

My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

Interview with Mahajabin [M]

Interviewed by Himu [H]

at,,,on 2015

Himu [H]. Do you have any memories from the other side of the border that you might have heard from people of your earlier generation? If you do, would you please share them with us?

Mahajabin [M]. There is no direct memory as such. All I can do is visualize whatever I can from the stories. In my case, everybody from my previous generation, my Dada-Dadi, Nana-Nani [paternal and maternal grandparents] . . . now you just said 'on the other side of the border' . . . if I ask father , what was it like on the other side, he becomes very confused. In those times there was no this side and that side. A lot of confusion is generated around this side and that. That was India as a whole. Then one has to define where was which region. Nadia was in both sides of the border. So then the question arises, which side of Nadia? That's how one must try to understand.

I haven't really had the opportunity of getting to know my Nana or Dadi. My paternal grandfather, Dada, passed away when I was only four. So memories are few. I have a very hazy recollection of my Dada. My Nani, maternal grandmother passed away when I was in class five. So my Nani's memories are comparatively clearer in my mind.

I've heard stories about my paternal grandfather from my father. The story goes like this: Dada was from Shikarpur and he was coming back. My grandfather was in the police. He had joined in 1926, his postings right from the start were all on this side. His first posting was in Kustia, then Meherpur, Pabna, that entire region. But all his postings were more or less in Nadia. So once he came back, the need arose for him to travel between Meherpur and Shikarpur, because that was his home. But transport system wasn't that organized in those days. In order to halt somewhere on the way grandfather bought a large plot of land in Bheramari in Kustia and built a house there. That's where we live at present. So that was actually his halting place.

Then in 1944 when there was a riot like situation, they set fire to that house. After that he remained here, and he cut down on frequent travel. He had actually decided long before Partition came by that he would settle here, because by that time he had a house and all that. My Dadi, i.e. my paternal grandmother's family had already settled in Alamdanga in Kustia much before that, i.e. before 1947. That everybody had come away, everybody including both sides of my father's family—it wasn't anything like that. I had heard from

Abba, i.e. my father, that my grandfather had taken him to Shikarpur in 1972. That was the last time he went there. My grandfather took him around to his old school, the place where his house once stood. The school was still functioning; my grandfather showed Abba which was his classroom, and was thrilled to find it exactly as it had been in his time, including a mark on one of the walls; or a place where he had written his name once. Abba still talks about those things to us. He becomes extremely emotional while recounting all this. Father loves telling these stories even now. Then there was an enormous agricultural land. Father asked, how is it that there is such abundant crop here? He was told that it was a graveyard for horses during the British period. The British race horses would be brought here, killed and buried. That was the secret of the fertility of the soil, and abundant crop. Abba loves telling these tales.

My grandfather's name is Fazle Rabbi Khan. Nobody knows him here by the name of 'Rabi.' But that's what they call him there, in his native place. Once when he had gone there, somebody called out to him, 'Hey, Rabi! Aren't you Rabi? How are you?' So father asked him, 'Do people here call you Rabi?' He said, 'Yes, people here call me Rabi.' So I've heard these stories. So these are a few visualizations or memories that have come down to me from Abba.

And about Nani, I've seen a lot of it myself. Nani's lifestyle for instance, how she works, how she combs her hair or drapes her sari—all this I've found somewhat different from what is prevalent here. I realize it now that this is a culture that isn't ours, we who are from the other side, the regions around Kustia or thereabouts. The region that was called Nadia. There was a lot of difference between that region and Dhaka. The differences were many, particularly cultural difference. I can now understand the cultural differences that were specific to India—the cultural practices in particular. So the things Nani would cook were entirely of the other side. I understand that now. I was very fond of not only Nani's cooking, but the way she would do up the interiors, the way she would tell stories. I have a mirror that belonged to her in my room. My grandfather had brought it for her from Kolkata.

