

# My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

Interview details

Interview with Shan

Interviewed by Disha

DRC. Have you heard any stories of East Bengal from your elders in your family? If so, would you share these with us? I won't interrupt, just make a few jottings.

SB. My paternal grandfather and grandmother are both from East Bengal. My grandfather was born in a village called Sholdhon in Dhaka district. My grandmother was born in Kauljani village, which was originally in Mymensingh, but later incorporated within Tangail, when it became an independent district. My grandmother was twelve and my grandfather around twenty during Partition. My grandmother came away during Partition. But it was different in the case of my grandfather. It wasn't as if they had to come away leaving everything behind. In fact my grandfather's family had stayed on in Sholdhon well after Partition. It was my grandmother's family which was actually displaced. I had heard a story as a child. Later on when I was doing this project of mine, my grandmother recounted that story for me. It seems when the news of Partition started spreading across villages, there was a major Hindu-Muslim conflict in Basail, a locality near Kauljani, houses were set on fire and there were murders too. But she wasn't able to recount that very clearly. This disturbing news reached my great grandfather, my grandma's father, who was the headmaster of the local madrasa (though he was a Hindu). In spite of repeated assurances by his Muslim neighbours not to fear and not to flee the village, because they would protect him, he decided he would move with his entire family to Kolkata. He felt threatened because there were a lot of young girls in his family and his was the only pucca house in the village.

My grandmother told me that they had to change transport thrice. First all the women and girls of the family were sent off to Basail in *palkis* [palanquins]. From there they travelled by night to Tangail town in horsedrawn carriages. They boarded the train to Kolkata the following morning. My grandma has told me that the train was so overcrowded that she had to be slipped in through a window! That train finally reached Kolkata.

My grandma's elder brother had a job in Kolkata. He had a place to stay in a mess [boarding houses that came up around the localities near the two major railway stations, Howrah and Sealdah where boarders could live at a nominal cost; modest meals and afternoon snacks and tea were served. Usually there was a gentleman who owned the mess and was the de facto in-charge]. For the first two nights, the entire family somehow put up at his mess lodgings. Then they went away to Habra by bus. An exchange of land was on at that time in Habra. A few Muslim families were going over to Pakistan across the border. Arrangements

## My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

were being made so that the Hindus could live on those lands, and the lands that the Hindus had left behind in Pakistan could be inhabited by these Muslim families.

My grandma was only twelve at that time. So she couldn't recount how fair this exchange was, or what the parameters were. However, they continued to live in Habra, and other members of her family gradually shifted from Kauljani to settle down in Habra.

My grandfather's family were in Sholdhon. My grandfather had come to Kolkata to study Law. But that wasn't immediately after Partition. That must have been sometime around 1948 or early 1949. He got a job with the police in Kolkata, and continued with his studies side by side. He went to his native village sometime around 1951. There were several reasons of his going back. One of the primary reasons was to convince the members of his family to shift to Kolkata. There were no untoward incidents or any kind of major rivalry in the village of Sholdhon. My grandfather's family were quite comfortable there. No wonder the others did not want to move.

My grandfather was a keen photographer. When he returned to his village, he clicked snaps of all the people in the village. Nobody had seen anything like a camera in that village, so there was much enthusiasm about posing for photographs—about 30-40 people posing together for photographs. There were very few incidents of communal violence in that village possibly due to its proximity to Dhaka. Grandfather had reiterated this several times.

But his school was in a place called Mahmudnagar in Tangail district. It was a residential school. His larger family, comprising several relatives used to live in Mahmudnagar. Some of them have remained there, and some have come away here. The branch of his family that had come away did not want to return, and those who had settled there did not think that they needed to relocate. So these are a few stories that I've heard from my grandfather and grandmother.

DRC. You have mentioned that your grandma had to struggle a lot more than your grandfather. Do remember hearing any such specific story, for instance the hardships they had to face when they were relocated, or did their lives / standard of living change?

