

My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

Interview details

Interview with Dolly Akter [DA]

Interviewed by Mahde Hasan [MH]

Mahde Hasan [MH]. Today we are going to discuss with you aspects of Partition, primarily the Partition of 1947, when one country was divided into two—one became India, and the other Pakistan. During that period, you grandfather, or his father had come to East Pakistan and spent some time there. You must have heard many stories from your grandfather and your father about those times. We would like to hear those stories from you right from the beginning. You are free to say as much as you like. No problem.

Dolly Akter [DA]. From whatever I've heard from my grandfathers and grandmothers, my great grandfather was from Bihar. He was quite young when he shifted from Bihar to Kolkata, after which he got married. A few years after that my grandfather's eldest sibling was born, i.e. my grandfather's eldest brother; then my grandfather was born, and after him were his three sisters. They were five brothers and sisters in all. There was a terrible ruckus among the Hindus and Muslims in Kolkata at that time. It seemed to them that no Muslims would be able to survive in Kolkata. Hence my great grandfather shifted to East Pakistan with his five children. They lived in Mohammadpur for many years. So we've been in Bangladesh since then. My grandfather must have been twelve or thirteen at the time when his family shifted. My grandfather told me about Mohammadpur. He knew my grandmother before the war, in fact three years before the war. My grandmother's native place was Savar. My grandfather took a liking to my grandmother, and they were married. All grandfather's brothers and sisters except his eldest brother were married in Bangladesh and settled there. His eldest brother married a



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girl from Kolkata. But they too shifted to Bangladesh. My grandmother too lived in Mohammadpur after marriage. But when the 1971 war began, there was an effort to keep Biharis in a safe zone. At that time my grandfather's family lived in one of the camps (I don't remember the name of the camp), but that was a safe zone. After the war, they were shifted to Mirpur, where there was a Bihari settlement. Land was apportioned, and my grandfather got about three-four cottahs of land to build a house and settle there.

When my father was nineteen, my grandfather introduced him to a lady in Narayanganj, who he said was a 'phuphi', i.e. paternal aunt. Now my grandfather saw my mother there-- she was only twelve or thirteen at that time. But he finalized her marriage with his son, i.e. my father. My mother is from Narayanganj. So a girl from a Bengali community got married to a man from the Bihari community; again, my great grandfather married a girl from Kolkata; my grandfather married a Savar; and my father got married to a girl from Narayanganj. After marriage, they were in a place called Murapara in Mirpur borough. This area was known as the Mudapara Camp. Then there was the Kurmitola Camp in Kalshi; then there was the Kalapani Camp. The areas were demarcated into these 'camps'. There were some influential local heavyweights of Awami League who intervened. The area apportioned to my grandfather was along the main road, and the valuation could have been much higher—the house itself would have been twelve to fourteen lakhs taka. Now in my grandfather's family, there were nine in all, but four of them died, and they are now five, including my father's elder brother, my *baro baba* and my youngest *phupi*, i.e. my father's youngest sister, who was only three at that time. My father and his youngest sister were captured, a gun held to their heads and threatened that unless the entire landed property was made out in their name, they wouldn't let them go. What could my grandfather do? He gave all that up [to the captors]. My grandfather was given just two rooms in Kalshi. They took away land worth so many lakhs of taka, and in exchange just those two rooms! Grandfather didn't have any power to fight them, so had to accept whatever was being offered. Then my grandfather shifted.

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From whatever I've heard about the war from my grandfather, they were what is called *rajakar*. But they weren't that, because they were originally inhabitants of Kolkata who had to move here because of the volatile communal condition there, and Bangladesh would incarnate in a few years from East Pakistan. But they loved their own country. I've heard from grandfather that many people considered all Biharis to be rajakars, who have tortured Bengalis. But when my grandfather was in Mohammadpur, there were some Bengalis under him, whom he could easily have handed over to the military establishment, which he didn't. Instead, he gave them shelter in his home, introducing them as his sisters and brothers, as Biharis, declaring that we belong in Bihar.

