

My Parents' World – Inherited Memories

Interview with Pintu Das

Interviewed by Soumita Mazumdar

Soumita: Please tell us your name and what you do.

Pintu: My name is Pintu Das. I am presently a student in the second year of the M.Phil course at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.

S: Could you please share something about the kind of accounts and stories about East Bengal that you have heard from your childhood, from your family members, from your parents and grandparents.

P: My home is in Patharpratima, in the Sunderbans, and falls under the police station whose jurisdiction covers twelve islands, which is unique in the Indian part of the Sunderbans. There is no other police station anywhere covering twelve islands! It took a long time for me to become conscious of the fact that we are Bangaal, that we came over from East Bengal. Speaking for myself, I think I was not conscious of this when I sat for the secondary exam, or before I graduated. When I was very small, when I used to go to school as a boy, when I mingled with those from any other community, I used to hear that Bangaals faced great discrimination. We were Bangaal, we lived like a separate community, our thinking, our thoughts regarding development, our culture, our food habits – everything was different, and when we used to go to school, I used to hear a lot of taunts. I used to feel pained, I felt very pained when we were called Bangaal. We were not so good at studies, and so one was extremely agitated inwardly. We lived in a very small mouza in an island, I mean the administrative unit called mouza, we all lived together in that small mouza. The population in the island was very small. Just as we were lagging behind economically, so were we lagging behind in every way, culturally.

And so I gradually grew older, and then I went to do fieldwork for my M.Phil dissertation, I began doing ethnographic work in the course of the fieldwork in that mouza. That is how I learnt more. I looked at the whole refugee issue, whether we were refugees at all, how we came away from East Bengal, what the background of my parents and grandparents was, what kind of environment they encountered there, why they had to come away here, what the environment here was like when they came here, what they hoped for when they came here leaving behind their own country, their homesteads and land, their villages, their friends and kin, or was there some powerful nexus, or some community or some religious nexus – which compelled them to come here. Such questions plagued my head greatly. And so, in the course of this work, I interacted with some local people there, who were identified as refugees by the government, although there is a lot of politics involved in this – regarding, e.g. who had been given identity cards as refugees. That locality had not been designated as a refugee area in the government map.

I had interviewed a person, his name was Jibon Poddar, who had told me that he had come away to India when he was seven years old, about what led to their coming

away. There was a religious angle to it. That story was something like this: It was mostly people from Chittagong and Barisal, from these two regions, who had come to that mouza of ours and who lived there. The people from Chittagong, who had lived near the town, were a bit more economically independent. They were associated with several businesses there and they used to live together as a group over there. Muslim folk and Hindu folk used to live together as one.

So what happened in that situation was that, from long before, say from 1912, 1913, 1914, the upper class Hindus of that time viewed the lower class – I mean those were the lowest class of Muslims, who were extremely poor economically, those who were labouring folk – as untouchable. The latter worked in their houses as labourers, and after their work they were given food outside the house, in banana leaves, and the woman of the household would have to bathe after she removed the banana leaves, the place had to be washed, or sometimes tulsi-water or cow-dung-water was sprinkled there. As this carried on, gradually the Muslims began to feel agitated about this. He told me that after this, when riots began in East Bengal, in 1946, 1947 and 1948, because it was the upper class Hindus who lived in that region, the riots did not reach them immediately.

But it was clearly observed that gradually the Muslim folk began to vent their accumulated ire against the humiliation and contempt heaped so long on them. They vented that upon the lower class Hindu folk who were there. Now there was a lot of politics involved there, that's what I heard the people saying. A large number of Muslims from Bihar were also taken there and lots of tales were spread about how all the Muslims in Bihar were being killed, with rivers turning red with the blood of Muslims. India had not yet been partitioned then, and many Muslims from places like Bihar went there and gradually the Hindus began to be oppressed. And he thought there was a reason for the oppression. What was the reason?

First, he thought this was the reaction to the contempt and scorn with which the lower class Muslims had been viewed. And he held the upper class Hindu folk of that time squarely responsible for this, the brahmins, the zamindars and so on. There were horrific riots. Women were taken away from their homes at night, a Hindu boy returning home from school would be taken away by the Muslims. That's how they began oppressing the Hindus. As this carried on, finally, unable to bear this any longer, they were compelled to leave behind their homesteads and come away.

They said that they had been able to survive because of Muslims – and whatever they had suffered was also because of Muslims. Why was that? That was because there were some Muslims with whom they had such good relations that often one could really not say who was Muslim or who was Hindu, they were like brothers, or like father and son, they were looked upon like blood kin. In such a context, in a situation of great danger, when riot-affected people (from Bihar etc) were coming there, when people saw that Muslims were coming to attack Hindus, then perhaps some Muslims protected them and provided them security. There were many such tales. All the four or five persons whom I interviewed told me this – that whatever they suffered was because of Muslims, but they also felt there was a reason for that. And they emphasized that the fact that they were alive when so many others were killed was also because of Muslims.