SB. Of course. My grandma's family was quite well-to-do in Bangladesh. They had three houses, one of which belonged to my grandma's family. They had to leave behind a lot of wealth and money when they came away in a hurry. My *bordadu*, i.e. my grandma's eldest brother, was quite well placed in his job in Kolkata. My *mejdadu*, i.e. grandma's middle brother set up a cloth shop in Habra after some time. So initially after 2-3 years, the financial problems that they faced got worked out. It is quite obvious, isn't it, settling down in an entirely new locale without any prior preparation is bound to cause problems. They knew absolutely no one around—only the families who had migrated within a few weeks were their neighbours, and they were gradually getting to know them. They were sort of discovering each other. There was obviously that initial problem in adjustment. But that got worked out eventually.

## My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

My grandfather's problem was somewhat of a different nature. His family back in their village were not a moneyed family. They came from a lower middle class background. It became very difficult for him to maintain a certain standard of living when he came to Kolkata to study. That's why he had to take up a job even while he was a student. He first lived with a distant relative of ours. Then he moved to a rented flat near Taltala. There too he had a phase of financial difficulties. Later on, before he got married, he was able to save some money and tide over that problem.

I've heard from my grandpa that the outlook of living in a village, or the elements that make this living possible in his native village were so different from the elements in a city, that a deep sense of alienation developed in him soon after coming to Kolkata. But I feel he was able to overcome that very quickly. There is an old document at home—my grandma would collect and preserve these documents—a daily expense record. My grandfather would meticulously note down the expense records of every week, month wise. When he was in Bangladesh there had obviously been no necessity of maintaining such records. But when he was on his own, in an alien land, trying to make both ends meet with his meagre income, the necessity of maintaining a statement of accounts became important. I've seen in those records, the price of soap, shampoo, toothbrush, even cinema ticket on a Sunday—and so many other items! Now these expenditures were nonexistent in his village. The financial straits he had landed into on moving to the city, got worked out later.

DRC. This document you're talking about—the one that your grandma has preserved till this day, what does she feel about that document? Or materials from a long time ago that have still remained?

SB. That she has preserved out of habit. She has never ever discarded any old papers, legal documents or photographs. These documents had been buried under piles of other papers and other sundry documents. When I began work on my project, I needed material. So I requested my grandma to dig them out. 'Why don't you bring them out along with the old photographs and other things?' I asked her. I knew that all the prints and negatives of my grandfather's photographs were kept with those documents. There is something I noticed though, while going through these documents. The sense of wonder or astonishment that rules my appreciation of these documents, the same feeling I do not see in my grandma. These have been wiped clean from her memory. She rediscovered these when we ferreted out those papers and went through them.

DRC. Would you like to tell us something about your project?

SB. My grandfather passed away in December 2012. He had been very ill and bedridden for two years before that. And my grandma had to bear the brunt of it all. She was under a lot of pressure, because she was constantly with him those two years and never went out anywhere. She was completely exhausted physically and mentally. A few days after his funeral rites and other rituals were over, I felt she *had* to go on a trip somewhere. She needed it.

## My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

We now live in the Sodepur-Khardah area. But before my grandfather built this house, they used to live in the Dunlop Police Quarters—a favourite haunt of my grandmother. So she told me one day, 'Let's go, visit that place once more. Let's see how that area has transformed.'

My project stemmed from there. It was like this: we suggested, why only Dunlop? This was because before Dunlop, they used to live in a flat in Belgachhia near Paikpara. My grandma's *mejdidi* [middle sister] and her family still live there. So we went to Belgachhia. After coming away from Bangladesh, my grandfather had lived in eight or nine different localities in Kolkata. I had this idea that I should map these. He first lived in a flat near Taltala. From there he went to a place called Hadi Goli in Baghbajar. He moved to Chitpur from there, where he lived for four-five years, before shifting to Belgachhia, and finally to this house.

