

# **The Life and Works of the late Al-Hajj Moulvi Ameer Ali**

## **I**

### **EARLY LIFE AND STUDIES ABROAD**

Al-Hajj Moulvi Ameer Ali was born at Pointe-a-Pierre on 21<sup>st</sup> July, 1898, the son of Salar Baksh and Nasiban. He had no brothers or sisters and lived with his parents and grandmother. At a very early age, he suffered a tragic blow when he lost the care and protection of his father, who separated from his wife and emigrated to the United States of America. Subsequently, his mother moved to Siparia to take up residence and he was left in the care of his grandmother.

At Pointe-a-Pierre, Ameer attended primary school only up to Firth Standard, and shortly after leaving this school, he moved to Siparia to live with his mother and stepfather. Ameer did not attend Secondary school and in order to obtain some form of qualification for employment, he began to tutor himself in Book-keeping. Later, he obtained employment as a Book-keeper with Mr. H.B. Syne, a road-building contractor of Siparia.

The young Ameer worked diligently and honestly, and was not preoccupied with the acquisition of wealth. Though poor, he did not appear to be so, for he was always contented with what he had. Up to this time, he was not a deeply religious person and was not known to be an active participant in the affairs of the local *Jama 'at*. His limited knowledge of Islam was obtained mainly by reading the *Islamic Review*, a journal printed by the Islamic Mission, Woking, England, and distributed to western countries.

However, in 1921, an event occurred which proved to be a turning-point in his life and which subsequently was of immense importance to the Muslim community in Trinidad. This was the arrival in Trinidad of Moulvi Fazal Karim Khan Durrani, a missionary attached to the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat-I-Islam, Lahore, India (now Lahore, Pakistan). His visit to Trinidad was the result of a request for a missionary made to the Islamic Mission, Woking, England, by a group of local Muslims, among whom was Abdul Ghany of St. Augustine. Moulvi Durrani organized the "evening of Religious Class" at Curepe in which he taught the principles of Islam to a small group of Muslims. In addition, he held many public lectures with the aim of stimulating an interest in Islam among Muslims and of defending Islam against criticisms by non-Muslims. The heated public debates which he held with priests and pundits were followed with keen interest by Muslims, Christians and Hindus from all over the colony.

Ameer became deeply interested in this man and his lectures and intimated to him his desire to study Islam. Consequently, he eagerly accepted the offer of a scholarship which

would enable him to study Islam at the Ahmadiyya College, Lahore, India, and towards the end of 1923 he left Trinidad to travel to India.

He began his studies at Lahore with courses in Islamic Theology, Arabic and Urdu and followed these in 1926 with courses in Logic and Comparative Religion. His tutors included Maulana Muhammad Ali and Maulana Abdul Haque Vidyarthi. He was a brilliant student and was deeply impressed with the high level of learning which existed at this institution. He often reflected on the condition of Muslims in Trinidad, and in a letter to Muhammad Ishmael Kaidar of Siparia, he lamented that “Muslims in Trinidad are like Christians and Jews in some of their beliefs about God.”

An outgoing person, he made many friends, and up to the present day, there are places in Pakistan where he is remembered with much affection and respect. He loved to travel, and in his free time he visited Java, Sumatra, and many of the villages of Northern India and Kashmir.

In 1927, Ameer had completed his course of study successfully. However, he felt that his learning was not complete until he had mastered the Arabic language. Thus, on leaving Lahore, he headed for Cairo, Egypt, and enrolled at Al-Azhar University. Here he made a deep study of the Arabic language and did additional courses in Islamic Theology, comparing and contrasting the teachings found there with those he had encountered at Lahore.

In May 1929, he performed the pilgrimage to Mecca, Arabia. He spent the second half of 1930 visiting several Middle East countries determined to see the main historical sites, such as the Cedars of Lebanon, the Dome of the Rock and the Wailing Wall of Jerusalem, the Temple of Baalbeck in Syria, the Khadimain Mosque in Baghdad, Iraq, and the Mosque of Sultan Ahmed and the Suleymania Mosque in Istanbul, Turkey. He completed his studies in Egypt early in 1931 and began his homeward journey from Cairo. He arrived in England in July, and after a few weeks, boarded the S.S. Magdalena, bound for Trinidad.

Meanwhile, Muslims in Trinidad, learning of his decision to return home, anxiously awaited his arrival. Their interest was partly due to the fact that he was the first Trinidadian to go abroad to study Islam and return a fully-qualified *moulvi*, and partly to the existence in Trinidad of a crying need for Muslims with that level of training with which to carry out missionary work. Thus, on 23<sup>rd</sup> August, 1931, a crowd of about two hundred people, all friends and relatives of Al-Hajj Moulvi Ameer Ali, gathered at the Port of Spain Wharf to welcome him. Among them were H.B. Syne, Abdul Ghany, and other prominent members of the Muslim community. In the following weeks he was the guest of a number of welcome functions held in his honour in various districts.

He lived in Siparia for a few months, after which he moved to San Juan, renting a house at the corner of Back Chain Street and El Socorro Road. Here, he began his work as a missionary.