S: You presented a picture of the riot-affected community of your village. Please tell us now about your family, where they were from and the circumstances under which they came away and began living here.

P: The place in present-day India where we live, and the community we live in, there are at most three-hundred-and-fifty to three-hundred-and-seventy-five families there. Originally there were one-hundred-and-seventy-five or one-hundred-and-eighty families, but actually more than two-hundred-and-fifty families had come there. They arrived here and found that the promises made by the Nehru government were not fulfilled. Then after that many people fell sick and died with malaria and diarrhoeal diseases.

That comes later, but what I have not said so far is that in East Bengal, my family lived in Noakhali. I had heard that from my paternal grandparents. There are *chars* (land formed on the course of a river) in Noakhali, they used to live on the *chars*. My paternal grandfather's house was the Poddar house ... I used to hear the names of lots of houses ... like the Poddar family's house ... So that family, they were basically merchants, what did they do for their security? They settled some families near the boundary of their house so that they would be provided security thereby. So I belong to such a family.

Another thing which they had said, which my father's eldest brother had said, was that he was very small, perhaps he was only four or five years old then. He remembers hearing about torment every day and night, there were screams from a particular direction, with houses being set on fire one after another, the body of a small boy being found floating on the river, a woman having been taken away from some house, a child walking to school having been picked up from the road and taken away. So, as such things continued, a sense of terror developed within them. In East Bengal, Muslims and Hinds lived in close proximity to one another. It was not as if there was a great distance between them, with a gap between their settlements. It was not like that. The picture that they presented to me – their houses were beside one another. There are many families who were protected by some Muslims and provided complete security when Muslims were coming to kill them or drive them away, to send them away from East Pakistan to India, so that they would not have any more Hindus in that country. By protecting them, by protecting the Hindus, their families were taking on a big challenge. After rising to this challenge and fighting against the others of their community, when they were finally unable to carry on this fight, what did they do? It was they who helped the Hindus, so that they could go away to India and live in relative security there. My family is such a family.

My paternal grandfather had four sons and four daughters. A son and a daughter had been born in East Bengal, the remaining six were born here. My father too was born here, my eldest paternal aunt had been married there, she had three sons and a daughter, one son and the daughter are still there. My aunt, that is my eldest aunt, left three of her sons there and came away with one son and her daughter. So when I heard such things from them, about their despair, or about the environment within which they lived their daily lives, the people they mingled with, the village environment, their spontaneity, their food habits, farming details, the relations between people – that it was much better than it is here, they thought of it as being more pure, where they could breathe freely. For them, the environment here is quite

complicated. The soil yields much less crop. Relations between people are quite difficult. So those are the kind of stories I had heard.

S: You told us that your grandfather had come away to India. After arriving here, where did they settle?

There is an amazing story in this regard. Around 1952 or 1953, the Nehru government declared that those who came from East Bengal would be provided some opportunities and benefits. On one side – they were unable to remain in East Bengal, their families could come to harm, the situation was such that something terrible could happen at any moment. So they came away with whatever they could bundle up at once – plates, utensils, clothes, some sesame *nadus* (a crunchy sweetmeat), so that if they were delayed when they travelled by train and by bus, if they were delayed when they travelled by ship, the small boys and girls could be given that to eat. The children were very small, they came when they were only two or three – taking great risk, I mean, walking, then boarding a ship, and then another ship, then a train and then once they had crossed the border, finally to Kalyani. I mean they arrived at Sealdah, and then they were taken from Sealdah to Kalyani. That was in Gayeshpur. There was apparently a military camp there earlier, there were about twenty-seven thousand tents there. In that camp, in those twenty-seven thousand tents, there were at least three hundred thousand people who had come from East Bengal. They were arriving via Howrah, via Sealdah, and from there they were loaded into lorries and sent by the government of India to Kalyani. To Gayeshpur, near present-day Kalyani.

For the first nine months, various non-governmental organisations, various agencies and associations provided them food, temporary latrines were set up there, whatever was possible so that they could survive, the bare minimum. Nine months were spent in this way. After that the government began providing rations there. Only the ration was provided. They lived another eleven months under this arrangement. Every week, Rupees 7.50 per person was provided for food purchases. After spending almost two years here, the government gradually began telling the people to decide where they wanted to go, whether to the Andaman Nicobar islands, or Dandakaranya or the Sunderbans. Sunderbans means the place called Mathurapur. This place was very close to Lakshmikantapur, and the people were then shown films about Mathurapur, the Andaman and Nicobar islands and about Dandakaranya. About the kinds of opportunities and benefits they would be provided if they went to any of these places.

