

My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

Interview details

Interview with Ashraful Huq Babu [AHB]

Interviewed by Hussain Dinar [HD]

Hussain Dinar [HD]. Could you share with us whatever memories of the Partition of 1947, tales and memories that you may have heard in your family, from your ancestors / elders, your impression of India or West Bengal, if you could share all these with us in some detail.

Ashraful Huq Babu [AHB]. Before 1947, my father used to live in Chhapra district of Bihar in India, so did my elder brother, who was with the Congress [Party]. In 1946 there was a riot in Bihar. The Patna Riots. The riots affected them badly, and that initiated a change in them. They were opposed to India's Partition; neither were they in any movement for the creation of Pakistan. But after the riots in Calcutta and Bihar, they started to feel insecure. They felt that maybe we won't get any security here, or that our future won't be secure here. Meanwhile the British government (my father was a railway employee) was asking people to opt: who want to go to Pakistan or Bangladesh. So father opted for Pakistan, and went over to West Pakistan in those days. My brothers, who were all opposed to this move, tried till the very end that father should not go over. This is what I've heard from them.

My Chacha, uncle, who was a doctor, went over to West Pakistan; so did another uncle of mine, who was an officer in the Navy, and remained in Pakistan. Yet another uncle had come here, and proceeded to London to study Law. He died there tragically in a road accident. So among my uncles, one was in Pakistan, one in India, and another in West Pakistan. Thus our family got divided into three units. I closely observed the intense emotion that the brothers had for each other when they wrote letters to each other, how sad they were at being separated—how close to tears they would be reading these letters from one another, and a deep sense of regret: why did this division have to happen? Why did we have to come away? As the years went by, they yearned to be close to one another.



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Meanwhile, there was tremendous political upheaval in West Pakistan. One faction favoured Pakistan, and another participated in the freedom struggle. This was the situation ... we were in Bangladesh ... and I was very young then—I was born in 1958 ... so gradually a difference erupted between Pakistan, Bangladesh and West Pakistan. As a result of this, there was a division even among the Urdu speaking population. My father was a follower of Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Vasani. So this was to continue in any case—this 'turn down', 'pin down' operation. I've seen my father, who was a staunch opponent of the Pakistani government. In 1968 my eldest brother completed his graduation. He too became involved in Left politics, and became a follower of Maulana Vasani, like my father. One slogan resounded in the whole of East [Pakistan]—'Death to Ayub Shah.' I heard Bhai shout that slogan; and my father and his comrades, through their involvement in the working class movement, would participate in various demonstrations against the Pakistan government. We were schoolchildren then.

The war of independence started in the mean time. That created a whole lot of problems. Earlier, there was a lot of confusion with the Bhasha Andolan, the Language Movement. That was followed by a confusion regarding the slogan of 'Jai Bangla'. The Urdu speaking people were misled into believing that it was a slogan only for the Bengali-language speakers, and nobody would really care for you, your culture, your language. In short, you would have no existence, to speak of. Hence you will have to live in Pakistan. This was Pakistan, which initiated this kind of an intrigue through agents in their administration. They succeeded in creating a huge misunderstanding between the Urdu-speaking majority and the Bengali-speaking majority. This resulted in the tragic incidents of 1971. The hatred and revulsion between the two had reached such mammoth proportions, that they were prepared to finish off each other.

Our family had got into a terrible mess at that time. The group led by Maulana Vasani, was in favour of Bangladesh, i.e. though they were not with Sheikh sahib, ideologically speaking, they were with them. Now my father was technically an employee of the Pakistan government, in the Railways. The doubts, tensions, killings, arson, communal riots, had already begun in the meant time. Once this started, news started to pour in from Dinajpur, Santahar, Mymensingh and other places that the Urdu-speaking people were being victimised, they were being targeted. Then there was news that the Bengali-speaking people were being tortured. This had happened earlier too, and it was happening now; but those of us who survived the indiscriminate killings all around, also got affected. Our Bengali-speaking brothers were hell bent on revenge.



