad, Hazrat Abu Bakr: The First Caliph and Islam in Practical Life*. They would normally have a plain, typographic cover, average printing quality and would be relatively cheap. To use a favourite phrase of publishers from the subcontinent, “the get-up will be O.K.”

This was avant garde stuff in the thirties when Shaikh Ashraf first started publishing. An unassuming, quiet, but very hard working man, Shaikh Ashraf started his publishing career by bringing out “penny pamphlets” (qissey) on folktales. He was born in 1903 in a small trader family and after matriculation from the local Islamia school - a big achievement for his time - he opened a small bookshop in Kashmiri Bazar, the book market of his city of birth, Lahore. Throughout his life he operated from the same shop; and even when his publishing empire gained international recognition, continued to live and work as he had always done.

The first major book from the Ashraf stable was the epic Punjabi love story, *Sohni Mahinwal*. For some time Shaikh Ashraf was content to publish in similar vein. But two things transformed his publishing ideas. The first was his meeting with Abd Allah Yusuf Ali who was busy preparing an English translation of the Qur'an. Yusuf Ali had no intention of publishing his translation in India; he had decided to publish the translation in London. But Shaikh Ashraf set about to change his mind; a somewhat risky venture for him since Yusuf Ali insisted on 'international standards' for the publication of his translation. His per-

sistence eventually won Yusuf Ali who placed certain conditions on the quality of paper, type-setting and printing. The translation was eventually published in 30 parts (*sipara*) at quarterly intervals. The first edition appeared in 1934.

The second factor which changed the direction of Shaikh Ashraf's publishing activities was the emergence of the Pakistan Movement. At about the same time that Shaikh Ashraf published Yusuf Ali's translation of the Qur'an, he also brought out the celebrated work of Allama Mohammad Iqbal, the poet-philosopher of the East, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. The influence of Allama Iqbal and other leaders of the Pakistan Movement was decisive in Shaikh Ashraf's output. From 1940 onwards to the creation of Pakistan in 1947, Shaikh Ashraf worked closely with Muslim scholars and leaders of the Muslim League to produce a body of literature that presented and promoted the idea of Pakistan. In 1944, he published such classics as S. A. Latif's *The Pakistan Issue*, F. K. Khan Durrani's *The Meaning of Pakistan*, Z. A. Suleri's *The Road to Peace and Pakistan*, Jamiluddin Ahmad's *Through Pakistan to Freedom* and El-Hamza's (nom de plume) *Pakistan: A Nation*. Immediately afterwards, Shaikh Ashraf published a series of thirteen pamphlets, written by teachers and scholars of the Aligarh Muslim University, arguing the case for Pakistan. During the two years before the creation of Pakistan, Shaikh Ashraf published a number of important studies on Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, including S. M. Hassan's *A Political Biography of Mohammad Ali Jinnah*, A. A. Ravooof's *Meet Mr. Jinnah* and Jamiluddin Ahmad's *Speeches and Writings of Mr. Jinnah*. Also published at the same time was the important history of the Muslim League by A. B. Rajput, *Muslim League:*

Yesterday and Today.

After the creation of Pakistan, Shaikh Ashraf settled down to producing Islamic literature on many diverse subjects: philosophy, history, art, culture. Works published by him on the Khilafat Movement, such as the biography of Maulana Mohammad Ali Jauhar and Afzal Iqbal's *Selected Writings and Speeches of Maulana Mohammad Ali* became important reference sources on the history of Muslim struggle in India and the pan-Islamic movement. In addition to Shaikh Ashraf's credit for publishing the first major translation of the Qur'an, he pioneered the publication of some of the leading *hadith* books. For instance, an English translation of Abu Muhammad al-Baghawi's *Mishkat al-Masabih* (by the Reverend James Robson) first came out in four volumes in 1963. Abdul Hameed Siddiqui's translation of *Mishkat* was later published by Islamic Publications, Lahore in 1976 in two volumes. However, his translation of *Sahih Muslim* was published by Shaikh Ashraf in 1972. *Al-Muwatta'* of Imam Malik ibn Anas (translated by Muhammad Rahimuddin) and *Sunan* of Imam Abu Daud (translated by Ahmad Hasan) were both published by Shaikh Ashraf in 1980.

