

“A Young Soldier of Islam” Haji Ruknudeen Sahib

*Prepared on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Haji Ruknudeen's death
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2013:06:02*

Introduction

This lecture, *A Young Soldier of Islam: Haji Ruknudeen Sahib*, examines the contributions made by this indentured immigrant who came to these shores some 120 years ago and spent 75 years in service to the Muslim community. A humble man, dedicated to the cause of Islam he joins the legions of other men such as Syed Abdul Aziz, Yacoob Ali Meer Hassan, Beekham Syne, Zahoor Khan, Ishmile Khan, Hafiz Naziruddeen, Baboo Meah, Abdul Ghany (Gany), Yacoob Khan, Subrate Meah, Mohammed Ibrahim, John Mohammed, etc. who made sterling contributions to the consolidation and propagation of Islam in Trinidad and whose stories also need to be written and understood by my generation and younger generations. Like many of my generation, had it not been for the legacy I grew-up surrounded by, the trials, the tribulations and the triumphs of the Muslim community would have been largely ignored, for I benefitted from the struggles of our fore parents and did not need to interrogate what existed. It is also a struggle that takes on new twists and turns in my generation and those after me. How to be Muslim in a globalised world with its distinct myriad images of individuality and modernisation, with attendant norms and values that runs counter to the very principles of Islam; submission to the will of Allah, humility, goodwill, community, cooperation and service? This challenge is made even more acute as we also live in an Islamophobic (as defined by Runnymede Trust, 1997) world. The struggle to constantly adapt, to live a life in service of Islam in a new world by Ruknudeen provides lessons for all of us even fifty years after his death.

Historical context

The year was 1893 when Ruknudeen arrived in Trinidad. He was part of the movement of labourers from India to the Caribbean who supplied labour on the sugar, cocoa, coffee, coconut and rubber estates, who filled the gap left by the emancipation of slaves in 1838. The vast majority of indentured labourers who arrived in Trinidad came through the port of Calcutta originated from the Indo-Gangetic plain; Uttar Pradesh, Oudh and Bihar with a minority from Punjab and Bengal. These migrants were known as *kalkatiyas*. These were predominantly Hindu areas. In Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, where a significant number of the immigrants originated, Sunni (orthodox) Islam dominated (Titus 1960). However, Shias (also spelt Shi'ites-another stream in Islam) and the Wahhabis (followers of strict fundamental Islamic teachings) were also to be found (Titus 1960). It is estimated that eighty per cent of the indentured migrants were Hindus, fifteen per cent were Muslims and the rest were tribal, Christians, Sikhs and others (Lal 1996). In other words, “every shipload of Indian immigrants that came to the Caribbean contained a few Muslims” (Bisnauth 1989). Over the seventy-plus years that indentured labourer scheme remained in place thousands of Indians arrived in ships which

docked in Trinidad and were dispersed to various estates. Consequently, Muslim indentured immigrants were distributed across the island to various estates.

So, what would indentured immigrants arriving in Trinidad meet in the 1890s? We appreciate from the point of entry in 1845 Indians were seen as an underclass, alien and unwelcomed except by the plantocracy, to whom they were but cheap, timely beasts of burden. Nevertheless, we know, for instance, the indentured population was undergoing changes. By 1871, the majority of Indians were resident on the estate (67.6 per cent) and nearly 40 per cent were indentured. By 1901 only 21.6 per cent still lived on the estate and a mere 8.5 per cent were indentured (Brereton 1981). Trinidad-born Indians comprised 16.5 per cent of the population in 1871 and 44.8 per cent in 1901. Hence, the Indian population had shifted from being primarily indentured labourers to becoming part of settled Indian community.

