

My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

Interview details

Interview with Sukanta

Interviewed by Somwrita

Somwrita Nag [SN]. Have you heard any stories from anyone in your family about East Bengal? Would you like share some of those with us? Please feel free to talk. I won't interrupt you; I'll just take some notes.

Sukanta Biswas [SB]. I've heard all these stories from my father; haven't seen any of this with my own eyes. Our home was in Pabna district in Bangladesh. Our ancestors were agriculturists, and also had a small business set up. They had lots of land. When India became independent in 1947, they went on a trip to India around 1950-51. They saw that conditions in India were far better than in Bangladesh, and it might actually be a good idea to set up business here. It would also be better to settle in India. They figured that out in that trip itself. After that they returned to Bangladesh, i.e. my grandfather. On returning home, he gave the responsibility of his agricultural land, which amounted to about 25-30 bighas, to a man named Ainuddin. He told him, 'I'm going to India for a while. I'm putting in charge of my lands. I'll decide what I want to do with my lands after I'm back.' So he went back to India once more, and started travelling—North Bengal, Banagram in Nadia, Singhati, Gobarpalli. He would stay for some time in each of these places, but never settled anywhere permanently in particular. Days went by. His financial condition started deteriorating. My father was only a child then. Grandfather then began tilling other people's land as a share-cropper. After some time, he could build a house in Banagram, Nadia. He didn't like the locality; and built a house again on the outskirts of that village. He relocated here, and continued with his share-cropping. He also had some cows, and this helped him in his farming. My grandfather worked tremendously hard, and slowly he was able to buy land. In this way he was able to put together about 20-22 bighas of land. Meanwhile father was growing up. He cleared his Madhyamik, Higer Secondary, i.e. class XII boards, then Masters, and forayed into several small trades even while he was a student. He was also involved in politics. This is how life continued; but the financial condition of the family didn't really look up.

The reason for coming away from Bangladesh was that, people there were making things difficult; for example, they would forcibly cut away crop and take it away, loot paddy from the granary, etc. Hence after coming away, the family finances became dependent solely on agriculture. Father meanwhile got a small job.

SN. Was there any other reason for his settling down here, or was it just on an impulse when he had come on trip once?

SB. It was on that trip that he liked it here, and he decided that they should go to India, and start living there; then subsequently settle there permanently. The reason being, India was by then an independent country and Bangladesh was not. So he thought the family would face more trouble living there. That's why he

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came away. He had foreseen that we wouldn't have a bright future in Bangladesh. He wanted to explore the possibilities in India, and hence the decision to shift.

SN. Didn't your grandfather face any difficulties?

SB. In Bangladesh?

SN. Yes.

SB. Of course he faced; else why would he come away?

SN. And he felt that things would turn out to be difficult in future? Why such a reaction? Did he face anything to provoke such a decision?

SB. Yes, in the sense that in village after village, the Hindus had started moving to India from Bangladesh. So he started thinking, what should we do then? Everybody's leaving. If we don't leave rightaway, we might get into trouble. Our relatives, neighbours—everybody started to move to India, the number of people who were living there started depleting seriously. That was the primary reason of moving to India.

SN. What does Partition mean to you?

SB. I consider Partition a terrible event, at least in my life. It could have been avoided. Had the two countries remained together, going from one place to another would've been so much easier. There would've been no impediments. There are still a few relatives who are in Bangladesh. Going to them, or they coming over wouldn't have been that difficult either. The country as a whole would've been a larger country, and it would've been better economically too. When I think about these things, I do not consider the Partition to be something positive.

SN. If you could tell us in detail how your grandfather came to India and settled down. What were the difficulties he faced before settling down?

SB. Grandfather used to mostly till other people's lands. We hadn't taken any help from the government here, because we had come long before the riots broke out. There was no tension as such between the two countries when grandfather came away. He came away when India was already an independent nation; so he didn't face any trouble at all. He began as a sharecropper. Agriculture and his grocery shop saw him through. He hadn't faced trouble here except for a bit of a financial trouble.

SN. But you had land on the other side of the border. Suddenly coming away to this side of the border—

SB. Yes, there was land, but we could never completely access those later on. We had to leave all that behind. We could bring nothing with us, nor sell anything. Some money had been brought over, but that was a very modest amount. Some land was bought with this money too. Whatever could be acquired was only because of the tremendous hard work that my grandfather put in.

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SN. How do you perceive the border between India and Bangladesh?

SB. If the two countries had been together, there would have been no need of any border. I don't think it is a nice thing. But because the two countries—India and Pakistan—are separate now, I think there is the border is necessary. In the present context, I think it is pertinent and good that there is a border. This is also because the two countries are different, and each one is independent. The border is necessary because we have two very different cultures and outlooks. So I feel in a way it is good that the border is there.

SN. Which one according to you is your own native country?

SB. My country is India.

SN. Is it true of your parents too? Do they feel that way too, or do you know of some other attachment that they shared?

