

My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

Interview details

Interview with Tunazzina

Interviewed by Md Mufazzal

at Beily Road, Dhaka on 16 October 2015

Md Mufazzal Hossain Rumon [MHR]. Good morning. How are you?

Tunazzina Sahrin [TS]. Good morning. I'm fine, thank you.

MHR. Will you please tell us your name?

TS. My name is Tunazzina Sahrin.

MHR. What is your profession?

TS. I'm a doctor.

MHR. Where?

TS. In Bardem General Hospital.

MHR. Have you heard any stories, incidents, anecdotes or memories from anybody in your family about the Partition of 1947? If you have, could you please share these with us? Please feel free to talk; I won't interrupt. I'll simply take notes as you talk.

TS. In my family I've heard stories and memories of the 1947 Partition from my Nanu [maternal grandmother]. She's the only witness (in our family) of that event who describes it in that manner. These are memories of the Partition of 1947, or of earlier years, or of the reasons why they were compelled in 1947 to leave their own country [India] and the city of Kolkata to move to Bangladesh. I've heard these from my Nanu.

She was born in Kolkata in 1940. Their ancestral home was in Beadon Street, Kolkata [the heart of the theatre district, with a number of theatre auditoriums dotting the entire road. Among the few that survive after a thorough make over is Minerva.] My grandmother used to live there with her parents, i.e. my great grandfather and great grandmother. They were three sisters, and their *chachi* [aunt, father's sister-in-law] used to live with them. My great grandfather was a contractor, coming from a tradition stone merchant family. That was his family trade.

The problem started in 1946-47, which was a period of frequent riots. This was taking a rather virulent turn. One of the stories I've heard from her goes like this: at first there was no trouble in their neighbourhood; but Hindus from the adjoining neighbourhood had come over with the intention of killing only the Muslims

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residents. And their killing method was unique—not only would they kill them, they would cut them open with swords.

I've heard that was when a decision was taken that they would have to come away. At that time, even Muslims who had taken shelter in mosques were butchered in this manner. That was in 1946; my grandmother was six years old. I've heard my Nanu tell me how, when they were moving from their own home for shelter in another house, they had to cross rows of dead bodies in order to even set out for another location. That riot that had started in 1946 was started by the Hindus, and the refrain was, 'Muslims will have to be killed.'

My great grandfather, that is my Nanu's [grandmother's father], whose family had stayed there for generations, thought that since Hindus and Muslims had been living in peaceful coexistence all these years, if I go and talk to them, maybe a solution would emerge. He had this in mind when he went out to talk it over with the Hindus of the adjacent neighbourhood. But right then, the daily milkman (he was a Hindu) from whom my Nanu's family used to get milk, got wind of this, and he pulled him into his house saying (and my Nanu repeats it to this day), 'Dada [elder brother], what are you doing?! They simply won't listen to anything you say. They'll butcher you.' Saying this he locked him in his house, put a padlock on the door from outside and said, 'You sleep here. They're butchering people outside.'

Meanwhile news had travelled to my grandmother's family that Nanu's father has been killed. So my Nanu's mother, i.e. my great grandmother, my Nanu's three sisters and her aunt (she had no kids) decided they should leave their ancestral home in Beadon Street. They went out and sought shelter in the local OC Siddiq sahab's house. He was a Muslim, and was a friend of Nanu's *chacha* [father's brother]. So they took shelter there. He gave them shelter in a room in the police station. After a couple of days when the situation had calmed down a bit, he shifted them to an adjoining locality, a Marwari neighbourhood. There were several empty houses there; and because these were houses of Marwari traders, they had large rooms. The OC had arranged to house many such Muslim families who had to flee their homes in such buildings. They got shelter in the Marwari locality. One room per family was allotted. A community kitchen, *nangarkhana*, was set up in one of the rooms on the ground floor. This arrangement remained till the time the riots persisted.

There's another incident that remains etched in my memory. Before they could reach the OC, they took shelter for a short while in a Hindu household, which was a house next to theirs. They hid them in their puja room, and put a padlock on the door from outside, so that there's no suspicion that there's any Muslim hiding in the house. So their neighbours had given them shelter too. They moved to the police station, and a couple of days later to the Marwari locality. They stayed there for quite some time. The police officer was suspended on the charge that he had saved several Muslims and helped them flee the neighbourhood.

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When the riots finally got over, my grandmother, her father and mother, her *chachi* and her three sisters left Kolkata and moved to Shillong. My Nanu's *fufus* [father's sisters] used to live in Shillong, because by that time the family trade of my great grandfather and the traditional family trade had collapsed. The house was almost empty. It had been ransacked and other people had occupied it. My Nanu's *chacha* was involved in the theatre trade; but he had died some time earlier; and my Nanu's *chachi* lived with their family. All of them moved to Shillong and settled there for a while.

