

*Reminiscing on*  
*PROF. SYED ALI ASHRAF*

*By Zainol A. Khan*

*(Prof. Ashraf, Director General of the Islamic Academy, Cambridge, England, passed away suddenly on the 7<sup>th</sup>. August, 1998 in Cambridge, England, where he resided)*

*(In February 2013 Prof. Shaikh Abdul Mabud, Director of the Islamic Academy of Cambridge, wrote me advising that the Academy was planning to publish a Commemorative Volume in cherished memory of his predecessor, the late Prof. Syed Ali Ashraf (may Allaah be pleased with him). He invited me to submit an article to be included in the publication, and suggested I chose from a number of themes, one of which was "Personal Memories of Prof. Ashraf." I accepted the invitation and subsequently submitted the under mentioned essay.)*

## **1. ABOUT TRINIDAD and TOBAGO**

The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago consists of two islands lying at the southern end of the Caribbean archipelago. The total area of the islands, of which Trinidad is the larger, is 1,980 sq. miles (5,128 square kilometres). The total population is approximately 1,300,000, of which Muslims number about 7-8%.

The first Muslims to settle in the country were brought from West Africa in the early eighteenth century as slaves to work on the sugar estates. This trend stopped in 1845 when, instead, indentured immigrants were brought from India for that purpose. This practice ceased in 1917.

The Muslim population is, to a very large extent, descended from the immigrants of India and is now involved in all spheres of the country's activities: business, political, social, sports, cultural and professional areas, to name a few.

There are over one hundred and twenty *masaajid* in the country.

## 2. HOW I BECAME ACQUAINTED WITH THE NAME

I first became acquainted with the name Syed Ali Ashraf when I saw a short article entitled “*Iman and Islam*” written by a person carrying that name in a publication some forty or more years ago. What struck me were the words “M. A. Cantab” appearing in brackets after the name. Having been born in a country which had been part of the British Empire and followed the British political and educational systems, I said to myself: “*This article has to be good because the author is a graduate of one of the most prestigious universities in the world*”. So I decided to read the article and was not disappointed, either with the contents (from which I learnt a great deal) or with the succinct way in which it was written as, indeed, one would expect from a graduate of Cambridge University

The contents of the article made an indelible impression on me so much so that I reproduced it subsequently in one of the issues of the “Trinidad and Tobago Eid-ul-Fitr Annual” which I edited for many years. In addition I would paraphrase its contents when I was sometimes called upon to address the audience at small Islamic functions.

When some decades later I did have the privilege of meeting the author of the article (who was then a Professor at the University of Cambridge) and having him as my house guest on many occasions I once reminded him of the article but he could not recall it.

## 3. MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH THE PROFESSOR

In late 1984 I visited Australia and New Zealand and while on my return journey I spent a week in Karachi as a guest of the World Federation of Islamic Missions and its affiliate, the Aleemiyah Institute of Islamic Studies, which was founded by the late Dr. Fazl-ur Rahman Ansari in honour of the late Maulana Abdul Aleem Siddiqui<sup>1</sup> (May Allaah *Ta’ala* be pleased with them both). At the time I held the position of First Vice President of the Anjuman Sunnat-ul-Jamaat Association Inc.(ASJA) and Chairman of its Propagation Committee.

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During my visit to Karachi I held discussions with Shaikh Imran Nazar Hosein (a Trinidadian who was among the first group of graduates of the Aleemiyah Institute and was at the time a Lecturer there) with a view to his returning home for a few weeks for the purpose of conducting a series of lectures and seminars. Shaikh Hosein was amenable to the suggestion and a few weeks after he arrived in Trinidad to conduct the programmes.

While finalising his programme the Shaikh informed me of the capabilities of one Professor Syed Ali Ashraf of Cambridge University and suggested that the Professor should be invited

to conduct a seminar in Trinidad and Tobago on “Genetic Engineering”, a subject which was then very much in the air. I thought the idea was a very good one. The Shaikh advised that he could contact the Professor by phone. I obtained the approval of the President of the Association immediately after which the Shaikh rang the Professor from my home. After speaking to the Professor for a few minutes the Shaikh introduced me to him over the phone, then passed the phone to me so I could formally invite him to visit the country for a week as a guest of the Association in order to conduct the seminar. I did so, and we agreed on the dates of his arrival, the seminar and his departure. He further told me that he would like to conduct some *muraqabah* (meditation) sessions while he was in Trinidad and requested that they be arranged.

I must confess that when speaking on the phone with the Professor I was immediately impressed as his voice and manner of speaking conveyed the impression to me that, besides being knowledgeable in the academic and Islamic areas, he had an amiable disposition and would be easy to get along with.

#### **4. THE PROFESSOR’S FIRST VISIT TO TRINIDAD**

On Professor’s arrival in the country the President of ASJA and I awaited him in the restricted Customs area and recognised him immediately as he stood in the Immigration line waiting to be attended to. It was easy to identify him as he wore a *sherwani* and Jinnah hat. He saw the President and I, both of whom wore *kurtas* and *topees*, smiled and waved to us.