So my grandfather would say that country names hardly matter; what matters is the name of the country I live in. When the war was over, my grandfather's family couldn't shift, and remained in Bangladesh. Bengalis moved to East Pakistan, and the Biharis in Bangladesh couldn't move either. So then some important leaders among Biharis took up the responsibility. They discussed the matter with the Bangladesh government and came to a deal with the government of West Pakistan—you will agree to keep some of our people, and in exchange we will house these many Bengalis in Pakistan; and we also agree (neither you nor us) not to inflict any kind of torture on these people. So they came to this kind of a mutual understanding.

When father used to live in Kurmitola, sorry, Murga para, he was nineteen (that's when he was married), and my mother was a child bride for all practical purposes, because she was only fifteen. At fifteen one is hardly self sufficient. Within two-three years of marriage, they had to make a red card, which was a ration card of sorts, with which they got wheat, flour, rice from another country, and during the time of *kurbani* [ceremonial sacrifice at the time of Id] also *dumba* meat which would be transferred from Bangladesh. That would be given to all people with that card.

When Kalshi Road was constructed more than twenty thousand people lost their homes. The government got into a deal with the powerful Bihari lobby who advocated this new idea of



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SPGRC. Biharis came under this scheme of SPGRC, and after talks with the government, it was decided that since these houses were demolished on account of development work for the country, all the displaced families with red cards would be provided houses, and those without wouldn't get houses. So families with children who lived in four-roomed houses were given three-roomed houses in quarters that were built on the road to Sagufta, on the right. All of them shifted to this new area which was named 'Natun Camp.' [lit. 'new camp'.] Since the old camp was demolished to build this new camp, it was named 'natun camp.' For us who are in the Kurmitula Camp, our red card is a guarantee that the government will arrange land for us. But for those without the card, even if their homes are demolished, the government will have no responsibility to compensate them for their loss. I've heard this from my father when he was alive in 2007, that they had a weavers' cooperative. Most of us Biharis belong to this trade. The system was that every member of the cooperative would contribute two-three thousand rupees, and a proportionate land would be allotted in his name in Bangladesh with a clear indication of how many cottahs each would get. There are about 2500-3000 people in these cooperatives who run this scheme, but all of them need to be weavers. My father had four workshops from where saris would be woven. He had applied for two and a half cottahs of land through the cooperative, and was successful too. Now remains the issue of giving the money in proper instalments to the government and the money will be granted as compensation in the eventuality of the death of the contributor. This is how Biharis are carrying on with their lives, and so are we.

MH. You were telling us about your grandfather who came from Bihar and spoke Urdu—he came to Kolkata and married there. Do you know anything about that? How did he associate with a completely new culture? Do you know any stories about that? Would you like to tell us?

DA. My grandfather's father had a love marriage. He loved to roam about. So he would go from Bihar to Delhi, etc. because he had an import-export business. When he came to Kolkata, perhaps it was during the Pujas (I not very sure). My father has told me that it was the time of

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the Pujas. Young girls are really well turned out in their best attire, they deck up in nice saris. The Muslims there, i.e. my grandfather's mother, most of her friends were Hindus. So he had gone to meet them. He met his future wife in a fair. He liked her a lot and decided to stay on Kolkata. Being the only son of his parents, his decision was final, and he announced to his parents who were Biharis, that I like this girl and want to marry her. He spoke Bihari, but the people in Kolkata did not speak entirely in Bengali; they too spoke Bihari sometimes. So there was a mutual understanding—that is all I know. Then they got married. The riots began with the formation of East Pakistan.

MH. How old was your grandfather then—during the riots?

DA. Must have been twelve to thirteen years.

MH. Did he tell you about the riots? What was his experience of the riots?

DA. From whatever I've heard from grandfather, they would be asked to hide under the bed in case of any raids. Then they were asked to move around with weapons like *da* [a scythe-like cutter] because Hindus were moving around with these too. Why? Because they didn't want to keep a single Muslim alive. Good for them if they left the land and went away; but if they didn't, they would be chopped to bits. On one such night, my great grandfather shifted to East Pakistan, and eventually died there.

