

## ***Obituary***

### **Dr Aquila Kiani (1921-2012)**

A pioneer, a founder, a path-breaker, a role-model, a social worker, a teacher; there are so many labels to describe just one personality—Dr Aquila Barlas Kiani or Aquila Begum Kiani—who had served the academia for over forty years and left indelible imprint in the form of her students, messages, practices and written works.

She was born in turbulent times of 1921 in India, grew up in India, served in Pakistan, US, UK and Canada, and breathed her last in Canada, at the age of 91 years. She had a noble ancestry; on the paternal side coming down from Nawab Qasim Jan, a courtier of Mughal royal court of Delhi, and from the maternal side, the last Nawab of Sardhana. Her father, Mirza Shakir Hussain Barlas, a barrister educated at the Oxford University, was an enlightened man who advocated freedom for all his posterity. After completing her graduate degrees (BA and BT) in 1943-44 from the Agra University, she moved to England to earn her MA in education from the University of London (1949). The pursuit continued and she earned her MA in sociology from Columbia University (1953) and PhD from Florida State University (1955). About two decades later she once again entered the classroom to earn her master in social work from the University of British Columbia (Canada) in 1983. Her thirst for education and knowledge knew no bounds; apart from education she was fond of learning variety of skills, too.

For her professional career, she chose to be a social worker, a university teacher and a researcher. Academy of Rural Development Peshawar was the first to avail of her services. She taught at the University of Karachi in the departments of Social Work and Sociology as a senior faculty member and chairperson, too. In later stages in her sixties, she taught at the Pakistan Study Centre. Throughout her career, she initiated many research projects, founded institutions and held leading positions in voluntary associations. Some of these positions include: president of Pakistan Federation of University Women, Pakistan Sociological Association, and the Soroptimist Club of Karachi. She held membership and executive position in well-known voluntary associations

operating locally, nationally and globally. She was awarded fellowship of the Institute of Cultural Research, based in London.

Herself being educated at the reputed institutions of India, UK, USA and Canada, she was among the first generation scholars of Pakistan, who built the national pillars by strengthening the academic institutions in various capacities. After spending over two decades and invigorating the community of social science students and teachers, Dr Kiani left for Canada in mid-nineteen-seventies.

On the personal front she had to go through very challenging circumstances, which could have broken any other person, but she faced the problem with great courage and perseverance. She got married at a relatively advanced age and had a short married life. After death of her husband, while her three kids were very young she waded her way through the most difficult circumstances at times. Her son died in his prime youth on their way flying with her to Canada. She never lost her nerves. She was imbued with a deep feminist spirit and approach. As a member of Council of Fellows of the Centre of Excellence in Women Studies, she had the most valuable experience of a lonely woman's struggle to share. Raised as a confident personality, she gave the same confidence to her new generation—children, students and researchers, too. She had been a close associate of Dr Akhtar Hameed Khan, Mr Shoaib Sultan Khan, Professor T. Scarlett Epstein and innumerable other scholars and students in and outside Pakistan. Her participation in academic conferences and social work activities around the globe, kept her abreast of many currents of change globally, nationally and locally.

The historic context to a person's life history is always unique for those who have aspiration to move forward, to change the world for better and to bring the rest of the humanity along. The time and upheavals of Partition in 1947 brought with it historic migration for those who were in search of a new homeland, a new identity and a new testament of life. This testament was to be written by those who were uprooted, and who had the capacity and courage and commitment to see, analyze and then chalk out plans for their individual and community goals. Individual goals are set by almost all sensible people, but there are also those who set them in consonance with the people around them, who see their individual gains in the form of collective gain, and who want to see the nation progressing, such were the first generation builders of Pakistan. It was those whose strivings made Pakistan stand with confidence and pride among the comity of nations at a very early stage; who built institutions, who conceived new projects, new avenues, and new vistas of development for the masses. It was the first generation scholars, educationists, researchers, teachers, social workers,

sociologists, and above all the feminists, who gave their sweat and blood to build the academia of Pakistan. Dr Aquila Kiani had worked in all such capacities. Even this is not full description of her endeavours for us—the posterity—who received her love, affection and patronage in terms of education, careers and in many cases, personal lives, too. I, as a member of that group, feel myself very lucky and blessed.

Dr Kiani has been a generous fellow, a kindhearted and compassionate guide, a loving mother, a caring colleague, a jolly travel companion, and a pleasant but strong personality to be with. We had a unique feeling of being secure when being with her. She used to give small or big items as gifts very often. One really needed a genuine sense of appreciation for the emotional, artistic or existential value of what that item meant for her, and how she expected others to value her gift. She once gave me her graduation gown which still inspires me in a unique way.

When she wrapped up her residence in PECHS Karachi, she donated her collection of books to Pakistan Study Centre, but not in a thoughtless manner. She advised me about some big cartons of books to be given to other appropriate departments and institutions, due to highly specialized nature of their subjects. She decided about each and every item of her belonging to be given to the most appropriate person. No wonder, she lives around us in many forms.

For us, the most valuable gift of her was her guidance. As a supervisor she was never tired of correcting us, no matter what the cost or the expediency. Her students speak so highly of her, and their community is amazingly large, within and outside Pakistan. She maintained connection with the eager ones, till her death, as she was a firm believer in the value of human relations. Despite that, she was never ready to let the substandard prevail.

Due to being connected with thousands of people around the world, and having travelled widely, she had collected a rich collection of experience, memorable items, fascinating stories, and valuation of people and places. Once she gave me a framed picture which was given to her by a student, who accompanied her to the perilous journey in the gorges of Karakoram along the road from Gilgit to Skardu. In the last stages of our communication she used to ask me to get her the group photograph from a colleague, that was taken at the Khunjrab Pass—at Pak-China border. At that time, she was engaged in writing her biography, a project which if not completed must be accomplished by someone else. It would not be a mere life history of a courageous scholar; it would be a story of a generation, of an age of commitment, of daring dreams, and of achievements, as well.

She had spent her life in a very bold manner. Her last phase of life was spent in an old home in Canada; of course a comfortable environment and professional care was available to her throughout. She was happy at that, too, and she never burdened her children to stay put with her for care. She believed that undue control of old generation on the young is a big barrier in the way of progress and evolution of the society. Each and every stage of her life has aspects that are worth-emulating.

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**Anwar Shaheen**