Nevertheless, we cannot ignore that the majority of Indians were low-paid manual labourers on the estates or poor smallholders, while those who migrated to the towns from circa 1884 worked as scavengers or porters and some were small shopkeepers, moneylenders, etc. In general, Indians held agricultural or mercantile jobs. Indentured and free labourers were paid a fixed wage for a task (25 cents for indentured and 30 cents for non-indentured). The hours were long and the work arduous. On the estates, the barracks were overcrowded and unsanitary; diseases were rife (especially malaria, hookworm). Thus, poverty, poor diets and ill health were rampant within the Indian community. Life in the towns, Port of Spain and San Fernando, was not much better. Even in the villages where the Indians settled from circa 1870 poverty was still pervasive, they lived in modest huts and their household goods were a minimum (Brereton 1981). Further, the indentured Indians, from their initial entry into Trinidad (1845) up until the 1880s and 1890s, grew up with a different set of family relationships from which their parents had experienced. Most of the Indians during this period were plantation residents and experienced fluid family patterns. Between the 1890s and 1940s, the extended family was more or less the norm in villages and among peasant Indians. Any new immigrant arriving into the country would encounter a hard life – employed in a low-status job and would experience harsh socioeconomic conditions – inhabiting a society that was essentially hostile to them and where attitudes ranged from indifference to contempt. This led the Indians to use their community, culture, religion and family as shields in a not so friendly a society.

The arrival of Ruknudeen

It was into that mix that a young indentured labourer, Ruknudeen, arrived in 1893. Not much is known about Ruknudeen's life in India. We do know that he was born in or around the year 1865 in Budhlada, Hissar, Punjab. (Remember I said earlier that a minority of indentured labourers came from Punjab) Beyond the names of his parents, Elahee and Ameena Baksh we do not know much more – we do not know their occupation; we do not know if he had any siblings, etc. Ruknudeen, we do know, was provided with a sound religious and multi-lingual education. He acquired a sound knowledge of the *Holy Qur'an*, *Hadith* and was schooled in Arabic, Urdu, Hindi and Persian. He was also trained as a Sufi and was a member of the Christi Spiritual Order.

We do not know what motivated Ruknudeen at age 28 to board a ship for Trinidad. We can speculate that he left India to escape the serious economic dislocation caused by British imperialism leading to the decline of handicraft and weaving industries, and famines in Northern India that led to severe poverty, unemployment and displacement. It is reported that the district of Hissar where Ruknudeen lived was one of the major victims of famine (Ali 1995). This socioeconomic condition forced many Indian peasants to leave their homeland in search of a better life. It may be further speculated that Ruknudeen indentured himself as a part of the Sufi philosophy to spread the message of Islam throughout the world. Whatever the reason, we know that Ruknudeen left the immigration depot Garden Reach, Calcutta on board the *Moy* in 1893.

Most Indians who left India had no clue where they were going, the length of the journey at sea or the harsh conditions they would endure crossing the *kala pani* (dark waters). Over the long voyage of 11,000 miles over 100 days brought seasickness, hunger and diseases to the Indians onboard the ships. Neither did they realise they would never see their motherland and their families again as many had planned to return home with their savings. Incidentally, of the nearly 144,000 immigrants who landed in Trinidad, only 29,448 returned to India (Dabydeen 1995) or about 20 per cent. Despite the long and arduous journey there were opportunities to forge ties, the ties of *jahajhi bhai*, and an opportunity for Ruknudeen to spread the message of Islam among his shipmates. The *Moy* docked at the Port-of-Spain harbour on 11th December 1893.

The cargo of immigrants was dispatched to estates throughout the colony. Ruknudeen and 17 other shipmates were assigned to the La Plaisance Estate, La Romain, south of San Fernando. The La Plaisance Estate, as Anthony De Vertueil (1989) notes, had a beautiful view of the Gulf of Paria and was a healthy estate, free of malaria, but it was, like all the smaller sugar estates in Trinidad, under severe financial pressure in 1890s due to the low price of sugar. It is believed that these new immigrants were transported from Port-of-Spain to San Fernando and marched to the estate. Each batch of new immigrants attracted much attention from the already indentured immigrants residing on the estate. The hope was to see familiar faces or receive news of their loved ones and of India. For Muslims there was another motive. They hoped that among the new arrivals were men versed in the knowledge of Islam. Remember, an overwhelming majority of the immigrants were simple rural folk from the traditional communities of village India, accustomed to hard work and poverty and deeply attached to the land and all its routines. So, they had a little knowledge of the ethos, the epistemology of Islam, to keep the faith alive. Further, recruiting agents in India deliberately recruited and sent illiterate immigrants to the colonies. The planters themselves often complained that educated immigrants were difficult to manage. Consequently, there was a careful screening of the immigrants. Nevertheless, a few literate men versed in Islam (or Hinduism) managed to escape the eagle eye of the recruiters. Ruknudeen was one such person.

