

On the Other Side of the Wall

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Interview and Writing: Atreyee Day Support: Blaise Joseph Interviewees: Mahinder and Chameli Choudhury Profession: Pressing clothes/ Laundry Date: Saturday, 29th of May, 2015

Introduction

On the other side of our compound wall where we stepped out through the rusty sheet iron back-gate to conduct this interview- the old hole-in-the-wall shop remains, something I have been seeing for the last 37 years. While approaching the 2 elderly clothes-press couple, Chameli & Mahinder Choudhury, I felt how little has changed with them unlike our family land - an assumption that would be toppled after an hour and a half of



engaging.

Drawing at right by Atreyee Day This was the

very first interview for The Vision of the Land workshop, more of a rambling conversation. The alley joins Ahiripukur Road which goes to Karaya Police Station and Park Circus market. But time hasn't stopped here in the gully. The buffalo shed next door now has no buffaloes but it has several tenants neatly living in their one room houses around a flourishing mango and a citrus tree laden with summer bounty, a neatly kept courtyard has been taken over by two Muslim families for several decades. Their landlord stays next door in another tiny room- a Bihari bow-legged peer of 80 odd years. Not much had changed except like missing teeth the old red brick house from where the voice of children would waft across to our kitchen was gone, with its green spiral stairway and a terrace full of linen drying, for it housed a laundry as well. It has been replaced by a nondescript square concrete structure. Relations are tranquil and remained so even during phases of politically incited violence. I prefer to use this entrance to our house flanked by a populous market, slum, apartment houses, the masjid with its flock of pigeons displaced by the loudspeaker amplified azaan, smell of tea brewing and stale oil frying samosas, the noisy car bodyworkshop, the grimey metalwork factory, the rationshop line and the small nondescript jaggery, oil and grain shop which stocked puffed red rice, the teashop and stationers with old teakwood store shelves and the neat row of mutton hanging besides the sweetmeat shop as the tethered goats nearby munch cabbage leaves meditatively. Both places run always on overtime. Municipal water, nobody's yet, yet everybody's water, gushes out from pipes with no taps. From Karaya police station nonchalant cops come and go in their white steel helmets. Kanaibabu the old bespectacled tailor of Purbachal Tailors & Son who has stitched petticoats & blouses for my grandmother and aunt has been replaced at the sewing machine by his old bespectacled son. Here community ties are visible still. Infact, I found it safer to use rather than the better paved main road leading to our main entrance, the dimly lit, treelined elite Gurusaday Road home to the several better known industrialists, the Birla Science Museum with sleek chauffer driven cars, the golguppa seller & the old cobbler are some signs of life and the occasional tired mini bus belching smoke flanked by the lush out of bounds grounds of the Border Security Force and the Ballygunge Cantonment. Several old houses are gone to make way for a popular Chinese cuisine chain run by a Bengali entrepreneur, which used to be a once a year pilgrimage for Calcuttans. Near it was a new unisex beauty parlour, prohibitively expensive and a corner turned reveals an interior décor shop which fits seamlessly into pages of fashion glosies than the familiar comfort of well lived spaces. No gulmohur tree, in place stood a Dilwara temple lookalike, a marbled concoction of the cities fast growing Marwari & Jain populace, often the cause of a bottleneck interspersed with the carcasses of used car sales parked, encroaching upon the road and pavement, defiantly. It made a lonely walk in the evenings. Just a little way down from where the road turned into my lane life resumed its familiarity with the comforting signboard in red and yellow in Mandarin, Susan Cheung's drycleaning outfit flanked by a lit up cross in the derelict spooky building where the barber sits.. The back alley way to our house has narrowed due to the 'illegal' unfinished construction- of a 4 floor house which is very closely built and houses a sewing 'factory' or sweatshop and tenants of who broadly fall under the unorganized labour force of Calcutta. We can hear them early in the morning right from their ablutions in the common facilities till they lock the painted blue doors to their meagerly furnished rooms to disappear into the maws of the city. Late in the evening when the dhoop is burnt to cleanse our house and the conch blown thrice by the caretaker, Indrajit we can hear another conch in simultaneous response, mellow and melancholic as the dusk falls over the sound of faraway ebb and flow of the traffic. The Interview Several times Blaise and I had been stopped by Chameli (mausi or 'aunty') in the past month while plying the lane to reach our backgate- She would ask us where were we off to in the sun? Have we eaten yet? Do we want to share their meal? You (me) have become thin and dark since you left Calcutta. (This was because I no longer stayed here but in Belgaum, Karnataka after we married 2 years back.) Today she was trying to fill kerosene in the stove while Mahinder (kaka) was ironing - coming out every once in a while to heat the heavy flat iron in a clay oven that had coals burning. He had a stoop from long hours of bending over his work in his undershirt and a checked 'lungi'. His wife was tall, spare with a myriad wrinkles, ruffled hair and faded sari worn in the 'dehati' way- head covered. She always had a strong and direct gaze. They remained equal in replying to us or asking questions. Mausi asked us where would we sit? They had two large wooden reels around which cable wires were wound, in front of their house. We later shifted inside their 6 by 8 feet living quarters; with a rattling fan, low ceiling and table a full of clothes, ironed and unironed, haphazardly kept. We sat on their 'bed' as Mahinder (kaka or 'uncle') ironed and his wife prepared their Spartan lunch. Are we disturbing you, we asked them? Not at all, they replied, but if we had known we could have got you tea from the shop. We didn't want to bother you, we said- (in fact that would have lead to preplanning, something Marc asked us to avoid to keep it spontaneous.) It was a scattered free-wheeling talk, not about land alone. Their curiosity needed to be met first about me, my family, Blaise. Quite naturally having been in the same neighborhood for the past 40 years, they had kept track of various deaths, illness, marriages and ceremonies, in their own way noting changes in our adjoining land of a bigha which was owned by my maternal uncle and now reduced to just the family house, the rest was promoted. There have been no daily ties with the clothes press couple now since my school days. We simply talk. These are the conversations that preceded any discussions on land. It came from the familiarity of having seen me grow up since age 3 with almost daily

