

My Parents' World – Inherited Memories

Interview with Sanchita Bhattacharya

Interviewed by Nazmul

I've heard many tales, and not from just one or two persons but from many people, but before that I would like to say something about how I relate to this subject of 'inherited memories'.

One day we were chatting in the canteen during the lunch hour at my office. Nazmul had just returned from a visit to Dhaka, and we were asking him about the Dhaka experience. Whenever someone went anywhere, it was our habit to ask him or her to tell us all about it. So it was Nazmul's turn now, what did you see in Bangladesh, what are the people there like, what all did you eat, and all that. He told several tales and in the course of that he spoke about the people there.

Suddenly I felt that I was not there, I had probably reached some point in my childhood and was visualizing my maternal grandmother serving boris (fritters) and telling us some tales as she did so. My mejo-mama-dadu (middle maternal grand-uncle) had told some tales about my boro-mama (eldest maternal uncle), about a conversation with Phool Mama (maternal uncle).

My mejo-mamima-dida (middle maternal grand-aunt) ... some old memories, tales relating to memories from early childhood, I was perhaps trying to imagine the story my didima (maternal grandmother) used to narrate about the paddy-field, a sudden flash of everything, all of those tales ... for the time being, I was not there. And then I returned to the conversation.

So I narrated some tales too, given the subject – when the light-bulb of an idea came alight in Nazmul's head – that I should tell more such stories. But I had a major objection at the very beginning because of which I did not agree initially. The reason was that I had huge objections to the way this word, 'refugee', was used. I was somehow allergic to this word, there were several reasons for that, I don't know why, but I simply cannot tolerate that word.

So then Nazmul persuaded me, that I must tell my stories, you have many stories, he said, I had told him a couple then, and he said, try and remember them.

So I began remembering, more stories came to mind, I began remembering various things, rather, in the course of remembering, there came a point when I felt, yes, there's plenty of things here, I ought to share them. So here I am, I am Sanchita Bhattacharya, an Indian from the city, Kolkata.

Regarding Partition, I have to begin a bit before that, because many of the people on my mother's side of the family came from present-day Bangladesh to present-day India.

Beginning from the time between 1946 and 1948, and then permanently. But before that, they came from present-day Bangladesh to present-day Kolkata, I mean they moved within undivided Bengal, so in that sense, I don't know whether it is correct to use the terms 'partition-ite' or 'refugee' to refer to them. I have thought a bit about this.

But yes, definitely, I would like to share the accounts I heard from them.

Broadly speaking, there are two parts to the story about coming from Bangladesh to Kolkata or India. First, was the arrival of my dada-moshai, I mean my mother's father, and her mother; and second, the arrival of people from my maternal grandmother's father's side, from my mamima-dida's (maternal grand-aunt) side, as well as some other relatives.

My dadubhai, that is my mother's father, I've heard about him although I don't remember him, whatever I have heard is mainly from my didima (maternal grandmother), boro-mama (eldest maternal uncle) and mashi-moni (maternal aunt). Apparently when my dadu-bhai appeared for the matriculation examination, that was in undivided Bengal, meaning it covered the entire region of present-day Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Assam and Burma, he had attained very good results in that examination. And he got a scholarship. With the scholarship he came to Calcutta from Jessore for his further education, from Norai sub-division in Jessore district, the name of their village was Mallikpur. That's where he came from.

He came here to do his Intermediate in Arts, somewhere around 1912 or 1913. I cannot remember the exact date. After completing his Intermediate, he graduated with a B.A. from Scottish Church College, and then he studied English Literature and subsequently he taught at Raj College, which had been set up by the Maharaja of Jharia. This was long before Independence or even the Second World War. Dadu-bhai lived in his workplace, Jharia, and returned to his village home in Mallikpur during the vacations. At this time, my boro-mama (eldest maternal uncle), was studying in college in Daulatpur, in Khulna district, and my boro-mashi (eldest maternal aunt) was studying in the district school in Khulna. And because she was studying in the district school, she stayed in my didima's (maternal grandmother) house, because the house was in Khulna town. My didima's father lived in Khulna, their main house was in Khulna town, and they had some property too. In the places called Senhata and Bagerhat, and they were rich people. But my dadu-bhai's family were, comparatively speaking, were not so well-off economically.

Like I said, my dadu-bhai used to travel back and forth, on account of his job he lived here, while his family lived in Mallikpur. I have heard descriptions of their house from my didima. The house was on a plot of about 20 cottahs, a mud house, and supposedly there was also a boat in the house, and I had thought that it was strange to have a boat in the house.

But I did hear that there were boats there, it was a place where it became flooded during rains, and then it was not possible to go from one place to another except by boat, in fact even to go from one house to another boats had to be used. And during the rains, it was by boat that vendors came to sell provisions. Apparently such boats were called *goynar nauka* (jewellery boat).

Subsequently I read the book, *Amar Mayer Baaper Bari* (My Mother's Father's Family), by Rani Chand. There I found a reference to this business of going from one place to another by boat, as well as about cooking on the boat. And then I realized that through the tales told to me by my didima, the same kind of memories had already been documented, and I, thanks to my own imagination, possessed those memories in my own version.

My didima used to tell several small stories, among them, I remember one particular story very well. There was a strange animal there, its name was apparently 'hural'. The subject had arisen in this way, that one of my granduncles had been bitten by a dog, and so my didima had asked whether he had taken the necessary injections. So I said, yes. I was very small then, and because both my parents had jobs, during the summer holidays, winter holidays and puja holidays I used to spend my time in my mamar bari (mother's brother's house, or mother's parents' house) in Jharia, in Dhanbad district. I was very close to my didima. Didima told lots of tales. One of those tales is the tale about the harul.

