

My Life With Karihaloos

Do Not Open The Doors To My Childhood

Why are they urging me to open the doors of my childhood,
Which I had shut stiff a long time ago -
To keep away my still smoldering pains,
To tamp down my recurrently reborn anguished hopes?

I do not want to see my grandfather's cane
Keeping step with me in our jaunts to bazaars;
Nor his ruffled face gleaming with joy on seeing me;
I do not want to hear my aunt's carefully calibrated voice
Narrating a romantic folk story in a series of evening sittings;
Neither do I want to feel tormented at the separation with my cousin.

I want that life to remain sealed
Till I am safely out of this world,
And take it with me to the other world where there is no hurt,
And open its doors there to my joy and happiness.

It seems only like yesterday, when I think of my visits to and interactions with Karihaloos. For my early life they were very significant. They gave me love, comfort, and familial belonging. But alas time has cooled many an ardor, snuffed many a flame, but what is left in me is still vibrant, warm, and scintillating - more than mere memories, it is a living mosaic of relationships and events, disappointments and dreams.

The earliest memory I have of my life with Karihaloos is when they lived in a

rented apartment in Karanagar, in transit between the houses at Malik Angan and Mandirbagh, both in Srinagar. The apartment was congested but had a very interesting view, through the windows, of a busy street crossing below. One day I managed to slip down from the apartment by myself and marched to the crossing and beyond. I was wearing a wooden sandal called khadaoon, a very bad footwear for a busy street crossing. The family had no inkling of where I was. One of them looking through the window spotted me on the street, amongst the throng of people anxiously crossing the street, and informed others. All of them were looking at me with deep apprehension, as I was still not street trained. But I seemed to them to be walking with a quiet aplomb, meandering through the traffic with adroitness. But fear shot through them as they saw me suddenly stop on the street, peering deeply at something that caught my attention, ignoring the danger of being knocked down by the passing people and vehicles. I was told later that after my interest faded, I looked at the traffic and escaped unhurt.

Karihaloos moved to their new house in Mandir Bagh, in Srinagar, sometime in late 40's. This was a comfortable house, with a small orchid of quinces. That is why the place was alternately called Bamzoonth Bagh, quinces orchid. It also had a lawn, a vegetable garden, and a well. However, the house was no match to their ancestral home at Malik Angan (earlier than that they lived in Drabyar), a midtown location in Srinagar, near the then Third Bridge, Fateh Kadal. There they had a sprawling house, which was inhabited by the four of the five scions of the family: Dama Kaul, Nand Kaul, Sudharshan Kaul, and Shyama Kaul. It was a large family living at an upper middle-class grand scale. At Mandir Bagh lived my grandparents Baiji and Ded, along with their sons Babuji, Baitoth, and Makhan Lal, and Babuji's wife Chandrani and daughter Nikki, and my mother's youngest sister Chooni, who was still unmarried, making it into a full fledged household.

My earliest memory of this place is that of running on the second floor verandah. Across the lane from the Karihaloo house lived Sarafs. A young Saraf daughter seemed to be flirting with a young man. One day the girl saw her boyfriend crossing the lane from her verandah, she tossed a letter to him from her lawn, but it overshot the lane and landed in the Karihaloo compound. Several Karihaloos and I were watching the letter tossing scene from our verandah. Upon watching

the letter land in our compound, a number of adults ran for it. They read the letter voraciously and had great fun. The Saraf girl did not and was not expected to claim her letter.

I have a vivid scene engrained in my memory. I must have been six or seven. One day my grandfather, Karihaloo Sahib, came to see us at Kaul residence in MalikYar, Srinagar. He was a big man by Kashmiri standards and carried a cane. After spending time with my mother, his favorite child, and my father, he started to leave us, but decided to take me along to spend a few days at Karihaloo residence in Mandir Bagh. My father objected to that move on the ground that it would interfere with my studies. My grandfather protested that a few days would not make any significant difference to the education of someone at my age. My father would not accept that. The arguments flew rapidly between the two men. My grandfather pulled my right arm to walk along with him, which I was inclined to do, but my father held my left arm and pulled it to his side. Suddenly I felt that I was at the cross points of the two diametrically opposite pulls. It did not hurt me so much in my body, but it hurt my feelings, as I wanted to go with my grandfather, who loved me a great deal. My father prevailed in the tussle and my grandfather left in a huff. This experience has been very significant to me, because when I grew up, I saw similar tugs of war in my life between inclination and responsibility, between emotion and intellect, between my connections to this world and my longing to remain away from it.