We met the Professor after he passed through Immigration and welcomed him to our country. I cleared him through Customs (where I had worked during my first ten years in the Public Service and still had some contacts) and we escorted him to the public area where a number of persons were waiting to welcome him. I then drove him to my home where he was my guest during his week’s visit. Joining us at dinner that night were a few persons including the President of ASJA and Shaikh Hosein.

The seminar was carded for the following Sunday. During the week the Professor visited some of the ASJA’s Primary schools, addressed a meeting of school teachers and met members of the ASJA Executive Committee.

Traditionally, lectures to the Muslim community related to Islamic topics. As the seminar to be conducted by the Professor was on a non-traditional subject, it was thought it might attract only a very small audience. However a nearly full hall of participants assembled (about 175 persons of different backgrounds and ages) on that Sunday morning to hear the Professor deliver his lecture, which was followed by numerous questions and lively discussions.

I must confess that I was pleasantly surprised by the positive response of the Muslim community to the invitation for the lecture having regard not only to the subject matter but also the fact that a small donation was requested of attendees to cover the cost of refreshments and lunch.

## **5. VISITS TO HAJI MUHAMMAD YUSUF FRANCIS<sup>2</sup>**

As I mentioned previously, during my first telephone conversation with the Professor he had indicated that he would like to conduct some *muraqabah* sessions while in Trinidad. I deduced from that request that he was a *Shaikh* of a Sufi order. I subsequently found out that he belonged to the *Naqshbandi* Order.

Very early during his first visit to the country (when he was my house guest for the entire week of his stay) he told me that he must pay a visit to Haji Francis, a revert to Islam. We did so and Professor made it his duty to pay his respects to Haji Francis during all his subsequent visits to the country.

## **6. COURTESY CALL ON THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO**

Justice Noor Mohammed Hassanali, a retired Appeal Court Judge, was elected to the position of President of the country on March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1987. During his visit later that year Professor told me that he would like to make a courtesy call on the President, who was a Muslim. I made the necessary arrangement with the President, with whom I had been acquainted for a number of years, and accompanied the Professor on the visit.

After the usual courtesies were exchanged the Professor advised the President of his involvement in the effort to further faith-based education in the United Kingdom and other countries and of the seminar he was due to conduct in this connection at the Hilton Hotel.

The President, who had a keen interest in education and had in fact been a teacher at a Secondary School for a few years before leaving the country to study law, wished Professor success in his efforts.

## **7. DINNER AND TEA WITH HIS COMPATRIOTS**

My wife had been actively involved on a voluntary basis in a number Islamic activities for most of her adult life. One such area was imparting Islamic religious instructions at the

University Private School, a task which she thoroughly enjoyed and performed for twenty eight years. The school catered primarily for children of the academic and lay staff of the St. Augustine Campus of the University of the West Indies. The academic staff was drawn from various parts of the world.

During one of Professor's earlier visits my wife told him that there was a Bangladeshi lecturer attached to the University, a Dr. Aberdeen, whose child attended her Islamic class. Professor expressed interest in meeting the family so my wife, who had met the child's mother on a few occasions at the school, contacted her and invited the family to have dinner with us. They accepted our invitation and Professor happily conversed with them and relished the Bangladeshi-style fruit desert Mrs. Aberdeen brought. During the course of the dinner Dr. Aberdeen told Professor that there were about three or four other Bangladeshis lecturing at the University besides himself. Professor informed Dr. Aberdeen that he would like to meet with them also. As a result we had them all over for tea one afternoon. As I recall they brought some Bangladeshi delicacies with them which Professor thoroughly enjoyed. Professor was very happy in the company of his compatriots and was all smiles on those two occasions.

## **8. MRS. SHRAF ACCOMPANIES PROFESSOR ON A FEW OF HIS VISITS**

Mrs. Ashraf accompanied Professor on at least two of his visits to Trinidad.

On the first occasion both of them were our guests for the period of their visit. My wife, who was at the time President of the ASJA Ladies Section, invited the members of the Executive Committee to have tea at our home in order to meet Mrs. Ashraf. Besides the social aspect of the visit, this gave Mrs. Ashraf an insight into the activities of the group.

## **9. MURAQABAH SESSIONS**

At the beginning of this article I mentioned that when I extended an invitation to Professor over the phone to visit the country for the purpose of conducting a seminar, he indicated to me that he would like to organise some *muraqabah* sessions during his visit. As mentioned also, during his first visit he made it his duty to pay his respects to Haji Francis who had conducted such activities for many years but was now failing in health.

Professor was able to attract a fairly large group of persons to join in this exercise, perhaps about a hundred or so, as evidenced by the number of persons who would be at the airport to

meet him on the occasions of his arrivals and departures. These sessions were conducted mostly co-inciding with the *fajr salaah* at two different venues, one of which was quite a distance from my home. This necessitated his staying at one of his *mureeds* in the area. As a result, after a few years, when visiting the country he would come to my home directly from the airport, have dinner with a few guests and leave about eleven next morning for the home of one of his *mureeds*, returning to my home about eleven on the morning of his departure, have lunch with some guests, after which I would take him to the airport to catch his flight back home.