## II

### RELIGIOUS REFORM

In September 1927, some of the leading Muslims in the colony gathered at Chaguanas to discuss the problems confronting the Muslim community. Some of those present were Sayad Abdul Aziz, Haji Rucknuddin Meah, Abdul Ghany, Ameer Baksh, Rahim Baksh and Shaffie Mohammed. In order to look after the interests of Muslims, these men founded the Anjuman Tackveeyatul Islam (or Tackveeyatul Islamic Association – T.I.A.). This organization was non-sectarian in that any Muslim, of whatever school of thought, could become a member. Sayad Abdul Aziz was elected its first President. However, he died a few months later, and the Presidency passed into the hands of Haji Rucknuddin Meah of Tunapuna.

In May 1931, the leaders of the T.I.A. applied to the Legislative Council to have a bill introduced for the incorporation of Abdul Ghany and Haji Gokool Meah as Trustees of the organization. On his return from India, Moulvi Ameer Ali joined the T.I.A. and was appointed its missionary. He, together with the two trustees and the Honorary Secretary, appeared before a Select Committee on December 1<sup>st</sup> to give evidence on behalf of the T.I.A. Consequently, on December 15<sup>th</sup> 1931, the T.I.A. was incorporated by Act 39 of the Legislative Ordinance.

However, his appointment as missionary was regarded with a certain amount of reservation by Haji Rucknuddin Meah and others, who suspected him of being an Ahmadi. At the first public lecture arranged by him at the Liberty Hall, Port of Spain on 29<sup>th</sup> December 1931, he delivered an address on “The Death of Jesus.” During his lecture he declared that Jesus (u.w.b.p.) neither died on the Cross, nor was he taken in his physical form to Heaven, but that he had survived the Crucifixion and had travelled eastwards from Jerusalem. This ran contrary to the beliefs of the Muslims in Trinidad, which were that Jesus was alive in his physical form in Heaven and would someday return to Earth to be a leader of the Muslims. The *Moulvi*’s declaration therefore caused a great uproar among his audience and he was immediately denounced by the majority as a *kafir*.

He was then asked to state his beliefs about Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat-i-Islam. He stated that he was not an Ahmadi and that he had no views in particular about Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, as he had not made a study of his life and claims. Having refused to openly denounce Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as a non-Muslim, he was accused of being in disguise a Qadiani (a name that opponents of Ahmadis use when referring to them). That day saw the beginning of a division in the ranks of the T.I.A., with some members supporting Moulvi Ameer Ali and being branded with the name “Qadiani,” and the majority sharing the views of Haji Rucknuddin Meah and calling themselves “Sunnis.”

The *Moulvi* continued to deliver public lectures on Islam, and as the months went by, new controversies appeared. Soon Moulvi Ameer Ali and his “new” teachings were the

topic of conversation in almost every Muslim home. He questioned the origin and authenticity of all those practices and beliefs that appeared to him to have no basis on the Qur'an and the *Hadith*. And as he did so, a deliberate campaign was initiated against him by Haji Rucknuddin Meah and his followers who felt that they must oppose the introduction of "modern" views into Islam. Finding themselves unable to accept the "new" teachings of Moulvi Ameer Ali, they decided to relinquish ties with the T.I.A. On Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1932, Haji Rucknuddin Meah, Abdul Ghany, Syed Mohammed Hosein, Basheer Meah, and hundreds of other Muslims founded the Anjuman Sunnat-ul-Jamaat Association (A.S.J.A.) at Chaguanas.

The much-reduced membership of the T.I.A. consisted of strong supporters of Moulvi Ameer Ali, and they soon appointed him their *Mufti* for Life. Two of his closest friends were Mohammed Rafeeq and Mohammed Hakim Khan. These three men led the T.I.A. for the next fifteen years, struggling for the defence and propagation of Islam and for a reformation of Muslim practices and beliefs in Trinidad. Some of the controversial issues in which they were involved are presented below.

### **Defence of Islam**

When one speaks of the defence of Islam, one refers to the clarification of the Islamic concepts misunderstood by non-Muslims and the refutation of false allegations made by non-Muslims about the teachings of Islam and about the character of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (u.w.b.p.). To this task, Moulvi Ameer Ali turned his full attention.

At all his public lectures, non-Muslims were invited to attend. For the benefit of both Christians and Muslims, he dealt at length with the birth, mission and death of Jesus. To the Muslims, he taught that Jesus was born from human parents, that he was dead and was not alive in his physical form in heaven; to the Christians, he taught additionally that Jesus was neither God, nor the son of God. He held many debates on these topics with interesting Christians. He also devoted much time to refuting the remarks made by Christians and Hindus that Islam was spread "at the point of a sword." In this connection, many Muslims remember his masterly reply to Pundit Ajodha Persad (a visiting Arya Samajist from India) at the Paladium Cinema, Tunapuna, sometime in 1934, when the *Pundit* said that Islam was spread "at the point of a sword."

However, he at no time encouraged the fostering of prejudicial feelings among the three communities of Muslims, Christians and Hindus. He believed that all citizens of the colony had the duty of working together for the upliftment of the entire community, and that Muslims and Hindus especially had a great deal to do to establish themselves as part of the machinery that determined the destiny of the colony.

He was an impressive speaker and rarely was he at a loss for words. At his public lectures he never read from a prepared text, preferring to refresh his memory from jottings made on small pieces of paper. He had command over the Arabic, Urdu and English languages. This ability, as well as his factual analyses of the topics under discussion, earned him the admiration of his audiences. Today, most Muslims who knew him unreservedly praise him for his fearless defence of Islam.

