Aurangzeb through a Firman from Delhi as Syeds. Incidentally Tagore's ancestors were also sent as Kulin Brahmins. The Tagores had close links with my ancestors, who were often invited to Jorashanko for games of chess. My paternal grandfather was a prodigal son who spent all his father's wealth entertaining his friends and family. When my mother entered that household as a bride the tables had turned and it was a different picture, she faced a situation that showed glimpses of grandeur from the past but was not quite as opulent as she had heard before. The story goes that once while passing through the area Nawab Sirajuddaudah stopped with his companions at their household and was pleasantly surprised to be served with seventeen different items of sweetmeat. Being a landlord's daughter she came with brass 'thalis' full of gold jewellery as was the custom in those days.

She was a brave lady and began to run a household with over thirty members with my father's fixed earnings in Kolkata. She ran a house with all her children, her brothers who studied in Kolkata, her husband's nephew and a retinue of servants and gave shelter to anyone who came to Kolkata for treatment from our ancestral village. No one knows how she did this but with Allah's grace she was able to keep everyone well fed and happy. The ambience in that household was one of togetherness and love and everyone was contented and satisfied.



She was not in politics but was able to keep in touch and get the love and respect from eminent personalities of the time. She was 'bouma' to Bidhan Chandra Roy and 'boudi' to Sarat Bose, and Tridib Chowdhury and Jyoti Basu. Sher-e-Bangla who was the first guest to arrive on every Eid day relished the cuisine she prepared ,with great joy and admiration. She was a lady with resilience and great vision whose children stood out as lawyers, teachers, writers , religious thinkers and lawmakers.

She was much respected in society. She was 'dadi' to the young children in the area and 'amma' to the older generation. She turned out to be lucky in death as well –her place of burial was already preserved even without payment by the Kolkata corporation. Her son Syed Ashraf Ali had made an application for her burial place seven years before her death. This application was deemed right and her place was reserved. The payment for the place was made when she died in 1981. Nature has a strange way of preserving things for people with honesty and integrity. This was my mother who even in the most traumatic times held fast her patience and faith in God and made us believe that after darkness there was light.

She loved music and poetry and the Gitanjali was kept next to the settee she sat on all day. Her love for poetry also enabled her to make an appointment with Rabindranath Tagore in Shantiniketan where she took my siblings to meet him. This is no legend –this is the tale of a mother who taught us to think big beyond the horizon and to live straight. This was a woman who sold her gold to get her husband elected in several elections in West Bengal. I remember in the late eighties her hand shaking as she hoisted the flag, to commemorate the opening of Syed Badrudduja School in Sandal street in Kolkata.

She was our lighthouse in the choppy seas and to this day as I imagine her grave in Gobra, Kolkata, I can smell her Jabakusummed hair. In the chill of winter, I remember and feel her warmth on cold days in Kolkata when I curled up in my blanket and she told me stories of her childhood and a glorious past.

Mother, as I think of you today in the twilight of my life, I am reminded of Rumi's words:

Love is the way messengers
From the mystery tell us things.
Love is the mother.
We are her sons.
She shines inside us,
Vinvisible, as we trust
Or lose trust, or feel it start to grow again.

The writer is the youngest daughter of Amatuz Zainab Rakia Khatun and Syed Badrudduja.