

My Parents' World – Inherited Memories

Interview with M Haque

Interviewed by Iffat Anjum

Even now, not everyone in our family has arrived in Bangladesh. And probably they will never come. That's why I have to go to India from time to time. So my family stories are what I have heard when I was in India. Most of the people in our family live there. They are not here. Here, I only have my mamas (maternal uncles), two of them, who live in Meherpur, near Kushtia in Bangladesh. And there's us, I mean we three brothers, and my sister. These are our blood relatives. There are some distant relatives too. There's an aunt, actually she's close too. Her children are also there. So whatever I've heard is from all of them, but most of what I heard or saw was from India. Regarding what I saw, their culture and our culture is different. I had come away in 1987, around February. So I came here in 1987 and joined Class 7. That was in a village in Kushtia, where my sister lived. So I saw a lot of difference between the cultures in the two places. Especially in terms of people's mentality or attitude. They seem to be very materialistic. I mean completely focused on what they want. Whereas I feel it is very different here. For instance, we are very liberal in regard to human values. Over there, I don't think they are so liberal in that respect. They are quite conservative. It's this kind of difference. And speaking of social difference, they carry on in their own way, by which I mean that I think their attitude or mentality is extremely closed. I've learnt that through my own life. In that respect, the people here are much more open. Things like that. And regarding stories, if you want to know anything very specific, then I can come to that.

Question: Did anyone in your family or any relatives move to East Bengal when the Partition took place in 1947?

Answer: Our people did not move in 1947. I have heard from my father that when the Partition took place in 1947, he too had participated in the procession, the celebratory procession. And in our locality, they had already taken out a procession with Pakistan flags, that the area had been added to Pakistan. But after they had already taken out a celebratory procession, they learnt that the locality was to remain within India, and that is what finally happened. And what I heard was that it was possibly a person from Murshidabad, probably Kasim Ali Mirza something, a name like that, anyway, his father somehow managed to communicate with the government of India. Now the map was something like this: going along the Padma river, via Jalongi or that side, I mean the part of the Padma river flowing near Nadia, that part lies behind. The river Ganga flows along Behrampur and on the other side of the Ganga in Nadia – that was supposed to be added to Pakistan.

When India was partitioned in 1947, the people there thought the place was going to be part of Pakistan, and there had been celebratory processions. Later they learnt that it was not added to Pakistan. Our family and relatives, were all from here, and quite a number of our family members and their resources were here, this side of the river. As a result of which my maternal grandmother came away, and my maternal uncle stayed

here. My aunt came away. That was only because of property. Our property was divided.

The story of our coming is that, the government probably changed around 1978, it was the Congress government earlier, and later it was the Left Front. I cannot accurately recall the year, but I think it was around 1978. We were closely associated with the Congress. Most of the people in our family were politically established. The head of the local government in that region was then called 'president'. So my maternal grandfather, my nana, had been president. My Chacha (paternal uncle) had been president. That was the village council. Before the panchayat system began, there existed a selection system. The Congress used to select people who were influential locally, to undertake developmental activities and act as a via-media for administrative communication with the village. Earlier my dada (paternal grandfather)'s elder brother had been president.

So when there was a change of government, there were some changes in relation to property. Initially the law was that land greater than 72 bighas had to be given over to the government, the land would vest with the government. And that would be distributed to the landless farmers. I was very small when the government changed. I did not understand anything then, I hadn't learnt about anything. I remember something from 1980, or maybe it was 1982 or 1983. I remember seeing processions in the village. People used to arrive and go out in procession. The slogans in the procession were initially not so loud, but when they passed our house it became loud. My father's name was Rezaul Haque, so they used to say, *Break Rezaul's Black Arms, Crush Them!* I remember hearing that. I was very young then. I did not understand what "black arms" meant. I used to think, my father is not so dark-complexioned, so why do they say "black arms". I used to try to figure out what it, in my own child's manner. I wouldn't talk to anyone either about this. So when I observed them I thought it referred to the place near the elbow of the arm, which was dark. But the arms of those who were in the procession were even darker. So why would they be asking for the black arms to be broken?