## **10. PROFESSOR ATTENDS RABETA (MUSLIM WORLD LEAGUE) CONFERENCE**

Professor arrived for his annual visit to Trinidad in 1989 a few days before a two-day Rabeta Conference for the Caribbean and South America was due to be held. He was my house guest at that time and I advised him of the Conference and that I would be attending it as a delegate of my Association. When he learned that Dr. Abdullah Omar Naseef, Secretary General of Rabeta, was due to attend he became very excited. He told me that Dr. Naseef and he had taught at the same University in Saudi Arabia for a number of years and a close relationship existed between both of them. He expressed the desire to attend the Conference and I told him that he should contact the local Director of Rabeta, whom he knew very well, in order to obtain an invitation so he could attend. The Director advised him that the issuing of invitations was under the purview of the Secretary General and that Professor's request would be put to him when he arrived, which was the evening before the Conference was due to start. Very late on that evening the local Director rang the Professor and informed him that Dr. Naseef had approved his request.

Professor accordingly attended the two-day Conference and sat at the table with the delegates of ASJA. When the delegates broke for *Zuhr salaah* and lunch on the first day I was separated from Professor while proceeding to the prayer hall. After the *salaah* was completed I could not see Professor because of the large number of delegates and accordingly proceeded to the dining hall with the expectation of finding him there. After looking around for a while I saw Professor and Dr. Naseef sitting at a table having lunch. Professor saw me and motioned to me that I should join them, which I did. We were later joined by two officials of Rabeta. Prof and Dr. Naseef carried on a light conversation during lunch, mostly about old times together. However, from their conversation and reactions to each other I came to the conclusion that they were very close friends. Dr. Naseef invited Professor to visit with him in his suite after dinner that night as we left the table to return to the Conference Hall

After dinner Professor asked me to accompany him to Dr. Naseef's room. I agreed as Professor was my house guest and was travelling to and from the Conference with me. Again, both of them were smiling and laughing while they spoke, obviously reminiscing

about some events in the past. After about an hour we took leave of Dr. Naseef, with Professor and Dr. Naseef embracing tightly in the Islamic fashion for a long time, both obviously with the thought “When will we meet again?”

## **11. PROFESSOR AT THE DINING TABLE**

Prior to Professor’s arrival in the country my wife sought advice from Shaikh Hosein on Professor’s preferences for meals. She was told, among other things, that he liked stewed fish with “kitcherie” (rice cooked together with yellow split peas) and a vegetable known locally as “*lowkie*” (“marrow’ in some countries). My wife was familiar with it as her mother used to cook it. After we were married my mother-in-law would sometimes send some cooked “*lowkie*” for us but, not being a lover of vegetables or one to venture into eating food to which I was not accustomed, I never partook of it. My wife loved it, however. At that time I used to go to the market on week-ends to purchase fresh vegetables and similar produce (my wife, of course, making a list of her needs). “*Lowkie*” was not easily available as it was used mainly by older persons of East Indian descent. I was eventually able to locate one or two vendors who stocked the item when it was available and obtained it whenever Professor was our guest.

As regards his daily routine, Professor occupied the bedroom next to the one my wife and I occupied. The bedroom was also adjacent to the *salaat* room *cum* library. I would often hear some movements in his room in the early hours of the morning, which indicated that he was awake. When I went to the *salaat* room for the Fajr *salaat* I would on most occasions find him already there waiting for me. We would converse until the *Fajr fard* was performed, after which he would return to his room. He would normally come out of his room after having a shower about half an hour after sunrise, have a cup of coffee and some crackers then return to his room for a while. He would come out about an hour and a half after to have breakfast, which consisted mainly of a soft-boiled egg and toast. I was never a lover of soft boiled eggs but had to have one to keep Professor’s company while he was having his. Since that time whenever my wife gives me a soft-boiled egg at breakfast I think of Professor. We never had guests for breakfast and quite often Professor would call my wife by her first name, telling her to come and join us at the table. Initially she would decline but eventually Professor became like one of the family and eventually she would have no hesitation in joining us at the table.

We would normally have guests for lunch. Over the years they included the Presidents of the three Muslim organisations, a former senior member of the Cabinet of the country, a

Pakistani national who had been taught by Professor at Karachi University and was the local Manager of a foreign bank, a number of Imaams and field workers in the cause of Islam. My wife would consult Professor on the menu for the day and he would tell her to prepare a simple meal. My wife however would prepare a variety of dishes and when we sat at the table she would come and explain what was contained in the various dishes. Professor would shake his head and tell her she should not have taken so much trouble. Then I, with a serious look on my face, would quip: “*Professor, you know it’s only when you are here that I get good food to eat.*” At this, Professor would laugh heartily, shake his head sideways in disagreement, and respond: “*No. No.*”

During one of Professor’s visits we had as our luncheon guests four of the first graduates of the Aleemiyah Institute of Islamic Studies, Karachi, Pakistan. They were:

- Shaikh Ali Mustafa, a Surinamese revert of African descent who had served as a missionary in a number of countries and was on a short lecture tour of Trinidad,
- Maulana Siddique Ahmad Nasir of neighbouring Guyana, who was in Trinidad to conduct a series of lectures,
- Maulana Dr. Waffie Mohammed, a Trinidadian, who was the local Director of Rabeta, and
- Sheikh Imran Nazar Hosein, also of Trinidad.