interactions as my brother and I went via the ironing shop to our art classes held in the house of a retired Navy personnel while his spouse ran a bread, milk and egg supplies. So here are some of the answers we took before asking any of our own were as follows: A barrage from Chameli mausi. Why is your hair looking so short and dry (unoiled)? How could I be married yet unadorned by any jewellery? What after all did a wedding band signify without vermilion in my hair parting? Did Blaise (dulah/bridegroom) put any vermilion in my hair parting during the wedding ceremony? It took her several tries to get Blaise's name as she rhymed it with 'blade'. It was out of the question for a village woman to have no signs of marriage on her! So we explained how a ring was good enough for some cultures and is binding enough. How in Kerala among the Catholics traditionally white was worn on weddings which of course, is considered inauspicious by Hindus. If she must know we had taken the 7 steps around the fire to solemnize our interfaith multicultural marriage. That there were readings from the Bible and Upanishads, she didn't quite understand or consider that very important. Vermillion, bangles, mangalsutra all were disappointingly absent. And where were the sweets if we had indeed married, she asked us! That we had a too small wedding with 40 guests was not befitting my family 'status'. We smiled and promised her sweets which she graciously turned down- No, no! Now there is no fun in getting what one asks for- I will only accept sweets now if we bring home a baby. And I don't eat sweets, she said demurely. We tried to explain about our work with art and communities- and how we collected stories as well- and that kept us plenty occupied and we have married late. How selfish we were to make work an excuse to not have a child, Mausi said! (No chance of impressing them with our work. Everyone after all did some work.) We joked about carrying a baby to workshops and remote destinations and suggested to them the possibility of adopting a child. It didn't please Chameli mausi who said how do you know bloodlines of adopted children, jaati, hindu, Musalmann- he could do evil to you- have a dacoit as an ancestor (we all do, maasi, we assured her of having dubious and lofty ancestry alike)! It could be a down-right bad child, maasi said. Her husband intervened and said no child is intrinsically bad and all children comes from God – no particular God- and went on to iron out his son's livery – their son is a chauffeur in (the upmarket) Sunny Park- he gets two uniforms, he informed us with great pride. I wash and iron them, see, Mahinder kaka



pointed the livery out to us with great affection.

