



# In a Land Far from Home: A Bengali in Afghanistan

*Syed Ali Mujtaba*

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## **In a Land Far from Home: A Bengali in Afghanistan** Syed Ali Mujtaba

An intrepid traveller and a true cosmopolitan, the legendary Bengali writer Syed Mujtaba Ali from Sylhet (in erstwhile East Bengal, now Bangladesh) spent a year and a half teaching in Kabul from 1927 to 1929. Drawing on this experience, he later wrote *Deshe Bideshe* which was published in 1948.

Ali's young mind was curious to explore the Afghan society of the time and, with his impressive language skills, he had access to a cross-section of Kabul's population, whose ideas and experiences he chronicles with a keen eye and a wicked sense of humour.

His account provides a fascinating first-hand insight into events at a critical point in Afghanistan's history, when the reformist King Amanullah tried to steer his country towards modernity by encouraging education for girls and giving them the choice of removing the burqa. Branded a 'kafir', Amanullah was overthrown by the bandit leader Bacha-e-Saqao. 'Deshe Bideshe' is the only published eyewitness account of that tumultuous period by a non-Afghan, brought to life by the contact that Ali enjoyed with a colourful cast of characters at all levels of society—from the garrulous Pathan Dost Muhammed and the gentle Russian giant Bolshov, to his servant, Abdur Rahman and his partner in tennis, the Crown Prince Enayatullah.

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