

My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

Interview details

Interview with Natasha

Interviewed by Nijhum

Nijhum. Have you heard stories from anyone in your family about India or West Bengal? You can speak freely; I'll just make some notes.

Natasha. The native homesteads of both my parents are in India, West Bengal to be precise. I've heard stories from both of them, but more from my father. That's because he was not only born there, he spent a substantial part of his childhood and youth studying there. Naturally I've heard most of the stories from him—about his parents, about the family of our ancestors, about the village. In fact there are very few days when he doesn't talk of the good old days. My sisters and I have grown up listening to these stories.

As one grows older, one tends to desperately hold on to nostalgia, and my parents are no exception. They tend to get even more nostalgic if they get hold of anybody from their times. What we have heard in our childhood are memories of their childhood; their relations, my maternal grandparents and their huge families. [*Laughs*] In fact the entire village was bound in some familial relation with us. If you tried to trace anybody from that village, they would some way of the other feature on our genealogical tree. Our house was known as *barobari* [lit. the big house]. My [maternal] grandfather was a hugely respected religious figure there. Sufi ... many people would come to him, waiting patiently in queues [*smiles*] to take away a bottle of *panipora* from him. [Pirs are known to have special healing powers, which they transmit through blowing air along with certain chants to water and oil that devotees bring them in glass bottles. Drinking the water and massaging the oil are supposed to have therapeutic / healing properties. They are also known to use certain chants and blow on an ailing individual to rid them from malevolent influences.] We've also heard a lot about our grandmother.

When we were studying, for example, we used to be told stories about how they had struggled during their growing years. There would be a comparison. We would be told that we've had to come away here; we have no relations at all. If we have to do well and be established in life, we would have to study well. There's no alternative to solid, good education, because we mustn't forget that we live on foreign soil. That struck me—so many years after Partition, yet this is 'foreign land' to father. I don't feel that way though. This is the country I was born in, and I consider this my native land. This sentiment of my father used to sound like something discordant to me. But this I realized that your roots lie in the land of your birth. That's inevitable.

We used to hear stories about our farmlands. My father's *chacha* [uncle, father's younger brother; corresponding to *kaka*] had passed the Matriculation Examination [school leaving examination]. People from two / three neighbouring villages had gathered to see him. We heard stories about that.

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Father would reminisce about my grandmother, and my *phuphus* [aunt; one's father's sisters]. Father's was a large family and some of his siblings stayed on in India and some came away to Bangladesh. It wasn't so difficult in those days. You didn't require a visa, and travelling between the two countries was relatively easy. Nobody gave any thought about the far reaching effects of Partition. Nobody thought that two completely different countries would emerge, or what effect this would have on our family. I think nobody could imagine the repercussions.

I've felt this both in the case of my father, and my uncle, who lived here and died —there was this thorn that had got stuck in their relationship. It stayed on throughout their lives—we live here in this manner, and our brothers and sisters on the other side of the border live differently. But in our family, my sister or my cousin (daughter of my father's younger brother), or my brothers and sisters (children of my maternal uncle) are all very close, very accessible. We can contact one another very easily; besides, communication has become quite easy these days because of Internet and mobile phones. Earlier making a call to India was a huge deal. You had to book a trunk call, then wait for half an hour. After the connection was put through you had to somehow shout out whatever you had to say, the connectivity was so bad, and then hang up when you realized the costs. I could realize how these things used to bug them.

After all, people do remember the place they spent their childhood in. Not being able to go there must have been so painful. I have felt this in the case of both my father and my chacha, my father's younger brother.

You were asking me about stories—I've heard there is a mango grove there, where my grandparents are interred. I've heard so many stories about that mango grove. In fact there is this special ritual in our family—mango trees are planted in the name of each member of our family. My third uncle who lives in Barasat had planted a tree in my name. And the first time the tree bore fruit, he had called me up to give me the news. He calls me up every year. That year he called to ask, 'Kochi [lit. tender; my family nickname], won't you come? Your tree has borne fruit, won't you come?' What happened ultimately was, he had brought a mango from that tree when he visited us, so that I could eat it. So I do understand how these little things gnaw at them all the time—not being able to visit one another when they wish, not being able to share with each other the little ups and downs that each family has. Something that should have been an easy, natural process became ever so complicated for us because of Partition.

What can I say? I haven't heard too many things from my mother because she was born here; but I've heard many stories from my *Nani*, my maternal grandmother, because my father used to chat with her a lot. About simple everyday things. Even today it is the same. Say for example the food items that used to be available then, but are no longer available now. My father and mother lived in neighbouring villages. They have common memories that they can very easily share. Some of these I too have heard, though my mother does not seem to have a large repository of memories—the kind shared by my father or my uncles and aunts from that side of the family.