As soon as she mentioned the harul, I had to hear the story, because I had never heard about such an animal. Now I think that it must have been a hybrid between a dog and some animal like a fox, which was called harul in the local dialect, and apparently this had bitten a boy and the boy had developed hydrophobia. This was after Independence and by then didima had come away to the house in Jharia. This family came after Partition and they were in a very bad way, lodging with a family somewhere in Kolkata. They were unable to get him treated. The place they were staying in was not very convenient, and the boy was turning violent. They did not have an extra room where he could be confined, and so they went with the boy to my mama's house, in Jharia, and there he was confined in an extra room. When he had attacks, he would apparently shout and scream terribly, bang the door, scratch it. They did not have food and were unable to feed their children, that was a frightful thing.

And something else happened at that time, the outbreak of pox. Pox means small pox, not chicken pox, and in our family, when one of my mamas (maternal uncle) was small, I call him Moni mama, he too contracted pox and was unable to get it treated. Either they didn't know what it was or were unable to get it treated, or whatever, but finally he became blind. He was 10 or 11 years old then, and that was a big setback. There were other children too, perhaps they had to be given barley to eat. There was a difficulty with water because didima used to say that the people there mainly used water drawn from the pond and the river.

But there was a tubewell in my dadu's house, they used to consume water drawn from the tubewell, but somehow because that water was infected too or for some other reason, many of the children in the house fell ill. Consequently, there was a sense of panic among them. Another cause for a sense of panic was that their land had suddenly been forcibly occupied by some people, and they belonged to another religion.

As a result, once the stock of paddy and rice in the house was exhausted, they panicked, about the difficult situation they were in, being unable to feed the children. And out of such a feeling they thought that for the time being, when everything was in

turmoil, they should go to Jharia. Now my dadu (maternal grandfather) was in Jharia then, so they thought they would go and stay there for a time. Once things settled down, when peace returned, they would return. Hence, as a temporary arrangement, dadu-bhai took his folks there, and so far as I heard, my mother's pishima (paternal aunt) didn't want to go there then. They asked to be dropped in their ancestral house, that is to say in the place where her father-in-law's house was. My mother's pishima, together with her children, was first dropped there and after that my dadu-bhai hired a boat and took his family on that boat, meaning my didima, dadu-bhai's mother and the children. He took them towards the ferry station in Jessore, and there was a place called Itna where they had to go before going to the ferry station. They went by a small boat from their house in the village of Mallikpur to Itna. When they boarded the boat, then, I heard that my mama and others were playing as they sat on the boat, handling this and that, lifting a plank to see what was underneath that. And he saw that there were a number of cleavers and axes there, and at the same time, my Ranga-mama heard one boatman quarrelling with another boatman about the division of jewellery. That was because they knew about my dadu-bhai, and they knew that my didima came from a wealthy family, with a lot of property. So they probably got the idea that these people were carrying jewellery. Maybe they were not going away permanently, but they must be carrying valuables. The boatmen had such an idea, and they were discussing how much each one would get after killing the passengers. My Ranga mama heard that, and he and my mashi-moni (maternal aunt) discussed that and told dadu about it. After that the children, meaning Ranga mama and mashi-moni, took out the bag from under the plank and slowly dropped the cleavers and the axes into the water. After the boat had gone a distance and the boatmen's quarrel had been resolved, when they came to search for the things, they could not find anything there. They began to scold the children. What are you doing here? We have expensive things here. There's this, there's that, why did you touch it, why are you playing here? The children replied, it's such a small boat, we were sitting on that side and then came to sit on this side, we don't know anything. So that was a danger that they averted, and then they came to the place called Itna, and once they reached there, dadu-bhai left that boat, and then he hired a *goynar nauka* (jewellery boat). That was the kind of boat that my didima had spoken about, on which provisions were carried. It was basically a goods-boat. A large one. It was big in terms of size, and since it was used to carry goods, if people boarded it, this *goynar nauka* could carry many more persons than a small boat could. Dadu-bhai and didima went with everyone to the ferry station in Jessore, they took a ferry there and crossed the river, and so they came to Basirhat. After crossing the river, perhaps from Basirhat or somewhere, they boarded a train. But I know they reached Jharia via Sealdah. Just after they reached Jharia there were riots in Calcutta in 1946, but before that they had already reached Jharia safely from Bangladesh, that is present-day Bangladesh.

After they reached Jharia there was a setback. One could say they left behind a big house, their paddy-land, they left everything behind and came to a small rented house, with so many people there, but they adapted to that. My boro mama (elder maternal uncle) used to tell me that you should not be dwelling upon the past. Instead of looking at things behind try to move ahead. Perhaps this is what is called life force, or the struggle against life. The struggle to survive with one's head held high in society. Perhaps Partition taught them this great lesson. Didima and all arrived here in 1946.

Here, the environment was completely different. Dhanbad, Jharia, the area of coal mines, there were lots of Bengalis there, that's so even today. Innumerable Bengalis were there, they were there to earn their livelihood in jobs. The spice market of north India went through Jharia, consequently it was a market area. Although it was a small place, it was densely populated. There was no impact of the riots there, nor did they face any kind of social difficulty. But they had another kind of problem after going there. In the main, I heard the tale of a dacoity there from my boro mama (eldest maternal uncle), and that was in a strange way. Boro mama used to go to Calcutta every now and then on work. My mama's house was in Sukea Street. So he used to stay in the house there. It was very convenient to go anywhere in Calcutta from our house there, it was very centrally located, and it was very convenient from the viewpoint of communication. So boro-mama lived there. He used to smoke but when there were elders in the house he never smoked, he did not smoke even when women-folk were around. In fact, he never smoked in front of the children of the house either, and only smoked outside the house. This was a peculiar aspect of his nature. My pishima (paternal aunt) and jethas (father's elder brothers) used to say, after all they are Bangaals, that's why they are like that. That's because my father's family had always been residents of present-day India. There was no concept of Bangaal with them. In fact, I never heard this business about Bangaal and Ghoti in my house, because I am of mixed origin.

