

# **Br. Muhammad Akram Rana**

By: Abdulaziz Mian.

***Q. Even though I have known you for over twenty- four years, can you tell our readers a bit about your background?***

***Br. Rana:*** I was born in a small village in District Narowal, Pakistan, in 1948. Actually, I'm not sure whether I was really born in 1948 as my family put that year down in the records when I started school. God knows when I was really born. I am the youngest among six brothers and one sister. I graduated from Government Polytechnic Institute in Sialkot as an Associate Engineer. I was enjoying life in Pakistan as an overseer in the Highway Department of Pakistan building roads and bridges when I decided to migrate to better my career and education. I left Pakistan on June 12, 1972. I travelled to many countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, France, England, Holland, Switzerland and Germany. Eventually, I settled in Winnipeg.

***Q. How long were you in other countries and what did you do?***

***Br. Rana:*** After my initial travels I spent most of my time in Germany where I worked as a carpet salesman and operated a small hotel. It was difficult to get citizenship in Germany so I moved to Canada on December 24, 1973. I landed in St. Johns, Newfoundland. Both immigration and I gave each other a hard time and then I was sent to Halifax. I was given the green light to stay. I tried Dalhousie University but things did not work out and I moved to Montreal in search of a job.

***Q. How did you survive? When and why did you move to Winnipeg?***

***Br. Rana:*** I was in good shape financially because I made good money from the hotel business. I worked in Montreal for one and a half years for a conveyer manufacturer, as well as in some labour positions building the Olympic Stadium for the '76 Olympic games. Due to my technical background, I was making \$5.41 per hour when the minimum wage at that time was \$1.30, Alhamdulillah. I was led to believe it would be easy to get immigration in Winnipeg so I moved here.

***Q. Please tell me of your arrival to Winnipeg story?***

***Br. Rana:*** Well, I took the train and arrived at the CN station. I picked up the phone book and called the first Muslim name I saw. It was Br. Mushtaq Ali who did not speak Urdu. He gave me his brother Dr. Jameel Ali's phone number who spoke a little Urdu. The poor guy picked me up from the station and brought me to the International Centre for prayer. This is where I managed to find other Pakistanis like Br. Wali-ur-Rehman. I stayed in a hotel for a few days and then found an apartment downtown. Ten days after my arrival I found a house on Young Street.

***Q. What was your impression of Winnipeggers at the time?***

***Br. Rana:*** Great. I met many helpful people like Dr. Jameel Ali, Khalil Baksh, Pervez Siddiqui, Dr. Riaz Usmani, Asghar Ali Shah, Dr. Asad Ullah, Dr. Qazi Hameed, Arshad Farooqi, Dr. Haider Ali, Dr. Luqman Tahir and more. These were the first Muslims here at the time. I felt welcomed and was guided very well.

***Q. You mentioned praying in the International Centre. What about the Masjid?***

***Br. Rana:*** There was no Masjid when I arrived in April of 1975 so we used to pray in the International Centre. The cost to build the masjid was \$139,000, which was a lot of money in 1975. We got a \$60,000 grant from the Saudi government and we raised the remaining \$79,000. Two fundraisers were held, first at 190 Dubuc and the other at Holy Trinity Church. A small and dedicated community dug the basement of the current St. Vital masjid themselves. I remember it being a lot of physical labour and a lot of people came out to help. The first Eid prayer there was held on May 17, 1976. I believe the regular Jummah prayers started a few years down the road when Br. Helmi El-Shareef and Br. Ayub Hamid took the responsibility. Gradually everyone else started coming to Winnipeg that year and afterwards, like Raza Durrani, Bashir Rajput, Mian Hameed, Khalid Khan, Aftab Shah, Javed Bukhari, Khalid

Iqbal, etc.

There were only two major streets in this area at the time: St. Anne's and St. Mary's, and most of us used to take the bus to the masjid. The bus would drop us far away and we had to walk a long distance in the wintertime to get there, but that didn't stop anyone from going. I met Haji Nasim for the first time this way while we were both going to the Masjid. After that we continued going together, Alhamdulillah.

