

My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

Interview details

Interview with Utpal Basak [UB]

Interviewed by Nandini Ganguli [NG]

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Nandini Ganguli. Have you heard any stories about India or East Bengal from your family?

Utpal Basak. Several.

NG. Could you share some of those stories with us please?

UB. I will, gladly. The stories I've heard since childhood were mostly from my paternal grandparents, my thakurda or thakurma. Stories about how they grew up, the village life. What was their source of income? How did they carry on their family trade? I've basically heard these stories. I'll begin with my grandfather. My grandfather was a trader in saris in that country [East Bengal]. He dealt in Tangail saris. These saris took their name from the district which was the home of this type of sari—Tangail. My grandfather would go to Tangail town on business. I've also heard stories of our house being attacked by dacoits quite often. Our house covered a large area of land. The Patrail station has been constructed on the land where our house once stood.

And from my grandmother I've heard stories about the lives of women in those days, about the rites and rituals they followed. The rites and rituals followed by women i.e. *stree achar* in East Bengal are different from those followed here in West Bengal. Not only in the nature and mode of festivities, the way of wearing the sari too differs.

NG. Now these differences you are talking about, did you hear about these differences from your childhood? If you could go into a little bit of more details, for example, where was your house in East Bengal? Could you share with us in a little bit of detail stories you might have heard about life in that country? If you could give us a little more detail ...

UB. Father's childhood was spent in roaming about in the fields, fishing in the ponds, swimming. There wasn't an overt emphasis on studies—either then or now. Maybe in earlier it was a war situation, there was always an uncertainty. It was more important to stay safe somewhere, find out a safe shelter. There have been times when rice has been cooked and served, but they couldn't eat. They had to flee. One gets goosebumps just hearing those tales. One feels so sad. They had to leave behind all that they had—their homestead, all their belongings—just to save their lives.

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NG. You're talking of the 1971 war, the war of independence. I'm going back further in history. I'm talking about 1947, Partition. They stayed on for a pretty long time after Partition, didn't they? How was life after Partition in that country?

UB. O yes, they were there pretty long.

NG. You said your grandfather had a trade. How did that come about? Could you tell us that story?

UB. My grandfather's trade was basically a family trade that was continuing generations together. So my grandfather was continuing that trade, and besides also looking after the agricultural tracts that the family possessed. We had large land holdings. Then there was the harvest to be looked after. The women of the family were also actively involved in farm jobs related to harvesting. I've heard from my grandma how they would winnow the rice, spread it out to dry in the courtyard. Stories like these. The women of the family would be fully occupied days on end, doing all these activities related to harvesting.

NG. You've told me about the sari trade your family was involved in. Would you tell us a little more about this? Who constituted the work force? How was the trade managed?

UB. I told you a little while back that we dealt in Tangail saris. That's a particular kind of sari, a speciality of Tangail district. That's why it takes its name from the region where it's woven. My grandfather was a weaver himself. What you call handloom. My father was also a weaver. However, I've distanced myself from it somewhat.

NG. What happened after you had to come away? What happened to the family business?

UB. My grandfather and father fled to save their lives. So they had to start from scratch here. It wasn't that easy. A man having to come to a completely alien land, alien people, leaving behind his native land, his homestead, without a penny on his back—it wasn't easy. It wasn't easy for them to come to terms with the situation they were faced with here. In those times, under those circumstances, we didn't get the kind of facilities that we are getting now. Such facilities were non-existent then. So it was beginning all over again, from level zero. They had to work as domestic help in other families. They had never been accustomed to doing the kind of menial work that they did to eke a livelihood. It was difficult to come to terms with that. It wasn't easy. Wasn't easy at all. It was terribly painful for them. Mentally stressful. They had to work very very hard. I don't claim that they made a full recovery, but by extreme hard labour, they were able to recover at least something of what they lost; and something of that has been left for us as well—something that we reap benefits from.

NG. When exactly did they come away?

UB. My father and my uncle [his elder brother] worked as domestic help towards the end of 1975. They worked for a year and a half. Then they bought land and a house in 1976. The land was basically agricultural land—rice fields.

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NG. What was their first stopover after they came away from Tangail?

UB. They first came to Phulia in Nadia district [this district is renowned for its handloom. Phulia saris have exquisitely fine weaves].

NG. Any particular reason why it was Phulia and not any other place?

UB. There were some relatives who had settled in and around Phulia. Naturally they gravitated to a place they could find at least a few known faces in an alien country. That way they could find their bearings better, and get some helping settling in. There wasn't any prior contact as such; they only knew that they were in Phulia, that's all. That was the only source. Once they started coming and settling, others followed. Other relatives followed suit. That's how it happens in an unknown land.

