

Dr. A.M.A. Azeez Memorial Oration

Sinhala Muslim Relations in Sri Lanka

Desamanya M.D.D. Pieris

May I, in the first instance thank the Senator Dr. A.M.A. Azeez Foundation for so kindly inviting me to deliver this 44th Senator Dr. A.M.A. Azeez Memorial Oration, to commemorate his 45th death anniversary. Among his many important and significant achievements, was to pass the stiff open competitive examination to enter the Ceylon Civil Service, a service to which I myself belonged. This is the fourth public oration I have been invited to deliver. It is interesting that one of the previous orations happened to be on Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam, who among his dazzling achievements, also had the distinction of being the first Ceylonese Civil Servant.

Before we proceed further, we must spend some time reflecting on the multifaceted life of Senator A.M.A. Azeez. If one were to go deeply into his varied and abundant achievements in any detail, it would require not one Oration, but a series of Orations to do justice to his accomplishments. However, on an occasion such as this, we must pay tribute to him, by remembering at least a few of them.

He was educated at the prestigious Jaffna Hindu College, and later for a brief period at St. Joseph's College Colombo. He was a scholar of distinction and amidst other achievements became a master of the Tamil Language. His knowledge of Hinduism was extensive and he showed a deep interest in Hindu devotional songs. He passed out with Honours in History from the University of London, and being awarded the Government Arts Scholarship, proceeded to St. Catherine's College Cambridge for his postgraduate studies. This he abandoned, because having sat the open competitive examination for placement in the Ceylon Civil Service, he passed out second in a batch of nine, which included distinguished personalities such as K. Kanagasundram; V.S.M. De Mel; M. Rajendra; D.G.L. Misso and C.P. De Silva. Mr. Azeez thus became the first Muslim Civil Servant. In 1948, he took premature retirement from the Civil Service, due to the intense persuasion of Mr. T.B. Jayah, and succeeded him as the Principal of Zahira College Colombo. In 1962, he became a Visiting Lecturer in History at the newly inaugurated Vidyodaya University.

Among his extensive public work, he founded the Ceylon Muslim Scholarship Fund; The All Ceylon Young Men's Muslim Association Conference; was a member of the Court, Council and Senate of the University of Ceylon, President of the All - Ceylon Union of Teachers and the General Secretary of the Headmasters' Conference. Appointed as a Senator in 1952 and reappointed several times; and, a member of the then highly prestigious Public Service Commission. He was awarded the title of M.B.E; A stamp was issued in his name by the Philatelic Bureau; and he was honoured by his inclusion in the publication entitled "100 Great Muslim Leaders of the 20th Century" brought out by the Institute of

Objective Studies, New Delhi. He was the only Sri Lankan featured in this publication.

I have given you only a brief glimpse of this rich and varied personality. Perhaps, it is best captured by someone who described Senator Azeez in the following manner.

“He is a Muslim, he is from Jaffna, he looks like a Burgher and acts like a Sinhalese.” He rose above narrow confines. He was truly a citizen of the world.

I wish to devote the rest of this oration to Sinhala Muslim relations and some of the wider issues that arise transcending a particular relationship.

Professor Lorna Dewaraja, a lady with whom I have worked from time to time, and whom I greatly respected brought out a book in 1994 entitled “The Muslims of Sri Lanka - One Thousand Years of Ethnic Harmony - 900 - 1915”. The book was happily named because the wide research the author had undertaken in order to write the book justified the descriptive title she gave to it. In this book she states, and I quote “in the history of Sri Lanka few are aware of the harmonious relationship which had developed between the Sinhalese, its indigenous inhabitants and the Muslims who initially were foreigners, and that both have lived together peacefully for over a thousand years”. Then she goes on to state and I quote, “Perhaps because it was such a peaceful relationship, it has passed unnoticed by the historian”. It is a matter of great significance that a distinguished academic, after extensive research could come to such a happy conclusion.

It would be of interest to refer to some details of the wide ranging nature of this relationship. She states, and I quote “The

Muslims served as officials in the administration of the State, as well as of the Buddhist monasteries. It is noteworthy that the Muslims were functioning in the Temple of the Tooth and participated in the ritual of the Esala Maha Perahera, the greatest pageant in the Buddhist world” unquote. Then she goes on to add this most significant comment and I quote “This process of structural assimilation which took place without any erosion of the cultural distinctiveness of the Muslims is perhaps unique in minority - majority relations”.

You would see therefore, that this relationship did not depend on some status determined by numbers. It seemed a relationship based on a natural and seamless mutual acceptance and understanding, and to this happy result the Buddhist doctrine of tolerance and its total disinterest in any kind of conversion to one’s faith, played a most important part.

