

Late M.H.M. Ashraff, P.C, LL.M

Introduced by

*M.L.A. Cadar,
Vice-Chancellor,
South Eastern University of Sri Lanka,
Olavil.*

On this occasion of the first convocation of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, it is indeed my great fortune and privilege, to present to this august assembly, a great National Leader, President's Counsel, Parliamentarian, Cabinet Minister and above all a fine gentleman, the late Mr. Mohamed Hussain Mohamed Ashraff, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Letters (Honoris Causa) posthumously, for the yeomen services he rendered to the nation and his community.

Born on 23 October 1948 to a respectable family in Sammanthurai, Eastern Province, Mr.Ashraff had his primary education at Kalmunaikudy Maha Vidiyalaya, and his secondary education at Wesley High School, Kalmunai. He had a brilliant record of school education, apart from his popularity at school as the Head Prefect and a Scout. After leaving school he entered the Ceylon Law College, Colombo in 1970 and completed his studies obtaining First Class Honours in the final examination. After graduation in 1974, he joined as a State Counsel in the Sri Lanka Attorney General's Department, where he distinguished himself as an efficient young lawyer. In 1975 he left this position to join the unofficial Bar. In 1995 he earned his LL.M degree from the University of Colombo. In the same year he was made President's Counsel in recognition of his contribution to the legal profession.

In his youth, as a student at Law College. Ashraff desired muslim politics in Sri Lanka to be more rational and goal oriented. He also had an

inborn aspiration to serve his people, specially those in the South Eastern region of whose problems he had first hand experience. When ethnic tensions created the problem of Muslim refugees and unrest among the Muslim youth in the Eastern Province, Ashraff could no longer remain aloof and thus entered the political scene as their spokesman.

From this time onwards, Ashraff never looked back. He knew his future was in party politics. With the experience he had gained as a founder member of the Muslim United Liberation Front (MULF) and as the party activist of Tamil Liberation United Front (TULF) during the General Elections in 1977, Ashraff founded the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) in 1981 and he registered this as a political party in 1988. This act of MHM Ashraff to create a political arm to serve his people showed his courage, foresight and determination to carry forward his political vision at any cost - a trait which he carried with him throughout his two decades of politics.

Once in politics Ashraff worked tirelessly. His speeches both in the Parliament and outside and his contribution to the debates and political questions bear an indelible mark of the enormous home work he has done to bring clarity and understanding to the problems of the Muslim Community in Sri Lanka. Of special mention here are his speeches on the security problems of the Muslims in the East, the role of IPKF, creation of the Tamil National Army, Merger of Northern and Eastern Provinces, the need for a Muslim majority province in the North-East which showed him as a person who would lead from the front.

It was Ashraff who broke the myth that the Muslims are the richest in the country when, they, in fact, languished in poverty and misery all over the island. In this context the rise of Ashraff gave a new hope for the thousands of under-privileged and socially depressed sector of the people of Sri Lanka. For them, he became a leader to whom they can

look upto solve the problems they faced in their life. Ashraff's oratorical skills, leadership qualities and organisational capabilities brought him in touch with the common masses. He elicited public opinion through party structures and organised annual party conventions at different locations. His knowledge of Islam and his unshaken faith in its principles endeared him to his people. He touched their hearts with his Islamic messages. He quoted from Hadis and Quaran to explain the rationality of modern politics which made him trustworthy to his followers. He convinced them of the need for organised leadership to win their rights.

His political rallies became his main instrument to keep the public informed of common problems, which the nation faced and to plan his strategies to tackle them. His hard work in this sphere enabled him to transform the values and beliefs of his community to support his goals and ideals. Ashraff emerged as a man with a mission, the champion of the Muslim cause and relentless fighter of Muslim rights.

During his career as a minister Ashraff held aloft his ideals and stood by his people. He never sacrificed the interests of the people to the devouring interest of the government. For instance when efforts were made to settle the political issues on the ethnic conflict, Ashraff took up the cause of the muslims and demanded the Muslim majority province showing clearly the problems the Muslims would face if the Northern and Eastern Provinces were merged.

