

My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

Interview details

Interview with Brishti

Interviewed by Farhana

Farhana Razzak [FR]. Have you heard stories about India or West Bengal from the people in your family? Please share these stories with us. Let me assure you, I'll not interrupt you. You continue speaking, and I'll just take some notes. Please begin.

Brishti [B]. Yes, I've heard. My dadabhai and dadumoni [terms of endearment for grandparents] were in Calcutta. They were born there. My grandfather served in the British Air Force when the country was one whole, i.e. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh was one. He was transferred to Islamabad, where he started a family with my dadumoni [grandmother]. My father was born there. My chacha [uncle; younger brother of father] and fufu [aunt; father's sister] were all born there. During the Partition of 1947, my grandfather was in the air force, and stayed on in Islamabad; he didn't return to Calcutta. After this he faced a lot of trouble, like for instance he could not return to Calcutta because of the Partition. He couldn't even go and meet his parents, or do anything. Contact was very nearly severed for a long time. My grandfather had wanted to come away a number of times, but because he was in a government job, he couldn't. He couldn't because of his career. So he stayed on.

Later, after 1971, when it was assured that if Bengalis living in Pakistan went to Bangladesh, they would be reinstated in whatever position they were, and would be provided the same standard of living quarters, etc, my grandfather came away to Bangladesh. Though he came away to Bangladesh, he always had a soft corner for Calcutta. But because the two had become two separate countries totally, travelling between the two countries did not really materialize as much as it could have.

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After he took up his position here, it was the same job, a government job in the air force. He settled down with his children. Trips were few and far between. All that I've heard is from my grandfather. I haven't seen how it was.

From what I gather from his stories is that we are a large family, i.e. a joint family. We have many chachas and fufus [paternal uncles and aunts]. We also have other grandparents, with whom we practically have no touch. My grandfather however always wanted that we keep in touch, or that contact must be kept. Maybe the distance between the two countries was quite a bit; maybe there was communal tension, so contact was never established. That is true even now. My mother, father, my older and younger brothers and sisters have all visited Kolkata, but somehow I haven't been able to. From whatever I've heard from them, all our relations there—my uncles, aunts, my grandfather and grandmother—are extremely fond of us and consider us part of their family. But because of the distance, in spite of both the countries being predominantly Bengali, in spite of them being related by blood, an unexplained distancing creeps into blood relations too. This is only because of the separation of the two countries, nothing else. If the two countries had been united as before, maybe this distance wouldn't be there at all. However, the desire to connect remains, because there was a link once upon a time. But without exchange, without regular contact, it petered away. My grandfather wanted to visit his parents several times before he passed away, but couldn't. Grandmother too wanted to go. But she fell seriously ill and in her health condition, it wasn't advisable to travel such a long distance. Till the time that she passed away, she wanted to see her own brothers and sisters and nephews and nieces. We try to keep contact occasionally and try to go visit them, but we can't. If I try to establish contact, they won't be able to recognize me—that's a fact. They knew my grandparents; their siblings might not be alive any more, only my uncles and aunts, or their children (our cousins) are likely to be around. How much would they know us or want to know us, or empathize with us is something to be considered. So our relationships have been shrouded in uncertainty. How would they expect us to turn out, for example, I wonder. Maybe that's why we don't contact proactively. I've heard from my grandfather that my

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bhaiyas [elder brothers, cousins] have beautiful houses; their village is very pretty, and that all of them live together in a large joint family. Going there, being with them is so much fun—something that doesn't happen here. We have a small family here, but we have a bigger family there, where I want to go so much. If I can, maybe I'll be able to stay with lots of my cousins. Even if the distance is daunting, if once I can go to them, stay with them, our relationship would become normal once again, like it was before. My grandparents wanted this to become a reality. I too sometimes feel increasingly that it would have been so good to go there. Not to settle down or anything like that, but to keep in touch, because our relatives are there. That's all.

