

# The Man Behind the Mantle: A Personal Glimpse into Mulla Asghar's Legacy

*Forget the titles, tributes, and plaques; this article isn't about the Mulla Asghar immortalized in reports or etched into organizational history. What I wish to share is something more intimate, more human. This is the Mulla Asghar I knew.*

*A man whose soul held the stillness of oceans—vast, uncharted, and deep. His mind was a boundless library, echoing with philosophers, mystics, poets, and Prophets. He carried the Qur'ān in his heart, Ghalib on his tongue, and Mulla Sadra in his silences.*

*And his heart? That was the miracle. It was a sanctuary. A refuge where the weary found rest, the confused found clarity, and the young found purpose. Leader or lost soul—when you sat with him, you felt seen. Heard. At home.*

*What follows isn't a biography. It's a glimpse. A doorway into private moments and unseen wisdom. A reflection of the man behind the mantle. A legacy not carved in stone—but etched in lives, like mine, forever changed by him. I invite you to step into that space with me—not as a reader, but as a witness.*

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## **The First Encounter**

I first met Mulla Asgharali M.M. Jaffer at Tarangire Lodge in Tanzania in 1971. I was a young organizer at a youth camp where he had been invited to speak. As his voice filled the hall, something shifted in my understanding of leadership. He didn't thunder. He didn't posture. He invited. He revealed. Not abstract theology or ritual minutiae, but the relevance of faith in community life. How to

serve. Why to serve. The tone was soft but firm, the ideas profound but digestible.

For the first time, I encountered leadership that spoke not just to the intellect, but directly to the heart. As he spoke of our responsibilities as Muslims in a rapidly changing world, I leaned in, drawn by the conviction in his words. It began there—with a simple act and a clear vision. Five decades later, that journey of service continues to shape who I am.

**Little did I know that evening would mark the beginning of an inspiring journey that would intertwine our paths—25 of those years as his close confidant, witnessing both his public accomplishments and private struggles. The man I came to know was more complex and profound than the public figure most remember.** His whispered prayers at dawn moved me more than his eloquent speeches to thousands. His grief for suffering strangers taught me more about leadership than any organizational accomplishments.

## **The Early Days: Witnessing the Foundation**

After that first encounter in Tanzania, our paths crossed again in 1975. I still remember the moment—I was a young volunteer, serving tea to senior community leaders. In the middle of it all was Mulla Asghar, sharing his vision for what would become the World Federation.

While others focused on immediate concerns—debating logistics, committees, and constitutions—he was thinking big. **He painted an incredible picture of a global community, not just linked by structure, but bound by shared values, by mutual support across continents.** His vision to establish the Federation's headquarters in London was strategic. "Our community has scattered like a broken tasbeeh," he said. "We need a string to connect us across oceans." His foresight left me speechless.

What struck me more than his words, was how he listened. He gave each person his full attention—whether it was a senior leader or a youth serving tea. He

drew wisdom from every corner of the room, always learning, always connecting the dots.

The most remarkable aspect of these early discussions wasn't his visionary thinking alone, but how skillfully he balanced it with pragmatic steps for implementation. "Dreams without deadlines remain fantasies," he once remarked, after a debate about the Federation's structure, "but deadlines without dreams produce only empty achievements". This synthesis of practical wisdom and spiritual insight became the hallmark of his leadership style—a style I would later observe from the closest vantage point.

His self-taught mastery of languages was evident even in these early meetings, as he switched effortlessly between English, Urdu, Gujarati, Kutchi, and the occasional Farsi idiom—ensuring everyone felt included. "Knowledge has no mother tongue," he once told me with a twinkle in his eye when I asked about this ability, "...it speaks to whoever has the patience to listen". This linguistic versatility wasn't merely an intellectual achievement but a tool for building bridges between people of diverse backgrounds. It wasn't just the languages—he had an uncanny ability to adopt local dialects when addressing audiences from distant parts of the world. I recall a man once asking me, "What area of Lucknow does he come from?"—just moments after Mulla had finished speaking to a group in Uttar Pradesh, India—unaware that he actually came from an entirely different part of the world.

## **A Confidant's Perspective: Leadership Beyond Titles**

The trajectory of my relationship with Mulla Asghar took an unexpected turn when, in 1977, he appointed me Secretary General of the World Federation. I was 27 years old—a surprising choice for many of the community elders. When I privately questioned his decision, wondering if my youth would undermine the organization's credibility, he smiled and said, "the community doesn't need another keeper of the past. It needs builders of the future." His decision to skip a generation wasn't impulsive but strategic—a deliberate choice to infuse the Federation with new energy and perspectives. It's a lesson still worth reflecting

on for today's veteran leaders.

