

My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

Interview details

Interview with Farhana Akhater [FA]

Interviewed by Iffath Anjum Sanchoie [S]

Sanchoie [S]. Have you heard any stories from anyone in your family about West Bengal or India? Or maybe stories of your family? Would you share these with us please? I won't interrupt, just take notes.

Farhana Akhater [FA]. My Nana [maternal grandfather]'s father was basically Indian. He had come on some work to Pakistan. During the Partition of 1947, this region went into Pakistan, and in 1971 they became 'Bangladeshis'. I haven't heard any stories about 1947 because neither my mother nor my uncles were there then; but I've heard lots of stories about '71. And about our family in India, I've heard that they had lots of property in India which went into the possession of others because they never could go back. I've heard many stories about 1971. During the war my Nana, Nani along with their nine children and Nana-Nani's parents used to stay there. There was actually no problem at the beginning, when the war had just begun. But when it had reached its middle phase, my Nana went missing one day. He left for work and never returned. My Nani was three months pregnant then. She suffered such a mental trauma—she had nine kids and two aged parents—she became somewhat disbalanced mentally. She had brothers, but couldn't contact them. So they took refuge in a camp. It was a transition from a moderately posh life to a camp. Before leaving their house, their neighbours came forward, saying, 'I'll take this, I'll take that ...' My mother tells me, she had rather a favourite doll's house, which her father had made for her. Her friend took it away. That was heartbreaking. Livelihood became a question after moving to the camp. My uncle was very



My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

young then—maybe just fourteen or fifteen years old—but he was ‘the man of the house.’ He had to drop out of school, and couldn’t even contact his [maternal] uncles. He had to do something for livelihood. So he started selling boiled eggs, and even lifting loads. It was a huge struggle for him, and the story was of incessant struggle. My mother’s youngest sibling was born in such a situation of extreme poverty and deprivation. The baby had worm infestation. It was a very hard life for them.

Some relations had come to see them there. Among them was an uncle known to my mother’s brothers. He told them that they had sent him to find out how they were. So he was told that they were really in a bad way, and if my uncles could take them away from there. He responded by saying, that as soon as the situation becomes conducive, he’ll come and fetch you all. Then he told my youngest uncle [who was in the camp] that your uncle has asked you to give your cycle to me. So my uncle said: why should I give my cycle to you? He insisted: your uncle has told me. So he went away with the cycle too. This happened again and again. Somebody or the other turned up, asking for this and that. One can understand once or twice, but this saga continued. They had no assets to speak of, but people took away whatever they had on any flimsy pretext. Then at last they were able to establish contact with my uncles.

My uncles were from India, but they did not face any problem as such, because their neighbours were very good. They remained where they were—didn’t have to move. In fact other Bengali families around them gave them protection and gave out the message that nobody could mess with them. In our case, it was just the opposite. So they went away. And the Partition happened. This is about it. There’s no such story as such except for stories of struggle.

S. What was the purpose of your grandfather’s visit in 1947?

FA. My maternal grandfather’s father had come in 1947 for a job.

S. And you said that your [maternal] grandmother had nine children . . .

FA. Yes, she was pregnant in 1971.



My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

S. This transition from a good life earlier to life in the camp—this change—can you give us some more details?

FA. When my grandfather was alive, they lived quite a posh life, in a neat and clean environment, in a large house. There was plentiful food, and no problem as such. And then coming to the camp, which was a horrible place. Mother must have been only three or three and a half then. Whatever faint memory she has of the time is that of a place very unclean, unsanitary. I've never heard good things about their life in the camp.

S. From your mother's perspective, I want to understand when did a new life start for them after the camp phase? Or what was your childhood like? What were your memories of your father and mother? I want to know whether that affected you in your life.

FA. Yes, I mean, what I've heard from my mother—for instance when programmes are routinely shown on 25 March or 16 December, stories about Pakistani insurgents, or that the Biharis were like this . . . and mother is watching TV, she reacts very strongly, saying, have they done all the suffering, we've suffered so much too. Say we are watching TV in our living room, when suddenly mother bursts out saying: 'They've taken all that I had. They've taken my doll's house. Such a beautiful doll's house it was!' I think it was one of her prized possessions. Something she could not forget even as an adult.

