

Obituary:**Ahmed Hoosen Deedat (1918-2005):**

Ahmed Hoosen Deedat, president of the Islamic Propagation Centre International (IPCI), icon of millions in the Muslim world, and loathed by many because of his polemics, passed away on 2 August 2005 after being bedridden for almost a decade through a stroke. Born on 1 July 1918 in Tadkeshwar, Gujarat, Deedat emigrated to South Africa in 1927 with his father Hoosen. His mother Fathima remained in India and he never saw her again as she died in 1930. He completed standard six at the Higher Grade School in Carlisle Street where he impressed teachers with his quick mind. He gained admission to the prestigious Sastri College but his father's financial circumstances prevented him attending.

Deedat, instead, became a retail assistant at *O.N. Mahomed*, a country store on the south coast of Natal. The store was situated opposite Adam's Mission, a training school for Christian missionaries. Students often taunted him that the Quran was plagiarised from the Bible, the Prophet Muhammad was a womaniser, and so on. Deedat told a reporter of the *Daily Reveille* while touring the USA in 1986 that he was 'driven by the challenges of Christian missionaries to read and study Islam and the Christian faith as well'. He was inspired by *Izhar-al-Haq* ('The Truth Revealed'), which chronicled a debate in Delhi between Reverend Founder and Mawlana Dehlawi (b 1746), which he stumbled upon by chance. He used Dehlawi's rational refutation of Christianity to go on the offensive against students of Adams. Their failure to respond satisfactorily raised Deedat's self-confidence. He studied the *New Testament* in detail and read profusely on comparative religion. Deedat was the archetypal self-educated man. He 'did not graduate from Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, or any high citadel of learning, but from the "University of Muhammad"'.¹

Deedat returned to Durban in the late 1930s to take up a position with Simplex Furniture Factory. He married Hawa Gangat of Northern Natal in 1940. They had two sons, Ebrahim and Yusuf, and a daughter Rukayya. Hawa was a pillar of strength in Deedat's life. She acquired a reputation for warmth and hospitality; it is said that guests "always arrived like kings and left like kings". Deedat gave his first public lecture at the Avalon Theatre in Durban in 1942 on the life of the Prophet. He was so committed that he paid for the hire of the hall and pamphlets advertising the talk. During the anti-imperialist struggle, Deedat became interested in the fight of Indian Muslims for a separate state and moved to Pakistan in 1949. He returned disappointed to South Africa in 1952. In 1954 he joined the Arabic Study Circle (ASC), established by young Muslims searching for an alternative to the prescriptions of conservative Ulema. Deedat was especially stimulated by Joseph Perdu, a Frenchman brought to South Africa by the ASC to instruct the youth. He told *Indian Views* that 'he had learnt more from Mr Perdu than I had learnt in the previous 38 years of my life'. Deedat also attended classes by an English expert on comparative religion, Fairfax, who spent most of 1957 in South Africa. When Fairfax left for England, Deedat took over the classes. By now he had delivered public lectures throughout South Africa and was a household name.

Deedat's desire to master comparative religion was connected to the expansion of Christian missionary work in South Africa and decline of Muslim power

internationally. G.H. Vanker, a close associate of Deedat, explained that “in those dark days of the 1950s, the mass media created havoc in the minds of Muslims who had no knowledge of comparative religion and were a target of malicious propaganda by Christian missionaries.”² Blacks lived in a state of humiliation in white-dominated South Africa. The Anglican Church and Dutch Reformed Church, which provided a theological foundation for apartheid, attacked Islam and branded it a false religion. When Deedat debated Christians, he usually took on Whites and it was exhilarating for oppressed Muslims to witness their embarrassment.

Deedat and Vanker formed the Islamic Propagation Centre (IPC) on 17 March 1957 to provide an organisational base for their activities, which consisted mainly of *dawa* (“missionary”) activities through lectures, symposiums, and debates. The IPC was dogged by controversy from the beginning. Deedat sparked a furore when he took on the Anglican Church during his Cape tour in September 1960. The Church, concerned about the conversion of former slaves to Islam, formed a Muslim Mission Board and published pamphlets and books from the 1940s discrediting Islam. Deedat responded with his ‘Challenge to the Anglican Church’ on 11 September 1961 in Cape Town and followed it with lectures in the Transvaal and Natal. This polemical “attack is the best form of defence” approach created a huge uproar, forcing the Cape Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) to appease Anglican anger by condemning Deedat’s methods and dissociating itself from him.³ Deedat was undeterred and debated the likes of A.W. Hamilton of Kimberley (1961); Cyril Simkins, a Professor of New Testament Exegesis from Tennessee (1963); and prominent Seventh Day Adventist David Lukhele (1966).

