

CHAPTER 1

ROOTS: WITH HUMILITY AND GRATITUDE

There are no printed or written records in my possession dealing with my ancestors. Whatever follows is, of necessity, confined to my parents, grandparents, paternal and maternal, and to my maternal great grandfather, Molvi Sami Ullah (d. 1908). I, however, understand that my ancestors on the father's side are the descendants of Khwaja Ubaidullah Ahrar, the renowned Saint from Tashkent in the 16th century, and, reportedly, the spiritual mentor of Babar. Our first ancestor who lies buried in the family graveyard in Aligarh city is Khwaja Abdul Qadir. His ancestors had earlier lived in village Sasni, about twelve kilometers from Aligarh city.

My grandfather, Khwaja Muhammad Yusuf (d. 1902), one of the top lawyers and landowners of Aligarh, was a strong and influential supporter of the Aligarh Movement under the leadership of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. Most of the rich and powerful landlords of the region were still reluctant, at that point of time, to go along with Sir Syed's mission of Western education and Islamic liberalism. They supported Western education more out of pressure from the British rulers rather than out of inner conviction. But Muhammad Yusuf, out of genuine conviction in the correctness of Sir Syed's vision, generously donated large sums to the *College Fund Committee*. He was also very active in the affairs of the *Scientific Society*. He had no objection to matrimonial alliances between different ethnic groups among the Muslims, something that was not looked upon as socially proper among traditional Muslims. He did not allow his beliefs and convictions to stand in the way of his warm friendships with Hindus and others or in adopting

Western ways in several social matters. Though *purdah* (seclusion) was practiced by the family womenfolk Muhammad Yusuf was the first Khwaja of Aligarh to impart English education to his sons.

Muhammad Yusuf was very close to his close friend and relative, Sami Ullah, a scion of the Muslim elite of Mughal Delhi and an accomplished oriental scholar and later District and Sessions Judge in Rai Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh. The Viceroy had lent his services to Lord Cromer in Egypt to facilitate the liberal reform movement in the region. This was the task Sir Syed had undertaken in India under the auspices of the Aligarh Movement, and both had been close friends and comrades. Sami Ullah introduced Shibli Nomani, as a young man, to Sir Syed who inducted him in the service of the MAO College. The famous advocate of Pan-Islamism in those days, Jamaluddin Afghani, bracketed Sir Syed and Sami Ullah together and denounced them as stooges of British imperialism.

Sir Syed and Sami Ullah were close comrades, but unfortunately, differences arose between the two due to some personal reasons as well as some policy matters relating to College affairs. The friends became estranged in the late 1880's. It was an ordeal for my grandfather, Khwaja Muhammad Yusuf, who was their common friend, to choose sides. His conscience compelled him to side with Sami Ullah. Our family lore has it that Sir Syed failed to appreciate the anguish and dilemma of a sincere friend and honest colleague. Sami Ullah withdrew himself from Aligarh affairs and made Allahabad the focus of his educational mission through founding of the *Muslim Boarding House* as part of the famous University of Allahabad. His son, Hamied Ullah, and, subsequently, his grandsons, Muhammad Ullah and Mahmud Ullah, remained closely associated with the *Muslim Boarding House* for the rest of their lives. Muhammad Ullah, my maternal uncle and a Cambridge graduate in Law, later on became a renowned author of several books on Anglo-Muslim family law.

My father, Abdul Majeed Khwaja, shifted the prefix, 'Khwaja' to the end of the name. He was the younger of the two sons of Khwaja Muhammad Yusuf. The elder son Yahya, died as a young man. Father

went up to Cambridge in 1906 as a member of Christ's College. He graduated in history and was called to the Bar in 1910. Jawaharlal Nehru, Sir Shah Sulaiman, the eminent jurist, and Iqbal, the poet, were among his contemporaries in Cambridge. It was in Cambridge that father first saw and heard Barrister M.K.Gandhi of South African fame and, then, a great admirer of British liberalism.

Returning home my father built up a flourishing legal practice first at the District Court, Aligarh and later at Patna High Court. At the call of Gandhiji he gave up his practice in 1919, joined the non-cooperation and *Khilafat* movements, and suffered six months' imprisonment. He was one of the founding fathers of the *Jamia Millia Islamia*, which was the brainchild of Maulana Muhammad Ali, M.A.Ansari, and Hakim Ajmal Khan. Muhammad Ali was the first Principal of the College, but due to his intense political activism, he decided to abdicate in favor of his close friend and associate, Khwaja Sahab. The young and dynamic Zakir Husain was the most prominent student leader of the MAO College to join the *Jamia* at its very inception and formation, and his zeal and commitment to the cause led him to join the staff as an honorary instructor. However, he soon left for Germany to study Economics in order to dedicate his life, after his return, to the *Jamia*. A little earlier, K.A.Hamied, another dynamic young man, and my father's favorite nephew, had done the same. Dr. Hamied, as he later came to be known, became famous as an industrial chemist and founder of the renowned pharmaceutical firm, Cipla, at Mumbai. Khwaja Sahab was thus left all alone to nurse the *Jamia* baby in the interim period. Father was, thus, Principal, Managing Trustee and Financier all rolled into one.