So, in December 1893, when the schooner carrying Ruknudeen and 17 others docked in San Fernando there was a group of former indentured labourers waiting on the wharf. It is said the late Imaam Qurban Ali, eldest brother of Haafiz Yacoob (the first Trinidadian to become a

Haafiz) enquired loudly of the new arrivals if there were any Muslims among them. To which Ruknudeen stood up in the cart and loudly replied: *Yes. I am a Muslim, Alhamdulillah. (Praise be to God).*

As mentioned, Ruknudeen was assigned to the La Plaisance Estate. Despite the congenial surroundings of La Plaisance Estate, life on the estate as in the barracks was likely to pose some challenges for Ruknudeen. Food rations were often short (from 1870 onwards, food rations were given to all immigrants during their first year), the barracks were insanitary, there were frictions due to caste and religion, consumption of alcohol particularly on Sundays and newly arrived immigrants were often given the most menial tasks to perform. Nevertheless, Ruknudeen met his circumstances with a sense of grace and completed his daily tasks. At night, Ruknudeen, like many others before him and elsewhere in Trinidad, organised his fellow Muslims at La Plaisance Estate and neighbouring estates into small groups and taught them the tenets of Islam, to read the *Qur'an* and undoubtedly, offer *namaaz* or *salaat*. While not certain how contact was established Ruknudeen seemed to have established relationships with the *imama* of nearby *maasjid*, Victoria and Diamond.

Incidentally, mosques, dedicated structures for devotion, began to appear as early as the 1860s as 'nice little buildings with galvanized roofs' (Sarah Morton, 1916), around the time that the Canadian Presbyterians began to arrive in Trinidad. Among the earliest known physical structures constructed in the country were the Calcutta No.1 Masjid (1863), Tacarigua (1865), the Victoria Village (1868), Prince of Wales Street, San Fernando (1894), Iere Village and Ryan Street (San Juan), Thomas Street (Chaguanaus) *masaajid*. The construction of the earliest *masaajid* would have been a community affair. It would have been modest structures, mostly small shed-like structures erected of bamboo with a roof of branches of coconut trees or of *carat* leaves. The next step would most probably have been erection of the four walls of *tapia*, which may have been about three feet high followed by wooden structures as in Penal (circa 1907) and then as we know today, concrete structures (circa 1913 San Fernando Jama *masjid*).

Contact between Ruknudeen and the *imama* may have been the result of the nature of practices on the estates. Most estates granted passes of leave on Saturdays or Sundays and immigrants used the opportunity to shop or visit other estates or villages. Further, immigrants were entitled to leave of 26 days annually but not more than seven days consecutively. It is presumed that Ruknudeen used his leave to establish relationships within the Muslim community and propagate Islam as well as set-up a tailoring business.

A significant event occurred sometime in 1893 or 1894 during Ruknudeen's first year in the colony. It is believed that he converted one of his shipmates, a newly arrived Hindu to Islam. When combined with his religious instruction of the Estate, it is understandable why this caused a tremendous uproar. When word reached the estate manager he was deemed a troublemaker and an attempt was made to get rid of him claiming that he was not really an immigrant worker but a missionary in disguise. Following an investigation in which the officials agreed with the estate manager it was determined that Ruknudeen should remain in the colony to save costs.

Undoubtedly, Ruknudeen would likely be very dissatisfied with his restricted life believing that he could do more to spread the message of Islam. Neither would he have felt comfortable with the behaviour of some of his fellow inhabitants who periodically consumed alcohol. As such, less than two years into his indenture he terminated his service and paid the cost of his remaining three and half years. It is presumed that he used his earnings as a tailor to offset some of the costs with the remainder paid by Imam Imdad Hosein of Victoria Village.

