

## My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

Interview details

Interview with Saswati

Interviewed by Mousumi

MM. Have you heard stories / reminiscences of East Bengal from your father, grandfather, or other members of your family?

SRC. Yes. In fact from both the flanks of my family—my father's and mother's. Both had been affected by Partition. So I have heard several kinds of stories from both my father's side of the family, and my mother's side. Interestingly enough, the tales that I heard from the two sides had nothing in common—they were very different.

Let me begin with my father's family. After coming over, they had first settled in Kudghat. Jobs were scarce in those days; but the search for jobs was going on nonetheless. My paternal grandfather used to be a teacher, and he got a job in Raisina School in Delhi. So he moved with his entire family from Kudghat to set up home in Delhi's C R Park [Chittaranjan Park] area. Later on, he got a job in Punjab, and moved to Punjab. He was there for a year. After moving to India, he had not been able to 'settle down', so to speak.

In the mean time, teachers were being recruited for Africa, as part of a project of uplifting education in Africa. The IMF and the World Bank were pouring in funds for the project. Several types of teachers were being recruited from all over the world. Several teachers were being signed up from India too. Indian families had a lot of misgivings about going all the way to Africa, and ours was no exception. Africa was an alien land after all. My father had two sisters. But my grandfather did not muster up courage to take his two daughters with him to an unknown country. So he admitted his daughters to Sarada Ashram to pursue their education; and they remained in India. Besides, the recruiting authorities were allowing only one child to accompany a family, so my grandfather took my father with him to Africa—Addis Ababa, to be precise. They settled in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. Many immigrant Bengalis had gone there, but several were unemployed, because there was some problem with their settlement. Like Bengalis, several Punjabi families had migrated too. In fact, there was a Bengali colony in Addis Ababa and a majority of the settlers were immigrants from East Bengal, most of whom were in the profession of teaching. As I mentioned earlier, several teachers had been recruited for teaching in Africa.

From the stories that I have heard of my family, one thing is clear—my grandfather was extremely apprehensive that our roots would somewhere get lost, that his little boy wouldn't know Bengali, wouldn't grow up to realize the significance of Rabindranath [Tagore], or the charm of Durga Puja. He was very apprehensive. So he laid down a strict rule—nobody would be able to speak any language other than

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Bengali at home. So Bengali was strictly followed as the spoken language at home. Since my father was educated in Africa, my grandfather was afraid his son wouldn't learn Bengali.

I have heard that Bengalis there would routinely celebrate Rabindra Jayanti [the birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore on 25 Baishakh / 8 May] and perform Saraswati Puja [worship of the goddess of learning, Saraswati, in the month of *Magh*, the last winter month in the Bengali calendar] on a modest scale; even try and hold on to Bengali cuisine as much as they could, a particular type of fish maybe, because of the fear that the vestiges of their Bengali culture and ethos would be lost. A terrible desperation gripped all of them—a desperation that they should preserve their ethos at any cost—sometimes manifesting itself in the rules laid down at home to speak only in Bengali.

Subsequently my father left for America. My grandfather stayed on in Africa with his job, and he returned directly to Kolkata on his retirement. He used to live in Salt Lake in Kolkata. Then my father returned from the US too.

At home, I have seen two contradictory generations. My grandfather would constantly say, 'I would love to go to Bangladesh once before I die. I'll go to my house just once.' Grandfather had a deep nostalgia for anything related with Bangladesh—be it a TV programme, or just hearing an artiste speak. On the other hand, my father had the same kind of feeling about Africa. Two generations nurtured their own unique nostalgia. Towards the end of his life, when he was about eighty, grandfather had the feeling that his days were numbered. That was when he went on a trip to Bangladesh. He believed that before he died, he would have to touch base with his homeland in Faridpur. 'I have to visit my native place,' he said. So he took that trip and visited his ancestral home.

There was always a very strong feeling about his ancestry, his roots. When he settled down in Salt Lake after retirement, he started the community Durga Puja. He wrote many books on the experiences of Partition. He was always writing something or the other, or reading something. He and two of his friends organized the Bidhannagar Mela for the first time. He took up the initiative of celebrating Rabindra Jayanti. As a child I have memories of him organizing *prabhatpheri* [an early morning commemorative march with songs and dances that would wind its way through a locality, initiating celebrations]. Our home would be the centre for all such activities. There were no community centres in Salt Lake in those days. All of us would get dressed up in that big hall of ours. That's where rehearsals would take place. Father, on the other hand, had this huge nostalgia for Africa. Supposing there was a programme on Africa on BBC, he would be hooked on to it.

