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Red steps to reminiscences

Shombit Sengupta
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“Shani kheer (milk dessert) turned upside down will never fall, it’s like a thick plate,” is an incredulous childhood image that’s etched in my mind. Mutually dotting on each other, my grandmother Nalini Bala had re-lived her erstwhile luxurious life in Burma and East Bengal before becoming a refugee in India, by brainwashing me with myriad little stories of that fantastic time.

Last week we took my parents on a nostalgic trip to retrace their original home. Untangling our car from the perennial Dhaka traffic jams, we drove with bated-breath anticipation to Madhyapara in Bikrampur just 35 km away. In the backdrop of my father’s wistful recollections expressed in peaks and troughs of emotion, we discovered that the Buri Ganga bridge had deprived us a steamer ride from Dhaka Sadarghat that he used to enjoy. His running commentary said we’d cross Kirangunj over two Dhaleswari rivers, enter Munshiganj district to Siraj Dikhan police station. The region, famous for early Buddhist scholarships, is the oldest capital of Bengal since the Vedic Period. We’d read about Buddhist scholar Atish Dipankar from Pala Empire, scientist Jagdish Bose, freedom fighter Chittaranjan Das, and Benoy, Badal,

Dinesh who gave their lives revolting colonial rule. My grandmother would say they’ve all originated from Bikrampur, but I’d never believed her. When their tales were endorsed here, you can imagine how Nalini Bala was accompanying me to our lost home.

Our Bangladeshi navigator stopped at a 100-plus year-old local sweetshop. A hard, yellowish, 6-inch dia, milk sweet on a banana leaf totally displaced me, my grandma’s voice reverberated in my body and mind. So this unique shani kheer, available only in Siraj Dikhan enroute to our village, was for real! The heritage sweetshop owner even recalled tales of the revered Raisaheb Ruhini Sengupta, my great grandfather.

Going forward, our contact hailed a 95-year-old Hindu religious man in one of those extremely colourful rickshaws that dot both the urban and rural Bangladeshi landscape. Everybody knew that he survives on fruits and knows everyone here from way back then. Visiting after 63 years, my father started recounting long-lost experiences. The spritely, wrinkled swamiji, his forehead vertically divided by a one by three inch thick vermilion streak upto his surprisingly natural black hair, corroborated each recall just as enthusiastically, and they’d hug each other like long lost friends. I’d never witnessed my father express such bonhomie. Swamiji embellish my father’s childhood tit-bits with detailed information on Ruhini Sengupta. He also mentioned that Bikrampur’s Durga festivities comprised

80 pandals before Partition, now only two Pujas are celebrated.

The road to the village was extraordinary. Arched trees on both sides touched one another to filter in patches of early winter sunlight to welcome our disoriented homecoming. I recognised the shanko my grandmother had described, the single bamboo walkway with bamboo railings that connect houses separated from the road by water bodies. People would balance tightrope like, walking with perfect grace, even with large bundles on their head on upto 100 metre shankos.

Veering into a small brick road alongside paddy and potato fields interspersed with water hyacinths, my heart skipped a beat as this signboard appeared: "Madhyapara Union Parishad." Our navigator escorted us to the local village chairman, Mohammad Azim, to make us acceptable here.

Chairman was waiting with several old people. He honoured my father, making him sit on his tall chairman's chair. Myth-like stories were emerging of Raisaheb Ruhini Sengupta's prosperity, power and fame. My father would start a topic, "My grandfather used to walk..." and old Karim Mia would continue, "...and if turbulent oxen are fighting there, they'd stop, and respectfully step aside to let him pass." This reunion in the chairman's bureau reminded me of Mafia recognition methods where two unknown Mafia-men on a pre-determined meeting are each given a torn currency note. If their two pieces converge exactly, the men know they've correctly found each other, and can proceed unhindered. The spontaneity of my father's memoirs was as incredible as the response from the increasing number of white-bearded, henna-ed men over-crowding the room. I was just an open-mouthed listener matching their conversation to my grandmother's stories.

In extreme brotherhood terms we walked the next two km to our lost ancestral home

"Subal Dham." Amid lush greenery and mustard fields, several questioning people kept joining our party. My father's eyes moistened when he saw his 400mx100m dighi or fishpond. He was shocked his large red mansion was demolished, sprouting in its place small tin houses. All that remained of his homeland gone adrift were a set of red British-style steps that jutted into the pond, and a concrete bathroom for women at the back. A current inhabitant of our property, Mohd Mofiz, recounted the heritage property of Raishahib Ruhini Sengupta, which amounted to 400 acres. He said, "The 360 degree horizon you see would have belonged to your family." I was utterly shocked. After the Sengupta family was forced to flee during turbulent times, the government appropriated the property, cut them into bits and pieces for many to occupy. Mofiz also knew that this was only the country house of Raisaheb, that his principal home and property were in Rangoon, Burma. My great grandfather was initially a PWD worker in British times. The British rulers rewarded him with the Raisaheb title for his excellent performance as the principal engineer in constructing the Burma-China border road. My grandfather became a successful advocate in Insein, Rangoon, before he suddenly died, leaving family with his father.

As my father narrated childhood memories sitting atop the red steps, occupants of our erstwhile property crowded in to hear him. I'm grateful to chairman Azim for smoothening our visit. Some people were scared that we'd come to repossess our 400 acres. We had to re-establish that ours was a nostalgic journey to discover our vanished legacy, and not to reclaim the land that got auctioned off after Partition.

—Shombit Sengupta is an international Creative Business Strategy consultant to top managements.

Reach him at www.shiningconsulting.com ■