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(1951 - 2020)

**Prof. Mohd. Firoz Khan: Scholarship and Simplicity is Thy Name**

By

Mumtaz Khan

Former Associate Professor of Geography, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

It was with tremendous pain, suffering, and heartbreaking news that came as a bolt from the blue to know that Prof. Mohammad Firoz Khan has left for his heavenly abode on December 1, 2020, just a month before his coming birthday on January 1, 2021. One can hardly imagine that a person seen in the University a couple of days before, could succumb to a heart attack in a hospital. Immediately, Urdu poet Nida Fazli's couplet started ringing like a bell in the ear, "The news of your death is a lie. You cannot die....We are imprisoned in your memories, you are alive in us". However, who can deny the will of the almighty? Besides being a close friend and a wonderful colleague, he was just like my younger brother. His demise created a void. and to fill it memories of my personal contact flooded like cinema reels. We first met in 1977, when he was doing research at Aligarh Muslim University under the guidance of eminent scholar Prof. S. M. Rafiullah. I went there to attend a Summer Institute only because of the recommendation of Professor Rafiullah Sahib. When I joined J.N.U. as a Teacher Fellow in 1982, we had frequent meetings. However, our relationship blossomed when I joined Jamia Millia Islamia in 1995.

He was born in the village Eknaura urf Akhtiyar Nagar, Shahjahanpur (U.P.). His father Mohammad Ghaus Khan urf Jumma Khan was a well-known person in the region. Firoz used to tell us that one day his father loaded in bullock-cart food grains and other things and went to his Guru Bhai (A Brahmin teacher) and said now he would study under your patronage. True to the concept of Guru Bhai, he gladly accepted. One does not know for how long he remained in his home. Having completed his 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> classes from Agra (U.P.) in 1967 and 1969 respectively, Firoz did his B.A. in 1971 from Agra University (English, Urdu, Mathematics, and

Geography). In 1974 he completed his M.A. (Geography) and in 1976 M.Phil. from Muslim University Aligarh. In 1990 he was awarded the degree of Ph.D. from Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. His intense urge for getting more and more knowledge led him to receive the degree of MSc (Ecology and Environment) from Sikkim-Manipal University, Gangtok in 2009 and a P. G. Diploma (Environmental Management) in 2010. from G.J. University of Science and Technology, Hisar (Haryana). His specializations included Population Geography, Mathematical Geography, Hydrology, and Water Resources. His Employment Profile is Research Associate in A.M.U. (1979-81), Lecturer (1981-88), Reader (1988-89), and Professor ((1998 onwards) in Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

Firoz was a Member of the Research Committee of Kanpur University and a Member of the Board of Studies at Jaunpur University. He delivered lectures in the Staff Colleges of Jamia and A.M.U. He was invited to deliver lectures at the Universities of B.H.U., A.M.U., Patna, Lucknow, and Giri Institute of Development Studies (Lucknow). As far as I could recollect, he published research papers in The Geographer (Aligarh), Population Geography (Chandigarh), Indian Journal of Regional Science (Calcutta), National Geographical Journal of India (Varanasi), Annals of the Association of Rajasthan Geographical Association (Bhilwara), Jamia Geographical Studies (New Delhi), and The Deccan Geographer (Pune). One of his papers -Kalota, D. and Khan, M.F. 2022, “Comparing Performance of Inverse Distance Weighting and Modified Shepard Interpolation Models with Different Sampling Arrangements. Re-envisioning Advances in Remote Sensing-Urbanization, Disasters and Planning”. Edited by Singh, R. has been published by Taylor & Francis Group (U.S.A.). He was a Life Member of the following Professional Societies-The Indian Society of Remote Sensing (I.S.R.S.), Indian National Association of Cartographic Association (I.N.C.A.), Rajasthan Geographical Association (R.G.A.), and Association of Population Geographers of India (A.P.G.I.), Indian Association of Hydrologists (I.A.H.) and American Geophysical Union (A.G.U.). ***It was a great HONOUR for him, to be the Invited Member of the International Commission of Water Quality (I.C.W.Q.) of the International Association of Hydrological Sciences (I.A.H.S.).***

