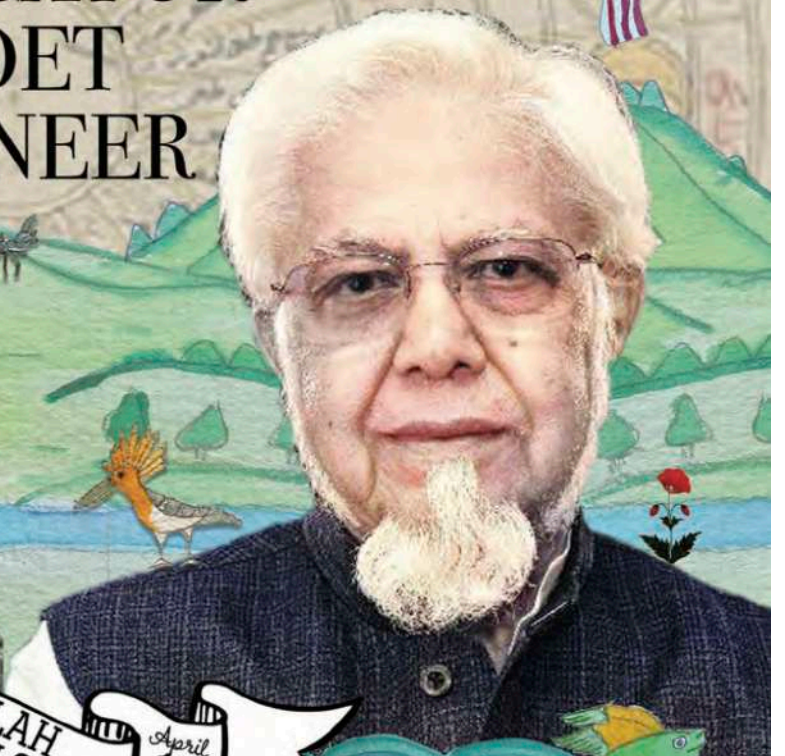
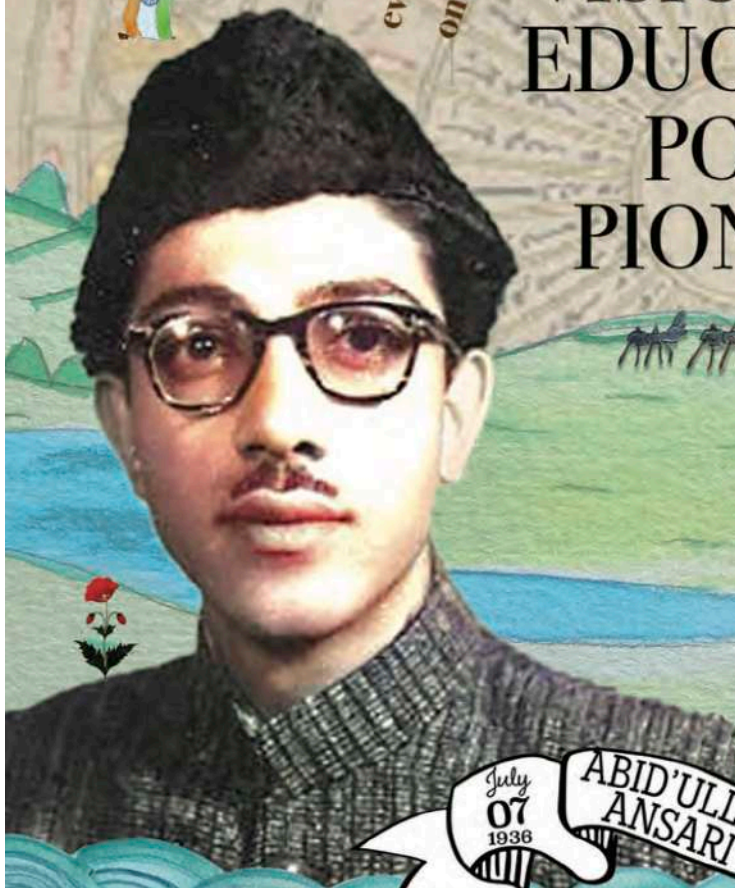


JULY/AUGUST 2021/1442 | \$4.00 | WWW.ISNA.NET

# I S L A M I C HORIZONS

God, His angels and all those in the Heavens and on Earth,  
even ants in their hills and fish in the water, call down blessings  
on those who instruct others in beneficial knowledge.  
*Al-Tirmidhi, Hadith 422*