I don't remember hearing anything from Nani about Partition, or that it at all bothered her. I was only a kid then; but I don't think it really mattered whether she lived in India or Bangladesh. What I found was that she held on to her cultural practices till the very end. Something of that remains in my mother too, particularly the cultural specificities about food habits. These have come to me to an extent, maybe with slight modifications, for example, even when I talk to Mehdi about food, I realize that I'm carrying part of that tradition with me. Maybe that was because I liked the cultural aspects that Nani upheld. So that's how it all happened. That's how it has come along with Nana-Nani. They were married there; Nana's posting was here. It so happened that they had come away long before Partition, and there was no way they could return. That's how all their brothers and sisters have come away here gradually, and settled down either in Meherpur or Kustia. All of them more or less came away and settled in in Meherpur-Joydanga-Kustia. My Nana-Nani

came here and put up in a house that belonged to the Hindus. The structure [architecture], puja room, everything remains as before. They had bought the house because nobody used to live there. There was a lot of give and take. So that's how they came here.

These are some of the memories that have come down to me through stories that I've heard. But memories that are more alive are those of 1971, because my father was a freedom fighter. I was born in 1986, fifteen years after Independence. That period isn't celebrated with the pomp that surrounds the celebration of our Independence, Vijay Dibas [Victory Day], 21 February. These commemorations are done with much fervor and pomp. Maybe because father was a freedom fighter, his stories have a different emotional charge. Maybe he had heard stories about the Partition of the country, India, Pakistan, etc from his father. But I've heard more stories about the war of 1971—what happened during the war, what was father's role in the war, how he fought, which sector he served—there's simply no end to the stories of war. You are all familiar with the events of 1971. Since my father served directly on the front, I would hear all these stories from him which I found were rather adventurous. I would listen to him with rapt attention and I would ask him several questions even while he was recounting his experiences. For me upto my schooldays and college years, the history of my country began in 1971. It didn't seem as if I had any sense of belonging to a history prior to 1971. I mean that sense of belonging wasn't there in me consciously. Later on I gradually started reading and came to understand the stories that I had heard about the Partition of the country, something that I had heard lots about; but this happened later when I was in my days in the university. It was then that I came to realize what is a community, what is the country, what is race, for example. I began relating to these things only then. Before that even in my childhood I heard stories of '71, about what happened during the war, how my father was arrested, my grandfather [paternal] was arrested—that's what I would hear.

Himu [H]. Maybe you didn't relate quite as much to the historical incidents in the pre-1971 period, but you've also heard some stories about 1947 too; there are memories that your family has of that period. How do you relate to this? Maybe your family did not undergo the manner and extent of struggle that we usually hear about in stories of that period; but you've heard the stories, been a witness to the situation; then heard the stories of 1971 from your father. How do you relate to all this politically or culturally with your life?

M. Relating all that to my life ... I mean ... the realization came to me much later. As I told you earlier, the stories of '71 that I heard when I was in school or college had a profound influence on me: the way the year was glorified ... what you might want to describe as nationalist fervor. My idea of nationalism and patriotism have been influenced by my father—naturally. He was an armed revolutionary in the struggle for freedom. It is obvious that his emotions would be somewhat different and rather intense. He has intense hatred for Pakistan; but responds to Bangladesh very emotionally. When he gets disturbed by issues of corruption in his country, he responds bitterly, 'Was this why we strived for

Independence? Was this why we tolerated such extreme privation?' This was because he had been associated with politics for a very long time. That was why he opted to be in the war, in the battlefield. But then when I began my studies, developed a new kind of consciousness I looked at this time as a historical period. Those times were different.