I believe it was the first time these scholars were all meeting together since their graduation many years before..

The guests arrived shortly before noon and we sat on the porch and engaged in light conversation until it was time to offer the *Zuhr salaah*. We used my living room for this purpose as it would have been somewhat crowded to perform the prayer in my *namaaz* room *cum* library. We then had lunch after which we sat on the prayer mats in the living room (which had not yet been removed) to have coffee and dessert. The whole atmosphere was one of informality, especially with the former classmates sometimes reminiscing about their experiences while studying together. Everyone was in a happy spirit, talking about a variety of subjects, laughing and having snacks. I saw Professor in a different light then, not as the staid University lecturer or Shaikh or religious leader, but as an ordinary human being who could relate comfortably with those around him. This atmosphere prevailed for a few hours until the guests had tea and left shortly after four.

## **12. PROFESSOR AND THE NEW BEDSHEET**

All wives like to keep a neat house and to pamper their guests, notwithstanding their financial limitations. My wife is no exception.

We were preparing for the imminent arrival of Professor on the occasion of his annual visit and my wife decided that she wanted a new bed sheet and pillowcases to match the colour of the recently re-painted bedroom walls. After my usual objections as to why a new sheet was necessary (which, as expected, were over-ruled) we went to the nearby department store where she purchased a set she found suitable. The items were duly washed, pressed and fitted on the bed on the afternoon of Professor's expected arrival.

Professor arrived on time, performed the required *salaat*, dined, then retired to his room early to recuperate after the long (nine hours) journey by air. When Professor came by the kitchen door the next morning to let us know he was up and to have his usual cup of coffee and crackers, both my wife and I enquired if he had had a good night's rest. To our surprise he stated that he could not sleep during the night as there was the image of a butterfly on the sheet. Now, both my wife and I are aware of the restrictions of Islam in this respect and we endeavour to follow them. We told Professor we were not aware of this and went to his room with him to examine the sheet. At first we could not discover the image but on close examination we realised that what we considered to be a simple pattern was in fact very faint images of a butterfly.

So my wife bought a new set of sheets, had them washed and ironed, and replaced the set which was on Professor's bed.

### **13. MISSION TO EGYPT, SAUDI ARABIA AND INDIA**

#### **(a) Background to Visits**

The ASJA had been sending students to study at great expense at the Aleemiyyah Institute of Islamic Studies in Karachi, Pakistan, since its establishment by the late Dr. Fazl-ur Rahman Ansari (*R.A.*) in 1964. This fell eventually under the purview of the writer in his capacity as Chairman of the ASJA's Propagation Committee. The necessity for the establishment of an Institute for Islamic Studies locally therefore arose from the late 1970's but did not materialise for some years. However, in the mid eighties the writer was able to get the Association to agree to the establishment of such an institution, to be named after the late Haji Ruknudeen, former *Qadi* and *Sheikh-ul-Islam*. A Board of Directors was established for this purpose, with the writer as Chairman. The Board commenced organising part-time residential courses in 1986 and when Professor became aware of its existence sometime later he suggested it should have a link with the Darul Ihsan University which he was at the time in the process of establishing. Professor then proposed that the Institute should operate on a full-time basis and offered to liaise with Maulana Abu Hasan Ali Nadwi,

a world renowned Islamic scholar and writer, in this respect. This was agreed to as a result of which the Maulana recommended Dr. Majid Ali Khan<sup>5</sup> of Jamia Millia Islamia for the position of Principal of the Institute.

During Professor's visit to Trinidad in 1990 the ASJA agreed that he and I should travel to a number of countries and meet certain officials, as indicated below, for the purpose of having the HRIIS functioning on a full-time basis. Professor arranged the travel schedule and the appointments for the middle of November. I met him in London and we visited the Saudi Embassy for him to renew his visa and for me to obtain one. We visited the Egyptian Embassy after for the same reason. (I had obtained my Indian visa in Trinidad).

### **(b) Cairo, Egypt**

The arrangements for our stay in Cairo and for a meeting with the Minister for the Affairs of Al Azhar University were made by a friend of Professor who was himself a retired Professor at the University and was then operating a bookstore specialising in Islamic books for university students. All I can recall of his name is that it began with the letter "B" hence I will refer to him as Professor B. He booked us in the Al Hussain Hotel, which is very near to the Al Hussain Masjid, in which there is a shrine containing the head of Imaam Hussain (R.A.). The Professor and I were forced to share a large room with two single beds and toilet facilities as the celebration of the martyrdom of Imaam Hosein (R. A.) was due to take place in a few days. As a matter of fact our booking was accepted on the condition that we leave by a certain time.