NG. Now this thing about them having to work for about a year ...

UB. One and a half ...

NG. Later when they started their family trade, their traditional business, were they able to keep some contact with their native land, or ...

UB. No it wasn't possible, because our trade was finished in that country when they left. My father and uncle came earlier, my grandpa came later. The business started once more after my grandfather came away. They had to leave everything behind; but in order to start a business you need capital. You need seed capital initially. They didn't have that. They had to save that slowly, very slowly, and only then they could start.

NG. Your grandfather came away, your father too. Could you share with us in some detail what they felt like—leaving behind their homeland, a fully thriving business—do you remember having heard any stories related to that?

UB. What they felt like—it was a question of managing to survive, being alive, that's all. The priority was on staying alive. They couldn't even think of what was to become of them. They were being hacked to death anyway. A brother of my pisheymoshai was killed in his own house. It was 1975-76. The war of independence had ended in Bangladesh. And there was widespread violence, arson and mass murders. The violence continues even today. Till today. I keep in touch with some people there through social media through the so-called social networking. I've been able to track a few people from our locality there. I'm in regular touch with them. The lives of common people remain the same. There has been no change at all. The Muslims dominate the Hindus the same way as they did in those times. That's because the aim is to transform it into a Muslim nation. There was a temple of the goddess Annapurna [one of the many manifestations of the goddess Durga; lit. 'the one who is bounteous with *anna* or rice / food'] in our house. That was pulled down. My grandfather and my father's generation had to be mute witnesses to that. They had no other choice. Durga temples are still not allowed to stand in any village. It still happens. This is not all. Women have no value whatsoever. The moment a girl child is born, the parents aim to somehow bring

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it up, put her through rudimentary schooling, and get her married off at the earliest. That's the end of their responsibility. It's just like shunting a load off their shoulders. This is the situation not only in Muslim homes, the same situation prevails even in Hindu homes. The ultimate aim is to get a girl married. This is the situation. That the state the country is in.

NG. You said you have contact with them. How have you managed to keep contact?

UB. There's a classmate of mine—from class nine / ten. He was in that country till 2000. He came away to India in 2000. A number of their family members live here. They've been here for a long time now. About three-four of them were in that country. So when they came away, we naturally became great friends. They still have two-three people 'left behind'. I use the words intentionally. They are really isolated there. They have no way of returning anymore, leaving everything behind.

NG. Are they eager to move to this country?

UB. Of course they are keen to move, but they can't; there's no way. It's like this: My friend's family has owned three houses there—one in Dhaka town, one in Tangail town, and one in Patrail, the same village where we used to have our homestead. All three houses were sold off practically overnight to Muslims. Not one of them could be sold to a Hindu. In fact my friend had no inkling that their houses were being sold. The night before they were moving to India, his father told him, 'Pack your things. We're moving to India permanently, leaving Bangladesh behind.' If by chance they had announced that their houses were for sale, they would never have been able to sell them; and they would have been forcibly occupied. There was also the danger of their family being attacked, arson and pillage. So even in the year 2000, it was again an immigration with a life risk factor involved. This risk is equally potent for the Hindus even today.

NG. You were telling us about the business in Bangladesh—where there's a business, there's also a comfort zone, a support base with known people, suppliers, etc. Now this business [weaving saris] was distinctive of Tangail. Your ancestors restarted it in a totally new way here in Phulia. What was this experience of reconstruction, or transposing this distinctive art form of Tangail to Phulia? What kind of experience was it for your grandfather or your father?

UB. You see, to an artist, a craftsman, it is his art or craft that pervades his being. It is his life. Art never dies. He may lose his homeland, but he can never lose his art. That's because it is etched in his heart. He won't be able to survive without his art. Tangail saris are famous for their specific designs and weaves. There are very distinct designs, as also different material for the weaves. But when they came to this country, they started making the raw materials. These began to be available. The culture of Tangail saris wasn't known here. Once the raw material started to flood in, their craft saw a rejuvenation. Maybe it hadn't taken on the dimension it is in today; in fact it had very modest beginnings, and now reached worldwide fame and acceptance.

It was probably because of lack of education that they were diffident in interacting with people from outside. They were extremely diffident about going out and meeting people. They were forever afraid

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about how they would accept the material. But slowly, one generation took the first leap—my father's generation started going out, and with it began a new kind of self learning for them. The purview of knowledge increased for them many times over. They overcame their fear. My grandfather would never venture out, but my father did. He stepped out of the village. And I left everything and moved here, permanently. So I think education has played a very important part in all this.

NG. The raw material required for making the sari—was it found only in that locality in Bangladesh?