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Towards the end of 1971, our family shifted to Saiyadpur from Parbatipur. This was immediately after the War of Independence; and on 16 December everyone shifted from Parbatipur to Saiyadpur. My father, who was with the Pakistan cause, and several others of his generation thought that we lost India in 1947, and now our very existence is at stake; so it's better for us to move to Pakistan. So they started the process of moving to Pakistan. The ICRC form was duly filled up, and a repatriation agreement was concluded between Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. The majority gave the option of moving to Pakistan. But we stayed on. My father said, we won't go to Pakistan. We lost our parents once, that was bad enough, now we won't go. Whatever happens, happens here. So we stayed on. Our relatives who are still in Bangladesh, have never wanted to move to Pakistan, nor ever participated in the option. We had tried very hard to make our community see reason; but the times were such, and the leadership wanted to keep them confused and undecided, so that the movement for opting for Pakistan, reached a peak during those times. Hence neither could we settle here, nor could we go to Pakistan.

It was only too obvious how our third generation got completely destroyed here. There was neither any opportunity of developing the language as such, nor was there any school or college, nor any job or entrepreneurial opportunities. Yet another struggle began—how to establish ourselves, and start our lives anew. Some set up as small traders, some even smaller business enterprises. The primary concern was: now that we've come out alive, we'll have to somehow eke out a living. Since there was practically no education, some branched off into smaller occupations like working as barbers or tailors—that became the chief occupation, the occupation of a lower order, in Bangladesh.

Among these people were some of us who were a bit active. We did well in our business ventures. I had an elder brother who had a business. Father and all of us were in that business. We had some kind of a stability and a foothold. There was a positive side to this. Those of us Urdu speakers who were on the side of Bangladesh, started weighing the options of having an election within our community. The terms of reference on the electoral rolls in Saiyadpur and Dhaka were somewhat different. All of us were voters in Saiyadpur, the elders, that is. **In 1985** my elder brother got elected as a Councillor. Both Bengali-speakers and Urdu-speakers voted for him. Another person was elected Chairman. Now this was new in Bangladesh—Urdu-speakers got elected to a responsible post through a proper election. And that was the post of the Mayor. People were slowly forgetting the past. If they had not given the electoral verdict and accepted, it would have been impossible to get elected to that post. So we went up till there. But we weren't politically very active, or affiliated to any political party as such.



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That was how our subsequent generations progressed. We too are progressing this way. People who are still in camps are leading a subhuman existence. There is acute shortage of living space; there's no privacy. They are living under extremely difficult conditions. Then some of us came together and started a movement with Ahmed Ilyas sahib, Khaled, Hasan, Pappu to make them (the people living in the camps) bona fide voters of Bangladesh. Many of us were involved in that movement. Then we filed a suit in the High Court along with the leaders of an organization called SPYM, and the court ruled in our favour. All the people still living in the camps now exercise their franchise as voters of Bangladesh. They are now citizens of Bangladesh.

Then another problem arose—they were not being given passports because they did not have a permanent address; then they were being told, no, you are still in Pakistan, so you won't be given a passport. So a fresh struggle has ensued. The government thinks that they are Pakistanis and they should move to Pakistan. We think we are Bangladeshis and we should remain here, in Bangladesh. Our rights of citizenship should be reinstated. That we've got. We've got voting rights too, but the other benefits and rights of a citizen have been completely denied to them. There's no scope of language development, no schools or colleges—no scope of systematic education. Amidst all this there was a desire among the youth to study in Bengali. It was seen that Urdu-speaking boys and girls were keen to be educated. Lots of them have the medium of instruction as Bengali. Khalid is now an advocate. Many have done their Intermediate, or even gone on to complete their Bachelors and Masters. This is a new development that we are observing among the youth in the camps. We are trying to instil some integration, leaving behind the past. We now want to live in Bangladesh, and exercise our rights there.

