

CURRENT BURNING ISSUES IN EDUCATION OF MUSLIMS IN SRI LANKA

– Dr. AG Husain Ismail

Let me start, by thanking the Organizers of the Azeez Memorial Foundation for giving me the singular honour of addressing this learned audience today, when we are paying tribute to a great Scholar, Historian and efficient Civil Servant of this country.

We are proud as Sri Lankan and being Muslims of this country, in a recent publication of Institutes of Objective Studies – New Delhi, India titled *Great Muslim Leaders of the 20th century*, published in 2005, Dr. AMA. Azeez is profiled as one of the educationists and reformists lived in the 20th century.

Eminent scholar, Historian and social worker Aboobucker Mohammed Azeez was born in Vannarpanni in Jaffna, in 1911. He had early education at Vaidyeshwara Vidyalayam and Jaffna Hindu College. His family was deeply religious. Young Azeez learnt tenets of Islam from his family and attended near by Allapichai Quran Madarasa where he learnt Quran. Schools and the Quran and Hadith College where he studied gave young Azeez a liberal out look in life. At the later date he stated **“one must follow one’s religion and customs strictly, and at the same time understand and appreciate the culture of others”**.

After the graduation from the University ^{of} Cambridge he began his career in civil service. He served as AGA Kandy and AGA Kalmunai. His final assignment as civil servant was as secretary, Ministry of Health, where he had an opportunity to develop close relationship with village Muslims. There he became convinced that the backwardness and poverty among many Muslims could be remedied with education. He noted **“that Muslim community due to educational backwardness was handicapped not merely in the educational sphere but in all sphere of life and any attempt to improve the situation must give priority to education.”** This was the reason why he gave up the promising career in the civil service to take up the post as Principal of Zahira College in 1948.

In selecting the theme Current Burning Issues in Education of Muslims in Sri Lanka that would itself be a fitting tribute to late AMA Azeez his intimate connection with education of Muslims in Sri Lanka did not escape from my attention.

At the outset, I would like to point out that my talk will differ in two ways from other memorial orations. Firstly I will not attempt to give a well researched erudite lecture to which we will all listen attentively and forget about completely once we leave this hall. I will attempt instead to pinpoint some burning educational problems of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka with an intention of making an appeal to the Muslim community to develop strategies to overcome these problems, very seriously.

Muslim community constitutes 7.6% of the total population in Sri Lanka. They are scattered in all the districts. The standard of education of the Muslim community has risen to certain extent with the introduction of various educational reforms in Sri Lanka. However, comparatively the benefits of the policy of education and equal opportunities have not adequately reached the Muslim community.

For my convenience I have categorized the problems of Muslim Education in to three sectors; Pre-school education, School education & Higher education and Madrasa education.

Pre School Education

In the stages of human development, childhood is considered ~~is~~ very important. During this period of life, the habits cultivated, the attitudes formulated, basic skills developed by the child will have a high influence in his future life. A system of “House based learning” has been introduced in few countries to prepare the child at home for Pre-School Education.

In the case of the Muslim child his Pre-School education is segmented / compartmentalized and provided in the three different institutions. This child goes to formal Pre-School in the morning, attends the Quran Madrasa in the evening to learn to recite the Holy Quran and during the weekends attends Ahadhiya religious classes to learn Islamic way of life.

In Sri Lanka most of the formal Pre-School activities are focussed towards the western culture. In the Quranic School, the traditional teacher who does not have a deep knowledge in Arabic language, Nature of Child’s learning behaviours and basic needs and teaching methodology, simply make the child to recite Quran by way of rote learning. Even in the weekend religious classes a few selected books and a rigid curriculum is used for religious “indoctrination”.

Hence, there is a dire need for an “Islamic Pre-School” which integrates the activities of all three institutions to provide a coherent unique system of Pre-School education for the Muslim child. The concept of Islamic Pre-School does not mean Pre-schools established by Muslims, taught by Muslim teachers and only wearing the Muslim uniform. Under this concept a child should be given a broad opportunity for developing his / her basic life skills in a happy and playful environment and to satisfy his basic physical and psychological needs and learn Islamic manners and way of life through a flexible curriculum.

Unless these basic principles are given due consideration when introducing Islamic pre school concept, our child will be backward in entry competency and unable to compete with other children when entering the formal Pre-school. Islamic Pre-School should not segregate the Muslim child from other communities and make him / her cripple to face the challenges of the modern world.