SB. My father was born in Pakistan, I mean, Bangladesh. That's why perhaps he becomes pensive when those memories come crowding in. Father becomes really emotional and sad when he narrates stories of those times. Reminiscing, he says: Bangladesh has such a lovely weather; it is a riverine country; how we could roam around freely days on end in boats, catching fish. You don't get such varieties of fish in India. [In Bangladesh] you would get to catch big fishes. Stories like these. He feels very sad when he narrates these. But my mother, who was born here [in India], cannot quite understand the difference, since she hasn't been there.

SN. Please let us in as much detail as possible about the rites and rituals, ceremonies, cuisine and manner of dressing.

SB. I love the way the people of Bangladesh dress, or the way they interact, because I find them very simple and straightforward, and their manner of speaking or behaviour is also very decent. They can form a rapport with people very easily, even with village people; and can very easily bind you in a bond of endearment. They speak in their mother tongue, a language we derisively call 'bangal' language. But it is theirs nonetheless. We crack jokes about their intonation and point out how strange it is. I fully support their identification with their language. We, who have learnt to speak a language more refined, laugh at them. But I feel what they are doing is right, it is good.

SN. Can you tell us something about rituals or ceremonies or cuisine in your family that has been inherited from the other side of the border?

SB. Of course there is. My grandmother and [women of her generation] taught the nuances of their culture to my father and mother. This is something I've inherited. I've taken all that's good, and rejected the bad. I've liked the ceremonies and rituals.

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SN. Can you tell us something about that? What kind of rituals or ceremonies?

SB. You mean what kind?

SN. We know that the food habits of the people of West Bengal and East Bengal are very different. If you could tell us in some detail, what your grandmother taught your mother.

SB. My grandmother, who was brought up on the culture of East Bengal (my grandfather too), taught my mother everything. And I've seen that culture to be rather nice. Their cooking, cuisine, etc.—people of East Bengal are better cooks. They are very devout in their observance of rituals or religious ceremonies.

SN. If you could share with us some details about observance of religious ceremonies . . .

SB. For example my grandmother shared the rituals of Lakshmi Puja or Saraswati Puja with my mother according to the observance of rites in Bangladesh. That's what we've been observing all through in our family, through generations.

SN. Can you tell us how these rites are different from those practiced here in West Bengal?

SB. In Bangladesh, people have a community feeling; the rituals have a rural community feel. They tend to do everything as a community. But here, in India, I feel that the people are somewhat self-centered, for example, they'll say things, do things on their own; ensure that they alone rise in life—a completely selfish way of life. There are a few people who live behind us, whose ancestors were Indian. They are extremely jealous of us. They simply cannot stomach the fact that we have come to India much later, yet been able to acquire their lands at a fair price by dint of sheer hard work—the fact that we came from Bangladesh empty-handed, but have been able to develop on our own, stand on our own feet, bugs them. You see all this was their property once, but now ours, because the people here never really worked at all for that matter. The people of East Bengal acquired everything because they worked their way to achieve something. There were never any shortcuts. That's what I feel.

SN. What kind of behaviour did your grandfather get from the native settlers in West Bengal, when he first moved here permanently?

SB. He was well received. Some people gave him space to live, some offered, 'You till my lands, and I'll give you a share of the crops.' If he didn't receive affable behaviour, how could he settle here? You see, he had nothing with him. So he continued with sharecropping, and his small trade [of the grocery shop] simultaneously. So there were good people who supported him. Not that everybody was nasty to him. There are always good people around; and those days were no exception.

SN. What other stories have you heard from your father or grandfather?

SB. But my grandfather ...

SN. I mean, from your parents about [life on] both sides of the border.

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SB. I've heard from my parents that food was good and plentiful on the other side of the border; the weather was good, people were healthy; and they had a very nice culture.

SN. If you could tell us something in detail about the food and culture—how and to what extent were cuisine and culture different from that in West Bengal?

SB. In West Bengal, people from Bangladesh have settled in nearly all the villages. They are the majority now. It is hard to segregate. There are a few native settlers of West Bengal in our side of the village. But our cultures can't be distinguished any more. They've become one.

SN. Could it be distinguished earlier? How?

SB. Earlier their behaviour was rather rude. They would say, 'These have come from Bangladesh. We can't collect water from the tap that they've touched. We'll have to wash it first.' That's how they would behave with the 'bangals.' It is not like that any longer. Now they are more or less civil.

SN. Do you have special sets of rules for rituals in your family?

SB. In our family various types of pujas are routinely held, viz. Lakshmi Puja, Manasa Puja, Saraswati Puja, Bastu Puja [worship of the presiding deity of the dwelling place, i.e. 'bastu'] —all of which are celebrated with devout fervor, and with adherence to all the rules. Durga Puja and Kali Puja are more community pujas, for which the community as a whole comes together and we participate in every way possible, and also keep to all the rules of the rituals, etc. For Saraswati puja, we must have hilsa fish, but for other pujas, we keep fast the whole day, and do whatever is required in the rites. The only exception is Saraswati Puja. We eat fish at this puja after offering *anjali*, and after the puja gets over.

