

My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

Interview details

Interview with Anusree Biswas [AB]

Interviewed by Proma Mukhopadhyay [PM]

Proma Mukhopadhyay [PM]. Have you heard stories about East Bengal, West Bengal, India from anybody in your family since childhood?

Anusree Biswas [AB]. Yes, I've heard.

PM. If you could please share these with us ... I'll not interrupt you, just take some notes.

AB. I'm from Hingaljanj, from the borders. The district is Hingaljanj, i.e. Hingaljanj police station, but our house is a good one and a half hours to two hours in the interiors. The Bangladesh border is just fifteen minutes from our house. The border demarcation there is just a tiny river. I've only heard about barbed wire fencing at the border. But no barbed wire can be seen as such. It's there only in patches, not along the entire area; but there's police presence all the time. And this concept about 'border'... people think there something called a 'border'—nothing of the kind exists. It's just a small river separating the two countries, that's all. Cross the river, and you're in another country! A country that we can see with our eyes from a distance—it's so near. I've heard little bits of incidents here and there about how we came away.

PM. Why don't you tell us something about that—what you heard, how your family came away—if you could share those stories with us ...

AB. My grandfather came away before 1971 for his education. The Muslims there were a real menace. They would unleash unbridled terror. It wasn't a conducive environment for studying. My grandfather came away when he was in class IX, and continued his studies here, moving on to take up a job, get married and start a family—everything he did here. But his parents were on the other side of the border, and they kept in touch. It wasn't so difficult in those days,

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because it was an undivided country then. When the country was partitioned, and the names East Bengal and West Bengal came into existence, people who lived there, remained there. We don't have much contact with them. And because grandfather remained here, we became residents of West Bengal. There were many from our family who came away later on. They settled here—but before 1971. After that nobody from our family came away.

PM. '71?

AB. Yes.

PM. You're telling me about people who have 'come away' ... have you heard any stories about this migration, for instance, how they came, and when—if you could recall and share with us whatever you've heard since childhood.

AB. I've heard bits and pieces only on the sly ... there were two groups: one was something Raj [Rajakar] and the *muktifouj*, something like that; and there was tremendous animosity between them. One supported the Muslims, and the other did good work. One group targeted the Hindus, tried to kill them; but gave the Muslims protection. But the Hindu families, especially the women were at the receiving end of such torture, that everybody would leave. My grandmother [paternal]'s native place was in Bangladesh; she was married in Bangladesh too. But she had to come away after marriage because of the torture unleashed by the Muslims. My grandfather had 72 bighas of land exclusively. That entire property had to be left behind. Nothing could be brought over. Our family was quite well-to-do there, but there's nothing here. Muslims have taken over everything there—land, property, everything. But they [who came away] had nothing. They had to come away completely empty handed. When my grandmother came away, the way they brought jewellery and valuables—in their hair, concealed in their coiffeur. It was the custom to cover their heads. And they would do up their coiffeur very tightly. Nobody could even guess that something was in their hair. Then they would smuggle gold ornaments in the shell of tamarind. How can I put it—the way they brought things with them surreptitiously ... they were desperate to bring whatever little by way of security as they were being forced to come away nearly empty handed. At least the gold they could bring with them would have a resale value, and would see them through rainy days. Else coming away just

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like that, with nothing to look forward to, no work, no provisions—they had to make some arrangements for subsistence.

I've heard from my thakuma [paternal grandmother] that they had to leave behind the mansion and all the other things that they had there. Their family got something in exchange, a mere pittance, merely one fourth of what the Muslims got there. My grandmother's family got so little in exchange. My grandfather got a job here after completing his studies. All his certificates are from here. He settled here permanently, and so we've come to live here too. My father was born here, so naturally we've been too ...

PM. You were saying, this was after 1971 or was it after 1947?

AB. No, 1971. Grandfather came away before 1947, and the others have come only after 1971.

PM. What about the others? Were all of them there? 1947-1971?

AB. Yes.