### **Importance of Qur'an and Hadith**

Moulvi Ameer Ali felt that one of the factors contributing to the general weakness of the Muslims in propagating their religion was the fact that the average Muslim did not endeavour to understand the teachings of the Qur'an and was not well acquainted with the life of the Prophet Muhammad (u.w.b.p.). At that time, the reading of the Qur'an by many Muslims was more of ceremonial value than educational, as they were mainly concerned with the blessings from God that accrued from its recitation in Arabic, while the understanding and interpretation of its teachings were the tasks of the few literate ones among them. On almost all religious occasions parts of the Qur'an were recited in the Arabic or Urdu language by groups of men and boys; all recited simultaneously and very seldom were the recitations followed by explanations of what was read. This ceremony was called a *Moulood Shareef*, and included the rendering of Urdu songs, the most common theme of these being the praise of Prophet Muhammad. Moulvi Ameer Ali opposed this ceremony of *Moulood Shareef* and appealed to all Muslims to read the Qur'an with the aim of understanding it.

The members of A.S.J.A. laid great stress on the adherence of the religious customs of their forefathers; but the *Moulvi* argued that a number of practices in vogue among them were borrowed from other religions, especially Hinduism, since Hindus and Muslims had lived together for centuries in India. One example of this was the holding of *Moulood Shareef* ceremonies on the third day, the fortieth day, and one year after the death of a Muslim, these ceremonies being performed by the close relatives of the deceased. At these functions, it was customary for a dish to be prepared of the food most liked by the dead person when he or she was alive, for prayers to be said over this food by an *Imam*, and for this dish to be left as an offering to the soul of the deceased. Moulvi Ameer Ali opposed these practices and urged all Muslims to follow Prophet Muhammad rather than their Indian ancestors. He encouraged them to restrict themselves to the use of the Qur'an and those books of *Hadith* considered to be the most authentic by the consensus of Muslims all over the world.

### **Islamic education**

Moulvi Ameer Ali conducted religious classes at his home and at centres throughout the colony, such as St. James, St. Joseph, Port of Spain, Preysal Village, San Fernando, Princes Town and Siparia. He held these classes in mosques and, when it was more convenient to do so, in the homes of Muslims. Very often, after his afternoon classes, he would remain for hours discussing Islamic concepts, especially the ones giving rise to controversies in Trinidad. When this occurred in villages far from his home, his hosts would be only too happy to accommodate him for the night.

He encouraged Muslims to read the *Islamic Review*, which preached Islam in the light of the most modern thought. In January 1933, he began the publication of a monthly journal, *The Comforter*. This was to be the organ of the T.I.A., and featured articles on Islamic principles, information on the life of Prophet Muhammad, news about Muslims in other countries, a children's page, and discussion on the controversial topics of the day. This journal was circulated throughout Trinidad, Guyana and Suriname, and a smaller number of copies were also sent to Islamic associations in India and England.

In these ways he sought to educate Muslims and non-Muslims about Islam and to stimulate an Islamic consciousness in the minds of Muslims.

### ***Meelad-un-Nabee* (commemoration of the birthday of Prophet Muhammad)**

The *Moulvi* felt that the method adopted to commemorate the birthday of Prophet Muhammad, that of holding *Moulood Shareef* ceremonies, was inadequate in that both Muslims and non-Muslims were left in the dark as to the true nature of the Prophet. He suggested that “papers reflecting the character and personality of the Prophet should be prepared and read on the occasion. And these should be printed in pamphlet form to be circulated among Muslims and non-Muslims.”

### ***Tazeem***

It was a practice of the Muslims that at the end of *Moulood Shareef* ceremonies they would all stand upright and render a song in the Urdu language called *Tazeem*. It was a method of paying tribute to Prophet Muhammad, they felt, and refusal to do so was considered a great sin. The *Moulvi* taught that this practice was unnecessary, and that there were more meaningful ways by which to honour the Prophet, the best of them being obedience to him. He therefore omitted the rendering of the *Tazeem* at religious ceremonies conducted by him.

### **Women in Islam**

An area in which he focused great attention was the position of Muslim women in society. Up to 1931 Muslim women were not allowed to participate in activities outside the home and could not even attend religious functions held at public centres. Muslim girls were made to leave school at an early age due to pressure of work in the home and to the fear of Christian conversion efforts. The *Moulvi* felt that Muslim women were denied the opportunity to contribute towards the development of their community.

He therefore encouraged the members of the T.I.A. to allow their womenfolk to join that organization and to attend the religious functions and public lectures. Later, he urged them to participate in the religious activities by singing Islamic songs and delivering speeches. The *Moulvi* set the example by allowing his wife to deliver a speech prepared by him on the topic “Muhammad, the Exalter of Women” on 6<sup>th</sup> July 1933. The occasion was the commemoration of the Prophet’s birthday, organized by the San Juan Men’s Muslim Association, and Mrs Ameer Ali was greeted by thunderous applause when, in the course of her speech, she said: “The Arabs, in the days of ignorance, use to murder their daughter physically, but many a Muslim father here today murder their daughters spiritually.”