In the mean time, my Nanu's father, burdened with several worries, mainly financial, about the plight of his family, collapse of his business, suffered a stroke. That was when they were in Shillong. After being bedridden for six months, he passed away. My Nanu's mother returned to Calcutta after that. By that time the situation had somewhat come under control. They returned to a place near Park Circus, in my Nanu's *chachi*'s place. A family which was once residents of Beadon Street, now returned to Park Circus. My Nanu's mother were terribly worried about the days to come—what would she do with her three daughters? The future looked bleak. Though the situation had calmed down, all the problems hadn't been resolved. There were several fears lurking; people had become apprehensive of attacks that could take place at any time. Besides, her husband had passed away. It was then that she decided that she would leave Calcutta and go away to Bangladesh. My Nanu's *chachi*, who was childless, loved my Nanu's middle sister dearly. So when Nanu's mother came away, she left her with my Nanu's *chachi* in Calcutta and brought Nanu and her youngest sister with her. So, leaving behind one daughter with her sister-in-law, Nanu's mother moved to Chittagong with her two other daughters. That was her first stop. She put up at the place of a relative there who were not exactly blood relations, but more like '*dharma samparka atmiya*' or acquired relations. After staying there for some days, she moved to Baguda. There were two bighas of land that belonged to my Nanu's mother. This was paddy-yielding land. She stayed in Baguda for some time. All this while she was managing with whatever money she could gather by selling her jewellery. While fleeing during the riots, she was able to save her jewellery. The house couldn't be sold then. It was intact. So she was managing with selling her jewellery. She had left her daughter behind. So to see how she was doing, and also to see the house [on Beadon Street], she would sometimes visit Calcutta. On one such visit she came to know that there were tenants living in the Beadon Street house, and somebody regularly collects rent from them. So she went to check. She later inquired about who collects this rent. It was revealed that when one of their relatives got wind of the fact that this house was abandoned and the owners had gone away, he rented it out; and regularly collected rent from them. My Nanu's mother went and had a detailed discussion with the tenants, and asked them not to hand over rent to anybody else in future. Thus one avenue of income was created. My great grandmother (Nanu's mother) would come to Calcutta once every few months and collect the rent. Then she had her jewellery as a major fall back option, which she was slowly selling for household expenses. After some time she realized that these frequent trips from Baguda to Calcutta (to collect rent) weren't really working out. Travel conveniences weren't very well organized in those days. With these

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factors in consideration, she decided to sell the house. She managed to sell it too; but had to deposit the money in the court. The version of the court was: since her three daughters were minors and she was a widow (she was only twenty two years old when my Nanu's mother became a widow), what if she decides to marry again and abandon her daughters? What will become of them? That's why the money that was obtained by selling the house wasn't given to her by the government and the court. The court took charge of the money, and every month a specific amount was handed over as expenses for her daughters. This was how it continued.

Meanwhile, my Nanu's mother wasn't feeling comfortable enough in Baguda, because it was a remote location; Calcutta was comparatively better. They weren't comfortable moving anywhere else from Calcutta—either Chattagram or Baguda. So she sold off all the land she had in Baguda and left for Dhaka. In Dhaka she used to stay in Narinda. At that time she used to work in an NGO, probably the first NGO, called 'Village Aid.' The adjoining areas of Dhaka were practically rural land in those days. She used to teach various kind of handwork, embroidery and stitching to the women of these villages. My Nanu and her two sisters were school children then.

The days went by in this manner for almost eight years. My Nanu got married in 1955, when she was fifteen. After her marriage she used to live in Dhaka, and so did her mother, but in different establishments. Sometimes Nanu's youngest sister would stay with her, and would sometimes go with her mother on her tours. She had to visit various place frequently within Dhaka and outside the city limits too. From what I've heard from Nanu, her youngest sister's life was that of constant struggle, much more than what Nanu had to undergo. She didn't have any memories of her childhood because she was so small, and she had to move continuously with her mother. She was so small that she couldn't even be admitted to a school. She had to be kept with neighbours because her mother had to go out to work.

Nanu was in Dhaka till 1960. My Nana [maternal grandfather] was transferred to Jessore. My *chhoto nanu* (my Nanu's youngest sister) got married in 1960 /63. After marriage, my *chhoto nana*, i.e. her husband requested his mother-in-law, i.e. my Nanu's mother not to work any more, now that her daughter had been married off. So she quit working and stayed on with them in their family; dividing her time between her two other daughters—my Nanu, who was in Jessore, Nanu's middle daughter who stayed in Calcutta. She would travel frequently.