We visited Professor B at his bookshop at around 11.00 the morning after our arrival, as he had invited us to have lunch with him. When the two Professors met I got the distinct impression from the way they greeted each other and conversed that they had not only known each other for a considerable length of time but were also close friends. Shortly after our arrival at the bookstore we were joined by two sisters-in-faith who had travelled from Alexandria by train that morning specially to meet Professor. From the way that Professor and the sisters exchanged greetings and conversed during their stay with us I concluded that they were *mureeds* of his and may have attended *muraqaba* sessions and/or seminars conducted by him. The sisters appeared to have a high degree of respect and admiration for Professor. The sisters spent about three hours with us before leaving to catch a train to return to Alexandria.

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Khan had taught for nearly five years at the ASJA Boy's College, San Fernando, Trinidad and was subsequently awarded the Second Prize in a world competition initiated by Rabeta for his submission on the life of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.).

The following day Professor and I met with the Minister and we made separate requests, through an interpreter, for teachers from Al Azhar University for the Darul Ihsan University in Bangladesh and the Haji Ruknudeen Institute of Islamic Studies in Trinidad, respectively. The Minister was very sympathetic to our requests, explaining that there were over five thousand graduates of Al Azhar who were assigned to various organisations in different parts of the world for the purpose of performing *daw'ah* and whose salaries were paid by the Government. He went on to explain the conditions under which missionaries were assigned to overseas bodies. The meeting ended with the Minister promising to give careful consideration to the two requests.

We visited the Al Husaini Masjid to perform our *salaat* as often as possible. After the *salaat* on one occasion Professor and I visited the shrine where the Imaam's head is buried in order to offer *du'a*. Prof offered the *du'a*, which lasted for about ten minutes, in a very low voice. I glimpsed at him occasionally and noticed that he was very emotional, his face taking on different expressions during the course of his supplication. I was reminded somewhat of supplications offered by Haji Francis at religious functions in Trinidad. This could perhaps be explained by the fact that they were both *Shaikhs* of the Naqshbandi Order.

After spending three days and nights in Cairo, we donned our *ihrams* and boarded a plane for Jeddah to continue our mission.

### **(c) Saudi Arabia**

We were met on our arrival at Jeddah Airport by one of the *mureeds* of Professor, a Bangladeshi, who had taken a few days leave from his job in order to transport us during our visit. We had dinner at his home, after which he drove us to Makkah Shareef, where we stayed in an apartment<sup>3</sup> rented by Professor. On arrival in Makkah we both of course performed *umrah*, though at different times.

The following day we travelled to Jeddah where we first met a Director of the Islamic Academy with whom Professor had an appointment to discuss progress being made in connection with efforts to raise funds for acquisition of the property adjoining the Academy's headquarters. The director informed Professor that he had written a number of persons soliciting a specific amount by way of donation from each for the project and that if half of them responded favourably sufficient funds would be received to purchase the proposed building. The Director expressed confidence that their objective would be achieved.

We then visited the Islamic Development Bank where I had an appointment with a Drs. Mohammed to discuss the delay in dealing with the release of funds already approved for the construction, furnishing and equipping of an extension to the HRIIS. Drs. Mohammed advised that this matter was not within his portfolio and took us to the head of the relevant section. It turned out that no action had been taken on the matter but the Head of the section,

after perusing the file, told us that all the requirements had been met for release of the funds and promised to expedite the matter.

We returned to Makkah after having a late lunch at the home of a Trinidadian brother who worked at the IDB.

I do not believe that either Professor or I would have been happy if we had reached Jeddah, performed the *Umrah* and did not read *salaat* in *Masjid al-Nabawi* and also visit the tomb of the Noble Prophet (S.A.W.). This we did the following day. We were driven to Jeddah Airport from where we flew to Madinah Shareef. We took a taxi to a hotel very close to the Masjid to book a room for a few hours so that we could freshen-up. The face of the front desk clerk at the hotel broke into a huge smile on seeing Professor, and he let out a loud “Welcome Professoor! Assalaam U Alaikum”. Professor’s face broke out into an equally big smile and he replied to the greeting, following which they heartily shook hands. (I concluded from the way they greeted each other that Professor was a regular guest at the hotel). After Professor signed the Register we went to our room, made fresh ablutions and then walked the short distance to the Masjid. We waited in the *Masjid* making *zikr* until it was time for the *Zuhr salaat*. After performing the *salaat* in *jamaat* we went to the shrine of the Noble Prophet (S.A.W.) in order to make *du’a* and send salutations to him. We continued by performing the same rites before the graves of Hazrat Abu Bakr As-Siddique and Hazrat ‘Umar Al-Faruuq (R.A.). After offering two *rakaats salaat* in *Riadh ul Jannah* we performed *zikr* for a while again before we returned to the hotel, checked out, took a taxi to the airport and boarded our flight to Jeddah.

Having completed our objectives in Jeddah, we then flew to New Delhi the next day in order to continue our mission.