The *Moulvi* ignored the many protests made by the members of A.S.J.A. against these activities. At every opportunity that presented itself, he would publish in the columns of *The Comforter* instances in India and Muslim countries where Muslim and Hindu women were entering public life and struggling side by side with men for the upliftment of their societies. In addition, he scolded Muslim and Hindu fathers who would not make the necessary sacrifices to give their daughters and a sound academic education.

He was opposed for many years by members of A.S.J.A., but today Muslim women from the various organizations are engaged in forming women's groups, pursuing higher education, and seeking employment.

### **Marriage ceremony**

An indication of the extent to which Muslim women were kept in seclusion was the manner in which the majority of marriage ceremonies were conducted. In these, the bride and bridegroom were not allowed to sit next to each other. Instead, the bride would be made to remain inside her house, while the bridegroom sat before the assembled guests. Three witnesses would then carry messages to and fro between them in order that each may be informed of the other's acceptance of the marriage vows.

### ***Eid service***

Two important festivals in Islam are *Eid-ul-Fitr* and *Eid-ul-Adha*. *Eid-ul-Fitr* is celebrated on the first day of Shawwal, the tenth month of the Islamic calendar, and marks the end of the Muslim's fast during the previous month of Ramadan. *Eid-ul-Fitr* is celebrated about two months after *Eid-ul-Fitr* and coincides with the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca, Arabia.

On both occasions, Muslims in Trinidad congregated at mosques for worship. However, in his studies, Moulvi Ameer found that it was the practice of Prophet Muhammad to hold the *Eid* services in the open air and not within the confines of a mosque. This he decided to institute for the first time in Trinidad on Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> April 1932, when he and scores of members of the T.I.A. gathered at the Aranguez Savannah to hold the *Eid-ul-Adha* service. Part of the service was an address by the *Moulvi* on the topic, "The Pilgrimage to Mecca."

However, this event aroused the anger of the members of A.S.J.A. who attempted to prevent the *Moulvi* from conducting further open-air *Eid* services. On 5<sup>th</sup> April 1933, when Moulvi Ameer and his friends gathered at the Aranguez Savannah to prepare the site for the *Eid-ul-Adha* service the following day, they were told by the manager of the estate (on which the Savannah was situated) that they would not be able to do so, as a group of Muslims had informed him that such practices were un-Islamic. They then had to obtain the permission of the manager of the Aranguez Concrete Works, situated nearby, to hold the service on the lawns of that factory.

### ***Miraaj-un-Nabee* (Ascension of the Prophet Muhammad)**

Late in his life, Prophet Muhammad had an experience called *Miraaj* (Ascension), in which he found himself in the Divine Presence. Muslims in Trinidad, as in many parts of the world, believed that he was taken to Heaven in his physical form. The *Moulvi*, however, preached that the Prophet's journey to Heaven was in fact a spiritual experience, that he had a vision in which he saw with his spiritual eye certain events and people, and that he had not entered Heaven in his physical form.

### ***Taraweeh* prayer:**

A Muslim is commanded by God to pray five times daily. Each prayer is divided into sections called *rakaats*, which are repeated several times until the completion of the prayer. Each *rakaat* consists of recitations in the Arabic language while moving through a series of standing, bowing, prostrating and sitting postures. During the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, Muslims, after fasting for the entire day, gather in the mosque each night to perform a special prayer called *Taraweeh*. For more than eighty years, Muslims in Trinidad had been performing twenty *rakaats* for the *Taraweeh* prayer. They also believed that it was a compulsory prayer.

Moulvi Ameer Ali informed the Muslims that this prayer was not a compulsory one. However, it was highly recommended as a Muslim ought to devote more of his time to prayers during the month of Ramadan. But one of the greatest controversies was born among Muslims when he announced that they should perform only eight *rakaats* for the *Taraweeh* prayer. This led to some of the most heated debates between members of the T.I.A. and members of A.S.J.A., and up to the present time, Muslim opinion is still divided in this matter.

As a result of these differences in beliefs, a state of undeclared war existed between the T.I.A. and A.S.J.A. The *Moulvi* would criticize certain beliefs and practices of the members of A.S.J.A., while expounding the principles of Islam in his public lectures and in *The Comforter*, and as he did so, Haji Rucknuddin would reply by also holding public lectures and by printing pamphlets for distribution among the Muslims. For a time, each would answer challenges extended by the other to appear for public debates on the controversial issues. However, these invariably ended in chaos, with each leader adhering firmly to his views. At this stage, there was not the slightest ray of hope that Muslims would re-unite. Every *Jama'at* in the colony felt the destructive effects of this disunity. In many instances, members of a family would be divided in their support for the two organizations, causing great enmity which, in some cases, exists up to the present day. Finally, efforts to work out a compromise between the two parties were unsuccessful as neither leader was willing to give up any of his views. Consequently, Moulvi Ameer Ali and his small band of followers were ostracized by the rest of the Muslim community.

Insults were hurled at the *Moulvi* wherever he went. At his public lectures, certain persons attended merely to abuse him and cause confusion. Consequently, many of these meetings broke up in arguments and sometimes fights between members of the two opposing factions. Songs were composed, which were rendered during his lectures in order to ridicule him.

There were very few marriages between members of the two factions, and those few were attended by much wrangling by the families involved. This was especially so in the case of the *Moulvi*, for when his engagement to Nurrun Nahar Khan, daughter of Ayub Khan, was announced, many relatives, who were members of A.S.J.A., tried to influence Mr. Khan to disallow the forthcoming marriage. However, he was a firm supporter of the *Moulvi*, and the grand ceremony duly took place on 6<sup>th</sup> November 1932, performed by Sobratee Meah.