Deedat introduced many innovative programmes. He held weekly bible classes for Muslims and ‘convert classes’ for new Muslims. Thought-provoking extracts from the Quran were placed in local newspapers. An Islamic calendar, containing Quranic quotes for each day of the year, was a major source of revenue. Deedat was determined to train missionaries to spread Islam in African townships and started ‘As-Salaam’ (‘peace’), at Braemar on the south coast on land donated by businessman Suleman Kadwa. He moved with his young family to Braemar where he worked tirelessly to build a mosque, dam, two houses, and dormitory for 25 students. The experiment was not a success, however, because of the IPC’s lack of manpower and paucity of funds, and was taken over by the Muslim Youth Movement in 1973. Deedat conceded to close confidants that As-Salaam had ‘broken my back’. He returned to Durban and expanded the IPC’s activities.

Deedat published over twenty books on a myriad of topics. He believed that “no means of communication can penetrate the heartlands of Islam more deeply than the printed page. And no medium abides so persistently as the printed page.”⁴ He distributed thousands of copies of *What was the Sign of Jonah?* (1976); *What the Bible says about Muhammad* (1976); *Who Moved the Stone?* (1977); *Resurrection or Resuscitation?* (1978); and *Is the Bible God’s Word?* (1980). Books were distributed *gratis*, while audio and video cassettes were sold at a nominal price. English-translation Qurans were distributed worldwide. Deedat’s main arguments were that (i) Jews and Christians have edited the Bible and Torah from earliest times while the Quran contains only the word of God; (ii) Jesus is held in high esteem by Muslims but must be regarded as human rather than the son of God; (iii) the trinity is a fabrication that brings Christians close to *shirk*; (iv) Paul was the real founder of Christianity who distorted Jesus’ original message; and (v) Hebrew and Christian

texts prophesy the coming of Prophet Muhammad, “the natural successor to Christ”.⁵ The books had outstanding graphics and were written in a style easy on the eye and mind. They included humour and human interest. Deedat’s writing had mass appeal because it was “characterised by clearness and simplicity. It lacked academic complexity and jargon. This greatly increased its availability for a wide circle of readers.”⁶

The IPC reached its apogee in the 1980s. The decade began with the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which Deedat supported. He even visited Iran in 1982 to participate in the third anniversary of the Revolution. In 1984 he delivered lectures in Libya on the effective methods of Islamic propagation.⁷ As Deedat cast his focus outwards, no one was beyond his reach. He wrote to the Pope four times during 1984 for a meeting at St Peter’s in Rome, and distributed a pamphlet in January 1985 headlined ‘His Holiness Plays Hide and Seek With Muslims’ when the Pope failure to respond positively. He visited Malaysia in November 1984 where he met Prime Minister Mahatir Mohammed. Deedat also debated renowned representatives of evangelical forms of Christianity in Europe and the USA. His opponents included tele-evangelist Jimmy Swaggart, Palestinian Dr Anis Shorosh, and Swedish Pentecostal pastor Stanley Sjoberg. Deedat boasted that his visit to England marked “the conquest of Britain for Islam, not with bombs and guns, but with love, compassion and logic.”⁸ The debate with Swaggart in November 1986 at the University of Louisiana in the USA on the ‘Authenticity of the Bible’ is considered Deedat’s greatest. A recording of this tape was a best-seller throughout the Muslim world. It catapulted Deedat into the international limelight and attracted millions in funding from the Middle East. Deedat told a reporter that he knew “the bible better than anybody” and was not afraid of Christians who are “like putty in my hands....”⁹ Deedat’s knowledge of the bible and polemical debating style made him a formidable opponent.

Deedat embraced the audio-visual revolution through his “Islamic Visions Programme”. From 1987 he opened auditoriums in West Street, the IPCI Centre, and Shiraz Cinema where his debates were broadcast. A supervisor was stationed at each auditorium to answer questions. Billboards on prominent buildings advertised Islam with signs like ‘Welcome to Islam!’ and ‘Read Al-Quran - The Last Testament!’ Deedat also concluded an arrangement in May 1989 to place an advert promoting the Quran on independent television station M-Net. M-Net subsequently decided that the advert might lead to criticism from other religious groups and paid the IPCI R27,000, the cost of producing the advert.¹⁰ While innovative and giving Islam new exposure, these activities were frowned upon by local Ulema unaccustomed to organised missionary work targeted at non-Muslims.

During these heady days the IPCI established branches in Abu Dhabi (1983), Dubai (1985), Jeddah (1986), the UK, and US. Deedat was awarded the *King Faisal International Award* in 1986. He was the first South African to win this prestigious award which carried a cash prize of R100,000 and gold medals. In October 1987 he met General Zia al-Haq of Pakistan; in December 1987 he visited the Maldives where President Khayoom paid him a special tribute; Deedat presented talks on television in Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar during 1988; in 1989 he met Prince Sultan Abdul Aziz, the first Muslim to visit space, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, and Idi Amin, the “Butcher of Uganda”. The IPCI was handling an average of 300 letters per day from countries like Rumania, Fiji, Yugoslavia, Nigeria,