So I had the idea that if I could take my grandma to these locations where she had once lived, we would explore whether those houses still remained. Would her memory be triggered off if she visited those locations where she had once lived? Grandma asked me, 'Why, do you want to take some photographs?' It was very natural for her, because she had seen my grandfather at work as a photographer. He was such an avid amateur photographer! Just imagine, he had just come to a new country, had no money; yet bought a KB10 Kodak Brownie with his first salary! And went on taking photographs like there wasn't any end! A 620 film was required in Kodak Brownie. Until that film became obsolete in the mid-1970s, he went on taking photographs. And he has carefully gone on documenting all these various locations in Kolkata where he had lived after moving here. The houses, the localities, the people, his family members—everything is there in those photographs. Then there are general landscapes wherever the two of them had gone on vacation. There are numerous photographs of his in-laws' family and homestead in Habra.

I began restoring the negatives, matching them with the prints, locating the negatives where the prints were lost and making fresh prints from them. While working I discovered how unique my grandfather's huge repertoire of photographs was, how his style, his subjects, his philosophy behind taking a photograph had changed and developed over the years. The way he would take a photo in 1948 had become very different in 1968, for instance. He had no specific preference for subjects. I've seen three or four photographs of prospective brides that my grandfather went to visit as an eligible bachelor. He hadn't been married to her, but the photographs remain.

As I began work on compiling these, I decided I would give a specific shape, where I would study through the [chronological] progression of the photographs, the upward social mobility of the refugee middle class. If we look carefully at the photographs from 1948 to the mid-1970s, this mobility is clearly discernible. Along with that, I took my grandma along to revisit all these locations where I took her stills; as well as to her old village in Habra. Then I thought—and offered grandma—why don't I take her to Bangladesh, where we would do the same exercise? Go to my grandfather's old residential school, see that place too? Document that in photographs too. Then I wanted to visit my grandfather's village Sholdhon. My grandma agreed

## My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

instantly. So I went to all those places with her. Shot photos in Mahmudnagar, Sholdhon. A branch of distant relatives from my grandfather's family still live there. Their descendants, who still live there, helped us a lot. I had made a compilation of a huge lot of my grandfather's photographs, and some that I had taken.

DRC. How was this experience of taking your grandma along on this journey? What was her experience of revisiting these places?

SB. She had different reactions on visiting the different places. To tell you the truth, she became very emotional on reaching Sholdhon. That was because she had gone there once with my grandfather while he was still alive, but that was a long time ago. What exactly her reaction was, I do not know, but when I took her there, she had already had a second look at the stills my grandpa had taken on his 1951 visit. She was with me when I was working on those stills, and she could identify some people from those stills.

I'll share another incident that is rather interesting. There is a photograph that shows my great grandfather, great grandmother and their family mixing *moori* [puffed rice]. My great grandmother is mixing moori and my great grandfather is puffing on hookah. And beside them stands a little child, with her hand on the mouth, grinning. We were asking my grandma whether she could identify any of them. She pointed at that child and said, 'Why! That's Hasi!' 'Who is she?' I asked. She told me she was my grandfather's niece. I asked her whether she had come away to India, or stayed on. Grandma said that as far as she knew, Hasi was somewhere in Bangladesh, but she wasn't very sure where. We realized that our relatives from Sholdhon, whom we saw in grandfather's photographs, had moved out of Sholdhon. The branch of my grandfather's family, their descendants who had stayed on, were not to be found in Sholdhon either—they had moved to Dhaka. Local Muslim families now live in those houses in Sholdhon. We asked some of them too whether they knew anything about the whereabouts of any members of that branch of our family. There was a *iyethu* [uncle, father's elder brother] whom we found there, who told us that he knew about some of them.

We went to the next village, where apparently some descendants of that family had stayed on. It so happened that we had gone there at the time of Durga Puja. Now Durga Puja in a village in Bangladesh is quite a unique experience. There is a screening of the *Mahishasurmardini* video, people dance, in the pandal there is the idol of Durga, there's lots to eat on the days of the puja, and the entire Hindu community of the village congregates there. Nobody can beat the people of Bangladesh in their hospitality. We put up at the home of a total stranger there, had our meals. Their hospitality knew no bounds once they knew we were from India. My grandmother located an elderly lady there, whose face she found familiar. I came out that this was Hasi! And both of them recognized each other, because she had seen my grandma at her wedding. When my grandma got married, people from my grandpa's family had come to Habra, then had gone back after the festivities were over. That was the last time that Hasi had seen my grandma. That was 1954. And they reconnected in 2014! Grandma became so emotional at meeting her.