Under his supervision, eight students were awarded the degree of Ph.D. Their fields of research were Population Geography, Quality of Urban Environment, Agricultural Geography, Agroecology, Regional Rural Development, and Experimental Spatial Analysis. He published three books. His first book-Human Fertility in Northern India (1991) was the outcome of his project. The second book entitled, Occupational Structure of Agricultural Workers. by Tahir Hussain and

Mohd. Firoz Khan (1993) was the outcome of his second project. His third book (co-authorship-Seemin Musheer) was on the Quality of Urban Environment-A Case Study of Saharanpur City (2007). He had an unusual and fantastic way of helping students. For all those who were poor in English, he used to write himself for their theses or papers. For the methodological portion, he used to write not only for his own research scholars but also for others in the department. Despite the meager contribution of the students, he invariably put their names as lead authors. He was so magnanimous that, while doing his research at Aligarh, in his papers published in The Geographer (A.M.U.), he obliged his friends by adding their names as co-authors. The research publications of Firoz received accolades from eminent scholars. His writings were complex, having grammatically correct but lengthy sentences. However, whether in class, in his room, or on verandah he taught his students in very simple language that one used to call his 'capsules'.

During his headship in the department a couple of professional sycophants, for their ulterior motive started daily visiting his home during evenings, for hours and wasted the time of the entire family. Ultimately, on the advice of his wife when Firoz resigned from the headship, they never visited his home again even during an auspicious day when he went for Hajj.

In a rare and almost impossible way, Firoz always considered me his elder brother. A couple of examples would suffice. Once he was very furious with a non-teaching staff in the department and wrote a complaint against him. When I reached there, as an elder brother I suggested destroying this and he immediately tore it into pieces. In the second case, he was annoyed with a departmental colleague. By chance, both of them one by one came to my room and the colleague expressed sorry. I said now you close this chapter and he became normal. One can vividly remember his rage over injustice to a younger colleague in the department and with the support of other colleagues succeeded in rectifying it.

One of the sharpest academics having impeccable integrity in the department, he was a creative intellectual with unparalleled brilliance. He was always fond of knowledge production and its dissemination through debate and discussion. His knowledge expanded beyond the confines of geography and entered the uncharted territories of other fields. Looking at it one may recollect a couplet by Allama Iqbal, "You are a Falcon, and it is your passion to soar. Many open skies lie ahead in your path". He immensely impressed me with his dedicated application of studies, logical thinking, critical judgment, latest methodological writings, and a startling range of knowledge. His personality consisted of wisdom, intelligence, critical scholarship,



humanism, and wit rolled into one. He would always teach his students to express themselves freely. One has a pleasant memory of his research scholar (Dheera), opposing the methodology suggested by him. On the other hand, he very politely and logically tried to convince her but failed. However, after rethinking the next day she came and recanted her opinion.

A scholar par excellence and an amazing human being, Firoz was a mentor not only to his own students but also to other teachers. It is worth recalling that whenever I went to meet him, he was found surrounded by numerous research scholars. One used to ask how many of them are your students and how many of them are ‘illegitimate’ children. He honestly indicated two or three of his. He was the only one in the department who could understand and appreciate qualitative techniques and gave lectures on them outside the university.

Firoz was too magnanimous. When Dr. Atiqur Rahman joined the department as a lecturer having a project, he voluntarily gave his big room. He also gave me his room twice. He was an exemplary Samaritan. Whenever he went outside Delhi, he used to hire a taxi. After coming to know that he is not the owner, he gave him money to purchase his own.

Following the legacy of his teacher Prof. Rafiullah, he had a devout life. His religion was well entrenched into his heart but unlike others, he never wore it on his sleeves. Arguably, he perfectly blended the religious life with most scientific knowledge in teaching and research. One was highly impressed by the wealth of extant historical scholarship on Islam. It needs to be emphasized that he performed Hajj along with his entire family. On the other hand, in academic discussions, he was always forthright, frank, and fearless.

**It is worthwhile to gauge his popularity by his “condolence meeting” in the department wherein a number of old students also assembled to pay their tributes. It was a unique meeting that unusually lasted for two and a half hours but everyone, whether speakers or audience could not control their tears.**

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