This marked the most insightful phase of our relationship, as I worked alongside him with a team of young professionals in London. For the next twenty-five years, I witnessed Mulla Asghar's leadership from a unique vantage point—as a trusted confidant who often sat with him late into the night, discussing community challenges, personal quandaries, and his evolving vision for our future. These conversations revealed a dimension of the man rarely seen by others—his moments of doubt, his private struggles, his unguarded reflections, and at times, even his wrath. He had an uncanny ability to see both the intricate details and the distant horizon. Once, in the middle of a tense meeting about financial distribution with the World Federation Office Bearers, he turned to us and said, “Never confuse the visible balance sheet with the spiritual ledger. One feeds the ego. The other, the Ummah.”

What made working with him as a young person so remarkable was his genuine interest in our perspectives. While some leaders of his generation viewed youth with condescension, he approached us with curiosity and respect. “When I appointed you and your colleagues,” he confided years after that surprising decision, “many questioned my judgment. They saw only your inexperience. I saw your potential to reimagine our community's future.” His faith in us became a self-fulfilling prophecy—under his mentorship, our team accomplished things we had never imagined possible.

A particular winter evening in London remains vivid in my memory. After our regular meeting at the World Federation office, I noticed Mulla Asghar was feverish and fighting a cold, his voice hoarse and his brow glinting with a hint of perspiration. I offered to drive him home, concerned about his health. “I can't go home yet,” he replied, “I need to go to South London for a *nikkah* ceremony.” When I insisted he should rest, his response floored me. “You don't understand,” he said, gently but firmly, “I had fallen out with the bride's grandfather decades ago in Mombasa. If I don't go today, they'll think I still bear a grudge”. Despite his illness, he made the journey—not for politics, not for protocol—but for healing an old wound. That was Mulla Asghar. Leadership, for

him, wasn't about public applause. It was about private integrity.

**“Leadership is a burden disguised as an honor,” he once told me late one night in London, the fatigue of the day etched into the lines on his face.**

I remember that 1990 evening clearly when he first shared the heart of what would become one of his iconic speeches. He said, “We’ve become too reactive. We need a society where *taqwa* shapes every decision—a community not defined by East or West, but by timeless Islamic values translated for modern times.” The resolution to anchor leadership in *taqwā* (God-consciousness) and *‘adālah* (justice) didn’t pass that year, but the awareness it stirred has endured. As I later documented in *Code of Leadership*, his exact words were: “We need a society where we rise above the mean and mediocre to that which is high and sublime.”

## **Intimate Glimpses: The Man Behind the Title**

**The Mulla Asghar I knew best appeared in the quiet moments, between speeches and meetings. I once walked into his office unannounced and found him surrounded by letters from orphans in India, replying to each personally.** He looked up, noticing my surprise, “Each child deserves to know they matter—not just as a case number, but as a soul.”

His modest lifestyle said as much about his values as his sermons. Despite his stature, he wore the same *Sherwani* for years. When I jokingly suggested an upgrade, he raised an eyebrow. “Will a new *Sherwani* make my words more truthful?”

He loved that old Nasruddin story: turned away from a feast in work clothes, Nasruddin returned in a fine coat and was honored. He then stuffed food into the coat’s pocket saying, “Eat, my *Sherwani*, eat!” Mulla Asghar chuckled every time he told it. For him, status was never stitched in fabric—it lived in the soul.

**His library, though, was his only indulgence. Thousands of books in**

multiple languages lined his shelves. “Books aren’t possessions,” he once said while showing me a rare manuscript, “they’re companions.”

Crises brought out a rare resilience in him. During the Somalia crisis in 1990, he made hundreds of calls, securing aid and safe passage for families he had never met. His imprisonment under Saddam Hussain in Iraq in 1983 deeply affected him. He rarely spoke of it publicly, but quietly supported many Iraqi exiles after his own release—never mentioning it to anyone. He bore wounds, but chose to become a healer.

## His Sense of Humor

Mulla Asghar's humility was matched by his humor. I'll never forget a speech in India. He was slightly unwell but determined to speak. As he stepped up, his shoe caught his *shalwar* and he stumbled slightly. Without missing a beat, he grinned and said in perfect Gujarati:

“????? ??—???????? ????? ?? ?????? ?? ????? ????? ??!  
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“See that? Life itself is just like this—you can be on the right path and still stumble. What matters is how you rise again.” That moment captured him perfectly—dignified, relatable, and wise.

