

## My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

Interview details

Interview with Rajlakshmi

Interviewed by Nandini

Nandini Ganguli [NG]. Do you remember having heard stories about India or East Bengal in your family? Anything—there is nothing important or unimportant as such—could you share these with us?

Rajlakshmi Ray [RR]. Father was of this country, but was living in Bangladesh. Then when the riots broke out, he left and came back to Calcutta. He was twelve years old. Grandmother [thakuma: paternal grandmother] stayed on in Bangladesh. Some time later she moved from Bangladesh to Agartala, then from Agartala to Barackpore. In Kolkata father began by doing odd jobs in small shops, and then very slowly, gradually started buying these plots of land, bought them in Garia [in the southern extremities of the city]. He tried his hand at a number of things. For example he worked in a tea-shop, then doubled up working in a shop owned by my *jjyethamoshai* [uncle: father's elder brother]. After this, he took a shop on lease, on his own in Garia. He got married after that. Father must have married when he was either fifteen or sixteen years old, or eighteen years old. After that he bought a plot of land. Then he built a house on that land. Then we came into the family. I was his first born.

My grandmother, once she knew of father's establishment, moved in with us from Agartala. She was with us for nearly twenty five years. I would go here and there with grandmother. We had relations in so many places—Agartala, Barackpore, Birati. I would merrily go along with her, visiting our relations all over.

I bonded wonderfully with my grandmother. I was the first born in the family, and she adored me, loved me a lot. We were very close. She would take me along wherever she went. 'Come, let's go ...' she would call me. My pet name was Buri [common pet name for girls, lit. 'old woman']. She would call me 'Buri'. 'Come, Buri, let's go there to elder sister's place', or sometimes if would be 'Come Buri, let's go to Taltola.' I didn't have any work then. I was a child of five / six years, and I would happily go gallivanting with her all over.

We used to worship the goddess Manasa. This puja used to happen in our native place in Bangladesh. But my grandfather, father, uncle—all of them came away; so did my grandmother. The first year during the puja grandma was taken ill. She was very ill with gastroenteritis, and bedridden for nearly fifteen to twenty / twenty-five days. Then she passed away. Such an incident happened the first year that Manasa Puja was revived in our family. The next year father decided to do the puja again. So he booked the idol and started making preparations for the puja, when he was taken ill. He was admitted to Chittarajan Hospital. While he was still in hospital, the puja took place nicely; we immersed the idol; then after two weeks or so father too passed away. My brother—he's the only brother I have—decided not to resume the puja again. He said, maybe grandma couldn't remember all the rituals, maybe something in the rituals went wrong, so we sought

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the blessings of the goddess, did pranams to her and kept her. Every year during Manasa puja, we make an offering of milk and bananas [supposed to be a favourite of snakes. Manasa, the presiding deity of snakes, does not figure in the Hindu pantheon, but treated more as a regional / local goddess; a vengeful deity].

After father passed away we struggled hard to keep the shop going. My brother and I joined forces to keep it going. We have four more sisters. This shop saw us through those dark days. We could marry off all our sisters. There was no useless pomp. They chose their partners and they are more or less doing well. None of them are hi-fi. They have decent middle class lives. But we have to do everything; try to subsidize whenever something goes wrong in their families. For example, we look after my third sister's children. She lost her husband, so we took charge of her kids. They've been admitted to Techno India school. That's how we've been managing.

NG. You've told us about what happened after you came here, for example about the Manasa Puja. Could you share with us some memories of stories you might have heard from the time that your family was in East Pakistan? Maybe stories you've heard since childhood—when you've come, or the members of your family. If you could share with us some of those stories.

RR. I've already told you about my family members who came from Bangladesh, like grandma, grandfather. I told you about my grandfather and father. What else do you want to know?

NG. How was it there? Why did they come away?

RR. There were riots.

NG. If you could tell us a little about how the riots ...

RR. The riots were very bad. Father had gone to chase payment. We had a grocery shop in Bangladesh. He heard on the way that the riots were spreading fast in that area. There was widespread arson and killings in that area. The moment he heard it, he didn't venture in that direction, or even homewards. He fled directly towards Calcutta; actually to New Barrackpore, to an older sister of mine. He had taken refuge there.