SN. If you could also tell us something about cuisine and food habits in your family ...

SB. If any relation of ours comes visiting, then we make several types of special preparations, and then before they leave, maybe one day before, or the same day, we'll make *puli* and *payesh*. We love any sort of *pithey*. We make all kinds of pithey. But on Poush sankranti, i.e. the last day of the month of Poush [a month in the Bengali calendar, mid-December to mid-January], we make an elaborate spread of pithey. That is a special rule that we follow. It is mandatory. This is also a time when we make and also distribute these to all members of the community in our neighbourhood.

SN. You've mentioned that your grandmother had trained your mother in all kinds of rites and rituals that are followed in East Bengal. Could you give us a little more detail, please?

SB. Grandmother has taught mother all types of recipes, pujas; daily rituals like *sandhyey deowa* [at sundown / dusk, the householder offers a lamp, incense to the household deity, taking the lighted lamp and incense from room to room, and around the grounds, especially the tulsi plant in the courtyard of every house, and blows on the conch shell thrice, to herald the coming of the evening]. She also taught mother

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which religious festival is to be observed on which day of the year; that Bastu Puja must be performed; that Poush Sankranti celebrations must be held with the cooking of pithey-payesh; what is to be done in the evening, what is to be done at daybreak, when one wakes up, i.e. sweeping the floor, scattering water, etc.

SN. You were telling us about the situation that your grandfather faced when he came here. Would you say something about that?

SB. The stories that I heard from father—that they had to work very hard, that he resolved to do well in life, and to blend with the new society that they were strangers to. There was a firm resolve to do well in studies because they had to be established in life. While still a student, he started a modest trade as a hawker, buying farm produce like rice and vegetables and selling these in the market; buying other kinds of crops and selling them. Grandfather used to grow crops on other people's lands, and with it was this small business that went on simultaneously. That is how we began, and within eight-ten years we had been able to consolidate ourselves financially. We could buy some land; then gradually this became total acquisition of about twenty – twenty-five bighas of land. After that we tilled our own fields. We didn't have to till other people's lands. Times have changed; now the stress is not so much on agriculture, but on doing a job, or starting an entrepreneurship venture. Now I don't work in the fields anymore.

SN. You've mentioned how the people of West Bengal were jealous of you when you consolidated your position here. Can you share with us specific incidents that you might have heard from your grandfather or father?

SB. When my father completed his studies, he didn't face any adverse behaviour as such. But he was active in politics, and he often had to run away, and remain absconding because of his political affiliation. It was because of the politics that the jute and paddy of our fields would be plundered, and threats directed at us, sometimes even picking up randomly from the family, and threatening to kill. But the common people never behaved badly with us.

SN. Have you ever been to Bangladesh?

SB. No.

SN. Do you want to go sometime in future?

SB. Of course. I want to go once.

SN. To see the land of your forefathers?

SB. No, not that alone. Of course I would like to visit the land of my forefathers, but I would also like to visit some of our relations who are still there. We had a house there, which was a sprawling affair; there was plenty of land around, there were ponds, trees. The lands survive; they had been given to a caretaker to look after. They till the land even now, but I want to go and see it once.

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SN. Do you still have contact with your relations there?

SB. Of course.

SN. Didn't they come here, or did they go back after Partition? Anything like that?

SB. They've come here, and they have lands here as well as there.

SN. Please tell us something about that. If they came here, why did they go back?

SB. Our relations had sent their children to study here. They lived with some other relations of ours. They just studied here, passed their Masters, and established themselves here. They have lands and houses there. Their children are in India, studying; they've grown up; now they'll sell of those lands and come away.

SN. Since you are in regular contact, how do you interact, and what is the nature of your interaction?

SB. Not that regularly. Maybe once in one or two years or so, somebody comes for a visit, we then get in touch. We have one relative with whom we are quite close. That's how we keep in touch with Bangladesh. We don't have many relatives as such. It is through them that we're in touch.

SN. What kind of stories do you hear when they come visiting?

SB. All kinds of stories about Bangladesh—what's to be seen; about Dhaka, which is a grand city, about the countryside with its water bodies and rivers; then stories about cuisine, etiquette, weather—that the weather's balmy, and many more stories like these.

SN. Would you like to share these stories and memories with your next generation?

SB. No, not particularly. Everything is finished now. There's nothing left in Bangladesh. What do I know that I'll be able to share? I merely know some stories that I've heard. If they wish to hear these in the form of stories, they might. I'll just tell them, that's all. I don't want to keep these preserved.

SN. Would you tell us why you don't want to?

SB. Why I don't want to keep anything of Bangladesh?

SN. Why you don't want to share those stories with your next generation?

SB. I don't know much about that country. I just know some stories. What can I say? If ever I go to Bangladesh, I'll tell them whatever I've seen myself. I want to go once, that's for sure.

SN. You don't want to share the memories of your ancestors with the generation that comes after you?

SB. The memories are gradually fading into oblivion. Can't remember too much.