The greatest measure of moral and material support came from Gandhiji through his generous disciple, G.D.Birla. But there were other sources of sustenance also, such as Hakim Ajmal Khan, Dr. M.A.Ansari, and several dedicated teachers at the *Jamia*, like Aslam Jairajpuri, Shafiqur Rahman Kidwai, Kalat Sahab and Aqil Sahab among others. Perhaps, the most memorable episode of this period is the convocation address by Sir P.C.Ray in 1923. In this learned address (of which only two or three printed copies are now available) the

eminent scientist and scholar recounted the contribution of Muslim thinkers, historians and scientists to world culture.

In 1925 father shifted the *Jamia* baby from Aligarh to Karol Bagh, Delhi and then handed over charge to Zakir Sahab who thenceforth became the soul of the *Jamia*. He later on shifted the small but steadily growing campus to its present site at Okhla.

Father resumed his legal practice at the Allahabad High Court in 1926, and remained there till 1944. After the death of Dr. Ansari in 1936 and at Zakir Sahab's insistence the mantle of Chancellorship of the *Jamia* fell on the shoulders of Khwaja Sahab.

My father was uncompromising in his commitment to Islamic liberalism and secular nationalism under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhiji was the only Indian leader father looked up to for inspiration and guidance. Those he cared for, next to Gandhi, were C.R.Das, Dr. M.A.Ansari, T.A.K.Sherwani and Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru. After suffering a heart attack in 1942 he gave up his legal practice and returned to Aligarh in 1944. From this date onwards right till the partition of the country he strove for a united India from the platform of the newly founded umbrella body of secular Muslims, the *All India Muslim Majlis*.

The martyrdom of Gandhiji, soon after independence, shattered father politically. Despite his intimate friendship with Jawaharlal Nehru, he never thrived in the politics of the Nehruvian era. Some of his close friends and colleagues achieved far greater political success and recognition, but he never bothered about such matters. His strong point was his Islamic liberalism and secular politics even in the teeth of opposition from Muslims who had been carried away by the slogan of Pakistan. He always retained a passionate and selfless concern for his *alma mater*, the AMU, at every stage of its career. He also had ample poetic gifts but was rather careless in preserving and publishing his poetry. He died in 1962.

Coming to my mother's side, our grandfather, Hamied Ullah (later Nawab Sarbuland Jung) was the eldest son of Molvi Sami Ullah. Hamied

Ullah was the first to be enrolled as a student of the MAO College and was the second member of the larger family of Sir Syed and Sami Ullah to proceed to Christ's College, Cambridge for higher studies. The first was none other than Sir Syed's son, Syed Mahmud, who became the first ever-Indian judge of the Allahabad High Court.

Hamied Ullah eventually became Chief Justice of the Nizam's High Court at Hyderabad. But he took early retirement and settled down at Allahabad. A religious and political liberal of a retiring nature, he shunned publicity and politics and preferred the quiet of the library to the polemics of the Courtroom or of the Assembly chamber. However, he was among the very distinguished early Presidents of the Muslim Educational Conference. He died in 1930. I have a very faint memory of him sitting in a wheel chair.

Our grandmother, Begum Akhtar Sarbuland Jung, survived grandfather by a quarter of a century. She had very little formal education. However, she was a poetess and writer and had traveled a lot in India, Europe and the Middle East. A pleasant conversationalist and charming hostess she conversed confidently with royalty as well as spiritual leaders. Queen Mary had given an audience to her when she visited London.

Mother was the first born of her parents. She too had no formal education beyond the Junior Cambridge level. But she had the immense benefit of learning from the enlightened and cultured atmosphere of her family and a circle of distinguished personalities of the day. Perhaps, the most famous among this circle was Sarojini Naidu and her daughter, Padmaja, who was mother's classmate at school in Hyderabad.

Mother was a good and efficient domestic manager. In addition, under the influence of father, she did a lot of constructive social work at Aligarh during the days of non-cooperation. During this period mother was torn between divided loyalties to her father, a Westernized liberal aristocrat, and her husband who, under Gandhiji's inspiration, had made a bonfire of his expensive and fashionable English suits and

switched over to khadi kurta pyjama. She founded and ran successfully a *Women's Khadi Bhandar* at Aligarh and also edited an Urdu magazine, *Hind*. Gandhiji wrote his first ever letter in Urdu to mother on a postcard. I have misplaced the prized letter but I am hopeful of retrieving it. To the best of my knowledge, my mother was the first lady in Aligarh to come out of *purdah*. Begum Sajjad Haider and Begum Muhammad Habib later on joined her.

After our family shifted to Allahabad in 1926 she remained in touch with the Nehrus and had a large circle of friends among all communities, including the Christian missionary circle. She was the first among the Muslims to get her daughters admitted as boarders in the famous St. Mary's Convent, Allahabad. The young Indira Nehru was also a student at the Convent for a short period. Mother founded and managed the *Hamidia Girls School* in the interior of the city of Allahabad to promote education among the relatively weaker section of Muslim women. This was in the early 1930's. The primary school eventually grew into a Degree College under the fostering care of her daughter, Akhtar, married to Dr. A.H.Khan, who retired as Civil Surgeon of Allahabad.

Mother died in 1981 at the ripe age of eighty seven. She ever showered very tender maternal affection on me, as a son, after six daughters. Two more brothers, Rasheed and Ajmal, followed me. Rasheed, much later, changed his name to Raveend. My elder sister, Taj Apa, who was twelve years older, used to chide me in the hearing of the family that my mother's love had spoilt me. I still don't know the truth.