In 1948, mother, sister, and myself went to Delhi to join father, who was living there. The previous year when he was on his way to Lucknow University from Srinagar, to complete Ph.D in history, during a transitional stop in Delhi, he was offered a job with the newly formed All India Radio. Because the job was very good he accepted it right away, compelled by his responsibility to his family, thinking that he will catch up with the Ph.D later. (Which he never did) During our stay in Delhi, sometimes during summers, mother, sister, and myself would go to Simla to cool off. There we would stay with the eldest brother of my mother, Kashi Nath, whom we called Babu Ji. He lived in Paras Dass Gardens. Only a few hundred yards from his home, my mother's eldest sister Jigri lived. Living with Babu Ji were my grandparents. Here, the contact with Karihaloos was refreshed.

By the time of moving to Simla, my grandfather had retired. Here he was living in a small apartment with many other people, depriving him of the convenience and luxury of the houses he had lived in previously. Also, his reduced financial income, dependence on his son, and his advancing age, cumulatively had changed his life to a moderated one – something he was not very happy about.

It is only later in life that I realized that I was his most favorite grandchild. People said that I acquired this coveted position due to the transference of it from my mother, who was his favorite daughter, out of the three. There were stories about my sleeping on his rather large abdomen, wetting it occasionally. It was in Simla, being now eight or nine, that I felt the intensity of his love for me. He would take me with him on his daily visits to Simla downtown. Here was a picture of a turbaned stocky old man with a cane, holding the hand of an eight or nine year boy, the pair walking with ease and inner delight. He told me sometimes that I was the apple of his eyes. He was wearing the anguish of a long life, evident in his sighs and weariness, countered to an extent by his still smoldering love of life. Sometimes, he would break into a couplet of a song. One of the reasons for his almost daily trips to Simla downtown was to have the opportunity to savor some snacks, like chat. During the walks, if he saw a lady passing by, he solicitously greeted her.

In Simla I had an opportunity to see my grandmother Ded up close. She was a sweet, good lady, always possessed by an emotion. Tragically, her face had been marred by scars, the result of a botched up surgery, whose details I do not have. Her emotion lit face had to be juxtaposed with the scars, something making me take my eyes away from her, as it was hard to see her and our misfortune. Years later, in 1950, one day while listening to cricket commentary in our Model Basti home in New Delhi, a telegram announced her demise. I remember how much mother cried. I was smitten by the news but did not cry. My mind would again and again go to her picture in my brain and feel the loss. Her mild personality was mismatched with my grandfather's explosive temper. I remember an incident of her being verbally assaulted by Baaji. I was hurt by this mistreatment.

While in Delhi I used to see Baaji sometimes, as he would get out of Kashmiri cold during winters. I am not sure if he would also, sometimes, go to Bombay. In Delhi he had a friendship with a family owning a business called Upper India Trading Corp., located in Kashmiri Gate area. I would dutifully be with him, hand in hand, when my father thought that I was not cutting on my education. His friend at the business would give Baaji a bundle of money from time to time. I later heard that he used to have a business connection with the company and there were some active financial accounts between the two.

In 1952 Baaji and others had come to Srinagar from Simla, to attend Baitoth's (Radha Krishen) wedding to Shanta Shangloo (who was already related to me through my aunt Gorabatni Shangloo Kaul). After the event, while on his return to Simla, he fell ill somewhere in Pir Panjal area. He and some others returned to Srinagar for his treatment. One day I was playing in Chandmari, the next locality to Karan Nagar, where Baaji was staying with his late elder brother's son, Dina Nath Kariholoo. I was on my way to home but decided to drop by at Dina Nath's house. I heard some crying coming out from the house. Walking in I found that Baaji had just passed away. I was very shocked to know that because I never thought he was that ill. Soon his body was brought out from his bed to the house front door, where some Hindu ceremonies were conducted.

With Baaji's passing I felt that something precious had been lost. Never have I found the same magic in love that I had with Baaji. He remains a white tower emerging out of my consciousness.

During my Simla visits I had developed an intense brother-sister relationship with my cousin Tathi (known generally by her another pet name Nikki, which was used by people older than her), daughter of Babu Ji (Kashi Nath). Our bond seemed to me imperishable then. I remember when I had to return to Delhi, after one of the summer interludes in Simla, how overcome I was with the sorrow of leaving her. My special feelings for her continued over decades but later seeing how worldly

wise she was, I had to retract a little, to have my feet on the ground. One of the haunting realizations of my life has been the disappearance or dilution of love between people, for no reason other than the sheer passage of time. This was to me the ultimate betrayal on part of a human being, but more philosophically, I now sometimes think it is a tremendous shortcoming of the human life itself. Only later in life I realized that human beings are not capable of carrying intense love for someone forever, only the very special ones can do that, and they must pay their price for it.