I had an uncle, a maternal uncle who always said that the division of India, the division of India was a great blunder for the Muslims of India. It was a disaster for the Muslims—this Partition of 1947. It was because of this that those of us could have stayed back in India are having to undergo such hardships. A lot of us think this way.

HD. You've said how your elder brother and father had to flee during the Patna riots and come away to this country. The times were definitely very tense and volatile. Could you share with us stories that you might know, of their struggle—and memories of those times?

AHB. During the riots?

HD. Yes.



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AHB. I've heard from my father that when the riots began in Bihar, the Hindu fundamentalists always wanted to attack areas of Muslim minority. That was always there. They would harass them in whatever way possible, set fire to their homes—this tendency was scary and it really worried my father and the others. There were many Congress leaders who came forward to give protection to the Muslims who were being attacked. And there were others who instigated surreptitiously. One would hear such things. The ultimate aim was how they were to be protected. This endeavour resulted in the conversion of some people who were siding with the Muslim League—they were told: 'none of you will have a moment's peace here. All of us Muslims must move to Pakistan; and slogan '*ladkey lengey Pakistan, Bantke rahega Hindustan*' [lit. 'we'll wrest Pakistan through a fight, and Hindustan will be divided'] was created among the Muslims. After the riots, father became associated with one such group. He told me how, one day at work, a very close Hindu friend of his was in tears when he heard that father was going away. He said, 'Why will you go away? Stay back.' In the mean time, another Hindu colleague came up and began to abuse him, saying, 'You Muslims, you should go to Saudi Arabia'—father was mortally wounded. Then his Hindu friend had an altercation with the man who was abusing father. But father was very upset. He came back home and wept—'I won't stay here,' he said, 'I'll take my kids with me and go away.' My elder brother was a Congress supporter, and never told father that you won't be able to go. 'Let's see the end of this. If I die, I'll die here.' But he decided to move to Pakistan, and gave that option to the Railways, his employer, and came away to Pakistan.

HD. So your family came away in 1947, by opting for Pakistan. What was their situation like? How was it for them, starting from scratch? It was a new journey for them. How did they cope?

AHB. After moving from India, they had to stay for two-three months in wagons. In fact they came to Pakistan in wagons. Then the Railway authorities provided them with quarters. I was born in one of these quarters, which was a proper constructed quarter. But they weren't in a particularly good position then. The situation was so confusing and ridden with difficulties—the position of East Pakistan and East Bengal—there was total chaos. They had to work in such difficult conditions, working in the railways—doing up the railways—there wasn't any light and they had to work by the light of lanterns. When they had to go to the loco[motive] sheds, they had what was known as *latka-lanthan*. After a long hard day's work, when they returned home, there was no fan or light. There was only a *charpai* or *khatiya* [a lightweight bed made of four legs and ropes woven in the place of a mattress]. Women would sleep inside, and the men in the open, on these khatiyas. That was how it was for a long time. Later on there was a proper set-up and the leaders and the Pakistan government made a difference to their position. Now



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they wanted that the national language be Bengali; but Jinnah declared that Urdu would be the national language. This created a panic among both the Urdu-speaking and the Bengali-speaking communities. The Urdu-speaking community was misled by the government into thinking that it was the end of the road for them. And they would have to go for an anti-language movement. The Bengalis thought that they are Urdu-speakers. They won't support our cause, i.e. on the question of language. They had to remain under tremendous pressure till 1971. But the division had started much earlier.

Father remained a railway employee, and because of his closeness with Maulana Vasani, he didn't have to face major problems adjusting, as such. But the others got into trouble. Maybe there were various reasons—the Urdu speakers who supported Pakistan, or because of their language identity, or because of their leaning to Pakistan and moving away from the Bengali-speaking community. They faced these problems both in their careers and elsewhere. The Urdu-speaking community were never in positions of power as such in Pakistan, barring only a few in the top posts in the Railways. But in civil administrative posts maybe just one or two Urdu speakers—else none at all. The people here could not understand this basic politics—them not being in actual power when it came to administrative matters. It was just that Urdu became a symbol of vanity for them. The people in the government spoke in Urdu, the administration was run in Urdu, and showing off in Urdu lingo. At the end, it was the Urdu speakers who became the worst affected.