Stories from my mother's side of the family were however very different. They had come away before the Partition—just when the riots were beginning to spread—before 1947. My mother told me that there was a

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cut mark on her *gyethu's* [uncle, father's elder brother] hand. He was injured while travelling by train [to India]. He survived, but bore the mark. On the side of my mother's family, I remember mother's widowed *pishima* [aunt, father's sister], who struck me as somewhat odd in her behaviour. I learnt later on that during that fateful train journey, in full view of his family, goons had slit her husband's throat. The family couldn't save him. My grandfather [mother's father] somehow managed to save himself by hiding in a bathroom outside the train compartments.

After coming to Kolkata, my maternal grandfather's family settled in Bagmari in a house abandoned by Muslims. They began using household utensils, etc left behind by them. I've heard that a Muslim friend of my [maternal] grandfather's used to be proactive in helping families relocate and settle after migration. He would make all necessary arrangements and help transfer entire families here. But after settling down, life was awfully dismal. After moving out of that house in Bagmari, my grandfather had rented a very small house; and then started a modest shop with money raised from selling off all the family jewellery. In the beginning, it was a very small shop, with a few jars of chocolate and chanachur [spiced and salty snack made of roasted chickpea, groundnuts, gramflour fritters; commonly served with puffed rice and rice crispies]. He did well as an entrepreneur and successfully ran many shops. Then he came and settled in Salt Lake [large tracts of salt marshes in the eastern fringes in the city; site for township built on reclaimed land, developed 1958-65]. He had many shops in the Kwaliti [bus stop] area [Block BE, Salt Lake], and had settled down for good in Salt Lake itself. So there really has been no 'ancestral home' for me. As I said, my [paternal] grandfather was first a resident of C R Park, New Delhi, then Africa, and then finally Salt Lake. So the only 'ancestral' houses I can relate to are the ones built by my grandfathers [paternal and maternal] in Salt Lake. These stories I've heard since childhood.

MM. You've heard so many stories—what does Partition mean to you?

SRC. For me, Partition signifies any act of removal or severance from one's roots. Say for example, even without countries getting divided up, if we are all extracted from where we belong, isn't there an inherent pain in it? Like I told you, I've seen my father pine away for Africa, just as I've seen my [paternal] grandfather pine for his native land Bangladesh. There is definitely a pain deep down that never goes away. And with it, if there is a history of violence in the process, the uprooting, then the wounds fester even deeper. You tend to retain those memories throughout your life.

MM. What is your understanding of your own country, your own native land?

SRC. I told you, this is where I've grown up. This is my native land—meaning, my home in Salt Lake, where I've lived, studied, took up a job. This is where my roots lie. I cannot relate to Bangladesh as my native land or the site of my ancestry or my roots.

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MM. In the context of the present times or contemporary history, what does Partition mean to you? How do you react to the situation of two countries separated by a Partition?

SRC. I teach History. While teaching, I've realized something—the present generation is only vaguely aware of one community being good and the other evil. Perhaps they don't even know *why* the incidents took place in that manner, or for that matter *why* one leader was good, and the other wasn't. They know nothing. Perhaps they have grown up with whatever they have learnt from the stories told at home, stories they have heard as children. Perhaps that is what constitutes the truth for them. Maybe the next generation would not have even that little bit of a link. In my experience as a teacher, I have seen students voice the experiences they bring from their respective homes. They don't know the whys and the wherefores. They seek no explanation, and they don't question.

MM. So you feel that way?

SRC. I feel that the present generation is not bothered. Many of them don't even know what happened. Many such generations would come and go. Do I know the complete history? I don't. But if we could preserve whatever little, in whatever manner that we can, it would be really worth something. If we could preserve this other history, this history that is different—

MM. You told us about the various cultural programmes that your [paternal] grandfather organized during his days in Africa. Would you like to share those stories in some detail?