He then started working in Jadavpur. After he came away from Barrackpore, he started working in Jadavpur in tea shops. Then Ala made these shops, he married, had kids. We're now somewhat ...

NG. Where was your homestead in Bangladesh?

RR. Kumilla [district] in Bangladesh; Chatolpar. What was Chatolpar?

NG. Your village?

RR. Yes, village.

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NG. Do you know any stories that have come down from there? How was it there? Something that you might have heard from grandma or your father? Your family had a grocery shop you said ...

RR. We had a grocery store.

NG. How was it? Who would work there? Did your grandfather set it up?

RR. My uncle, *iyethamoshai* and father would work there together. Then he was taken ill. My grandfather too was taken ill and they both died. My *iyethamoshai* was a keen sportsman. One day he crashed against a lightpost. He was in hospital for some time, but he passed away.

NG. Did your father take up the responsibility of the shop after that?

RR. Yes, my father would look after the shop. Then there were riots, father came away; *iyethamoshai* died, grandfather too died, grandmother came away from Bangladesh. From that time on father never or anybody else never returned. None of them could return to Bangladesh.

NG. You say you had a shop ...

RR. We had a shop ...

NG. What about your family homestead? Could you bring over any belongings?

RR. No, my father could bring nothing. Nothing at all. Just that little money that he was able to collect as payments—probably just that little bit of money. He came to the house of *iyethima* [aunt: wife of paternal uncle] and *iyethamoshai* in Barrackpore. He could manage to bring nothing over. Our home, our shop were left behind in Bangladesh. He never went back. He could never go back. How could he bring anything at all? Who else would go? He came away to Calcutta and could never go back ever again.

NG. You said your father came away midway. How did your grandmother manage to come?

RR. Grandma too came away with other relatives from Bangladesh. They had looked for father. Maybe they thought he had gone missing, or had been killed. Maybe that's what grandma thought. Because no news was forthcoming. Telephones were non-existent in those days. So there wasn't any chance of communicating with anybody. Everyone was concerned about staying alive. That was the only concern. She looked for him, but couldn't find him. Maybe she thought something has happened to him ... Maybe she thought like that. It was after a long time that she had come away, a long time after that, when she came to Barrackpore that she came to know that father was still alive, that she came to live with my father.

NG. That means after coming here your father was ...

RR. Yes the contact was established with my father after everybody came here. It happened like this: my grandma was staying in Barrackpore with my *iyethima* then. While staying there she got the news that my father was alive. So she decided, well then, I'll go to my son. Why should I continue living with you all? I

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have my son, I'll stay with him. There was a link with the family, and there was a fair amount of exchange too. We would go to our relatives in Barrackpore; then they would take me to Birati. Jagadhatri Puja would be celebrated with great pomp in my sister's place, i.e. my  *jyethima* 's house. We would all go there—my father, grandma, my mother, my sisters. Even my  *mashis* , i.e. maternal aunts would gather there. My  *jyethamoshai*  and  *jyethima*  are no more. They were actually our neighbours, very close neighbours. It is how we call our neighbours:  *jyethima* , or something else to somebody. Don't we call elderly neighbours ' *jyethima* ' or ' *kakima* '? It was like that. None of them were blood relations as such. My father had another sibling; there were no  *pishi*  or paternal aunts either. One passed away in Bangladesh, and the only one that remained was my father.

NG. Now this  *jyethima*  you've referred to, was her native homestead in Bangladesh too, or were they native residents of Calcutta?

RR. No, they were natives of Bangladesh. We were practically next door neighbours.

NG. So in the same village?

RR. O yes. In the village. All the relatives lived in adjacent houses. They lived very close to us. There was a lot of give and take among our families. We had grown pretty close to each other. Just like we've become close to one another—just like relatives. So it was just like that with them too. Like close relations.

NG. So you must have heard these stories of Bangladesh from your grandma?

RR. Yes. What she told me was somewhat like this:

'Your  *jyethima* —there—they lived next door. They weren't anybody of our family. You have none to call your own. There's your father, and there was his elder brother, your  *jyethamoshai* . They did not have any sisters. So you don't have any  *pishi*  [paternal aunt]. Your father and his elder brother—just the two of them. How could you see your  *jyethamoshai* ? He passed away in Bangladesh. So did your grandfather.

NG. India was partitioned in 1947. Two countries got divided. Have you heard anything regarding that?