Instances of this relaxedly tolerant attitude form part of the text of Professor Dewaraja’s book. She refers to, I quote “The magnanimous attitude adopted by the Sinhala Kings to the people of other faiths:” unquote. Then she cites examples of this magnanimity. Let me quote: “There are a number of mosques in the country built on land donated by the Kandyan Kings. For example, the KATU PALLIYA in Kandy and the Maddulbova and Kahatapitiya mosques. There were instances where the bhikkus had permitted mosques to be built on Buddhist monastic lands for the benefit of the Muslim villagers. For instance, the PAN GOLLAMADA mosque was built on land belonging to the DEGALDORUVA Vihara and the mosque at RAMBUKANDANA on land belonging to the Ridi Vihara at Kurunegala. Further, the bhikkus of the Ridi

Vihara supported a Muslim priest to minister to the spiritual needs of the Muslim tenants living on monastic lands”. Unquote: Then she comes to the following most important conclusion: I quote “In this manner as the Muslims became structurally integrated into the Socio-Economic system their religious individuality was not effaced but enhanced”.

What a stupendous achievement for a society! Professor Dewaraja’s valuable research brings out the seamless and harmonious relationship that prevailed between the Muslim and the Sinhala Buddhists, including the Maha Sangha for such a long period of time.

Then, what of Foreign relations? Here too, the evidence points to Muslims playing an important role. Professor Dewaraja states, and I quote: “Muslims played a significant role in the foreign relations of Sri Lanka. As early as the thirteenth century Al-HAJ-AL Uthuman was sent by the Sinhala King to the Mamluk Court of Egypt to negotiate direct trade relations between the two countries”. (unquote). She goes on to state further and I quote, “It will be seen that Muslims were sent on important missions to South India right up to Kandyan times” (unquote).

Of the research conducted to write her book the distinguished academic Professor Dewaraja records, and I quote, “It was found necessary in the Course of this inquiry to visit Muslim villages, mosques and Buddhist monasteries and hold interviews with descendants of old Muslim families, Muslim physicians, trustees of mosques, and several eminent bhikkus. Many old residents cherished memories of their ancestors who enjoyed cordial relations with the Sinhala Kings. Muslim physicians recollected

their student days in Buddhist monasteries. Several elderly bhikkus including the Mahanayake of the Malwatta Vihara were aware of Muslims rendering service to the Viharas within living memory. It was observed that in remote areas which were less modernised, less commercial, and less politicized there still prevails a healthy spirit of cooperation between the Sinhala and Muslim peasants and also between the Muslims and the bhikkus". (Unquote). Please note the words "less modernised, less commercial and less politicized". Later, with these ingredients came greater competition and greater stresses. All these have undoubtedly impacted the evolving current relationship. The evolution demonstrates certain negative aspects that must not be permitted to grow. Since we are living in a globalized society, we get hit by global trends that we have to manage responsibly. These trends get enhanced by rapid technological change, and one such, massive change is the revolution in the speed and ubiquity and the ambiguity of information and misinformation which can create instant stress, rouse feelings and reduce the time available to think and reflect.

Then, there is the other strong trend towards populism and identity politics. These too have to be carefully handled and carefully managed. It is a question of balance, a balance which groups and communities find increasingly difficult to achieve under the current bombardment of truths, half-truths and lies.

There is nothing, intrinsically wrong in religious, ethnic and other communities identifying and celebrating their uniqueness and their special identity and taking pride in that identity. The central issue is how far can you go, and whether you can do so without jeopardizing your relationship with the larger community of which you are a part. Can the principle of unity in diversity be protected? If all communities and groups do not work towards this,

the appearance of dangerous social and community stresses would be inevitable. To manage these trends, we also need a mature and responsible political leadership both at the national level and at the Sub-national level as well as of communities and groups. Do we have this now? If not, is there not a responsibility on the part of the educated, intelligent and thinking sections to address this issue on a regular, consistent, and certainly on an urgent basis?

On all sides, if identity issues are not handled on the basis of an appreciation of the richness of diversity, as opposed to feelings of a threat and a perception of disturbance to others, such issues could degenerate into prejudice and hostility. If that were to happen, everyone loses, the country most of all.

Currently, while the issues that I have mentioned seem to affect most groups to variable extents, it would be ignoring reality to pretend that Muslims are not being perceived in a more negative light in many parts of the world, including in Sri Lanka. Particularly after the 9/11, attack on America and the rise of numerous extremist groups and the consequent strife and bloodshed, certain realities have emerged, which have inevitably led to a degree of prejudice and even hostility towards Muslims.