VISIONARY  
EDUCATOR  
POET  
PIONEER



July 07 1936  
ABID'ULLAH ANSARI GHAZI  
April 11 2021

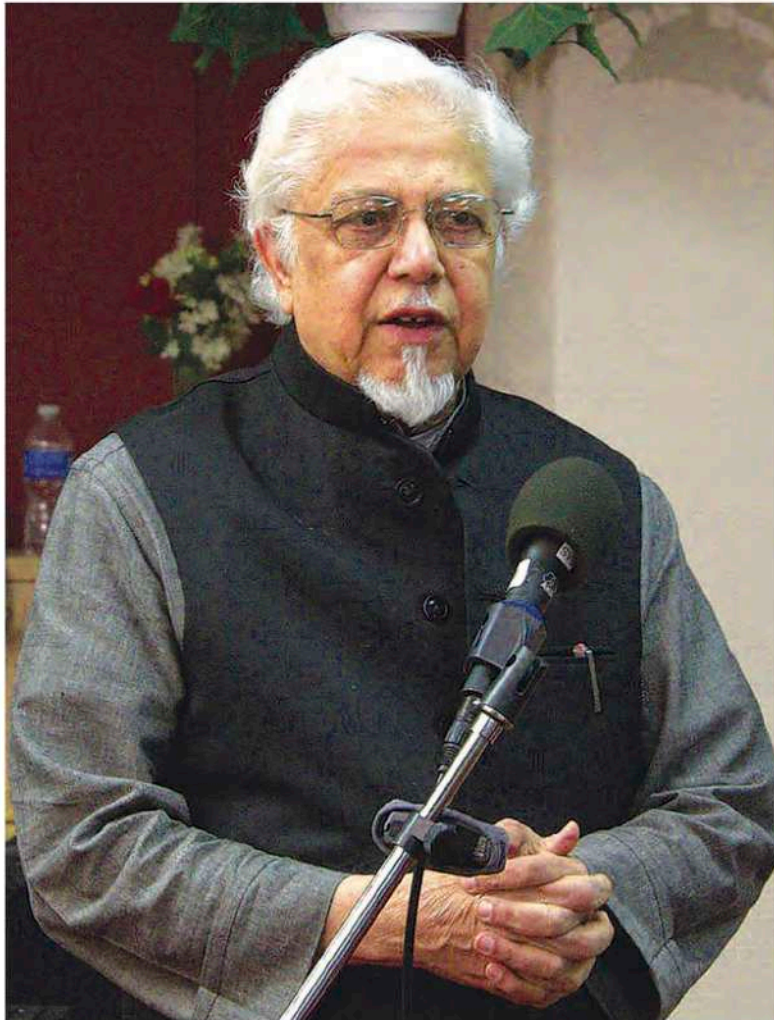


# Abidullah Ghazi

## 1936-2021

*Visionary Educator, Scholar and Poet*

BY AHMADULLAH SIDDIQI WITH SEEMI BUSHRA GHAZI



**E**ARLY SUNDAY MORNING, APRIL 11, THE MUSLIM WORLD LOST A VISIONARY educator, scholar, poet, interfaith activist and a humanist par excellence — a true *insan* (ultimate human).

Abidullah Ghazi, Ph.D., was born in 1936 in Ambhehta Pir-Zadegan village, Saharanpur district, northern India. He came from a family of renowned religious scholars, saints, luminaries, journalists and freedom fighters. His father Hamidul Ansari Ghazi, who had served as editor-in-chief of several prestigious Indian newspapers, was deeply engaged in the Indian independence movement. The family had close ties with Darul Uloom Deoband, the renowned seminary founded by his great-great grandfather Moulana Qasim Nanautavi (d. 1880).

Abidullah Ghazi experienced an itinerant childhood and a youth filled with familial and material challenges. He lost his mother Maimuna Bi when he was two, yet wrote poignantly of her tenderness and of his pain when relatives would pull him from her arms to protect him from her terminal tuberculosis.

