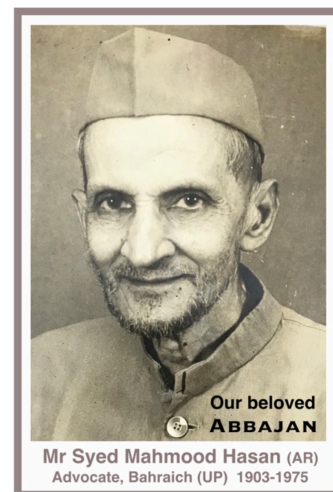


OUR BELOVED ABBAJAN

Syed Zafar Mahmood

May Allah bless our parents in the higher echelons of paradise, Aameen.

Till attaining the age of seventeen years I had stayed at my hometown in the Indian city of Bahraich in the eastern region of Uttar Pradesh state. After schooling at Montessori School and Government Intermediate College, I had moved to Aligarh Muslim University for graduation, postgrad and doctorate.



My mother, Bi Ammi, had expired when I was a child of three years. For the rest of his life our father, Syed Mahmood Hasan (AR), whom we addressed as Abbajan, profusely acted both as our father as well as mother. He too died after performing Haj in 1975 and was buried in the sacred graveyard, *Jannat-al-Ma'la* in the holy city of Makkah-al-Mukarramah.

I and my siblings are indebted to two of our brothers namely Mr Syed Nasir Mahmood for accompanying and well serving Abbajan during his Haj pilgrimage and to Mr Syed Qaisar Mahmood who financed Abbajan's Haj pilgrimage. Both brothers then lived in Muscat, Sultanate of Oman where Abbajan had stayed with them for a month before proceeding to Saudi Arabia. May Allah bless them, Aameen.

The earliest that I can recollect Abbajan was around 1960 (my pre-teens) knowing him as a thin tall person in white kurta pyjama and white *do-palli* cap (made of two pieces of translucent cotton cloth stitched together by the tailor). Being an acclaimed lawyer, while going to the

court he'd always wear black sherwani & matching *kishti-numa* (scaphoid / navicular) cap and well starched white pyjama. To beat the heat during the summer to & fro trip between home and court he also wore a pith-helmet type khaki English hat. Usually he used to ride a bicycle to the court and back; otherwise sometimes plied by hired manual tricycle rickshaw. During winters he replaced pyjama by pants (trousers) and wore a long overcoat on top of woolen sherwani. At home during winters he wore a woolen gown on top of woolen kurta pyjama and a woolen cap knitted by my only sister Mrs Zakia Khatoon (eldest among the siblings). Abbajan was fond of wearing *Itr* (natural perfume made by distilling the flowers).

At home Abbajan had a huge office room sitting therein on a cushioned chair, working on a sprawling table with a revolving book-rack by his side. Other two sides had long wooden benches for clients and a sofa on the fourth side. The adjoining smaller room accommodated his *Munshi* (clerk). In the office-table, as well as in drawing room, dining room and prayer room, he had got push-buttons fixed for ringing the bell to call his favorite helper Mr Aslam Khan who devoted life-time with us; later during my service career I hosted him as a family member wherever I was posted including in Saudi Arabia where I worked as First Secretary in Indian Embassy and Director of Indian Int'l Schools.

Offering daily five times Namaz (prayer) was essential for Abbajan and us, his children. *Fajr* (dawn), *Maghrib* (sunset) and *Isha* (late evening) were necessarily with congregation in Masjid while the remaining two viz *Zohr* (early afternoon) and *Asr* (late afternoon) could be offered at home or in his court room where he had made special permanent arrangement to perform *Wuzu* (ablution) and offer Namaz.

After *Fajr* prayers in Masjid often he would take us and the other *namazis* along on foot and would knock at the doors of the neighborhood houses waking up men and persuading them to offer Namaz. On some other days he sat in the Masjid and loudly explained to

the co-namazis Allah's message as mentioned in selected verses of the holy Quran.