MH. How did your grandfather start his life there? What was his struggle like before/ up to his marriage in a new land?

DA. Grandfather came here when he was twelve or thirteen and lived in Mohammadpur. He used to study there, but once he shifted to East Pakistan, his education came to a standstill. Grandfather was just like his father. He liked to explore new lands and would always assist his father in the import business. It was entirely and on the job training. He would observe his father very closely—where he went, what he did. They would often go to Bihar from here—

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make it a point to visit Bihar on any pretext. I've heard from my grandfather that when he was eighteen, he had a service job with the airlines. He had been recruited because of his height, smartness, etc. He did that job for three years. He lost interest in it after that, and returned home. He now began to explore the various places in Bangladesh. Perhaps he had been asked to transfer goods to a place in Savar. So he met my grandmother on one of these trips. From age twelve-thirteen to twenty one, he would spend time with his friends quite openly, and also with his father. When his father died when he was nineteen, he decided to take up the airplane job. His elder brother had passed IA [interim stage between school leaving and undergrad]. He had continued his studies in the face of extreme adversity. And my grandfather stood by the family, helping it tide over rough times, and looked after generating income.

MH. They would go to Bihar to meet them, didn't they? Your grandfather would go to Bihar. Who lived there? Whom did he contact?

DA. My Baro-baba, i.e. my grandfather's father would run his import-transport business from Bihar. He would supply goods to different places from Bihar. His clients would buy goods from him, and then transfer them. I've heard that my Baro-baba had a sister [daughter of his khala or paternal aunt] who lived in Bihar. There was nobody else. He had a sister who got separated from him at the time of Partition, and while crossing the border, he went to the western side and they to the eastern side, and to Calcutta. My grandfather's cousin [mentioned earlier] was transferred to Benaras. She is still alive. But we have never met them. I have a Phupi who comes to Bangladesh off and on; and there is my grandmother [maternal] who is in West Pakistan—we have no contact with them. We only have some contact with a grandmother who is my maternal grandfather's sister.

MH. Where does she live?

DA. Narayanganj, Gandariya.

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MH. You've seen your grandfather till the time you were seven. They first came to East Pakistan in 1971. What was their experience like? They were here during the Bhasha Andolan or during the war. If you could tell us something about those times—their experiences, how they faced the adversities. Your father was there too, wasn't he?

DA. Father was one and a half years old during the war of 1971. I've heard from my Dadi grandmother that they had to undergo a lot of hardships. Grandmother was Bengali and my grandfather Bihari. There was a huge problem. The war was on, but they weren't supporting any side. They lived in the countryside in East Pakistan after shifting from Calcutta; and he had married a Bengali. Now the war was between these two, yet both cohabited the same space, the same home. The most troublesome part was, my grandmother had to learn Bihari. And during the Bhasha Andolan, grandfather taught all his kids to speak Bengali. Otherwise they always used to speak in Bihari. When the military came on raids, they would pose as Biharis; and when the Bengalis planned to attack them, they posed as Bengalis. My grandmother would take a stand that we are Bengalis. That's how they saved father at the time of the war. Hadn't they done it then, they wouldn't have been able to save anybody at all, because there were two to three attacks on them. Both parties used to get so confused by their stand as Biharis and Bengalis. I used to laugh a lot hearing those stories, and would my grandfather, 'But you are so much an opportunist! And what will we tell us if someone asks us what we are?' He would reply, 'Tell them, we are *ghoti-bati*; because you can speak both Bengali and Bihari.' ['Ghoti' and 'bati'— derogatory, often humorous colloquialism indicating natives of West Bengal and natives of East Bengal, respectively.] At one point of time, father became a citizen of Calcutta. According to the card belonging to my Baro-baba, when they got transferred from Bihar, his permanent residential address was Calcutta. Even now our ration card carries our Calcutta address. If people ask us, 'Do you belong to India?' We reply, 'Yes.' But what is India? It is Calcutta. If we think about it from the point of nationality, father was born in Bangladesh. He is

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a citizen of Bangladesh though he was born in East Pakistan; mother is a citizen of Bangladesh, and besides, there's me.