When Partition was over and Bangladesh was formed, we finally went to our house to check what's left in it, to take away with us. It was stark empty. There was absolutely nothing in it. When we went to our neighbours, we found one of our tables in one house, a chair in another neighbour's home, another one in another family. We were very shocked. That is the memory I have. These thoughts I carry from my mother. My father was a freedom fighter. He was twenty one years old during the war. He had four brothers. My dadu was alive; dada had passed away long ago. My father came from a zamindar family. During 1971 father left for Assam with a brother of his, my chacha (they were roughly the same age) for some training. Of his three brothers, two were very young. The middle one wanted to come away, but father asked him to



My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

stay on because someone had to look after their mother. The situation gradually worsened, and they noticed that military influx was more intense near their zamindari lands. Possibly they thought there would be a place to stay there, or something like that. My second uncle (who came right after my father) went away into the interiors of the village with their father, i.e. my grandfather. They didn't face too much of a problem, except for a robbery, when the robbers made away with the things at home. Otherwise everything else was okay.

As far as 1971 is concerned, for me it is more a tale of bravery, not something to be mournful about. I take pride in the fact that my father was a freedom fighter. I take pride in my identity as a Bengali. I have heard of the injustice inflicted on us by the Pakistanis, or of the various stories of injustice even before that. I feel the anger surging through me. Of course the war was necessary, but the sufferings of the normal, ordinary people are never brought to light. I know both sides of the story. I feel that the division that happened in 1971 was good; it was necessary. But when I look at the way my mother's family suffered, I sometimes feel maybe it shouldn't have happened that way. They were totally shattered economically. They could never have a life of peace and quiet. It is only now that my maternal uncles have been able to make a good life for themselves. But just imagine the kind of struggle they went through.

The land that was earmarked for them by their grandfather, i.e. my Nana's father, the papers had his Urdu signature. And the government authorities refused to hand them over the land. Later when my father married into the family, he was able to recover it because he had some influence. But a huge amount had to be paid as bribes simply because of that signature. Father said, 'With the kind of money that had to be given as bribes, your uncles could easily have bought a piece of land. There was no need to take so much of trouble.' But my maternal grandmother insisted that the land was more than land—it was the memory of her son-in-law. She said, 'I want a house on *that* piece of land. I won't let it go.' It was actually on her insistence that the land was retrieved.



My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

S. Would you tell us the story of how your maternal grandparents shifted here, or how they adjusted with the new surroundings? I wanted to know those stories in some detail.

FA. My maternal grandfather, i.e. Nana's father had come away to this region in 1947. That was in Pakistan. Nana grew up here, was educated here, and then got the job of a railway engineer. He then got transferred to East Pakistan, i.e. Bangladesh. I don't know where exactly my Nana and Nani, i.e. grandmother met. Maybe she lived somewhere in Pakistan. She was only a child then. There were some Indian connections in her family, but I don't know what they were, very clearly. They were of Indian origin, but used to live in Pakistan. All four brothers of Nani live in Pakistan. Of them two had come away to East Pakistan because of their jobs. During 1971, those two brothers stayed on here, with their sister. The other sister got married in India, so she lives there; and the other two brothers live in Pakistan. So all her brothers and sisters got divided up between these three countries.

S. I wanted to know a little more about Nani. She was the one who had to undergo such a lot of hardships—like you said, after coming away like that, having to fend for nine children—if you could tell us something about their lives, in some more detail.