Subsequently, my Abba (father) thought that they could not stay there in such a situation, the way they were being oppressed. Because some of our people had already come here, some of our relatives and family members, he thought he would completely shift with his family to Bangladesh. In the same way, Hindus here wanted to go away there, the border was an open one then. They wanted to go away so we communicated with them. Our locality was basically predominantly Muslim. So we had some land transferred. That was quite a bit of land over there. We discussed the matter with various people. The discussions had almost been finalized with one of them. So after going there, after seeing the area, they did not want to take it. Because the reason for which they would leave this country and go to that country, they would not get that if they went there. Because they would be surrounded by Muslims. They said that this would not match what they wanted. So they returned our land to us and went away towards Nadia. Because they could not get what they were looking for. But it was even worse for them there. So we couldn't complete the transfer then. As a result, my sister came here, through marriage, and we two brothers came along with her.

There's a story here. In 1971 when some people from here took shelter in that country, we had provided shelter to a relative. After that we found that there was a family commitment. An intimacy developed between the families. They liked us, and so my aunt told them that she would take a girl from our family into her family. Thus my sister was married to my cousin. So they came over to Bangladesh. So ultimately, for such reasons, everyone in our family did not come over. That's why I have to go from time to time. That's our story.

Question: You said that with your mamas (maternal uncles) it was on account of property and in your case, it was for political or other factors that you settled here. Please tell us about the kind of situation you faced here after you moved, both initially and also thereafter.

Answer: I am the youngest of four brothers. Initially my father planned to come here with my second and third brother (who was 5 years older than me). When my second brother came here, he had already passed intermediate there. So when he came here and went to join a college here, the nationality was a problem. I mean it would be a barrier in getting facilities and so on. Here it is Class 9 that is considered a basis for any kind of registration. That was a kind of minimum qualification. And the brother who was just before me, he too had completed his matriculation. That meant that when he came here, he would have to start afresh. I was studying in Class 6 then, I was about to complete Class 6. Father thought I could go there later. I did not know about anything. I was not asked about anything, nothing was discussed with me. Suddenly I was told: You have to go to Bangladesh. So I would go to Bangladesh, I had no choice, I was very scared of my father. I did not have the courage to say anything. And so I came away immediately. Where my sister lives here is very close to the border. In Daulatpur, close to the border in Kushtia. So because her family had some influence, I did not have any difficulty in getting admitted to school. I joined Class 7 here. If I had gone to the city, a transfer certificate would have been required, or some documents, and so I came to the village and joined the village school.

After completing Class 7 and 8 from there, I took a transfer certificate from there and came to Kushtia. We settled down in our house in Kushtia, and after coming to Kushtia we or I personally did not have to face any problems. Except for some comments about our culture. And in that regard too, no one really attacks anyone personally. For instance, those who come from India, because of the cultural difference, many people called them 'Ghoti', or various other things. I mean, that they have a very narrow attitude, or are only concerned about themselves, things like that. That used to be said generally, but I never faced any problems regarding being personally denigrated or harmed in any way.

Question: It is Partition that is seen as being fundamentally responsible for these differences. What meaning does Partition have in your life?

Answer: To me, it seems that Partition is related to cultural differences. That's my personal opinion. After Partition, each country has its own policy. It is based on that policy that the cultural aspects of the country emerge, I mean how everything in life is organized, is according to the government's policy. If the government now thinks that it will run this state along socialistic lines, it means that every person's life situation will change. What happens in India is that, the central government is democratic. But

in West Bengal, that is, where our home was, there was socialism. So after there was socialism there, everything began to be divided. And I think the administration there is stricter than it is in Bangladesh. I mean they have more control. Here everything is open, a person does business here without any trade license. Here a person fixes his price without any government policy in that regard. If I feel that I should charge a higher price now, the demand is greater now, so I can do that. There's nothing like a consumer association, there's no implementation of the law. So in this regard we see that the income is more just as the expenses are also more. But in India – I'm talking about my views then – I had heard this about a change in the government there that it was only because of the price of onions that the government of that region changed. What was the reason? The price of onions rose from Rs 10 to Rs 20, Rs 40 and Rs 60. People were asking: why should that happen? What is the government doing? The awareness to hold the government to account exists among the people. Here we find that, let's say that the rickshaw fare from here to Mohammadpur bus-stand should be 20 taka. Now if he demands 50 taka from me, I will think, after all it's only 50 taka, it's just for today, let me take it and pay him the amount. I am talking about the mentality here. Here they won't think that if I pay that today, he will ask for the same tomorrow. Then he'll say you have to pay not 50 taka but 60 taka. Or at least 40 taka. But if I don't pay that today, then the fare would remain at 20 taka. That's how they think, so it's also very difficult for them to earn. I think if they earn 10 taka there, they spend 12 taka. Here, if one's income is 12 taka, then somehow or the other the expense will also be 12 taka. If he earns 10 taka, he will spend 8 taka and save 2 taka. That's the difference. I think it's difficult for them to earn. It's easy for us to earn.