MH. We were listening to so many stories till now, and we'll soon return to that phase. But I wanted to know what the border means to you. Borders existed earlier, and will do so in future too. But how do you perceive the border that was drawn then? What was it like? What is your perception about the division between East Pakistan and India?

DA. The West Pakistan government wasn't giving any recognition to the East Pakistan state as Bangladesh, as an independent nation. They wanted it to be under their thumb and ...

MH. I wanted to know what your perception is about the division of the country in 1947. I'll come to the question of Bangladesh a little later. How do you perceive the experience your grandfathers had, for example? If, for instance, you are told that you are no longer a citizen of this country and you will be moved to the other side of the border, how would you feel? What was their experience then? What do you feel? How do you see that?

DA. During Partition, there were strictures on movement across the border, there were several problems. I've heard my grandfather say: being uprooted from one's own birthplace, just on account of religion, and being transplanted to a completely alien land where everything is unknown—isn't that a matter of deep agony? This I feel is a totally wrong way of addressing the situation. Whichever religion I might belong to, I am a citizen of a particular country and that should be the abiding factor, above every other consideration. You must be able to see me in totality as a human being and not mark me in terms of religion alone. So from whatever little I've heard from my grandfather, this division of countries on the basis of religion is an extremely wrong step to take. It should never be done this way.

MH. What do you feel about the border? There is still a border. Maybe you have relatives in Bihar, or in Pakistan. How do you perceive this border now?

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DA. I read in various newspapers or watch TV where news of illegal transactions at the border are reported. Maybe these strictures are good because smugglers cannot smuggle good out of Bangladesh to other countries, because it takes the illegal route. But the real agony is felt by people whose relatives live on the other side of the border, people belonging to the economically backward classes or very ordinary middle classes, who simply cannot afford to spend all that money to maybe go and meet their cousins across the border. But for me, even though I've been fortunate enough to travel outside Bangladesh, I haven't been able to make any contact with my relatives because I simply don't know where they live! Maybe it's good and not so good.

MH. You say that you don't know where your relatives are. Don't you want to know? Don't you want to meet them?

DA. Of course! I certainly want to meet my relatives, because I've heard about them from my grandparents. The process is so expensive that it becomes impossible to continue the communication, both from our end and theirs.

MH. Your father's side, i.e. grandfather, father etc were from Bihar or Benaras, and your grandmother's side belonged to Bangladesh or were Bengalis from Calcutta. So the cuisine and cultural practices in your family had both these elements in equal measure. Marriage rituals for example are very different. How have you seen the two coexist?

DA. I don't know about my grandmother's marriage, but I've heard about my mother's marriage, and it was very amusing. The Biharis have a custom of anointing the bride and the groom with turmeric paste for seven days. Then make the bride sit in a space bound by four banana plants, and bathe her. Then the *mehendi* ritual begins. But the sindoor that is applied is kind of a fluorescent orange, not the dark vermillion used by Bengalis. Until the sindoor ritual is over, the marriage is not complete. The sindoor is put on the bride as well as all other married women present. Then there is a custom about a specific coiffeur for brides. We normally go to

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beauty parlours and get spa treatment for our hair, then get it set and sprayed. But the custom is, the hair is braided into numerous small braids. Mother has told me how awfully painful that is. When only half the braiding was done, she fell unconscious. Five-six people are engaged in the braiding of the hair. Then there is the ritual with betel leaf, which has to be brought from the grooms' house. Any slip up on that is supposed to be ominous. Five married men from the groom's family along with their respective spouses deck up the bride, and apply copious quantities of oil in her hair. That's another rule / ritual. Mother was distraught that she has been married off to a Hindu, and she was mighty irritated at the oil ritual, because the oil dripped incessantly down her neck and back! She was so angry with her mother for marrying her with this strange set of rituals. And everybody in Narayanganj was telling my grandmother, whose name was Saleha, why did you do this? You had to marry off your girl to somebody outside your religion! Got nobody from your own? They couldn't figure out it was their custom. Bengalis never gift shoes to the groom. They always give money instead and ask the groom's family to get shoes. So shoes weren't part of the wedding gifts, neither were broomsticks. So the Biharis were looking for the shoes. How can the groom leave without shoes? They didn't get the point that money was given to buy shoes at their end.