FA. My Nani was completely Indian. She tried to speak in Bengali. When their situation was somewhat stable, and someone came knocking on the door, and my mother or her sisters asked [in Hindi before opening the door] 'Kaun?' [lit. 'who is it?']—she would get angry. 'Why can't you ask the same thing in Bengali—"ke"?' she would ask. But she couldn't speak faultless Bengali till her dying day. You know how the Biharis speak Bengali, a little haltingly, a little distorted—that was how she would speak. But my mother and her siblings can speak proper, fluent Bengali. Nani's lifestyle was totally different. She would eat roti at night. The clothes she would wear or the utensils she would use would be so unlike any Bengali household. She wouldn't like anything Bengali in her day to day living. She didn't want her children married into Bengali households either. She wanted all of them to remain in their own community. She got all her sons married into Bihari families. One of my uncles [maternal uncle] fell in love and got



My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

married into the Narsinghdi community. She refused to acknowledge their existence. They weren't accepted into the family until their children were born—the daughter was four years old, and the son only one. Nani had passed away by then.

Nani used to say, '*mar dalenge*' [lit. they'll kill you] while referring to a marriage into the Bengali community. That was the commonly perceived notion in our family and was true equally of boys and girls. It was thought that boys would be killed by the respective in-laws too. My mother, the third born, was the first one to be married in a Bengali family. My grandmother (i.e. my maternal grandmother) was very fond of my father. She and my paternal grandmother became such good friends after the marriage. My Nani, i.e. my maternal grandmother had never really ventured out of Dhaka, but loved to visit places, move around, and was simply fascinated by village life. After her daughter's marriage, she had a place she could visit. Whenever she had the opportunity, she would go to her daughter's place. There was no such binding that she couldn't go there, and she was welcomed with open arms by my Dadi, i.e. my paternal grandmother. So both of them would chatter away to their hearts' content—my Nani in Hindi, and my Dadi in chaste Brahmanberia dialect—that conversation was a delight to hear! My Nani loved watching the activities of village life like paddy harvesting, seeing the village people at work. Since she was a regular visitor, she made it a point to always give my mother five or ten rupees, because according to her, it didn't look good staying there and having meals at her daughter's in-laws' place. Then she would pay two rupees or five rupees for the pickles she would bring from there. My father would get very angry at that. He would tell her, 'Mother, what are you doing?' But she would say, 'It isn't proper, staying so long at the son's place.' It is one of our customs that the son-in-law goes to the market after marriage. But my Nani never allowed my father to go to the market. She would say, 'Oh no! How can I possibly allow my son-in-law go to the market?' My father would reply, 'But that is the custom!' She wouldn't agree. 'I don't know about custom,' she would say, 'How can you go to the market here?' The apprehension that my Nani's family had about marrying into Bengali families was all gone once they got to know my father. My aunts too got married into Bengali families. My uncles too



My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

favour marriage alliances with Bengali families. Their preference for Bihari families is no longer there. All marriages in the present generation have been in Bengali homes.

S. There's another thing I wanted to know—your Nani came away, but some of your relatives stayed back. How was contact maintained between them, or was the contact severed in any way? If you could tell us those stories.

FA. Of my Nani's brothers and sisters, two of the brothers stayed on with her; two brothers remained in Pakistan, and one sister was in India. There was absolutely no contact with her sister who lived in India. I think the two of them must have talked only once or twice in my Nani's lifetime. But there was quite a regular correspondence with her brothers in Pakistan. My uncles (mother's brothers) also visited them off and on. The contact continued over rare telephone conversations too. Recently I've been able to connect with relatives over Facebook, whom I've added as 'friends', and sometimes talk to them.

There was a marriage in our family recently. My mother's youngest uncle's daughter got married. She insisted that all her uncles and aunts must be brought over for her marriage. So that was the first time that we were meeting my Nani's sister who was in India. She couldn't stop weeping for joy—seeing all of us for the first time ever. It was such an emotional moment for all of us. There aren't too many people alive in my grandfathers' (Nani's brothers) families in Pakistan. The only one in their family who came for the wedding was my mother's aunt. She was the only one alive then. Nowadays we keep contact over Skype. But as long as Nani was alive, the only way she could keep in touch was through letters.

S. I find this quite fascinating that your mother's Phupu came visiting after so many years. How did you adjust with them? Were there any problems, or did you notice any marked difference between your family and theirs?