One of my most powerful human relationships has been with my aunt Bibi (Tathi's mother). I was under her powerful spell. She had the tact, the tenacity, the charm, and the sensibility to massage my feelings. Those days I felt she had the right approach to my inner sanctum, out of all my contacts. A woman of intelligence and dignity, capacity to suffer, and capable of silent martyrdom. She was low key even when storms raged in her life, which she managed even to hide from her eyes. It was unfortunate that she was married to a man who could not appreciate her special attributes. She was an excellent storyteller. I remember her narrating Louisa May Alcott's Little Women to me with such spellbinding rendering that I had never seen anything like that before and have never seen after. Looking now from adult perspective, I realize a lot of her magic came from her awareness of the emotional terrain of the person she was dealing with and her innate dignity. I look back at her and see her sensitive mouth, her controlled voice, her smooth demeanor - all hallowed now in the perspective of time. Truly, God has made some people special. But ironically her daughters did not inherit any of her finer qualities, though they are very special in their own ways. Genes and environment play a complex game with human personality, an outcome that can not be forecasted. I thank God for that.

My other cousin Usha (Jigri's daughter), also in Simla, was a very different personality. She was cool, collected, and tried always to behave in an established proper way. Her family, in general, was like that. Her father, Dr. Pushkar Nath Thusso, had achieved a Ph.D. from Cambridge University, in perhaps Botany, in 40's. He was quite a person. He played with his children, while at the same time imparted discipline to them. This was a pretty unusual combination for a KP

father to perform those days. He wanted them to be self-reliant and smart. It is difficult to estimate how much influence did his discipline, vision, and values have on his children's achievements later in life, but one can not too much underestimate them. He was a fun person to be with and wore his achievements and high government position lightly. He limited his socializing with Kashmiri Pandits (KP's), especially his relatives, as he did not think much of KP's and thought of relationships with the relatives fraught with much hypocrisy and selfishness. These traits in him were hard to understand in an educated person like him, but then every person's development is mysterious. His older children, Iqbal and Usha, unmistakably picked these traits up from him, especially the former.

Another personality who has remained very strongly etched in me is my uncle (my mother's middle brother) Radha Krishen, called Bhaitoth by people younger than him. I first saw him keenly during my summer interludes in Simla, where many things in me seem to have come of age. I saw his sensitive brooding personality. He seemed to be continuously in a state of thought. He was a strikingly handsome man. This thoughtful, sensitive, handsome man touched some inner chord in me - most likely because I saw some similarity between us. When I saw him suffering, I was reminded of my own sufferings. But I thought I had a better control in extricating myself from the depths of sorrow. Looking at him I always thought may God save him from too much suffering. He introduced me to Goethe and his Sorrows Of Werther. Walking with him in the down hills of Paras Dass Gardens in Simla was joyful pain, as I descended more and more in the recesses of his mind. More dramatic relationship developed with him (our relationship was mostly one-sided, from me to him. That is, the drama lay in my being able to perceive his inner suffering and other aspects of his personality, while his relationship with me was simply that of an uncle with his well behaved nephew) when he took me with him to Kothgarh, I guess some sixty miles from Simla, where he was transferred on his job. Here was an infinitely secluded place, in the folds of mountains, where I felt I was face to face with God. Baitoth was going through some intense inner suffering those days and part of it was manifested in the severe shoulder pain he experienced. He told me that it required a strong control on his part to avoid the deep urge he felt to take the entire bottle of the pain relieving medicine, with an idea to end his life, as his pain was excruciating. I was getting an intimate view of

human suffering, knowing well that I will be going through this a lot in my own life - a projection that has not been entirely wrong.

In Kotgarh an American called Stokes had settled. He was now called Nityanand Stokes. He invited the new officer in town Baitoth, and naturally me, for tea. Nitayanand was dressed in Indian clothing and he was tall and radiated a glow. In the tea hard boiled eggs were served. Always having loved them, I could not resist the temptation to eat one. As I started breaking one, Baitoth was nervous, as the process of breaking a hard boiled egg and eating it cleanly required some adroitness, which he was not sure if I possessed. Seeing him seeing me, I was very self-conscious during the act. But I went through it very well, making my uncle proud of me, which he expressed to me after we left the host's residence. Later in my life, at Banaras Enginnering College, we had a student with us from Stokes' family.

As years passed Baitoth married and settled in Srinagar as an officer in Imperial Bank Of India, which later became State Bank Of India. I was shocked to see my childhood tragic hero change to become a man of the world, with a large appetite for materialistic success. Before my eyes I saw the transformation of a man who was affected by Sorrows Of Werther to a man who valued money, property, and worldly laurels. I have never really overcome my initial shock at the change. I tried to revive the Werther in him but of no avail, as it was almost a complete transformation. I have thought many times writing the story of this dramatic shift in the personality of a man. I believe what happened was Baitoth realized that he could not carry on his sensitive and thoughtful self in the world, the world being what it is, so he took the plunge into the world, rather than fight it. It was obviously an act of wisdom for him but for me it was an act of betrayal of his natural personality, going from a higher level to a lower level, the pain of which will never leave me.