Question: I would like to go back now. You had said that two of your mamas (maternal uncles) and an aunt came here for property-related reasons. Can you please tell us any specific stories about them?

Answer: My aunt is still alive. She is almost 98 years old. She still walks and moves around. If you look at Daulatpur, at that part of Kushtia on the map, then you'll see that along Jalongi and the final part of Daulatpur is a river, I can't remember its name. They had a lot of land there. She used to study at Bankura Medical College. She was studying to be a rural doctor, she was doing what was called the LMF or something like that. After completing that, she remained there. So after that, their father came away here from there. Ten kilometers from the border you are inside Bangladesh. As it happened, while at Bankura Medical College, my aunt got married to my uncle. And because their entire family had come away here by then with their wealth, they too came away to this country. Ultimately, by the time Partition took place, the validity of her studies had lapsed. That's how they came. My maternal grandfather (nana) studied at Rajshahi College. My paternal uncle (chacha) also studied in Rajshahi College. Because the distance between our house and Rajshahi College was about 17 or 20 kilometers. They used to study there and we had some relatives there, but they were distant relatives.

And regarding my mamas (maternal uncles) coming here, I should say my maternal grandfather (nana) lives in Meherpur. Our family history is a violent one. We used to own a lot of land and property. So there was a lot of trouble arising out of people's self-interest. Under such circumstances, the people in those days used to think that if they divided the property among siblings then the relations between them would remain sound. We had some property in Meherpur, that was probably my nana's. So

he thought that he would send his two sons (my maternal uncles) there. He thought if they were there, he would be able to meet them regularly, and that because they were coming from afar, they would find acceptance there.

Question: But after coming, what was their experience? Did they find things to be very different here?

Answer: I have not heard about any barriers that they faced. They only had a positive experience. In my own childhood, I did not want to come and stay here. For whatever reason, when I was small, once I was there I did not want to come back here. I wanted to stay there. But somehow I could not remain there. My father did not want that, because he thought it would harm my career or future. He wanted me to be educated. After a time when I realized that I would have to stay here, I started accepting it.

Regarding my mamas, I remember one incident. My boro-mama (eldest maternal uncle) and mejo-mama (middle maternal uncle) had come there. They were living in India, not in Bangladesh. After my nana's decision they came here. After coming here, they were dependent on my nana's support, they were doing their studies. Later they were engaged in business. My mejo-mama went there once. After that he did not want to return here. Seeing that he was not returning for long, my boro-mama went there, and my mejo-mama told him directly that he would not go back to Bangladesh. Perhaps boro-mama was committed to nana. After that – I don't know whether the story is correct or not – I heard that the police had gone there. The police pushed back boro-mama to Bangladesh. He did not want to return, but he was pushed back. Mejo-mama then left that village, and the police were unable to find him. So my mejo-mama managed to remain there somehow. My mejo-mama was a relatively soft-spoken man. So subsequently, the decision was changed and my boro-mama and sej-mama (second youngest maternal uncle) were sent here. Sej-mama was a very good man. So he is here now, but I have never heard about them facing any barriers after coming here or about anyone creating any social impediment.

Question: What about your own stories? About coming here during your childhood?