FA. They would speak in beautiful Urdu. They would always use honorific appellates, like 'hum', 'aap.' The Hindi that is spoken in my mother's family is a mix of Hindi and Urdu. For example my mother would say, '*merey sang chalo*'; it should actually be '*merey saath chalo.*' So my



My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

mother's aunts would burst out laughing—'What queer language you speak!' Mother would speak to us in Hindi or Urdu, but we'd answer in Bengali. We're Bengalis to the core, but we have a working knowledge of Hindi, though we can't speak it that well. I felt that they too have a working knowledge of Bengali, because they had lived here once. They understand some of it, and some of it they don't. We had some practice of the language because of TV. So we tried to speak Hindi with Urdu. They told mother that this is wrong—they must learn to speak their own tongue [*nahi nahi, iyey bahut galat bath hai, bacchey logko seekhna chahiye, apna bath seekhna chahiye. Apna zaban hai yaar.*] My mother would try to brush it aside smilingly, saying, but they belong here. But they would insist: you need to learn your own language. My cousins and I were admonished equally. 'But Nani, I'm Bengali,' I pleaded. 'So what?' she retorted, 'your mother is Paki-Indian, isn't she? Don't you need to learn your mother tongue?' [*Toh kya hua? Tumhara ammi to paki . . . Indian hai na, ammika zaban nahi seekhegi?*] They would insist that the language has to be learnt well. When I talk to them now, in broken Urdu and Hindi, they definitely get wind of it. Their language is so elegant. That's how we communicate.

S. You said they had come for a wedding in the family. Wasn't it a culture shock for them, seeing the marriage rituals, or cuisine?

FA. The marriage rituals are very similar, like bringing in the bride shielded with a length of cloth, the ritual of *mehendi* and so on. So there was no shock on that account. But they had a major problem about food. 'You Bengalis eat a lot, you gorge on food. You people stay in the kitchen for such a long while!'— they would comment. 'Rice and dal suffices for us.' It would be just roti and dal in the morning, and the same thing at dinner, or just one vegetable or a beef preparation. If they had rice, there would be just one vegetable to go with it, or beef. 'These people need dal, vegetable, beef and fish—all of that!' 'Why do you people need four items for in a single meal? We are ok with just biryani and yogurt. There isn't any need for anything else.' They would keep telling us, 'Why are you organizing such multi-course meals?' Now our custom

My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

is to throw these elaborate lunches/ dinners for guests. They were shocked at the number of courses. There would be several side dishes with biryani, and an equal number of side dishes with pulao. They would be in deep discomfort. 'Why do you eat so much? Why are you taking so much trouble setting up such elaborate meals?' —This would be their standard refrain. They thought we are outdoing each other just because we were meeting them for the first time, and they were getting terribly embarrassed. But later they figured that this wasn't something special; it was part of our culture.

Once something very amusing happened. There was a lunch invitation for them at my maternal uncle's place. There was *shuñtki* [dried fish] bharta. Now I don't eat *shuñtki*, neither do my cousins, because of the strong, pungent smell. But the guests took a little, and were completely over the moon! 'This is lovely!' they said. They don't get fish there, so they would only eat fish. We were completely surprised at the way the Pakistanis and Indians were relishing their *shuñtki* and commenting 'what a delicacy it is!' We were so amused. We were calling people and showing them how appreciative they were of our cuisine. They said, 'We really don't know the charm of the *shuñtki* here, but we simply love it!' They took some cooked *shuñtki* with them when they went back.

An uncle of mine who stayed in Pakistan once came to our home in Brahmanberia. Naturally mother cooked an elaborate meal for him. We Bengalis never eat a single course meal; and this was a wedding invitation. Normally the menu for weddings is pulao, roast, beef, zarda, and so on. He was so surprised at the spread— 'they aren't that well off, but what elaborate arrangements! I hadn't expected such a spread in a village wedding.' But that was a set wedding menu in Bangladesh. It is common in all weddings here. He went back to Pakistan full of praises—'Batun is just like a *thakuraine*, and her husband is like a zamindar.' Our village homestead is really quite formidable in size, and there are so many servants and retainers, so much of food is cooked every day. They don't get such domestic help back in Pakistan. So mother's image is that of a *thakuraine*, the matriarch of a zamindari household. From that time

My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

on, they refer to mother by that name. When they call us, they ask, 'So, how are things with you, *thakuraine*? But having many retainers in a village household isn't something extraordinary, because there's a lot of farming activity to be done, and lots of household work too. I found that very amusing.