So boro-mama used to come to our house. One day I went out for a walk with boro-mama. Boro-mama wanted to buy a pair of flip-flops from Bata. The Bata shop in Manicktala was near our house. The two of us set out in the evening. I was small then, but I used to read the stories in the Crime World series. Oyshkanto Bakshi, Nata's intelligence, storybooks, pictures in that of a bandit with a staff in his hand, and so on. After that I had read some stories about dacoits. So boro-mama asked me, have you read the story about the bandit Mohan? I said I hadn't. Mama said, how's that! If I had not read the story of the bandit Mohan, my life was in vain. What's the point in reading all these detective stories? Or the Crime World series?

If you don't read about the bandit Mohan, you can't call yourself a Bengali. So what was to be done! I did not have that. It's alright, I'll get it for you. On his next visit he brought me a book of stories about the bandit Mohan. I read that. After reading it I had lots of questions. Once again, I went out one day with my boro-mama. That's when boro-mama told me about this dacoity. He had come with my didima from present-day Bangladesh to present-day India. They had arrived in Jharia in 1946. It was something new to the people there. People had not yet started coming away from East Bengal on account of the so-called refugee crisis. Coming to India and spreading out had not yet started on a massive scale, and so in Jharia, those who lived around the small colliery house there, were extremely surprised that in this house people spoke in a strange dialect.

I remember my didima's conversation with the milk-man. My grandmother was talking in her East Bengali dialect, and the milk-man in Hindi, *Ma-ji, gamla laiye* (mother, bring the utensil). In this strange way the two of them were communicating with each other, and both of them could understand each other very well. There was another thing. My didima used to say that if she talked money matters with him he understood that, but whenever she said that the portion was less or something like that, he could not understand. But he did that deliberately. She said that he knows the

language but he won't speak that with me because that's his conspiracy. Because didima had come from East Bengal. That's why he didn't like her. That's why he played all these tricks.

Somehow the news spread that these people had a lot of property. That was true too, and didima herself had brought along almost 150 bhoris of gold. There was a dacoity in the house. Apparently the police station was right in front of the house, and when the dacoity was taking place, someone ran there and informed the police and apparently they sent them away. How can there be a dacoity in the afternoon? And that too when we are around? This conversation was taking place in Hindi, but those who had gone to report the incident were small, they were sent away and the dacoits took everything away. They took away good clothes, good utensils and whatever else they could find from the house.

Dadu-bahi suddenly got agitated for some reason, and grabbed hold of one of the dacoits and there were fisticuffs between them. And unless one sees the houses there, it's difficult for me to explain all this.

As it happens when there are lots of people in a house, a room was piled up with bedding and so on. I have seen that, but for the benefit of those who haven't seen that I say it. A room piled up with bedding, with mattresses, pillows and so on piled from the floor to almost the ceiling. Several rows and columns like this, and in the course of the fisticuffs they landed there and somehow both dadu-bhai and the dacoit got entangled with a mosquito net. The dacoits had something like swords in their hands, big swords or cleavers. He tried to hit dadu-bhai with that but he rolled into the mosquito net. The dacoit rolled too. Meaning both dadu-bhai and the dacoit were injured. And after a point he could not fight any more, and the dacoits pulled away their member and went away. Dadu-bhai was severely injured and was under treatment for a long time and gradually recovered and resumed working again. My didima used to say various things about some incidents like this. Like once I told her a story about my friend's thakuma (paternal grandmother), she had made excellent pithe (crepe), and so the next time I went to my grandparents' house I said, Didima I had a kind of pithe, I believe it's called patisopta. Didima then told me about several more kinds of pithe. I asked her, what's 'lucy pithe'? And that got her started, although it was evening mashi-moni (maternal aunt) came along, coconuts were grated and the lucy pithe was prepared. So this was one of the several varieties of pithe, she said. After that my didima told me, do you know, the womenfolk in Dhaka are extremely skilled. How was that? They are very good in stitch-craft, they generally know how to sing, meaning, a leaning towards arts and culture, and very educated and sophisticated.

Actually I see the thing in a different way. From the time I was very small, I have seen that because there was a television set in my house, sometimes a group of people would come, who came in the afternoon, skipping their office, I mean signing in at work and then presenting themselves at our house, and asking my mother for various items of food. My mother too, after returning from office, made arrangement so that they could eat. And they created a ruckus, why, because there was a football match, between East Bengal and Mohun Bagan. My father was a Mohun Bagan supporter, and all the people who came to watch the match were East Bengal fans, and it was in our house that they ate ghugni, payesh, toast, omlettes, or boied eggs, they made all

kinds of requests. Some even said before they left, I'll have luchi-alurdom, and said, Boudi (sister-in-law), there's a game on such-and-such date. When I was very small, whenever the match was being relayed, I did not know what was happening, I mean there was a terrific ruckus, it was a small room, we lived in a nuclear family. I mean we had a small room, the television was in the same room where we slept, the 'Supreme' model of the Konarak brand of television, which had a shutter that could be opened and shut, black-and-white. And they used to come, they came on the match days, and stayed all day, and because I was small they were kind enough to give me a place on the corner of the bed. And after half-time – why in that room, mother, father and I did not have a place even in the space adjacent to the room, where the dining table was. We would stand in the small terrace adjoining our room or in the verandah, and inside the room, there were some highly agitated people, all fighting with each other, about why someone could not score a goal, all that was happening inside. I found this very interesting because all of them were Bangaal, but our house was a Ghoti one. I had not yet realized then what is Bangaal and what is Ghoti, or why I should be called Ghoti, why my mother should be called Bangaal and my father Ghoti.