FR. You said communalism was a deterrent to re-establishing contact. Would you be a bit more specific?

B. We are Bengalis from Kolkata and Bangladesh. But because the country was divided, they call themselves 'Indians', and we call ourselves 'Bangladeshis'. But a Bengali is always a Bengali. When my grandfather went to Pakistan from Kolkata, he was a Bengali. When he came away to Bangladesh, he did not come there as an 'Indian' Bengali. He decided that I'm a Bengali, and I'll go there. When the three countries were one, such a problem would never arise. A Bengali would be a Bengali. It did not matter whether he was a Pakistani, an Indian or a Bangladeshi. Such problems were created because the country was divided. It gave rise to communalism. It happened because the country was divided. Else a Bengali would always be a Bengali. Sometimes people from India call us by a different name, indicating whether we are Bangladeshi or Bengalis from Kolkata. In Bangladesh, the two are differentiated. Somehow a wedge is drawn between Bengalis from Bangladesh and Bengalis from Kolkata. They are also differentiated in their manner of speaking.

FR. I found something you said very interesting—how the familial relationships begin to change slightly after Partition ...

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B. Familial relationships changed not 'slightly' but quite significantly after Partition. It may be that my grandfather's decision to go to Bangladesh instead of returning to India was not taken very kindly in the family. Maybe it was interpreted as him not having enough bonding with his family; hence his decision to move to Bangladesh, etc. It wasn't like that at all. Grandfather would always say that it was because his parents and his brothers and sisters loved the country so much that he joined the air force. The three countries, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh hadn't been divided. The three were one. He served all three countries. Later when circumstances changed, he acted according to his best judgement. But the result was that his relatives thought he didn't care for them, and only thought about his own good. That's why perhaps they never really drew him close or accepted him. They must have thought—well, he comes from another country for an occasional visit or so, so let's keep it at that. Maybe that attitude was natural for them to have. Division of countries changes everything—creates an artificial distance between two countries, and among various other things, changes relationships irreversibly.

FR. Your chacha and fufu, they are your father's brothers and sisters. How were relations between your family and theirs after Partition?

B. Relations between my chachas and fufis are very cordial, but my chachas had a soft corner for Kolkata, and wanted to settle in Kolkata. Maybe because they thought it would have been a better option. When my grandfather came away to Bangladesh in 1971, my grandfather, my chacha and fufu—all of them had to struggle a lot. I mean they had to face a lot of adversity and hostility that probably made them assume that they weren't being accepted in that country. It was probably why my chachas thought that settling in Kolkata would have made all the difference. They would find acceptance there. But from whatever little I've noticed, my chachas don't live in our original joint family. They live separately. Totally separate. When my chachas went there, they weren't accepted in a manner that they had expected. They weren't added to the family. They were marginalized.

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FR. When your grandfather came away to Bangladesh, what kind of struggles did he undergo in adjusting to the situation there?

B. When grandfather came to Bangladesh he was assured of a job by the government. The commitment was not honoured. He first came by ship to Chittagong. After a short stay there, he went to Sylhet, then to Barishal—from one place to another, slowly; then he came to Dhaka. There were lots of link-ups to be made, people to be met, because that was a time immediately after the war, and nothing was in place. Nobody knew what would happen, and there was no certainty. Many a time there wasn't even a proper place to stay. Some Bengali family, maybe a family from Kolkata gave my grandparents a place to stay. They stayed there for some time to get their bearings right and then look for some other job. I've heard from grandmother that they've stayed for some days somewhere, some months somewhere else. In fact even after coming to Dhaka they had to live in a rented house in Tejgaon. Till then the job promised to my grandfather hadn't materialized. After staying there for a few months, and doing the rounds of government offices, he got a job in the Air Force; but that's a job that one gets after retirement. Maybe that was an official job, but that was the job of a third class officer. That was the job granted to him, and government quarters allotted to them in Mirpur. Here, my grandfather and grandmother began their lives in right earnest. Mirpur became the initial centre of my father's education, and his shop; and the education of all his siblings, i.e. my chachas and fufus.