My maternal grandmother's side of the family doesn't like Bengali celebrations in general, especially Poila Baishakh, the advent of the Bengali New Year. For us, the third generation, we love the celebrations, get new dresses made, and go for an outing in the evening. That's what all our cousins do. And it's a special day for father. He'll do a lot of shopping, have *panta bhaat* [cold rice cooked the previous day soaked overnight in water]—it's like a ritual. Once, soon after marriage father had gone to Dhaka and mother was at home. He had told my uncle's wife (my mami), 'Bhabi, please pour some water in the rice tonight. Tomorrow's Poila Baishakh. I'll have *panta bhaat* tomorrow.' So she kept it ready. But the next morning to her utter surprise she found clear water in the rice. She couldn't fathom how that could have happened. My grandmother filled in saying, 'I found the rice all gone bad. How could my son-in-law have that rice? So I rinsed it in water and poured fresh water on it.' Father was completely taken aback. 'What's this?' he asked, 'rinsed rice?' My grandmother said, 'Why will you eat putrid rice? So I rinsed it and [*laughter*] poured fresh water.' They can't figure out the significance of Poila Baishakh. My aunts get irritated at why we celebrate the festival. According to them, this is not our festival; but my cousins cherish their Bengali identity. Even in cricket matches between Bangladesh and India (and most of the time Bangladesh would lose in those days), my cousins would steadfastly support Bangladesh. Let it lose, still it's our country. They acknowledge that the excesses of the Pakistani army in 1971 need to be condemned in the strongest terms. Maybe their origin is in India or elsewhere but they are Bengalis, heart and soul.

A cousin had recently gone on a trip to India and visited a relation of my mother's aunt. Everybody there spoke very disparagingly of Bangladesh, saying: 'Why do you take such pride? What's so great in your culture and language that you take so much pride? You're always so



My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

puffed up with pride!' At first he quietly heard all that, but his blood had begun to boil. He retorted by giving them a whole compendium of how and why Bangladesh was unique. When he returned I asked him, 'So how was your India trip? He replied, saying, 'It's my motherland that's the queen of all countries.' I burst out laughing—so that's what you felt? He replied, 'It's an awful country. People aren't cooperative at all. They find it bothersome to even give you proper directions to a place. If you want a helping of gravy while eating at a restaurant, they don't give you. Here they'll give you a piece [of fish or mutton] with the gravy. Then if you want onion, they won't give it to you. So he had such awful encounters. We don't like India at all. He broke into a stiff quarrel with his cousins in India. He was told that he was praising Bangladesh so much, and the grass was always greener on the other side. So he replied saying that he was a native of Bangladesh, and his admiration was from the same side, as a native of that country, not 'the other side' We have become one with the people of that country, and we can very well compare their mentality with the mentality of you Indians.

This belief is now ingrained in them that Bengalis cannot be anything but good. All their marriage alliances are now with Bengalis. Recently there was a marriage proposal for my cousin, from India. The groom was an MBA. But she refused outright. We find Indians somewhat queer.

S. Since you and your relations on both sides of the border visit each other, what is your experience? How do you reconcile your cultural differences?

FA. When they came here, they were surprised to hear us speak in Bengali and not Hindi. Then our foodhabits surprised them no end. That was it. When someone from our side of the family go there, they are surprised at their frugal lifestyle. They simply have biryani and pickles or biryani and curd for lunch. That's their menu even when a son-in-law comes visiting. And they have a tendency of looking down on Bangladesh. What do they think of themselves? We don't know how to dress? We don't have a sense of style? Don't they buy all their saris from us and take them to India?



My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

My maternal uncle's daughter recently got married and my maternal aunt would join them with her family. She had taken leave from work. My cousins and I were very concerned about the clothes she would take there, because we needed to prove that we had enough pizzazz. And we tutored her meticulously on fashion and what to wear on which occasion in the marriage. We also told her to keep uploading her photos on Facebook, so that we know she was dressing correctly.