PM. Have you heard any stories about the Partition of 1947? The fact that two countries got divided ... when this happened, your grandfather was here, isn't it?

AB. Yes.

PM. Have you heard anything from your grandfather or anybody else anything concerning those times? Where was he living then? Hingalganj?

AB. Yes, Hingalganj, in the village of Gobindakati. My grandfather and Kishore Kumar (who was born in East Bengal), the singer, were friends and studied together. My grandfather had talent as a singer. Once he had come with Kishore Kumar. He became a famous singer, and my grandfather remained in academics after studying in Surendranath College. Either Surendranath or Bangabasi College. After completing his studies here, he returned to Gobindakati with a job in Gobindakati School, and began to live in that village.

PM. Have you heard any stories from 1947?

AB. In 1947 the British and the Muslims both were inflicting a lot of torture; but I haven't heard any stories as such about my family. I've only heard that Muslims unleashed all kinds of torture.

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They would pillage and plunder, raid the house when it was empty. They had attempted to break in when only women were at home, just when my grandfather and father were away. Women of the family were not allowed to go out. They remained indoors even during the day. This story I've heard from my mother: when she had gone to her maternal uncle's place, there was a large lake there, and water would have to be brought home from here. But my mother wouldn't be allowed to fetch water from there as she was quite good looking. Muslims were not only very abusive, but they tried to break into the house. That's why Mother wouldn't be allowed to go out. She was very young then, and couldn't understand the reason very clearly. She would readily go out with anybody. The married women of the family would go out only after covering their heads entirely, and always escorted by male members of the family. They wouldn't be allowed out after dusk. If they at all went out unescorted, it would have to be a large group of women. I've heard stories like this.

PM. Was this the situation on this side of the border?

AB. No, the other side.

PM. Where was this?

AB. Paranpur, across the border, across the river, on the other side.

PM. When your family came here, did they have to cross the river?

AB. Yes.

PM. Have you heard any stories about the migration?

AB. When they were coming away by the banks of the river, there were two groups: one led by Sheikh Hasina's father [Sheikh Mujibur Rahman], who was head of the administration, led the band of *muktijodhha*. They were very good. But he declared the country to be a Muslim nation and the Hindus faced hell trying to cross over to the other side. My mother's grandfather was the village headman and he did good work there. That irked the Muslims a lot. Somehow they got wind of the fact that the family was coming away. Now he got to know that the Muslims had got the information and would be creating trouble. So he stayed at home, and at night under the cover of darkness arranged for his family to cross over one by one. There have been

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instances of people being shot to death in transit. Grandfather came away on one such night, guarded by several people who kept watch and helped him cross over. I've heard from my grandmother that when they were crossing the river, the water had lost its natural colour. It was red all over. And all the boats were overcrowded, because people were in a hurry to cross over as fast as they could. She saw how people were leaving behind babies. It was an impossible situation. People were being beaten up with lathis, shot at. My grandmother has told me how several mothers had to leave behind their babies. They boarded the boat, the baby was in somebody else's arms, and the boat left the jetty. There was no way the baby could be reached to the mother.

PM. You were telling me: it was evident from their faces and eyes—that was what you felt ...

AB. Yes ...

PM. These incidents of 1947 or 1971 are from times long ago. You haven't seen any of these, yet both seem very living to you. What would you have to say about that? Please tell us what you feel about it now.

AB. I feel that the British were to blame for this Partition. It was a ploy for them to come back—to convenience them. If only the Partition hadn't happened! Earlier, when Bengal was one, undivided, it was such a huge country; and there was a healthy exchange among its inhabitants. There was a unity. My grandfather's brother's sons, who have stayed on over there, they are our relatives after all, our blood relations. But they are foreign to us now. Bangladesh has become another country, another nation. They are from another country. Relationally they are so near to us, yet they have become so very distant, that it saddens me. Then there are relatives on my mother's side, mother's maternal uncle's side, some of whom are still there. I've seen them come for a limited time, maybe just for a month, with visa or sometimes clandestinely even. But time is limited and they have to return within the stipulated time. You cannot take them here and there as much as you wanted to. This makes me sad—that with one's close relatives too, one can't stay together. Some of mother's uncles who live here, cannot find enough time to be with them when they come over. I really feel bad. They have to bear the burden of a close relation that they can rarely access.