## **Delhi**

In Delhi we stayed at the Hyatt Regency Hotel where we were able to obtain separate rooms.

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Shortly after we checked in at the hotel Professor contacted Dr. Majid Ali Khan, who had been recommended by Maulana Abu Hasan Ali to fill the position of Principal of the HRIIS. The following day we met with Dr. Khan at the office of the Managing Director of Kutub Khana Azizia, booksellers and publishers, and started discussions with him. We broke for *Zuhr.salaat*, which was read in the *Jama Masjid* opposite us and returned to the office for lunch. We then hired a taxi which, under Dr. Khan’s directions, took us on a brief tour of the Parliament Buildings, President House and a few other places of interest before returning to our hotel late in the afternoon.

While *en route* to Delhi Professor had told me that it would be a pity if we reached India and did not visit the shrine of Kwaja Moin-ud-din Chisti in Ajmir and also the Taj Mahal in

Agra. I agreed with him entirely. On arriving at our hotel Professor went to a travel agency office in the lobby and enquired about a tour to Ajmir. We were informed that it would take a full day, and involved taking a taxi to the railway station at six in the morning, catching a train at a particular time for the long journey to Ajmir and, after visiting the shrine, returning to Delhi during the night. Professor made the necessary bookings for us to go but on checking with the travel agency for the tickets for our train journey the next morning we were told that there was a problem with the train schedule that day and our proposed tour would have to be cancelled. We were naturally disappointed, especially as another arrangement could not be made due to our limited stay in Delhi.

However, we were able to visit the Taj Mahal in Agra. Dr. Khan made arrangements with the owner of a taxi to drive us there and accompanied us on the visit. We left the hotel about seven in the morning, arriving at the monument some four and a half hours after. While touring the monument we went to the basement (now closed to the public) where the bodies of the Emperor Shah Jehan and his third wife, Mumtaz Mahal, are preserved. While before the remains of the couple Professor commented that millions visited the tomb every year and wondered whether any offered *du'a* for them. He said that we should, then raised his hands and offered an appropriate supplication. I raised my hands and joined him in it.

After our tour of the building, we proceeded to the adjoining *masjid* where we offered our *Zuhr salaah*. We then had lunch at a nearby restaurant and started on our return journey around four o'clock. However after about three hours the car started developing mechanical problems while we were on a highway. Fortunately the driver was able to coax the vehicle along until we reached a village and located a mechanic who was able to complete repairs after working on the vehicle for about three hours. We then continued our return trip to Delhi, arriving at our hotel around one in the morning.

The following afternoon we went to Dr. Khan's home to have tea with about ten to twelve of the senior academics at the Jamia Millia Islamia, where Dr. Khan lectured. Professor gave a brief presentation on the advantages of faith-based education and entertained questions from them. The discussions had to be curtailed however when it was time to perform the *Maghrib salaah*. Professor and I had previously been invited to stay on for dinner, which we did. After dinner we continued our previous discussion on the offer to Dr. Khan to accept the position of Principal of the HRIIS, with Dr. Khan requesting time to consult his family before arriving at a decision. We then performed the *Isha salaah* after which we returned to our hotel.

#### **(d) Lucknow**

We flew to Lucknow the next morning to meet with Maulana Abu Hassan Ali Nadwi<sup>4</sup> former Rector of the *Nadwatul Ulema*, who had recommended Dr. Khan for the position of Principal of the HRIIS. We arrived in Lucknow at about eleven in the morning and were

met at the airport by an official of the institution. We were driven to the institution and escorted to separate rooms. Professor was ushered to his room first. The door was wide open and I naturally looked in. It was a very large room with an unusually large bed, which was covered with a beautiful bright-coloured bedspread. It was obvious that the institution thought very highly of Professor and had spread the “red carpet” for him. I smiled, looked at Professor and said: “Professor! You are being given royal treatment today.” Professor smiled back weakly at me (I believe he might have been embarrassed at the arrangements) and I left and was escorted to my room

We refreshed ourselves and when we heard the *adhaan* for the *Zuhr salaah* we came out of our respective rooms, where we met an official in the corridor who escorted us to the *masjid* on the compound. After the *salaah*, the official led us to a large room in a building where a number of persons, including the Maulana, were gathered. Professor and the Maulana heartily embraced each other and had a brief conversation before we were introduced to the others in the room, who were senior members of the academic staff.

We then sat, in Islamic tradition, on the carpeted floor to have lunch. There were a large number of small containers, each with a different item of prepared food, spread on the floor. This was the pattern for lunch and dinner during the three nights and four days we stayed at the institution. It appears to me, in retrospect, that whenever the Maulana visited the institution, he would have his meals with senior members of the academic staff, with each one bringing a small quantity of whatever had been prepared in his home and sharing it with the *others*.

*At Nadwatul Ulema* Professor met an old friend and colleague, Dr. Abdullah Omar Abbas *Nadwi* (then retired), who was a distinguished scholar and writer. Professor spent two mornings with him compiling a syllabus for the HRIIS. I sat in at the meetings but could not make much contribution as this area was outside my scope.