There used to be music programmes on Bangladesh television, late at night. During 1984-85, one could catch the transmission at our place, if someone had a large antenna. So the music programme could be caught on our TV set, and several people from our para (neighbourhood) came to watch that, and it was very good. The thing called privacy, about which we fight so much these days, about my privacy being hampered – there was no such notion of privacy. A trunk call from far away would come in our house, in the middle of the night there would be a knock on the door and we would be woken up. Someone wanted to hear the songs, so there would be a knock on the door and we would be woken up. There was an India-Pakistan cricket match, there was no question of sleep, get up, go and sleep on the stairs, but the match would go on. That's how it was. Small things like this. And then when I first realized about this Bangal-Ghoti business, there's a story about that too.

I had gone to Baharampur, my Ranga mashi (maternal aunt) lives there. I was roaming around near our house there with my older cousins and their cousins. We went to a person's house, the dida (maternal grandmother) in that house waved out to us and called us. She was making pickles, we were greedy to eat that. We went to her as soon as she called us, and when we went to her, she said, "*Aay boy*". We could not understand her. Again she said, "*Aay boy*". There was another person with us, she said, "But I'm a girl, why is she calling me a boy!" Laughter.

I couldn't understand either, my older cousin was with me, she tried to cover up by saying, she's asking you to sit, she'll give you the pickles if you sit down. All of us sat down beside each other. I can't remember what kind of pickle it was, whether made of mango or something else. We had the pickle in our hands and ate it as we returned home. As soon as we reached home, my Ranga mashi's in-laws asked: Where did you go? How come all you children have pickles! So we said we had gone to such-and-such a place, we went through this lane and that lane. They said: Why did you go to that house? That's a house of Bangaals. They were ultra-Ghotis. I asked: What's Bangaal? And what's Ghoti? I don't understand. Returning home, I told my father. After I told my father, he told me something very funny. He said, if someone asks you what you are, what will you say? I didn't know what to say, I could not

understand. He said, say you are Bati (a compound of Bangaal and Ghoti). 'Ba' from Bangal and 'ti' from Ghoti, and then no one can tell you anything.

That was my first experience where I heard and learnt about that. Then came the Hailey's comet, in 1986 if I am not mistaken. A telescope was fitted on the roof of Science College.

Both my mother and my father were then posted in Science College. And the story of the telescope fitted on the roof was a funny one indeed. Sometimes we saw Mars, sometimes Venus and sometimes we saw Saturn but we could not see even the tail of Hailey's comet. So the first day's efforts were in vain. On the second day, everyone said, No, this won't do. Good food has to be organized, or else the telescope won't heed us. The responsibility for cooking fell on some people. One of them was my mother, because my mother was a good cook. And the responsibility for cooking was given selectively only to those whose origins were in East Bengal. My mother cooked and took the food along. That night our turn came to see the Hailey comet. We stayed up the whole night frolicking, and people had cooked and brought various items – alurdum, posto, kumror chokka, meat, mutton chicken. And several more items, more than could be eaten. It was a unique experience. Acharya Prafulla Chandra Road went past our house, the Rajabazar Science College was very near our house. We climbed up to the roof in silence, it was as if we were in some hill station, the road looked so clean at night from above. I remember seeing that and it was then that I heard: Do you know why the food was no great? They are all Bangaal. People were eating the food and praising the cooking, but they could not refrain from taunting. I observed all these things, but such things were never there in our house, nothing like this had been told to me, or talking about the term 'refugee'. My Thakur-dada (paternal grandfather) was pandit (priestly class). He had come to Calcutta many years ago from Bhatpara, near Naihati, holding his father's hand. I mean my father's grandfather. So then are we too refugees? Or else why is the term 'refugee' used? And who is it used for?

Later this debate came to my mind when I heard something my dadu-bhai (maternal grandfather) said. I don't know, maybe this is a bit controversial, I don't know if it's appropriate to talk about that, but still I think I should say it, because that's how I view things.

My father's paternal grandfather came to Kolkata from a place near Naihati with his son. They came from faraway, walking all the way and bearing a lot of hardship. He struggled a lot, he got his son educated here, and had him established. Built a house and lived there. The city of Calcutta developed after that. Apparently there was a hogla (hyacinth) jungle at the Manicktala intersection. In that case that was also a remote area, very far away from where he used to live. Neither he nor his ancestors had anything to do with the place, and they too migrated. And my dadu-bhai, my mejo-mama-dadu (middle maternal granduncle), my mamima-dida (maternal grandaunt) and my didima too had migrated.

My dadu-bhai never got a refugee card made, he never went to claim anything after the land-exchange arrangement. His stance was, I am an independent citizen, of independent India. Sometime before 1947, I came from one region to another region within my own country. Why should my family and I be called 'refugee'? Am I a

refugee? If he is a refugee, then why is only my Thakur-dada (paternal grandfather) a non-refugee? He too migrated from one place to another place. We use the term 'diaspora Bengalis', don't we? After all he had come in search of livelihood. He too was not being able to continue living there, he was in hardship. A forced migration, for one reason or another. Between the two of them, whom will you call a refugee? This is a very big question for me. And so my objection to the term 'refugee'.