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PM. You were mentioning relations who stayed on there. Have you heard any of their stories? How did they stay on? What kind of problems did they face? I'm sure they faced lots of problems.

AB. Yes, they faced similar problems; but those who could come to an understanding with the Muslims, could stay on; those who couldn't, couldn't stay on. I have a jyethu [father's elder brother] who is a lawyer there. I've never met him, but I'm sure he must have kept the Muslims in good humour, that's why he could survive. Else how could he survive the torture that was unleashed by Muslims? It would've been impossible to live there. My grandfather for example couldn't live there, nor could he complete his education there. He came away. But for this uncle of mine, he must have been able to make the necessary adjustments in order to get the job of a lawyer. In the face of problems, he must have been able to complete his studies, and then get a job.

PM. You were saying that the border is quite close to your house ...

AB. A small river ...

PM. Right.

AB. It's so funny—people from India, i.e. we, are allowed to get off on one side; and people from Bangladesh are allowed to get off on the other side. Nobody can come to the middle of the river. And this is manned by the police round the clock. But during curfew nobody will be able to get down into the water, or even the road by the river. The river is so small, how can I explain, we can see everything clearly on the other side—people, traffic, everything.

PM. What's this 'curfew' you're talking about?

AB. Curfew is clamped during Id, when cow smuggling across the border increases significantly. Cows are smuggled from India. The border police try to ensure that the cows don't enter the Bangladesh border. The ordinary people there have a very hard life. The main source of income is agriculture, but the farming situation is not good. That's why their financial condition is rather precarious. That's why they always look at ways in which to earn an extra buck with minimum labour. So smuggling cows is one way; then there's sugar and fish too. If there's a stringent vigil

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during the time, it becomes a problem for the cows to cross over. When the guard's strict, they'll clamp a curfew. Nobody will dare come on the road then, because there'll be a round the clock vigil. Maybe it's announced: nobody will come on the road after 7 pm. However dire the need, nobody will be seen on the roads. Now suppose somebody's ill and needs to be taken to a doctor—going out is essential. What'll he do? So there's a rule—rather funny—you'll have to carry a lantern. That's what I saw when I was a child. Now, this has changed to a torch, or a lathi. And if you have an ID card on you, then there's no problem. You're free to move. If the police stop you, you can show your I-card and they'll let you go. If not, they'll take you away.

PM. You were saying this cow smuggling happens through the waterways ...

AB. Yes. There's a road right in front of our house. They bring the cows from Orissa. Large cows. At night you hear the cows crossing over, and with them the men herding them. The men are on small *dinghy* boats, and the cows all tied together with a rope wade through water. This can happen because it is a shallow river, small river. It feels so bad—after all the poor animals are scared too. When the police get wind of the fact that cows are being brought over, they start taking bribes, and allow them to cross over. Else how do you explain such regular smuggling despite police presence? When the men are rounded up, the men jump off boats and swim away, in a bid to escape; the cows are left to their fate in the water. They never turn back to see whether they live or die. If they manage to find the cows, they take them away to the camp, in custody. They arrest the men too. Now suppose they aren't able to arrest the men—just the men. What do they do with so many cows? There are at least 50 /60 to 100 cows. They stand to lose on so much profit; and who doesn't want profit? So they bribe them and take the cows. The cows are branded in a certain manner when they are brought over. Then the police mark them when they're taken into custody. So when we see the cows, know which ones had been impounded by the police. Cows which couldn't be smuggled are taken back by the same road. It is obvious that these had been caught at the border.