As the years went by, opposition and hatred towards Moulvi Ameer Ali grew to the extent that in their frustration at being unable to suppress his preaching, certain persons sought to frighten him by throwing stones at his house at night. This happened with such regularity that whenever he returned home from a particularly rowdy meeting in which he had got the better of his detractors, he would warn his wife: “Be careful tonight, they will throw stones at the house.” On one such night in early 1935, they were awakened by a neighbour to find their house on fire. Some neighbours had to rush into their house to rescue them and their two infant children, while others formed a bucket brigade to put out the blaze. As a result of this, the *Moulvi* decided to change residence, moving to Sellier Street, St. Joseph.

In spite of these difficulties, Moulvi Ameer Ali continued to preach, travelling from district to district, inviting all Muslims to unite under the banner of the T.I.A. He felt that the controversial issues were not fundamental to Islam and should not produce so much disunity, which would cripple the Muslim community. At the same time, he encouraged the members of the T.I.A. to exercise the utmost patience and forbearance, consoling them with the words that “anyone introducing new, progressive ideas in a community must expect a response similar to that displayed by the members of A.S.J.A.”

During July and August of 1934, Moulvi Ameer Ali visited Guyana and Suriname to conduct a series of lectures, at the request of the Muslim organizations there. He introduced the same ideas which he had been preaching in Trinidad, and very soon the organizations in these countries began to be dominated by these new ideas. He returned to Trinidad in September 1934, and soon after was appointed to the post of “President for Life” of the T.I.A.

Meanwhile, the members of A.S.J.A. felt the need for a missionary to counter the influence of Moulvi Ameer Ali and Moulvi Nazir Ahmad Simab arrived on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1935. This missionary, while in the employ of A.S.J.A., conducted religious classes at a number of centres throughout the island. However, after about eighteen months, he was dismissed, and he returned to India on 15<sup>th</sup> July 1937.

### III

## SOCIAL REFORM

Moulvi Ameer Ali was a man of wide vision and was concerned not only with matters in the religious field, but also with social issues, especially those affecting Indians. He struggled hard to improve the position of Indians and to place them on an equal footing with more privileged communities in the colony.

### **Education**

The threat to Islam and Hinduism posed by the indoctrination of Christian teachings in the minds of Muslim and Hindu children at the Canadian Mission Schools, and the high level of illiteracy among Indians, were of great concern to the *Moulvi*.

He encouraged Muslims and Hindus to study and respect their religions, and when the Education Commission sat in Trinidad in 1933, the T.I.A., together with other Indian organizations, made representations to have at least one Indian language (Arabic, Urdu or Hindi) taught in the primary schools, as an aid in the preservation of their religion and culture. On learning that the Marryat and Mayhew Report of 1932 recommended that the Indian community could have their own schools like the Christian denominations by forming an organization for that purpose, Moulvi Ameer Ali held discussions with other Indian leaders and the Indian Educational Association was formed in 1937, with the *Moulvi* as the President. But their application for permission to build a school was turned down by the Governor, Sir Hubert Young.

On 1<sup>st</sup> January 1938, Moulvi Ameer Ali became the first non-Christian member of the Education Board. At one of its meetings, he moved the resolution that Hindus and Muslims should be eligible to receive Government aid in running schools in the colony, but this motion was defeated. However, he continued to agitate in this matter and when his term on this Board ended in 1942, his efforts were continued by other Muslims. Finally, in 1949, through the persistence of N.M. Ghany, Secretary of the T.I.A., the El Socorro Islamia School became the first non-Christian denominational school in the colony to be granted Government aid.

### **Franchise reform**

Another example of his involvement in social issues was in the area of franchise reform. On October 6<sup>th</sup> 1944, a decision was made in the Legislative Council that an inhabitant of the colony was entitled to be registered as a voter after satisfying a number of requirements, one of which was that “he or she is able to satisfy the registering officer that he or she can understand the English language when spoken.” Indian leaders realized that Indians formed the majority of those affected by this provision, dubbed the “language test,” as illiteracy was highest among them.

They called an emergency meeting on 15<sup>th</sup> October 1944 at the India Club and Moulvi Ameer Ali attended, representing the T.I.A. The Indian Central Committee was formed, and the *Moulvi* was one of the members. This Committee launched a well-planned

campaign, which included tours throughout the colony, holding public lectures at which they dealt with the implications of the “language test.” After about two months, this committee succeeded in having the “language test” removed, and many more Indians were able to exercise their right to vote.

### **Muslim Marriage and Divorce Ordinance**

By the Immigration Marriage Ordinance, Indians in Trinidad were required to register their marriage so as to be considered legally married. For a number of reasons, Hindus and Muslims were reluctant to do so, and by the end of the nineteenth century, the disadvantages of not registering their marriages began to be felt. Their children bore the stigma of “illegitimacy” and some were excluded from secondary school because of this. Also, the wives and children of a person who died intestate possessed no inheritance rights and so disputed successions were often settled in a violent manner. Thus, from the early twentieth century, individuals and groups began to protest against these disadvantages.