I am a successor of people who have witnessed Partition, but I am not willing to accept the identity of a 'refugee'.

Question: It's been such a long time since the Partition in 1947, it is 2015 now. After all this time what meaning do the terms India, West Bengal, East Bengal (which is present-day Bangladesh) and Partition have in your life?

Answer: To tell the truth, they have no meaning at all. This is all about memories, memories of my ancestor, my dadu, my dida, the people in my family, their experiences, their feelings and my feelings for them, the way I feel for them. Liking them, loving them. My own likes and loves are thereby conditioned by that.

There's an India-Pakistan match, Pakistan wins, flags of Pakistan are waved and crackers are burst to celebrate in Rajabazar, I feel bad about that. But Bangladesh too wins cricket matches against India, yet no one waves their flag, no one bursts crackers. I'd like to say something here, maybe it's unrelated. Whenever anyone goes somewhere for an outing, I have a habit of asking them about it. I'd like to mention my mejo-mami (middle maternal aunt's wife) and mama-dadu too, or mamima and dada as I called them, what I learnt about their experiences. One of their daughters is my mashi (mother's cousin). That mashi and her family had gone to visit Bangladesh. They have travelled all over the world, they've been to China, to Egypt, to America, and Bangladesh too, and after they returned, two things from their account struck me. One, that in Bangladesh, alcohol is not sold in the open market, and second, that there are no brothels there, no prostitution. Being a woman, I feel proud for that country, and look at the ratio of rapes. Today these are our social problems. If you look at any country in East Asia or South East Asia, these are the problems, isn't it? If a small country like Bangladesh can overcome that, then why shouldn't we learn good things from them? In the same way, another mashi (mother's cousin) of mine had been to Lahore, Islamabad and Karachi, that was just a few days before a gun attack on a school in Islamabad. They were in Pakistan for over a month. I heard a lot of things from them too, but I think Pakistan is a country that is behind terrorist attacks in my country, exploding bombs, but one does not feel that way about Bangladesh. Maybe that's because of the common language, maybe it's because my forefathers loved that country, I don't know why.

Question: How do you view the border between India and Bangladesh, I mean, once we were one, now there is a physical border in between and we are two separate countries.

Answer: As soon as the word 'border' is mentioned, if I shut my eyes, I can see the picture of the Wagah border. Soldiers in headgear stand carrying guns, a large gate, barbed wire. But is that what 'border' means? I'd like to say something here. The Aila

cyclone took place in 2009. After the cyclone I had gone to the Sunderbans on a relief mission.

We went along the road near Science City, going past Malancha, to the Block called Dhamakali II. When we reached there, we spoke to the District Magistrate, and after that we took the DM's boat and went to a place, via Hingalganj. At that time, because the topography of the place changed after Aila, I mean the location of the islands, the geographical locations had practically shifted, because the tributaries and their branches had all become so merged, and there had been land subsidence, as a result of which the entire topography had changed. The landmarks indicated on the map had disappeared and become non-existent.

We had a lot of rice with us, almost 500 kilos, 200 kilos of daal, lots of bottles of water, packets of biscuits, and some clothes. Five of us had gone on the relief mission, entirely out of our own initiative, we had raised funds from among our friends, bought all the stuff, loaded it on two Tata Sumo vehicles and set out. And our plan was to not hand over the things to anyone in between. We would give it directly to the affected people. We had gone in July, the impact of Aila had waned by then. On the way, we saw that the relief materials going there were being sold, shirts, caps and socks for five rupees each, packets of biscuits and so on. As we travelled, we began to doubt whether we had taken a correct decision, to come on a relief mission.

So we went first to the DM. He was operating out of a temporary office in a lodge, because the DM's office and the police station had already been submerged under water. He was operating from there and he was extremely helpful, and gave us his personal launch and put us in touch over the phone with the upa-pradhan of a village, who then took us from Hingalganj to a place called Situliya. We got down there. The embankment of the river was 20 feet high. I had heard such stories from my didima. I could actually relate to the topography, the high mud embankments, the river-bank. It took us almost two hours to reach there from Hingalganj on the DM's launch.

Along the river-bank were countless people, I mean in an extremely bad way, without clothes, whatever they were wearing was torn and dirty, they lacked any food. Some of them had erected plastic sheets on the embankment, and some were there without even that. Our goods were unloaded. There were several people from the government on the launch we had come on, because it was the DM's launch. The village upa-pradhan who was with us, said to us, since you have come all this way, go ahead and see for yourself the level of devastation in the village. We went a just a little bit into the village, a narrow road, on both sides of which there had been land subsidence, with the river flowing by, probably the Ichhamati or some part of that.

After going a short distance, the road came to an end, and when we were retuning the water was hitting at my feet, perhaps the tide would set in within five minutes, so we had to depart. There I remembered the stories my didima had told me, how the disaster left everything silent. When we were back in the boat, someone in the launch threw a packet of biscuits, and just for that, someone jumped from the high embankment into the water, because they had nothing to eat day after day. Standing on that boat, the upa-pradhan told us, do you know, on the other side is Khulna. And I thought, but Khulna is where my didima's house was!

Question: Have you ever been to Bangladesh?

Answer: I haven't been, but I really want to go there.

Question: The way you describe each and every thing, each place – do you have a desire to go to the Bangladesh of your forefathers?