These feelings have been aggravated by distinctive dress codes and sartorial styles adopted by a significant number of Muslim women and men. While, the reasons for all these are quite complex and cannot clearly be laid at the door of a particular group of people, it has been difficult to manage perceptions. Legitimate expressions of identity gets interpreted sometimes by others in terms of being separate and alien.

The various interpretations of Islam indulged in by some of these groups have aggravated matters further.

In this context I wish to quote from a recent interview given by Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia to the Television Channel CNN. I quote :-

C.N.N. : “You are the leader of a moderate, mostly Muslim nation and in 2003 you called on Islam to evolve. Has it?”

Mahathir : “Well, the Islam that you see today is not actually the Islam that is taught by the religion. It is the Islam interpreted by certain powerful people, leaders, scholars and all that. We find that it is quite different from the original teachings of Islam as found in the Quran. So, we feel that the Islam of the Quran is a very moderate Islam. It doesn't preach war. It calls upon all Muslims to be brothers. It forbids killing. Well, we are doing all these things which is forbidden by Islam. So, it is the interpretation of the religion that has got us into the world state”.

C.N.N. : “So, in your opinion, it is these interpretations that are running your religion?”

Mahathir : “Yes. Somebody comes along, becomes a very popular leader and he interprets in his own way that you should fight, you should kill, you should be opposed to people of other religions. Even among yourselves, you don't accept people who have other interpretations. All these things have resulted in instability, even in conflicts and civil wars, and also wars within nations”.

Whether one agrees or not with these comments, Mahathir is a highly respected world figure and his voice commands much respect.

Ladies and gentlemen, what I have endeavored to do in this oration is to bring to your attention the unity in-diversity, which our communities have achieved in the past, as well as the comfort level and harmony that had existed for centuries between the Sinhala and Muslims communities. I have also endeavored to reflect on some stresses to which we are subject in modern times and to emphatically state that we must evolve permanent and stable mechanisms to manage these. I have also alluded to the complexity of handling diversity. I remember, many years ago, when I was secretary to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, I happened to be seated next to the Minister of Education of Bahrain at a lunch in his honour. During the course of conversation with him I referred to Muslim education and Muslim schools in Sri Lanka. He listened courteously was silent for sometime and then to my surprise asked me “but Mr. Pieris why Muslim schools?” His view was that it was unhealthy for communities to be segregated, a very enlightened and rational view. I had to then talk to him about certain historical developments and concentrations of populations etc. that have resulted in our present school system. So these are complex matters, and people hold different views.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to leave you with the thought that while issues of identity, respect and so on are most important, if these sensitive issues are not well managed, they could lead to conflict. Centuries of history have given the Sinhala and the Muslims communities a splendid framework within which to function. Persons at the individual level happily function, as in the past. Let me relate the importance of functioning in this manner from an actual example within my personal knowledge. I am on the Board of Trustees of the Vidyodya Pirivena at Maligakanda.

Vidyodya is considered the foremost pirivena in Sri Lanka, and besides being a center of Buddhist and wider areas of learning also, played a central role in the revival of national culture as well as the movement for national Independence. The pirivena has a significant number of pupil monks and teachers in residence for whom dana has to be provided. Sometime ago the pirivena, due to various reasons faced a most difficult financial situation, and the issue of providing dana to the resident monks was becoming a serious problem. Just at this time, the then third member for Colombo central, Mr. Halim Ishak who was passing the pirivena thought of dropping in. He met the highly respected Nayaka Thero who headed the pirivena quickly grasped the serious difficulty and made immediate arrangements for an infusion of funds from his decentralized budget. A few months later, the Nayake Thero invited the M.P. to a large function at the pirivena which was graced by very Senior Monks from various temples including Malwatta and Asgiriya. Mr. Halim Ishak was the only lay person accommodated on the Central stage. All the others were Senior Monks. Even the governing board of the pirivena was accommodated below. This arrangement elicited some inquiring looks and some subdued conversation. When the function started the Ven. Nayake Thero explained to the gathering who the person was that was seated on the stage, and why he was accommodated there. No distinguished Buddhist lay person was accommodated, only Mr. Halim Ishak. The spirit prevailing was that of what Professor Dewaraja has recorded in her well researched book.

This oration is a remembrance of and a tribute to Senator, Dr. A.M.A. Azeez, who worked within, and promoted and protected the great historical traditions of breadth of vision and harmonious relations between the Sinhalese Buddhists and the Muslims.

Therefore I considered it appropriate to conclude this oration with a quotation from a collection of his essays on numerous topics entitled “The West Reappraised”.

