



DEATH OF AN UNSUNG HERO

HAFIZ GULAMMOHAMMED BORA WAS AN AMAZING PERSON WHO TOUCHED THE LIVES OF ALL WHO MET HIM, WRITES FUAD NAHDI. LIKE ALL GREAT PEOPLE HE IS DIFFICULT TO DEFINE OR PIGEON-HOLE, AN UNSUNG HERO IN THE STRUGGLE TO ESTABLISH ISLAM IN THE WEST.

15 JULY 1945 - 10 FEBRUARY 2005

I can't remember exactly when I first met Hafiz Bora but I always felt that I knew him all my life. Intelligent, well-educated and cultured, he was a delightful company - provocative, inspirational and accommodating. He was that rare creature: an *imam* who listened and was prepared to learn and, more importantly, challenge convention.

Born into a noble Bombay family he was the second youngest of fifteen children. His father, Hajji Ismail Manejwala, was a businessman with property and dairy interests. But from a very young age it was obvious that he was inclined more towards scholarship than the cut-throat world of business. By the age of fifteen he had completed the memorisation of the Holy Quran and therefore, earned the title "Hafiz".

In 1968, he graduated with a honours degree in Physics and Chemistry from the prestigious Bombay University. In the same year, aged 23, he married Zainab nee Tarapuri with whom he went on to have six children: Aasia (b.1970), Fozia (b.1972), Suleman (b. and d. 1975), Musab (b. 1972), Aatika (b. 1978) and Erfana (b. 1981).

Hafiz Bora remained loyal to two passions in his life: his love of travelling and teaching. In the mid-seventies he moved with his young family to Zambia to teach Maths and Physics at the Mukandawire Secondary School in the capital city, Lusaka. After a year he moved to the Britain and landed in Sheffield where he was appointed Imam of the Jamiah Mosque at Industry Road.

Sheffield residents at the time remember him fondly. The local community at the time consisted of Yemenis, Kashmiri Mirpuris and Pathans from the NWFP of Pakistan. Hafiz Bora, a Gujarati, was not only seen but also acted as a honest broker between the different groups. It was his fairness that led him to be loved by the community which he served for seven years.

One of the major challenges he faced and which he dealt with much courage was in mixed marriages. He championed the right of young people to choose whom they can marry so long as it was within the *shariah*. At the time he used to solemnise the marriages of young Muslim couples (if they liked each other, they should marry but if possible get the parents on board to approve it) sometimes against the wishes of their parents who wanted their children to marry within the clan.

Hafiz Bora was also among the first *imams* in Britain to engage with the wider institutions of government including the Commission for Racial Equality, the Citizens Advice Bureau and other local and central government bodies. Fazlun Khalid, a senior CRE official based in Sheffield at the time, remembers Hafiz Bora as "this amazing Imam who was never afraid of being engaged and involved and who held views far ahead of the times."

Between 1982-84 Hafiz Bora worked as an advice worker for the Sheffield Minority Advice Project (SEMAP) at Spital Hill, Sheffield. SEMAP was the first project of its kind in England and Wales. He worked as an advisor to the police and various local government

initiatives. His dual role as an imam and as a professional advisor gave him a unique insight into community issues and an ability to solve many personal problems and to communicate community issues to a wider society.

His Imamate was at a time when Sheffield was passing through a traumatic period including having a council run by the hard left, the mass redundancies of steel workers (many of whom were Pakistani Muslims). It was also a time of increased racial tension. Hafiz Bora was a victim of a vicious racial attack. One day he was attacked outside the mosque by a man who threw a brick to the back of his head. An inch lower and it would have paralysed him. Youths from the community besieged the house of the attacker wanting to avenge their beloved mawlana. But at the request of the Police Inspector Hafiz Bora intervened and the mob was disbanded and a potential community disaster averted.

Hafiz Bora is most probably the only British citizen to have become a US Army Chaplain. In 1990 and 1991 he was given the rank of Sergeant by the US Army and lead tarawih prayers at Fort Bliss, El Paso, Texas. In 2000 he became among the first Muslim to be appointed as a Chaplain to a hospital - a post he held had the Leicester General Hospital until his death.

But despite all his other achievements nothing made Hafiz Bora more proud or satisfied than his role as a teacher. Here he was both outstanding and innovative and those fortunate to come under his wings were always outstanding achievers. He took his students to play cricket, taught them to wrestle and took them on trips to theme parks and others places of interest to young people. Also, he made sure his students cleaned madrassa toilets with him weekly, to teach them lessons in humility.

Later, when he became too unwell to teach boys even at home, they would often knock on the door, pleading for him to teach them.

However, it is through leading by example that Hafiz Bora was head and shoulders above his contemporaries. For instance, he broke the mould in Leicester by sending his daughters to university - at a time when it was socially unacceptable for young women to live on their own away from home. Such a courageous act made him a victim of much attacks from members of the community but Hafiz Bora stood firm and simply turned a blind eye to the judgemental comments - some really vicious - aimed at him and his family.

When the first of his four daughters left for London University, his encouragement was mixed with trepidation. By the time his fourth daughter had finished school, he positively pushed her onto a degree course (telling her he would not let her get married till she had a degree!)

Hafiz Bora was a man who lived and understood diversity. He adhered to protocol in matters of religion, but at the same time had a great sense of his own and others' autonomy. This was helped by his experience at school. At his first secondary school, Barda High School, he was the only Muslim boy in a school of Hindu pupils - his mother had sent him there because she wanted him to learn to read and write in Gujarati, his mother

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tongue. He later went to Saifi High School in Bombay, where he was the only Sunni boy in a Shi'a school.

Hafiz Bora was a man steeped in culture and loved the arts and particularly poetry. In his second marriage, he wooed his wife with urdu poetry, in the style of Cyrano. A polyglot he loved to listen to long wave radio in Urdu, Hindi, Marathi and Arabic broadcasts to get a variety of versions of the news - not just the official anodyne version from the BBC.

He spent much of his life following the *Tabligh Jamaat* movement - engaged in his love of da'wah, often in the most remote corners of the world which included Malta, Turkey, Delhi, Palestine, Zanzibar, Pakistan, France, America, Canada and Belgium.

In his final journey to India in January 2005, he launched a successful health awareness campaign in Gujarat on kidney disease which affects the Indian community to a disproportionately large degree.

His real spirit was that he never allowed his illness to hold him back. He never gave up on his travelling or his teaching - both were the great loves of his life. "Though he lived most of his life with only one kidney, he performed over a 20 pilgrimages. The exact number was known only to himself, but three *Hajj* and *umrahs* were performed while he was on dialysis.

Hafiz Bora is survived by five children, all of whom went to university (two to Oxford, two to London, one to Manchester) and two grandchildren (Sulayman b.2001 and Layla, b. 2003).

Those who were fortunate to have met Hafiz Bora will miss the quality and intensity of his conversation, the warmth of his hospitality, the genuineness of his sincerity and, more important, his sense of humility and compassion.

May the Almighty grant him the loftiest abode in Paradise and may He grant his family and friends patience and everlasting fond memories. Amen. ■