## My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

The other places we had gone to, for example my grandfather's school, etc did not carry that much of meaning for my grandma. Those locations were just places, like other places she had been visiting. But all the places that my grandma had set up home with my grandfather triggered off memories. Their flat in Chitpur for example. That flat was on the top floor. The house was practically crumbling down. I suggested that I'll take a photo and show it to her; but she said, 'I've come this far, let me try.' I took her through another flight of steps. The rooms where they had once stayed had become a Khadim shoe shop godown. She was a bit disheartened on seeing that those weren't living quarters any more. But all the other places we went to—Belgachhia, Dunlop Police Quarters—there was some family living in the spaces she had once set up home, and she would strike up a lively conversation with them. But she didn't like the Chitpur rooms becoming godown. On another occasion, she didn't want to even enter the Baghbajar lodgings, because she disliked the family of the landlords. So I told her that I would see the house from outside and come away. Grandma had diverse reactions.

DRC. Now about your grandma's father, who was the headmaster of a madrasa. Being a Hindu and the head of a madrasa—wasn't there any problem he had to face? Did you hear anything about that from your grandmother, relating to her father?

SB. From whatever she has told me, I know this that in the village of Kauljani, there were 20-30% Muslims. There were many families among the Muslims who had done pretty well in business and were quite well off. Their village was a remote one and there was only madrasa in it. There weren't many educated people in the village. From whatever I've heard, my grandma's father was the only one eligible to become the headmaster. And he didn't have to face any religious or racial problems. But I won't really be able to throw any light on the condition of the other Hindus living there.

DRC. What does Partition mean to you?

SB. Which type of Partition? Just the India-Bangladesh Partition, or any Partition?

DRC. Maybe both. You can begin with 1947.

SB. To me directly Partition is nothing more than a historical event.

DRC. You've heard so many stories since your childhood; there's so much of influence, yet to you it is nothing more than a historical event?

SB. In my life or worldview, Partition does not help me identify anything on my own. Maybe my family condition, my grandfather's interest in photography, these I've derived. Maybe if my grandfather had lived on in Shodhon, he wouldn't have bought his camera, or developed an interest in photography. I would have been born in Bangladesh, and brought up in a different way—that too could have happened. But as of now, I cannot directly identify anything.

DRC. And how do you perceive the India-Bangladesh border?

## My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

SB. Meaning?

DRC. As in division—maybe in the case of the visa-passport redtape; two countries which were one, now partitioned; making two countries separate—in the physical presence of the border, or in some other way—does it affect you?

SB. If you look at it from that perspective, I do not endorse borders between countries in any part of the world. In order to go to Bangladesh, I have to submit my passport and apply for visa; the same exercise holds true for Europe. I do not think these should exist. I hope that in future, these divisive policies would be done away with. What I mean to say is, I do not have a special regret about a border existing between India and Bangladesh.

DRC. If you are asked where you live, what will you answer?

SB. To tell you the truth, I live where I set up my home. Today I'm in Kolkata, some time ago I was in Sodepur. My family has moved from one locality to another in Kolkata, never settling down permanently in one place. That is why I have never developed a sense of belonging to one single home. I'm perfectly at home in the most random of places. I go to the mountains quite often, to a particular village. When I go there, I feel that's my home. I stay there a month and a half maybe, then come back. Now if you ask me where's my home, I won't be able to tell you the name of one single place.

DRC. Since both your grandparents were from Bangladesh, do you see any specific cultural influence in your family that you've inherited from those roots?