right by Blaise Joseph Mahinder kaka was mostly silent after that, his wife continued- you see, if you died your land/home/property would go to your own child or even your adopted child. (We lost an opportunity to raise the topic of land and inheritance here.) If not, the government annexes it. So I asked her- it's not only about the last rites and who would put some fire in my mouth to make sure I exit this earth well (which is according to Hindu last rites), right? Is it about 'owning' the land in absentia from Heaven through an assured bloodline? She said, of course it is! Since, the Muslims and Isayis bury their dead so aren't they liberated, I asked mausi? How about if we symbolically perform our own death ceremony like renunciates do in all traditions including Hindus, I said playfully? Then they become jeevanmukta (liberated while still alive)! She was shocked. Sadhus are known to do it symbolically- she actually thought I meant literally burning ourselves and getting blisters all over! Renunciates are known to also symbolically get married to their chosen Godhead; that she understood. Aaccha, samajh gayi (Ok! Understood!) Like our Mira bai (mystic saint from Merta, Rajasthan)! Gods & Goddesses in myths and legends was referred to as familiar as near and dear ones are. We tried several times to cut the meandering thread about yogis and indigenous tribes who prefer being buried when dead or put in water so that till the end they served humanity through feeding the fish with their bodies or enriching the earth, the microbes, plants, animals and men, ultimately the whole earth- they believed in gifting themselves to all earth communities and didn't really belong to any one narrow religion in the end- And then we asked them what was their connection & memory with land? Muzaffarpur or 20 [kos](#) from there is where they hailed from. She married him at 7 years of age so all she knew was how to cook and tend the hearth and home well- so she didn't understand any other kinds of work, for example, what I did. Tending her in-laws, children and husband, gathering & preparing food, caring for livestock from feeding fodder to fetching water – cleaning the home and washing clothes- repairing fences, gathering fire wood. It went on and on. I told her but that is a formidable list of achievements, I wouldn't be able to accomplish all these works, mausi, I told Chameli mausi. You see, she answered simply, I am un-read (illiterate)- so I do what I know and have been doing since I was a child. (We were tempted to open the necessary and urgent discussion about the primary or secondary educational system which did not draw their curriculum from actual lived realities or living tradition) Then Blaise asked, so that means after marriage you continued to stay at the respective parents place...Yes!Yes! When we came of age we were married again in another 'real' ceremony and started cohabiting. What are your memories of land as a child, I asked, of your parent's house? Oh, we were rich, [gudia](#), Mausi said! (Throughout the interview she addressed me either as [gudia](#) /doll or 'baby', and clearly she seemed not to notice the white in my short hair.) Mahinder Kaka said her family is better off than mine. They have many more *bighas* than our family- aam, litchi growing besides masur, arhar dal, rice, wheat, vegetables and roots. We ate and lived well. Our ceiling was high. We had mudwalls with cow dung packed, they were cool to lie on. Not like this house! Look at the asbestos sheets above! No respite during the rains or the summer. So now do you have a 'pucca' house? Yes! They described a 7 room house with large courtyard and 'verandah' a separate space for the cow-the son's wife stayed there with the children. What is your son's name? Bacchan, like Amitabh Bacchan? (Laughter) Bacchan lived with them and drove a private car. So he must be supporting you? Oh no no no. We support him! He pays for the upkeep of the land, his wife and children. Our joy is to wait for him at night- sometimes its 11pm or 12 midnight- and eat together. I make his 'parathas' for breakfast and pack him a 'tiffin', maasi said. See! We pay rent here for 1,200 Rs- and our house lying empty, if it were near town it could be rented out, but who will rent a space in a village? Then looking up at Mahinder kaka picking up a steaming iron, so you are land rich, kaka! But land is priced according to its 'position' (how close or far from the city, motorable roads, markets, banks. The partisan modern economics of polarities and maintaining the never meeting parallel lines.)