The inauguration of the South Eastern University in 1995 is yet another example of his courage and determination to serve his people, particularly to do justice to the helpless displaced students. He took all measures to make it a success through persuasion and moral courage when many believed that the idea of the South Eastern University would lie undisturbed as a pipe dream. South Eastern University today stands as a living monument to his enterprise and leadership. The fact has to be

recognised that by establishing this institution, the South Eastern Region itself has entered the main arena of higher educational activity of the country for which the people of the South Eastern region will always be indebted to him and cherish his memory forever.

There are other aspects of Ashraff which we must understand to appreciate his leadership and as to why he was held in high esteem as a leader of national importance. It is because Ashraff always carefully studied national problems and provided concrete solutions. Ashraff, in fact, had the capabilities to critically analyse any problem to the core and to make people to think clearly and offer suggestions.

Ashraff was always methodical in his work who not only meticulously planned his work but also reviewed his own ideas and work from time to time. His twenty years of political experience made him to realize the need for national consensus and therefore he began to rethink his own politics in terms of National Unity Alliance, a formation, he announced to replace the Muslim Congress eventually.

Apart from being a lawyer, statesman, literary critic and political commentator, Ashraff has also a singular distinction of being a poet while being active as lawyer and politician. His 600 page anthology – a collection of the poems he wrote from the age of 12 stands as a masterpiece. For his contributions in the field of poetry he was awarded the title "Kavignar Thilakam" by no lesser a person than Kaviko Abdul Rahman, a well known Tamil poet in Tamil Nadu. Asharff always thought of himself as a poet first, which we can see clearly in one of his poems, as follows:

*If some one would ask the question
how I would like to be remembered
by posterity
my answer would be
not as the leader of the SLMC
not even as a President's Counsel,
but as a humble writer
for I firmly believe
that everything will die,
except my desire that
I should continue to communicate
through my writings
even after my death !*

His political career is as colourful as his political thinking. MHM Ashraff entered Parliament in 1989 as a member for Digamadulla District. He and his party received tremendous success in the General Election in 1989 and 1994. In 1994 the Muslim Congress joined the People's Alliance Government, in which his contributions were acknowledged by being appointed as a Minister of Shipping, Port Development, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction from 19 August 1994 to 09 June 1997, and Minister of Port Development, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction from 23 June 1997 until his unfortunate and untimely demise.

As a Cabinet Minister he worked for the whole of Sri Lanka, irrespective of race, religion, creed and sectoral differences. He had systematically planned developmental projects and implemented them without fear or favour for the welfare of the people. He established the Mahapola Training Institute and Finalization of the primary work at Olivil Harbour. All such endeavours tell us the message of his aspirations of sustainable development of Sri Lanka.

Ashraff had never been a politician only. His great passion for knowledge, and dispassionate search for learning, particularly in the field of law and jurisprudence, had never deserted him.

He tested his political standpoints in the background of law and history. His apparently indefensible political acts sometimes had arisen from his thorough knowledge of law and law making capacity. Even his worst political opponents had in the course of time, agreed that Mr Ashraff was right in the long-term analysis.

In my youth, at the university, I had been captivated by the phrase, "Philosopher King". This remained to me as perception, to be mutually irreconcilable. This was till a time when I came into contact with the Late Mr Ashraff. He, to my view, comes closest to the concept of the Philosopher King.

He knows the art of governance, as every statesman knows his wares. At the same time, he has the cultural background and historical sense to see his work neutrally with humility and without hurting the sensibilities of others.

Unfortunately, this remarkable gentleman, a great son of Sri Lanka met with his demise under unexpected tragic circumstances, at the age of 52. He had so much to achieve. Unfortunately he has been summoned out of this world at his prime stage of activity. I would say without any hesitation that he has not lived in this world in vain.

Personally, I have lost an intimate and a good friend who gave us all material and moral support to speedily establish the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka to offer quality education and achieve excellence.

Chancellor,

I hereby present with magnificent appreciation the name of Late Mohamed Hussain Mohamed Ashrff for the conferment of the coveted Degree of Doctor of letters (Honoris Causa) posthumously.

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