Then we heard that there's are gangs of twelve to fourteen people that operate in the cow smuggling racket. They have a specific modus operandi. They walk along the border, and take their positions within two-three minutes distance of each other. The policemen are of course

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there. But they'll not let them suspect them. In the border areas, the police have specific duty slots. One has duty for one hour, the other the next hour. So it is impossible for them to recognize so many people. They think somebody is standing there, so what? And most of the times the smuggling is supervised by them. They make a sound alert if they sight a policeman. They have a specific code. Once that's sounded, they'll flee with or without cows.

When we were kids, we would routinely see sugar and fish being smuggled. Morning walkers would routinely see that the roads filled with fish. They didn't need to go the market [for their daily stock of fish]. The roads would be white, strewn with sugar.

PM. But wouldn't the fish be sourced from the river right in front? Or is it ...

AB. I'm not too sure. I've been seeing this since childhood. I don't see fish anymore; it's only cows these days—that too rarely. Don't know which route they take these days.

PM. Ok, and ...

AB. There is a place called Sarberiya on this side of the border. There are lots of cows there under extremely strict vigil. No cross-border movement of cows. I don't think they are sending the cows back to Orissa. We don't have an inkling of when the cows cross the border. After some time you see that the cows have all gone! There have been several instances when the police have given them a chase . . . what happened once—it was evening and I was studying . . . no, not exactly evening, it was around 10 or 11 o'clock at night. Suddenly I heard the voice of our next door neighbour—uncle—and the path in front of our house is brick-laid. There was a sound of somebody running away on the brick-lain path. Father immediately went out to check. He could see nothing, but could understand that somebody had fled. The uncle who lived next door was returning in the rain. He saw somebody crouching in the bushes. So uncle shone the light on him and asked, 'What's the matter? You, here?' And that man imploring him to keep quiet, 'Sh-sh-sh. Please don't speak. It's the police'—he was pleading with folded hands. So he let him go. What's the use? He would return a few days later with suitable bribe. In the worst case, he would get a sound thrashing. What of it? He'd return anyway. So uncle let him go.

PM. There's such a variety of movement across the border—cow, sugar, fish—yet you can't go.

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AB. Can't.

PM. Don't you feel anything about how things are?

AB. Many people go, many. Since it's just a matter of a small river, with specific time mentioned when the vigil is somewhat relaxed, they ferry you across. Rates vary from Rs 2500 to Rs 4000 to Rs 5000—they take whatever they can. The more the luggage, the more they charge. If you don't have any luggage, they'll ferry you for a minimum charge. Just to cross that small little river, that's what they charge. But I've never had an opportunity to cross over like that. Besides, my parents wouldn't allow, me being a girl. If I had been a boy, their stance would have been—ok, let him go; nothing is going to happen. And all this happens at night. How will my parents allow? I went when I was only two and a half years old. I have no recollection at all.

PM. Where did you say you had gone when you were two and a half?

AB. To our native homestead in our village.

PM. You're saying you had gone to your native village. Now if you are suddenly asked, 'Where's your home?'—what will come to your mind first? Where's your home, or your native homestead?

AB. India.

PM. India? Don't you ever feel that there's something on the other side?

AB. Not at first, but yes, it hits me later, because after all it's my native land. But there's nothing I can do about it. Sometimes I do have this longing to cross that tiny slip of a river—why can't I? I surely can. I had a chance once when a large gang of my friends were crossing over covertly. They said, let's go. It was a sudden opportunity that had come their way. I hadn't informed my parents. So I couldn't go. That opportunity came just that once—never again.

PM. Now if you make the journey the legal way, you need visa, passport, else you'll have to take the covert route

AB. Yes.

PM. Don't you feel bad about it? The sheer pointlessness of it all?

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AB. Yes. Those who take the surreptitious way risk their lives. In the border area there's always a shoot at sight permission. So they can do it instantly. It happens sometimes. The police see it when the military keep a very strict vigil. They have permission to shoot. But the local people don't allow the vigil to get too strict. They kill anybody who tries to be strict. There was a police in our locality. He was very conscientious and he imposed restriction so well that nobody could cross over. They killed him. The local police killed him—murdered.

PM. Didn't quite get you. Who murdered, you said?

AB. The police murdered him.