SB. Yes, obviously. It isn't so much in me, but the types of fish that my grandma, father and mother are fond of, those are typically delicacies from the other side of the border. My grandma often breaks into her native dialect while talking to members of her father's family or her sister. It is not that she speaks that all the time, but does so quite often. So there are influences like these. Besides there are rites and rituals particularly pertaining to religious worship, which my grandma says are different from the ghotis. The family of a paternal aunt [*pishi*] of mine are ghotis. My grandma pointed out certain differences in the rites of worship for a certain puja, saying, 'Uff! Now these people are ghotis. No wonder their rules are different.'

DRC. Haven't these influences ever affected your life? You have told us about your grandparents, but have these practices ever influenced your life?

SB. Not really. When I went to Bangladesh, I did not stay in Dhaka. I stayed in these villages. I encountered a sense of alienation similar to my grandfather's when he came from the village to the city. Though the language is similar, I felt that apart from the language factor, I felt exactly as I would, going to a foreign land in my interactions with the people there. In my mind I've questioned certain cultural practices, I've questioned the logic, the rationale behind these practices—but that has happened equally in France and Bangladesh. So . . .

## My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

DRC. You have mentioned alienation. Would you share with us instances / incidents where you have felt specifically felt very alienated?

SB. There are several. For example, the family I was living with in Bangladesh served me a bowl full of biscuits in the morning. How can somebody have that quantity of biscuits first thing in the morning! I have no idea! There were six-seven types of biscuits, with two to three of each type. Then there is a special biscuit that they make out of bread which those people must have been really fond of, because they had given five-six of those. I picked one or two of each variety, but I found that they had cleaned the entire bowl of biscuits! My grandma and I exchanged glances. Later on I asked my grandma whether there was a custom of eating biscuits in that quantity in her time, and she replied obviously not. Why would people have so many biscuits? This must have been a development in recent times. Then the traffic. I wouldn't want to dwell on that. I was moving along the highway, and it was Durga Puja, just before Id. Trucks full of cows were cruising towards Dhaka from the villages. Just before entering Dhaka there was an area, I forget the name right now, there was a space as big as the Maidan in Kolkata. That was an open market for buying cattle. I requested my *jyethu* to take me there one day because I thought the experience would be somewhat different for me. So we went. I saw people had landed up from Dhaka with tempos of all kinds. Among the buyers were people who had come in Mercedes, or people who had travelled by bus. It was like a field cattle fair, where people were poking and prodding the cows and deciding on the price. The shopkeepers were calling out: 'This cow is from India. Price: One lakh taka.' Bargaining commenced—wouldn't go beyond 85,000 taka, so it was settled at 90,000 taka [Bangladesh currency]. The cow was put up on a tempo, and the buyer left in his Mercedes. The cow would eventually be delivered.

We identified a family who were neighbours of my *jyethu*, near Sabha. They were next door neighbours. My uncle asked him, 'Bought anything?' 'Yes,' he replied, 'one lakh ten.' 'Then it must be really good,' quipped my uncle. 'Sure I have,' said the neighbor. 'Let's see,' my uncle said. We saw a really large, well endowed cow, which would be slaughtered on the day of Id behind his house.

I've encountered incidents like these in all countries I've visited. Somewhere or the other I've come across strange events and cultural practices which I find very interesting. Maybe I don't relate to these, so it's nothing different that way.

DRC. Would you be interested in passing on these memories that you have inherited from your grandparents or your other family members, to the next generation?

SB. Of course, because the history that we read conventionally captures a very narrow spectrum. When I was working on vernacular history with my grandfather's photographs, I realized that the recent trend constitutes in reproducing vernacular photography and republishing it, thereby creating a discourse—be it oral history or written, literature or photography, stories that come down in families. If the next generation is made aware of the vernacular aspect, chances of them relating to all this would be much higher.



## My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

DRC. Are there any specific stories that you would like to pass on?

SB. For the last two years, working on this project of mine, I've come to realize something—maybe a particular tale is specific to my family, but there are so many families, and most of them have more or less the same stories with slight variations here and there. But these are trivialities. Ultimately we are going through the same thing.