In 1924, the Government drafted a Bill on Indian Marriages and Divorces, to be discussed by Hindu and Muslim organizations. When Moulvi Ameer Ali returned from India in 1931, he found the Indian community in a state of confusion over this Bill, one of the main difficulties being that Muslims could, under certain circumstances, contract divorces, while divorce was not permitted by Hindu religious law.

The T.I.A., under his leadership, requested the government to consider the question of a separate Muslim Marriage Bill, and shortly after, the “Draft of a Bill, An Ordinance relating to the registration of Muslim Marriages and Divorces” was published in the *Royal Gazette*. The executive of the T.I.A. examined this Bill, found in it nothing to which a valid objection could be made, and the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Ordinance came into being in 1934. By this Ordinance, marriage and divorce officers were appointed from among the Muslim community, and the stigma of “illegitimacy” on children born of married Muslim couples was removed.

## IV

### FORMATION OF THE TRINIDAD MUSLIM LEAGUE

Nazir Ahmad Simab returned to Trinidad on 13<sup>th</sup> April 1939, at the request of some of his former students in Trinidad who had formed themselves into a group called Tabligh-Ul-Islam. Apart from religious work, he was very interested in setting up schools to be run by Muslims, and Moulvi Ameer Ali granted his request for the use of the Islamic Hall, El Socorro (headquarters of the T.I.A.) to conduct a primary school. Thus, in 1940, the El Socorro Islamic School opened its doors.

However, Nazir Ahmad died on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1942, leaving his organization in the hands of Abdul Ghany, President, and N.M. Ghany, its Secretary. They soon realized that their organization, with a membership of just over two hundred, could not function without a missionary. Thus, a committee headed by Abdul Ghany negotiated with the T.I.A. in an attempt to unite the two organizations. Moulvi Ameer Ali agreed and relinquished the title of “Life President” of the T.I.A. in order to facilitate the “merger.” Finally, on 7<sup>th</sup> February 1943, the Tabligh-Ul-Islam Association was dissolved and its membership was absorbed by the T.I.A., with Moulvi Ameer Ali as President.

Unfortunately, disunity again reared its ugly head, when, at a General Meeting held in February 1944 for the election of officers for the new term, every office contested was won by a former member of the Tabligh-Ul-Islam Association. Investigations into events leading up to this election led the *Moulvi* to the conclusion that in extending his hand in friendship, his organization was snatched away from him. The matter was then taken to court in an effort to have the results of the election declared null and void. By this time, there were two factions within the T.I.A. – one led by Abdul Ghany, the newly-elected President, and the other by Moulvi Ameer Ali. In the next three years, very little religious work was done by both factions, as they were hindered partly by restrictions arising from the Second World War and partly by the many litigations lodged in the courts by both parties.

In November 1944, the *Moulvi's* faction began publishing *Al-Azan* along the same lines as *The Comforter*, publication of which was ceased a few years earlier. In 1945, the *Moulvi* changed residence, moving to 64 Charlotte Street, Port of Spain, where he ran a small dry goods store called The Gem Store. Here, he also sold Islamic books imported from England and India, and collected books to form his own library called the Bee Library.

By 1947, he realized that struggling for control of the T.I.A. was a lost cause and the matter was settled outside of the courts. Abdul Ghany's faction retained the title “T.I.A.” and kept control of the El Socorro Islamia School, while Moulvi Ameer Ali accepted two parcels of land, one at Princes Town and the other at St. Joseph. The *Moulvi* and his friends then had to form their own organization. They founded the Trinidad Muslim League (T.M.L.) on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947, an organization subscribing to the creed of *Ghair Mukallidiam* (Non-Conformist), and elected Moulvi Ameer Ali to the post of *Mufti*.

An examination of the idea of *Ghair-Mukallidiam* would reveal more clearly the role of Moulvi Ameer Ali as a reformer of Islamic thought and practice in Trinidad. After the death of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (u.w.b.p.) in 632 A.D., his followers split themselves into well-defined sects, the two main ones being the Shi'ah sect and the Ahl-us-Sunnat sect. Late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, another group, the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat-i-Islam was formed. By far the majority of the Muslims belong to the Ahl-us-Sunnat sect and are called Sunnis. Among them there were four schools of thought. These are the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi-i and Hanabali schools. The term *Mukallid* refers to any Muslim who follows unreservedly one of the four schools of thought.

Moulvi Ameer Ali regarded *Mukallidiam* as totally contrary to the spirit of Islamic teachings, which postulates that all actions must be the outcome of intelligent reasoning. He felt that *Mukallidiam* was the greatest single factor which was causing a disintegration of Islamic thought, and had to be removed before a true reformation of Islamic thought and practice could be affected. Thus, he adopted the creed of *Ghair-Mukallidiam* by which a Muslim does not conform to one particular school. Instead, in order to settle any controversial issue on which no clear ruling is set down in the Qur'an and the authentic books of *Hadith*, a Muslim is free to examine the rulings of the four schools before arriving at a conclusion. The T.M.L. remains the only organization in the Caribbean subscribing to such a creed.