We reminded several times in the *Holy Qur'an* in Chapters 4.1, 16.71, 30.21, 42.11, 51.49 the importance of mates, marriage and family life. Ruknudeen versed as he was in Islam would be well-aware of these directives. Very shortly after he ended his indenture, he married Imam Hosein's daughter and this union produced seven children, four daughters and three sons. He encouraged his family to live in accordance with the teachings and requirements of the *Holy Qur'an*.

Putting down roots

It is unclear how long Ruknudeen lived in Victoria Village but eventually he settled in Tunupuna. Tunupuna was originally a tiny hamlet (De Vertueil 1989) but gained a new lease on life with the opening of the railroad in 1876 which was further enhanced with the declaration of Tunupuna as a town in 1898. Around that time, a Warden's Office, Court House and Police Station was erected. Several estates, Orange Grove, Streatham Lodge and El Dorado, were in proximity to Tunupuna. It is quite likely Muslims were to be found labouring on these estates. By now, Reverend John Morton, Canadian Missionary, had established his Church in Tunupuna and was known to be visiting nearby estates and villages in St. Joseph, San Juan, Tacarigua, Arouca, etc converting Indians to Christianity. The population in 1901 was 5,543 comprising indentured and ex-indentured immigrants many of whom were Muslims. So, sometime between 1900 and 1920 Ruknudeen left Victoria Village to settle permanently in Tunupuna. He initially constructed a one story house on the Eastern Main Road near the Police Station opposite the Presbyterian Aramalya Mission which he later expanded. This must be viewed as a strategic move to counter the proselytising efforts of the Canadian Mission.

Ruknudeen opened his tailoring business sewing *chapkan* and *kurtas* (men's trousers and loose long sleeve shirt) and *topees* (hats worn by Muslim men). He had a steady flow of customers from nearby estates and villages. Given that indentured labourers could not leave the estates as they desired, Ruknudeen also loaded his ready-made clothes into his cart and visited the estates every payday like other pedlars. As an itinerant visitor to the estates Ruknudeen was able to give *daw'ah* (spread the message of Islam) to his Muslim customers. As he did at the La Plaisance Estate, Ruknudeen held *maktab* nightly at his home for adults and children. The aim was to thwart the proselytising efforts of the Presbyterian missionaries and Muslim converts to Christianity at a minimum.

Ruknudeen, it must be mentioned, was always fair, honest and sincere in his dealings with merchants and customers. It is reported that on one of his visits to purchase materials in Port of Spain, a merchant accidentally placed a bolt of cloth that was not among his purchases. Ruknudeen on his arrival at home offloading his purchases noticed this extra bolt of material.

He checked his purchases and put it aside. The next day Ruknudeen journeyed into Port of Spain and returned the bolt of cloth to the merchant. News of this deed spread to other merchants and Ruknudeen was treated with utmost respect and highly regarded by the merchants.

Building community cohesion

Despite the opportunities for *daw'ah* and the holding of *maktab* Ruknudeen knew that was insufficient to frustrate the efforts of the Christian missionaries. He firmly believed the best way was to consolidate the Muslim community. Ruknudeen was also able to connect with like-minded persons in the Muslim community. The story of Ruknudeen cannot continue without mention made of Syed Abdul Aziz, an ex-indentured labourer who settled in Iere Village and another stalwart of Islam. At some point these two gentlemen met, we are uncertain as to the details, but they both had a desire for the preservation of Islam and the creation of tangible unity within the Muslim community. They along with others like Meer Hassan and Beekham Syne in San Fernando; Zahoor Khan in Couva, Ishmile Khan in California; Hafiz Naziruddeen in Tacarigua; Baboo Meah in San Juan; Abdul Ghany, Yacoob Khan and Subratee Meah in St Joseph worked assiduously to keep Islam alive. These stalwarts by their strategic geographical placement in the colony were able to counter the effects of the missionary activities of the Canadian Presbyterian missionaries. Further, by establishing *jamaats*, mosques and *maktab* classes the community was able, to a large extent, to resist to an appreciable degree the well-financed and sustained efforts of the Christian missionaries who were sent to this country to convert "the heathens". It was these men along with Ruknudeen that would script the future of Islam in this country.

