

My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

Interview details

Interview with Somnath

Interviewed by Soumita

SM. Would you please share with us stories / reminiscences of East Bengal that you may have heard from your father, mother, grandfather or grandmother in your childhood? You please, continue speaking, we'll take down notes.

SRP. All the stories that I've heard of East Bengal is from my father and my *thakuma* [paternal grandmother]. I did not see my grandfather. I've heard from my grandmother that we were originally a family of idol makers and potters, referred in the local dialect as makers of *hañri-patil*. My grandfather would be commissioned to make idols for the local zamindar's family, and he would take my *jjethu* [uncle; father's elder brother] along, on these assignments. My father and *kaku* [uncle; father's younger brother] had hands-on training with my grandfather. That is a craft they had been trained in. The subsequent generation, that is our generation—we too have learnt this. That is how it has been continuing from one generation to the next.

SM. In which district of East Bengal was your ancestral home located?

SRP. It was in Dhaka—Bikrampur Sholgar.

SM. Could you describe the journey—from there to Kumortuli in Kolkata?

SRP. I wouldn't be in a position to describe that, because I haven't heard anything. All that I know is that my grandfather took the initiative during Partition. Our family was not well off financially; but they had heard of this settlement of potters and idol makers in Kolkata, and had come there in order to continue working with their traditional craft of idol making.

SM. Your family had to come away because of Partition. From that perspective, my question to you is, what does Partition mean to you?

SRP. You see, if you mean Bangladesh and India, I would say, we've learnt a lot here. Again, we've had our share of harassment as well. But the distinction between the two countries and the divide is best expressed in the *bangal-ghoti* distinction. That remains, but you cannot make out any other difference. But in our trade, unless you give out your name, nobody would ever know whether you are a bangal or a ghoti.

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That is because we speak the same language as the locals here. My father and grandfather spoke in their own dialect from East Bengal. None in our generation can even speak that dialect properly.

SM. You've mentioned that you have had to face harassment after you came away to Kolkata. What kind of harassment did you face?

SRP. Harassment primarily related to work. Many would look down on us because we were bangals. This continued for a while until we sought police help. They came and mediated a 'mutual' settlement.

SM. Could you please go into a little more detail? Why did the police have to intervene? Did the bangal-ghoti divide turn so bitter?

SRP. That was work-related. The idol-makers who were in majority in this locality were from Krishnanagar in Nadia district of West Bengal. They would come here, but would remain idle for the most part. They would work only seasonally, before the Durga puja. They would shut shop after the festive season and return home. But for my ancestors, or our contemporaries, or other people from East Bengal, our work culture was totally different. We would work continuously from morning till night. So they got jealous, and began harassing us in many ways. It came to such a point that we had to seek police help.

SM. You also mentioned that you have learnt many new things here. Would you tell us what you learnt? Did this learning enrich your craft in any way?

SRP. You see our working methods were different, but both were market driven. The learning was mutual—we learnt from them, and they from us. Our craft was different too. Earlier, we have seen that the jewellery of the goddess would be made of *zari*, or of different colours. They wouldn't make those. Then the *chalchitra* that you see framing the goddess and her family—something that you see in all pandals nowadays—that began with the advent of the bangals. That wasn't the tradition here. So there were differences. But we've learnt a lot from them too. We've learnt how to draw the large eyes of the goddess according to the tradition here. That was their speciality. We learnt it from them.

SM. We've heard that one has to adhere to some specific rules of construction and rites of purity and cleanliness while the idol is being made. Would you tell us whether these rules that the ghotis would follow were different from the rules that bangals followed while making the idols? In what way were the bangal rules unique or different?

SRP. The ghotis had several specific rules. For instance, they would use bamboo to make the base support structure. That is what we would do too, but gradually we shifted to wood. This is one difference; the second was the difference in working methods. Their attitude was—you'll have to do this job and you'll have to work

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for these many hours. We don't believe in this. For us, the structure and the shape are supreme. They would never complete the back portion of idols; but we took equal care to complete the front and the back of the idols. These are some of the differences between their work and ours. As for rules of structure, we'll use two bamboos instead of one, if we feel that the structure would be strengthened. But they have a set numbers of bamboos assigned for each structure, and they'll stick to that.

SM. Tell me, when you came away from Bikrampur, in those initial days, did you take up lodgings at Kumortuli, or elsewhere in Kolkata?

SRP. My grandfather and father came and settled initially in a place called Bali Nischhinda. Perhaps you have heard of it. Later they settled here.

SM. Please tell us something about your family. How many members were there?

SRP. Our family—when we came away—was a joint family of about 18-19 heads. My father and his younger brother, and they had 16-17 sisters. They would all live together. There used to be one rule in our family, that when a work was in progress, all the hands doing the work would have to eat at home. Right from breakfast, all meals would be served at home.

SM. So you would commute daily from Bali to Kumortuli?

SRP. Yes, initially. Later, once they settled here, this became the place of work.

SM. So this became your centre of work. And the people who work for you in this 'karthana', were the craftsmen bangal or ghoti predominantly?