He was raised by his maternal grandfather Moulana Muhammad Miyan, a Sabri Chishti practitioner who cradled him through nightly prayer vigils, and later by cousin-sisters and aunts. Their vivid voices fill his literary portraits of the social world of pre-Partition (1947) Indian Muslimas. The charming vulnerability and compassion reflected in his poetry, relationships, and charity likely stem from these years. In a *na't* (verfied praise) to the Prophet he pleads, *Abid ko Gudri men samole. Mahjoor e Aalam bohoth hai* (“Enfold Abid in your embrace. He has experienced so many *hijrahs*, so many wounds”).

Despite these challenges, he shone in his studies in *madrasahs* in New Delhi, Bahawalpur and Bijnaur. He journeyed to Kabul and Jalalabad to reconnect with the Afghan branch of his family descended from his politically exiled grandfather. When they fled the Soviet invasion, Ghazi took his family to stay with them in the refugee camps in Pakistan, and supported their education. His personal mentorship and support led to thousands of people being educated and uplifted. His brother Tariq noted that after their father’s demise, “The father-like-brother took us under the shade of an oak. We never felt alone or left out.”

Abidullah Ghazi had an illustrious career. In his autobiography “Jahde Musalsal: From Aligarh to Aligarh” (2017), he summed up his upbringing as follows: “I combined the religious scholarship [that] I inherited from my father’s side with the mystic and spiritual traditions of my maternal grandparents, and spent my entire life in reconciling the two with the modern educational movement of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, the founder of Aligarh Muslim University (AMU).”

Ghazi spent the years 1951-59 at AMU, earning a Bachelor of Theology and an MA (political science), earning gold medals. Elected secretary and then president of its Students Union, he went on to become president of the National Council of University Students of India. In 1956 he was among 10 nationally selected students who were part of an Indian government-sponsored goodwill trip to China.

While at Aligarh, Ghazi fell in love with Tasneema Khatoon, an illustrious fellow student, champion debater and student union secretary of the Women’s College. When divergent family backgrounds delayed their marriage, Ghazi’s cherished mentor, Chancellor Dr. Zakir Husain (later India’s president) wrote to their parents that “Abidullah is the jewel of the Men’s College, and Tasneema is the jewel of the Women’s College. It is only right that they should come together in one beautiful ring-setting.” Married in 1963, Tasneema Ghazi, Ph.D., a thinker and scholar in her own right, remained his life partner and soulmate for more than five decades.

After graduation, Ghazi taught for a few years at Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi.

# A Personal Reflection

BY SULTANA AL-QU'AITI

IT WAS IN THE 1980'S THAT I MET THE GHAZI FAMILY IN JEDDAH. Dr. Abidullah Ghazi's wife became my Tasneema Khala,<sup>1</sup> and their daughter Seemi my "adopted" sister.

After the loss of my inspirational mentor and guide, the late and much lamented Muslim polymath, the Raja Sahib of Mahmudabad Mohammad Amir Ahmed Khan (d. 1973), Dr. Ghazi assumed this role in my life and instilled further understanding of my *deen*, emphasizing its simple essence, great tolerance, Divine compassion and comportment with others no matter what their faith.


Dr. Ghazi was the quintessential Muslim *buzurg*<sup>2</sup> endowed with impeccable *akhlaq*<sup>3</sup> and that rare quality of complete humility that is the hallmark of the true *mu'min*.<sup>4</sup>

He was utterly authentic in his persona, his deportment, his old-world *tahzeeb*<sup>5</sup> and wore his deep scholarship lightly. He devoted his life to advancing one's knowledge of Islam, and the way he imparted it to the younger generation was joyful and inspiring.

He was exceedingly erudite and well versed, both in Persian and Urdu, which he loved and spoke to perfection, not forgetting his great love of Arabic. He was the *ne plus ultra*<sup>6</sup> of that rare and dying breed of Urdu speakers whom we delight in listening to, such is the captivating eloquence of that polylingual language. Listening to him converse with friends and family with his ineffable bonhomie was a sheer pleasure, as he interspersed his exchanges frequently with pithy couplets in his preferred idioms.

He imparted his great love of Islamic calligraphy to my three children, finding an excellent Pakistani calligrapher residing in Jeddah to teach them this great art. For his guidance and encouragement in this regard, I remain truly beholden.

As I scanned my visitor's book to remind me of his beautiful *khatt*,<sup>7</sup> I noticed that instead of perfunctorily writing his name and address, he had graced it with verses from a bygone age in both Urdu and Persian.

He was totally without pretension, and I can hear his soft voice ringing in my ears today expounding on some fascinating Islamic topic in his own quiet, understated manner. He had a spontaneous knack of somehow making one feel the most important person in the room, when it was his gentle personality and overwhelming aura which dominated. 