For Ruknudeen the means to consolidate the Muslim community was through education. To that end, the number of *maktabs* had to be increased. But there was a problem. There were insufficient trained teachers capable of giving instruction. To solve the dilemma he began the process of carefully identifying and grooming youths from different areas of the colony who could in time initiate their own *maktabs*. When the training ended he did not abandon the youths; he journeyed throughout the island to the *maktabs* established by his students to ensure they met his standards – quality assurance, in other words. He would individually examine the students in the classes and give his own personal grade. Prizes were awarded as an incentive for the students to work harder and all students benefited from a treat of sweets and soft drink.

Amidst all these efforts by the Muslim community and Ruknudeen, in particular, Reverend Morton imported the Bible and other scriptures (translated in Hindi) from the missionaries in India. He believed that after preaching the message of Christianity in Hindi (the language of the Indian masses) then the Indian should be provided with literature to enforce the sermons. As Ali (1995) and Rampersad (2002) note to counteract this Ruknudeen Sahib imported the *Holy Qur'an* and other Islamic books directly from India. Although he had elected to remain permanently in Trinidad, Ruknudeen still maintained strong ties, through letters, with his fellow Sufis and relatives in India. It is believed that they acquired the books he requested and shipped them to him. He sold these books to Muslims at a small profit. The Muslim community now had

a steady supply of Islamic books to keep in their homes and read when they wished. He also imported theological and philosophical works which formed part of his reference library.

Again, Ruknudeen was not content with these inroads – the establishment of nationwide *maktabs* and availability of Islamic books. He believed more still had to be done. Knowledge was the key. Ruknudeen, Syed Abdul Aziz, Abdul Gany (also spelt Ghany) and other stalwarts believed the solution lay in inviting a foreign missionary. This led to the arrival of Moulvi Haji Sufi Shah Mohammed Hassan Hanafi Qadiri from India. He had noble intentions of further educating and unifying the Muslim community, however his brand of Islam, a puritanical Islam symbolised by outward manifestations of the faith, found favour with many. This, may be attributed to the fact the community were assured of a secure group identity in the here-and-now (Smith 1963). At the same time, it also did not attract many who resisted any attempt to change their beliefs and customs. Perhaps, equally important, his teachings not find favour with local Muslim leaders, Ruknudeen and Aziz, in particular. As such, Qadiri or Lal Dahri (Red Beard) as he was known departed Trinidad in 1918 having realised that sections of the Muslim community had turned on him.

The stalwarts recognised the need to address the fallouts and in particular, the rift within the Muslim community following the departure of Lal Dahri. Still not confident of their own strength and knowledge, the Muslim community seemed doomed to commit another mistake. Sometime between 1918 and 1920 a committee comprising of Haji Ruknudeen Meah, Abdul Ghany and Rahamut among others was formed for the purpose of finding a suitable Muslim missionary from India and inviting him to Trinidad. To this end, the group established contact with The Muslim League, Woking, England and sometime thereafter Moulvi Fazal Karim Khan Durrani, a native of Punjab, India and a scholar of modern and Oriental (Arabic and Sanskrit) languages arrived in Trinidad. He, too, had noble aims of educating the Muslims and defending Islam. Initially, he impressed the Muslim community with his knowledge. However, discord soon arose. The committee had expected a Hanafi schooled missionary and as such, Durrani, who began articulating views in accord with Ahmadi beliefs, became a disappointment to them. Unfortunately, this realisation and eventual opposition came too late for Durrani had inspired some with his message. Among them was a youth from Siparia, Ameer Ali, who left soon thereafter for Lahore to study Islamic theology.

Again, the departure of the foreign-invited missionary left the local Muslim community in disarray. Once again, this committee of wise men, Syed Abdul Aziz, Ruknudeen Meah, Abdul Ghany, Gokool Meah, recognised that there was need to reorganise the Muslim community into a united one. They believed that a single organisation that united the Muslims across the country would bode well for preserving and propagating Islam. By this time, the Muslim population was less than 30,000. Between 1923 and 1926 several meetings were held that led to the formation of the Tackveeyatul Islamia Association (TIA) in 1926. The importance of state recognition was not lost on Ruknudeen. In 1931 TIA applied to the Legislative Council to have a Bill introduced for the incorporation of its Trustees. Heading the list of ten signatories was Ruknudeen Meah (Ali 1995). The TIA was incorporated by Act No. 39 of 1931.