PM. Ok.

AB. Their henchmen killed him. About crossing the border, what happens is, this crossing happens within a specific time span. When that gets over, they'll tell you: we'll help you cross from here to there. We'll drop you off in the jungle. How you get out that place is your business. They tell you that they won't be responsible for any eventuality. Will you be able to go in this manner? Those who can, follow that route; those who can't, don't. That's how people are ferried across the border. The moment they see a police speedboat, they'll dump anywhere—just anywhere—even in the middle of the river, and the people somehow stumble across. Those who don't know how to swim, can't even think of crossing the river. Those who have proper passports and visa cross over at the Bongaon border. Basirhat is on our side. They cross from Basirhat to Bongaon.

PM. Tell me, why do you think so many people cross over in this way, putting their lives in jeopardy?

AB. Because passport and visa processing takes time. Many have relatives to whom they have to reach urgently. Besides, this process is expensive. Many don't have the means to spend so much on these formalities. So they spend this bit and go across, pick up some skill and start a business with that. Craftsmanship in gold is very good in Bangladesh. Many go across just to learn that craft; then come back and start their own trade. It happens like that.

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PM. You were saying that you have so many relatives and friends. Haven't you ever thought that if you have just a passport and visa you can visit them?

AB. Yes, but I have to show a cogent reason why I want to go. What reason am I to give?

PM. You mentioned earlier that your family couldn't bring anything at all with them; maybe some gold, that too very little. How did they start their lives literally from scratch? Have you heard anything at all? What was their struggle? How did they resuscitate themselves?

AB. I've told you earlier that my grandfather completed his studies here. He was married off before he got a job. After marriage my grandmother stayed at her father's place. My grandfather brought her over only after he settled down well after getting a job. So he didn't face much problem as such. But my maternal grandfather's family had a really rough deal when they came away here. The Muslims took away their land, and what they got in exchange here was so bad that it wasn't fit for agriculture. It was uneven land, in places slightly raised ground. One would probably build a house in this type of land, but it was impossible to sow crops there. And then there were huge tracts of cactii. So it was a patch of land in the middle of cactii forest, with acute shortage of firewood. Anybody trying to cook would have to hack up the cactii to serve as fuel. It was such wilderness that (now this story I've heard from my mother and grandmother) a huge snake, this fat had coiled up with its hood open amidst the cacti and had died. Maybe it had been impaled on the thorns and had died. Who knows? They chanced upon it when they had gone to gather firewood. The land was infested with snakes.

They had to tolerate a lot of hardships and their financial condition became deplorable. My [paternal] grandfather finished his studies here, and even got a job. So that was fine; but my [maternal] grandfather had to undergo severe hardships because of his financial condition.

PM. How did they later on ... I mean, after that ...

AB. They cleared that tract of cacti-infested land, cultivated it, did several kinds of work besides agriculture, i.e. they would work in households too—somehow eked out means of sustenance.

PM. You were talking about exchange of land. How was this deal concluded? Do you remember having heard anything about that?

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AB. Yes. I've heard about this from my *dida* [maternal grandmother], whose family owned more than 350 bighas of land there. They had to give up that land and were compensated with less than 35 bighas here. And that was the tract of complete wilderness [that I talking about].

PM. Ok.

AB. Also, the house that my mother's family had there, it was a lovely, large house, very tastefully done up. But the Muslim houses that they saw here were so filthy, nothing arranged properly; even the structures weren't good. That was the situation. That's what constituted 'exchange.'

PM. Did they know that they would come to this Muslim house? Was there any prior discussion on it? Was there any deal, or was it just impromptu ...

AB. The deal was done from there.

PM. How was it? Have you heard anything?

AB. It was undivided Bengal then and people kept in touch with each other regularly. When Partition was inevitable and they knew they had to come away, and Muslims would go across to that side, they had a discussion. That's how they came. They came away in whatever way they could. I've heard of the atrocities of the *Rajakars*, who were either shooting them dead, or lynching them. And those who could come away surreptitiously were ok. I mean those who could come away without them [the *Rajakars*] get wind of it, could manage it well. The liberation army or *Mukti fauj* volunteers would help the Hindus with a safe passage.