We garnish our cooking with *lusni*. Everything from Safi and other things were given as wedding gifts except broomsticks and shoes. A huge furore began around that, and came to a point where the marriage was in danger of getting annulled. Then there is another rule—the bride is lifted over the threshold. Mother was only fourteen when she got married. All her tears and protests fell on deaf ears. She was lifted over the courtyard and put down with a bump on the bed like a bundle, not even set down gently. Now whoever came to see the new bride, she would have to hold their legs and do salam. Mother was fed up of getting up and down, up and down doing this. After a while, she came and sat on the floor in front of the bed because it was much easier getting access to someone's leg that way. Her face was covered with the end of her sari. Bengalis wear saris differently, but the way the Biharis had tied hers was very weird,

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and it seemed to her with every such salam, her sari might just fall off! The Biharis have a veritable compendium of rules. Bengalis don't have so many rules. At the end of two and a half days of marriage, the bride and the groom will visit the bride's home once again, more gifts of clothes need to be made; then they leave for the groom's home. We Bengalis make a gift of *khoi* and *muri*. The in-laws were livid at seeing this. They refused to accept this gift. The saga of my mother's marriage had so many strange tales of cultural gaffes and wrong communication between two very different cultures. The bride is fed up by the time the rituals are over and done with. They are so very rigid. For example, from the time your marriage has been finalized upto the marriage proper, you are not supposed to set foot outside your house. Suppose my marriage is after fifteen days, then I'm a prisoner for those fifteen days. I won't be able to stir out; if I have a job, then that goes for a toss as well. The Biharis have very deep rooted superstitions. I'm not saying Bengalis are above superstitions, but I have a feeling that the proportion is grater in Biharis.

I'll give you an example. Mother got married when she was very small, and she was naturally unable to conceive. I was born three-four years after marriage. So the in-laws started torturing her. She couldn't see my father off when he left for work; she wasn't allowed to eat with the others, etc. Then when the bride comes to the in-laws' place after two and a half days, she is required to cook for the family. Bengalis treat that rather as a symbolic gesture; but not so with the Biharis. They insist on not helping out the new bride in the kitchen. The logic being, because it is the first time she is cooking, she has to do it all alone. Then there is the stigma of not bearing a child as soon as you are married! This has remained through the ages, and continues even today. In fact there was once a talk of marrying my father off a second time with a cousin of his—the middle daughter of my grandfather's elder brother—Putul aunty. Now my father's younger brother, my chacha, was in love with her. This my grandfather didn't know, but father did. So father decked him up in all the wedding regalia, with turban and a veil of flowers coming

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all the way down the face, so it was impossible to recognize who that was, and left the scene. After the marriage was through, it was realized that it was my uncle.

The Biharis torture the brides most on account of not producing an offspring. Second marriage—even though the first wife is still around—is quite common. They don't go by the law. Only when it was known that my mother had conceived that she regain her position in her in-laws' family, and she was reinstated to her old lifestyle.