UB. Raw material meaning a special kind of thread, a slightly thicker kind of thread that was available only in Bangladesh. Transportation was not developed that well anywhere. One could not expect things to land up for manufacturing anything. So the rule was, get what's available locally and develop your craft, or make what you please. This used to be true of your house, or the implements used in your house, or even clothes. That's why craft used to be confined to certain limits. But now, since it is easier to get material from elsewhere, we use thread from Gujarat, or Maharashtra, and zari from Gujarat. We also use silk from Murshidabad. Murshidabad to us is 'local'; but Gujarat is not. That's how it has continued.

NG. You had mentioned in the beginning of the interview about the differences or similarities in rites and rituals. Could you elaborate on that point?

UB. There's very little similarity. Most of it is ridden with differences. Let me first tell you about the way the sari is worn. The women in the two countries don't wear the sari in the same manner. Then the rites that women do particularly on auspicious occasions, *stree-achar*, that too has no similarity with the ones practiced on the other side of Bengal. For example I don't find any similarity at all with any of the rites that I see here with the ones I've seen at home. I've been living in this city for ten years now, but the rites are completely different. I've heard from childhood about marriages being held with the fire as witness: '*agnisakshi korey biyey*' [marriage vows are exchanged as the bride and groom walk around a fire especially lit for the purpose, every step being sanctified with a *mantra*; the bride and groom are joined in matrimony with fire as witness]. A major difference that I see in marriage rituals is that, our marriage rituals are with the sun as witness, not fire. That's why probably I see that among people here, marriages are held in the evening, with the normal marriage and '*basi biyey*' [a ritual on the following morning, concluded after the bride and groom have remained awake on the night of their marriage in the bride's house] happening together the same evening, the bride is given the *sindoor*. We haven't seen this in our house. The *basi biyey* takes place the following morning, with sun as witness. Another major difference is that the *sat pak* [the seven rounds that the bride and the groom take around the fire, sanctifying their marriage] does not take place around the fire; it takes place around a freshly dug up pond. That is a very important part of the marriage ritual in our tradition.

NG. Ok, you've told us about the difference in marriage rituals. What about food habits / culinary habits?

UB. We prefer *ilish* [hilsa], and the people here prefer *chingri* [prawn / shrimp]. We don't like *posto* [poppy seed; posto, used as a paste in various culinary items, a favourite among people of Rarh Bengal or West Bengal because of its distinctive taste and cooling properties]; whereas it is a hot favourite among people

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of West Bengal. Even in the cooking of greens, there is a difference in taste between preparations that we make and those made by the people of West Bengal. When I first came to Kolkata and began studying in Jadavpur University, I used to live in a mess nearby. The landlord used to be bangal, and there were a few boarders from West Bengal. They could tell by the aroma of the cooking that something different is being made in his house!

NG. So what you are trying to say is some of the typical bangal traditions in your house ...

UB. That's right. The typical bangal tradition persists, and is all the more evident in our manner of speaking. We speak in a different tongue, i.e. we don't speak the language that people do here. When I go to my village, for instance, or speak to some friend or relation even on the telephone, I speak my own language, because I can identify with it as my own.

NG. So you use this same language at home as well?

UB. Yes, I use the same language—pure Bangladeshi language. But every district had a different dialect even in Bangladesh. The language we speak in is a dialect used in Tangail district. The people of Dhaka speak differently; people of Mymensingh speak in another dialect; and the people of Chittagram [Chittagong] speak a dialect completely different from others. Each one is different.

NG. What you said just now is very interesting. You speak in your own Tangail dialect with people who are close to you, or with people at home; but you don't speak that language when you speak to outsiders.

UB. When I'm talking to other people outside of my home / family, I'm speaking like everyone else. For example, with a non-Bengali speaker I would naturally begin with Hindi or English. Just like that. When I'm speaking to a native of this place, I'll be talking to him in his own language. The language we normally use every day. But when I meet an old acquaintance who I know knows my language, I obviously converse with him in that language.

NG. What do you feel about the India-Bangladesh border?

UB. O! You mean Partition?

NG. Partition, border—whatever you might call it.

UB. Partition was a result of the vested interests of a handful people, and political machination—that was it, basically. The common people of the two countries never wanted the two countries to be separated. If you actually heard their opinion about Partition, you'll find that's not what they wanted at all. We now call the two states 'East Bengal' and 'West Bengal'. This was not so. It was one single 'Bangladesh.' The people of the two countries never wanted 'East Bengal' or 'West Bengal' out of their territory. A few politicians, just to consolidate their own vested interest, to consolidate their hold and power executed this. They never think of the common people! Now naturally after Partition, this whole dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' initiates. Earlier, there was never any need of 'us' and 'them.' It was just 'us'

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before the country was divided. To me, Partition is just division of the borders because of certain political reasons. Nothing else. Men's hearts and minds can never be divided. If any person from Bangladesh comes visiting, I welcome him with the same warmth and generosity that I would get from him if I ever visited his home in Bangladesh. The unity of hearts remains.