PM. Do you feel anything of what had happened so many years ago? In your culture, in the stories of daily existence that you must have heard, in rituals, worship, religious commemorations, traditions—have you ever felt: yes, I'm a *bangal* to the core? Do you feel this deep down?

AB. No. I'm not acutely aware of being a *bangal*. Bengal was originally one, undivided. Nobody mentioned a 'bangal' then. Besides, we came away long before Bengal was divided. I've been born here, my father has been born here, my grandfather too had come away. In fact

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grandfather came away when he was in class nine. He was quite young then. That's why I've never been aware of being a 'bangal.'

PM. Would you specify, this awareness of being a bangal?

AB. I mean I never felt this difference in being a 'bangal' within my family. However in the seasonal rituals of Bangladesh, I have come across something that happens in the month of *Pous* [approx. mid-December to mid-January; the month when some winter crops are harvested; a season of festivity]. It is known as *bamni deowa* [lit. 'giving the bamni'; bamni is a colloquialism of 'brahmani', or the wife of a Brahman, in rituals a venerable old woman]. It is a ritual with *kool* or berry leaves, newly harvested paddy; alpana designs are created with *atap* rice paste and oil lamps are placed on the alpana. This is a winter ritual that takes place in the month of *Pous*. I've seen this. And on this day, *pithey* must be eaten. [pithey is a special winter delicacy which runs into several varieties; made primarily of rice flour, jaggery (*gur*), milk and various other condiments. Some pithey preparations are made with peas, cauliflower and cabbage, which are seasonal greens, and deep fried]. On Saraswati Puja day parched rice and jaggery must be had.

PM. Ok. Have you ever felt that people around you have made derisive comments about you being a 'bangal'? I remember you telling me one day that 'I'm not a bangal' or something like that. Why did you say that? Have you ever felt uncomfortable on that account? Have people around you looked down on you?

AB. No, I never felt that way; nor have people been derisive as such. But when I told my friends that I had come away to Namkhana for my studies in class XI, and when they heard that we were originally from Bangladesh, they would refer to us as 'bangal'. I would retort, saying I've never heard anyone refer to us by that name. I felt that they reacted in a somewhat odd manner at 'bangal.' But even for me, since the time I was a child, I too reacted in the same way at the word 'bangal'. Their culture, their lingo is so different. We somehow don't like the way they use language, which borders on abusive. There has been a marriage in a neighbour's family. The bride is bangal. How strangely she speaks! Nobody likes her. It's like that.

PM. Is this because she a 'bangal'?

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AB. Yes, because she's a bangal. Everybody refers to her as 'O, she's a bangal bride after all! What can you expect of her?'

PM. But your own relations are in Bangladesh, so they are bangal by default. What about them?

AB. Yes, I told my father this. Father said, "You see, we came way much before Partition. There was no differentiation between East and West Bengal. The term 'bangal' hadn't been coined. We had come away earlier. This means we are 'Bengali', not 'bangal'. Our grandfather had come away first. If that hadn't been the case, there would have been at least a trace of us being 'bangal'. But grandfather came when he was in school, in class IX. We've been born here, and so have you. So there's no way we are remotely 'bangal'." This is what father told me.

PM. What about your mother's side? They came, didn't they?

AB. It's the same with them too. My maternal uncle, *mama*, has been born here. My uncle, grandfather, all of them have come away here.

PM. Ok. So the way you look at a 'bangal' bride, you're not like that.

AB. No! Everybody says that because we are 'bangal', we have no culture.

PM. How would you describe a 'bangal' bride?

AB. Somewhat bad tempered, very foul language, no respect for family members. We respect our elders, and treat the younger members with affection. She's not like that—respect and love are alien to her. There's nothing tender about her. She speaks such a strange lingo that I can't understand what she says.

PM. Do you know where she has come from in Bangladesh?