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Having reached this age, and as I grow older I seem to empathize with their pain even more. See, our elderly relations on the other side of the border are growing older; some of them are passing away. It strikes me that as one grows older, this kind of apprehension about age and the well being of others grows too. Who knows when I'll be able to meet my brothers and sisters? Wonder how they are keeping? Since I'm a doctor, it is understood that I'll be the one to inquire after everybody's health. Or somebody or the other will call me up for any kind of medical advice. Now this is not possible for my relatives living on the other side of the border. I try to be of as much help as possible when they come visiting, but this thing hurts me—not being able to do for them as much as I would have loved to.

Nijhum. One part of your family moved here. Why did they do that? What was the main reason?

Natasha. It seems 'migration' now. But it used to be one country, isn't it? We had lands on both sides. My elder uncle had come here for his studies, then stayed on for his job. He had several brothers and sisters. I feel my grandparents must have felt this way—now I don't know whether this was the reason, but it is my assumption—we have so many children, so let some of them stay here. One kid is living by himself all alone; let some of them stay there as well. I guess nobody could have imagined that the Partition would have such far-reaching consequences. I don't think it was possible for them to imagine this, because they always saw this land as one country, not a truncated one. Maybe they thought, well, how difficult could it get? My elder son is staying there all alone, you go there with your sister. Somebody needs to look after the land too, because if there's nobody to supervise, the lands might get usurped. So that must have been at work somewhere. Then, as I was telling you, visas weren't needed in those days. So probably travelling was a lot easier. It wasn't a long drawn out procedure like it is today.

There was another reason, the root cause of Partition—division on the basis of religion. That was a Hindu majority country and this, a Muslim majority country. Maybe that was another reason. Perhaps they thought if this should have any repercussion, there should be some backup measure in place—what if the next generation encounters any trouble? I have a feeling that neither part of the family could even imagine in the wildest dreams that it would come to this. That it would be such a wound, or that the two parts of the family would be separated like that. It wasn't possible for them to understand. Because those were their lands, their homestead too, on both sides of the 'border'. How do I decide which half to keep and which to give up? Maybe they thought they should have a presence on both sides.

I haven't seen my paternal grandparents, my *dada* and my *dadi*. In fact I haven't seen my *dadi*, and my *dada* passed away when I was only a kid. So I haven't heard anything directly from them as such; but when I put myself in their shoes, maybe I too would have thought along similar lines. Maybe I too would have wanted to keep my own things near me, scattered on both sides. This may be a reason.

Nijhum. The families that moved to this side of the border after Partition ... there were some basic problems, or maybe struggling to adjust. Did your family face any such problem in an attempt to adjust?

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Natasha. Yes, there was of course some trouble. First, you are having to keep a part of your family in one country, and then you are having to live in another. Virtually uprooting from one place and trying to dig in roots at another. I don't think that's a very pleasant experience anyway. The Bangladeshi diaspora who have settled abroad for instance, I don't think it has been easy for them either. Partition was a traumatic experience because it was an imposition. People who settle abroad do so of their own free will, but Partition was a different matter. The people affected by Partition had no say in the matter directly. So overnight, Rahim Ali, my neighbour becomes somebody from another country, whom I cannot meet if I wish. I'll have to go through the whole paraphernalia—cross the border, get a visa in order to do so, get checked at check posts, etc. Right?

We people in Bangladesh, or in the subcontinent as a whole are extremely family-centric, and our families blossom out into numerous branches. When my father, my uncle and my aunt tried to settle here, they found that their branches had been all lopped off. They were all alone. This affected them very badly. Previously, on one call, several people would appear before them, but there was simply no one here. They were somebody once—son of such-and-such family, or daughter of such-and-such family. They had a background. But they had no background here. Nobody knew them here. This struggle to establish themselves had of course been very irksome. But I also feel that as this was a new country, an imagined country, they had also benefitted, because there were more openings. They could achieve a position on account of their merit. This might not have been possible in a large country like India. I don't know what was possible and what wasn't. There was both a positive and a negative side to it. The positive aspect was, they knew if they had to establish themselves, they had to do so on account of their merit and hard work. So they worked much harder. This was a driving force. That we must establish a permanent address for ourselves. When I was a kid, I have often heard father say, 'We don't have a permanent address.' What you need to give is always the present address, never the permanent address. This would strike him hard. I heard my uncle say—he build a house before my father—now we have an address of our own at last. Having a place in this unknown land. That's no mean achievement, is it? This thing used to gnaw at them always—that this is a foreign land, a foreign land ...

Nijhum. You have said that Partition is a traumatic experience. What does Partition mean to you?