Again, if I go to a native of this part of the country, he will definitely not be rude or inhospitable to me. He will be civil, just as we would do to any guest coming to my house. What does it prove? It proves that men's hearts haven't changed. The only thing that has changed is the border and their homeland. Nothing more.

NG. This Bangladesh, which was once your own country—now you require visa and passport to seek entry—how does that feel? What do you feel about these concepts?

UB. To be honest, I believe this is my native land; but my father still believes that the land he has left behind is his native land. Father feels very strongly about this. Why should I have to carry passport in my own country? Again, when our relatives want to come visiting, they too carry Bangladesh passports with them to India. There are some who have come on Bangladeshi passports and become permanent residents here. My father and grandfather had come through a clandestine route. There was no question of passports or visas there. Generating a passport wasn't as easy as it is today. The way they came away, at great personal risk—if they got killed in cross-border firing, nothing could have been done.

NG. You say that for your father, East Bengal is his native land. What do you consider your home?

UB. I consider West Bengal, India to be my native land. Phulia is my native land. My home is Phulia. That's what I think. But somewhere deep down in my heart, there is a desire, that if I ever get a chance of going to the homeland of my forefathers, I surely will pay a visit. I would love to go there, see the land, get a sense of what it was like, meet the people who live there. Maybe I'll never be able to get a grasp of what it was like, but I have this deep, deep desire to see the land of my fathers. And if I get an opportunity, I would surely go.

NG. And is there any link between your family trade here, and the trade there? Is there any necessity?

UB. Yes, but it wasn't there even until a few years ago. It has started about ten years back. Earlier import-export wasn't very easy. For the last ten years or so, because of easy availability of transportation, and rationalization of import-export duties, things have started looking up. The extent of business has spread. And the culture of Tangail saris has mixed with the culture of other sari weaves. But across the border, the Tangail sari has retained its pristine quality. It is pure Tangail. In terms of design, Tangail in West Bengal is way ahead of its cross-border cousin. They adapt these designs, which are widely accepted in the rubric of their craft.

NG. You've heard some stories since childhood. Would you share these with your subsequent generation? How would you share these stories?

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UB. I definitely shall. Certainly. I've heard these stories from my grandparents. So I shall try to convey these stories to my subsequent generation in exactly the same way as these were represented to me. Another question that comes in here is the language. Maybe I won't be able to use that language any more, because with the passing of every new generation, the language as we knew it has stopped being spoken. That language is getting lost in oblivion. The whole concept of commemoration of 21 February as 'Bhasha Dibas' or International Day of the Mother Tongue—the struggle for it, the bloodshed that ensued in the struggle—the language itself is getting lost. And this is true of the Bengali language as it is spoken on this side of the border, as also on that side. The Bengali language sounds more like a fusion language, with pepperings of English and Hindi. The real pure Bengali as we used to say it, no longer exists. The language that we read in novels, stories, poems, etc, is not Bengali. The language has got polluted. The pure Bengali language is getting lost in oblivion.

NG. You said that people from your family emigrated around 1975-76. Do you remember having heard anything about the period between 1947 when the Partition actually took place, and the mid-seventies? How did they live there? Why did they continue living there? Why didn't they come away? Have you heard anything regarding that? If you could tell us something about that.

UB. I won't really be able to tell you about 1947, because my grandfather himself was very young then. My father was born in 1956. So my father didn't go through those times; but he saw things unfold as he grew up. The situation immediately after 1947 wasn't that bad. The violence and terror that we talk about wasn't there. That started many years later, around the time I was talking about—1976. Actually it all began in 1971 with the Mukhijudhho—East Pakistan wanted to cede from West Pakistan on language grounds; Bangladesh wanted to become an independent nation. But I won't be able to give you all those details, because I have no idea about what happened. Father was too young to realize. And grandfather never told us anything, or else maybe had forgotten to tell us. And we never got around to asking him about those times. When we were kids, we would rather listen to stories of dacoits—how they would plunder, tie up people and loot. Those stories would have the wonder of cinema. We could see these in our mind's eye. I'll reiterate what I told you some time ago. The incidents of violence began later. I already told you about how a family member was killed. It was an encounter killing. He was a graduate. In the Independence movement here we have seen how educated young men were being killed, because they are the future of a nation, and they were raising their voice against corruption and torture and wrong doings, and resisting them. The incident happened in full view of everybody in our family. It was a very tragic and unfortunate incident. What more can I say about that?