Ameer Ali returned as a Moulvi (Islamic scholar) and joined the movement in 1930, subsequently being elected as the Mufti (a person qualified to make a legal judgment). It must be remembered that this was the same man who had come under the influence of Durrani and for whom Durrani had arranged an Ahmaddiya education. It soon became clear to Ruknudeen and others that Ali's appointment as Mufti may have been rash; they had neglected to consider that someone educated at an institution run by an Ahmadi group may have embraced their ideas. Ali was given an opportunity to make his views clear. At a meeting on December 29, 1931, at the Liberty Hall, Port of Spain, Ali delivered a lecture on Mirza Ghulam Ahmad without condemning him. From that speech it was deduced that Ali was a supporter of Ahmadi teachings. News spread throughout the Muslim community and Ali and his supporters were condemned. Although Ali indicated he was misquoted he did little to alter opinions, he continued propagating a message that was in contradiction to orthodox Islam. This brazen approach sent shockwaves through the Muslim community and forced its leader to consider its options. And so on April 3rd, 1932 a group of Muslims who firmly believed in the Hanafi Sunni tradition met at the Islamic Hall, Chaguanas "with hundreds of Muslims in support and Ruknudeen Sahib in attendance ASJA was formed" (Kassim 1999). This new body applied for state recognition and was incorporated by Act No. 24 of 1935.

Legalising Muslim marriages

From the point of arrival of Indians in Trinidad, 1845 to 1935 marriages performed according to Islamic rites were not recognised as legal. This meant that the stigma of illegal unions and illegitimate children would haunt the Muslim community for some 90 years. It had implications for inheritance rights. Despite the determined efforts by the Muslim (read Indian) community to change the results were less than satisfactory. The 1881 Ordinance only provided for registration of non-Christian marriages among new immigrants which had taken place before their arrival in Trinidad and the 1904 Ordinance allowed for the registration of Indian marriages and divorces with permission of the Protector of Indians, Chief registrar and the District Registrar. In other words, the discriminatory elements remained entrenched; there was no recognition of *imama* as bona fide marriage officers. From 1905 the Muslim community began an earnest campaign for legalisation of Muslim marriages and divorces. The pressure influenced the Colonial Government to draft a Bill in 1924 on Indian marriages which still contained provisions for the compulsory registration of non-Christian marriages. The Muslim community holding true to their goal of legalisation of Muslim marriages and divorces entered into talks with the Colonial Government for a separate Muslim marriage ordinance. It is said that Ruknudeen "supported the proposal for the registration of their marriages provided it did not affect their religion in any way" (Ali 1995). The negotiations provided successful and the Muslim Marriage Ordinance of 1935 was promulgated. The Muslim community had won many concessions – marriage officers would now be Muslims and divorce would be secured before a divorce officer according to the Islamic law of divorce.

Performance of the Hajj

True to his *deen* (religion) Ruknudeen performed *Hajj* (the fifth of the five principles of Islam) in the 1920s. Zainool Khan (2013) believes that he was the first person from this country to have

performed this sacred journey. Commercial air travel or travel agents or organised *hajj* groups were not available. Ruknudeen made the long and arduous journey by boat via London to Jeddah (a port on the Red Sea) then from Jeddah to Mecca by camel over some 45 miles to perform the sacred rites required. It is very likely this journey took about six months. Following his return to Trinidad he inspired further respect from his fellow Muslims. De Vertueil (1989) believes that even as late as 1958 there were only 24 *Hajis* in the island.