Gradually the people began leaving for the places they had selected. This departure was under the aegis of the government. They were brought from Gayeshpur to Howrah through some government means. There were about two-hundred-and-fifty families of my community who lived there. Because some people from among these two-hundred-and-fifty families had been unable to board the ship, the government kept the two-hundred-and-fifty families there, in Howrah station, for a month and a half. But they did not want for food because at various times different associations and agencies, as well as government relief, provided them food and daily necessities, they were provided whatever was necessary. After a month and half, when they boarded the ship, they were shown Mathurapur. Nowadays Mathurapur has a mofussil character, but the situation then was somewhat like this – they departed at night from Howrah by ship along the river Ganga. After that, where my island is now, just bordering that, in a very low-lying area, where even a few years earlier, I mean even

one-hundred-and-twenty or twenty-five years ago, the place was under the river, I mean below water. That gradually became *char* land, and through the accumulation of silt, land was created. What I said earlier, that in the Indian part of the Sunderbans, our police station is the only one whose jurisdiction covers twelve islands – Patharpratima police station, and we lived in the G-Plot island, the G-Plot island is right on the Bay of Bengal. That's where my folks started living.

When they got off the ship, at dawn, they found a fertile land, plants, fruits and greenery, it looked just like East Bengal. They thought – this is indeed great, this is a good place to stay, there's no difficulty, a nice place, fertile soil, we will cultivate the land and get by, the river is beside us – like it was in East Bengal. They were very happy. After a few days, the Collector there, acting under government instructions, declared that this was not the place for them. Their place was further north. That is, further north on the island, which was forested. Completely forested. There were no dykes on the river. They said that they had even seen tiger paw marks. They never saw any tigers but they saw its footprints. Dykes were made on the river there under the aegis of the government.

It was in Mathurapur that all the promises made by the Nehru government to the people there, the local people, that is to say the refugees, were exposed. But they did not let them stay in Mathurapur. They were taken to the Sunderbans, to an island right on the Bay of Bengal, a place of greenery like Mathurapur. They were taken to the best spot on the island, a fertile location. They were happy when they arrived there too, if not Mathurapur then this place was good too, that place was called Buro Burir Tot. The place had fertile, sandy soil, fruits and greenery, trees and plants, there was some place for a market, some land at an elevation. The people felt they could live there. There was the river beside, they could cultivate the land, catch fish in the river and get by.

After a few days, the government declared – this place is not for you. You have to go further north, on the same island. They went there, I mean, they left some of their family members behind and went to see the place. They saw that the whole place was forested, completely forested, there were not even any dykes on the river. There was nothing to be done, for sheer survival they cleared the forest and gradually, under the aegis of the government, some relief funds were provided by the government, I mean rice, wheat and so on. A family was provided a certain amount of money for every bigha (1 bigha = 20 katthas; 1 kattha = 70 sq ft) of forested land that was cleared. They received two, or three or four rupees in this way. And so by clearing the forest in this way they created a place. After that a dyke was made on the river. And so in this way, a settlement grew there. They saw that paddy was already growing nearby. They thought they could start cultivation by somehow obtaining paddy, or by sowing some seeds, by obtaining seeds of other crops – they did not have ploughs then, everyone there was a refugee. They began planting seeds there. The land that was earlier under forest, they dug a large pond in the middle of the settlement, a pond measuring three or four bighas. The banks of the pond were made high. When the people were sent here from Howrah by ship, each family was provided some sal or teak wood and tin sheets so that they could come here, build houses and live there. All the families had these tin sheets. Tin sheets and bamboo and wood was provided. The pond was called Tank Pukur. That was what it was called locally. A very large pond. They lived there. The tubewell was at a distance of at least two kilometers, that was

the source of drinking water. And the place I mentioned earlier, the marketplace on the shore, there, some two kilometers from where the people were, was where a doctor was available. If someone was ill, the doctor arrived at eight o'clock, I mean he could not come there earlier and he had to leave by the time it was three o'clock or three thirty, because of the water in between. The doctor had to be provided police protection or accommodation by the government and kept somewhere.

So as the two-hundred-and-fifty families lived there in this way, they began falling ill with malaria, diarrhoeal diseases and so on. At least seventy or eighty people died there. After such deaths, Harinarayan Chakraborty, who had come from a place called Tripura in East Bengal, took some local people and went to the sub-divisional headquarters in Diamond Harbour (now it is in Kakdwip). He went to Diamond Harbor with almost a hundred-and-fifty people, to meet the Collector. They complained that they had not been given what had been promised, what they had been shown as the resettlement project in Mathurapur. They said they would not remain where they were, and that they should be given some other place. The collector sent a letter to Nehru, the Prime Minister then was Nehru. He said that they should be sent to Delhi. They went to meet Nehru, under the leadership of Harinarayan Chakraborty. Those who were a bit educated, who were of a middle-class background, who had the courage to go all the way to Delhi, those who had some economic means, they went to Delhi. They met Nehru, and he said to them: what is your demand? They responded that they would not remain where they were, they wanted to stay near an urban area. In accordance with their demand, the Nehru government provided them Rs 24,000 for five kattas of land near the urban area (which could be in any colony near Jadavpur, or in Garia), a one-storey house and to start a business. Who was this for? This was for those who were middle-class, who could show some means.