# The Spiritual Bond: Conversations About Faith and Doubt

Perhaps my greatest privilege was seeing Mulla Asghar's private spiritual life. His faith was deep—but never dogmatic. He once told me during a midnight chai session, "Doubt is not the enemy of faith. It's the shadow that proves the light exists."

He longed for *madrasas* that didn't just teach doctrine but cultivated compassion. "Religious instruction without transformation," he said, "is like learning grammar and never writing poetry."

I remember many mornings when he stayed at our home. I'd hand him his early morning chai, and there he'd sit after fajr prayers, wrapped in quiet reflection, the light of dawn illuminating his face. Once, he whispered, "Real prayer begins when the rituals end." It wasn't duty that drove him—it was love.

## **Radiating the Teachings of Ahlul Bayt ('a)**

Mulla Asghar didn't just preach the teachings of the Ahlul Bayt ('a) —he lived them. Once, in a lecture, he said, "When Imam Ali ('a) advised Malik al-Ashtar on governance, he wasn't just speaking to rulers—but to anyone with responsibility for others."

He once postponed a high-level donor meeting to sit with a newly arrived refugee family. When asked why, he simply said, "If leadership distances you from the weak, it isn't leadership."

His respect for intellectual inquiry echoed Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq ('a). "The Imam's circle," he often reminded us, "was full of people who disagreed. Real learning happens when knowledge is alive, not uniform."

**He walked the talk. Once, mediating a conflict between two *jamaats* (congregations), he chose fairness over appeasement—because, as he believed, leadership meant embodying the justice of Imam Ali, not chasing approval.**

## **Khoja Heritage: A Deep Appreciation and the Birth of a Legacy**

Of all his enduring contributions, Mulla Asghar's reverence for Khoja heritage holds a special place in my heart. **For him, our history wasn't a matter of nostalgia—it was a wellspring of identity, a compass. He believed deeply that a community disconnected from its roots would always struggle to find direction in the future.**

He often said, "We are not just descendants of converts—we are inheritors of conviction." He took great pride in the syncretic journey of our ancestors—from

Hindu roots, through Satpanth mysticism, to finally embracing the path of the Ahlul Bayt (‘a). He never allowed that story to be flattened into a footnote; he elevated it into a narrative of resilience.

He introduced me to the earliest chroniclers of our journey—Adelji Dhanji Kaba, Sachedina Nanjiani, and others who had painstakingly documented the struggles of our forebears. “If we don’t preserve these voices,” he warned, “we risk forgetting who we are, and more dangerously, becoming who we are not.”

His passion ignited something in me, too. Later, when we launched the Khoja Heritage Project, it was more than an initiative—it became a movement. His dream of seeing our narrative captured on screen led to the creation of *The Khojas: A Journey of Faith* documentary. I remember his eyes lighting up when we first discussed the idea. Though he didn’t live to see it completed, it was created in his spirit, framed by his belief: “*Understanding our past is not about looking back—it’s about walking forward with clarity.*”

And even now, as the Khoja Heritage Project continues to grow—with translations, exhibits, oral histories, and children’s resources—it bears the imprint of his vision: that our heritage should not be embalmed in glass cases, but lived, taught, and celebrated. Not to glorify ourselves, but to ground ourselves—in humility, in history, and in hope.

## **A Farewell Without Words**

There are departures in life you see coming. Then there are the ones that quietly unfold—unannounced, unhurried, yet unforgettable. My last journey with Mulla Asghar was one of the latter. It was February 2000. We had wrapped up yet another familiar visit to India—meeting community members, inspecting projects, listening to concerns, and reaffirming our commitments.

On paper, it was business as usual. But looking back, every detail of that trip now shimmers with significance. He wasn’t rushed. But he was intentional. In each meeting, he spoke with a quiet finality. Every promise was made with unusual weight, as though he were engraving it onto stone rather than simply



expressing it. He asked me to take notes diligently. He introduced me to others not merely as Vice President, but as “someone you must now trust.” At the time, I took it as a nod of respect. Only later did I realize he was preparing them; not for his next visit, but for his absence. Perhaps, most poignantly, he was preparing me.