So we have to constantly prove ourselves, and we've formed a group. Though we're family, a distance has crept in somehow.

S. You were talking a little while ago about how the third generation, i.e. you and your cousins have connected over Facebook. Do you feel the same judgemental attitude here too—this tendency to make you feel inferior, or to make you feel the difference?

FA. We always try to prove that we are different—we are not what you think we are. They couldn't imagine that we would react to their slandering Bangladesh. They have this superior Indian privilege. But we are very formal on Facebook, a few arguments notwithstanding. But those are really very minor, insignificant, altercations that happen among cousins. Nothing to put down on record as such. They feel, we are after all Indians, so why must we react that way when they say things about Bangladesh.

S. I want to ask you something you had mentioned some time ago about your father being the first 'Bengali' son-in-law in the family. Do you know of any stories about any problems he might have had adjusting to this culture?

FA. Father didn't stay here. Mother went to him. Father loved very simple food. Mother cooked accordingly, Indian cuisine. They were very pleased to have such a daughter-in-law. There were some fault-finding relatives who were critical both of the Indian brides and the Bihari brides. My grandfather would get wild. He would say, all my daughters-in-law are lovely—Indian or Bihari, I don't care. He loved my mother's cooking; still does. Mother can make different kinds of *parathas*—gobi paratha, muli paratha, aloo paratha—then dal, bhatre ki roti, and so on.



My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

Mother first cooked halim in the house; else they would have to go out and have it. She could also make various Indian snacks like *singara* [samosa]. She could also make biryani at home. But her biryani was different. They loved it. But my Dadi, i.e. her mother-in-law didn't like a few things she cooked and kicked up a fuss about the use of too much spice, because my grandfather liked plain, bland food. But he always supported my mother.

When my maternal grandmother would go and stay with them, there were changes that they noticed in her lifestyle, clothes, even speech, but there was no other difference as such. Mother would never bother about these things. Father too didn't have any difficulty because her lifestyle was the same as any other ordinary Bengali. In the preparation of *semai*, there is a subtle difference. They put some garam masala in the preparation. Otherwise it is the same Bengali way of making *semai*. The two cultures have infused beautifully.

S. We're chatting for such a long time now, but the story begins from Partition. I would like to have your personal perspective on the issue. What significance does Partition or the division of a country have in your life?

FA. Partitions happen. That is a political act. But people suffer; they suffer a lot. No one side gains in this exercise. There are many neighbours who are Bengalis like us, but who have had to abandon large properties and leave the country. Their problem is just like ours. My mother's family have come away here, there are others who have gone away from here. It might apparently seem hunky dory from the outside—just a political division—but if you delve deep inside, you will find a trauma. The trauma is deeply entrenched. Our relatives had to leave behind so much in Pakistan in 1947. The same thing happened in 1971. So there's definitely a trauma. That's what I feel. Looking at it from father's point of view, from a Bengali point of view, then the reaction would be—that's a gain, the country has been partitioned, we have a separate country now; ultimately we're an independent State. But when I look at the way my mother's family has suffered, I really cannot point it to one opinion. It is a real dilemma for me. I cannot really say whether it has been for the better or for the worse.



My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

I think a lot about it, but then border for me has become a normal thing. We are a civilized state; so there must be a border; to go to the other side, you need a passport; to go to the other side you need a visa; you've got to wait for two to three months for a visa—all this seems pretty normal and logical to me. They don't have much fascination regarding the border. And it really means nothing to my mother. But my Nani used to be fascinated with the border. Travelling between countries has become so ridden with hassles that going across from one country to another is no longer simple any longer.

S. If I ask you : where is your home, your native place?

FA. My home is in Bangladesh [*laughter*]. All my cousins who live here identify themselves as Bengalis. That's what they prefer. They call themselves 'Bangladeshi.' But if someone asks me where is my native place, I'll answer India. But my mamas [maternal uncles] never claim that. They'll tell you they're Faridpur natives. They'll never divulge they are Indians. The same goes for their sisters, (my *khalas*, aunts].