Answer: Definitely. I want to go, because I have heard my didimas stories, about how heavily it had rained before she went to sleep at night, and water from the river had submerged the paddy-fields, and they remained submerged for a long time, even after the rain had stopped. The paddy crop had gone under water. Before they went to sleep at night, they saw that the paddy-fields had been submerged under water. When they woke up in the morning, they saw that the tops of the paddy-stalks had emerged from the water. Perhaps this was a desire to survive, a survival strategy, or defence mechanism. The survival strategy or defence mechanism of those who experienced Partition was exactly the same.

The most significant thing is that the stories we hear in our childhood have an amazing impact on our mind. When I read a book of stories now, let's say *Pother Dabi*, which I used to read when I was in Class 4 because it was my didimas favourite. At that time I didn't understand, it had seemed strange, and after that when I read it again when I was in Class 9 or 10, I saw it in another light. I discussed it with my boro-mama (eldest maternal uncle). He asked me: Why did you read that? Read *Ami Subhas Bolchhi*, by Sailesh. I read that. After reading that, I talked to my mamima-dida (maternal grandaunt), because she had met him, she had met Subhas Bose, they had participated in the freedom struggle.

And after that I came to know a lot of things from them. Hence, you look at something at a certain age, but it has another kind of impact at a later age. If you talk about childhood memories, I will tell you about my summer vacations, there would be no studies, I'm roaming around in the garden of my mamar-bari (maternal uncle's house, or mother's parents' house), I'm plucking mangoes from the trees and eating them. These are my fondest memories, very personal and intimate memories. That's not how I would feel if I went out for lunch today to the Mainland China restaurant! One can't convey the nature of those feelings.

Question: Although people had thought that there would be no partition, that the turmoil was temporary, ultimately it did happen. Can you tell us something about life after Partition?

Answer: Yes, definitely. My mejomama-dadu (mother's middle maternal uncle) role is very important in this regard. My mother's mejo-mama (middle maternal uncle) was Shantisharan Roychoudhary, he was associated with the armed revolution in Bengal. He had participated in the struggle with Subhas Bose too. He had studied in Khulna College. After he graduated, he was engaged full-time in the freedom struggle. He was arrested by the British government of India and sent to jail.

I think he was released from jail a few years before Independence. And his jail custody was a strange affair, because didima's father, Chandicharan Roychoudhary,

lived in Khulna town, he was a landlord from the Bagerhat and Senahati areas. Apparently the British government of India had acquired land from him for laying railway lines and setting up railway stations, schools, colleges and factories. So he was a resourceful man and he had contacts in high places, and despite that, one of his sons was a revolutionary, the government had caught him and tortured him. He was whipped in jail, his nails were pulled out, and the gentleman carried the marks of that torture on his body all his life. All his life, he only wore khadi punjabis, he never gave up his ideals. He used to write for newspapers and later he was also the editor of a radical magazine called *Biplobi Bangla* (Revolutionary Bengal).

I was very familiar with his ideology. I remember his easy-chair, he would either be sitting on the easy-chair all day, reading, or at his desk, writing something. A man who held on to his ideals all his life, I definitely want to know about his ideology, I want to know about the hatching ground of the ideology. My dadu-bhai's ideology was the same my didima's, or my mamima-dida's. They had the same ideology and its hatching ground was East Bengal. I want to go and see the place once.

Let me come to the subject of pre-Partition and post-Partition. In that connection, I want to say that when mejomama-dadu was released from jail, he returned home. An incident took place when he was in jail. My didima's father passed away, and although he was a very influential person and a wealthy person, the British government of India did not permit his son who was in custody in jail even to see his father's dead body, let alone light his father's funeral pyre, according to Hindu rituals. That was the kind of treatment meted out to the son of someone whose very title (Roychoudhary) indicated that he was a friend of the British. Such harsh treatment even to the son of a friend of theirs, he was tortured in jail. So what would have been the condition of someone who had no such contacts?

My boro-mama (eldest maternal uncle) used to say, my Phool mama had also said, as had my mashimoni (maternal aunt) as well as my mejomama-dadu and mamima-dida, all used to say that there would be no partition. They had that firm conviction because all their life, I always heard them say, that this was not the kind of freedom they wanted. Was Partition the basis of Independence? Their stance had been that the British ought to leave and let us run our own country ourselves, so why did they partition the country? And because of this belief, my dadu-bhai and didima migrated to this place from present-day Bangladesh in 1946. But mejomama-dadu remained in East Pakistan even after Independence.

And if I am not mistaken, they came away to India around the end of 1948, and it would be wrong to say that they came, they were compelled to leave. Their ancestral property and land in Bagerhat and in Senhata had already been encroached upon, been forcibly occupied. Mejomama-dadu had told me that the British authorities used to torture people by whipping them. The country became free, but did the Pakistani army do any better? They too barged into my house, they set fire to the granary full of paddy, some officer of theirs liked a large mirror of Belgian glass in our house and had it removed and took it away. Someone liked the lamp in the natmandir (temple) in our house, they had that removed and took it away. A friend who was a police officer came and told me that my house was no longer mine, that my name was on the hit list, if you remain here too long your family will be killed. This was not Independence.

Question: It's been a long time since Partition, how do you view it now? Bengal was one once, and now, after so long, which country do you think you belong to?

Answer: My country is India. I am an Indian by birth and from my soul. I belong to India, I don't have any sense of belonging to any other country. Kolkata is my city. I have been here ever since I was born, I grew up here, this is my place, I don't have any other place. But yes, if you talk about Bangladesh, then there is definitely a soft corner somewhere, because that place was dear to my didima, whom I love very much. It was very dear for my grandparents, and I love them dearly. I had spoken earlier about my love for my ancestors, it's that which has conditioned me, conditioned the way I feel about Bangladesh. I definitely want to lay my own eyes once on the scene of the golden paddy-fields. If I am given an opportunity, I definitely want to go there.