HD. What does Partition or division of the country mean to you?

AHB. '47 or '71?

HD. '47

AHB. I told you, we still think that the Partition of 1947 was a wrong decision. And I say this as a Muslim, an Indian Muslim—that as an Indian Muslim we have been harmed. Had we stayed on *with* India, had we stayed on *in* India, had this entire region had remained with India, I can vouch as a Muslim, that the Muslims at large would have been in a much better condition. It is all too clear now—in today's perspective.

HD. Would you share with us the stories and memories of your family members who had come with your father?

AHB. Several of my relatives had come with my father—my Mama (maternal uncle), Chacha (paternal uncle), grandmother, and Chachis (wives of my Chachas). And my Dada (paternal



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grandfather), who came and then returned. But his last wish was—don't live here; go to India instead. Whatever happens, let it happen there. He stuck to his decision that I won't go there unless I retire. Because of his staying on, they all remained here, and they went away. My uncles remained in East Pakistan. They too suffered in exactly the same way, cowering in the face of rabid Hindu communalism. They saw the riots and were very scared. That's why they didn't want to go back and stayed on here. After they came away here, they were very well received, and from whatever I've heard from father, the Bengali Muslims were awfully fond of them, offering to carry them on their shoulders, and when they couldn't, lifted all their baggage on their shoulders, and took them home and gave them shelter. They carried them home from the wagons in which they were living then, and gladly hosted them in their homes. The Indian Muslims were so moved by these small, but potent human gestures, that they thought—this is infinitely better. The people here are accepting us as one of their own. So this was an incentive not to go back, and stay put there.

One of my uncles told me that he had many Hindu friends. When he went back, the kind of love and emotional bonding that they shared—all of them were weeping copiously. And then the uncertainties of their lives were also affecting them—what if we die if we stay on here? Will my friend be able to save me? They were paranoid when they came; yet the kind of warm and friendly reception they found among their Bengali Muslim brethren—so beautiful, like filial bonding; the way they had been accommodated, and spaces created for them to live permanently—it was incredible. As these stories of the incredibly warm reception circulated, more and more people started to come over, and tried to adjust to the living conditions here. Then again political conflict drove in thorns of difference. That was how it went on.

HD. You've said that many people from your family have come away on this side of the border. What kind of stories have you heard from your aunts or mother, for example, women who have lived at home?

AHB. Stories of this kind?

HD. Yes.

AHB. Yes, the same stories. They too had friends—women who were their classmates for example—they too had very similar stories. When I used to read Mother's letters in Urdu, they would contain names of her Hindu friends. She would want to know how they were, whether they were still there, whether they could be contacted. She would ask me to convey her *adab* and *salaam* to them; and request them to write letters to her. I have seen her write to her



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Indian Hindu friends who were her schoolmates, who were her fast friends. Similarly, her friends too would write to her. Sometimes these letters would contain a few lines of Hindi, but the letters would mostly come in Hindi. I was only a child then, but I too felt that there was a deep sense of hurt and sorrow on both sides. I could see it clearly in all Mother's letters. I've heard that my grandfather was one of Dr Rajendra Prasad's very close friends. My mother was very close to one of his granddaughters, and there was a close connection between the two families. There was no telephone in those days; letters were the only mode of communication. I've seen my grandmother write about her. Then she would get a reply—yes, now my age is such and such, I've married—so she got the news that she was well. So the camaraderie never diminished. Even when Mother was ill in 1981, before she passed away, she would tell us, write this letter and send it to Chhapra in India. My maternal uncle was in Kolkata. He was the Imam of the mosque in Delhi. I would often write to him, and he would reply. I would despatch letters to mother's friends through him, and also informed them about her passing away. We also received condolence messages from them. There was this feeling among us that we had been able to get away from the rabid Hindus and come to Pakistan. This was the general mindset. Within our family however, there was an intense pain at having to go away. Again, there was the fear of having to face ridicule if we decided to go back to India. So there was no question of going back to India.