Kaka added, Rs.1,400 per quintal- the price of coal- we require 40 kgs. Yes! Every month! They have electricity in their village home, a hand pump and like stories every where the well has predictably, dried up. Everyone draws (water) from anywhere using 'pump'— so what about the groundwater and the water table (silence). He nodded as he ironed with a rhythmic thud. Blaise and I talked about depletion of water sources due to irresponsible usage, dirtying common water sources, building fences around individual property as opposed to commons, allowing water sources to replenish, containing oneself to single rainfed crop, monoculture as opposed to etc, - the thread of talk didn't take off. Kaka remained silent. Nodding and smiling shyly. We became conscious. Kaka continued politely picking up the thread from where he had stopped, "...and then electricity for this fan and light is 400 rs- separately to be paid to our 'makaan malik' (landlord) - they nudged us pointing towards a bow-legged elder in a 'gumcha' walked by giving us the once-over...what do they want, he asked amiably enough, ambling off before a proper answer was formulated by kaka. Desh..the conversation continues So what is your house like in 'desh'? How long have you been in 'videsh'? More than 50 years. Don't you remember we had a shop in the Quadri Mansion? We were asked to leave. Really? Were you compensated, I asked? No answer. They had moved on in their story. Our original address was 1 Park Street- Kaka said proudly, quite aware that only the very rich or the old Calcutta families could afford that address. It was a derelict mansion, we gathered, in Old Park Street area near the tram-lines at Matha Rasta (Seven Headed Road), Park Circus. Mahinder kaka continued; our children were born here in Chittaranjan hospital. We cut to the chase, And what about Mahinder kaka's home (where was he born)? In Dharbanga district. Our villages are far from each others. Oh, we have about 3 bighas close to the road. But we lease it out to sharecroppers- no one wants to work the field. You see the best fruits go abroad- we never get to eat it. We can't afford it, in fact, Kaka said. I asked why you suppose this happens. Everything is eaten by the middleman... (So much more conversation needed on this...We tell them in brief about meeting Bhaskar Save the natural farmer who did not believe in exporting the bounty of his orchard.) But it seemed they get to have vegetables and rice from their land, Kaka added. Chameli maasi said, I have only 2 children. The daughter is married and the son lives with us. It is for him we stay here. What is the point if we can't share a meal with our only son, you tell me? They had 3 grandsons and 1 granddaughter. The grandsons don't even feed the cattle or water them but the granddaughter does. But why, we asked? We stressed that isn't it about training the children or do you feel 'education' which they are receiving does not make them fit for land-work? For example, I added, Blaise shares all kinds of work around his house, outside the house be it on the farm or art projects and housework shared between us. We pointed out just like they supported each other we supported each other, too. (Much merriment!) We are married 50 years, they said- we were merely teenagers. Just the 2 of us stay here. Mahinder kaka said, look at this age- it's the age of medicine- people, plants everything subsists on 'dawai' – it is an age of duplicity – it looks good from outside, empty from inside. Does the cow's milk have any strength? Maasi said how they consumed half a litre in tea between them here and felt bad they could offer us none. We don't have to pay for food in the village, Baby (she kept calling me that for my greys escaped her and all she still saw the unruly child in a pinafore!). Here we pay



for everything.

Drawing at right by Atreyee Day I asked

if we were disturbing their routine- oh no! The rice is cooked. The daal is cooking over coal. All I need to do is add some fried garlic and make a 'chokkha' – potato vegetable. I said you have a long wait for dinner till your son comes! What about Bacchan's wife, I asked? She is in 'desh', bitiya (daughter), how can she stay in this tiny room? But they visit sometimes. Dulhaniya (daughter in law) tends to the farm and the children in school. Mentally I ran through the laundry list of chores, maasi had mentioned. Can you cook, she asked me rather skeptically? But, of course, I said! What can you cook, she challenged? Well, we can show you sometime, I said. Blaise makes great 'rotis'- this was a shocking piece of news to her! And you? Not too bad. You eat meat, fish, Maasi asked? Yes! We do but we don't cook often. We weren't sure how she differentiated 'mutton' from 'meat'



as in goat from cow. Again, she said, we don't like buying even tea from the Muslim 'chaiwala'- why, we asked?

Because they eat beef and we pray to the cow, pat came the answer, with no rancor but simple acceptance. Don't you have Muslims in the village, I asked? Of course we do, and there is no dushmani or enmity with them. They are different. We are different. That's all. Blaise said, is it what goes into the mouth or what comes out that makes a man bad- words of hate etc? Don't you have 'masjids' there? Sure, we do. There is no fight with Muslims. But closest to our house is the Shiva mandir and opposite it is Hanuman ji's mandir. Do you remember our snowy haired night-watchman Kailash Singh-I asked; the storyteller par excellence- best friend - he would take me and my brother to the Hanuman mandir every Friday in the Border Security Force campus and regale us with stories from Ramayan and carry us on his shoulder to distract us because come 5 pm near sunset and like clockwork we would start crying for our mother. He would take us to have us whisked by the 'mullah' by the white yak's tail flywhisk in case we ran a

temperature. Don't you go to the mandir, maasi asked me? Sometimes- but rarely, I said. That won't do, you must go-I liked her emphatic ways, her familiarity! Mausi said we go and sing in Bhojpuri late into the night and eat together – it is inside the Dhangar bazaar- many Bengalis join in. I remember these nasal plaintive songs accompanied by drums and ‘

khnjani’