SRC. Of the stories that circulated—and this is what I heard—that my grandfather had a tremendous admiration for Tagore and he insisted on celebrating Rabindra Jayanti. Now the Bengalis there would send their children to African schools because there were no separate schools for Indians. He would mobilize these kids who somehow managed to speak a very broken Bengali, and celebrate Rabindra Jayanti with them. I am still in touch with families of Bengali migrants in Africa, who have later come back to India and settled here. We arrange get togethers occasionally. I've heard from a lady in one such get together about the desperation with which they would go hunting for *suñtki machh* [lit. 'dried fish'. Sun-dried fish, that gives off a distinct overpowering smell during cooking]. In those days there was no remote chance of *suñtki machh* landing up in Africa. The story goes like this: this lady insisted that she had smelt *suñtki machh*, while the other kept questioning how could that variety of fish land up in Africa. But the former insisted that no *Bangal* [colloquial usage, meaning natives of Bangladesh] could mistake the smell of *suñtki*. So the two of them set out on a quest looking for the source of the smell. They actually traced it to the family [where it was being cooked]! So there was this bonding over eating *suñtki*. When they came to India, they would invariably return with a good stock of typically Bengali food stuff that wasn't available there—something that they sorely missed.

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Then they would celebrate Saraswati Puja on a modest scale with all the children in the Bengali community. They had their own way of celebrating. They would hold on to their roots by celebrating even the most insignificant of *pujas*. Bengali recitation and songs would be part of any programme put up on such occasions. There was a desperate urge to retain and preserve the Bengali language in whatever way they could.

MM. You've said earlier in this interview that your grandfather has written extensively on Partition. Would you like to say something about those pieces? What according to you was your grandfather's perspective?

SRC. What I found was an overpowering sense of nostalgia. Something that I told you a little while ago—this yearning—'I must visit my native place, my homestead'—nostalgia was the driving force. That's what I felt. He reconnected with a few singers on his visit to Bangladesh. I have seen grandfather arrange a musical evening at home on an informal scale for his friends from Bangladesh, when they had come here on his invitation. He arranged local talents to sing for them. He would take such initiatives.

On the other hand, my father had this deep attachment for anything to do with Africa. Since he practically grew up in Africa, he could speak that language very well. Possible he was the only one who could in Kolkata. That's why African students visiting the city under the aegis of Rotary Club would routinely come home to us, and father would be like a mentor to them. I have seen two different manifestations in the connectivity factor of these two generations. I guess each one wants to return to the place that they have grown up in. Perhaps that is where their roots lie. From my childhood I've observed how people from these two different countries with their unique cultures have been regular visitors to our home in Kolkata. Maybe I couldn't figure out what was being spoken in African, but there was an exchange, a coming together that was always there. As I told you, Rotary Club would send them to our family as father was fluent in that language. I've seen this at home.

MM. You've told me earlier in your interview that your maternal grandfather's family had to take shelter in an abandoned Muslim house in Bagmari. Can you tell me anything about your family's reaction—a Hindu family living in a Muslim's house?

SRC. I've seen my *dida* [endearing usage of 'didima', maternal grandmother] till I was quite old. She was awfully staunch and a stickler for rites and rituals; a great believer in caste, creed, religion. At that point of time, she had no other option but to accept the situation she was in. Later on, when things sorted themselves out, that inherent staunch streak remained in her. I've heard stories about how in those days of utter despair, their Muslim friends had arranged everything—how they could reach safely and all that. The family didn't even have money to buy utensils. So they managed with the household stuff left behind

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by the Muslim family, and cooked in their clay oven. Then again, when better days came by, she became her staunch old self.

MM. The rites and rituals for ceremonies in East Bengal are somewhat different from those in West Bengal. Does your family continue to follow the rituals practiced in East Bengal?

SRC. Both my mother's and father's side of the family had their origins in East Bengal. But I have seen more of ceremonies on my maternal side. Say for example, Jhulan [a Vaishnav festival in the month of Shraavan in the Bengali calendar (mid-July to mid-August approx.) worshipping Krishna and Radha on a swing decorated with flowers; festivities would include singing of specially composed songs, and offerings of homemade savouries and sweets] would be celebrated with a great deal of pomp and fervour, and so would many other religious festivals. But the situation on my father's side of the family was somewhat different. Since my grandfather had gone away to another country, and my father to America, I haven't come across such adherence to the ritualistic aspects of worship. Those were more on my mother's side. On the other hand, I saw my grandfather [paternal] very active with community celebrations like Rabindra Jayanti, or Durga Puja, or organizing *prabhat pheri*. These were more community based activities. And on my mother's side of the family I have memories of grand Jhulan celebrations, with a superbly bedecked Krishna idol on a swing.

MM. Would you pass on these fascinating stories about the Partition to the subsequent generation?

SRC. Certainly. I'm a teacher, a teacher of History. So when I teach my class Partition, since I don't have any direct experience, I constantly draw on these stories that have been passed on to me. I retell those tales, the tales I've heard. I make them do projects that involve interviews. I encourage them to take interviews of people in their families or outside, who have these memories. So I would definitely pass these on to my next generation.

