

## AZEEZ - A RENAISSANCE THINKER

by AL-HAJ SAEED M. IRSHAD B.A. (HONS)

Yet another year has rolled past reminding us of the name and fame of Al-Haj A.M.A. Azeez, educationist, statesman and a devout Muslim. Al-Haj Azeez's memory defies the limits of time. His services to society are evergreen in the minds of those Muslims who had the good fortune of knowing him well and benefiting from that enlightened acquaintance. His services to education in particular and the Muslim community at large are monumental. Death has robbed many a brilliant individual but the demise of Al-Haj Azeez is the loss of a generation that was looking for enlightened, cultured and selfless leadership.

Al-Haj Azeez belongs to the calibre of intellectuals like Allama Iqbal, Abul Galam Azad, Moulana Abdul Hassen Nadvi, Allama Maudoodi, Sir Seyed Ahmed Khan and Arabi Pasha. In the field of Muslim Education Azeez had no parallel. His name undoubtedly and undisputably stands out as a colossus and shines out as pre-eminent. Emotion stands in the way of an accurate and objective assessment. Azeez's birth and death is a matter of history today. I assert without fear and contradiction that Azeez is undoubtedly the greatest Muslim scholar and thinker this country has produced to date and will not produce for years to come. He is also the acknowledged Muslim leader of Islamic educational renaissance. Many Muslim intellects before and after Azeez excelled in the field of Jurisprudence, Science, Islamic Literature, Arabic Language, Law and Philosophy.

They were masters in their chosen fields but Azeez, the perfectionist, excelled not only in his chosen discipline of intellect but shone out brightly in any field he adored. Destiny produced the man of the era to the Muslim community in Azeez, in that he had the courage of conviction in accomplishing what he thought was right just and best by the Muslim community and Ceylonese nation. Like the great thinker philosopher, Machiaveli, Azeez believed in 'end justifying

the means' and for him 'necessity knows no law'. So it can be said here that when Muslim community was at cross-roads, urgently in need of a man with educational vision to build up a generation of Muslim students, in particular and others at large, to undertake the responsibilities of a community on the threshold of educational upsurge, destiny gave this brilliant young man from Jaffna, who was endowed with a combination of such rare gifts as intellectual ability, moral upbringing, spiritual foresight, academic excellence and supreme assurance to undertake with confidence the most onerous task of kindling the intellectual genius of islamic youth. He had complete and absolute faith in the will of Almighty Allah.

Even so often, be it by rare coincidence, or by skilful dedication, two names loom large in the contemporary annals of Sri Lankan politics, <sup>or muslim education</sup> leaving indelible impressions on the memories of their fellow countrymen. They have dedicated themselves to the services of their fellowmen with tremendous whole-heartedness. It is this quality as well as the fact that they are the epitome of selfless service which allow them to be in the forefront of National attention. Al-Haj A.M.A.Azeez and Dr.T.B.Jayah are two eminent and distinguished Muslim educationists. When they do something, they throw themselves into it with tremendous whole-heartedness. It is this quality as well as the fact that they are the epitome of service which allows them to live in the hearts of millions for years in the past, for years in the present, as well as for years in the future. Whenever they are confronted with the call of the community they strode to the centre of the arena and action with consummate skill and ease. Nothing short of brilliance is expected of them. Lesser mortals with such prodigious talent would crack in such situations.

Abdul Azeez is a household name of every Muslim in this country and many Muslims abroad. Mr.Azeez's greatness to fame is enumerated by his singular service to Muslim community of Sri Lanka, in the field of Education, Politics and Statecraft as a skilful and a sophisticated educationist, Administrator, he guided the destiny of Muslim community for

many a generation. During the course of his service and fame he may have roused the envy of few, whose only known past time is maligning, which cannot shroud the fact of his distinguished achievement and service to his community. He still reigns supreme as the undisputed intellect of the Muslim community of Sri Lanka.

Mr. Azeez, is the firm supporter of the principle of the equality of man. He held positions of power and privilege but was only interested in discharging his duties by his fellowmen. Persons who achieve such sense of balance and property are far and few among us today. But, Azeez is an illustrious and noble example of such balance of power. Mr. Azeez displayed a sense of natural justice, fair play, relevant mind, lucid, soft spoken, firm and personative. Industry, devotion, humility, simplicity and sense of fairness are his forte.

Mr. Azeez helped the Muslim community to shed their inferiority complex by contributing directly to a Islamic revival and indirectly to a National revival in this mother country of ours.