Both Professor and I wanted to do some shopping, he for his wife and niece and I for my wife. We were taken to the stores one afternoon by an official of the institution for this purpose (see next section).

The Maulana invited the Professor to visit his home in Bareilly (some thirty or forty miles away) to spend a day with him. Professor asked me to accompany him on the visit the next day but I declined, feeling they would want to have some time together to reminisce. Professor was away for most of the day.

The next morning, having concluded our business at *Nadwatul Ulema*, we returned to Delhi.

#### **(e) We part company**

With our visit to Lucknow, our mission was then completed.

The following day we left for different destinations: I, early in the morning for London and, after a few days, back to Trinidad and, later in the day, Professor to Bangladesh in connection with matters relating to Darul Ihsan University. Professor came down to the front desk of the hotel with me to see me checked out after which I expected he would have gone up to his room. He did not but walked down the steps of the hotel with me to my waiting taxi. We embraced each other for while before I entered the taxi. It was a sad parting as a close bond had grown between us during his visits to Trinidad and strengthened during the two weeks or so we had spent together. I looked back through the glass of the car as the driver moved off and saw Professor waving for sometime before turning and starting to mount the steps to enter the hotel.

#### 14. **THE EXPERT IN LADIES WEAR**

I must confess that I am not familiar with the preferences of the opposite sex. Shortly after I was married some fifty nine years ago it was my wife's (Laila's) birthday so I went to the cosmetic counter of a reputable local store, purchased (on my limited salary as a public servant) a well-known international brand of perfume which was highly advertised, had it gift-wrapped and then presented it my wife lovingly. She unwrapped the gift, opened the perfume, then told me that she did not like the scent. Well, from that time I left the gift-selection for her initially to one of her sisters (most of whom lived nearby) and then, when our children grew up, one of our two daughters. When both girls were married and lived abroad, my eldest son took over this highly skilled art and still does the needful whenever the occasion arises.

My wife wears Islamic garments based mainly on the Pakistan-Indian *shalwar-kameez* fashion so when the occasion arose for the Professor and I to go to a number of countries, including India, she naturally wanted me to purchase some outfits for her. Not being accustomed to purchasing garments for her I accordingly took along one of her outfits which fitted her well and also made copious notes about the colours, styles etc she would like. While on our mission to the various countries I told Professor that if the occasion arose I would like to do some shopping for my wife and he replied that he would also like to do some for his wife and niece.

During our three day stay at *Nadwatul Ulema* in Lucknow arrangements were made for a member of the staff to take us to the shopping district. As we visited various stores Professor would chose suitable items for his wife and niece (at which he seemed to be accustomed). When we visited the stores which stocked an assortment of *shalwar* and *kameez* he would look carefully at the items as the attendant held them up for us to obtain a proper view, and would make comments such as "Laila will not like this" or "This will not suit Laila" in

which case the garment would be rejected. When he felt a garment was suitable for my wife he would comment “This will fit Laila” or “Laila will love this” and put it aside to be paid for. I thanked Professor for undertaking a task which I would have failed at and, indeed, my wife was enthused when she saw Professor’s selection.

## **15. THE POWER OF DU’A**

While travelling with Professor in 1990 I had a personal experience with his prowess in the spiritual field when we landed at Jeddah Airport. The invasion of Iraq by the Western countries was then imminent and there was very strict security at the airport. There were long lines of passengers waiting to be cleared by Customs Officers with most passengers’ baggage being thoroughly examined. I was in front of Professor in the line when he tugged at my *Ithram* and told me to stand behind him. I did as he wished, after which he pulled our suitcases together. I could then hear him whispering some words softly. I looked at his face and saw his eyes closed and his lips moving. He was obviously offering an appropriate *du’a* for us to be cleared by Customs without any difficulty. He finished the *du’a* by leaning slightly over the suitcases and blowing over them. When he reached the Customs Officer, the officer spoke briefly with Professor and then cleared us without inspecting our suitcases.

I will mention here the experience a prominent local businessman related some years at a small function he held at his residence to mark Eid ul Fitr and the award to him of an honorary LLD degree by the University of the West Indies. In his welcome address to the guests the host alluded to a recent fire in his local plant, saying that he was out of the country when his wife telephoned him and informed him of the fire which was then spreading rapidly. Continuing, he said he immediately telephoned Professor Ashraf, who advised him to offer a particular *du’a* (supplication), which he immediately did. He kept in continuous contact with his wife on the phone so that he could be apprised of developments at the factory and very soon after she informed him that the direction of the heavy breeze, which was spreading the fire rapidly through the factory, suddenly changed to the opposite direction, resulting in the fire no longer being a threat to the whole premises and the damage being contained.

I was aware that the businessman had a very close personal relationship with the Professor and had no doubt about what he related, especially having regard to my own experience at Jeddah Airport.

## **16. THE TWO SEMINARS ON FAITH-BASED EDUCATION**

Professor conducted two seminars on faith-based education in Trinidad.