After coming back from Masjid we had to loudly recite holy Quran and he used to listen and made correction wherever needed. More than forty thousand copies of his Urdu book *Quran Karim ki Basic Reader* and its English and Hindi versions rendered respectively by our Bhaijan Prof Syed Tahir Mahmood (law faculty dean at Delhi University, served later as chair/member at Indian commissions of law, human rights and minorities) and another academician from AMU have been distributed pro bono.

This was followed by Abbajan changing into pants trousers and white canvas shoes and briskly walking upto the water body known as *Jhinga-Ghat* located at a distance of about two kilometers from home. His contemporary cloth merchant friend Mr Abdullah would often accompany him for such morning walks. After coming back home he did physical exercises on the carpet in the drawing room taking cue from Dale Carnegie's and many other books.

Immediately thereafter we sat together at the breakfast table, often interspersed by loudly reading to him the earlier day's English newspapers, Pioneer and National Herald (none others were then available in town) followed by discussion on the news items. Sometimes magazines like Illustrated Weekly of India, Radiance and Readers Digest were also similarly read out and discussed. Abbajan also used to maintain files of print news clippings which too we'd browse through, at times.

On Fridays, a set of local *Ulema* (persons learned in Islamic theology) were regular invitees for breakfast at home. Abbajan used to discuss with them nuances of the injunctions in Quran and prophetic traditions.

Thereafter, Abbajan sat in his office to prepare for the court cases and we devoted time to our studies. By 9 am we too would shower and leave for school and he for court. After studies at school and playing football or hockey there we returned at 4 pm while Abbajan returned at around 5 pm. After evening tea / *sharbat* / *lassi* (as per weather) with cookies again we sat together during summers in the internal courtyard and during winters inside the rooms and he engaged us in some intellectual conversation matching our level. I'm told by my elder siblings that till Bi Ammi was alive both my parents used to play badminton together in the evening; we had two badminton courts - in the inner and outer courtyards. We had revived the evening game tradition over weekends.

On returning from masjid after *Maghrib* Namaz we loudly recited tables from two to twenty straight as well as in the reverse order. By that time dinner was laid, we again sat together and oral conversation & teaching continued. This was followed by *Isha* Namaz in Masjid from where we would return to brush our teeth and slip into our beds calling it a day.

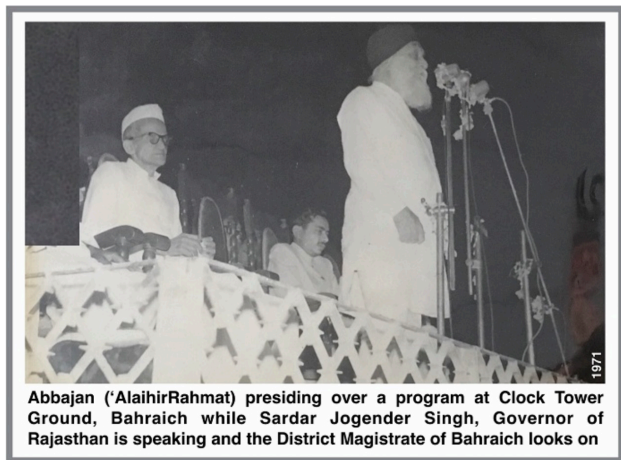
At home, the Oxford dictionary used to be our daily companion. On some Sundays, for several hours from morning till evening, Abbajan used to teach us English language very systematically based on the lessons in our ongoing textbooks. During the summer vacations Abbajan used to make us practice improvement of handwriting: English, Urdu and Hindi. Frequently, over weekends, we were lined up in the drawing room and were told to recite in chorus some selected poems of Allama Iqbal, the composer of our national song *Saare jahaan se achha Hindostaan hamaara*.

Outside the home Mr Aslam Khan had pet animals: pigeons, ducks and dog. Once on return from court Abbajan was told that the neighbor had tied the dog with the electric poll and beat it to death because he was bitten by the dog. Abbajan got the burial organized and called in the neighbor, a cloth seller, counseled him and asked him to donate cloth for two pairs of clothes to an orphaned child in the locality.