I've heard from Nanu that after this, all my Nanus were well settled. However I've observed a terrible burden of sad memories that she carried with her. That was there to a large extent. Whenever I ask Nanu: what do you feel about Partition? Was it bad or good? She always says, (if it hadn't happened) something would have remained, after all. My father died, and I lost my country. For my Nanu one thing is very important—patriotism, love for one's country. My Nanu may not understand a lot of things, but she keeps focusing on the fact that they had to leave their own country. I find this extremely significant. And she reiterates it

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forcefully—'I had to leave my own country. I've been able to come away, I've also managed to remain alive. But if I had my country and my own people, my relatives around me, I would have felt so much better.' We declare that we are patriots so easily—wear dresses the colour of our national flag on any such occasion as a symbol of patriotism, but I've seen what true patriotism is in my Nanu. What can be emulated from my Nanu is, for a person who may not understand the idea, for her it constitutes in whether it is her country or not. Whenever the question is raised about India, or any other topic, my Nanu forcefully mentions that India is her country—whether it be some sporting event or cultural event, or any other occasion, she would only measure that. I've heard her compare food habits, cuisine—here it is done like this, we do it like that. If we've gone to a wedding for example, she'll continue her comparison—here you it this way, in Calcutta we would it do like that. In this age of globalization, everything has become one; we've accepted some from them, and they from us, but she'll keep on saying things like 'this used to happen in Calcutta but I don't see it here. With cuisine, I've seen she tends to cook like they do in Calcutta, i.e. the use of sugar; she has a special liking for anything sweet. Later on, suppose she hasn't like the way something has been done, she would comment: I don't like this the way it has been done. The Bangladesh people do it like this. That is something my Nanu's mother would also say—that the people here are so different from the people of Calcutta. The people here have learnt so much from Calcutta. It could never be erased from their memory that this is not their native land. They are migrants here. They had been compelled to emigrate here, be it for geographical reasons, be it for political reasons.

MHR. You've told us, when your Nanu came to Bangladesh, she had to face several adverse situations. She had been born and brought up somewhere, then coming away suddenly to an alien country, adjusting to a new atmosphere there, her studies, her job—coming from one kind of atmosphere to another — how did she overcome the hurdles in such a kind of adverse situation?

TS. The adverse situations that she faced were primarily in Calcutta. From whatever I've heard, the people in Bangladesh were extremely cooperative. She didn't face any trouble as far as her neighbours were concerned. They were very supportive, because they knew that they had been compelled to leave their home and belongings and move here. The adversity they faced here was starting over afresh, starting everything all over again, I mean starting from scratch. Her father had passed away, there was no 'guardian' as such. He had died about six months / one year ago—that was a major problem. But the kind of problem with neighbours, or problems in a new situation—problems of those kinds were comparatively very negligible in Bangladesh. Everyone looked upon them with a lot of empathy, and gave them a lot of support, because they had to move, leaving everything behind because of religion and the political situation of the country. They were thankful to the people of Bangladesh because they did not have to face those kinds of problems.

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MHR. You know that the two Bengals now stand separated by a border, which is actually a huge wall of segregation, though we speak the same language, and our cultures have so many commonalities. How do you see the significance of the border?

TS. I feel that the border is a mere geographical and political representation. The language spoken in West Bengal and Bangladesh is almost the same. There are regional variations in the same Bengali language in different parts of the country. Maybe there's some difference in Bengali spoken in Calcutta, Murshidabad or Odisha. The border sought to segregate two regions speaking the same language; it sought to segregate people of a region that shares almost the same cultural specificities, clothes and food habits. I don't think the border can bring about any emotional or mental segregation or enforcement of separation; because for me it is just geographical and political. It was constructed geographically, and being used politically.

MHR. You've mentioned how your Nanu had told you many things about Calcutta—about the use of sugar in food, or about the cultural differences, or differences in food habits. Could you share with us some of those details?

TS. She always cites the example of wedding receptions in Calcutta. She says that in Calcutta guests are always welcomed individually with sweets and sharbat; the actual ceremonial meal follows later on. But in Bangladesh people are hustled into the dining area at once. This practice has now caught on in Bangladesh, something that wasn't a practice earlier. She has told us this a number of times, that people from the groom's family, for example, are welcomed in this manner.

Secondly, she says something very significant about the difference in the manner of dressing: that we, the people of Bangladesh don't understand what to wear and when. Going out doesn't necessarily mean wearing garishly flashy clothes everywhere. She says that people of Calcutta, people have a sense of what to wear and for which occasion. They know what to wear when visiting a doctor's chamber, or in a wedding, or when one is going out on vacation. She says that the people of Bangladesh lack this sense.