Except for the quarterly *Islamic Culture* that commenced publication in 1927 from Hyderabad (India) under the editorship of Muhammad Maraduke Pickthall, there was no worthwhile English-language journal published by Muslims. Shaikh Ashraf tried to fill this gap through the inception of a monthly journal - *Islamic Literature*. Very quickly it became a widely-read magazine all over the world. Shaikh Ashraf had the advantage of worldwide distribution points for his books and, therefore, had no problem in introducing *Islamic Literature* to a wide audience. A number of reputed scholars from both East and West were regular contributors to the journal till the early seventies when it ceased publication. Perhaps, it was due to the untimely death of one of his sons as well as his declining health that he could not bear the responsibility of editing a monthly journal.

Shaikh Ashraf's publishing house was open to Muslims from all over the world, with varied backgrounds. Unlike, Islamic Publications, another famous Lahore publishing house, he did not follow a policy of publishing writers linked to particular movements. As such, he encouraged numerous Muslim authors to get their

works in print and thus produced a wide-ranging and varied list. At the same time, he welcomed non-Muslim writers and published their works without prejudice. Works by non-Muslim authors usually tended to be translations of the classical Arabic literature. Some of the notable works to carry the Ashraf imprint are translation of Ibn Sina's treatise on phonetics by Khalil I. Semaan, many of Imam Al-Ghazali's writings by Nabih Amin Faris and Allama Iqbal's *Shikwah Jawab Shikwah* (Complaint and Answer) by Arthur J. Arberry. Often, Shaikh Ashraf's zeal led to reprinting apologetic works of western authors, as well as those produced by Muslim writers during the colonial era.

Since its inception the Ahmadiyyah group has been a source of great resentment for the Umma. The claim of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Qadiani had been unanimously rejected by the Umma. Shaikh Ashraf led the battle against this heresy by publishing definitive works on the subject. The earliest to come out was Allama Iqbal's *Islam and Ahmadism*. It was followed by a highly satirical work, *His Holiness: An Exposition of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's Claim to Prophethood* by Phoenix (pseudonym). He also brought out an English translation of Maulana Sayyed Abu al-Hasan Ali Nadvi's *al-Qadianiyyah*.

For Shaikh Ashraf, publishing was a social service in the cause of dissemination of Islamic knowledge. Although his field of activity was rather limited, yet he catered for a wide variety of literary taste. Thus, while he published highly scholarly works of interest to researchers and academics, he did not overlook the necessity of providing reading material for the lay persons. He continued to publish series of books on the *sira* of the Blessed Prophet and biographies of his companions. In addition, many volumes were issued on Islamic practices and institutions such as prayers, Hajj, Zakat, fasting, and the Arabic language. He also paid special attention to bringing out a number of books addressed to children. Written in simple language, these books were meant to be an introduction to the history of Islam. More than a dozen titles, written by Professor Fazl Ahmad, spanning the *sira*, biographical accounts of the Prophet's companions, *Khulafa ar-Rashidun*, and history of Muslim rule in India formed the substance of these books. In view of their popularity, these books have been reprinted again and again.

Muraqqa-i Chughtai is a mas-

terpiece of Urdu literary expression for it combines two epic artists, Mirza Asad Allah Khan Ghalib the classical master poet and Abd ar-Rahman Chughtai, the contemporary miniature painter par excellence. The publication of *Muraqqa* by the Ashraf Press was a major literary event in Pakistan. In the area of historical studies, Shaikh Ashraf concentrated on Iqbal, Shah Wali Allah, Muslim historiography, and the Mughal period in India. He has published substantial number of titles on sufism as well.

For the last fifteen years, however, Ashraf press has not published anything of real significance. It seems to be out of touch with the recent developments in the Muslim World and the new ideas that are now making their impact. The Ashraf house seems to be content with reprinting its old titles, not least many apologetic tomes, despite the fact that most of these have

clearly outlived their usefulness. It is a sad commentary on a publishing house which led the battle for the creation of Pakistan, and published the works of literary giants like Alama Iqbal and Maulana Mohammad Ali Jauhar, and has dominated the Muslim world for over fifty years.

Shaikh Ashraf died in 1980. He was 77 and continued to work at his office till his last days. In an obituary, A K Rajput, one of Shaikh Ashraf's early authors, described him as "a self-effacing person of very few words, he was a man of simple habits, dressed in a black *sherwani* and white *shalwar*, and always shaved his head clean under a red fez. He would travel hundreds of miles to meet writers and scholars, and would honour his commitment to the last word". Muslim writers and scholars could do with many more Shaikh Ashrafs.

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