HD. Do you or have your forefathers continued the cultural practices like food or style of clothing of India? Are there any related stories that you would like to share with us?

AHB. Culture?

HD. Culture, food habits, dress—things like these . . .

AHB. Sometimes . . .

HD. Please would you give us some details?

AHB. My grandfather was in the party there; quite influential. He was a great patron of *shayars*, poets who wrote Urdu poetry. We still have this culture. We still participate in *mushayeras* and do *shayari*, songs and *quawwali*. I still participate in such Urdu cultural programmes, such as poetry reading sessions, songs and *quawwali*, in keeping with our family tradition. Such programmes have taken place in this room itself, and in various other venues in Dhaka. We had formed the Bangla Urdu Sahitya Forum with Afsar Chowdhury, the poet; and I was its first Secretary. We followed that culture here.



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HD. For example the cuisine or the condiments used while cooking . . .

AHB. We follow the traditional cuisine.

HD. Could you tell us in a little more detail about the rituals in marriage, for instance?

AHB. Those rituals continue. There are songs. At night the women of the house make *gulgulla* and take them there. And the Indian ladies would put sindoor. Muslim women too put on sindoor; they still do. We refer to these as Indian culture. Many get miffed at this labelling, and tell us we should not refer to it that way. My nephew got married only a few days ago. My nephews had come from London, and Khaled had taken them. There was another lady who had come from America who wanted to see whether our culture was any different from the culture of India. They were there for two days and saw both the ceremonies. They were so pleased, and told us—how well you have been able to preserve your culture, hold on to your culture. This is a very good sign.

HD. Would you tell us something about food?

AHB. It's the same—pulao, beef, mughlai dishes like kebab, biryani, kachhi—all these are Indian and we follow these. Gradually this tradition of our food has spread all over Bangladesh. This is the cuisine—mughlai cuisine.

HD. You say you are Urdu-speaking, yet living in a land where the majority speak Bengali. This element of the two languages, and you speaking in Urdu—do you have any experience regarding the dichotomy between the two languages, or do you have any stories related to this?

AHB. Any incidents related to Urdu? No.

HD. I mean you are speaking in Urdu, and your young generation have their medium of instruction as Bengali. This mixture of the two languages – was there any problem arising out of this? Do you recall any incidents or stories related to this that you might want to share with us?

AHB. It's perfectly all right for the elders who speak nothing but Urdu. For us, who are neither too old nor too young, it's a great problem for us. Our children don't even understand Urdu that well. They can keep up a conversation because of us, but if we tell them to write five lines of Urdu text, they won't be able to. Urdu is gradually receding into oblivion for the present generation, because there is no consistent practice. There are no schools or colleges teaching the language. The practice of the language terminates with either our seniors, or just us. I have



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serious doubts about the fate of the language. In *mushayras*, we encourage the participation of younger people. They do the 'wah wah' all right, echoing the response of the elders; but when I ask them pointedly whether they have actually understood the import of the lyrics being recited, they draw a complete blank. They can't understand the language properly.

HD. These two countries were divided on the basis of religion, and a wall—a border was erected. What does the border mean to you? How does the border affect your life?

AHB. I've told you earlier that I don't see this division as something positive. It is not good.

HD. Would you tell us in some detail how the existence of the border influenced your daily lives?

