

FRAGMENTS FROM A PRE-PARTITION CHILDHOOD

Kaniz Alia on her early years in India, as narrated by her daughter



SARA ZAKER

I am Kaniz Alia also known by my nickname Baby. I was born in March 1933. I have no memory of my mother. I was two and a half years old when she passed away, and my sister (Kaniz Fatema, nicknamed Kochi) was 13 days old.

My mother, Sara Begum, and my father, Syed Golam Kabir had five children over a span of nine and a half years between 1926 and 1935. She was married off at a very early age, and as was the practice in those days, her firstborn was raised by our maternal grandparents. A young mother, *Maa* was not able to rear an infant with another on the way.

My eldest brother, *Boro Bhaiya*, lived with my grandparents, *Nana* and *Mini*, till he was seven. *Maa* brought him back to live with her because his studies were suffering. My brother would lament about being deprived of a mother's love from a young age. He would always say the two and a half years he spent with *Maa* were the best years of his life, but *Boro Bhaiya* was thoroughly spoilt by my grandparents as well.

Maa's second child was a girl. Kaniz Zohra, nicknamed Piyari, was born in 1927. When my mother's third child, Syed Humayun Kabir, *Choto Bhaiya*, was born in 1931, *Maa* handed over the baby boy to a nanny. We called our nanny, Khilai, a name derived from Calcuttan Urdu, meaning one who feeds. *Maa* continued to breastfeed my elder sister even after my *Choto Bhaiya* was born. *Maa* was very fond of girls. She also breastfed me until her youngest was born two years later. The first three children were born wherever my father happened to be posted as a member of the Bengal Civil Service. My younger sister and I were also born in Calcutta, but by that time my parents lived in a rented house.

Khilai came to live at my parent's house soon

after Humayun was born and was a part of the family until she passed away in the 1970s. Much of what we know about *Maa* we heard from Khilai. Khilai said that *Maa* would hand over the baby boy to her with all the necessary items for the day, such as milk and nappies, and turn her attention to her daughter Piyari. *Maa*'s attachment to Piyari was unusual in those days and very indulgent. Once she made a large bowl of *roshogolla* (syrupy sweets), and let *Boro Apa* play with the entire bowl of sweets, as she would not have it any other way until it was one royal mess.

During her relatively short life, my mother acquired a reputation for being a Swadeshi, a Bangali, and something of a 'feminist.' She was socially conscious and read widely.

The name of the area where *Boro Bhaiya* was born was Gora Bazar in Bahrapur. Initially, *Boro Bhaiya* was named Gora by my *Nana*. *Boro Bhaiya* loved this name—more because Gora is the protagonist of Tagore's novel by the same name. *Boro Bhaiya* read Gora many times. It did not matter that the name Gora did not stick; he was eventually called Ali Kabir. He was in fact named after Gora Bazar, but that too did not matter. It was through this name that *Boro Bhaiya* identified with Rabindranath and being a Bangali. He took the pen name Gora when he started to write in his teens. But when, after many years he became a well-known columnist, he wrote as Syed Ali Kabir.

