

Graduate Institute Oral History Project

Geneva Graduate Institute, Switzerland

Geneva, Switzerland

Deep Das

Interviewed by

Saheli Chatterjee

November 7, December 22, 2022.

Online over Whatsapp audio call

Background:

This collection consists of oral histories collected by students and researchers at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies as part of their coursework or research projects. The narrators come from diverse backgrounds and recount a wide range of different trajectories, allowing us to see a broader spectrum of historical experience.

Key features of the interview

The purpose of the interview was getting to know Deep Das's restaurant *Burmese Bahar* and understanding the inspiration behind it. The interview was conducted in the context of a broader project, for my PhD dissertation, that explores the history of circulation of Bengali families between British India and British Burma during 1900s-1970s. The interview traces Deep Das's connection to

Burma explored through his grandmother's childhood in Rangoon up until the early 1940s. The interview explores the stories about Burma that Deep recollects his *didan* once shared with him and how it profoundly influenced creating *Burmese Bahar* in Kolkata.

The interview was conducted in Bengali and has been subsequently translated and transcribed by the interviewer, Saheli Chatterjee. The translations and transcriptions have been authorized by the narrator for publication and usage.

Narrator

Deep Das is the owner and chef at *Burmese Bahar*, a Burmese-cuisine restaurant in Kolkata, India. He is also a Fine Arts graduate from Kala Bhavan, Shantiniketan.

Interviewer

Saheli Chatterjee is a first-year doctoral student at the Department of International History and Politics at the Geneva Graduate Institute. Her PhD research explores the repatriation of the Indian community from Burma to India during the 1960s and 80s and addresses broader issues related to the partition between India and Burma.

Format

Deep Das_Audio 1, 1:10:25, MPEG 4

Deep Das_Audio 2, 42:18, MPEG 4

Transcript

The transcript has been produced and edited by the interviewer and has been reviewed and approved by the narrator.

The use of punctuation marks in the transcription are as follows:

- 1) “...” indicates a pause in the conversation or a moment taken to rephrase a statement made in conversation
- 2) Bengali words that remain not translated upon the interviewer’s discretion has been kept in italics with the translation in parenthesis.
- 3) Time intervals during which both narrator and interviewer were speaking at the same time or with multiple overlaps have been indicated in footnotes in the transcript.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Audio recording

Bibliography: Deep Das. Interview by Saheli Chatterjee. Audio recording, November 7 and December 22, 2022. Geneva Graduate Institute Oral History Project.

Footnote: Deep Das, interview by Saheli Chatterjee, audio recording, November 7 and December 22, 2022, Geneva Graduate Institute Oral History Project.

Transcript

Bibliography: Deep Das. Interview by Saheli Chatterjee. Transcript, November 7 and December 22, 2022. Geneva Graduate Institute Oral History Project.

Footnote: Deep Das, interview by Saheli Chatterjee, November 7 and December 22, Geneva Graduate Institute Oral History project, p10.

Deep Das Das Interview 1/2 , November 7, 2022

Saheli Chatterjee 00:00

I wanted to begin by asking you about your interest in Burmese cuisine and your inspiration for your restaurant.

Deep Das 00:59

Actually, my grandmother is from Rangoon, now Yangon. My grandmother's father used to work in Rangoon in the police department. She was born in Burma and she grew up there. She got married here but she carried her memories of Burma. These memories of Burma that she carried in some ways influenced me and when I ate my grandmother's cooked Burmese dishes, of that time... I was not used to eating Chinese and other food...I am talking about my childhood days. So then eating noodles or other Burmese dishes that my grandmother cooked created an interest. I wanted to eat more and I wanted to know more. I used to hear many stories about Burma from my grandmother. In those times, my grandmother was considerably modern and through her stories I understood that from us, Burma was more modern, in the way that people dressed and in everything else. My grandmother also used to play the sitar in the radio station there. Some of these Burmese cultures my grandmother brought along with her somewhere taught me and I got to know more about it from my grandmother. When I grew up my grandmother passed away and I could not find the taste of Burmese food anymore. Little by little, here and there, whatever I could find, I have eaten. Burmese cuisine has a pull, the food is amazing. I could not understand why then I could not find Burmese restaurants in Kolkata. There is so much work done here with other cuisines but why not with Burmese cuisine? Chinese cuisine for example. At one time, there were so many Chinese people in India and perhaps for that reason Chinese cuisine has developed a lot. Or maybe because China has developed so much economically that