Karihaloos, like other families, lived in different generations, so the changes brought on by time were inevitable. But certain personality traits stand the test of time. They were a gregarious and fun-loving family. Affectionate, extroverted, and

family oriented. They enjoyed life within their large group, though there were the inevitable intrigues and fights among them. They were gastronomes. Unlike some of the other KP families, they did not push their children hard toward the achievements in education. Good life to Karihaloos was to have money, to be partying, and indulging in gastronomy. Intellectual pursuits were not their big thing. But generations of the succeeding Karihaloos would perhaps not know that their ancestors cared about enjoying life.

Simla seemed to provide more than a summer recess from the inhuman heat of Delhi, it crystallized some of my unfinished emotional situations. Here in the salubrious sanctuary of pine trees the emotions seemed to be filtered of stray experiences and found congruence with thoughts. Walking down the hilly vistas of Simla I felt the taste of inner freedom. What was it I wondered that was different here? While I could not fathom that then, in my later years I realized that it was life's integration with everything significant that produced the feeling of freedom. A few years ago reading on Yoga, the author of the article said that while Yoga's purpose was to provide a good mind and body integration, but more than that its aim was to integrate the mind with everything it sees. That is the total harmony with universe. Childhood is generally a very harmonious period, and while in it one feels free and therefore happy. It is only when one grows beyond it, one starts to lose that universal harmony, the start of the deep rooted unhappiness. What Simla did for me was to straighten out the elements of discord in my existence and put me in full force with the natural universal harmony of my childhood.

One story about the Karihaloo gastronomy is carved in my memory. I was told that my grandfather Baaji, being a gastronome of a big league, used to indulge, from time to time, in cooking himself a special recipe of a fish. According to the story, should I say legend, the fish would be cleaned and cut longitudinally once and filled with certain spices. It would then be wrapped in muslin, then covered with mud. After the mud dried it would be brought to Baaji. Baaji would be in his drawing room, sitting against a duffle pillow. The dried mud covered fish would be put in a large kangri with live charcoal. From this moment Baaji was in control of the preparation. He would pour a spoon (it used to be a silver spoon) of ghee in the open mouth of the fish periodically and continue the process of ghee pouring

and baking for a while, till the fish would have baked fully to a desired degree of tenderness. Then of course the servants would have to remove the mud and the muslin, cut the fish, and bring it to Baaji for his savoring and delectation.

After the demise of the old Karihaloo guard of the four scions, Dama Kaul, Nanda Kaul, Sudharshan Kaul, and Shyam Kaul, the next generations of Karihaloos did not keep up with the old social status their seniors had developed. Manahor Nath Karihaloo achieved a ministership in Jammu And Kashmir State government. Kashi Nath Karihaloo rose up to the level of Manager of Punjab National Bank. Pyarey Lal Karihaloo rose to a good level in National Conference. Radha Krishen Karihaloo also did well in State Bank Of India. Like other families, Karihaloos did not maintain good networking among each other. Exception being that of Radha Krishen, who became a sort of a hub of the Karihaloo wheel. Karihaloos passing through Delhi would contact him.

Dama Kaul Karihaloo's grand children are generally doing well professionally and economically. Many of them achieved Ph.D's (especially Chuni Jigri's all the five children). They are in engineering, economics, comparative literature, biochemistry, medicine, and other fields. Many of them are high-achievers. Subhash Kak and Maharaj Kaul have a second line to their basic professions, that of writing. None of them have ventured into business, like their grandfather Baaji.

While a few Karihaloos of Dama Kaul Karihaloo's children's generation are alive, but for me the Karihaloo era is over. The character, the color, and the spark of Karihaloos went away perhaps with Baajee's demise. In the recent times the passing away of Tita Karihaloo Wattal and her two brothers Triloki Nath and Badri Nath, who passed away within a few years of her, made a significant inroad to the Karihaloo mystique. In Prithvi Nath, Aruna Kaul, Radha Krishan, Chooni Kak, and Krishna Kak we have some of Karihaloo dynasty's old glow, but that of a sunset - attenuated reverberations and haunting echoes of the Karihaloo magic, as they are now in the grayer years of their lives.

I wake up sometimes during the night from a nightmarish dream in which I am in the Mandir Bagh house, sometimes in the Malik Angan house (where I was born), playing with kids, and seeing Bibi (Chandrani) walk by with her head down and hear Baaji's voice from inside the house. I wake up in a stab of sorrow because some corner of my consciousness realizes that it is not real but a dream. But yet I can not take Karihaloos out of me, as much as I can not stop dreaming and living. I must carry them on with me till my last breath.