In fact I do not perceive the border between countries or the Partition of two countries as just drawing of a boundary wall that determines the creation of two countries and two nations. That is because I have several elements in me that wouldn't change with any 'partition'; things that would match with them, and them alone. Something that I noticed in the case of my mother, father, more so in the case of my Nani. Particularly cultural specificities, say manner of speaking, for example. Supposing I'm talking to somebody in Dhaka, from my intonation and enunciation they would invariably ask me, 'Ghoti, aren't you?' Now you are familiar with the term 'ghoti' [pejorative usage, meaning natives of West Bengal, i.e. not 'bangal', i.e. native of East Bengal, now Bangladesh.] So you've come from that side, I see ...Then there's another specificity regarding use of whole spice in food; say a spice like *panchphoron* [a mixture of five whole spices, viz. black cumin seeds, mustard seed, fenugreek seeds, fennel seeds and *randhuni*] that is used quite extensively in our cuisine. Now that is a spice associated with Hindu cuisine. That is a practice that has stayed on in our cuisine. So when that would be labelled as 'Hindu' cuisine, I found that very odd! What is exactly meant by 'Hindu' food, I ask. Then comments like, 'So, you're a ghoti, aren't you?' or 'This is ghoti food' or 'that's how ghotis eat.' I would constantly hear these comments for example in the university. I never had any complex regarding these pejorative terms. You see there is a hierarchy practice regarding this. You know who are the original ghotis from this side of the border. Ghoti is also an abuse. When I had just got admitted to the university, one of my roommates had told me right at the beginning with a lot of derision, 'O, you are a ghoti!' There was such a sneer in his voice! I thought 'ghoti' was an abuse. Prior to this I had no idea that being a 'ghoti' is being in an inferior position. I thus came to realize how the cultural divide works. I talked to my father about this later. He told me, 'That's how we are perceived.' Again, he told me, 'I've fought for the freedom of this country; did so much for this country. I don't feel for one moment that I belong to the other side, or that I have no sense of belonging here. Of course I do!' And I do not wish to get into any further debate regarding that. My perception of the border is absolutely a political issue. They had divided us politically. Now to travel I need a visa. That's how the distance has widened. To me Kolkata or Murshidabad is much closer than Dhaka. Without immigration hassles, the distance from my place to Kolkata or Murshidabad is about two hours. And to reach Dhaka you need six hours. But now, Dhaka is nearer. Now if I want to go to the other side, I have to make arrangements for visa and other paraphernalia. The distance has widened, there has been a cultural change, and the reason has been political. But I feel that there isn't much of a divide in our cultural or religious practice between this side of the border with the other side.

H. From whatever I've heard from father, it seems to me that he has a lot of thoughts about the border, something that surely occupies a space in your thoughts. Could I extend that a bit further and ask you what do you understand by the term 'border'. This is a wall between two countries. Why this wall? If you could share with us some details.

M. The relevance of this lies in the fact that it is a political issue. Due to political reasons, a border is drawn between two countries. There are economic reasons too, just as my father said the other day, this competition between the Tatas, the Ambala Group and the Adamji Group here . . . it is obvious that the politics is driven by economic reasons. We all know that the politics of our country is determined by the businessmen, the corporates. This is something that happened in those times too. The Adamji and Ispahani Groups did business here. One of the reasons for the competition that the Tatas and Ambalas had with them was the Partition. For me, dividing the country for political reasons is like cutting off a part of your body and dividing it up. Whether it matches or not is immaterial—the aim is to draw a demarcating line. Nobody cares if the parts just get torn away from each other and get scattered. I see this as a top-down approach entirely for political reasons. The top takes the determining decision. It doesn't matter what the receiving end thinks, or what percolates down to them.

My family had come away quite early. Perhaps that's why they had suffered less; but I've seen many around me who have had to undergo terrible suffering. There have been families which have got separated and they couldn't be united. This has happened in our family. This has happened with my *Dula bhai*, my sister's husband. He and his two sisters have come away to Bangladesh, and the rest of the family have remained there [India]. Unless you see it for yourself, you won't be able to imagine the kind of struggle they face to go home. Visas are not given, it's a struggle to get a visa; they can't go to see their ailing father just because the visa is not forthcoming, and it'll take a long time unless that comes through. It is so difficult to get an Indian visa these days. These things bother me. I ask myself, why this? This could have been avoided. I don't know why this is being done. But the sense of belonging, my being, is linked inextricably to this even today.