Question: We heard many stories from you. Would you want to pass on these stories to your next generation? Are there are specific stories that you would like to pass on, or not to pass on?

Answer: Yes, I will definitely do it. The memories of my childhood, or the kind of stories I have heard, I will definitely share those stories. Not only with my next generation, but also with my friends and acquaintances. With all those with whom I can share stories about my life. Why not? It's very good if I tell you what I know. That is how we get to know each other in a better way. So in that sense, I would definitely want to share this.

I remember an incident. Didima used to say that when the village house used to get flooded, koi fish would emerge from that. So there's a funny incident about that. When we were small, when we used to go during our holidays to my mamar-bari (maternal uncle's house, or mother's parents' house), there was water shortage there. A large vat was filled with water and fish like shingi and magur were kept there. Catching those fish was a great accomplishment. These fish were caught, cut and fish curry was prepared and fed to the children.

Catching the fish was most difficult! My mamas (maternal uncles) were unable to, as were my mamis (mamas' wives). All except my mashi-moni (maternal aunt) and my didima, who could do it with their eyes closed, putting in their hand in a certain way and pulling out the fish after that. We used to watch with astonishment, how they could blithely pull out a fish in one go, and they used to say, 'Hey, it was like this in our village'. And then she would narrate a story.

So, why not? Why would I not want to share such things, or tell someone such stories. And I like to take photographs. So if I get the opportunity to go to Bangladesh, I will take pictures and I'd like to show them to my mother, because my mother can't move around nowadays, she's quite old. And there's my Phool mama. He's an octogenarian. In fact when I told Phool mama about such a project on inherited memories, he told me he's old, he can't remember everything.

But Phool mama was an engineer by profession. He told me, if you can make some time, then if you need I can draw a map of where our house was, that is, a blueprint. This shows how strongly he feels about that even today, but when I asked Phool

mama whether he considered Bangladesh to be his country, he said, no dear, in fact when I think of my country it is Jharia, in Dhanbad, that I think of. Because when I came away I was very small, I've grown up here. But yes, later Phool mama told me that they tried to go back to Mallickpur, at least to just go and see the place, but for some reason that wasn't possible.

At the time of the land exchange initiated by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, my mejomama-dadu (mother's middle maternal uncle) got some compensation in exchange for their land. There's a funny thing related to this. We have seen, we have witnessed a love story. At a time of great turmoil, when riots were taking place, when the freedom struggle was happening, at that juncture my mejomama-dadu met my mamima-dida, in Khulna College. Mejomama-dadu had apparently gone to give a talk and he was picked up by the police right there and put into jail and mamima-dida was very impressed by that, and that settled it.

Mamima-dida could not complete her studies there because of the disturbance, she could not leave her home because of various impediments. Mamima-dida and her elder brother, they used to be part of the freedom struggle with mejomama-dadu, and so after 1946 they came to Calcutta, to Ripon Street, where my mother's parents' house was. They stayed there, and either by that time, or the following year, mamima-dida's family too came away from Khulna. Mamima-dida completed her college education in Asutosh College, she did her M.A. in Bengali from Calcutta University and after that she worked in a job. After she came to Calcutta, their connection was rejuvenated – through this freedom struggle community. Many of them had already been awarded plaques of honour. Their contacts were rejuvenated and in 1950, or in the early 1950s, they got married. At that time, we saw that the son of that highly conservative Hindu Brahmin family of my mother's parents was getting married to the daughter of the conservative Buddhist family of my mejomamima-dida.

That was an inter-caste marriage in our family, that was after Partition. Recently when my sister had an inter-caste marriage, then the parallel was drawn in my house. I mean, maybe we have not been able to overcome many things, so because they were people from that time, their mentality was very broad. I have seen that they used to help a lot of people. And subsequently, there was a great inflow of people. I mean, I've seen that there were always guests in my mama's house, not less than ten or fifteen people, at all times, for some reason or the other, someone or the other was coming or going. I remember a few people like that. I had heard stories about one person, I had never seen him myself. My mother used to refer to him as Manoranjan jethu (a term denoting father's elder brother), he was apparently a resident of Mallickpur village. He was senior to my dadu-bhai and every two years or so he would visit the house in Jharia – because he did not like the food that the people in his own house ate!

He used to say to didi-ma: Bou-ma (daughter-in-law), only you have held on to the food of our land, to that food culture, no one else can cook like you. He used to stay for about a month in my mamar-bari (mother's parents' house), and he had something to say about everything. He did not want to talk to anyone who was not a graduate. Even if the person was an engineer, he did not like him because he was not a graduate and my mamas (maternal uncles) used to laugh a lot about that. My boro-mama (eldest maternal uncle) had completed his graduation and become a surveyor. He

studied physics but because he was a graduate, it was only boro-mama among my mother's brothers who Manoranjan jethu chose to sit beside him and talk with him. And he used to say – my dadu-bhai's name was Ardhendu – I say, I believe they hear the cricket commentary on the radio, I remember we used to go to see football matches. I went to such-and-such a place to see such-and-such ... He would say such things and whatever was given to him to eat he declared to be inedible, except my didi-ma's cooking.

So there are some memories like that. He used to disregard even my Phool mama and Moni mama for not being graduates and the last time he came, my mother had learnt to make deem-paunruti (like a French toast). So mother made deem-paunruti and gave it to Manoranjan-jethu and apparently he had praised that and said to my didi-ma, Bou-ma, you have trained your daughter very well and after that my didima had said, the old bloke won't live much longer. He really had a nasty tongue! And as it happened, he never came to stay there after that.