Natasha (*with a sigh*). I haven't seen the trauma directly. Whatever experience I have is what I reconstructed from the stories that I heard from my father and my *nani*, my maternal grandmother, seeing these two families, reading books, watching films. I feel very strongly that it is a wound that will perhaps never heal. When you drive a wedge between two families with a border, they will never be able to get back to their original form. It will always be an event. Before Partition and after Partition. This will remain an eternal demarcating boundary for ever. It can never be that this will have no effect. Maybe there will be a trickle down effect. Maybe the effect would lessen gradually, but there will always be a backlog. That yearning to go back. That will always be there. My father and mother and my paternal grandparents felt the trauma

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most of all, because they had to decide which side they would go to, which side of the border, or which region would be better. If someone tells me, 'Look, your Bangladesh will be divided into two parts; you decide which part you want to live in.' It would be awfully difficult for me. Even if I take a decision, there will always be a nagging sense of insecurity working within me. Have I done the right thing? Will my later generations be able to live here properly? Will this have an effect on them? Is this being done right? What if I don't go? What if I do? This vacillation will always work within me. I'm sure my previous generation too suffered from this. Maybe they still ruminate on whether they should have stayed on in that country. That will always be there. An unanswered question. That is bound to remain. There will never be a correct answer to this question. And I feel these elements make up certain defining moments in a human being's life. I've done this, hence it would have these effects.

There are few incidents that affect his life subsequently. Partition was one such effect. Many people have horrific experiences of the trauma—experiences violent and bloody. AS for our family, the experience has not been violent, but extremely painful nonetheless, because the wound that appears on severance of the umbilical cord never really heals.

Nijhum. When countries are divided or partitioned, borders are created. What does the word 'border' mean to you?

Natasha. To me a border is a border. But I don't feel this country is my own, and that isn't. I don't feel that way. What the border means to several other people, it means exactly the same to me. Because there is no alienation in the language, I feel quite at home even when I travel to West Bengal. I don't feel alienated. But with it there's something else too. We share a common history. Because we were one country, our history—of freedom struggle, cultural history, religious history, economic history—originates from the same source. That creates a common bonding—something that is present more or less in all the countries of the subcontinent. I feel this is present in a somewhat larger proportion between India and Bangladesh. In fact it may not be correct to say 'India'; rather it is West Bengal and Bangladesh. That's because people from other provinces in India seem much more foreign to us; whereas people from Kolkata never seem alien to me. I feel the feeling is reciprocal. This is because, as I told you, our cultural, economic and linguistic disparity is practically nil. Maybe that is why it is not so difficult. But, then again if I try to talk to a Marwari or an Assamese or a Manipuri, the border will retain the characteristics of a border, just like it would in my interactions with a Britisher, or an American. It is different in the case of West Bengal.

Nijhum. If I now ask you, 'Where do you live?' What would you answer?

Natasha. I live in Bangladesh. Forever. And that's how it will be.

Nijhum. Since you belong to a generation that has experienced the Partition ... you are living here, maintaining a lifestyle, but is there any subliminal influence at work?

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Natasha. Of course.

Nijhum. What is it exactly?

Natasha. The seeds of the life you are now living have been sown in your childhood; and how my childhood would shape up has been decided by my parents, with their philosophy, their language, their value system, their food habits—all this has made me what I am today. I am perfectly aware of these small affects that linger in our manner of speaking, food habits, etc.

Nijhum. If you could go into some more detail about the aspect about food habits or ceremonies and rituals that you follow ...

Natasha. We don't have ceremonies and rituals as such ... I feel we have grown up with secular values. One of the reasons may be Partition. It was very strongly present in my parents. We wear *tip* on our foreheads. That is one thing. Though this isn't connected directly with Partition ... many people wear it in Bangladesh. It notifies our common cultural background. There are many interesting point about food habits, for example the way we cook ... because my mother had learnt it from her mother, my nani, which she had picked up from her mother and so on. What to cook with what and all that—which has a lot of commonalities with the other side of Bengal. We too have adapted several things. Mother is very fond of *suñtki* [dried fish; a rich, spicy preparation, a particular favourite of the people of East Bengal] —something (*laughs*) that is not common there [in West Bengal]. My father and his sister, that is my aunt, are not fond of fish at all. They love chicken. So there has been a cultural amalgamation. It has been an osmotic process—we have taken this and that from one another and made something of our own, internalized it. I don't think it can be actually discerned.

Nijhum. You have got so much from the earlier generation. Would you like to pass on the memories related to the other side of the border to the following generations? Why would you like to pass these on?

Natasha. If I need to pass on memories, I would surely like to pass on the memories of my parents, because there is a part of my family there. I don't know for how long this connection will remain, but this I feel very strongly—that there is a part of our family who are living in another land, they are our blood relations. I think it is imperative for them to know, and I also believe that it is their right to know. There is absolutely no scope of skirting this issue, or neglecting it in any way. There is no need to worry about this, because this is a fact that we have accepted it in our lives, and I'm sure they would too. So much for memories. As far as value system is concerned, I feel Partition is an example of the plight of a colonized people. We achieved Independence under British rule. I would like to teach my children—never do anything so that you are forced to be subservient to another, like the British had in our case. If it hadn't been that way, I wouldn't have been answering this question. That's what I'll teach them—don't let it happen. Again, I would also teach them never to be divided on account of religion and ethnicity, because a country is made with all these various

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elements, and that is where the strength of a country lies. I believe in that. This is a value system that I would like to pass on to the next generation.



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