

Memories of My Dadi and Nani



Renu Khanna née Chatterji

Renuka (Chatterji) Khanna, born in 1927 in Lahore, studied psychology at London University. She supported and encouraged her husband, Krishen Khanna, in quitting his prestigious job at Grindlays Bank to become a full time painter. Thereupon, she became the school psychologist and taught English at Modern School, New Delhi until retirement. An avid reader, a dilettante painter of birds, and an inventive embroiderer, she has raised her three children to follow their own stars. The eldest, Rasika Mohan, is a classical Bharatnatyam dancer, Malati Shah is a painter, and the youngest, Karan Khanna, is a professional photographer. She is a most loved grandmother to five grandchildren, who know her favourite word to be “comfortable”, which is what she wants everyone to be.

Editor’s note: This story has two parts. Renu Khanna’s story is followed by her daughter Malati Shah’s memories of Mrs. Khanna’s nani.

Dadi - Kumodini Das (1858?-1949)

On Dadiji’s eightieth birthday my parents celebrated by lighting up the house with about two hundred *diyas* (oil lamps in earthen containers), and having a party at which delicious food and sweets and clothes were given to our domestic servants and their children.

Dadiji, dressed in her prettiest white *dupatta*, *kurti* and *lehnga*, enjoyed the evening immensely. It was about 1938 and we lived in a bungalow, in the shade of the great Government College in Lahore of undivided Punjab.

Everyone called her “Dadiji” but she had been christened Kumodini and her maiden surname was Das. When she was sixteen, she was married to my Dadaji – Prabhat Chander Chatterji who was probably twenty-five and was a teacher in a Christian mission school in Narowal, Punjab. Family legend had it that he had converted to Christianity when he was a student at the Scotts Missionary College in Calcutta. Immediately after graduation, he had been sent to Punjab partly to help staff the new educational schools there – and partly to save him from the wrath of the Brahmin community to which he belonged in Bengal.

Dada and Dadi had three sons, Jyotish Chandra, Sotish Chandra and Gyanesh Chandra, all of whom grew up to be educationists and remained Christians. Long after Dadaji passed away, the three brothers looked after their mother and she would come for a period of three to six months to stay with us in Lahore along with her special servant “Begum.” Dadiji had twelve grandchildren, two from her eldest son, four from her second son and six from her youngest.

I was child number five from the youngest son’s brood, so my view of her was rather special. It was usual for my younger sister Indu and me to drop into Dadiji’s bedroom every evening at the time she would be having her meal. On Sundays, we used to go to her at about 9 o’clock in the morning, and she would get us to read to her from her big Bible. Sometimes she would dictate a letter to her relations in Calcutta. I remember a “cousin Bee” whose surname was Nott – that made it rather mysterious to me – Cousin Bee Nott...to be...bee or not to bee...be?

Rather mysterious growing up between the Bible – Old Testament – Adam and Eve – the apple – the serpent – Noah, the Ark and the New Testament – Jesus in the manger – on the cross, and not to forget: Lamb’s tales of Shakespeare – The Merchant of Venice, Romeo and Juliet and As You Like It...!

And so it went on, happily and peacefully, with drives in the car to Lawrence Gardens in the evenings. Brother Tan, who had been named Prabhat Chandra, after Dadaji joked with Dadiji. He used to say that “they” could be introduced as Mr and Mrs P.C. Chatterji and in fact he would like to have a visiting card printed to drop in socialite homes...to which Dadiji would bang her walking stick and say “*Dhutt teri ki*” (Get away with you!)

Yes, peaceful happy life went on until 1947, and the sudden partition of Punjab and the Independence of India.

Our branch of the family got turfed out of Lahore and established itself in Shimla. Later Delhi, then Jaipur, and finally Delhi again. Dadiji spent her last days in the home and care of her eldest son in Delhi. She passed away peacefully in her sleep at the age of ninety years.

Her children, grandchildren, servants and their children, remember her as a cheerful, smiling gracious, slender little lady who combined the best of Bengali culture and modern forward-looking social mores. It was she who chose the names of all her grandchildren and so Renu as I am “the little atom” is all I owe to her.

Nani – Rajnibala Singha (1878? – 1960)

My mother, Ila Snehalata Rudra, was her parents’ second child. Her elder brother Sudhir Kumar Rudra was about two years older, and the youngest just about two years younger than Ila. He was christened Ajit Anil Rudra. Yes, they were of a Christian family and they were born in the period of 1894 -96-98.