The first was towards the end of 1987, shortly after a new party had been elected to power. It was a Thursday morning with Professor due to leave the country the following Monday. At breakfast Professor told me that he would like me to arrange a meeting with the new Minister of Education, a former Principal of a well-recognised Government-assisted Boys Secondary School, with the view of having faith-based education introduced in the education system in the country. I informed Professor that it would be difficult to make an appointment with the Minister before his departure at such short notice but he insisted that I at least try. I did and was able to reach the Minister, with whom I had a very good rapport as we had served together on the Executive Committee of the Anti-Apartheid Organisation of Trinidad and Tobago. I explained my reason for calling to the Minister who advised that he had a very busy schedule as he was due to leave the country the next afternoon on Government business. He however agreed to meet us at 8 a.m. for half an hour the next morning.

Professor and I went to the Minister's office at the appointed time and Professor briefly explained the concept and importance of faith-based education. We raised the question of the Minister's attending a seminar on the subject to be sponsored by the ASJA and he promised to give the opening address. Two days were fixed in consultation with him and Professor accordingly returned to the country to conduct the seminar. I made appropriate arrangements, liaising with the heads of religious organisations, who I knew through my involvement in the Inter Religious Organisation of Trinidad and Tobago. The leaders of about fifteen bodies and two other representatives from each organisation were invited to the two day Seminar which was held at the Hilton Hotel and Conference Centre. I chaired the various sessions of the Seminar which was very well attended. The Minister delivered the feature address and was so interested in the subject that he remained the entire morning, only having to leave to attend the regular weekly sitting of the House of Representatives after lunch. Discussion was at a high level and I was especially surprised at the quality of the presentations and suggestions made by all participants, especially representatives of the smaller bodies.

## **The Second Seminar**

The second seminar was held under the auspices of the Inter Religious Organisation at the Royal Plaza Hotel in August 1993 during Professor's annual visit to the country. I was First Vice President of the IRO at that time and when I became aware of the dates of Professor's visit to the country I suggested to them that they should sponsor a seminar along the lines of the one held previously by the ASJA. They readily agreed.

I presided over the opening session of the two-day Seminar which was formally opened by the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, the Hon. Basdeo Panday. Like the first Seminar, all discussions were of a high standard.

Recommendations were made to the Government after both Seminars but in spite of promises made no positive action was taken as neither of the parties in power at the time was re-elected after their term of office expired.

## **17. LINGERING MEMORIES**

I knew Professor from 1984 until his sudden demise in 1998. I consider it not only a privilege but also a blessing from Allaah *Ta'ala* to have known him, to have had him as my house guest every year during that period, and to have spent over two weeks travelling with him. Nearly fifteen years after his being recalled to his Creator my wife and I still have vivid memories of him, a few of which have been recorded above.

I pray that Allaah *Subhaa-nuhu wa Ta'ala*, in His Infinite Grace and Mercy, will make his grave spacious for him and grant him a place among His honoured ones in the life after.

Zainol A. Khan

### Notes

1 Maulana Siddiqui paid a six-month visit to Trinidad in 1950 as part of one of his world tours. He was accompanied by his son-in-law, Dr. Fazl-ur-Rahman Ansari, who carried out the duties of Private Secretary. Maulana Siddiqui passed away in 1954 in Madinah at the age of 63 after performing the hajj. Dr. Ansari paid three further visits to Trinidad and was elected Shaikh-ul-Islam in 1974 following the demise of Haji Ruknudeen. As he was resident in Karachi, a local Muslim Advisory Council was established and worked under his directions. He died in Karachi in 1974.

2 I first made acquaintance with Haji Francis in the middle forties when I became involved in Islamic activities. Haji Francis became a revert to Islam in the late thirties or early forties. Subsequent to his reversion, his siblings also reverted to Islam. He started a group involving Muslim youths called "The Mahai-uddeen Young Men's Muslim League" in the capital city which was very active in projecting Islam.

He became involved in one of the Sufi Orders (Naqshbandi) and was able to attract a group of persons who met once a week for *muraqaba* sessions. In the early sixties he visited Madinah where he spent about two years with his Shaikh. I would meet him at various functions and briefly before the *Jumu'a salaah* at the Jama Masjid, Port of Spain while I was working. In addition, I would consult him for guidance on what course of action I should take on a number of occasions.

I do not know how the Professor became aware of the activities of Haji Francis and can only surmise it was through his international connections.

3 Professor told me that he had rented the apartment, which was very near the *Haram Shareef*, while lecturing in at a University in Makkah. and, on moving from the country he had kept the tenancy because of his frequent visits to Makkah. He further said that the owner of the building had given all the tenants in the building notice to vacate it so that a modern multi-storey structure could be erected.

Professor however wanted to retain the tenancy because of its convenience and attempted to have the rent paid regularly. The owner however refused to accept it.

4 Maulana Hasan was a distinguished scholar who was internationally recognised for his work in the field of Islam. He received many honours from different parts of the world , including being given the key to the Ka'abah in order to enter it whenever he wanted

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