***Q. When did your wife, Sr. Attiyah, come into the picture?***

***Br. Rana:*** Allah finds the way for everyone. I was looking for someone to get married to. She was living on the same street as me, two houses away. I discussed the opportunity with Dr. Haider Ali and Br. Rai Mumtaz who encouraged me to pursue a marriage proposal. Attiyah Naseem Rana accepted Islam and we got married on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 1975, which was also Friday, the 17<sup>th</sup> of Ramadan, and the groundbreaking ceremony for the masjid! As everyone knows, I have two wonderful kids Bilal and Saduf.

***Q. People rarely see you working because you are always helping someone in the community. Do you want to elaborate your career in Winnipeg?***

***Br. Rana:*** I opened up a grocery store with friends in 1976, while working as a Welder and Machinist at Allied Farm Equipment, then Dominion Bridge and then Bristol Aerospace. I later made the switch and bought a taxi in 1984. It was profitable so I bought a 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and then 4<sup>th</sup> taxi. I also bought a vehicle repair shop in 1993. After a few years I sold all the taxis and the garage and started buying revenue properties.

***Q. Everyone in the community knows that they can count on you. How do you find time for the community?***

***Br. Rana:*** If it is in your nature to help people, you will find the time. No one has the time, we have to make time. I remember everyone who helped me during my transition. They set the standard in my heart and I have to do the same.

***Q. How do newcomers know to call you? How come they do not call me?***

***Br. Rana:*** I told all of my friends in other cities to give my name to anyone who is coming to Winnipeg and needs assistance. Most of the taxi drivers also know to contact me if they feel their client is Muslim and is a stranger in Winnipeg. I have also asked the taxi dispatchers at the airport and bus depot to let me know if a newcomer needs help.

***Q. I have seen you doing community work for the last 24 years. I know you have been working in the background for all these years. How about telling our readers about your official times in the Pakistani Association and MIA?***

***Br. Rana:*** I believe the Pakistani Association started in 1971. I was elected General Secretary in 1982 and President in 1986 and 1990. I also served as the Vice-President of the National Federation of Pakistani Canadians, which was the Canada-wide organization. The Association was more dynamic in those days, holding various conferences and seminars, as well as community picnics and dinners. We purchased a building for \$42,000 and it took another \$30,000 to renovate. The Pakistani Centre moved from 793 Beverly to 348 Ross. Despite the growth in the Pakistani community, we still have the same 20 year old centre, but it makes me so happy to see the entire community use the Pakistani Centre as a masjid. There were about 75 people there last night for Maghrib prayer and a halaqa going on!

I also became involved with Human Concern International in 1982 as a Manitoba Representative. I continue to hold that title now. However, my most important work was when we were working with the United Nations High Commission in helping Afghani Refugees come to Canada in 83/84. I had gone on their behalf to Pakistan and obtained a list of those refugees that required exit, with lots of trouble from the Pakistani Embassy. I then consulted Lloyd Axworthy, who was the Minister of Immigration at the time, and collaborated with MIA to bring those refugees to Winnipeg. Aftab Bukhari was President of MIA then, and later it was Dr. Abdul Malik. I had managed to convince them to participate and in doing so, MIA was the first and only organization that brought approximately

100 Afghani refugees and about 30 Laotian refugees to Canada. It was a great achievement for the MIA and later the government continued this endeavor.

The community also gave me the opportunity to work as the Trustee for one term. It was a humbling experience. I encourage people to serve on the MIA board and/or committees.

***Q. You have been able to get money from those politicians who were off limits. How did you manage that?***

***Br. Rana:*** It was definitely not easy. I was constantly showing up in their office trying to provide rationale and documentation for our project. I think they knew I was not going to go away. We have to be persistent in our cause.

***Q. Any advise for those who are sitting on the sideline?***

***Br. Rana:*** I think our families were heavily involved and attached to activities in the Masjid. I do not see the same enthusiasm in newcomers. I still remember the contributions of the many Arab students that have come and gone, through financial aid for the new masjid and various activity involvements. Hopefully our contributions and sacrifices will pave the way for others. I think it's very important to stay involved and be able to form the community in which you live. I think that's how we had such a tight-knit community for so long because we all had to work together to establish any sort of community and be able to practice our beliefs. We need to extend a helping hand to the newcomers instead of criticism and make sure they take responsibility for this community. We have many talented people; it is just a matter of priorities.