

islam awareness week



Pioneers

Maulana Ahmed Said Patel (1937-)

New Zealand's first Muslim cleric

Maulana Ahmed Said Musa Patel was the first Imam (Muslim cleric) in New Zealand and served as the principal spiritual and religious advisor to the Muslim community here from 1960 to 1986.

The first Imam of the Ponsonby Masjid (Muslim house of worship) was Maulana Ahmed Said Musa Patel. Born on 16 January 1937 in Kafleta in Surat, Gujarat, western India, Patel was one of seven sons of a farmer turned restaurant entrepreneur. The Imam also had six sisters.



Maulana Patel studied at religious academies in Gujarat from 1949 to 1959. In 1957 he married. He was a lecturer at the Madrasa Jami-a-Islamia Talimuddin, in Navsari, Gujarat (an Islamic religious academy) from 1959 to 1960 before accepting an invitation to serve as Imam to the nascent Muslim community in New Zealand.

On Sunday, 18 September 1960, Patel boarded the P&O SS Strathmore in Bombay (now Mumbai) and travelled via Sydney, arriving at Auckland on 9 October. His primary task initially was to teach the Muslim children of Auckland the reading of the Qur'an (holy book of Islam) and Islamic studies. The regular Qur'an classes at the new 17 Vermont Street property became busier over time. According to the records of the "Madrassa-E-Islamiyah Auckland" ("Islamic religious school of Auckland") there were 23 pupils at Maulana Patel's class in July 1972 and by the end of year examinations in December there were 27. These figures increased steadily through the decade until by February 1978 there were a total of 43 students attending the Madrassah.

Maulana Patel was also expected to lead the prayers at the newly acquired (1959) Islamic centre on Hargreaves Street, St Mary's Bay. However the New Zealand Muslim Association (NZMA) was unable to afford a regular salary and he was obliged to work - first at a wool store, then at Donaghy's rope factory, then as a welder and packer at an electrical utilities factory. In 1963 he was part of a delegation to the Auckland City Council requesting a separate Muslim burial plot.

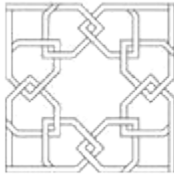
In 1966 Maulana Patel was authorised to conduct marriages pursuant to the Marriage Act 1955, and in 1968 he was formally naturalised as a New Zealand citizen. From 1972 the Juma Salat (Friday congregational prayers) were held regularly at the Islamic Centre with Maulana Patel and Hafiz Sidat from Fiji taking turns at leading prayers until Patel retired from the rope factory four years later. Hajji Abdul Samad Bhikoo also led prayers on occasion.



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In 1975 Maulana Patel oversaw the amalgamation of the Fijian Muslim organisation Anjuman Himayat Al-Islami into the NZMA. The following year he was appointed Patron of the Association and in January 1977 he was made "Religious Advisor". In November 1978 he performed the Hajj and was a member of the NZMA Executive Committee over 1981 to 1982. In 1986 he suffered a serious stroke and has been retired ever since. He currently resides in Auckland.

By Abdullah Drury

Picture Credits:

1. Picture courtesy of "SS Strathmore" <http://www.ozhoo.net.au/~strathsisters/strathmore/index.htm>
2. Picture of the creation of first mosque in New Zealand Herald (2 April, 1979), p12.



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