

MARHOOM HAJI A.M.A. AZEEZ - THE ARCHITECT OF THE  
Y.M.M.A. MOVEMENT

by HAJI M. LAFIR CASSIM, J.P.  
(Founder President, Maligawatte Y.M.M.A.  
Founder Secretary, All-Ceylon Y.M.M.A.  
Conference)

The day was Saturday 24th NOVEMBER, 1973. Having risen early and thanked Almighty Allah for another day's lease of life, I looked into my list of duties for that day and on top of the list I had written "Phone Mr. Azeez". I dialled, and in a few moments the voice at the other end said "Azeez here" that melodious voice familiar to me for 25 years since I first met him in 1948. "Mr. Azeez, Lafir Cassim here, Sir, the Maligawatte Y.M.M.A. is celebrating its Silver Jubilee on 1st January, 1974 and I want to discuss this matter with you. Can I see you today at 4.30 p.m.". "Lafir, good that you rang up, I myself wanted to ring you about a request from South India for advise to form a Y.M.M.A. Movement there. Let me see, Lafir. Will you hold the line? How about Sunday? No, Lafir Sunday is out, I am expected at the Naleemah Institute, Beruwela. I think Saturday is fine". "Thank you, Sir, I will meet you on Saturday, 4.30 p.m."

This was the gist of my telephone conversation with him on that early morning. Influenced as I was by one of his admirable habits of punctuality, I was at his residence sharp at 4.30 p.m. on that Saturday afternoon. Having pressed the bell I waited and in a few moments the servant boy came hurriedly but with a sorrowful face to tell me that Mr. Azeez had been suddenly taken ill and rushed to a private nursing home at about 3 p.m. that day. Feeling sorry and disappointed I walked into his study to leave behind some books and papers I had for him. On the center of his table I saw his diary spread-opened and at the bottom of the page he had jotted "Lafir Cassim - 4.30 p.m.". I felt as if those words were telling me "MAN PROPOSES - GOD DISPOSES". At 9 p.m. that night I received the most shocking news that Mr. Azeez had passed away. I subsequently heard from the members of his family that the words "Allah, Allah" were on his lips when he breathed his last. Inna Lillahi wa Inna Ilaihi rajihon. (We are from Allah (God) and unto him we shall return).

When I spoke to him that morning, little did I realise that I was speaking to him for the last time. How strange that it was about the formation of the Maligawatte Y.M.M.A. that I spoke to him for the first time in 1948 and that my last talk with him was in connection with the same Y.M.M.A.'s Silver Jubilee.

Though it is not unusual now-a-days to hear of sudden deaths, yet to me Mr. Azeez's demise was deeply disturbing, more so because I had spoken to him just that morning and how true the following words are :-

"THE RISING MORN CANNOT ASSURE  
THAT WE SHALL END THE DAY  
FOR DEATH STANDS READY AT THE DOOR  
TO TAKE OUR LIVES AWAY"

In the morning he was that intellectual giant; in the night he was less than a shadow. A very terrible thought indeed for us mortals. It is when one is stricken with grief of this magnitude that one is reminded of all the wise saying of eminent men on death : "HEAVEN GIVES ITS FAVOURITES - EARLY DEATH" - "HE WHOM THE GODS LOVE, DIE YOUNG" - "MAN FORETELLS AFAR THE COURSES OF THE STARS; THE VERY HOUR HE KNOWS WHEN THEY SHALL DARKEN OR GROW BRIGHT, YET DOTH THE ECLIPSE OF SORROW AND OF DEATH COME UNFOREWARNED".

There is a saying that is so appropriate in the case of Mr. Azeez "LIVE SO THAT YOUR NAME LIVES AFTER YOU". His whole life was dedicated to the service of his people. His intelligence, his sympathy for young people and his desire always to inspire in others the highest aim were some of his pre-eminent qualities. He was warm and an intensely lovable and human person;

human in his simplicity, human in the efforts he made to stimulate and encourage his friends.

I have already mentioned my first meeting with him in 1948 and that was at his Barnes Place residence. I was then only a lad of 22. I had already heard of him as the first Muslim Civil Servant, as an eminent educationist and as the Founder of the Ceylon Muslim Scholarship Fund and the Y.M.M.A. Movement. It was with a certain of uneasiness that I went to see him about forming a Y.M.M.A. at Maligawatte.

Today when I write this article in English, the temptation to quote an interesting incident is irresistible. I started talking to him in English and I found it rather difficult to express myself well because of my poor English, and I observed that Mr. Azeez too was a little embarrassed. I had no choice but to switch on to tamil and here too I was not up to the mark because he spoke very high tamil compared to my colloquial tamil peculiar to the Colombo Moors. However, when I left him after nearly 90 minutes of discussions I felt elated not only because he had given useful advise and his blessings to start a Y.M.M.A. but also because such an intellectual like him had put me at ease and given patient hearing to a raw youth like me. To me this was greatness at its very height. The common touch transcending human inequalities.