MM. Would you like to share with us any stories that you wouldn't want to pass on to the next generation?

SRC. You cannot deny the truth. If an incident has happened, it ought to be shared and passed on at any cost. Of course I would share everything I've heard. I said, for instance, how my maternal grandmother changed once things were going smoothly. That's the truth. And only a true narration of incidents must be made to the next generation.

MM. What does Partition mean to you at this moment?

SRC. What strikes me most is the constant bickering, differentiation and nitpicking between 'Bangal' and 'Ghoti' in the mundane details of daily existence. Yet when I teach History, I teach historical facts and

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incidents of Partition. That has become 'history' now. In marriages, in cuisine, among friends, concerning loyalty among friends, and in religion—this dichotomy lingers, grows stronger and becomes more divisive every day. People who have been through the experience of Partition have very strong views on religion and the Hindu-Muslim divide. The blame game continues entirely on religious parameters. And there is this other generation, who have heard stories about the Partition experience. Their perspective is through interpretation of the stories they have heard.

MM. About this Ghoti-Bangal difference—do you have any experience where you've become acutely aware of your 'Bangal' identity?

SRC. I've always seen members of my maternal side of the family use the 'Bangal' intonation while speaking to each other. Otherwise they wouldn't speak in any dialect while talking to anybody else. That was a special family thing. Then it was taken for granted that Bangal cuisine is essentially hot and spicy, while Ghoti cuisine is mild, sweeter. We would relish hot stuff at home. Bangal girls were known to pick fights easily. Why did such generalizations come into vogue? There is a history behind it. Bangal women are known to be much more bold. There is a reason behind it, a history. Some of our relatives are from Tripura; again, their language sounds so different.

MM. How do you relate to the term 'refugee'? Does it mean anything to you? Any stories to share from your father or grandfather?

SRC. This thing about Bangal girls being more bold—perhaps because they had the hard life of a refugee, they had to rough it out, they had to suffer. Maybe that's why they are bold. Their personalities have been shaped that way. Their food habits were different because in their life of struggle and hardship, they had no time to spend on food. But in most instances they were much more liberal in many respects, particularly on the Hindu-Muslim question. Perhaps their refugee existence has shaped their character.

MM. Have you heard stories of such experiences?

SRC. You mean refugee experience?

MM. Any specific behaviour because of their being refugee?

SRC. Their behaviour?

MM. No, towards them.

SRC. Take my mother's family for example—they didn't have any proper place to live; grandfather couldn't settle down that well, and to continue studying amidst all that. How hard that must have been for the

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children! My mother had three more siblings. Imagine the struggle. They could rent only a very small house in Bagmari later on. Maybe all of them just had one cramped room between themselves. There is a struggle inherent in that. Maybe they had just that one space as a living room and study and bedroom. Maybe they did not face any coercion as such, but very few people even understand the struggle that refugee families faced here. After all, they had a status, a settled lifestyle in their native land. They had to leave all that behind. People don't seem to empathize with their situation—the altered circumstances that they were thrown into. But I've not heard of any torture or coercion.

MM. What does the word 'border' mean to you?

SRC. Our country was divided on the basis of religion. Two new countries emerged—India and Pakistan. Later there was yet another division on the basis of language. So sometimes it is religion, and sometimes language that creates demarcations. These demarcations are nothing but borders. People close to the border have a different experience. Our experience is different from theirs, because we live far away from the border. We know that we need a passport to cross that border—something that wasn't needed earlier. To reach my native homestead I would now require a visa, a passport. Only then would I be able to access my home, because that is now on the other side of the border. May be it was the home of my childhood days —

MM. What about the experiences of the women of your family? What did they face after coming here?

SRC. A memory from my childhood that is very vivid is that of my mother's *pishima*. She used to be always dressed in pristine white, and was high strung and stern. But she used to be very fond of us. We children used to wonder— why is she so angry all the time? Why does she speak like that? Nobody told me the reason when I was little. Later on I had come to know that her husband was butchered in front of her in the train, while they were coming away. She was a dependant. She had a small son too. I've always seen her staying with some relative or the other—a few months here, a few months there. Just imagine the hardships she had to face! But families which had a male member didn't have to go through this. My mother and her siblings also had to struggle, but not like this. I still feel very deeply in my heart for my mother's *pishima* who had to carry that severely traumatic memory all her life, and live the life of a dependant.