There's a story here. Some land transfer was done. There was no real land transfer but what happened was that, say, some Muslim here, some Muslim in India, who had a lot of land here, who had gone away to East Pakistan. Some Hindu in East Pakistan who had a lot of land there would leave his land there and come here and take the land belonging to the Muslim here. So people like this who had property, what did the Nehru government do for them? Rs 24,000 was given to such people. To whom? To those who had some economic means.

But those people who belonged to the lowest strata, those who, like in my family's case, lived by a house like the Poddar's for the latter's security, those who had nothing at all and still have nothing, they were severely discriminated against by the Nehru government. How was that? It was something like this: lots of promises had been made. First, that a school would be set up there. Then, that because they were refugees they would be provided extra relief compared to the other communities there. That they would be given identity cards. Their land would be shown on the map as being allotted to refugees. And roads would be made for them. Arrangements would be made to provide them electricity. A market would be set up for them to sell merchandise. But ultimately nothing was done.

There were a few people there who were intelligent, who through various means – I myself have seen two or three such people – obtained refugee identity cards. How they did that – regarding that, in the course of my field-work later, I would find out how these were issued by some department, and when I searched for government

data, I found that their voter cards have the name of the colony – the name of the place is Jayashri colony. Although it's a refugee colony, on the land map, it is not shown as a refugee colony. So what is the government's rationale? The government's position is that we have given them land.

How was that done? Now the people who were there, those who lived at Tank Pukur, had to be given twelve bighas per family, with ten bighas for cultivation and two bighas for the homestead. Actually the government of India thought that the land was not fit for settlement, that no one would be able to live there, but since the land is lying idle let them live there, and in that jungle region, tigers and bears could attack at any time – we can tell the refugees that we have given you a place, this is the protection we have provided them, our government has done the following for them.

But we find that the land was extremely low-lying and it was a very saline area, where it was very difficult to grow crops. Even now, when cultivation is undertaken there, I have seen this myself, when I used to go to stack up the paddy, the roots of big trees could be seen there. So that's the kind of land they were given. So who was the government concerned about? Those who had some economic means were the ones to whom the government provided Rs 24,000. Those who could move around, who were courageous enough to go all the way to Delhi, were given five katthas each, in Jadavpur, Bijoygarh colony and Garia, and helped to build one-storey houses. But those who were on the island simply remained there. Fighting with tigers, natural disasters every day, the land unfavourable for cultivation. In such circumstances, they continued to struggle for survival there and not a single one of all the promises made by the government were fulfilled. I can say with confidence that it was not done. The government has a single refrain: the government provided twelve bighas of land to each of the fifty-four families who first went there. And why was that? Because they thought that no one would live there.

The number of people grew over time. As people heard that the government had given us land here, they too came over. Someone's family, someone's relative and so on. Eventually the land available for them shrank in size, to six bighas or four bighas. What happened during the settlement in 1962? When people were unable to grow crops in that place, a lot of people went away to other places. Because they were unable to sustain themselves there. What happened then? What did the Collector do at the time of the settlement? It was shown as low-land. That is to say, those who were poor, those who had obtained the land from the government, lost the land. The land was no longer theirs by right. So that is how it was.

Those who came as refugees were not treated in the same way by the government of India. Those who had economic means got one kind of treatment, and those who had absolutely nothing, who got only empty promises – for sheer survival, and to provide for their families, they were compelled to come here. That's the kind of treatment they received from the government of India. I have all the information, and I also interviewed some people.

So when I asked them – if you go to Bangladesh now, what do you think about the character of that Bengal of yours, the environment, the friendships, the food habits, the fish in the pond ...? I interviewed three persons, all of them had tears in their eyes

and their voices were choked with emotion. The real picture is this – they could not have a good life here, they had come here simply to survive.

S: You have told us a tale of governmental discrimination and about a community which has been struggling all these years, about some people getting and some people not getting, you spoke about the despair. Can you tell us about what you have heard from your family about their struggle to survive under such circumstances, when they were not among the beneficiaries? How did they confront such a situation?