Answer: I have a lot to say about my childhood. I've already said that I was terribly scared of my Abba (father). I was suddenly informed about the decision to send me here. It was sometime in February 1987. It was probably in early-February. The day before I left, my cousin told me: You have to go to Bangladesh. My father hadn't told me anything, he did not communicate with me. I was told I had to go to Bangladesh because my father had said so. I was brought by bicycle and dropped at my sister's house. It took about an hour-and-a-half to go from our house to my sister's house. So we came by bicycle and one only had to find out whether there was a clearance from the BDR (Bangladesh Rifles) and BSF (Indian Border Security Force) personnel. That was all. Even as late as during 1995 or 1996 or 1997, I used to go in that way. When I felt like going I would just go across. I would stay a day with my sister and the next day I would get up and leave, and have breakfast after I reached home. That's how it was. I used to go across by bicycle or ask a cycle-van to drop me. I only had to walk about a kilometer in all if I couldn't take the bus. If someone had a bicycle then that's how they went. Or they walked. If I took a motorcycle, then I would be in my sister's house in an hour. So that's what I used to do. When I was living in Kushtia, then I would go to my sister's house and the next morning I would go across.

There was no difficulty as such after coming here. When one comes away from a place, then one leaves behind friends and family members, and so there was some sadness on that account, but nothing else. I gradually adjusted to being here. When I got admitted to Class 9 here, I was completely new there, I began to make friends with the local boys there, and then I went to Kushtia, and a circle of friends developed there. That's how I developed a circle of friends here.

Question: The story of your nana (maternal grandfather) is quite fascinating, you spoke about him sending his two sons here. Can you tell us something more about him?

Answer: I should mention that in my family, most of the marriages were within the family. My nana was my dada's (paternal grandfather's) paternal uncle's son. I think we were zamindars for one or two generations. They are called zamindar families over there. We had a house in a town, the name of the road it was on was 'Zamindar Road'. That title referred to us, it was in Behrampur town. Our property was divided into three parts. Each one comprised what is known as a 'mahal', similar to what we now call 'taluk' here.

The place where our house is over here is Faridpur, in Gram Panchayat no. 6, just beside that is the Mollarpara (Muslim quarter) . That's the Mollarpara in Jitpur. That's where our origins are. But my paternal grandfather was born in Faridpur. His father was born in the Mollarpara in Jitpur. He moved from there, he came here after his marriage. There was a mahal here. So he came to this mahal and married someone. My dada's father came away here from the Mollarpara in Jitpur. Another mahal was where my nani's (maternal grandmother) house was, in Kuchiyamora. Kuchiyamora was in one mahal, the Mollarpara in Jitpur was in another mahal, and there was a mahal in Faridpur. These mahals were among our family members. That means the land revenue was collected from here and given to the British authorities. Once my nana had some revenue-related problem and was unable to pay the revenue to the British authorities. So the office was to be auctioned. Before it was auctioned, he thought the mahal could be taken over by my dada's (paternal grandfather) brother, he was quite powerful, my dada was not so well off. So my dada's brother was asked to purchase it from him, or an arrangement was made to show that a sale had taken place, so that he would not pay the revenue any longer, that would be paid by the purchaser. If you can pay the revenue, then so long as you pay the revenue you can keep it under your possession. So this was transferred in their name. Now my dada's brother, instead of acquiring it in his own name, he took the whole estate in the name of his mother. So it was under the Bibi Kulfunnesa Waqf estate, so that no one could sell it off. Only the caretakers were changed subsequently. There was a committee, and the eldest son of the family was the hereditary caretaker. So Bibi Kulfunnesa Waqf estate came about. After some time, they wanted the estate back, but it was not returned. Subsequently, our people went there and cut and took away all the crop in front of my nana's (maternal grandfather) house. He would shut the door and weep about his crop being taken away by others. So ultimately there was a dispute that was passed down through the generations. It seemed we were unable to live peacefully with one another. So it was because of this that ultimately the division of the property took place.

My father too thought in these terms, and wanted to keep us brothers apart, some would stay there for a time while we would come over here. So that the relations within the family would also be harmonious even.

Question: All these memories of three generations of zamindars, and then you suddenly left all that and came here. So didn't you remember things from the past, or from there, didn't it make you sad?

Answer: I never saw our zamindari. I think it was only for two generations. I did not hear about the period before that, but they were in three regions. Maybe a single property had been divided into three. You can't call it zamindari, because, if you are a zamindar, from what I have seen through my visits to zamindar's houses and otherwise, one sees a lot of pictures of their ancestors there, there's usually a memorial hall or something like that. I've never seen anything like that. And so I think they were not zamindars but people who were influential in the region, who liked to call themselves zamindars. I don't have any evidence of their being zamindars. But there's no doubt that they had a lot of property. I have my own idea about their relation to the mahals. I mean, if the British found that someone was unable to pay the revenue, they would give it over to someone else, who could pay the revenue, or someone who could maintain that office. That's why I think that my forefathers did not have a historical base as zamindars. Somehow, the generation before my dada (paternal grandfather), took over that office. I think that is how it started.