The name of the new organization and the date of its birth reflected the high degree to which Moulvi Ameer Ali and his supporter identified with Muslims in India. During the 1940's, political developments in India held the attention of Muslims and Hindus in Trinidad. India was in the process of obtaining Independence from Britain, while the Muslims in that country were agitating for self-rule. The decision to create Pakistan was greeted with much rejoicing by Muslims in Trinidad and Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the father of Pakistan and leader of the All-India Muslim League, was held in very high esteem here. Thus, Moulvi Ameer Ali chose Pakistan Day, 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947, to declare the formation of the Trinidad Muslim League, the name closely resembling the All-India Muslim League of Jinnah. In addition, when the T.M.L. built its first mosque at St. Joseph, it was named the Jinnah Memorial Mosque.

The erection of an edifice of the stature of the Jinnah Memorial Mosque is an achievement that is worthy of the highest praise. That this small group of Muslims built in the space of three years the most beautiful mosque in the Caribbean at a cost of \$120,000.00 is an indication of the deep spirit of dedication and sacrifice with which these early members were imbued. They were inspired by Moulvi Ameer Ali, Mohammed Rafeeq, Mohammed Hakim Khan, and later by Aziz Ahmad, who took over the presidency of the T.M.L. from Mohammed Hakim Khan when the latter resigned in 1952. On 31<sup>st</sup> January 1951, the *Moulvi* dug the first shovel of earth, after saying a short prayer, to begin construction work. From then until its completion his constant presence was a source of encouragement to all those engaged in this task. He took part in the carpentry and masonry work and held the office of Exchequer, all monies passing through his hands. Thus, Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> April 1954 was a day of great significance for

Moulvi Ameer Ali and every member of the T.M.L., when the Jinnah Memorial Mosque was finally opened.

The *Moulvi* was a member of the T.M.L. School Board as he was very interested in Education, both secular and religious, and even before the completion of the Jinnah Memorial Mosque the T.M.L. had its first primary school, which was established on the premises of the Prince Albert Street Mosque, San Fernando, in 1953. Further, though faced with the heavy burden of liquidating the debts on the Jinnah Memorial Mosque, two more schools were built, one at Liberville, Rio Claro in 1955, and another at St. Joseph in 1957.

During the 1950's, the *Moulvi* was engaged in conducting Islamic classes and delivering lectures at the various mosques associated with the T.M.L., as well as officiating at many wedding ceremonies and burial services, these duties comprising part of his work as a missionary. In 1950, he produced *An Islamic Catechism for Muslim Children*. In addition, he edited the *T.M.L. Bulletin*, a monthly journal which replaced *The Azan*, the publication of which had ceased when he and his supporters relinquished ties with the T.I.A. Through his journal, he engaged the missionaries attached to the other Muslim organizations in debates on religious issues. Some of these missionaries were Moulvi M.I. Saki, attached to the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat-i-Islam, Rabwah, Pakistan; Maulana Fazlur Rahman Ansari and Maulana Siddiqui, both visiting missionaries attached to A.S.J.A.

The impact of the T.M.L. in this decade was felt not only in Trinidad, but also in adjacent territories, notably Suriname and Guyana, from where requests came for the *Moulvi* to conduct lectures there. He also established and maintained contacts with Islamic associations in other countries, such as South Africa, India, Pakistan, Egypt and England.

## V

In 1958, Moulvi Ameer Ali took time off from his missionary work in order to do a refresher course in Islamic theology at Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt. He left on Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> March 1958 and arrived in England on 15<sup>th</sup> April, where he was met by some of his relatives. He visited a number of mosques in and around London, and spent some days at the British Museum, reading the history of the Moors. Before going on to Egypt, he spent three weeks in Spain, where he visited some of the great examples of early Islamic architecture. In Cairo, he attended Al-Azhar University between the months of September and November, studying such topics as “*Mukallidiam* in Islam” and “The Islamic Concept of Miracles,” as well as improving his knowledge of the Arabic language. He then returned to Trinidad in December 1958, and resumed his missionary duties.

During 1961, he conducted “The Hive Class,” an Islamic class held every Sunday morning at the T.M.L. School, St. Joseph. For most of 1962, he was ill, and as a result he closed down his business and moved to 10 Picton Street, Port of Spain. At around the same time, he gave up the office of *Mufti* of the T.M.L. in favour of the formation of an Ecclesiastical Board of which he was a member. This Board comprised members of the T.M.L. and handled all religious matters in which the T.M.L. was involved. In 1963, having fully recovered his health, he accepted an invitation to attend the Annual *Jalsa* of the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat-i-Islam, Lahore, Pakistan, due to take place in December.

It must be understood at this stage that although the *Moulvi* was not an Ahmadi, he accepted and preached most of the ideas taught by that faction of the Ahmadiyya Anjuman based at Lahore. (The other faction has its headquarters at Rabwah, Pakistan.) He was also an agent for the distribution of Ahmadi literature since the 1930’s. In addition, his organization, the T.M.L., had, since its inception, maintained close ties with the Ahmadis of Lahore and had, over the years, hosted several Ahmadi missionaries during their stay in Trinidad. It is believed that the *Moulvi* intended to use this opportunity to clarify certain lingering doubts in his mind about the controversial claims of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad.

He left Trinidad on 24<sup>th</sup> October, allowing himself enough time to visit relatives in London and to tour several countries in the Middle East before going on to Pakistan. He arrived in Lahore on 11<sup>th</sup> December and attended the *Jalsa* held from 25<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> December. Here he met Ahmadi missionaries from all over the world and held discussions with many of them. In January 1964, he journeyed to Rabwah, where the other faction of the Ahmadis had their headquarters. Here, he also met many missionaries who served in various parts of the world, and discussed with them the question of the “prophethood” of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, and other claims made by him. He used this opportunity to compare the views held by both factions of Ahmadis.