–bells-would drift into our bedroom windows as a child – there weren't so many buildings to detract the plaintive sound which lulled us to sleep, of the displaced and dispossessed, remembering the home they much rather not leave.

Mahinder Kaka continues...

How can there be fresh air or light here unlike our desh – so many, many buildings. We'll go with you one day to the mandir. Although I remember visiting years back as a child this particular makeshift mandir – in the mess and melee of the Dhangar bazaar in full-swing. How apt-no separation between the sacred and the everyday living. I found them rich; in their rootedness in their relationship their commitment to each other. They didn't have to keep up 'standards' and was at peace with their society/samaaj of those for centuries toiled for their bread- their toil literally 'fed' and 'clothed' others, is that what brought this peacefulness – they were the earthworms and the millions of microorganisms, the substrata of soil itself – taken for granted, ignored and walked over. Dignity was innate. They didn't come from a broken family with fragmented sense of self, a self undifferentiated from community. They didn't yield to the 'promoters' or landsharks. They had little land and held on to it as it held them in place even if from a distance. They sold half a bigha years back in distress when Bacchan was small (he was in his 40's now), kaka added, but proudly held on the other 3. Faith was a living thing for them.

Maasi's Story

Let me tell you a story, maasi said. First tell me are you joining in for lunch? No maasi, I said, we will be eating outside? Why your cook hasn't come today? Yes, she has! There you can hear her clashing and clanging pots and pans, I quipped. What, maasi said? You'll eat in a hotel? Do you know dry roti homemade dipped in water is better than that poison. The implication was that food cooked with loving intention could never hurt but indifference could kill. You have seen Ramayan in TV? Yes, years back. We love Hanuman ji, you know- he is Shiva avatar, right- Pavan puta Hanuman ki jai? Yes, yes, I reiterated, go on. Maasi continued in her nasal dehaati voice cracking occasionally, once Hanuman who was very innocent and pure at heart saw Sita Maiyya putting 'sindur' in her parting. You must understand how important sindur is. Look, I wear sakha pala (conch shell bangles) from Kalighat like Bengalis. Hanumanji asked Sita maiyya, Ma why are you doing this for what reason? Sita said, it gives Rama ji immense pleasure and satisfaction! At which Hanuman who took everything to heart rolled in sindur and covered himself from head to toe except his 2 eyes! When asked by Sita maiyya (mother) what are you doing , my son! Hanuman said, now tell me mother, if the little sindur gives Father (Rama) joy how much more joy would he get seeing so much sindur! I hugged maasi and walked out into the afternoon sun- where is your umbrella, bitiya? She called after us. We waved at her gesturing not to worry, we'll be fine. I mentally noted that among the traditional Bengalis it would be considered inauspicious to call back a retreating person with the exception of the mother. We would no doubt be shaded from the harsh afternoon sun as long as her motherly gaze followed us. We told them we'll be back. End

..... A Note: Over a Friday & a weekend in May 2015, we attended a 3 day online course & discussion facilitated by [Marc Hatzfeld](#) , French social anthropologist & scholar. The enigmatic title & brief of the course had drawn us to apply for. It was called [The Vision of The Land in India & Elsewhere](#). [Modern Academy of Continuing Education \(MACE\)](#), Calcutta and [Trimukhi Platform](#), Boropada Village were jointly hosting this 3 day event. Participants were from Calcutta, parts of India and Latin America. The interview mode with guidelines was to be part of our fieldwork. Finally , the interviews shared online through our writings were diverse and created a quilt of people's stories, poetic, emotionally charged, highly personal 'visions' steeped in yearning and rooted in living memories. There was nothing clinical in the way of scientific enquiry. Lines blurred and often the listener and the speaker changed positions. So, it was both an inner and outer dialogue both enriching and healing for me. Contact the Author