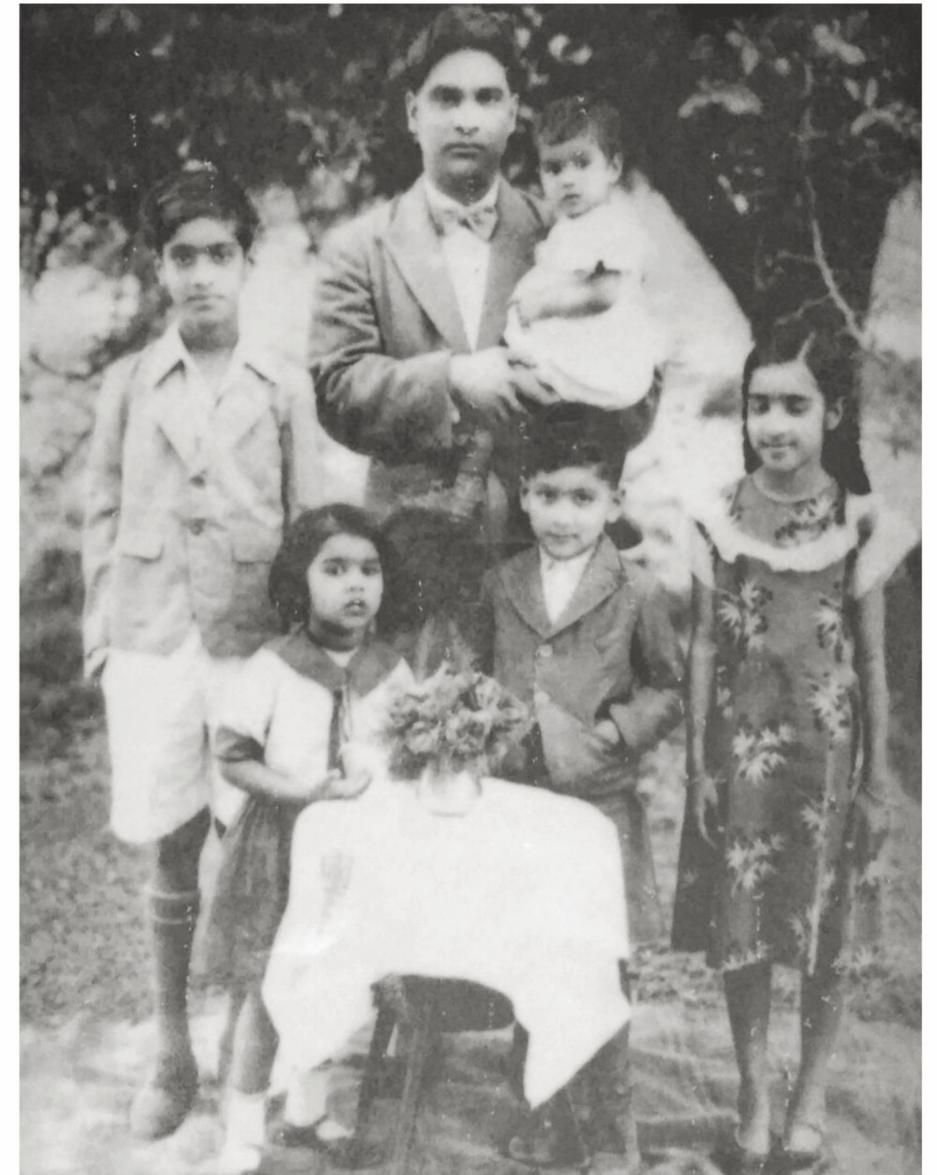
We were told that during Gandhi's Swadeshi movement *Maa* refused to wear sarees made in the mill and don handspun cotton. She lived in Rangpur during the 1934 earthquake and worked tirelessly to give relief. She even got a special certificate from the British Government for her work for the earthquake victims. *Maa* was a non-

conformist in other ways as well. During Shab-e-Barat she would not send *halwa* to neighbours, as was the custom; she would say "I will give *halwa* to the poor in the streets; they don't get to eat such nice things."

After my mother's death, my father's sister, our *Phupujaan*, came to live with us. She was 22 years older than *Abba*, with grown children of her own. *Abba* himself was brought up by *Phupujaan*. My father was in the Bengal Civil Service and was posted all over Bengal. Whenever he was posted in Calcutta, we would rent a house near *Phupujaan*. The house also had to be near Khanqah Sharif as *Phupujaan* and the whole family were the followers (murids) of the Huzur of Khanqah Sharif, a descendant of Syed Abdul Kader Jilani. After *Maa*'s death, we lived in 33 European Asylum Lane, in a Muslim majority neighbourhood of Calcutta known as Entally, for two years.

Abba seldom spent more than a year in postings outside of Calcutta. He was concerned about his children's studies and proper upbringing. In 1937, we moved to Calcutta after a stint in the mofussil town of Basirhat and rented a house in Balu Haqqaq Lane (Pearl Road).

I started school a little shy of four years at Little Flower's Day School. I did not want to go to school and would protest and cry. But I was dragged all the way anyway. *Choto Bhaiya* and I were admitted in the same school and the same class. The school was housed in a flat in a building named Siddique Mansion on the corner of Amir Ali Avenue and Park Street. The founder and principal of the school was an Anglo-Indian woman who went by the name Mrs Vincent. We called her Auntie.



Syed Golam Kabir with his five children (circa 1936)

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