Perhaps he has in this process parted with all his wealth for the betterment of his community and made himself poor in worldly wealth but he made the Ceylonese Nation and his fellow Muslim brethren rich in self-respect and honour. He has helped to establish many Islamic Institutions beyond cavil or criticism that Muslim community can be trusted to manage with success the affairs of their Institutions. Today, it is our duty to honour Mr. Azeez by appreciating the good work he has done for his community. Mr. Azeez's bold and courageous stand taken in managing the affairs of Zabira and other Institutions are ample testimony for his vision, leadership and courage of conviction, the forces he had to challenge and live with the anxieties he had to suffer, the ridicule and brickbats that he had to face and the tactful cultivation of the goodwill of the governments in power and the vigorous collection campaigns he organised for the life blood of these organizations and buildings are a monument to the enterprise

and selfless service of Mr. Azeez.

His strong and wonderful personality, rare persuits and qualities, towering above others, his love and service for his fellowmen, is a noble example for other to follow. His genial and amiable personality has endeared him to all those who had the good fortune of knowing him and associating with him well, a quality which is emanating and radiating goodwill to others in his magnanimous personality which embodies the bigness of the heart and mind. This noble virtue is rarely found in one and the same person. The mould of his personality manifests all that is good and nice. Personified identity of compassionate heart and wisdom of mind. His large hearted mind has no place for petty, small, mean thinking. It would not entertain ignoble thoughts for goodness begets goodness. Love, charity, kindness, service, concern for others and tolerance, are the outstanding hallmarks of Mr. Azeez's personality, thought and action. Mr. Azeez was simple, unassuming and dedicated. He moved with kings but never lost his common touch. His balance and poise is the gift of Almighty Allah for his service to his fellowmen.

"The great men, whose shining labours make our pulses throb, were men who got a glory in their daily job, the battle may be glory and the odds unfair, but the men who got a glory never knew despair, for those who get a glory it is like the sun and you can see it glowing throughout the work they have done".

By quality, service and personality Mr. Azeez is still in the public mind. Impressive to visitors, magnetic to crowds and acceptable to the Nation in its entirety. He has dominated the National scene with grace, culture, charm and poise. His undoubted achievement in leadership and nation building, directly and propelling his community is worthy of emulation. It ensures him a place among the greatest this country has produced and is proud of. He never stooped to low levels to achieve his ends. Institutions established by him, individuals uplifted by his generosity, causes championed by him are the greatest tribute we could pay this intellectual giant of Sri Lanka. He is still held in popular appeal and have made him a legend. His continuing popularity and mass

appeal, qualitative leadership, has enshrined his name in the heart and soul of every Sri Lankan Muslim and Ceylonese Nation. His long shadow of leadership is still unmatched and will lead us for years to come to inspire us to dedicate ourselves to the service of the community and for the betterment of our motherland. The extraordinary qualities of leadership of Mr. Azeez is recognized and admired with arrection by his countrymen, a sort of one man task force working for what he conceived to be the welfare of his country. If he is more widely popular now than he was alive it is not because he worked at it, but because of a perception of his character and personality has percolated down to man in the street.

Elegance is given to few but still fewer have that indefinable and elusive quality described as Panache. Azeez had this in ample measure and he will remain a fragrant memory in the minds of many. His philosophy of life was that 'you are a gift of God and what you make of yourself is your gift to God'.

This idealist was not tempted by vistas of material prosperity. He had made up his mind to serve mankind in the best possible way. He understood clearly that he must be self abnegating first and foremost, and beguided by time honoured religious principles. The logical outcome of his thought was that he must adapt "simple living and high thinking" in order to befit to serve his community without being disturbed by concern over the self. The life he undertook was of one of education and service. He was like a huge healthy sheltering tree of life that rustled its leaves in the sun, that was washed by rain and gleamed in the sunlight to the caress of spring winds by the steady running brook, that it blossomed and bore fruit inspite of all the alien storms that beat and tried to fell it'.

The thought of his days, still hovers in minds of all who knew him, his memory will never die, as he lives on in the hearts of all those who knew him and held him in high esteem. Albaj Azeez was well known through his vast personal influence and vast responsibilities. He had his own way of looking at things and stuck by it to the very end.

It was not in his nature to compromise, he had principles of his own. They were the principles of an experienced God fearing man who lived a life that was upright and hard, full of dignity and honour.