RR. Regarding that ...

NG. When did your family move here? Have you heard? During which riot?

RR. My father and others?

NG. Yes ...

RR. During which specific riot ... that information ... that particular bit, i.e. when exactly they came to Calcutta, I don't know. Father never told me which year. I only know vaguely what my father told me: 'I had come away when I was twelve. The riot had just started in Bangladesh. I came away just then.' When exactly was that, he never told me; because he never said: 'I came in this particular year ... this I did in so

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and so year ...' There wasn't much education. The focus was more on how to keep body and soul together, how to put food on the plates at home; how to start earning and how much should one earn; how could I bring up my kids well; how could they survive; how soon would I be able to get a house for myself; there was a rented house at first when my father got married. Our own house got made after I was born. Father bought this plot of land and made this house.

NG. I guess you knew from childhood this thing called 'bangal'. You knew about the dialect we refer to as 'bangal bhasha.' Have you in your house ...

RR. I've heard all that from my grandma. She would speak that language, so would my father. We would hear that; but my sisters don't speak that language. Only I do of the five siblings—my brother and four sisters. My brother and sisters speak exactly like the natives of this region. I speak 'bangal' to my heart's content with my brothers from Anjali Pharmacy. They too are from Bangladesh. I've become accustomed to that tongue. I can more or less understand questions and give proper answers—like this conversation we're having; but I'm more comfortable with the 'bangal' language.

NG. Are you aware of any rituals or modes or worship that are distinctively 'bangal' in character? Any such puja or ritual that you have seen specifically being performed in your homestead?

RR. The Manasa Puja I was telling you about, that stopped with two consecutive deaths in two consecutive years. All that close down. My mother does her daily puja, just as they do in all households. She recites *The Gita*. Besides there's the daily ritual of offering flowers, water, incense, etc. to the deities at home. And about the rules to be followed for rituals, there's nothing particular. We have Lakshmi Puja at home. My mother follows all rituals that are to be followed for Lakshmi Puja. Then we worship Ma Tara [an incarnation of the goddess Kali]. I offer *bhog* [elaborate, cooked food offered at the close of the puja] here, and also at home. I also offer puja to Gopal [Krishna as a child, worshipped as a household deity in most Bengali homes]. I do all my pujas there.

NG. Can you discern any difference in rituals for a puja between bangals and ghotis?

RR. Our puja, say Lakshmi Puja, is performed in this manner: we women do the puja ourselves. The priest doesn't do the puja. My mother reads the *panchali* [a tale in verse about the divine powers of a deity in easy conversational Bengali, meant to be read during certain pujas, as part of the rituals]. Then she would place the *ghot* like it should be placed; the goddess as she is worshipped daily in our home, that same goddess is decked up and worshipped. For instance, if the daily puja is done in front of a framed [painting or ] photo, the same photo [or painting] is worshipped according to the rituals. A separate earthen idol isn't brought over for puja. There's no additional paraphernalia. We worship the goddess like we do every day, as part of our daily routine.

NG. What about the neighbours who live near you or around you—are they predominantly ghoti or bangal?

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RR. Everyone does puja like that. Our neighbourhood, is a predominantly bangal neighbourhood; there are practically no ghotis. Some have the surname Roy and some Saha. They are all from Bangladesh. They come to us. And we call the elders *jyethamoshai* or *jyethima*.

NG. Have you had to face any trouble after moving here? For example, did the *ghotis* look down on you, or anything like that?

RR. O no, nothing of the kind. There's always some jealousy, though. But we're all *bangals*. There are no ghotis among us. Even our rites and rituals are the same. More or less. But there are subtle differences. For example, some families use the stem of the banana plant in Lakshmi puja, some use *sora* [large earthen bowl with a wide open rim, used for pujas], some worship the idol. Again, some would worship a new earthen idol, some would worship the regular framed portrait / painting of Lakshmi. You see we aren't ghoti, so we don't know how their puja rituals are different from ours.

NG. What about cooking? Can you understand any difference in the culinary tastes of a bangal and a ghoti?