AB. No, no.

PM. So you're saying that you've imbibed nothing in Bangal culture except for what you've shared with us right now.

AB. I haven't seen anything else except the two memories that I've shared.

PM. Do you remember anything else, like marriage rituals, for instance?

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AB. No. Marriage rituals are the same—nothing different.

PM. Do you think that the following generations too should grow up with ideas like a 'bangal' bride is very bad. Again, you've shared with us stories of struggle and privation that your family has suffered. There is a poignant story of struggle there. Would you like to pass on such memories to your next generation? Or would you say, so many years have passed, let it be ...

AB. I would surely like to pass on memories. So what if they are bangal, aren't they human beings too? This dichotomy between people, I don't like. This is my personal opinion. How can somebody, just by virtue of staying somewhere, be bad? Why should it be this way? I want to change this mindset. I don't like this.

PM. For your next generation . . .

AB. I would obviously like to pass on the good memories. I also want to tell them the struggle of all those people who had to come away, and are now well settled, have a good life—I want to tell them all this.

PM. But there's one element that comes across again and again in what you're saying—that's that's this thing about Hindus and Muslims—Muslims have done this, Muslims have done that. All this has happened such a long time ago. Do you think this needs to be told to the next generation? Is it necessary or not necessary? What do you think?

AB. Yes, to be honest, I don't like Muslims at all. They have this propensity to grab and eat up everything instantly. They're violent by nature. If we live a good life now, we try to ensure that our life in the days to come would be equally good. But their mindset is, let's grab what we can today; we'll think of tomorrow later. Tomorrow is in the future. We're alive today doesn't guarantee that we'll be alive tomorrow. So being alive today means we have to eat well, clothe ourselves well. This is something that I don't like. And I don't like their violence either. I've seen bangal Muslims. They are habitual liars. I just can't tolerate that. But that doesn't mean that all Muslims are bad. There are good people too. There's a Muslim locality within ten minutes of where I stay. I don't like that at all.

PM. Where have they come from—the settlers of this Muslim neighbourhood?

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AB. I don't know where they're from. There's this locality within half an hour's walking distance.

PM. So you want to share these memories with your succeeding generation.

AB. Yes.

PM. But don't you feel, what's the use of raking up those issues that happened long ago? Don't you feel that way? Or do you feel that it is essential that people should know all this?

AB. Maybe it will be of no use to anybody, but I feel they should know that we had a house in Bangladesh, this is how we came here, this is how we spent our lives. It is useful for them to know all that. Like it happened today. I've never been to Bangladesh that way—just once when I was two and a half years old. I don't have any memory of that. But it came in handy. So I feel that in case my succeeding generation too should be faced with such a situation, they shouldn't draw a blank. They should know at least something so that they can put it across to somebody. It is good to know. They should be able to reveal it if the need arises; if not they'll keep it to themselves.

PM. Don't you feel any kind of pride in saying that yes, I'm a bangal? I take pride in saying that, yes, I'm bangal, I'm from Bangladesh—this identity that you are talking about. I mean, this ability to speak out is all about asserting one's identity. Don't you feel proud saying yes, I used to live here once, I used to have so many bighas of land there?

AB. No, no. I've never felt that way. I feel good that I've come away. There are my ancestors there, but I have no contact with them, never seen them—ever. Maybe I've seen one of them, but I won't be able to recognize him now. But it feels good that we're 'foreigners'. Bangladesh is foreign to me. Yet I have relative, maybe I can go there if there's a chance.

PM. Will it feel like a foreign land or your own country?

AB. Like my own.

PM. Is it?