AHB. There is a strong feeling that had we, the Urdu-speakers especially, stayed on, nobody would have abused us, beaten us up, calling us 'Bihari'; nor would they have usurped our language and culture. We feel these things deeply. Aren't there Muslims in India too? Don't they carry on with their own cultures? There are Urdu schools and colleges there. There are so many religious groups coexisting in India. Generally speaking, nothing happens to them. There may be one or two sporadic incidents—it's a large country, after all—but things are okay. Here, the situation is there's no Urdu; no endeavour on the part of the government to resuscitate Urdu. It is not an accepted medium of instruction either. There is no development of the language. When a community cannot develop or enhance its own language, there is a gnawing sense of hurt and betrayal. On the surface, there are facilities available, trades and businesses flourish, we're investing in business, nobody creates any hurdles; Bengalis and Biharis are in the trade together—there's no problem as such. But nobody speaks a word to another—they don't even abuse one another. There is a strange kind of mental torture in this existence—we have no language, no culture, we can't talk in Urdu, we can't allow our culture to flourish and blossom; we can't gauge what people might think if we talk in Urdu in public. I'm an officer all right, but if I speak in Urdu, they might call me 'Urduwallah'—these things rancour inside constantly. There's this constant mental pressure. This is always there.

HD. If you think about it today, what influence does the border have in your lives at the present time? Does it have any role to play at all?

AHB. The border is a huge bar for us—that's what we feel. Now if we say something like the Bangladesh border is a bar for us Urdu-speakers, our Bangladeshi brothers might not like it. That might take a turn for the worse. But I want state this in a clear cut manner even now that



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the border has been a bar for us. Had the border not been there, we could have lived in close proximity with our relatives. We could have mingled with them ever so easily. Travelling between our homes would've been so easy. This pain wouldn't have been there—the pain that still persists. Maybe relatives could have rescued their own relations from life in camps, telling them, 'Come, we'll take you away, stay with us.' Even that they can't because of the border. The humiliation that the present generation is facing wouldn't have been, had there not been a border. They would have studied Urdu, been educated properly, and made substantial progress in life. You'll notice how they've been reduced to being the smaller traders like barbers and tailors. They don't even find the scope of thinking at a higher level. Had the border not been there, they could have been educated there, got proper jobs. But there would have been no country without its borders. There would have been no sovereignty without borders, nor would have been the independence of countries assured without borders. This land would have become another land. From our perspective, we consider the border a bar.

HD. Which according to you is your native place, or native homestead?

AHB. Bharat, India. I have a special emotional bonding with the soil of this land, because I was born here. I love this land, I'm fond of this land. And the homestead of our forefathers that we have, that too has a pull. Even today we line up in front of the Indian High Commission, seeking a visa, so that we can meet our relatives. We still go there. There is this pull, this attraction. I've been born here, grown up here, been educated here, we've mingled with the people of this country. So there's love. But there also a deep attachment and a definite weakness for the homestead of our forefathers. That's quite obvious, isn't it?

HD. You have heard so many stories from your forefathers—memories, tales—which they have shared with you. Would you like to share these stories with your subsequent generations? Would you like to leave some of these memories with them? Would you like them to know about these?

AHB. Of course. No nation can progress unless they are aware of their past. This Urdu nationalism or Muslim nationalism—whatever you may call it—what was in it? There's only despair in our generation, and the unanswered question: was there nobody worthwhile among us? There's this feeling. The greatest poet in this subcontinent, Mirza Ghalib was an Urdu poet. This feeling hurts--hurts terribly.



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HD. Thank you so much for sharing your memories and stories. If you feel we've missed out something, if you want to say something in addition to what we've asked, please feel free to say so.

AHB. Through this medium? Then I would like to convey this message through you to the government of Bangladesh and to the government of India—that we are originally from India. I will have an approach to the Indian government—now that such a wonderful relationship has been forged between the two countries through our forefathers . . . it is the border that is the cause of all trouble. If the two governments forget it—the leaders in both the countries—if they talk to each other, they can easily resolve this problem. If they truly consider us one of their own, that we are their progeny, and the moment we cross the border, we become Indian progeny, because we've been born on this soil. So if both the governments are genuinely willing, they can easily solve this problem of people living in camps; this cultural problem—there can be a solution to all these problems—that's what I feel. I would like to appeal to them—if they solve this humanitarian problem, generations on both sides of the border would be eternally grateful to them.

HD. Thank you so very much for sharing your memories and stories with us. We had such a good time talking to you. Thank you so much.

AHB. Thank you.