He left Pakistan in February 1964 and was met by his wife in Cairo, having made plans to accompany her on the Pilgrimage to Mecca, Arabia. After the Pilgrimage and a tour of several countries in the Middle East, they returned home in 1964.

By this time, the President of the T.M.L. was Aziz Ahmad, who had become an Ahmadi on one of his visits to Lahore. During the absence of Moulvi Ameer Ali in 1964, Aziz Ahmad extended an invitation to Maulana S.M. Tufail, an Ahmadi missionary attached to the Islamic Mission, Woking, England, to visit Trinidad and to conduct a series of lectures on the teachings of the Ahmadiyya Anjuman (Lahore). As a result of the work of this missionary, many members of the T.M.L. joined that organization. Moulvi Ameer Ali was one of these. In August 1964, after the departure of S.M. Tufail, Moulvi Ameer Ali and some of the Ahmadi members of the T.M.L. formed an "Ahmadiyya Committee" at the Gasparillo Mosque. Later in that month, as part of the programme of activities drawn up by this Committee, he delivered, at Preysal Village, a lecture entitled "Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the Reformer of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century." However, soon after this, he fell seriously ill and this committee ceased its activities

Although he recovered his health a few months later, this illness marked the evening of his career. His involvement in the affairs of the T.M.L. gradually declined and he spent more of his time at home. In 1966, he made the last major decision in the affairs of the T.M.L. when he said that the creed of *Ghair-Mukallidiam* did not prevent an affiliation between the T.M.L. and the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat-i-Islam, Lahore, thus paving the way for these two organizations to be affiliated in 1967.

From here onwards, the sun began to set on the career of this illustrious worker for the cause of Islam. He would become ill for months at a time, during which he was confined to bed. His loving wife and children were never far from his side, having been a source of inspiration and comfort to him throughout his many trials. He rarely left his home, doing so only to attend a religious function at the home of a Muslim friend or at a mosque. Though his health steadily declined, the religious zeal continued to burn strongly in his mind, and he confided to his friends that, "I wish I could find ten or twenty young boys, devoted to Islam, to whom I would teach this religion." However, this was not to be.

At 12.15 a.m. in February 1973, Moulvi Amer Ali finally breathed his last. Hundreds of people gathered from mid-afternoon of the same day at the Jinnah Memorial Mosque to pay their final respect. After a short burial service, his body was interred in a grave on the premises of the Jinnah Memorial Mosque, permission for which was obtained from Government just one month before his death.

## CONCLUSION

During his long career as a missionary, Moulvi Ameer Ali came in contact with and was influenced by some of the greatest Muslim minds of this century, and shared with them a strong desire for a rejuvenation of Islamic thought. In his sojourns to Muslim countries he would spend long hours studying and marvelling at the sublime beauty of early Islamic architecture, as manifested in the great mosques and palaces built by early Muslims, and in his quiet moments he experienced the glory of Islam in days gone by. He kept in touch with Islamic development in other countries and read widely, having at his disposal the results of the most modern researchers in Islamic theology. He exemplified the words of the Prophet Muhammad: "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave," and in his old age, his mind was as receptive to new ideas as it was in youth. Indeed, it was this particular quality that set him apart from all other contemporary Muslim leaders in Trinidad.

In the 1930's, he was a long way ahead of his time, this being borne out by the fact that today the descendants of many of those Muslims who had vehemently opposed him in that decade are now gradually accepting the practices that he had fought so hard to establish. It is now a common sight to see Sunni women participating in Muslim youth camps, organizing ladies' groups, engaging in fundraising activities such as bazaars for their mosque, and moving out into the professions. More and more Muslim marriages are conducted along the lines practiced by the *Moulvi*. An increasing number of Muslims are today rejecting the traditional methods of studying and practicing Islam in favour of the more logical approaches taught by the *Moulvi*; (and in many Sunni homes the *Moulood Shareefs* of today are far different from those of yesteryear, those rituals of purely ceremonial value having being omitted). However, a great fear of modernism still exists in many quarters and these continue to offer strong resistance to the slightest inclination towards change in their beliefs.

Moulvi Ameer Ali is held in high esteem by those Christians and Hindus who recall his admirable performances in the defence of Islam. But among Muslims, mention of his name produces varied responses. Some dismiss him as a modernist who distorted the teachings of Islam, and others, though becoming increasingly progressive in their thinking, still refuse to admit the influence of his work. However, there are those who believe that, had Muslims united themselves under his leadership, this community would have been able to make a more effective contribution to the political, economic and religious life of this nation. Fragmentation and suspicious of each other as the various Muslim organizations are, they have allowed to go a-begging many opportunities by which they could have made the Muslim presence felt more strongly.

Thus, any assessment that is made of the present position of Muslims in Trinidad must be done not only by reviewing their achievements since 1845, but also in the light of what could have been achieved had they not sacrificed unity in favour of loyalty to sectarianism. In doing so, Muslims will recognize that they owe a debt to the late Al-Hajj Moulvi Ameer Ali, which they will begin to repay only when they realize that he gave his entire life for the progress of Islam in Trinidad.