China, Bolivia, and Siberia. The transformation in the stature of the IPCI was encapsulated by its relocation to ostentatious premises in Queen Street following the purchase of Sayani Centre for R5 million in March 1986. The building was initially renamed the *Bin-La-Din Centre* after the major donor, the Bin Ladin family of Saudi Arabia, but later became known as the IPCI Centre. In April 1988 the IPCI purchased the Rajab Centre in Victoria Street for R3,75 million and renamed it *Ibrahim Aal-Ibrahim Centre* in honour of its Saudi benefactor. While Deedat began the 1980s supporting radical Arab regimes by the end of the decade he stood firmly on the side conservative regimes. During the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991, he placed adverts condemning Saddam Hussein. Abdullah Deedat branded him a pro-Western mercenary whose actions were motivated by monetary considerations.¹¹

While most of Deedat's polemics were against Christianity, he also had outspoken views on Hindu polytheism. *From Hinduism to Islam* (1987), a critique of Hindu beliefs and practices, produced a backlash from both Hindus and Muslims which Deedat may not have anticipated. ICSA "deplored attempts by any group to degrade the religious practices of any other community. We urge Mr Deedat to act responsibly with understanding of the fragile base of South African society."¹² Mohammed Makki, editor of *Muslim Digest*, wrote that "never before in the history of the Muslims of South Africa were relations between Hindus and Muslims so damaged".¹³ Deedat also got into strife with Jews over his 1989 publication of *Arab and Israel – Conflict or Conciliation?*, which contained a photograph of a Palestinian mother attempting to grab her child from the grasp of Israeli soldiers. He launched a national competition inviting readers to supply a caption. The South African Jewish Board of Deputies condemned the action as "blatant propaganda with the purpose of arousing hostility against the State of Israel".¹⁴ Deedat's criticism of Jewish policies was sensitive in apartheid South Africa which enjoyed a close relationship with Israel.

The fortunes of the IPC, which climbed new heights during the 1980s, plummeted in the 1990s mainly as a result of internal strife. Deedat's problems started in 1985 when he reorganised the IPC into a non-profit organisation for tax purposes. The addition of jeweller Yusuf Ally, his son Naushad, and Deedat's son Yusuf spawned tension between the Deedat's and Ally's who opposed Deedat's unilateral decision-making. Deedat's problems began when Yusuf Ally started legal proceedings in October 1991 to recover money that he alleged had been deposited into an IPCI account in Jeddah.¹⁵ Between 1990 and 1996, Ally was involved in 12 cases of litigation against Deedat. The Master of the Supreme Court attempted to remove the trustees because of this discord. Based on a report by auditors *Coopers and Partners* that Deedat's reputation in the Arabic world as a man of the highest religious wisdom had attracted millions of rands to the IPCI and that his removal would considerably reduce its income, the Bloemfontein Appellate Division ruled in October 1996 that the Master could not remove the trustees but that trustees had to lodge a security to continue in their positions. Before further action could be taken, Ally suffered a heart attack and Deedat a stroke. Though paralysed, Deedat played an active role in the trust by signing over power of attorney to his daughter-in-law Yasmeen. Deedat's mental faculties were unaffected. He communicated by blinking his eyelids at an alphabet board to form words. When several trustees successfully brought an action in 1999 to prevent Yasmin from acting as trustee, Yusuf Deedat resigned in protest. Though Deedat remained president, this brought to an end his four-decade long active participation in the IPCI. He remained a highly respected figure, and local and

international visitors continued to visit him and pay homage to his outstanding work until his death. Many remained in awe of his achievements.

How are we to assess Deedat? He enjoyed widespread support in the Middle East where he was respected and admired from lay persons to prime ministers. This may have been because neo-Colonial regimes in these countries were largely puppets of the West. Deedat's tirades against Christian missionaries may have had a cathartic effect on them. Deedat was a paradox. He was a caring family man whose hospitality was second to none. But against his adversaries, the hammer would literally come out as he went on the offensive. Views on Deedat, understandably, range from hagiographic to intolerable. Many found his approach inappropriate and felt that he destroyed inter-faith dialogue. Deedat's supporters, on the other hand, viewed him as a guardian against Christian missionaries. However one views Deedat, what is indisputable is that he was unwavering in his commitment. He always stood up for his beliefs and was never fazed by his many adversaries.

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¹ *The Message*, December 1993: 28.

² Letter to *Rabitah Al-Alam Al-Islami* (Muslim World League), a government-funded body of Saudi Arabia, 13 March 1980.

³ *Muslim Digest*, October 1960: 25.

⁴ *The Message*, December 1993: 28.

⁵ See David Westerlund, "Ahmed Deedat's Theology of Religion: Apologetics through Polemics", in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 33:3: 263-278.

⁶ Westerlund, "Deedat's", 275.

⁷ *Lenasia Times*, March 1984.

⁸ IPCI Pamphlet, June 1985.

⁹ *Sunday Tribune* 25 February 1979.

¹⁰ *Post*, 26-29 July 1989.

¹¹ *Herald*, 20 January 1991.

¹² *Sunday Tribune* 30 April 1986.

¹³ *Post*, 19 August 1990.

¹⁴ *The Cape Argus*, 20 January 1989.

¹⁵ *Herald*, 6 October 1991.