My aunts and I go to the same tailor. He's very curious about identity. He'll keep on asking where we hail from, where's our native village, etc. My aunt kept on saying 'Faridpur.' One day I had gone to the same tailor with my cousin. He asked me point blank, 'Apa [sister], please tell me truthfully where you are from.' That was because he found us a little different from the other Bengalis in Bangladesh. I answered that we are Indians. The man replied, 'I knew it! But your aunts don't want to own up.'

S. I've heard a lot about various recipes from you. Are there any rituals or ceremonies, or language usage that is carried on even today? Is there any impact?

FA. Yes. When people in my mother's family talk among themselves, say my mother talking to her sisters or brothers, for example, she sometimes speaks in Bengali, but always in Hindi when they get hyper, when there's an argument and a lot of shouting. When there's an argument with us too, they shout in Hindi, and we retort in Bengali. [*Laughter*] And my aunts, i.e. my maternal uncle's wives say, 'Why don't you people tone down your voices? The people around



My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

will hear you quarrelling in Urdu!' They reply, 'We don't care.' When one is excited, one's inner self is exposed. When they start speaking among themselves, there is a liberal use of slang too. When they are very happy, they break into Urdu / Hindi too, and if they want to congratulate, they'll say, 'Mubarak Ho! Mubarak Ho!' They normally speak in Bengali, and don't have any problem with their accent either; but my Nani and another aunt who has been in Pakistan all along have major problems with their accent. Anybody can figure out that they are not Bengalis.

S. So you have good memories and bad, both. I wanted to know how you would assess these memories, in the sense that which memories would you like to pass on to your subsequent generation, and which you wouldn't—and why.

FA. I would like to pass on the memory in its entirety, in the form of stories. If I don't, they would think what happened in 1971 was right, that the Pakistanis were the ones who inflicted all the suffering and the Bengalis were the only sufferers—this perception of theirs would change, in a way that my perception has also changed. I think that both had suffered; both were to blame equally. If I explain to them in this way, then they would be able to understand it from a different dimension. Then they wouldn't have the same one-sided perception as the masses; they'll understand it from a different dimension. Their understanding will be somewhat better. So I will share with them the whole story, in all its aspects.

S. Do you feel you've left out something—maybe something you would like to end this interview with?

FA. Nothing in particular, really. When I agreed to be a respondent to this interview, I asked my parents. She asked me, 'What will they ask?' She became a little conscious. I assured them that I would be asked questions about the Partition, and what I think about the border—things like that. So mother was ok with it. I asked father, and he said, 'Of course you should give the interview. Why shouldn't you? You must of course share your thoughts.' He gave me that independence. Father has always been independent; mother is conservative and doesn't trust



My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

anyone. So she would ask questions like: 'Why is this interview being conducted? Who are taking it?'—and so on. Then she agreed. When I came to Dhaka and was talking to you over phone (maybe I was talking to you), my aunt asked me, 'Who are you talking to?' So I told her what this project was all about. Her reaction was—'Well, now you've been framed! So they'll interview you now, is it? So then your picture will be taken?' So I replied, yes. Then she got totally hyper. She rushed to my uncle complaining, and spewing out her apprehension—'Now do you know anything about this? She's saying everything, they're going to record it on video. Any idea where this video will land up?' [Laughter] So it not only an apprehension about their identity being revealed, they get apprehensive about where my face would travel. They get very tense about that. I told you, didn't I, that they are apprehensive and skeptical by nature. They can't accept anything easily. So from what I've seen of them, they are rather conservative and take time to accept things easily. But in contrast, my father does not have those hang-ups. He doesn't have any lurking fears in his mind; but they have a fear, even if that's in their subconscious mind. That's why I requested Sanchoie to blur my face in the video.



Centre for Studies in
Social Sciences
Calcutta

RESEARCH
INITIATIVES
BANGLADESH



UNIVERSITÄT
HEIDELBERG
ZUKUNFT
SEIT 1386