FR. How did he slowly adjust with the local people after moving here?

B. At first it posed quite a problem when they came to know that my grandfather and grandmother were Bengalis from Kolkata. The local people did not want to accept them in the beginning; they maintained a cold distance with them. That's what I've heard from my grandfather. They slowly realized that my grandparents were friendly and affable. There were many people in Dhaka like my grandparents who had a wonderful relationship with them. Gradually interactions started, and they were able to live with cordiality. But that took time, that's all.

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FR. You didn't tell us anything about your maternal grandparents ...

B. Nanu ...

FR. What was their journey like?

B. Their journey was very different. It had no relation whatsoever with Partition. My maternal grandparents came away because the condition of Kolkata was such that it was becoming increasingly tough to eke out a living. My Nanu was quite well off. But after my khala [mother's sister; aunt] got married to a family in Dhaka, they decided to come along with her. He settled in Dhaka, but there was struggle nonetheless. When they first wanted to buy a house, they were refused because they were considered people from a foreign country. The reason was that property could not be sold to people who were not natives of their country. Later on my khala and khalu [her husband] mediated the purchase of a house. However, the locality where the house was purchased was extremely hostile towards Nanubahi and Nanumoni [terms of endearment for maternal grandfather and grandmother]. In fact at one point of time they even decided that they would return to Kolkata. But later they thought that now that they had settled here, going back again would pose fresh trouble. So they decided not to return. Everything slowly settled down. This was immediately after the war. In a post-War situation the country is so tenuous that accepting people who came from outside was not easy. Perhaps there was a grit and determination working in the minds of people. Perhaps they thought that if the country hadn't been partitioned in 1947, the situation of Bangladesh wouldn't have been what it was in 1971. I feel in those days people were much more emotional rather than practical, and hence their responses were such, and they considered all three countries—India, Bangladesh, Pakistan— as their own, and considered themselves citizens of one single country. But now people of each country identify themselves differently. The way my paternal grandfather had to struggle here, my maternal grandparents had to struggle trying to settle here.

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FR. You belong to the present generation. Two generations have passed before you. What does Partition mean to you?

B. From whatever I understand of Partition, I'd say I'll identify myself as a Bengali. A Bengali from Bangladesh, because if the Partition hadn't taken place, then the three countries taken together would have been one the most powerful countries of the world. The resources that the three countries had all together, diminished considerably after Partition. After Partition, India got the largest share of the three; Pakistan's state has become quite deplorable; and Bangladesh is trying to keep its head above water, but it too was in dire straits for quite a long time. If the three countries hadn't been partitioned, then the 1971 war probably wouldn't have happened. Both our countries suffered substantial losses in 1971. This is of course something terribly negative. Maybe this shouldn't have happened. It would've been far better for all concerned if it hadn't happened. The situation in which are right now—a rift has been driven even into us Bengalis—one group is Bengalis from Kolkata, the other from Bangladesh. Maybe this wouldn't have happened. Maybe we would have been able to live in a large single joint family. That joint family is now no more. I have several grandparents. So what if my own grandparents have passed away? I could have had the affection of my other grandparents in that joint family. I could have been loved by several other chachas and fufus. I could have lived with so many more of my cousins. I can't now because the country has been partitioned. We cannot establish connection even if we want to. However much we claim that we have been modernized, the fact remains that there is a distance between the two countries, and the two are after all two *separate* countries. Every individual is emotionally attached to the country he / she is born in. I identify myself as a Bengali. Now if I ask my cousins why would you not associate with me? They would reply, because we are Indians. There is nothing I can do about that. Had the country not been divided, such a conversation would not have occurred. Then we would have been people of the same country and we could have had the right to an opinion. In the present times, however smooth the diplomatic relations, however close the bonding by blood, there is no such claim we can project on each other. This should not have happened.