So I don't have memories to speak of. I don't have any memories of a zamindari. Just stories I have heard, that our present house initially consisted of just three rooms, divided among my father and his two brothers. It was my dada's elder brother who was influential. So they acted against us and left us with only three rooms. And that was a kind of courthouse. The pillars of the , building are still there. Those pillars were apparently there to tie people against and torture them, say, in regard to paying the revenue, or for creating some disturbance. That's all I know, but I never saw any of that or I don't have any evidence. I've only heard about it. But from the time I came to my senses, from that time I never got the impression that people regarded us well or respected us. Because I only heard "*Break the Black Arms!*" That's why I don't have any nice memories about that.

I saw, when I was studying in Class 3 or Class 4 there that there used to be Bangla Bandhs (a state-wide general strike). What is called *hartal* here. So when there was a Bangla Bandh, we were picked out for harassment. Why we were ploughing on someone else's land, or why we were doing something else, that nothing at all could be done on that day. Basically they wanted to leave us bereft. I've seen our land getting forcibly occupied. One would suddenly find that all the people of the village had assembled, and a person would declare that the government had vested the rights on the land and so the land had to be given over to him. On further examination it was found that he had built a small house and occupied the land. He had occupied the land and was living there. So I've seen this kind of oppression. But I have never seen us being regarded with respect or honour.

Question: I'd like to know more about your childhood there. What were the activities and events at home, what was the environment at home like?

Answer: I lived in a village in my childhood, till I was 10 years old. So till that age I went to school, that was nearby, that was at a distance of about a hundred or a hundred-and-fifty meters from our house, it was the primary school. Most of the people in the village were poor. I went to that school because it was near our house, and also because my Abba (father) was the secretary of the school's managing committee. In school, the only refrain was that I was the son of a wealthy man. That was all I heard. I don't have any memories as such. The government used to give some food. In the afternoon, some broken wheat or something like that was given to the children in school to eat. I never ate that food. I think I ate that only on two occasions. Those were specially prepared. It had been prepared separately, fried together with onions and so on. Maybe someone had wanted to have that for some reason, or maybe he wanted to eat something nice and so he suggested to me that if I asked for it would be prepared. It was something like that. And the broken wheat or whatever, that used to be stored in our house. As well as the cooking oil and so on that was required. That was cooked. Sometimes an improved diet was given. So the children used to eat that. I thought that food was very meagre. I didn't think about it in my childhood, but now I can remember that actually there were insects and so on in that food. The two rooms outside, beside the sitting room, had been left vacant for the foodstuffs. That space would be piled with sacks when a large quantity of food was delivered at one time. The sacks would be left open so that the foodstuff inside could dry. I remember seeing see insects in the foodstuff. The girl who used to cook the food would come everyday and take what was required. So that was cooked and the children ate that. That was the arrangement in the school.

And regarding the subject of Hindu-Muslim relations, in our school there were very few Hindus. There were just a few Hindu families in the whole area. So there were never any problems between the communities. And the Hindu boys were good students, compared to the others. So the teachers also liked them. In my time, all the three teachers who taught me in the school were Muslim. There was a Hindu teacher but he never taught me, he taught my brothers.

I don't have any memories as such.

Question: A new life suddenly began for you after you came here, and a new school. What was the environment like there? What were the new friends like?

Answer: Back in India, one had to move to a new school after Class 4. So I had only recently moved there. The village school that I joined in Class 7 after coming to Bangladesh was the Monishkundi High School. Here too, I used to live with my sister, and they were more or less influential people, because her father-in-law was a doctor. Although only a rural doctor. So a lot of people regarded me well, as a relative of the doctor. My teachers also knew that I was the shala (brother-in-law) of Mafidul, which was my sister's husband's name. Everyone knew that, as did the teachers. So I did not have any problems here. The problem was that I did not want to mix with anyone.