P: How do we view a refugee? We have an image of the refugee that we have seen so far, and the state or a particular political force has identified people or a community as refugees. What I feel is that no one wants to leave his personal homestead and go away somewhere else. Consequently, when he becomes a refugee, somehow the very word ‘refugee’ is something despicable, there is discrimination, somehow a contempt becomes expressed through this word. Hence I have a suspicion regarding the word, could there be any other word instead, could there be another way of viewing the people. A word in which there would be no contempt, a concept and way of thinking that would not be derogatory.

In such a context, about what my family used to think, even just some days ago I heard a story from my father. When, slowly, the electoral process reached the G-Plot island, when the state administration arrived, that remained confined to a corner of the G-Plot island. When any development work, or project or funds came to the island, I mean the general development processes, like roads, tubewells and so on. There are seven mouzas on the island. So if twenty tubewells were to be installed across the seven mouzas, and they should be equally distributed – what we find is that in my mouza, maybe one was installed, or none at all. On the grounds that it was not required. This is the role of the state that was clearly displayed. Why was that done? I have heard from some people of this community, my community, who became panchayat members, that although they subscribed to the same political ideology, they actually belonged to a different community. When they sat on the board to discuss a development-related issue, and said that they too should get three tubewells, or a primary school – then the political leaders and development members of the other mouzas would not accept that. We don’t need to get that. Why don’t we need to get it? Because the number of voters there was small, they lacked power, and so they were denied everything. This happened in various ways. There’s a kind of politics involved here, a politics of development, and that’s what happened here. This happened clearly, I have seen this happening, and it is still prevalent.

Coming to my family, my father was the youngest of eight siblings. So perhaps he does not remember so clearly. Because he was the youngest, he was somewhat privileged. But what did my grandmother and uncles do? They told me. Shapla (a plant, like a hyacinth), wheat-flour dissolved in water, and working in other people’s homes – if they could work for half a day, if they got such work, if they got some rice, grandfather would bring home that rice for grandmother to cook the meal. Perhaps it even transpired that by the time he returned, my father or uncles would have fallen asleep waiting for grandfather to come home with food. Or perhaps grandmother had gone out and was meant to return, the plates would be laid out and ready, the rice pot would be ready, but the rice was not arriving. Or even when it finally arrived, it was much less than what was required. Those who were older could understand. My

middle uncle understood, the youngest uncle was still small, my aunt was small. So those who were small were fed more and the older ones had a bit of rice and lots of water and fall asleep. A lot of the time they survived eating shapla, and wheat-flour dissolved in water. They did not get wheat-flour. Then came a time, because of all the canals and water-bodies, and being surrounded by the river, there was a lot of fish. No rice but plenty of fish. How would they eat that? They began to eat just fish.

And so they struggled to survive in this way and the children in the family grew up. They went out to work, they worked in some area there, or worked outside, and gradually they began to become somewhat economically self-reliant. Economically self-reliant means that the people from that refugee area who lacked food, who had no identity at all, gradually they were in a situation to be able to have two meals a day.

When I was in school, I remember clearly, because I had come from East Bengal, or because my father was poor, I don't know why, when I took the ferry to go to school, the fare on the ferry was Rs 1.25. There were times when my father was unable to give me even that. And my father loved music and singing, he got a cooking job in Jadavpur University. My father did not take that up. He loved singing, he wanted to sing, he wanted to stay at home and enjoy everyone's love, he would live amidst laughter and gaiety because he was the youngest. So he remained there. Maybe this was also a reason for the economic vulnerability. But what happened was, what I mentioned, one day my father was unable to give me even Rs 1.25. It wasn't like that everyday, but it did happen sometimes.

And my parents hoped that I could learn singing and music, I did learn that too, I did that for three years, that was classical music, one year of vocal and two years of Nazrulgeeti. I remember I sold blackberries and nuts so that I could buy a book called *Sangeet Jigyasha*. I bought it and started learning songs. Even now I sing sometimes, I like it. My sisters still sing, my father sings too. So that's the kind of family I come from. But it wasn't just us, it's the story all the people who are there, including those who were not land-holders, who struggled fiercely. It's because like us, lots of boys and girls rose to the challenge that today some of them are doing good jobs, they have become educated, I mean they are trying to get educated, trying to buy land somewhere, trying to become self-reliant. Whether that's good or bad, that's another question.

S: When your family lived in Noakhali, they had some economic stability there. But when they came away here, they lost that entirely. So did you ever hear from anyone in your family that when they were in East Bengal, they were able to get by but after coming here they couldn't manage even that? Do you remember hearing about this grievance or sorrow?