Sultana al-Qu'aiti, MBE, (based in Jeddah) is cofounder of the U.K.-based Friends of Hadhramaut, which promotes philanthropic, educational, and medical links between the people of Hadhramaut (Yemen) and overseas. Hadhramaut ([www.hadhramaut.co.uk](http://www.hadhramaut.co.uk))

1 Maternal aunt.

2 Respected elder.

3 The practice of virtue, morality and manners.

4 Who has complete submission to the Will of Allah and has faith firmly established in his heart.

5 Refinement.

6 The highest point.

7 Calligraphy.

In 1964 he joined The London School of Economics, earning another MA focusing on Palestine. He was part of the student initiative that invited Malcolm X (now al-Hajj Malik el Shabazz) to speak there in February 1965. Malcolm was so moved by Ghazi's knowledge and person that he spent three days talking with him and meeting Muslim leaders, scholars and activists in London.

In 1968, Prof. Wilfred Cantwell Smith (founding director, Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School) recruited Ghazi for a Ph.D. He and his family lived there along with such scholars as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Mahmoud Ayoub, Muzammil Siddiqui and Diana Eck. He participated enthusiastically in the interfaith celebrations, intramural volleyball games and the center's cultural life, and co-founded the first weekend Harvard Islamic school with fellow students. Ghazi studied literature with the renowned scholar Anne Marie Schimmel and completed a dissertation in 1973 under Prof. John Carter on the Hindu social reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy — the 400-page draft that Tasneema retyped three times.

Ghazi's diverse and distinguished education made him a luminary. His autobiography notes, "Harvard taught me to take all criticism positively and not to blame others for my own mistakes." He went on to teach at San Diego State, the University of Minnesota, Northwestern University and Governor's State University, after which he settled in Chicago in 1979. He also spent five years as an associate professor of Islamic studies at Jeddah's King AbdulAziz University.

Ghazi also co-founded The American Federation of Muslims of Indian Origin, The Iqra International Educational Foundation (Chicago), The Iqra Educational Foundation India/Pakistan/Europe, The Indo-American Foundation of America, The Academy of South Asian Studies and The Aligarh and Muslim University Students Endowment Fund. Aside from these, he relished civic engagement at all levels.

He loved the book booths and banter at the ISNA convention and the Parliament of World Religions. He embarrassed and delighted his children by inviting Jehovah's Witnesses inside and regaling them with chai and *pakorras*, nuances of Buddhist philosophy or the construction of the Christian canon.

Above all, Ghazi shone as an unparalleled "conductor" of the Urdu *mushaira* (poetry recitals). Youtube videos show audiences mesmerized by his extemporaneous wit and repartee. A maestro of Urdu love lyrics and creative prose, he used *ghazal* to express not only adoration for his beloved, but also immigrant nostalgia, social aspiration, political critique and even ecological concern. He left behind an Urdu-language volume of poetry, "*Zikr e Saman Azaran*," essays on *sareer e khama* and *insaniyyat*,

## Educators Salute

**T**RIBUTES POURED IN FROM ALL strata of society, especially educators of all ages.

► Renowned educator Seema Imam, Ed.D., a former chair of The Islamic Schools League of America (2018) and one of the first “Ansars,” as the Ghazis called those who cared and supported IQRA, said, “I speak, along with many other voices, as we look at educational development over the past half a century and the role the Ghazis have fulfilled. We are so very, very grateful to Dr. Abidullah Ghazi for his commitment and role in getting it right. Children nationwide have benefited from IQRA International. May Allah grant him the highest stations of the garden.” She also reminisced about his immense role in the teaching and learning of Islam in the U.S. and the world.

► Educator and author Freda Shamma, PhD, recalls asking Tasneema Ghazi why they were writing a series for a separate religion class. Tasneema replied, “Because we have so many full-time Islamic schools starting up with one subject being Islamic studies, and there are no books for them. Yes, we need to integrate Islam into every subject, but this is the pressing need right now.”

Shamma added, “Not only has North America benefitted from IQRA’s books, but they have been essential textbooks in Muslim schools in many other countries.”

► Shaza Khan, PhD (executive director, ISLA) fondly recalls, “The IQRA books from which we learned our deen were foundational. My eyes well up with tears as I think about their enormous impact on my own Islam and on that of every Muslim child in my city. We are just one small city of Muslim children who have now grown up and are trying to make our own small impact in this world, drawing upon this foundation in which IQRA played a huge role.