Another point she says is that in Calcutta all the steps in any ritualistic occasion is followed in perfect order, one after another. There are no shortcuts. But in Bangladesh the steps are condensed, shortened, to her it is not caring enough, not sincere enough. She just points out these differences, even in the case of food, but never ever imposes anything on us. I've seen instances in which my mother has been involved, or heard my aunts tell me that she has never imposed her ideas and beliefs on anybody. She just shares this, never intimidating another into following her bidding. She doesn't have that habit.

MHR. So she shares her memories of what she would eat, or what was a speciality of Calcutta, or something that was a favourite, or that 'I liked that song a lot' or 'loved that film'. So those ...

TS. The films or songs that she has grown up with, she still hears and watches them with the same eagerness. She can also perfectly identify which film, who are the artistes. She also mentions that her uncle

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had a theatre, which was his business, which was acquired by the government for turning it into a museum. You may have heard of Minerva Theatre. They have made a [theatre] museum there. My Nanu's uncle was one of the four owners. She still loves to share her memories of how her mother would take her to watch plays. Exclusive horse-drawn carriages would arrive, heavily covered with curtains, and they would go to watch plays at the theatre, unseen by anyone. She's keeps a tab on TV programmes and would surely tune in to her favourite singer Manna De singing, or watch a Suchitra Sen film. If we want to change the channel, she says, No, I want to watch this. I love watching this. When we bring CDs, she'll watch those. She prefers watching films from those times, not the new ones that are being released. It is the same with songs. If it is a song by Rabindranath Tagore, she'll listen to it, or say that 'today there's a programme of Rabi Thakur songs on TV.' She'll make it a point to watch that programme. She listens to programmes by Sandhya Mukherjee or Manna De with a great deal of interest and with rapt attention. Earlier, when there was no television, she would listen to the songs on radio.

MHR. If you ask your Nanu, 'Which is your native homeland?' What would be her answer?

TR. Shs is very specific in her answer. She says, 'My father's home is in Calcutta. I've come here from Calcutta; and my father-in-law's family is from Sylhet.' She'll never say, 'I'm originally from Sylhet or Dhaka.' Till date this is the standard answer she has given to anybody who asks her this question. Women usually talk in terms of my father's house or my father-in-law's house. She never says that.

MHR. If I ask you where is your native country, where is your home, what would you answer?

TS. If you ask me, I would definitely answer Bangladesh, because I've been born and brought up here, I've lived here all along. For me my Nanu's memories are important because after my father and mother, the most important person in my life is my Nanu; because I've mostly stayed with her. That's why I've been able to be so specific, and could tell these incidents in such detail. I've heard these several times, maybe in bits and pieces; but because I've heard them several times, I remember these so clearly. But to me my home and native land is Bangladesh.

MHR. These memories of your Nanu about the period prior to Partition, followed by Partition—would you share these memories with your succeeding generations? If you do, how would you like to disseminate them? And which memories?

TR. I shall certainly want these memories to be shared with my own brother and sister who are younger than me, my nephews and nieces, or even generations after them. I'll never be able to replicate the manner in which my Nanu recounts these stories. So I've told her, that is my brothers and sisters and me, you write down whatever memories you have of your childhood. Write everything down. Because we'll be able to say all that, but not in your language, the way you have seen things—we won't be able to represent properly. So she has written everything down and told us that we should open her notebook only after her death.

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She has told us that she has written down everything that she wanted to say, all the information. And we told her to write down everything so that she doesn't miss out on anything.

MHR. What does the Partition of 1947 mean to you?

TS. The only meaning I find in it is that an external power wanted that we should be divided and weakened, so that they could reap the benefits. Can one really and truly geographically divide a people who share the same language? I think it is significant, because you cannot really divide them. But you surely reap political benefits. The more divided we are, the more weak we become. Then they divide on grounds of religion, as Muslim-majority countries. We can think of many other countries where the division has been on religious grounds, like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia. But can we really say that these countries and Bangladesh share the same nationality just on religious grounds? I don't think so. That can't be a constant parameter for dividing up nationalities. I feel that the Partition was contracted very shrewdly to make the entire people of the Indian subcontinent weak. Maybe the leaders then did not quite understand the ulterior motive (I may be wrong) that by weakening us, the powers that divided us would reap a rich harvest of endless benefits by breaking us up into three. I feel an undivided India would have been ideal.

MHR. Would you like to say anything that you haven't earlier? Anything at all?

TS. No, not really; just that I'm very happy that I've been able to share my Nanu's memories so that they'll be recorded somewhere. Nanu is asking us to write these down somewhere so that they are not lost. Having said all this once again, I've memorized all this once more. It made me feel good that I've been able to recount and record what my ancestors have told me, what I hold important. I felt good about that. In the present times, where do we sit with our senior family members and listen to their memories of the past?

MHR. Thank you for giving us so much of your valuable time.

TS. Thank you.