H. In your memory of Partition or Partition stories, there is no direct memory; however you've seen the terrible privation of the people around you; again you've told us about the riots that sparked off due to religious issues, and there were other reasons too. A combination of all these reasons might have contributed to the Partition. There may have been problems, but do you think that was adequate reason for dividing one country into two? Have you ever thought of this at all? How do you perceive the Partition?

M. It won't be possible for me to give you any specific reason as far as I'm concerned, because I don't know it that well. Maybe I respond to it in a more emotional manner. Yes I have certain likes. I feel if the country hadn't been partitioned, maybe cultural practices would have developed in a certain way. If the country hadn't been divided, maybe I would have grown up in a different way. Again, I feel we would've done better had we remained

together. But my father and mother believe whatever has happened had to happen. They believe the situation was taking a rather nasty turn and nothing good would have come out of it. When we were with Pakistan, it had almost become imperative that the Partition would happen. Had we not been separated, the situation would've worsened. The Partition had become a necessity. It seems unless that happened, the way it is in Bangladesh, the lifestyle that we have, the economic condition we are in --- we are so much ahead of West Bengal. Had we been together, we too would have become regressive. That would have given rise to another kind of complication, because as it is, West Bengal is way behind the other states of India. India is a predominantly Hindu nation, and we would have been treated as Muslims. We would have been at the end of everything. So according to my parents, whatever has happened, happened for the better.

I don't feel the border is a necessity, because the same kind of people are living in two different territories, on two different sides of the border. Had there been no border, had movements between countries been unfettered, if the transportation had been freer, the exchanges between two countries would have been smoother. That would have been better for both countries concerned.

H. Thus far we've talked about division of the country, about Bengal on both the sides of the border, and along with it, we've also talked about a few cultural aspects like cuisine, food habits and certain socio-cultural aspects of our lives on both sides of the border. I would now like to focus on a few of those points, and talk a little about those.

I see that Aapu [mother] has worn a bindi. Now this wearing the bindi indicates a certain cultural specificity and also indicates a certain community on the other side of the border. This is something that emerges directly out of your life.

M. There are lots of commonalities between us and them, because we belong to the same culture after all. The only difference being that we are less in number on this side of the border after Partition. There are lots of cultural specificities that have no connection with those of the Muslim community here. Muslim cultural practices are much more prominent here. All the babies in our family have had *annaprasan* [rice ceremony, held when the child is six months old; initiation into solid food]. But such practices are vanishing quite steadily. All this is considered 'haram', because these are Hindu cultural practices—practices that are alien to Muslim culture. Cultural practices are never determined by religion. In marriage too, practices like *gayey halud* [application of turmeric paste on the bride and groom, one of the several pre-wedding rituals] are Bengali [Hindu] rituals. These are not done in Muslim marriages, just like *annaprasan*. When my niece was born, father told me that the *annaprasan* ceremony had to be organized; new utensils like plate, bowl, glass had to be bought. Several of my friends had been rather surprised at this. Why should it be done? This is Hindu culture. I too was surprised about this 'Hindu culture' thing. Culture is culture--- whether Hindu or Muslim, isn't it? Culture isn't determined by religion. Culture is determined by the context of one's background, or where one is growing up. Nowadays

you'll see many brides wearing *hijab*, and in full bridal regalia. This I find very odd. Why should there be such an odd dress in a Bengali wedding? This is creating a new kind of a conflict within Muslim culture and creating something new. This is not there in our culture.

