

My Early Years: 1920s-40s



Munir Kadri

Dr. Kadri, a surgeon, lives in New Zealand. He was born in 1927 and grew up in Ahmedabad. .

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I was born left-handed. I do not know if this was fortunate or unfortunate. However, it is interesting to note that our son Sunil was also born left-handed and I now note that many global visionaries have been left handed.

I was born on 6 December 1927. Back then, left-handedness was viewed as a handicap for a variety of reasons, including the use of the left hand for ablution. It was considered mandatory to convert left-handed children into right-handed ones. So attempts were made, especially on the part of my mother, to convert me into right handed via a myriad of methods which included both incentives and disincentives. Initially I was reminded repeatedly which was my right hand and which was the left. Naturally, I still used my left hand for most functions. When the verbal incentives were exhausted at one point, I was lightly branded on the back of my right hand to make the message clear. When I started to write it was compulsory for me to use my right hand. This of course created a certain confusion in my mind.

We now know pretty well that the manual and oral centres in the brain are situated on the side opposite of the hand you are using. But at that time, this sort of disruption in the centres developing in the brain was not quite appreciated. On commencing school, things got worse. Firstly, our mother tongue was Urdu while the medium of instruction in the school was Gujarati. Further, I could not comprehend the mathematical figures and got quite confused between the symbols. My school reports started to come home noting my poor performance.

By the fourth standard, my grades were consistently poor. I had convinced myself that I was not up to the standard expected by my family and had lowered my sights. By this time, moving films had arrived in Ahmedabad and my older brother Zia used to take us to the movies every now and then. I decided at this point that I wanted to be a movie usher – that was the height of my ambition. This lack of self-esteem created a situation whereby my performance was considered not only inadequate but also very disappointing by my parents. Fortunately, this was about the time that one of our maternal uncles had returned from United States after obtaining a degree in preventive medicine.

This uncle of mine, Fakhruddin Hussain Khan, advised my parents that all my confusion and bad performance in the school was because of the forced conversion from my left to right hand. He went on to recommend that I should be sent to a school where the medium of instruction was same as my mother tongue. As a result of this, after lot of thinking and re-thinking, it was decided, when I was nine years old, that I should be sent to a new nationalist school in Delhi called Jamia Millia.

So my younger brother Iftikhar and I were parcelled off. We had been very protected children within the precincts of our home at Diwan's Bungalow back in Ahmedabad. Our sudden severance from family and our journey of around 500 miles to Delhi were quite traumatic. We became very homesick and used to hug one another and cry for long periods. The school where we found ourselves had just moved from Delhi's Karolbagh to Okhla, which was near the River Jamuna and had a brand new building. However, the building was not quite complete, though it was quite large for a contingent of 75 primary school children and our 15 teachers.

In this building there was no running water, no sewerage, no power and the toilets were situated some distance away. The building sat within a bushy jungle, mainly of *bher* – a sort of Indian berry. There were a lot of snakes in the area as well as foxes, deer and other wildlife. So far as the physical comforts were concerned, we were quite happy because it was a sort of adventure for us to explore the jungle with which we were surrounded. However we were not happy being away from home and we were determined to run away.

During the first week of our arrival at Jamia Millia, Dr. Zakir Hussain, who was the headmaster of this school, was taking individual interviews with all the new children. When my turn came, I found myself sitting on the floor with our principal, whom we called Zakir Sahib. He was a large man with a dark, black, short beard. He was wearing a sherwani and a Gandhi cap. I remember that interview very well because it was conducted very gently – bringing out all the thoughts of the child by this big man who was very gentle in his interview. The first question he asked me was “Why have you come to Jamia?” I said quite candidly that I had come because I was sent here, not voluntarily. He went on. “I would like you to give me two promises.” So I asked him cautiously “Well, first you tell me what promises you want me to give you.” To this, he said “That you will always do what you really want to and that you will always speak the truth.” This initially sounded to me quite contradictory but then I thought about it and said, “I shall be quite happy to keep these promises.”

At this point, he also said to me “if you have any problems, my door is always open and you should come to me and tell me about it. I’ll be quite happy to listen to anything you have to say.” So after a while, when we failed to settle down, I remembered the words of Zakir Sahib, who had said that I should go to him if I had any problem. So one day I gathered my courage and announced, “I have decided that we are very unhappy here so I would like to go home with my brother and if it cannot be so arranged we shall have to run away.” To this, he smiled and said, “There is nothing to keep you here forcibly – by all means you are free to go.” This sort of deflated me and I asked myself, “How will I go home and explain to my parents that I had chosen to leave the place where they had sent us for a better education?” So then, we continued to stay, and eventually settled down to a regular routine.

At Jamia Millia Islamia, we had to pray 5 times a day, and we were woken up early in the morning for prayers when it was quite dark. This was one thing both my brother and I loathed the most. After the prayer, we used to have physical exercise time out in the fields. Many of our classes also took place outside. The school was quite a modern concept in education. I remember quite well at one time when we were walking – about 10-12 of the children with Zakir Sahib – and he was teaching us while we were walking. He picked up a leaf one day from a shrub and asked us to tell him about it. We, of course, promptly said it was a leaf. So he asked what was the colour of the leaf and we chimed in that it was green. Then, he asked, “Do you know why it is green?” Some of the students said it was green because that is the colour of Islam. He smiled at this yet did not contradict us. He continued, “Yes, that is possible, but really speaking the leaf is green because what it is breathing out is what we breathe in and that’s how we are kept alive.” He went on to explain that if there were no trees and green in the world, we will have great difficulty existing. He didn’t get into complex terms of oxygen, carbon dioxide or chlorophyll, but provided us with the basic understanding that we are alive because of the greenery of the world. This concept stuck to my mind and I have never forgotten it.

Such was the teaching in the school – there were no textbooks, no curriculum, and there were no rigid teaching methods. Most of the subjects were taught by what was called the “project method.” For example, there was a project called Gandhi. In this period, we were asked, “Who was Gandhi?” We all knew that he was an Indian who had in recent years returned to India and was campaigning for the freedom of the country from the British rule. Then we were asked, “Where was he born?” Of course, we didn’t know that. So a map was unfurled on the wall, and we were shown the town of Porbandar, where he was born. This was our first taste of geography. And so the lesson would continue here and there to cover all manner of details about Gandhi’s life. It was in this style that we were exposed to history, geography and linguistic differences between different countries of the world. The explorative style

adopted by Zakir Hussain formed the essence of our new education at Jamia Millia. My ambitions to become a movie usher were left far behind.

Zakir Hussain went on to become the president of India.

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