I was fancying to publish a family journal that I typed on the typewriter, a family heirloom, brought in by our Bi Ammi as a part of the wedding gifts which she had received from her parental home. Incidentally her father used to be Deputy Post Master General of Uttar Pradesh state and they lived in Lucknow. I asked Abbajan as to what title should we give to the proposed periodical, pat came the repartee, 'Folly Personified'. With his advice we named it as *The Family Journal*; many members of the nuclear and extended family contributed articles to the journal, it was published and distributed *in-house*.

On the festive occasions of *Eid al Fitr* and *Eid al Azha* in the morning after getting ready Abbajan gave us *Eidi* (small cash gift) and then all of us together walked to *Eidgah* for *Eid* Namaz. On return, different types of *Siwaiyan* (vermicelli) dishes, *dahi barey* and *kabaab* were served in our massive high-ceiling drawing room where people of all faiths kept coming in till late evening embracing each other in celebration and exchanging pleasantries.

On *Diwali*, *Holi*, *Christmas*, *Guruparb* Abbajan took us along to greet his friends in the city. His closest friends most relied upon by him included Sardar Jogender Singh, Barrister Balbir Singh, Adv Onkar Nath Kaul, Adv Badlu Ram Shukla and Seth Bihari Lal. Mr Jogender was landowner and later served as Governor of Rajasthan. During my postgrad at AMU, I and my friend Pankaj had visited him and were his guests in the Raj Bhawan (governor house) in Jaipur. Mr Balbir hailed from Punjab, studied law in Britain and served Kapurthala Estate in Bahraich; his son joined the Indian foreign service and served as ambassador abroad. Mr Kaul too was Abbajan's fellow lawyer; his grandson ended up as



Comptroller & Auditor General of India. Mr Shukla was later elected as member of parliament; his daughter Mrs Kusum was my classfellow and friend in the Montessori School and her IAS husband served as principal secretary to prime minister (2014-2019) and is now administering Ayodhya's Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Trust. Mr Bihari Lal was the city's biggest industrialist and Abbajan's client.

Abbajan's another zamindar (landlord) friend *Chacha* Anwar Beg, known as a jolly fellow, used to treat all of us and many others with annual picnic at his farm, away from the city, with roasted whole corns and delicious curd drink. It used to be a much awaited trip we thoroughly enjoyed.

Abbajan ran a small charity through a dedicated bank account, thus serving the poor and needy of different age groups. Besides, he was Manager of Azad Inter College. Often I accompanied him during his local and outstation trips. As lawyer, he used to plead only on the side of the genuine victim decided after deep examination of the case. For social causes as well as the poor litigants in general he didn't charge fee.

My room was adjacent to Abbajan's. He used to wake up more than an hour before dawn, had warm water shower, got ready for Namaz and then used to wake me up calling me from his room: *Zafar Sahab !* Just one call was sufficient and I would respond by loudly saying Salam to him which he very fondly responded to. During the process of getting ready I sometimes heard his humming sound singing in low pitch Allama Iqbal's Persian poem:

*Tuu Ghani az har do aalam, man faqeer,
Roz-e mahshar uzr-haa-e man pazeer,
Gar tu mee beeni hisaaabam na-guzeer,
Az nigaah-e Mustafa pinha bageer.*

Ya Allah, You are the Lord of both the worlds & I am a fakir,
On the Day of Judgement kindly accept my excuses & pardon me,
But if You must judge me and take account of my deeds,
Please do this away from the sight of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

We knew and accepted that Abbajan was not a votary of cinema. However, after my result of tenth standard was announced whence I had got first division (first ever in the family) Abbajan told us, to our astonishment, that he had asked one of his young trainee lawyers to escort us to watch cinema.

During my class eleventh, I was advised to undergo a minor eye surgery for which Abbajan accompanied me all the way (100+ km) to the famous Sitapur Eye Hospital, got me admitted there, got the procedure performed by the widely known Dr Pahwa, stayed there with me for several days alongwith my sister and elder brother Mr Syed Khalid Mahmood, professor of Botany in Nepalganj Campus of Kathmandu University and brought me back to Bahraich.

Subsequently, in class 12th, I didn't get good marks in my half-yearly examination. Lying in his bed one evening Abbajan called me and expressed his displeasure to me. Holding his feet I cried, sought his forgiveness and promised to him that I would iA do my best to improve my grades. Thereafter I unleashed all my effort and, with the grace of Almighty, I scored First Division in the Board Examination which was a rare feat those days.