Our bride can wear a bindi, that is, she must wear it. How can you have the look of a bride without a bindi? These days I see without application of the *halud*, the *gayey halud* ritual is done. Just for the sake of the photo-op, there is some halud kept in the frame, that's all. For us, the bride must apply the turmeric paste all over her body before she weds. So all that's there. The rituals may be different, but they are slowly getting transformed. A lot of things are getting left out at weddings. They are saying, this is Hindu culture---it can't be done. Lamps cannot be placed on the *dala* [a round, reed tray, used to keep ritual implements on auspicious occasions like weddings and pujas], because the lamp is a Hindu cultural symbol.

This place, where we live, is a Muslim dominated area. Every day new *Hadis* dictates are coming in, and as a result, the earlier customs are not being followed any more. This affects my parents. That's why I hate the country being partitioned, the divisive thoughts, 'Bengal on this side of the border' and 'Bengal on that side of the border.' Nowadays I notice my father saying things like, 'Why was this lamp placed here? Here, in front of this? This is Hindu culture. This is not ours . . .' When I retort, 'But we've been placing this for so many years.' 'No, no,' he would say, 'we can't place it. It is Hindu culture.' But this isn't Hindu culture. This is Bengali culture. This is our culture: that we'll place a lamp in front of the bride.

This is true also of names. When we were children we would be given a pet name or house name, and father would say what's the use of such difficult Arabic names? Let the house name be a Bangali name. I too have an official name, but even in school the pet name would be used. Only while writing I would use 'Mehjabin'. Nowadays you'll see that there's no pet name any more. Kids would be given Arabic names. That's what's happened in the case of my nephews and nieces. They don't have any Bengali pet names! My pet name is Dithi. It was a name given by my father, because he was keen to always give a Bengali name. Now giving a Bengali name means you're adhering to Hindu practices; or that you're becoming a Hindu. What's the use of keeping a Bengali name? Keep one name? My niece has been given the name Adiba Ara. That's an Arabic name. They don't have a Bengali pet name. These cultural practices are slowly changing. This is not something I like. Everyone is getting influenced by these religious practices, practices that are special to this side of the border. Frankly, I don't even know whether this is a practice that's special to this side of the border; however, this I can understand that there is this overwhelming eagerness to 'become' Muslims Muslim women are forbidden to wear a bind on their foreheads, there must be no *annaprasan*, no lighting of lamps. Imposing all these things has made our culture limited.

H. This cultural change that's setting in . . . Hindu culture, Muslim culture, or the other changes that are setting in, in the mindsets and opinions--- now are there any stories that you have, or heard from your elders, from people in the earlier generation that you would like to disseminate among your heirs, or your family members who come after you? Would

you like to share with them some stories that they need to know? The changes or transformations that you yourself haven't been able to come to terms with, do you feel your subsequent generations should be carriers of this tradition?

M. Of course I would want that, because I like that, I have my priorities that I'll do this. But the things that I practice . . . you'll notice that in Dhaka, wearing a bindi, having *annaprasan* or a baby in the family, lighting the lamp—these have become symbols of progressiveness. The fact that this can be somebody's cultural practice, that these are part of my own cultural practice and not something imposed from anywhere outside—this has become very difficult to communicate. Ladies who wear bindis are supposed to be progressive and atheist. That's what a common middle class person in Dhaka would think. But for me this is part of an age-old cultural practice that is not new to me. There's nothing new to define. There's nothing new to be said slot me into 'this' or 'that'; if I do this, I become devoutly religious, and if I do that I'm an atheist. There's nothing new to be said about that. I've been doing this for a long long time now. Yes, of course I would want these practices to remain alive in my subsequent generation, because these have been my original practice.

Take the example of wearing a *hijab*. This is something that has started anew. You'll find a whole floor in Basundhara City . . . I don't know whether I'm digressing into irrelevant talk here, that of wearing *hijab* . . . *hijab* has become part of our culture now. You'll find most girls in Dhaka city now wearing a *hijab* over *salwar-kameez*. We are gradually accepting this as our culture. But in reality that is not my culture. I've mixed it up. My culture constitutes in wearing bindi, putting whole spices in my cooking, wearing the *saree*, lighting the lamp. That is my culture. Of course I would want all this to go forth in my subsequent generations; that Bengali names be kept for babies. I would want these to happen.