RR. Ok, about cooking: you see, we are Sahas and our culinary taste is very distinctive. Our cooking is very different from other bangals as well. Maybe they are bangals, but they don't know the finesse of our cooking. They don't know how to cook so many items either, or how to make the food as tasty as ours. Our cooking is very different. We make *pitha*, *payesh*, *patisapta*<sup>1</sup> with grated coconut, or *puli pithey* with grated coconut filling; which the others would do with sweet potato filling. We always do the fillings with grated coconut. That's a major difference. We Sahas or Roys are very different in our cooking. For example, whatever my mother cooks is so different. She's from Dhaka. My sister has watched her cook, and picked up from her. But her in-laws are from Barishal; and my sister is a fine cook too, but there's a little difference between Dhaka and Barishal.

NG. But aren't there differences between the various place in Bangladesh too ...

RR. Yes, there is. Different places have various kinds of distinction in cooking. But all of us are bangals here. There are absolutely no ghotis. Practically none.

NG. When you built that house ...

RR. That's in Vidyasagar [an area near Baghajatin, Jadavpur, developed as a settlement of colonies to rehabilitate refugees from Bangladesh].

NG. Did you choose that area because there would be only bangals around?

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<sup>1</sup> Delicacies made especially in winter, with outer coverings of rice flour, semolina, etc, shaped differently, with sweet filling of grated coconut, *kheer* and condiments. *Pulis* are spindle shaped, and place in thickened milk, or *gur*. The outer layer of *patisapta* is like a thin pancake made of rice flour and milk, and the filling is with grated coconut cooked and thickened with *kheer* and raisins. This filling is put in the middle of the pancake, then wrapped into a small roll.

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RR. No, not exactly. My father liked the locality. The gentleman who owned the plot of land that we bought used to visit us. He suggested to father, 'You've come all the way and endured such hardships; you couldn't even bring anything with you. Why don't you take half the land from me.' To which my father said, 'But I work in a grocery shop. How can I buy land?' The gentleman told him, 'Don't you worry, you give me money as and when you can.' So my father agreed and pawned my mother's jewellery. My father could save nothing from his native land. So that's how the piece of land was bought. It was only because the gentleman goaded that my father bought the land. Else it would have been impossible.

But this is something I'm telling you today, I'm a great believer in religion and I do pujas regularly. It's a lifelong passion—to do pujas well. I've bought a plot of land measuring five and a half kathas in Teuriya. It is my heart's desire that I'll build a temple there. Now what'll happen at the end only Ma Tara [goddess kali] knows and my Gopal [Lord Sri Krishna] knows.

NG. You told me that your father bought land in a bangal locality; but what about your shop here? What about ...

RR. Here the maximum population is from this side of the border. Of course there are bangals, but fifty per cent are people from here. Say we are bangals, then some from the fish market and some Muslims. The rest are from this side.

NG. What about work? Do you people and them work together? What do you feel about that?

RR. We work together now.

NG. Does it feel different? What do you feel about working together?

RR. We can never be compatible. Our lifestyles don't match, our speech patterns and dialects don't match. I keep my interaction to the minimum. Of course I need to talk to all my neighbours, but I keep a limit. I keep to myself mostly; keep busy with my pujas, my shop, etc. Their language and lifestyle is so dissimilar that I don't feel very comfortable getting close to them. There can never be compatibility.

NG. How do you think you are different? In what ways?

RR. Look, they are different in their speech. We can never talk like them. Suppose I talk to them with respect; they'll never reciprocate. They don't talk like we do. I'm not even mentioning their dresses. Them and us—we more or less wear the same things. But we can never gel. Suppose I tell you something; they'll make a mountain of a mole hill unnecessarily. Hence we can never have friendly relations with them. My interaction with them is confined to business interactions merely. 'How much does this cost?' etc. That's all.

NG. You still feel that way after so many years?

RR. Yes.

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NG. You've been living here in Calcutta for a long time now.

RR. Yes. Because I will never be compatible with you. I'll go to you only when I require something. Else I won't. Why should I? We'll never see eye to eye. Ever. What for should I go to you?

NG. You speak only in the bangal tongue.

RR. I speak like this to nearly all the people I know.

NG. Do you speak in bangal with everybody, or only with your family members?