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Had this not happened, there would have been no war in 1971, and the Bengalis of the two countries would not have been separated by this unfathomable chasm.

FR. What do you feel about the border that has been erected between the two countries?

B. Since the two countries have been divided, the border should be maintained in such a way that the people of each of the two countries should remain within their boundaries. Bangladesh is facing several trials possibly because it is a small country, a weak country. I feel all this is happening because of the border. The border should be made in such a way that nothing of the kind happens. I strongly feel as a Bengali that the border must totally and separately segregate the two countries. No negative impact of that country must fall on us; neither must that country unnecessarily flex muscles to show that it is a more powerful nation. Each country must be able to show their strength according to their own individual capabilities.

FR. If I ask you: where is your native land, or where you belong, what would be your answer?

B. I would say I'm a local resident of Dhaka, because my mother has been born and been educated here. I've been here since my childhood, I've grown up here, breathed its air. Hence I want to be identified as a native of Dhaka. I feel the Bengalis in Bangladesh are much better. I've never felt any negativity among them. When I've said that my paternal grandparents have their home in Kolkata, they've never said anything negative. They are of course curious to know how and why they went there, or what they do. But they have never for once been negative. That's why I want to declare this with pride that I'm a local from Dhaka.

FR. Since you have been here for a very long time now, and a lot of things must have changed, can you tell us of any rites, rituals or celebrations that have remained with you all—some things that were originally common to the other side of the border, but have lingered on in your life or in your family?

B. There are celebrations and cuisine. As both our families originated in Kolkata, mother's cooking style and recipes all have a Kolkata stamp. Again, my dadumoni, i.e. paternal

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grandmother also cooks in the Kolkata style. There are many such recipes that people here cook differently. We know this difference when we get to know other people here. There is no such cultural specificity or festival originating in Kolkata that I can think of that we celebrate here. We celebrate only those things that have originated in Bangladesh. The cuisine is like Kolkata, and even the language. We don't have that intonation that natives of Bangladesh have. People generally have a feeling that we are from Kolkata.

FR. It would have been good if you could tell us about the cuisine and food habits in a little more detail.

B. I don't really know about that because I haven't been acquainted with people from the other districts of Bangladesh. But there are several food items that we don't use, and they do. I won't be able to say that very clearly. About certain Kolkata recipes, I can say this: that we have a meat preparation with cabbage or spinach; then there is a matar-paneer [green peas and fresh cottage cheese] preparation, and alu paratha. We have besan laddoo [sweet made of gram flour, clarified butter, nuts and raisins]. As far as I know, these are Kolkata recipes. My mother learnt these both from my dadumoni, i.e. her mother-in-law, and nanumoni, i.e. her mother.

FR. You have so many stories in your family, so many incidents of joy and sorrow. Do you want your next generation to know these stories? Which ones would you like sharing with them?

B. The present generation is much more civilized. So they must have a clear sense of the division of the two countries, or what exactly should be the nature of relations between the two countries. That is imperative. They should form a personal opinion about what they want to do or which country should I identify with, or what kind of relations should I maintain with the other country. If the perspective is clear, then there will be clarity of choice and judgement. They should have a dispassionate view of both the negative and the positive things. That way they will know what they should do, or how they should express themselves in this matter.

FR. Do you want to tell me something more, or wish to add something more? Any comment, or any thought that you would like to share?

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B. All I would like to say is that those who have stayed on in Bangladesh, should remain as citizens of this country. A country gives so much to its people—so much. It gives to its citizens without them asking for anything. So nobody should have his heart in one country and stay in another. That way you can never belong to any country. So you should be loyal to one country and one country alone. As a Bengali I'll be able to remain loyal to the country I'm living in. On the contrary, if my heart is attached to one country, and I have to live in a different country, then I'll never be able to be either honest or loyal to the country I'm living in.