AB. Yes, because I can see it—it's so near. Especially at the time of pujas. We have a fair at Chanralkhali village. It's called 'hañri mela'. Lots of artistes go there and there are many good

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programmes. There are policemen too. But rules are relaxed for that one day when people from Bangladesh are allowed to come to the fair. But there's widespread immigration that day, bringing with them whatever they can. If they want to migrate properly they have to bring proof, which they can't. Besides there's a lot of money involved and other documents that are required. People don't want to go through such paraphernalia. They make identity cards by paying suitable bribes, on the plea that 'I belong here'. Many come away like this. There is a time span given for people from Bangladesh to visit this side of the border for festivities, say for Durga Puja, on the day of the immersion. Idols from both India and Bangladesh are taken to the river on boats and while doing the rounds [as part of the immersion ritual] boats from both the sides come near each other and the turning round of the idols in boats happen in unison. That is when luggage and other things get transported from one boat to another. The police know everything, but would allow it. That was how it used to happen. Now guards are posted mid-stream, and the idols are immersed on the banks of the rivers. It is Durga Puja after all—as much theirs as ours. Whatever little chance there was of coming together, the police have now separated.

PM. Tell us a little more about what happens at the fair you had just mentioned.

AB. It's a fair where people from Bangladesh are allowed to come over by the police, since this is a fair of historic importance.

PM. How is it historic?

AB. I don't really know why it called historic. But it has been a regular fixture for a long time. Earlier it used to be famous for earthenware and pottery. It used to be a site for Jatra performance. That was a long time ago. Then there is a temple, which is supposed to house a rather potent deity. Maybe all these factors contributed. But why exactly it is called a historically important fair, I don't know.

PM. And people coming from the other side? The police know it, don't they?

AB. People aren't allowed to go from India, but people from Bangladesh are allowed to come in.

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PM. And there's no stipulated time when people from India can go to Bangladesh?

AB. No, no, no.

PM. Does it never happen?

AB. No.

PM. You said, that if ever you go, it will feel like home, it won't feel as if you've gone to a foreign country.

AB. Yes. There's another place called Shamsurnagar. It seems our relative had passed away. They had called out from one bank of the river informing our family on the other bank of the news of bereavement, and with a request to convey it to the family. The two countries are so near each other that you can actually holler any message to the other country.

PM. Have you had any such experience?

AB. No, but I've heard from people.

PM. You were saying, your friend lives there . . .

AB. My friend lives here; the parents live there. His father is a school teacher. I've heard gory tales of torture from them. Muslims would enter their house and drill a pillar anywhere in their compound.—that means, it is theirs. That's how they try to usurp. They create hell. They don't allow people to cultivate. His father, who is a school teacher there, won't be able to do much here. He won't get a job. What will he do here? He had no other option but to remain there. He'll stay there for as long as he has the job. Once he retires, he'll move here. He has already sent his sons over so that they don't have to face such trouble. Both his sons study here. One of them is supposed to join Hingalganj B-Ed College, which hasn't yet started. I don't know for certain, but because he'll join the college, he is staying there. The younger son who is my friend, stays in Sonarpur. I've heard his father's plans of moving here, to his sons from him.

PM. Because it is difficult to live there?

AB. No, his maternal uncle and everybody else have come away. It's just his father and an elder brother of his who have remained behind.

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PM. They must be facing a lot of trouble ...

AB. A lot. The Muslims create a lot of trouble for them. Say his father is going to school; they'll block the road and won't allow him to go. So he has to return. There's no transport; a bandh can be called any time. These are everyday happenings.

PM. You've heard so many stories over the years. Do you like hearing these stories? How does it feel?

AB. I love it.

PM. Why do you like it?

AB. I've never really understood why I like those stories. But there is this feeling deep down that Bangladesh is very dear to me, very close. But I feel the hurt much more if there is any untoward happening here, rather than there. That's because I've been born here. But if anything happens there, I don't feel that it has hurt me. Why I feel that way I really cannot tell.

PM. You speak the same language, the same ...

AB. Yes, yes, yes. The clothes are similar too, the manner of speaking ... come to think of it, so many commonalities ...

PM. Just the division made by a river.

AB. A small little river, with bits of barbed wire fencing—that too not all along.

PM. Where is this barbed wire?

AB. On the road.

PM. When cows are transported across the border? Do they go through the barbed wire?

AB. That's only in some places. The rest are open waterways through the river.

PM. I see.