My grandfather's generation started to pass on. My own grandfather died when I was seven. And gradually the cultural trappings of the Biharis started to get wiped out from our family. I wouldn't know about the other families, but they surely got removed from the cultural practice of our family, the reason being, all my kakimas [wives of my uncles] are Bengalis. My mother announced that with the responsibility on her shoulders, she would have these marriages organized according to Bengali rules. There is one thing mother says that I completely agree with—if there is a healthy understanding instead of assiduously clinging on to these rules and regulations, that's a much better option. I get along much better with my mother. We're like friends. She is never dependent on what her culture is. The Biharis in our locality are only educated upto class five / seven or at the most eight. That's it. And my aunts have only been educated upto that. Let me tell you the history of my eldest aunt. She would read the Koran, lessons in Arabic; and my grandfather had a strict rule that girls would not be allowed to go out of the house. So on the pretext of going to her friend's house, she would study surreptitiously. When my grandfather passed away, my youngest aunt had reached school going age, and my father got her admitted to school, and she studied till SSC. In our locality all rules and regulations are for girls—none for boys. Boys can study for as long as they want, but girls can't. I've passed Intermediate, for example. In our entire locality including Kurmitola, and Baguda we are seven girls who have passed Intermediate. All of us were admitted to school in class one, studied together upto Inter, and now applying for university. Our struggle is supported by our parents. Many Bihari parents support their girls nowadays. We wouldn't have been able to

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continue unless we had this support. My father always had this dream that my daughter would study. I had gone to Pakistan just a week before he passed away. I last went to Pakistan in 2007. Father told my mother, 'Allow her to study as long as she wishes. Don't prevent her from doing anything. Don't talk of marriage.' They supported me very strongly. The reason being, they had seen how Bengalis never prevent their daughters from doing anything. It was a healthy competition. It was because of this that we've been able to study this far.

MH. You were talking about the ration card, where your father is identified as a Calcutta citizen, and mother as a Bangladeshi. If you are asked where is your native homestead, what would you say?

DA. Children always take on the identification of their parents. I would say mother is a citizen of Bangladesh; father too had in fact become a citizen of Bangladesh, because that red card really doesn't matter. It only matters when some specifically Bihari issues need to be addressed. Otherwise this card just doesn't have any validity anywhere in any official dealings in Bangladesh—in schools, colleges, or anywhere else. The government of Bangladesh has decreed that no red card holder can become a citizen of Bangladesh. But when voter lists were being drawn up, the red card holders could also become citizens of Bangladesh and they would get ID cards too. So if anyone asks me, I say I'm a Bangladeshi. Both my parents have been born here, so why should I say that I'm a Bihari? My identification is totally that of a Bangladeshi citizen. The Biharis have no problem with it. The Bihari kingpins always show their valid voter ID cards everywhere. I have to show my birth certificate. Biharis won't get any support from anywhere at all in Bangladesh unless they show their voter ID cards. In that respect I'm not a Bangladeshi.

MH. What is identity according to you? Are you a Bihari or a Bengali? Because you have both Bihari and Bengali cultural elements in you. How do you discover or locate yourself in the confluence of the two? Are you exclusively Bihari or exclusively Bengali?



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DA. Let's look at it this way: when I go to Save the Children, some people ask me, 'Dolly, you are a resident of Kalshi. Are you a Bihari or a Bengali? Again during my admission in school in class one, INCIDIN Bangladesh used to teach only Bihari children, but I got admitted because father had shown his red card. If anybody asks me, I'll tell them what grandfather asked me to say—I'm from Calcutta. And if anybody asks me my nationality, then my nationality is definitely that of a Bangladeshi. That's because I've been born here, and this is my country. That's my nationality.

MH. You have told us about traditional elements in weddings. Now if you could tell us something about food habits and cuisine.

DA. There's normally very little difference. Biharis make Ukma and have rotis in the morning—not rice. Bengalis have a preference for rice. Among Biharis, chapatti is favoured. The pure Biharis would prefer rotis for both their meals, and some rice in the morning. We sometimes have rotis in the morning and nobody in our house wants to eat rice. Mother makes rotis for us in the morning, we also take rotis for tiffin; but we eat rice for lunch and dinner. Sometimes when mother makes some other dishes for dinner that need to be eaten with rotis, we have rotis.