RR. At home my mother tells me at times, 'What's this? Why are you speaking like that? You're a big girl now. How come you still ...' One day we were travelling by bus. Once we boarded the bus, I asked my mother in our dialect, '*ma, tumi poisa bair korsosh?*' [Mother, are you bringing out the money?'] She said, 'Need you speak like that even here? Can't you speak like the people do here—*ma, tumi poisata ber korechho?* Can't you say like that?' I replied, 'But my grandma would speak like that, my father would too, you too ...' I know nothing of Bangladesh. I've reconstructed from whatever I've heard from my grandma and father. But I have a great desire to go there once. To see for myself what we had once. I'd like to see that. I'd like to explore and find out. There's nobody left in our family; yet I want to go there, roam about and see what the country is like. Is it like Kolkata, or is it something new, something different.

I had once met somebody from Chattagram. He had said, 'If ever you go to Bangladesh, come to Chattagram, and look for my house.' How I wish I could go there even once. But then with visa and all that I wonder whether at all that will be possible. Who's going to take all that trouble? A lot of time will be wasted chasing that. If after taking all the trouble I manage to land up there, I'll go to a relative of ours, who had many more relations in Bangladesh. He had told me once, 'Buri [my nick name], come let's go to Bangladesh. I'll show where your house stood. I'll show you.' I replied, 'Very well, Shyamal-da, I'll go.' Unfortunately he died. He had blood sugar. He died of complications related to diabetes.

NG. You speak of going to Bangladesh. Why do you feel this way?

RR. I wish to relive the memories of my father ... we had a house there ... I want to see what it looked like. I want to see what Bangladesh is like. I want to relive my grandfather's memories. I know there's nothing more to be seen, probably nothing remains, but still I'd like to see. I want to see whether that country is like this one, or is it something different?

Don't know how I'll manage. Wanted to, but don't know how. How would I? There's nobody. If I do go, I'll have to take somebody along. I can't all by myself, all alone. Can't ever. Besides, how can I just pack my bags one morning and set off? There are so many formalities to be taken care of, like visa and other things.

NG. Say these two countries—India and Bangladesh—your father's native land, your grandfather's native land. Then these countries are suddenly divided into two. A barbed wire fencing separates the two countries

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at the border. Then you say there are visa formalities to be concluded in order to go to a country that was once your own. How do you see the Partition? What does Partition mean to you?

RR. If I could ... they couldn't stay there. If they could stay in Bangladesh, then all of us could have lived together over there. But they had to come away after the riots. But I'll be able to tell which country I like better once I go there and see for myself which one I like better. We've been born in India. We need to say that this is good. We know nothing about Bangladesh. How can I say whether I like it or not? Whether it is good or not? How can I say whether my father's memories are beautiful or good? We're here in India. This is good enough for us. We're working hard, putting in a lot of labour—doing everything we can. I like it here. I like it.

NG. If someone asks you, which is your home? Which is your homeland? What would you answer?

RR. Kolkata would be my answer.

NG. Ok. What about Bangladesh?

RR. I wasn't born in Bangladesh, I was born here in Kolkata. So I have to identify Kolkata as my birthplace. Kolkata is where I was born.

NG. You have heard so many stories from what it was like in Bangladesh. Would you share these with the younger members of your family, like your nephews and nieces? Would you tell them these stories?

RR. No I don't. I don't have the time. One needs time to narrate these stories. I don't have that kind of time. My father passed away when I was twelve. When did he come away? When he was twelve years old. I had to take care of all my younger brothers and sisters. The difference between my brothers and sisters were two years. My struggle began from that time on, when I was only twelve years old. How could I keep the home fires burning? My brother and I began to work. We maintained this shop, and would also go to the *haat*. My brother would go there. Thus we pulled along. It was tough. Somehow we managed to eke out a living and put food on everybody's plate.

NG. If you have some free time now, would you like to tell them stories of Bangladesh? The kids in your family?

RR. Would they want to listen to stories from Bangladesh? Would they? I don't think they would. If I ask them suddenly, 'How was your grandpa?' They haven't seen him. They haven't seen my father. They won't be able to understand. They heard from whatever their grandma told them: 'Your grandpa was a nice man. As long as he was there, your aunts never had any trouble.'

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But they had to struggle after he was gone. You have seen nothing of that struggle.' Mother always said, 'My children had to struggle a lot, undergo a lot of hardships; but you never had any of that inflicted on you. We saw to that. We gave you whatever you wanted. Perhaps we couldn't afford something that cost Rs 5000, but we gave you something that cost Rs 2000. I did. But my children never wore dresses that were expensive.' She would tell them that.