School Education and Higher Education

At present there are ⁷653 muslim schools distributed in all parts of the country. The average teacher pupil ratio in the muslim school is 33:1. But the national index indicates the average teacher pupil ratio is 20:1. although some disparities prevails in the rural areas. In the year 2005 it was found that 3000 vacancies in existence in the muslim schools even after the mass graduate appointments.

Consequent to the issue of the public Administration circular 44/90 providing incentives for the retirement of public servants quite a large number of experienced principals and teachers in muslim schools, muslim officers in the ministry of education retired from service. As a result teaching and administration in the muslim schools came virtually to a standstill. No appropriate measures have been taken to fill this vacuum created for the last 15 years.

For an example, there are 34 muslim schools with three 1AB schools in the southern province and about 16,000 muslim children studying in these schools. **We are surprised and shocked to learn that not a single science graduate is serving in these schools in the southern province.** A/L Science streams in the three schools in the southern province had to be closed down for the last fifteen years due to shortage of science teachers. Same situation prevails in the Western, North Western and North central provinces.

The present acute shortage of teachers and principals in the Muslim Schools and the annual increase of new admission of children have come to pose terrible constrain. As a result for the last 15 years the standard of education have dropped down and resulted with low rate of performance in the GCE O/L and A/L examinations and number of students admitted to universities, technical colleges is decreasing annually. Therefore the opportunity of higher education for muslim children is at stake. I suggest to establish a Science College for Muslims in Sri Lanka to overcome this situation.

Religious Education

Appointment Arabic Teachers (Moulavi)

Under the consensus law, opportunities were provided to all students in the state schools to study their respective religion. The 'White paper' on education reforms in 1981 recommended introducing religion as an optional subject. All Ceylon Muslim Educational Conference with other religious organizations made a strong protest and the religion was re included as a compulsory subject for GCE O/L examination.

Under the state policy, in the year 1954 Moulavi teachers were appointed to teach Arabic language and Islam in state schools. A Chief Education officer in Arabic in the Ministry of Education and three Circuit Education Officers in provinces were appointed to supervise the teaching of Arabic and Islam in the state schools and teacher training programme was also introduced at the Addalachenai and Aluthgama muslim teachers colleges.

Since 1991 no action has been taken to appoint Moulavi teachers. Now 700 vacancies for Moulavi teachers exist in the muslim schools. Not a single officer in the Ministry or Provincial offices to supervise Arabic teachers as these posts are not filled. As a result number of students offering Arabic as a subject is declining.

Religious education for singhala medium muslim students

Now large number of muslim students receive their education in singhala medium in the muslim and singhala schools. Some muslim schools have started singhala medium section in their schools. In Colombo district alone there are 15,000 muslim students studying in singhala schools in singhala medium. There are no teachers to teach the subject Islam in these schools. Hundred vacancies exist in the western province for Islam teachers in singhala medium. To supervise teaching of the subject Islam religion, two In-Service Advisors in singhala medium schools were appointed to serve in the western province. Now these two posts are standing as vacant.

Due to shortage of teachers muslim students drop the subject Islam a compulsory subject and ~~an~~ appear for the other compulsory subjects.

Therefore the ACMEC suggested to the ministry that muslims who have done their A/L in singhala medium be appointed to teach Islam in the singhala medium schools. And to commence teacher training programme for teachers teaching the subject Islam in the singhala medium schools, at one of the colleges of education.

Education Governance / Management

With the amalgamation of the Dept. of Education and Ministry of Education in 1966, all powers relating to the general education came to be concentrated in the ministry of Education with Regional Directors exercising within their regions, powers delegated to them. Under this system a circuit education officer was appointed to manage the Tamil medium schools in the district with all the powers to make provisions to schools and teacher transfers within the district. Muslim schools were well managed by these officers till 1985.

The enactment of the 13th amendment to constitution in 1987 reduced the ministry function with devolution of considerable powers in education to the provincial councils. The system of district department and circuit education officer was replaced by five tier structure: Line ministry, Provincial ministry, Provincial department, Zonal offices and Divisional offices.

At present there are 8 provincial offices, 92 Zonal offices and 302 Divisional offices in the country.