In his essay on the “Buddha Jayanthi”, he states as follows:-

“The Buddhist Council is being inaugurated to commemorate in a fitting manner the Buddha Jayanthi. This great historic event is not only of intensely religious importance to the preponderant majority of the people of Ceylon but also of special national significance to all of us who proudly claim Sri Lanka as our Island Home it behooves us, who live in this pleasant land to be alive to the heritage of our nation and to the history of our land which are so inextricably inter woven with the teachings of Lord Buddha.

The celebrations that are being planned will indeed help us, particularly those of us who do not belong to the Buddhist Faith, remember vividly that the art and architecture of Ceylon, her learning and literature, her status and stature in the comity of nations and her position of prestige and privilege in South and South East Asia cannot be disassociated from the Life and Teaching of Lord Buddha. These have also largely encouraged the inter-communal amity and harmony that prevails in our land which all of us should feel justly proud. The spirit of tolerance and kindness that characterizes the Teachings of Lord Buddha was truly responsible for the warm welcome that was accorded to the early Muslin settlers and for the freedom of worship which they enjoyed in Ceylon.

Because of the welcome and because of this freedom, they and their descendants were able to make substantial contributions to the wealth and welfare of Ceylon” unquote.

Today, more than ever we need such people of vision, learning, judgment and wisdom as Senator, Dr. A.M.A. Azeez. It was a great loss to the nation that he died so young at the age of 62.

The greatest tribute one can pay to him now is to actively network with other eminent Muslim organizations, as well as similar organizations representing other communities and religions to oppose prejudice and hostility, and to actively recreate that harmony that was an intrinsic part of the relationship for centuries. Inaction, is not an option. We must always keep in mind the wise observation, that, for evil to triumph, it is only necessary for the good to do nothing.

I thank you.

About the Speaker

Desamanya M.D.D. Pieris is a graduate of the University of Ceylon (Peradeniya), Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute, UK and has been conferred the Degree of Doctor of Letters (Honoris Causa) by the University of Colombo. Doctor of Letters (Honoris Causa) by the University of Westminster (UK) and the title of Honorary Senior Fellow by the Post Graduate of Institute of Medicine. He is also “A Distinguished Fellow” of the institute of National Security Studies, Sri Lanka.

His career was in the then Ceylon Civil Service and later, on the abolition of that service, in the Sri Lanka Administrative Service.

He had a distinguished career in the public service and held several important posts, including that of the Secretary to the Prime, Minister; Secretary, Ministry of Public Administration, Provincial Councils and Home Affairs; Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Cooperatives; Secretary, Ministry of Education and Higher Education and Chairman and Director General of Broadcasting.

He has also acted on several occasions in addition to his duties, in the posts of Secretary to the Ministry of Defence and External Affairs and Secretary to the Ministry of Trade and Shipping.

He has at various times been the Chairman of the National Institute of Education; Chairman, Board of Management of the

Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration; Chairman of the Agrarian Research and Training Institute and Chairman of the Public Sector Infrastructure Development Company.

He has also served on the Governing Councils or Boards of Management of several Universities and Post Graduate Institutes, including the Council of the University of Colombo; the Board of Management of the Post Graduate Institute of Medicine; the University of Colombo School of Computing; the Council of the Buddhist and Pali University; The Board of Management of the Arthur C. Clarke Centre of the University of Moratuwa; and the Post Graduate Institute of Archaeology of the University of Kelaniya.

He has been Director of the People's Bank, the People's Merchant Bank and a Member of the Rural Credit Advisory Committee of the Central bank.

He has served as a Member of the National Salaries Commission; a Member of the Presidential Commission on Finance and Banking and has chaired three Presidential Committees - one to examine and report on the proposed mechanized gem mining in the KALU GANGA; the other on the Functioning of the Survey Department, and the third on the Sri Lanka Foreign Service.

Currently, he is the Chairman of the Board of Management of the Institute of Information Technology and serves on the Board of Directors of L.O.L.C; the Governing Board of the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies; on the Board of Management of the Institute of Indigenous Medicine of the University of Colombo; and on the

Board of Management of the School of Computing of the University of Colombo. He is also a member of the Academic Affairs Board for Post Graduate Studies of the Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration (S.L.I.D.A); the Board of Management of the SANASA Campus; a Director of the M.M.B.L / PATHFINDER Group and a member of the Board of Governors of VIDYODAYA PIRIVENA Maligakanda.

Desamanya Pieris also lectures from time to time on invitation, at S.L.I.D.A.; the Defence Services Command and Staff College at Sapugaskanda; the Bandaranaike International Diplomatic Training Institute and the Kotelawala Defence University.