Bengalis make a lot of dishes. Take the example of Shab-e-barat. Bengalis make a *buter halwa*. Biharis make something similar, but add carrots in the halwa. Then they make a paste of masur dal and make stars of different designs on Shab-e-barat. In the month of Muharram Bengalis keep Roza every single day, and do *Doya-Kalam*. But if you go to Kalshi Road on the 7th of the coming month, you'll see what Biharis do. Those who keep *manat* [a vow to serve the god if a prayer is fulfilled] for somebody, running about on the streets with a large insignia. They have a lot of belief in the benediction of Hasan-Hussain. There'll be games of mock fight the whole night on the 10th. Then the *tazia* will be immersed. In the month of Muharram we Bengalis eat fish and leafy greens. But Biharis, especially those who have kept the *manat* won't touch fish or leafy greens. It happened once in our family when a special prayer was pledged in my youngest



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brother's name who used to be very sickly. My parents had a lot of belief. Honestly speaking, I too believe in this. They would wrap cloth around a pipe. Whoever did that was forbidden to eat salt, touch fish or leafy greens. From the day of the sighting of the moon, they wouldn't wear any shoes or footwear. Biharis take off from school during this month. The Bihari system is a bit different. They make various kinds of food. The people who wrap the pipes are called *pipiyan*. They wear similar attire, wear caps, keep namaz and run great distances. They need to be fed cooling drinks like *sharbat*. They feel they can attain benediction. So this is a cultural system basically.

But among Bengalis, this is not so. Bengali Hindus keep fast during Durga Puja; but there are Bengalis who don't do anything, but Biharis do. That's a definite cultural difference. During Eid everybody goes to the homes of everyone else and cook *semai*. People who belong to Benaras, our neighbours, they make their semai with so much sweet that even a non-diabetic will have it if he tastes just a spoonful of their semai. When I was small and went there on an invitation, I told my mother, 'Why have they given me such a miniscule portion? I won't eat.' I was adamant—I just wouldn't eat. Any other Bengali would have been embarrassed serving that kind of portion. But the quantity of sugar in it is so cloying that you wouldn't even think of having another spoon. That's why they serve you such a small portion. Because if it is wasted, nobody will be able to eat it any more.

MH. Another question: did your father and mother converse in Urdu or Bengali, or a mixture of both; and can you speak both the languages?

DA. I can speak both. There's a funny story. Learning the Bihari dialect came in most useful when I visited Pakistan in 2005. There was an aunt from India, Bhabani-di, who had seen me very young and I was representing Bangladesh. Representatives from all over Asia had gathered, and Hindi was a language known to all, because all of them watch the Hindi serials on TV, and even if they can't speak, they can understand quite well. Now Bhabani-di was talking to me. She couldn't speak in Bengali, so it would either have to be English or Hindi. So she asked,

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'Aap kaisa ho?' ['How are you?'] —saying this she was taken aback, because she felt her question wouldn't be understood. Then she repeated the question in English: 'How are you?' So I replied in Hindi, 'Main thik hoon, aap kaise ho?' [I'm fine, how are you?] She asked me whether speaking in Hindi was a problem, to which I replied, no. I communicated to Bhabani-di that I belong to Bihar. She said that it was a boon that I could speak in Hindi. And she would like to have me on board. Those who had gone to do the translations were rendered jobless because here I was translating their Bengali presentations through the night into Hindi. When a brother from our team tried to explain it in Bengali, he was told that the Hindi translation was good enough. So I had another language for communication. Usually we Bengalis learn English and Bengali; and for me the added advantage was, though my mother tongue was Bengali, I could speak both Hindi and Urdu besides English. This has been possible because I'm a Bihari. Many feel shy disclosing their identity as a 'Bihari', but I don't feel that way. Even though I love Bangladesh a lot, this is my history and I don't feel ashamed to declare my identity. What I can speak, I can speak.

MH. Do you wish to share these stories that you've heard from your father , grandfather to your next generation in future?

DA. I'm my father's eldest daughter. My younger siblings haven't seen my grandfather—just the photograph. I tell the younger kids—you know, grandfather used to do this, and that. Again, I pester mother to tell us stories about her wedding. I chat about these with my friends, because I always feel very amused to talk to people about my background. There's no problem in it. I'll definitely try and tell my kids, when I get married and have kids, stories about my father and their grandfather, or their paternal grandfather. I have no problems.