Under this system, management of Muslim schools are totally ignored as there are no sufficient number of Tamil speaking officers to look after the Tamil medium schools in these zones other than the North and Eastern province. The following table indicates the situation prevailing in the different Zonal offices.

Ministry of Education	Post of Director, Muslim unit	Vacant A class three officer performs
	Deputy Director	Vacant
	Asst. Director	Vacant
	Officer religious unit / Islam	Vacant

Provincial Education ministry	Western Province	2	N. Zones	No Muslim schools
	Eastern Province	0		278
Zonal offices	Trincomalee	0	2	89
	Gompaha	0	4	17
	Kurunegala	0	7	39
	Kegalle	0	5	29
	Ratnapura	0	4	5?
	Anuradhapura	0	2	31
	Puttalam	1	3	35

Quality of Teaching:

In each District under the Zonal Director an Additional Zonal Director is appointed to supervise the in-service advisors (ISA) who are responsible for teaching of different subjects in the schools.

In the Colombo District itself there are 30 vacancies for ISA for Tamil medium schools and there is not single Officer in the Zonal Offices to supervise the teaching of these subjects in the Muslim and Tamil schools. This has resulted very low quality of teaching and led to high failure rate in the subjects like Maths, Science, and English in the Tamil medium schools.

Concept of Muslim School

In the school magazine Crescent of March 1923 TB. Jaya stated "the problem before us then is to evolve a system of education which would be in harmony with the tradition of our religion and at the same time respond to the modern conditions". Azeez concurrent with Jaya, was willing to borrow from any other educational system so long as it did not undermine Islamic values. Zahira College was established to achieve these goals. The concept of Muslim school is the evaluation of this model institution.

"Muslims want our children to be brought in schools according to their culture. It is for that purpose we have agitated in the past to appoint Muslim teachers in schools in which Muslim children are in majority"

HS. Ismail, 18. August 1952

The Minister of Education W. Dihanayake [in 25th of June 1956] ordered all government schools in which over 50% of the children are Muslims should be called and known as Government Muslim schools and appoint Muslim teachers to Muslim Schools and fill vacancies existed in Aluthgama and Addalachenai Teachers Training Colleges.

Mr. MA. Bakeer Markar M.P, called this order as the Magna Carta of Muslim Education [16. Sep 1965].

Before the Muslim schools are brought in to the system in Sri Lanka there were only Sinhala medium schools and Tamil medium schools recognized by the government.

In Muslim schools, holyday system, the time allocated for the teaching, school uniform, time table, extra curricular activities are found in different from other state schools.

For the last few decades, due to the dearth of facilities and resources the standard of education in the Muslim schools is gradually decreasing. As a result Muslim parents prefer to send their children to non Muslim schools. Some other parents are willing to educate their children in Singhala and English medium and seek admission to singhala medium schools and International schools. In Colombo district alone 15000 Muslim children study in non Muslim schools. To remedy this problem Singhala and English language could be introduced as medium of instruction in the Muslim schools. This cannot be materialized in the absence of physical and human resources.

The question before us to day is whether Muslim Schools should exist. The severe competition for admitting Muslim children to non Muslims schools, conflict created by some parents in sending the Muslim female students without the Muslim uniform are some indicators for the future existence of Muslim schools.

Madrasa Education

The history of Madrasa education has a record of 200 years and the curriculum of these colleges has not changed for the last two centuries. Few Madrasas have attempted to change their curriculum by adding few new concepts and preparing the students for G.C.E. O/L, A/L Examinations. However traditional methods of teaching are being used in Madrasas.

Another problem in the system is the absence of a common curriculum for all the Madrasas and unable to conduct a public examination for the purpose of certification. They differ in contents, Teaching methods and Evaluation methods. As the curriculum is not integrated with general education and vocational education they find it difficult to face the modern challenges and also unable to meet the employment market demand. Some Madrasas admit children to 'Hifil' classes at the age of seven or eight. As a result they lose the opportunity to receive primary education and secondary general education at school level.

At present the Arabic Madrasas are managed by different groups who have different ideas and approach to Islamic Education. The Graduates of the respective Madrasas are trying to excel quality of the kind of education they received. As they try to justify their stance it creates confusion and conflict in taking common decisions regarding the religious pronouncement.

To conclude my presentation I quote few verses from the Holy Quran, often quoted by Dr. Azeez in his letters "verily never will Allah change the condition of people until they change it them selves".

Thank you.