Zahira, under Azeez, grew with incredible speed, to be not only the largest and best Muslim educational Institution of Sri Lanka, but also the most and highly respected radiating centre manifest in the classroom as well as in the playing fields. Zahirians of Azeez's era excelled in studies and sports and in the national arena of administration and legislature as well. Azeez comes from a stock and environment of intellectual superiority, a peninsula overflowing with talented men in all walks of life. His father, a Proctor by profession, had sufficient resources and the necessary foresight to recognise his son's talents and give him a sound education. Strangely enough, though the major part of Azeez's educational upbringing was in non-Muslim environment and the impressionable years were spent in Hindu institutions the light of Islam was giving radiance to Azeez's intellectual mind and thinking. In these noble and illustrious institutions Al-Haj Azeez came under the influence of dedicated teachers of high calibre and showed exceptional brilliance as a student passing out with superb performance in school and public competitive exams. Honours and distinctions in exams, were there for the mere asking. His achievement in London exams were both quick and spectacular in relation to his contemporaries.

It becomes quite pertinent at this hour to recall with esteem what eminent men, who matter, had to say about a leading light of their time. I quote below, the words of Mr.H.H.Basanayake, the former Chief Justice, then Attorney General of Sri Lanka in 1955 when he presided over Zahira College Prize Giving, as Chief Guest. "Two names loom large in the history of Zahira College. they are Jayah and Azeez. In the age of Jayah, Zahira emerged from childhood to youth, in the age of Azeez, it passed from youth to manhood. I may say supermanhood, for the reason that your numbers have, in the course of two decades, grown by more than four times. In 1935 it was in the region of 600 and in 1954 it passed 2500. Mr.Azeez is still young and the age of Azeez may become the golden age of Zahira.



In the many years before him, if one may go by what he has achieved in the short time of this tenure of office as Principal, Zabira will grow and grow. In Mr. Azeez you have an energetic, keen, untiring and ambitious Head with a breadth of vision and depth of learning that are very rare. You have in him one who has contrary to the usual trend, come from the Public Service, sacrificing all the glittering prizes that service offers, to serve the country in the wider and more important sphere of nation building. Schools are but factories in which the nation's manhood is fashioned. As in the industrial world we have factories that are large and factories that are small, so in the educational world we have factories or schools which are large and schools which are small. As in the industrial world we have factories which are well managed and factories which are not so, in the educational world, we have schools which are well managed and schools which are not. Now Zabira belongs to the class of those large schools that are well managed. In the course of its history it has been progressing, on lines which have ensured a bright future for it. But unless the parents and well-wishers of the school realise the need for more and greater support, the task of its head will not be easy. As I told you, the head of your school is a person of ambition. Whenever he reaches one height, he finds greater heights to conquer. There is no limit to the growth of a school like Zabira. I gather from one of the reports that the word "Zabira" means excellence or perfection, or if one may be permitted to use the expression, excellence and more excellence. The training of patriotic and loyal citizens is the greatest industry we have in our country. If the many hundreds that pass through the portals of this school are trained to be patriotic and useful citizens, that is greater contribution to the wealth of our land than the production of such raw materials as tea and rubber".

As an experienced brilliant young intellectual Al-haj Azeez guided the destiny of Zabira with clear vision and distinction. He gave up the alluring civil service for the service of his community and the cause of education. He skillfully diagnosed the dire disease that afflicted the Muslim community in Sri Lanka with the unmistakable symptom of educational backwardness, cultural isolation and political

insignificance. It gave Al-Haj Azeez imaginative insight which was beyond the range of his contemporaries who were immersed in the business of the day and were insensible to the changes that were imperceptibly overtaking them.

He gave pulsating new means to educate life. His brilliant leadership made Zahira "Par Excellence" and the radiating centre of Muslim thought and culture. Zahira is the lasting monument to the memory of Azeez. A monument to an enthusiastic effort to ensure educational equality and a living symbol of earnest endeavour to convince the Muslim community of Sri Lanka that "Education cannot be dissociated from men, money, methods and material".

For reasons better known to him and to the community at large, good fortune and destiny combined to give Azeez the sense of service and the unity of purpose for dedication of himself for the service of his fellow men. The lucrative field of law as well as its studies has a sense of thinking in his mind. Instead he made the laudable and courageous decision to accept the offer of the stewardship of the youth of the country. There is hardly any doubt that he put the religion of Islam and the community of Muslims before self in deciding to give up the most prestigious Civil Service appointment and accepting the Principal Post of Zahira College. In taking this commendable decision Azeez carved for himself in the contemporary history of Sri Lanka a name that adores every mind, and a memory the country would cherish with eternal gratitude.