P: Absolutely. I had heard this many times. I remember my grandfather was anxious to see my eldest aunt and her husband and so they were brought here somehow. I think that was done through a middleman. There were middlemen who took people across the border for money. I remember my eldest aunt and her husband coming, together with their son and daughter. I heard stories of distress from them. Although they were reunited with my grandparents here – they did not have a place of their own, they did not have utensils of their own, a house of their own, even rice of their own. Hence if they ate with them once a day, for the next meal they would have to

fend for themselves or depend on someone else. I heard this grievance many times, that if we were in East Bengal today then perhaps we would not have been in such difficulty. For instance while eating, putting a hand to the forehead and lamenting – how well-off we were over there, with buffalo milk, turtles and various kinds of fish, like katla and rui, such large crabs ... I've heard lots of stories like that. Stories about being unable to eat properly here. It was food that was their biggest hardship. Which they were unable to get here.

S: You had said that they came here at a time of riots. And that a lot of Muslim families helped them and gave them shelter. Do you remember hearing anything about them, any good things about them? Were they remembered, or were there any descriptions of those times of riots?

P: I have forgotten the name of the Muslim gentleman. But I can never forget some things about them, which touched me very much. What I want to highlight is that it was because of our discrimination that they became enraged, because of our contempt and scorn. What do I mean by 'our'? The contempt displayed by the upper class Hindu Brahmins and zamindars enraged the lower class Muslims, and some Muslim preachers capitalized on that, they used that as a weapon and tried to foment riots so that Hindus could be driven away from East Pakistan. And that was the time when what I heard took place.

I interviewed three persons, in great detail, for one hour or one-and-a-half hours each, and I've heard that there are many more people with such experiences. They said that the fact that they were alive was because of Muslims. So-and-so Chacha (uncle), such-and-such Bhai (brother). I heard from three or four people who still say – Oh, so-and-so was such a good man. When I went back after three years, how he embraced me, he took me home and wouldn't let me go until he had fed me. Such stories, of tears shed. While returning he gave me a lot of money so that I don't face any difficulty. He said: Raise your children well, if only they had been here ... One story is from Jibon Poddar, who came here when he was seven years old, his father was in the gold trade. They used to live in Barisal, close to the urban area. The family was in the gold trade. When gradually riots began to erupt in various places, people began leaving the *char* area, and eventually people close to the urban area also began leaving. At that juncture, Jibon babu's father had a close friend who was a Muslim, a Chacha. Relations between them were intimate. If there was no food in the house of one then he went to the other's, and vice versa. Jibon's father was in the gold trade and he also did some money-lending, he was economically self-reliant. Gradually resentment against him grew, people wanted to drive him out. Perhaps he could provide security to many Hindus, that is lower class folk. He could provide security in economic terms or in other ways. Because of that he was targetted. He should either be killed first or driven away. That Chacha heard about this. He held back the attackers once, twice, thrice, and when he was unable to do that anymore, he said, you should take your family and leave, you can't survive here any longer. I won't be able to save you anymore. Jibon babu's father then told him that he was owed money by several people, and I too owe money to several people. Chacha said to him: Forget such attachments. Life comes first. I hope it won't be like this always. When these riots stop, either you come to meet me or I'll go to meet you.

After three years, Jibon babu's father went back. Riots had gradually begun to cease then, or perhaps it was the open air of East Bengal, his Chacha, that environment and one's own people which he was eager to experience again. And so even if there was any problem, he took the risk and went there to meet them. When they met, they embraced warmly and shed tears. How is our daughter-in-law? How is your son? Have you put him into school yet? Is everyone well? He loved to eat some things, does he get them there? Jibon babu loved to eat shapla cooked with prawns, they gave him all that to eat. Because he was small and he lived in a big house, a big Hindu house, and he was the youngest in the house, and the only child in the locality, all those who lived nearby were older. He was everyone's favourite, meaning if shapla and prawns were cooked in some house, he had to be fed that. I mean they came and gave that out of love for him. So Chacha enquired: How is Jibon? Is he getting shapla and prawns there? To hear about this kind of a relationship – touched me very much. So here, our question is: Why did the riots take place, who fomented the riots, why did they have to become refugees, were they to blame for becoming refugees, or was it the state, those who were greedy for state power, or was it someone powerful, the community that was powerful, because of which the lives of all the common folk were transformed into what the term refugee signifies? Such questions plague my mind.

S: After hearing whatever you did about Partition from your family, how do you view the Partition today?

P: What is a country for? What is this notion of 'country'? Or what is Partition? I think the whole thing is a social construction. I mean I am not referring to the function of the state or a border. What I feel, from their accounts and from what I have seen is that if one thinks level-headedly, this is entirely the work of the elite class, those who acquire intellectual property. A person who would have been living in East Bengal, whatever his circumstances may be, he was born there too – after the riots that took place, and the Partition, and because of the riots he is a Indian today, the Hindu masses who became Indians after that – if someone asks himself, why did I have to leave East Bengal? What is Bangladesh and what is India? Why did I have to come across the border? Why did I have to identify myself as a refugee at the border and seek relief, go to a refugee camp, or obtain food by showing my identity card? Was this my fault? Or is the state required to ensure that a healthy environment for all is built up? In that case what is the meaning of society for him? What does the state mean to him? What does land mean to a refugee? I seriously seek the answers to these questions.

