

## KHORASANEE FAMILY HISTORY

by Nafiseh Khorasanee

### Mulla Ashraf and the Move from Iran

Our family traces its roots to Mulla Ashraf, who came from Nishapur, in Khorasan. The reasons for his journey to India are not entirely clear, and over time, several theories have emerged.

According to my grand-uncle Dawood, Mulla Ashraf may have come as part of the entourage of Nadir Shah Afshar, the Iranian Shah who invaded Delhi in 1739. However, the timeline does not fit, as this would predate the birth of Mulla Ashraf's grandson. Another theory suggests that he was a relative of Nadir Shah who fled Iran when the Shah began persecuting his own family, fearing conspiracies against him. This too seems unlikely given the chronology.

What has persisted in our family's oral tradition, however, is the belief that we were somehow connected to Nadir Shah Afshar, and that Mulla Ashraf may have been one of his descendants.

While the exact circumstances of his departure remain unknown, it is clear that many Iranians of the 19th century left their homeland due to political unrest and the promise of better opportunities in India and Burma. Most Shia families arriving from Iran at this time first settled along South India's eastern coast, in Vijayanagar. Over time, Lucknow became a centre for Shia culture, and from there, some families—our own among them—migrated further east to Burma. In both India and Burma, Iranian Shias continued to wear the ammama and zeri caps, traditional attire from their homeland.

Though little is known of Mulla Ashraf's own life, what is certain is that he had many children and eventually died in Vizagapatam, a Shia-ruled kingdom in South India.

### Hasan Ali and the Burmese Years

Mohamed Ali Khorasanee, my father's eldest brother, recorded that while many of Mulla Ashraf's children are lost to history, some names survived. His son, Hasan Ali, settled in Burma and earned his living trading along the Irrawaddy River with the help of his two sons.

After Hasan Ali's death, his elder son, Mohamed Backer, remained in Rangoon and founded a shoe business that flourished for some years. By the time of his death in 1922, the business was already in decline, and under the management of his son, Hasan Ali, it eventually closed in the mid-1930s. The strain of this loss weighed heavily on Hasan Ali, particularly as he was also supporting his widowed daughter, Shireen, and her young child, alongside his own large family.

Other Iranian families in Burma endured similar hardships during this period between the two world wars. Many who had once been prosperous saw their fortunes dwindle. The outbreak of the Second World War, and the Japanese advance into Burma, added to their difficulties, leaving them with an uncertain future.

#### Maan Dadi and the Court of King Thebaw

Mohamed Backer's sister, Sakina Khanum, was affectionately known in the family as "Maan Dadi," though the local Burmese, unable to pronounce her name, called her Khala Ma Saun. She married her cousin, Mohamed Jaffer, himself a grandson of Mulla Ashraf.

According to both Ebrahim Shirazi and my grand-uncle Dawood, Mohamed Jaffer once served as a minister in the court of King Thebaw, the last Burmese monarch. During a turbulent period of Thebaw's reign, Maan Dadi and her husband, along with others, were forced to flee Mandalay, then the royal capital, for Prome.

Historical accounts tell us that during this time a smallpox epidemic struck Mandalay, killing two of the king's children. Thebaw, advised by his Indian soothsayers, planned mass sacrifices of both Burmese and foreigners to ward off the supposed demonic influence. Fear spread rapidly, and the city was soon emptied as people fled aboard Irrawaddy steamers or into the countryside. Thebaw's rule came to an end in 1885 when the British annexed Upper Burma.

After being widowed, Maan Dadi may have lived with her nephews Hasan Ali or Hashim. A family tree recorded by Mohamed Ali notes that she was later the “old lady in Bow Bazaar, Calcutta,” where much of the family spent the war years. She remained deeply attached to Hasan Ali’s children, especially Akbar, who as a child in Rangoon called her “Munaa.”

### The Families Divided

By the mid-1930s, Hasan Ali’s fourth son, Mohamed Reza Khorasanee (Afshar), had taken a post as an engineer with the Iranian Oil Company in Abadan. He married Sakina Ispahany by proxy, and soon after, Hasan Ali, his wife, daughter Shireen, granddaughter Banoo, and the new bride all moved to Iran to begin a new life.

The four younger sons remained in Burma under the care of Hasan Ali’s brother, Hashim, and his wife, Budima (Fatima Sultan Shirazee), along with Maan Dadi. Hashim, who had no children of his own, shared a particularly close bond with his brother and gladly took responsibility for his nephews.

When the Japanese advanced into Burma during the Second World War, Hashim, his wife, their twin nephews Akbar and Asghar, and Maan Dadi were among the thousands who fled on foot to India. They likely paused for a time in Lucknow, where Hashim died in 1942 or 1943.

### My Father’s Escape from Rangoon

My father, Backer Khorasanee, was about 20 years old at the outbreak of war, and his older brother Mehdy around 22. Just before the Japanese bombing of Rangoon, the two brothers secretly boarded the last ship to leave the city, thanks to a family friend, Munshi Haq, who was serving as bursar. When the vessel reached Calcutta, they hurried home, where they found their mother deep in prayer. Seeing her sons safe, she felt her prayers had been answered.

This story was passed down to me by my cousin Zahida.

### Calcutta Years and Beyond

By the time of the war, Hasan Ali and several family members had already moved to Calcutta from Iran. A family photograph taken in a Calcutta studio in 1948 shows the entire household, including Maan Dadi.

In 1952 my grandmother, Fatima, died there and was buried in the Shia cemetery. Her headstone bears a poem written by Ameen Khorasanee (Afsheen), a tender tribute from her children:

*She cast a glow of love around,  
Her gentle heart could bear no ill,  
So let her sleep be long and sound,  
And have, of peace, of God, her fill.*

In the years that followed, history again reshaped the family's course. After India's independence and the partition that followed, relatives dispersed to East and West Pakistan as well as back to Iran. By the 1950s and 1960s, new migrations began—this time westward, to the United Kingdom, America, and Canada—where many branches of the family remain today.