**That final evening, we sat in a modest hotel lobby, sipping tea. No ceremony, no grand declarations. Just two colleagues, two friends, two travelers, who had walked a long road together. Our conversation wandered—from the highs of past conferences to the laughter of minor mishaps.** Then came one of his signature moments of distilled wisdom. He leaned in slightly and said: “The most important quality in leadership isn’t vision or eloquence—though both help. It’s the ability to see what is already emerging... and remove the obstacles.” I asked what he meant. He smiled, his gaze both distant and piercing. “The future of our community isn’t ours to design,” he said softly. “It’s already being written—in the hearts and minds of the youth. Our duty is not to mold them, but to make space for them. Guide them gently. And then step aside.”

There was a calm in his tone I hadn’t heard before. Not resignation—but readiness. As though he was already speaking from a different place, a mountaintop view only he could see. The next morning, we embraced as usual. The embrace lingered—firmer, fuller, as though trying to compress decades of trust into a single gesture. “We’ll continue this conversation when you’re next in London,” he said as we parted. But something in his eyes said otherwise. Just over a month later, I received the call. He was gone.

I boarded my flight from Dallas to London in a daze, the hours felt endless. My mind replayed every detail of that final trip, every word we exchanged. Somewhere over the Atlantic, it dawned on me: I had been a witness to a sacred farewell. One that had unfolded with such grace, such humility, that I only recognized it in hindsight. He hadn’t made an exit, he had made a transition.

He had spent those final days not preparing his legacy—but planting it and

watering it. Ensuring that even in his absence, the roots would deepen and the branches would stretch toward new sunlight. In his final act, he left us with no vacuum. Only a torch—gently placed in our hands, still warm from his grasp.

## **The Living Legacy: Carrying Forward His Light**

It's been nearly 25 years since I stood at his freshly prepared grave. Still, his presence lingers. A certain light, a prayer's cadence, a warm salaam—all stir his memory. Though gone, he remains my compass.

Institutions like the Memorial Library in Toronto and the Hall in Mombasa bear his name. However, his truest legacy lives in the Zainabiya Child Sponsorship Scheme. "Education connects a child to their God-given potential," he'd say. Each supported child is a verse in that living poem.

He trusted youth. Not as a gamble—but as a strategy. "Elders give roots. Youth provide branches reaching for the sun." That's why I stepped down from leadership at 53—to make space for the next generation. Not just succession, but partnership; that's what Mulla taught me.

His multilingual gift wasn't about tongues—it was about reaching hearts. "The message is constant," he'd say, "but the medium must evolve."

## **Philosophical Echoes: Wisdom That Spans Traditions**

Now, in the twilight of my life, I often reflect on the quiet brilliance of Mulla Asghar's mind—how naturally it resonated with the world's great philosophies. He introduced me not only to Muslim thinkers like Mulla Sadra, Al-Ghazali, and Ibn Sina, but also to the Vedas, the Stoics, Krishnamurti, and the depth of Urdu poetry. Today, when I read them, I hear his voice woven between the lines.

Like the Vedic *karma yog*, he lived for selfless service. "Do what is right, not what is easy," he'd remind us. During the Somalia crisis, when many felt helpless, he said, "We cannot do everything, but we must do something—and do it well." That was Stoicism in action—calm, resolute, real. He embodied Krishnamurti's open-mindedness—listening more than speaking, adjusting not

out of hesitation but humility. His guidance came not from ego, but from clarity grounded in evolving truth.

One of the other gifts of Mulla Asghar's companionship was how he opened my heart to the depth and beauty of Urdu poetry of Mir, Ghalib, and Iqbal. It wasn't just verse—it was vision. Over time, I began to see how his leadership mirrored the very spirit captured in lines like these from Allama Iqbal:

***Sabaq phir padh sadaqat ka, shujaat ka, adalat ka;***

***Liya jayega tujh se kaam, duniya ki imamat ka.***

*Learn the lessons of truth, courage, and justice—*

*For you will be called to lead the world.*

These weren't just words to him. They were a roadmap. He lived them—leading not only the 150,000-strong Khoja community but speaking to the conscience of the global Shia world. And for those of us who had the honor of walking even a part of the journey with him, that legacy is not just remembered—it's lived.

Learning from Mulla wasn't academic. It wasn't instruction. It was an immersion. You didn't study him, you absorbed him: the cadence of his voice, the deliberation of his silence, the glint of a smile when someone surprised him with insight. He is gone from our sight, but not from our path. In the quietest decisions I make, I feel his whisper. In the toughest moments of principle, I hear his voice.

This was the Mulla I knew.

This is the light he left behind.

This is the torch we must carry.

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