They were the children of Sushil Kumar Rudra and “Bela Singh”. Bela died when her third child Ajit was a few months old, and the care of the babies aged two months, two years and four years fell on Bela’s younger sister Rajnibala. She took up the responsibility with cheerful good humour, backed by her excellent practical ability, for she had been a “Mothers’ help” to an English lady (Mrs Corfield) with whom she had travelled to England and there furthered her abilities by taking the midwifery and nursing course at a prestigious nursing college in the U.K.

Little Ajit was put on to a formula milk diet so that he grew well. His brother and sister, Sudhir and Ila, were cared for and went to good schools. It is said that Sushil Kumar Rudra asked Rajnibala to marry him but she refused, saying she loved her little nephews and niece too much to ever like the idea of becoming step motherly. Sushil Rudra accepted this and remained a widower. He was an eminent educationist, lived in Delhi, and in due course became the first Indian Principal of St. Stephen’s College in Delhi. (In those days, Delhi did not have a university.)

The other day while driving in the University area along with *my* granddaughter Sonal Shah (aged twenty years), I saw a winding road on the ridge named Acharya Sushil Rudra Marg. “Oh, there goes my Nana,” I exclaimed but alas born in 1927 I was just a few months too late to know my Nana except by repute.

As for Rajnibala, the de facto Nani, I certainly got to know her well and to admire her for her lifetime of hard work. She made Lahore her home, as my parents lived there after my father Gyanesh Chandra Chatterji was appointed to the Indian Educational Service. He taught Philosophy and Psychology and was Head of Department. He was a member of the Senate of the Punjab University.

Rajnibala was well known throughout Lahore society as an excellent midwife, and she was called to attend on the birth of children in wealthy homes. She served the poor without charging any fee. She built her own house in a posh area of Lahore called Park Lane. In fact, her home, Seventeen Park Lane was a big double storied house with a garden front and back and plenty of servants’ quarters. Many of her relations, brothers, sisters and their children lived with her and her younger sister Abhoyabala who had trained as an M.B.B.S in Edinburgh. To recall the intense Anglicisation of that

period one has only to mention that these ladies were better known in society as “Rosie Singha” and “Eva Singha.” They were great “do-gooders” and had a large circle of friends amongst all the communities.

One of my precious childhood memories is spending Christmas at Granny Rosie’s home and meeting uncles, aunts and cousins of all shapes, sizes and ages. It was a joyous childhood and a very practical way of life. The day after party celebrations all the children were dosed with “castor oil” – the saying was “up the nose and down it goes” – administered by Granny Rosie herself. You got a mouth sweetener of an orange flake!

In 1947 with Independence and partition, Granny Rosie thought it best to retire from active work. She sold the Park Lane house and came to live permanently with my parents, Gyanesh and Ila. Other members of the large family moved to Batala, a big house called Fountains Court, and the younger generations were busy following careers in education, nursing army, air force and radio.

In the silvery period of Granny Rosie’s life, she lived in Jaipur, where my father had become the Vice Chancellor of Rajasthan University. She had two *ayahs* (maids) to look after her and spent her winter mornings sitting in a sunny veranda, while her great grandnephews and nieces would be playing. She would insist on doing some domestic chores such as shelling peas. She would happily ask the children as they galloped by on their “wooden horses” or skipped by with their ropes or crawled by on all fours or just gurgled in their basket cots, “*Tu kiss ka buchcha hai?*” (whose child are you?)

So a whole new generation of Singhas, Chatterjis, and Rudras came to know her benign influence. The year Gyanesh and Ila had to go to Paris for a UNESCO conference, she moved to the home of the Bhatias in Ajmer. She died there and was buried in the churchyard.

Her golden life ended in a rosy glow
Dear, dear Granny Rosie
We all loved you so. ❖

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My Memories of My Mother's Nani

Malati Shah

Malati, an artist, currently divides her time between Shimla, Delhi and Washington D.C.

I am six years old, adorned with an enormous ribbon on my head. We are visiting my grandparents in Jaipur and Nana wants his afternoon nap. We want to play, so he sends us fishing into the Persian carpet. While we swim among the swirls and arabesques, he snores, until we shake him awake again with the 'smelly fish' we have caught.

I wander out the back steps of the kitchen, past Sumra who is making tea, and make my way to a rose arbour where sits an old, old lady, old as old can be. I am a little in awe of her; she seems so remote from me, with her wrinkles and gnarled hands as she shells peas into a white bowl. She peers at me through rheumy eyes and a smile cracks her face.

“Are you Ila?” she asks me.

“Mallu!” I shout out, and run for my life.

I am running and running and running, and now she doesn't seem so very far away any more. I am catching up with Granny Rosie, and I will soon shell peas into the sunset.❖

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