If today I am able to express myself satisfactorily in the English language, a great measure of credit must go to Mr. Azeez. After forming the Maligawatte Y.M.M.A. I had plenty of opportunities to meet him, to discuss and develop the activities of the Y.M.M.A. and in the process develop my own self. Mr. Azeez loaned me various books and also gave me copies of his numerous articles and speeches. Having watched my gradual progress one day he said, "Lafir, here is a note to the Deputy Principal of Zahira College, Colombo - Mr. Wijeratne. He will recommend books for your further reading. You are also free to borrow any books from the Zahira College". My self-improvement got further accelerated during the period 1950-53 when I served as Honorary Secretary of the All-Ceylon Y.M.M.A. Conference under the Presidency of Mr. Azeez.

Mr. Azeez is known and was popularly called "THE FATHER OF THE YMMA MOVEMENT" and let us trace how he came to be identified as such even though there had been Y.M.M.A.s before his coming into the scene. I will quote some appropriate extracts from his Presidential speech delivered at the Kandy YMMA on 29th July, 1944 when he was Additional Government Agent, Kandy :-

"I take this opportunity of thanking the members of the great trust which has been put in me, which you have a few minutes back clearly indicated by your ready and unanimous acceptance of my resolution that the name of our Association be changed from KANDY MUSLIM ASSOCIATION to KANDY YOUNG MEN'S MUSLIM ASSOCIATION, a trust involving many and heavy duties which I hope to discharge to the best of my ability and I hope satisfactorily with your co-operation....."

I do not like to hide my feelings of extreme happiness today at the easy passage of my resolution in favour of the name Y.M.M.A. for it was in the year 1933 that I developed a passionate attachment to this name, chiefly as a result of reading "WHITHER ISLAM" edited by H.A.R. Gibb in which the contributor describes the Y.M.M.A. Movement which has been started in Egypt (Mr. Azeez visited the Cairo Y.M.M.A. on 4.2.1947) and was spreading in the neighbouring countries. Some of the aims of this YMMA Movement are "to spread the Islamic humanization and morals, to endeavour to enlighten the minds by knowledge in a way that is adapted to modern times, to work against dissension and abuses among the Islamic parties and groups and to take from the cultures of the East and West all that is good, and to reject all that is bad in them". The very name Y.M.M.A., indicates that in some of its method and some aspects of its organisation there has been a good deal of borrowing from the Y.M.C.A., whose usefulness and achievements

I need not elaborate at length in this year of its centenary when many articles pertaining to it have recently appeared in the local press. Gentlemen, if there is anyone among us who is inclined to feel uneasy about this borrowing, let me remind him of the many contributions made by Islam to Western science and modern civilization and assure him that after all we could legitimately expect a certain amount of repayment, if not in full. I would, however, emphasize that these aspects of payment and repayment are not so relevant or important as the invitation to reciprocity not merely to YMCA's but also to YMBA's, YMHA's and CYMA's. I am sure this invitation will be readily accepted and will help us understand something about their institutions, their culture, and their problems as much as help them understand something about our institutions our culture and our problems".

Readers are kindly referred to another of Mr. Azeez's speech (elsewhere in this Supplement) delivered at the Maligawatte YMMA. It will be clear from this article that even though the All-Ceylon YMMA Conference came into being in 1950, it was distantly dreamt of by Mr. Azeez in the year 1933 - a period gap of 17 years and it is a coincidence of great interest that when the YMMA Conference was inaugurated on 30th April, 1950, there were exactly 17 YMMAs present in the ratio of one YMMA for every year between the dream and the deed.

By the fact that YMMAs had been there as far back as 1919 it must be admitted that many an individual would have naturally made substantial contribution to the successful evolution of the YMMA Movement, but it must be ungrudgingly conceded that the foremost of the contribution has come from Mr. Azeez and it is therefore a fitting tribute that he is called the "FATHER OF THE YMMA MOVEMENT". It is said that an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man and that ONE man in the YMMA MOVEMENT was AZEEZ and AZEEZ alone. He gave the Movement a powerful platform from which to pursue the aims and aspiration of the organisation.

He gave the movement a flag not only to be hoisted and left flying, nor to flatter ourselves by talking about our past heritage, glorious, no doubt but to create in us the necessary vibrations to elevate ourselves higher, to gear ourselves to greater achievements, to derive distinct inspiration from the high ideals and matching performances our forebears reached and kept in their deeds and duty. He gave the Movement the Motto - "FAITH, UNITY, DISCIPLINE" though borrowed from a brother Muslim, Mohamed Ali Jinnah, but a dynamic one. He gave us a Crest in keeping with one of our objects to bring about an Islamic synthesis of the cultures of the East and West, by accepting what is good in both.

But above all, he gave us Organisation omnibus in its objectives capable of attracting all sections of the Community, with diversity of interests and identifications, wishes and wants. In other words he believed our strength lies in the richness of our differences. He wanted us to be like "those who hold the kind of communion between man and man that marks the full acceptance of each man in his uniqueness as a person cannot be content with either the exaggeration of differences or the simplification of them. Rather the YMMA ideal wants the many to be one, in those things that matter most deeply, and yet to remain many. It wants the full sound of the orchestra, the harmony of the many different notes; it wants the full range of the spectrum, no one colour being any special beauty in itself, but all being beautiful together."

"LET US EMULATE HIS VIRTUES  
THAT MEN OF US MAY SAY ;  
THE WORLD IS BRIGHTER, BETTER  
BECAUSE HE PASSED THIS WAY"

"THE LIFE GIVEN US BY NATURE IS SHORT, BUT THE  
MEMORY OF A WELL-SPENT LIFE IS ETERNAL"