SRP. There was no such distinction, but a large part was from Nadia. Most of the artistes of Kumortuli are from Nadia or Medinipur districts.

SM. When your family came away in 1947 after Partition, how did they set up this new business in a new land? What were the hardships and tribulations that they faced? Any incidents that you may have heard from your elders?

SRP. My father and uncles had to struggle very hard. I've heard that my [paternal] grandfather passed away in the Bali Nischhinda house. There was virtually no guardian to look after the family. My father's uncles were there though. The grandfathers I refer to are my father's uncles. They were awfully strict. They supervised my father's training with strict instructions—you'll have to complete this job today. So immediately after coming back from school, they would sit with their assignment. Suddenly they would be

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set the task of painting so many idols, with the incentive of a present if the job was well done. That's how my father and uncles got trained.

SM. You've mentioned that your family would work for the zamindar in your village in East Bengal.

SRP. Yes, they would go to their house and make idols there.

SM. So they built idols. What kind of a clientele did you get when you came here? For whom did you work?

SRP. Once they came here, my grandfathers first made idols, then for the really big community pujas . . . there are many these days. For instance, the Tala Sarbojanin Puja at Tala Park would be a steady client. Idols didn't cost much in those days. You could get huge idols only for Rs 1000 or Rs 1100. I made idols for as little as Rs 700 for Khidirpur Pañchattor Palli, or Simla Byayam Samiti.

SM. You've mentioned two very old, traditional, ghoti localities for which you made idols—Simla Byayam Samiti and Khidirpur. Was there any inhibition on their part on taking idols from bangals?

SRP. No. They looked at the quality of work, and noted the difference in craft . . .

SM. If you could please tell us the distinguishing features of your craft. What I mean to say is, if you could point out for us the difference between the craft of an idol maker from East Bengal and that from West Bengal?

SRP. The shapes of the faces were very different. But the real difference was in adornment of the idols—both in the lengths of heavily embellished cloth, and ornaments that we adorned the idol with. Now there's no difference at all. The fight that we had was over this issue of the adornment of the idol. Their grouse against us was because we used to give excellent quality adornments; and also because the structures of our idols stood out because of these adornments.

SM. Apart from making clay idols for the zamindar, what other activities were your family engaged in, in East Bengal?

SRP. Our main trade was in pottery. We are a family of potters, *kumbhakar*. So we would make pots, pitchers, etc.—stuff that traditional potters make. My grandfather also knew how to make clay idols. In those days there would be the village *morol* [headman] who would send word that an idol needs to be made; and my grandfather would go and make it. He couldn't do it alone of course! So he took his brothers and nephews with him to work.

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SM. Did anybody from your family stay on in East Bengal after you all came away? [SRP answers no] So there's no one there in your native land. Then, your native land for you is India, and Kolkata to be precise. Could you recount for me the situation before 1947—the circumstances in which your family came away to the other side?

SRP. Look, I'll not be able to tell you the exact circumstances, because we really don't know the details. All we know is that the financial condition wasn't at all encouraging, and that was one of the primary reasons for my grandfather migrating here. Then there's another reason—perhaps you may have seen it or known it too—the price of idols outside Kumortuli and in Kumortuli are different. The Kumortuli rates you don't get outside. Again, when Kumortuli artisans travel somewhere else to make commissioned idols, those rates are different. That's because the work methods change when you're required to stay somewhere else and make the idols. They wouldn't get the right prices for their efforts. That is why they came away. And as I said earlier, the financial situation was grim.

SM. How far do you think was the political situation and the Partition responsible for their decision to leave their country?

SRP. We never really had a frank discussion with them about the reasons. From what we've heard, we know that the main reason was financial. Besides, my grandfather's family did not come all together in a group. They came gradually. One of them came here and heard that trouble had started. Then my grandfather brought everyone away one by one.

SM. What kind of 'trouble' do you recall having heard from them?

SRP. The riots had started already, and my grandfather and grandmother were having problems staying on. That's why they came away.

SM. You've mentioned that yours was a joint family. What kind of specific rites and rituals from East Bengal are still being followed in your family here in Kolkata?

SRP. The presiding deity of the Rudrapals is the goddess Manasa [a lesser deity, blind in one eye, vengeful goddess of snakes; not in the Hindu pantheon. A whole body of regional literature has been written on how Manasa came to be worshipped in Bengal, in the several versions of the *Manasamangal Kavya* which tells the story of how Manasa wrests her right to be worshipped from the gods of the Hindu pantheon, particularly Shiva]. We are very devoted to her. We do all our pujas meticulously with several special rites. For example, for us bangals, on Saraswati puja day we apply turmeric paste while bathing in the morning, and buy a pair of *ilish* fish that day. The pair is separated three days later. Then there's another rule: even the bones are preserved and immersed in the Ganga. That's a rule we bangals follow. We also believe that because we

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came, ghotis have learnt many new things, and their practice of rites and rituals have changed with our influence.

SM. You were talking about Manasa puja. Would you tell me about the Manasa puja bangals would perform?

SRP. Manasa puja is particularly common among us, the Rudrapals. The puja is widely practiced by us, and the *baniks* or traders.