The invaluable services he rendered for Muslim youth and to the cause of Muslim education are beyond comparison. The acceptancy of this challenging assignment is a tribute to the foresight of those who could identify Azeez with the intellectual leadership and to Azeez's determination to be in the vanguard of Muslim education resurgence. It undoubtedly speaks volumes for the sagacity and foresight of Dr. Jayah, a man of unparalleled inborn talent and leadership to have spotted a unique candidate to preside over the destinies of the Muslim youth of this country. In retrospect, from the point of view of Azeez, it can be said with confidence that



Azeez's outstanding success in the field of education has proved beyond any semblance of doubt that no better choice could ever have been made for an office such national significance as the Principalship of Zabira College. On assumption of office Mr. Azeez found that the limitations confronting him against the urgent development of Zabira were numerous and the obstacles almost insuperable. The position of muslim schools visa vis the other denominational schools, the craze of muslim parents to seek admission of their talented children to recognized non-muslim schools, the absence of sufficient facilities for accommodating the increasing number of intake, absence of talented teachers and limited resources were only some su-handicaps. Non of these organizational obstacles and handicaps stood in the way of Azeez's ability, determination, zeal and unremitting endeavour to proceed to his targets.

He toiled day and night and fought severe battles for the betterment of Zabira. He appealed to the Muslim public the world over. He believed in the dictum that "nothing is impossible under the spur of necessity". and his efforts were amply rewarded. Zabira grew fast and famous under his regime, making its presence felt in every field of national activity. He was soon to have an enviable staff of dedicated and honourable men of the calibre and standing of Wijeratne, David, Jesudason, De Mel, Nadesan, Babar, Nelson, Mubular, Ariff Doray, Issadeen, Mrs. Poulrier and Abdul Hassen Alim, among many others. Mr. Azeez's wide mindedness in this selection is transparent for majority of them were non-muslims of outstanding ability and skill. Before long he ~~was~~ awarded scholarships and endowments and attracted brilliant students of Muslim youth from all parts of the Island who in turn obtained first class distinctions in University and Departmental examinations. The academic side was not the only aspect to which he directed his mind.

In extra curricular activities such as cricket, soccer, ruggar, boxing, wrestling, table tennis, badminton and atheletics, Zabira lost no time in reaching the fore-front and national recognition. Zabirians of Azeez's era were intellectual giants and kings of sports in that they adored many fields of sports activities by winning cups, trophies,

challenge shield and captained national sides and leading Clubs. Muslim public rallied around Azeez with contributions and necessary buildings for accommodation of Day Scholars and Hostellers as well as fully equipped science laboratory which gave impetus for the future Doctors, Engineers and Scientists to pass out with distinct from Zahira and Honours Degrees from the Universities, Zahira became Par Excellent in every field and Azeez became the heart and soul of that Par Excellence.

His achievements were not confined to Zahira alone. It did not satisfy him within one ambit. He worked incessantly for the betterment of Y.M.M.A. Ceylon Muslim Scholarship fund, Old Boys Association, promotion of Arabic Tamil Literature, Naleemiyah Institute, Madrasa Education, Ceylon Muslim Cultural Centre with Islamic Library, a Publication Bureau, an Archives miniature Art Gallery, Auditorium and Islamic Research Centre,

Within a short space of time he gave Muslim education colour and character and brought Zahira to a position beyond the imagination of lesser mortals and unceasing critics, with absolute detachment, impartiality and sincerety. Mr. Azeez may aptly be described as a unique educational genius who had the vision of an intellectual Islamic Society, that would adore the National arena of Sri Lanka with Zahirians equipped with leadership, integrity and honesty to undertake the daunting task of Nation building. This is the record he has left behind in the spirit of dedication and supreme sacrifice he made in accepting the Principalship of Zahira which has aroused the envy of some section of the people whose only weapon is maligning and whose only past time is shroud the honour of that noble soul which is the household name of every Muslim intellect and general public. They now see reason in that the corpse of Azeez would have managed the affairs of Zahira made better than the "living saints" who took over it's destiny and let it to it's present ruination.

The contemporary stature of Muslim education and the variety of leadership roles in which the products of Azeez have served and are serving today, will remain as an everlasting monument to his memory, for generations yet unborn.

Al-Haj Azeez combined in his towering intellectual

personality, Scholarship, Administration Excellence, faith in the future of Muslim community, and Spirit of Service. Nature does not produce such versatile superman of the calibre of Al-Haj Azeez too frequently and it may be a thousand years before another Azeez is born. But his memory is perpetual in that he has left behind a band of young men who would sing and say in unison "You are the radiance of our ways, you are the goal of our days, you are the Principal of our Love who fashioned our time and fate. We are the shadow of your light, we are the fruit of your sweat. His passing away reminds us year in year out that life is nothing but forgetfulness, slumber, indifference, intoxication and unconsciousness".

The eloquent tribute we could pay to that departed great soul is to live the honourable life he taught us.

I quote below the words of Rudyard Kipling which is very relevant to the life and time of our illustrious *Principal,*

"I expect to pass through this world but one, any good thing therefore, that I can do or any kindness that I can show to any fellow creature, let me do it now, let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again".