And I remember another person, called Deben babu. I heard a lot about him from my boro-mama. He was also a resident of Mallickpur. His name was Deben Bannerjee. He used to teach in the school established by the Raja of Jharia, and he had an idiosyncrasy. He used to go and deliver a lecture on any subject, starting from sociology to mathematics and he was bent on teaching it. The more the boys were naughty in class the more he would subject them to his teaching. That was Deben babu's class. And as he taught, at the end of the class, he had to start weeping, saying he would return to rural Bengal, that is, to Mallickpur. He said that was the best place, the school there was the best school, nothing else existed in the rest of the world. Phool mama told me that after his retirement, he wound up everything in Jharia, took whatever money he had and went away to Bangladesh. It wasn't known where he went. No one had any information about him.

There was another person I heard a lot about, his name was Lakhman mama. The gentleman was visually challenged. My Moni mama was also visually challenged. He used to study in the School for the Blind in Behala and that was how he got to know Lakshman mama.

Lakshman mama's family were hit by Partition. They came away to Calcutta sometime after 1947, and because he was visually challenged, either people from his home, or someone from the neighbourhood dropped Lakshman mama in the school in Behala and disappeared thereafter. So Lakshman mama was in the school till he was sixteen or seventeen and after that they gave him a job, because he was very skilled, he knew how to play various kinds of musical instruments, like sarangi, esraj and so on, and he used to teach music to the boys in the school. But apparently after some time it wasn't possible to accommodate him in the school. Communication was a problem then, there weren't phones and so on. Lakhman mama's story is like this. Once, on the day the Puja break commenced, when my dadu-bhai was returning home – the Durga Puja in Jharia was a grand one, there were a lot of Bengalis there – a peon or watchman informed my dadu-bhai that his son had come to visit. Dadu-bhai was puzzled because he knew his son was already home, he had already arrived in Jharia for the Puja holidays. So when he was informed that his son was waiting downstairs, he went there to meet him. He found an unknown person sitting there, he had a bundle

with him, a violin case and some other things. I mean a couple of musical instruments and his bundle. So dadu-bhai asked him, who are you, what's the matter?

Then Lakshman apparently said, are you Kamal's father? Kamal was my mama, his name was Kamalendu Shekhar Bhattacharya. Are you Kamal's father? Dadu-bhai said, yes, he was. Then he fell at dadu-bhai's feet and said, Father, I am Lakshman, I have no one. You are my father. So that day dadu-bhai had held Lakshman by the hand and brought him home, and as long as he lived he was in my mamar-bari (mother's parents' house). My mother and her sisters used to feed him, he couldn't eat unless the fish-bones were removed, so my didi-ma would remove the fish-bones for him. He lived there all his life.

Another person I remember a lot, was someone called Jharna aunty. Jharna aunty was a family acquaintance, of my kaka (paternal uncle) and jethu (father's elder brother). Jharna aunty had come from present-day Bangladesh, probably from Barisal or somewhere like that. Jharna aunty's father had crossed the border with her elder brother with great difficulty and arrived in Calcutta. I heard that from Jharna aunty and I met her father once.

The gentleman was a dementia patient, and he used to speak out of context, he would mutter to himself. That's all I remember of him from my childhood. He had come and taken a house somewhere in some locality in Jadavpur. He had converted the assets he had into money before coming. They said it comprised of large denomination notes, I mean Rs 100 notes, I don't know if there were Rs 500 notes then. So he came with the large denomination notes to Calcutta and he lived somewhere near the Jadavpur crossing. And he had apparently kept those notes in bundles inside the mattress and pillow, until such time as he was able to deposit it in a bank. Those notes were banned overnight and he had not got that news. When he came to know that these notes were defunct, the gentleman went insane, meaning he completely lost his mental balance and lamented all day, that he had lost everything. I heard this from Jharna aunty.

Another person was a family friend, my mother used to call her didi (elder sister), her name was Amita-di, the lady is no more. She used to work in the National Library at one time and in the evening she was studying Library Science in Calcutta University. My mother too came eventually to Calcutta from Jharia and both of them studied in the same class. When the liberation war was taking place in Bangladesh, in 1970, once again one saw large numbers of people crossing the border and coming to India, and at that time relief and assistance was being sought for the liberation war. So my mother had given whatever money she had in her bag. Her rationale was that the liberation struggle of my father's country is taking place. And Amita-di had reacted furiously. Later I heard that Amita-di came from a very wealthy family in Dhaka and they had to leave home and hearth overnight and come away.

They came away with a group of neighbours, and they were going through some place and she became separated from the group. She stayed with someone else from their neighbourhood as she was separated from her parents. After that they crossed a field and stopped for the night at some place. When she woke up in the morning, she apparently saw that where they had sheltered for the night, there, on the wall, or on some part of the dilapidated house, and all over the place, there were bloodstains. She walked many miles. They walked and crossed the river and eventually, after all the

hardship, came to a house, where the people owned a car – owing a car then was a big thing – and took shelter there. She was given a part of the space under the stairs, beside the water-trough. Because 60 or 70 known people were already in that house, in the same way. And she had fallen very ill, there had been no hope of her surviving.

But somehow, fortunately, her parents managed to trace her and then they took her away. After that they struggled a lot. Education was their only hope, and through that they overcame their hardship. So I've heard Amita-di's point of view too during my childhood, that let alone give money for the liberation struggle, I won't give money even for relief. Those who took away everything of ours – serves them right that there's a flood in their country. I mean I saw that too. I've seen this kind of reaction too.

But I don't know how this can be explained or whether at all it can be explained. Everything depends on how we look at it.

Translated by V. Ramaswamy