Appointment as Qadi and Sheikh-ul-Islam

Ruknudeen was well-respected among the Muslim community for his knowledge and piety. So, it was no surprise when Syed Abdul Aziz passed away in 1927 that by general agreement among the *imama* he was appointed *Qadi* (Spiritual Judge). Such a person must be aware of *Shari'ah* (Islamic Law) and the application of *fiqh* (jurisprudence). He was bestowed with the title *Sahib* (leader). At this time, Ruknudeen was 62 years of age and had spent 35 years in Trinidad. A few years later in 1957 he was elevated to the position of Sheikh-ul-Islam (Spiritual Leader). Such was the respect and esteem that the Muslim community held him. For such a title to be accorded, a person had to have knowledge of the views of prominent scholars and capable of applying the laws extracted from the text unto others.

Cognisant of his role in the Muslim community and by extension, the wider Trinidadian society, Ruknudeen continued to live a humble life. With his new role he was very aware that he may be called upon to render decisions and tried to retain his independence so, there would be no hint of or perception of partiality or bias. For instance, if he travelled in a taxi with others and someone gave the driver money to cover his fare, he would softly insist that he pay his own fare and indeed would do so (Khan 2013). In these exalted positions, Ruknudeen was called upon by the Governor to make certain high contributions to the Muslim community.

Ruknudeen often attended meetings of the Executive Committee of the ASJA in his capacity as its *Qadi*. While he did not speak in English he understood the language. Generally he did not take part in the discussions and spoke only if his opinion was sought on a particular matter. However, there were occasions on which heated discussions took place on a particular matter, mundane or religious. On such occasions, he would intervene after a while by saying "*Sunu*" (the Urdu word for "Please listen"). Complete silence would immediately descend on the meeting. He would then give his "*Fatwa*" (ruling) in Urdu on the subject under discussion and that would be accepted as the Executive's decision without being put to the vote. Such was the respect he commanded and such was the *imaan* (faith) of the Muslims then who, having elected him as their leader, were prepared to follow him unquestionably (Khan 2013).

During this time he emphasised that Muslims were no longer merely a number of heterogeneous individuals in a foreign land but could stand on their own as a new entity in Islam. Not only did he continue to give Islamic classes, lectures and visit *maktabs*, his home was open to both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. For instance, in Tunupuna where he lived there were no Pundits and yet, there were many Hindus resident there. Ruknudeen often lent an ear or offered spiritual guidance to them or "jarayed" them or gave them 'tabeech' (guards) to wear.

Ruknudeen was also highly respected outside the non-Muslim community. He was a firm believer in establishing good relations between Muslims and other religious bodies in Trinidad to whom he preached and practiced brotherhood, fellowship and tolerance. It is said he had good relations with the Hindus and was also well-respected by that community. This was clearly evident in the fact that he was invited by the Hindu community to officially open their first school in Chaguanaus (Ali 1995).

The sorrow

Ruknudeen died on the 10 July 1963 at age 98. At his funeral thousands of Muslims came to pay their final respects to Ruknudeen who had served the Muslim community for some 75 years. His death did not go unnoticed by the Government. The House of Representatives expressed deep regret at his death noting that the late Haji was “a very great religious leader” who had left behind him a memory of service not only to Muslims, but for the whole community thus, leading them to conclude that Ruknudeen’s contributions to religion was “something unique.”

Lessons Learnt

His name which meant bowing down to faith was quite fitting; he lived his life according to the very tenets of Islam, submission to the will of Allah and obedience to His law. From the sketch above we can see his life was about service. It is said that he himself said in 1960:

In service to your community and humanity in general, bear in mind... that a thing is either right or wrong – it cannot be half-right or half-wrong. Something is either true or false.... Beware of the vanities of this life which are chattels of deception.

To that end, any role he assumed, he assumed with humility and approached it with diligence.

For those of us, who remember him and for those of us who grew-up hearing about him Ruknudeen inspired respect. We remember him as a softly-spoken man in white trousers with a length just above the ankles (in the Islamic tradition), white *kurta* and white *topee* (cap) who dedicated himself to the consolidation and propagation of Islam in Trinidad. So, three words or phrases that one can take away when they think of Haji Ruknudeen Sahib are:

- Submission to the will of *Allah* and obedience to His law
- Service to the community
- Goodwill and fellowship to all human beings.

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