“I can only imagine the many mountains of good deeds he will be greeted with when shown his scales of good deeds! Surely he will be greeted with, ‘Return to your Lord, well-pleased and well-pleasing Him’” (89:28).

It is now up to us, the well-wishers of the Ghazis and IQRA, to see that his mission continues with even stronger zeal and vigor.

and his 1,000-page autobiography, “*Jahd e Musalsal*.” More than three dozen scholars, academics, political and literary personalities have paid tribute to him in “*Ahl e Fikr o Fan ki Nazar Mein: Dr. Abidullah Ghazi*.”

Together, the Ghazis won numerous local, national, and international honors in the U.S., South Asia and the Arab world. In 2009 they were included in “The 500 Most Influential Muslims,” published by Amman’s Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre and Georgetown University’s Prince Walid Bin Talal Center for Christian Muslim Understanding. They continue to hold this honor.

Ghazi’s crowning accomplishment was his 1983 establishment of the IQRA International Educational Foundation. While establishing Sunday schools wherever they lived from 1968-79, the Ghazis discovered that there was no existing curriculum apart from A.S. Hashim’s pioneering books. They began writing *sira* books at Harvard and eventually left the Academy to devote themselves full time to writing and publishing a “Comprehensive and Systematic Program of Islamic Studies,” the first full “Scope and Sequence for Islamic Studies” for children outside a traditional *madrasa*. They divided Islamic studies into *sira*, Quran, *aqida*, *fiqh* and *akhlāq*, along with Muslim history and Muslim geography. They then produced textbooks, workbooks, teacher’s guides, and enrichment for each subject from the K-12 level — all of which incorporated graded readability formulas and developed critical thinking skills.

The first series completed was *sira*, a subject that allowed them to seamlessly integrate all other topics. Fully convinced of the work’s importance, Dr. Ghazi sold the family house and gave the \$25,000 equity to Kazi Publications, who published the first edition. The books were widely used by Muslims of all sects, ethnicities and worldview. Over 150 IQRA books are being taught in schools in 40 countries.


The curriculum became a model for new Muslim publishing houses and inspired similar projects among both Muslim and non-Muslim groups. IQRA hosted workshops in which Jewish, Christian and Muslim educators read one another’s curriculum to remove bias and promote cooperation. In the early 2000s, the Singaporean Education Ministry invited the Ghazis to create a new Islamic Studies curriculum for their *madrasa* system, integrating traditional and academic pedagogies. In cooperation with the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, the Ghazis helped develop a complete program that satisfied all parties.

In 2016, Ghazi contracted a lung condition that began to weaken his vigor. Just before falling ill he had made a spreadsheet of 40 projects he wished to complete — he finished them all. His devoted wife, children, their spouses, grandchildren and caregivers kept him slowly writing and at home.

After years of being wracked by violent coughing, his last day was peaceful, his last breath, gentle.

Ghazi passed at 12:30 am on April 11. Condolences and tributes poured in on social media and in newspapers worldwide.

Forty years ago Sidi Farid, Gouverneur of the Islamic Texts Society, called Ghazi “the last of the Muslim gentleman scholars.” A culmination of 1,400+ years of Muslim cosmopolitanism — *adab*, *akhlāq* and *rahma* — he lived according to “And do not forget your share in this world; and do good as God has done good to you” (28:77). Dr. Ghazi has left an enduring legacy and example, and now it is our work to see that his vision and mission thrive. Indeed, we all belong to God, and to God shall we all return.

Abidullah Ghazi is survived by his wife Tasneema and five children: Bushra Yasmin (lecturer in Arabic), Rashid Mansoor (businessman), Saba Tasneem (artist and designer), Suhaib Hamid (lawyer) and Usama Hameed (physician) and sister-in-law, Asiya Khan. His daughter-in-law-Ruhma Quraishi Ghazi created a beautiful haven for him. He also left behind nine Ghazi, Ameen and Samad grandchildren; four brothers and a sister; and many family friends, disciples, and admirers worldwide. 

Ahmadullah Siddiqi, Ph.D. (professor emeritus, journalism and public relations, Western Illinois University-Macomb), with Bushra Seemi Y. Ghazi (lecturer, Classical Arabic, The University of British Columbia).