At age seventeen, after my schooling, Abbajan sent me to AMU where I did my three-year Honors and then got admitted in two years masters in Physics; he too was an AMU alumnus of late 1920s. However, by the time I completed the first year I realized that I'd do better for my future career if I switched over, mid stream, from the science faculty to social sciences. During the summer vacation I brought up the matter to Abbajan's attention. Most broad-minded, large-hearted and positively oriented as he was, after listening to my arguments, he readily agreed to

my proposal without even remotely thinking that I was going to waste his precious investment by way of my university fees paid over the last one year.

With a smile he permitted me to switch over to political science where I stood first beating the nearest rival by 85 marks that worked out to five percent in the aggregate. I was awarded gold medal and prestigious fellowship of the Government of India's university grants commission for my PhD and was soon appointed to teach undergrad students on campus. So, with God's grace, Abbajan felt satisfied and happy. By the way, in my political science postgrad batch even the second position holder later appeared for competitive examinations and joined the Indian police service (IPS).

So, in mid 1975, with Abbajan's full knowledge and permission I had simultaneously begun preparing to appear at the civil services examination annually conducted by the union public service commission of India (UPSC). During his pilgrimage, Abbajan wrote to me from Makkah-al-Mukarramah that in the Grand Mosque he had made special dua for me.

During a winter vacation we were visiting Bahraich. At the dinner table my elder brother Mr Syed Nasir Mahmood (who too was pursuing his Economics postgrad then at AMU) brought up the topic that the daughter of Mr Manzoor Alam of Tonk (Rajasthan) was then a student at AMU and that '*Zafar Sahab* likes her'. Subsequently, during one of Abbajan's visits to Delhi, he and I were staying in Old Delhi with my Bhaijan (elder brother Prof Syed Tahir Mahmood). Abbajan asked me to accompany him to the nearby *Markaz Jamaat-e Islami* which was then located in Old Delhi. He had to go there for a meeting with his friends the *Amir-e-Jamaat* Mr Muslim and the Editor of Weekly Radiance Mr Yusuf Siddiqi. On the way in the rickshaw, he suddenly and coolly brought up the topic and verified from me that I had a liking for Nazira, daughter of Mr Manzoor Alam, Advocate, Tonk (Rajasthan) whom

Abbajan used to meet during national level conferences for societal uplift. Nazira was then pursuing English Honors at AMU.

Much later, after Abbajan's death, in a meeting at AMU, Mr Yusuf Siddiqi took me aside and told me that Abbajan had requested him to convey to Nazira's father that Abbajan was interested in my marriage with Nazira. Mr Yusuf added that he had faithfully conveyed Abbajan's *paighaam* (matrimonial proposal) to Mr Manzoor Alam. In February 1978, I and Nazira got married and, with God's grace we have a wonderful family life. May Allah keep us blessed, Aameen.

Thus, on planet earth, my quarter-century short association with Abbajan was richly filled with exemplary multifaceted intense parental love and commitment spanning *inter alia* sacrifice, perseverance, support, protection, spirituality, compassion, empathy, trust, integrity, faithfulness, facilitation, tutelage, industriousness, discipline, patience, forgiveness, and so on. May Allah bless our Abbajan's and our Bi Ammi's noble souls in *Jannatul Firdaus*, Aameen.

I donated my share in the ancestral house in Bahraich to Zakat Foundation of India, registered charitable trust (Est 1997) headquartered in New Delhi. Other portions and adjoining properties were acquired by ZFI. The Foundation's local committee, with help of salaried resident staff, runs there charitable institutional facilities for uplift and empowerment of the deprived sections of society.



This house was got built in 1935 by Abbajan out of his personal income as lawyer. This photo was taken 88 years later in 2023. Now this is Zakat House owned by Zakat Foundation of India zakatindia.org where it runs for the poor & needy Mercy Home Medical Centre, Knitting Instt for Girls, Residential Coaching Centre for Competitive Examinations and Library-cum-Reading Room.