I used to have a school-bag, a kind of literature-related bag, like a Tagore bag or something. I brought that bag here with me. I joined Mohishkundi school here. I used to carry my school books in that bag. Because I was new, I didn't have any friends.

The boys there used to make fun of the bag. At first I thought that there must be something funny that I did not know about. From time to time my books would be removed from the bag, and the bag moved away. Whom could I tell? Who would help me find the bag? I would go and tell the teacher that I had lost my bag. The teachers knew who might be the culprits. They would talk to them. After a couple of time, I realized it was not appropriate to take that bag, and after that I did not carry it.

Ultimately I did not make many friends there. I remember only two or three people there. And I did not go back there either. I was there only for two years. The first year went by before I could get to know anyone, and then as soon as the second year was over I left the place. I came away to Kushtia. So I don't remember anything about friends there, except for two people. One of them is a university teacher, in Rajshahi University, he's also a doctorate. Another person studied subsequently at the polytechnic there, then he had a job, he runs an NGO. After that, what usually happens, one's communication is confined to where one is, and so since that was only a village, one did not have any contact with them subsequently. Once I came away to Kushtia, I began going to school there, from Class 9. After that I did not really make friends. My friends were boys in the neighbourhood. It was with friends from school who were with me in college as well that I was in communication with. There were almost a 150 boys in my batch in school. About 40 or 50 of them were with me in college. It was with those 50 people or so that I was subsequently in communication with. It was when we were together in the university that our ties became stronger.

And so if I look back at my school, college and university life, it is only about 5 or 10 of those friendships that have remained. Most of my friends are from the neighbourhood.

Question: Was there any difference? For instance, over there you were called the son of a big man, perhaps here there was nothing like that? Do you see any difference between the two childhood experiences?

Answer: Actually I had got used to hearing all that and so that did not affect me. I did not feel that I was the son of a wealthy man. What I used to think was that the name people called me by, Mehdi, was because I was the son of a wealthy family and so they did not need to call me by my name. So there was no other effect on me. After coming here, I myself was an introverted kind of boy, as a result of which I did not notice anything. And so I did not feel that people viewed me differently, and I never thought about such things.

Question: Let me ask a different kind of question now. How do you view the border – whether physical or mental – between India and Bangladesh?

Answer: If you ask me about the border between India and Bangladesh, if I look at it in a very selfish way, then I will say that the border should not have been there. Because it is this border that has divided our family. That's why I would say there should have been no border. But if you say that the border is necessary and that there is a basis for the border, maybe it was necessary to divide India and Pakistan. If that's the case, then I would say that Nadia, Murshidabad, Malda were initially meant to have been on this side, but that was changed. It would have been better if they had been on this side.

Question: Why would that have been better?

Answer: The first thing I would say is that it would have been best if there had been no division. What does that mean? The interview that I am giving about my relatives, whether they are here or there, would not have been necessary. If I think more selfishly, I should say that I would have always been in a safe zone. I would not have to ask people if they had heard about West Bengal, for they would know that things in West Bengal are the same as they are here. It's in that sense that I say that those places should have been on this side.

The division took place on the basis of the two-nation theory. If the division took place on the basis of the two-nation theory, then why didn't the Hindus who were transferred there from here, live in the place they received in exchange? They didn't do that because the whole environment there is like ours. My Kushtia culture is the same as the culture in that part of India. In any case, in people's speech and agricultural work there's no difference at all. The difference is in their income. I think the state of West Bengal lags behind the other states in India. I think the government there does not pay attention to this. In comparison, if I talk about Kushtia, or if I talk about Khulna, they are far ahead. There is a lot of difference between the infrastructure there and our infrastructure. A boy in our village there would not have gone even to Kolkata. Whereas there would not be a single boy in Kushtia who does not have some relative in Dhaka. Because here, in a country of 160 million or 170 million people, 20 million people live in Dhaka. One in every 8 Bangladeshis lives here. So everyone has some relative or the other living in Dhaka. They live in the capital, and so they are connected to the administration and the facilities. Maybe someone in a village in Kushtia has not been treated in Apollo hospital, but he would have definitely have gone to the Apollo hospital, or at least know about the facilities there. But in the place I am talking about, a person can't even think about what's happening in Apollo. That's the difference. It's only the level of income that's keeping people like that. That means that the India we see, in the form of its government or in the media, that India is not really India. That's the inner India. But all around that, in 5 or 10 states, I think they have not yet received the light of education properly.