H. You've said that countries have been divided, but the people of those countries haven't. So where do you think your home is? Where is your ancestral home?

M. Our ancestral home is in Kustia, in the erstwhile Nadia [of undivided Bengal]. It is still Nadia. This is what the division of a country does. So my origin is in Kustia, Nadia. I've been born and brought up here. I won't say that I've been born on the other side, or for that matter because my Dada [grandfather] has been brought up there. I won't say that. I belong to that culture in which I have grown up. That's where I belong. If you say, you belong to the culture of that side, yes I do. I've been brought up in this culture—I don't have any hesitation in owning up. I had read a book in my Honours class. It was a book by Benedict Anderson called *Imagined Communities*. It was a book that made me think a lot. Maybe that was because I found a lot of affinities with my situation. In that text there was a statement which said, this concept that we call 'nationalism' is also imagined. I know I do not relate to that person in Thakurgaon. I only think that there is a border, and because it falls within my border, I am a part of that concept of nationalism. But that concept I may not necessarily share with the people of Thakurgaon. Maybe I have that with the people of Murshidabad. Isn't it? I imagine that just because my border is drawn from his side, he and I share the

same country, share the same thoughts, feelings and perceptions. But the fact remains that a border has been drawn forcibly. My belonging is with that man in Kolkata, or that man in Murshidabad. So a border cannot drive a wedge in feelings and perceptions; nor can it define these things.

H. Do you have any other stories that you might have that would illuminate / illustrate our concept of Bengal—right from 1947 to the present times, or which would help us understand your philosophy of life, or anything else that you might want to share with us—

M. Nothing much, really. We live in a patriarchal society and I've been brought up in my grandfather's house. Perhaps these perceptions would have been stronger if I had been brought up in my Nana's house. My Dada's house is a newly built house; but my Nana's house is an old structure, built of lime and mortar—the kind that you don't find any longer; it's crumbling. We would go to that house on holidays. It had a sprawling roof, and big stairs. It was an old house. There was an idol in one of the rooms. This was worshipped. So that was a room for pujas. There were recesses in the walls where lamps would be lit. I would wonder why we cannot keep spaces for lamps in a similar way in our house too. We used to go to our Chhoto Nani. There was a basil plant which was worshipped. The owners of the house had gone away. I often wondered how it would have been, had they stayed on, or why we don't live like them—questions like these would crop up in my mind. My maternal uncles, Mamas lived in that house till 2010. But the house had started to crumble, but some artefacts, clocks, etc. hung on the walls. When asked, my Mama would tell me: 'This clock my father brought from Kolkata; this mirror he brought from Murshidabad; this medal father got in a competition from Krishnanagar. So I wondered, all these are things from 'the other side of the border'—nothing from this side. The people have just become separated because of the Partition. If anybody wants to hear stories from me, they will be stories of Kustia, Meherpur, Dhaka; but just because I'm on the other side of the border now, I don't have stories to narrate from the other side. Because I don't belong there. The people have come away, carrying a few symbols that belong to that side. There nothing more to be said other than this. But I try to imagine what they might have been like. What did they do? Maybe fantasy plays tricks too. After all, my father, uncle, grandmother—they did not glorify anything in their narratives. They never said, O! How lovely our house was! This is something that I like to imagine. How lovely the house was! What a sprawling roof it had! What beautiful railings! Everything connected to that place seems so exquisite, so beautiful. All the stories that I've heard from my earlier generation were straightforward stories, but the thoughts and fantasies have worked on my mind because we do not live together any more. If we did, I might have thought it to be stuff of humdrum, diurnal existence.