To me it seems that it was a means for a powerful class, or the elite class, to achieve their ends. State, Partition, Independence – I can't grasp the meaning of these terms right now. My question is this: What is the meaning of these questions to the refugees? How are they to blame? How are their children to blame? For that matter, how am I to blame? Who will answer these questions? Will the state answer me? But as I told you the state has already responded – the promises that the Nehru government made, and what they actually did. We could not say anything, we were Patni by caste, we hid away. If we said we were Patni we risked being beaten up. Our culture was foul, according to them. I don't know why that was so. Why was it considered foul? On what basis was it seen as being foul? What was the basis for the

culture? Why are we aggressive? Who made us aggressive? Who will give me the answers to these questions?

S: You had said that some members of your family are still in Bangladesh. So for you, what is the relevance today of the border between Bangladesh and India? Because a part of your family still lives there. Your family is there but there is a border in between. What is the significance of this border in your view?

P: Border and state are for me material issues. Tarani Das is my eldest aunt's husband, about whom I had spoken a little while earlier. He was witness to the liberation war of Bangladesh and he had also interacted with the freedom fighters, and on many occasions he provided them food, whether out of fear or goodwill. He took food from his house for them. They did not even know who he was. So I had interviewed some people like that, among whom, Tarani Das was my uncle. Two of his sons and a daughter are still in Bangladesh. My grandparents brought them over, because they were very eager to set eyes again on their eldest daughter and her husband. But they brought them over through a middleman, and had paid three or four thousand rupees for that purpose, so that they would not have to bear the expense. Grandfather did not want them to go back after the visit. They wanted them to stay back. My grandparents wanted their daughter and her husband to live with them. So then what about the children of my aunt and uncle, who had remained behind in Bangladesh? When I asked about this, he said – How I got trapped in life, how I'm dying to lay eyes on them again, how can I do that, you are an educated boy, why don't you see whether you can take us there? When they speak over the phone now, I hear them crying, oh mother, your eldest grand-daughter has got married, she is doing well, she is pregnant, her son is going to school, he's beginning to walk, he doesn't know you people, I wonder how it will be if you come here, when will you come – even now the children who are there are hopeful that they will be able to see their parents. Both my eldest aunt and her husband are now over eighty. They are losing their memory. They know I study in the city. They want me to help them get a visa. If only they could lay their eyes on their children there. Or if possible, the family members who are still here, one son and one daughter, the daughter has a daughter and the son has two sons, they wish they could go back to Bangladesh with everyone. That's what the situation is like even now.

S: In your view, which is your country then?

P: This is a difficult question! I've already said what nation, Partition, the state and the border mean to me. When I am identified in society as a refugee, and when I go to school, or go to play, when I play with my friends, then the fact that I have to hear this word, when some people in the society discriminate against me, when assurances are given which are not fulfilled, when promises have failed, when the state has failed, when the elite society has discriminated against us at various times, when we look at our experience in terms of caste, class and culture and in economic terms – then, when you ask how much I respect and trust the state behind all this, how I view the Partition and the border, these are the questions that I'd like to raise first.

S: You had mentioned that as someone from East Bengal, your customs, thinking, food habits and so on are different. In what way is it different, what is the difference, and how do you maintain that in your own daily life?

P: This very interesting! Regarding food, my understanding is that we believe we dominate other communities. By other communities I mean those who came from Mednipur, they are the only ones I know. I observe the other community, the people from Mednipur. We know that we like greens very much, in various forms – from the crown of the tree to the very leaves. We cook all that in various ways. Prawn, hilsa, and even the snout of the prawn, all cooked in different ways. Perhaps when we eat prawn, shapla, kochu (taro), and even the kochu root and stem, when we cook these in various ways, then the next door neighbor – from the community from Mednipur – comes by, a daughter-in-law or a mother, they look at the food and ask – What on earth is this? Do you actually eat that? Let me try some. If they like it, then they say it's tasty, and if they don't then they make a face and say, this is rotten stuff, but that's only to be expected, they've come from East Bengal, after all they're refugees. This used to happen, I've seen this happen during my childhood, I still see it. There a fish called lotey, I don't know whether people know about it, and then there's the nihari fish which people of my community eat a lot. I like it a lot too. When I used to eat that, given the appearance of the fish and what it looked like after cooking, it was something despicable for the other community – Do you actually eat this? To tell the truth, our foods, that fish – we don't get it in the market anymore. That's because people of other communities buy it up. Or dried fish, which I know the Bangaal folk eat. To tell the truth, we don't get that nowadays in the market. Or loti – that's the root of the kochu (taro) – we don't get that anymore. So there are some things like that, which are unique, which we East Bengalis used to eat, but those have become mixed up now. I mean you can't tell anymore what's ours and what's theirs. I know those are our items, that they have taken it from us. That could be good or bad, or simply nutritious, but it has happened.