Question: Everyone has a family house or a house in the village. So in that regard, which house do you think of as your family or village house?

Answer: I have to give a very diplomatic answer to this. I always say that my home is in Kushtia. But if you ask me where my father lives now, I have to say that my father lives in India. So if I go by that, then I have to say my family or village home is in India. But I personally feel my home is in Kushtia, because I have a house in my own name there. That's why I think my home, my family home, is in Kushtia. And so I have to say very diplomatically that my father's home is in India, but my home, and my family home are in Kushtia, because if I think about my entire childhood and youth, most of my time has been spent in Kushtia. It is Kushtia that has had the greatest influence on me, all my close friends are from Kushtia.

Let me give an example. If you tell me I could spend the day of Eid anywhere I want in the world, I would definitely choose to be in Kushtia. I don't have my parents

there, but I go to Kushtia for Eid, and to my house there. I don't go anywhere else. What does that mean? I am drawn to the people of that place, to the activities there, to my friends there.

Question: Is there still any influence of the food habits there, or any customs or festivals or any cultural aspects, on your life?

Answer: It would not be wrong to say no. That's what I think. But if you are more specific it would be easier for me.

Question: Say, you used to enjoy the cooking there in your childhood, but after coming here you don't get that. Or some event that was celebrated on that side in a certain way is not celebrated here like that. Can you see anything like that in your own life?

Answer: I don't think there is any difference as far as the daily rural life and events in West Bengal. That's my personal opinion. But there is a big difference as far as the food surrounding festivals is concerned. If I am there for Eid, after the Eid namaz, no one invites me to come to their house. They don't do that. I would go, and find that they have prepared one or two sweetmeat items to offer visitors. If there's a sunnat ceremony (circumcision), before going for namaz, they partake of some sweets first. So they do things like that, but it's all at a very minimal level. On the other hand, here, even a week before Eid one would know it was imminent. When it's the Eid after the month of fasting, one would know a week before Eid, and even a week after, one could feel that a festival has taken place. Perhaps something like that happens there during the Durga Puja. So on the occasion of Eid, I did not see anything special regarding food and so on. If no one invites me, and when I visit if I am given only one or two items, then I don't think it's very special. But here, if you visit my house even when it's not Eid, I would give you one or two items to eat. So there's nothing special about the food there during festivals.

But yes, during my childhood, in our house the cooking was with mustard oil, so there's a cherished memory of a different kind of food. So because of that, sometimes I think I will cook a country chicken in mustard oil, so that it might be like how my mother used to make it. I used to like that food. I liked it, but I don't necessarily feel that I should continue that. Sometimes I feel like eating food cooked in mustard oil, so I try to see how something will taste if it is cooked in that. Say, I buy a fresh fish, I try to see how it would taste if cooked that way. I wonder whether it would taste like how a fresh fish from our pond was supposed to have tasted. I had heard stories about how many tasty fish there were in our pond. But I had never eaten that, so it's not something I remember. It's only the mustard oil that I remember sometimes.

But in Dhaka it's no longer possible to cook on a *chulha* (traditional clay stove). One cannot get the taste of food traditionally cooked on the *chulha* even if one wanted to. So if I think about that logically, it is not something that can be carried forward. So it does not mean much to me.

Question: You would also have lots of other memories, whether positive or negative. Do you want your next generation to know about the things you remember? And if you think they should know or feel that you must let them know, which stories would

you like to tell them?

Answer: I don't think there's anything significant about my life that I need to tell my next generation. Because I came away when I was very small. If my child wants to know about my paternal grandfather or his paternal grandfather, then maybe I will have to tell him about my grandfather or their grandfather. I would tell them about what their environment and situation was like, and so on. If they ever want to see something for themselves, I can take them there, and show them their grandfather's place, and tell them that my grandfather came there.

I always viewed the culture in India negatively. If I tell my daughter all about their history from the perspective of human values, I think it will have a negative effect. I would like to avoid that carefully. Even in case of my wife, I think it is not at all necessary for her to know about my background, and my forefathers' background. She can see for herself and know about whatever is good. But I don't think there was anything special there.

Translated by V. Ramawamy