He has delivered four convocation addresses, at the University of Colombo; Sri Jayawardenapura; Ruhuna and the Open University. He has, also on invitation delivered three Memorial Orations - the Lalith Athulathmudali Memorial Oration; the Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam Memorial Oration; and the Vidyajothi Professor V.K.Samaranayake Memorial oration. He has been conferred the high National Honor of DESAMANYA for “Distinguished Service of a highly meritorious nature to the Nation”.

He has published his memoirs of his experience in the public service of Sri Lanka in a book entitled “IN THE PURSUIT OF GOVERNANCE”.

Desamanya M.D.D. Pieris

by M.P. Muhammad Jaleel

The Dr. A.M.A. Azeez Foundation invited the distinguished personality Desamanya M.D.D. Pieris to deliver the annual Memorial Oration honouring late Dr. A.M.A. Azeez, who was an eminent educationist, scholar, Civil Servant and author of numerous publications.

For me, personally, it is a privilege to know Mr. Pieris as a friend since 2003. I am delighted that we have the opportunity of having Mr. Pieris to deliver the Memorial Oration.

One of the greatest professional contributions of Mr. Pieris, who was the Secretary to the Prime Minister, was to spread awareness of the value and importance of the administration of the Ceylon Civil Service.

In addition to his professional qualities, Mr. Pieris is a wonderful human being. He is a thorough gentleman, a very gracious person, broad minded with a high intellect and openness. He is a person of exceptional poise, talent and character, a very inspiring orator, clever strategist and pragmatic administrator. It was appropriate that he spent seven years as Secretary to the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka.

It was not surprising that a person of such stature made the culture of administration and professionalism as the mainstay of the

Prime Minister's engagements with world leaders. A key attribute of that culture was its emphasis on its accomplishments and result orientation. His highly analytical skills carried a conviction carefully nurturing of talent and creative thinking and all combined to engender a constructive ambience within the administrative service and its professionals becoming accomplished as well.

Mr. Pieris' many achievements speak volumes about him. His autobiography "**In the Pursuit of Governance**", published in 2002 is a memoir of over three decades of public service of Sri Lanka. Many accolades were received.

According to Late Dr. Gamini Corea, "This book is of exceptional value and should serve as one of the most important contributions to political history of post independent Sri Lanka".

Late Mr. Kamalabasaban, former Attorney General, has said that this book is extremely useful to members of the public service.

Dr. Radhika Coomaraswamy has said that Mr. Pieris is the best example for a public servant.

Dr. Carlo Fonseka has said that Mr. Pieris became the Secretary to the Prime Minister at the age of thirty two. His book is a handbook of ethical conduct for public servants.

Former Vice Chancellor Prof. Savithri Goonasekera has said that this book is an inspiration on how to rediscover an almost lost tradition of public service.

Mr. Charitha P. De Silva, a leading professional and personality in business, has said that Mr. Pieris' dealings with his political

bosses in a way that earned him the respect and affection of the leaders of both major political parties. His handling of trade unions and subordinates were exemplary and demonstrated his skillful communication. Mr. Pieris' whole life is based on values and principles imbued in him by his Parents, Justice and Fairplay were at the root of all his decisions. All these exemplary qualities were reinforced by an inexhaustible capacity for hard work.

Mr. Paul Collins, Journalist in London, has said that Mr. Pieris in the seventies as Secretary to the world's first woman Prime Minister brought him into contact with a galaxy of world leaders of the time. Yet the tone of his writing features as profound humanity based in a keen sense of values.

Former acting Prime Minister Mr. Maithripala Senanayake in his letter to Mr. Pieris has said, "Dharmasiri, you are the last of a very special breed of public servants and I am afraid that you belong to another era, another time, the calibre of public servants that you don't get now of loyalty, integrity, trustworthy and valuable asset to any Govt. Always to the correct advice and to the benefit of the Govt. I am well aware how fortunate Mrs. Bandaranaike was to have you as her Secretary when she was Prime Minister in the seventies.

Prof. Ameer Ali of Murdoch University, Western Australia has highly recommended Mr. Dharmasiri Pieris' book as an important source of reference to all his post graduate students who have come from developing countries.

Former Cabinet Secretary, Mr. M.S. Alif said, “Dharmasiri - a great administrator, a thorough gentleman who I was honoured to count as an intimate friend. A very sharp minded intellectual”.

Finally, Mr. Pieris is a proud product of the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya. He still loves his University as we all do. Peradeniya campus is a magnet to us. May God Almighty Bless and Shower His Blessings on him and his family.