S: In regard to the customs and practices during social functions like pujas and wedding rituals, is it in any way different from the people of West Bengal?

P: I should say at first that whatever little I have seen is of those who came from East Bengal. In my childhood that was all that I saw. I mean I did not attend any wedding ceremony of any other community, say of the Muslims or the people from Mednipur, I didn't know anything about that. From what I've seen of the wedding ceremony in our community, it was a very warm relationship. I mean, everyone had to be invited. I mean, if there's no money in my house, that didn't matter, someone else would pay and I would repay him later. This trust existed between people, it is still there. During the wedding ceremony, various songs are sung to the bride, the preparation and decoration of ritual objects, taking gifts to the groom's house, gifts being brought to the bride's house – in all these aspects there's a lot of difference. We used to think you people do it this way, but we don't do it that way. But they would say – These aren't any customs at all! Such things are not part of the culture! You've made all this up by yourselves. You don't have any culture, any unique culture handed down by your forefathers, after all you people have come from East Bengal, you don't have any identity, you've made it all up in your own way ... Even if that was the case, the fact was that we liked it, whether it was our culture or whatever, we used to like whatever we saw. I mean we had a unique culture. That was the case with all the social functions.

S: Do you remember the customs that used to be followed?

P: Actually I didn't observe that so closely. For instance the ceremony in the bride's house on the eve of the wedding. The pomp with which the wedding eve ceremony was conducted – I have not seen that in the other community. Maybe I didn't get the opportunity to see that, I don't know what it is actually like in their community. In our community, the ceremony on the eve of the wedding is a very important one, I mean it was a most enjoyable one, when we were small, all the elderly men sitting around the ceremonial fire, lamps made of clay would be prepared, with oil and wicks made of cotton, showering paddy on the couple in blessing, I used to enjoy all these rituals, and lots of songs were sung. The songs that were sung – that was a very important part of the whole thing for me, it was great fun. This was a very unique culture, it seemed to me to be an expression of the inner culture of these folk. It was like that for everyone.

S: You had said that there were also several other communities besides the community that came from east Bengal. Can you tell us who the other communities were, and what your relations with them were like?

P: The people were mostly from Howrah and from Mednipur. Patharpratima is a large region, as I've already mentioned. The largest police station in the Sunderbans is Patharpratima. Which was set up covering twelve islands. There are some people from Orissa as well, though you don't see them that much. So basically it was people from Howrah, from Mednipur and people from East Bengal, those who are known as Bangaals. It's these three communities that I've seen.

S: You told us these stories as an insider from this community, which you had heard from people at home from your childhood. The story of struggle, coming away from East Bengal, settling here, struggling against the government's discrimination. From all the stories you heard, which are stories you want to tell your next generation?

P: There is a member of our community, from that small region, who had qualified as an M.B.B.S. doctor. He is a nephew, a cousin's son. Another person is an auditor with United Bank, someone qualified as a chartered accountant. All of them are children of refugees. But no one studied social science or took up such research, this aspect was skipped – about what we should get, what we did not get. Why we did not get that, who were the ones who denied us that. Such questions come to my mind because I took up social science, in my research I am trying to look through the lens of social science – family, community, culture, economic source, political economy. In an attempt to find answers in these areas I began to find out about the people here. When other educated people talk about that, I mean when people from my community become engaged with such matters – then we will take up the issue of our demands and grievances, we must fight. Just as I am trying to find out about that, so do I want to know more about the fact that 'refugee' does not mean merely Dandakaranya or Marichhjhampi.

In AG-Plot, the low-lying island right on the Bay of Bengal, in the Sunderbans, which comes under the Patharpratima police station, refugees have built up a middle-class village. I don't know whether there has been any discussion about that in the academic world. So I will try to highlight this. I mean, so that there can be more discussion about this in the academic world. What the political economy of the

community was like, what kind of politics happened regarding them. Also, in future, I can or will try to write about the people here.

S: Why would you want to tell the stories about your family to your next generation?

P: In all the families of human beings in the world, in one form or another there are stories about their forefathers, about the family's history. I will tell them that, I want to tell them only one thing, about how my family came here, why they came here, and what the answer to that 'why' is. And who is responsible for that 'why'? What is it that you must do, and how will you view this 'why'? That's how I look at it.

Translated by V. Ramaswamy