SM. Please tell us something more about the rites and rituals that are especially practiced on social occasions like a wedding, or any other family festivity. You've told us about Saraswati puja; so if you could also tell us something about the rituals you follow—the traditional rituals that have continued to be practised from your days in East Bengal.

SRP. In East Bengal, and particularly among bangals, you'll notice how they make a huge hullabaloo, bringing together everybody possible on any occasion, be it marriage or any other festivity. In marriage for example, they would preserve the *piñri* [rectangular or square low wooden seat, not more than a few inches high, used for sitting on the floor; common household furniture; also used for festive social occasions like marriage, in which the bride and the groom sit on separate decorated *piñris* during the marriage rituals] with great care, treating the marriage *piñri* like family heirloom. The father would preserve his *piñri* for the marriage of his son and so forth. A few days ago y sister got married. Now that *piñri* will be preserved with great care for the next marriage in the family. That is one rule. The other is the manner of inviting people. I'm sure you've noticed the difference. We bangals make it a point to visit every home individually while inviting. But ghotis on the other hand are much more relaxed. They invite over telephone, or even on a chance meeting on the road. That is a major difference between the bangals and ghotis. Then their food—they did not know how to prepare *kochu* [arum]. Bangals taught them how to cook *kochu*. They didn't know how to prepare it with ilish head. They have a fascination for prawns, though. Among fish, they would only eat prawns, rohu and katla. They rarely had smaller sweet water fish.

SM. How are your puja rituals different from theirs? You've told us about Saraswati puja. What about Manasa puja? What are the special rules and rituals for Manasa puja?

SRP. We all sit together and do the puja, and the offering is milk and bananas, which is distributed as *prasad*. I don't know what the ghoti rituals are for this puja. Perhaps they don't do this; I don't know. Then they have something called *ranna pujo* or *orondhon*. They do all the cooking the previous evening, and have it the following day. We don't have any such puja. There's another thing that we all maintain—vegetarian food to be cooked on every puja; we don't take non-vegetarian food on the days of puja.

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SM. Your factory's name is 'Bikrampur Mritshilpalay' [Bikrampur Clay Arts Centre]. Why did you use the name 'Bikrampur'?

SRP. The reason is because we are originally from the other side of the border. Our identity needs to be established. People need to know who we are. That's why we have printed 'Dhaka Bikrampur' on our banner. Who is the artist? Nepal Pal, Panchanan Rudrapal, etc. But those names are mentioned below the name of the factory—the Dhaka Bikrampur factory run by bangals.

SM. What kind of attachment do you feel with the name?

SRP. See, the name Dhaka Bikrampur implies that we are bangal. There was a common adage that anybody hailing from Dhaka is a bangal. So that has remained I guess. We've come from Dhaka Birampur, but I've never gone there. My ancestors came away—that's all.

SM. What according to you is your native land?

SRP. India.

SM. What kind of attachment do you have for East Bengal?

SRP. The attachment that the name brings. Nothing else.

SM. You've told us these stories that you have heard from your father or grandmother. Which stories are you going to pass on to your next generation?

SRP. All the stories that I've heard, I'll teach them, so that they know how we came here and created our establishment; how we got acquainted with people.

SM. Would you to go into a little more detail?

SRP. Detail? Why, I've told you all that for so long. The problems that we faced. How we came away from East Bengal; how our real native land is this land now. And the attachment to the original native land remains only in the name. That name is what we hold on to. Otherwise everything else is in this country.

SM. You've said just now that you had to face so many problems before actually setting up the business. What is the situation now in Kumortuli? What about bangal-ghoti relations?

SRP. Perfect. No bad blood any more. In our family, all my uncles have mostly married into ghoti families. The divide isn't that pronounced. Even my sister has been married into a ghoti family. The situation isn't what it was previously.

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SM. While negotiating a marriage proposal, do you have to face questions like: 'Are you a bangal or ghoti ?

SRP. Earlier it would be negotiated marriage; now it is more like saying yes to a relationship that has continued for some time—that's where the family comes in. Now, taking off from that, my grandfather was very firm about not bringing in ghoti brides into the family. But my uncles marrying ghoti girls never posed a problem.

SM. You told us so many stories about your family, you've brought up the question of marriage—how have the women of the family contributed to the family business?

SRP. The ghoti brides who have come into the family are not connected to the business at all. But my mother and kakima [aunt, wife of kaka, father's younger brother] did a lot for the family business. As I told you some time ago, all the workers of the factory would have their meals at our place. My mother and aunt would cook for all of them. Then they would look after the family nitty gritty and a few chores outside the house as well with great care.

SM. Do any of the female members of your family help you in idol-making?

SRP. Yes. Now that father is no more, it's only my sister and me. She is totally a part of the business; and she's the one who does the *chakshudaan* [the most crucial part of the finishing of an idol—painting the eyes of the goddess; demands a great deal of skill. It is believed that with this drawing of the eye, the goddess comes to life in the clay frame]. There was a time when artisans would demand huge amounts of money for doing that. But she has picked it up really well, and there's no problem anymore. She does the whole process completely by herself.