Chinese cuisine has become so popular. I kept thinking of the flavours from my childhood, it used to follow me around and I think it is from there that made me think that in Kolkata, and around, there should be some Burmese cuisine and restaurant. People should get this flavour. There were many Bengalis at one time, not just my grandmother, that used to live there. So, there was a massive exchange between Bengali and Burmese food. For example, the taste itself really goes along well with the Bengali palette. These are the kinds of inspiration behind Burmese Bahar.

Saheli Chatterjee 04:30

Is this your maternal or paternal grandmother?

Deep Das 04:42

Maternal.

Saheli Chatterjee 04:47

Your grandmother used to play the sitar in Rangoon. Did I hear that correctly?

Deep Das 04:54

Yes, she used to play the sitar at the radio station. She also brought back the sitar with her here. Later, in our family, I never heard her play it. As a child, once in a while I used to ask her to play it but she didn't play it. Maybe she could not concentrate at that time. But I did used to listen to her stories and those used to draw me a lot. The sitar used to be displayed in a corner of my uncle's house. But I never ended up listening to her play. Later, I grew up in a hostel and so naturally over time our

connection decreased. And after that she passed away. But the memory of her cooking stayed on with me. I can never forget about my grandmother's fashion codes...the memory of this has always followed me around. That is why Burmese culture, or at least Burmese food, I want to help reach to people.

Saheli Chatterjee 06:04

What kind of food did your grandmother make? Which ones do you remember the most?

Deep Das 06:16

She used to make Mohinga, Khao Swè, Ohn No Khao Swè. She of course made the soups, Shan noodles. She made lohe. I had tried to make some of the things that my grandmother used to make which were a little easy when I first started the restaurant. There was a sticky rice roll that she used to make. I have tried to make those. Now, to find someone anew from whom I can learn some more has not been possible. Whatever you find in the restaurant now at some point I had learned from my grandmother. My grandmother in general used to cook really well. Later on, she cooked Bengali food as well. She had learned from her mother-in-law and it was a joint family, so there were other women in the family from whom she learnt as well. But from time to time, for example, when I used to come back from the hostel over the holidays, she used to make these types of soup, noodles. Then, she used to get noodles from Teretti Bazaar. Either New Market or Teretti Bazaar. Noodles was not widely available then. She used to make chowmein. She had this interest, especially when I used to come home...actually from my childhood, I used to really like this food. Of course, I also really like Bengali food but this Burmese food, and those stories of my grandmother...so whenever I used to come home, I used to demand these things.

Saheli Chatterjee 8:16

Hearing you speak makes me think of my childhood, when I used to ask my two grandmothers, of the story of the other Partition. That is between East Pakistan and India. They shared with me the Bangal food they used to eat and make. I mostly heard them tell stories about the fish—that the quality of the fish was really nice in Bangladesh and how there were similarities with the food they found and ate in Kolkata after they came to India. They both got married in Kolkata. And through these stories, I learnt so much and eventually these stories are what inspires me to study these topics.

Deep Das 9:27

And it is in these stories we find so much hidden *moshla* (spice)!

Saheli Chatterjee 9:31

Absolutely. This is why when I speak with you—when you tell me about the stories that you listened to while you were growing up from your grandmother—these family histories make me think about the little that has been written about the connections between India and Burma. It is quite a mystery to me.

Deep Das 10:30

It is also quite mysterious to me, the why not? The few Burmese restaurants that are in India, all of them have some or the other link to Burma. Only those who have a link to Burma have made these restaurants. Beyond this, nobody works on Burmese cuisine. There were many Bengalis and many people from Kerala...South Indians...who used to live in Burma at some point. In the port areas, such

as Madras port, Calcutta port area, you would find this. Somebody told me that you can find it in the Madras port area even now, the other day. Roadside Burmese food, I mean.

Saheli Chatterjee 11:06

I wanted to come back to what you were saying about the many Bengalis living in Burma...

Deep Das 11:24

Many Bengalis used to live there! Rabindranath Tagore had said that when he set foot in Burma he does not feel like he has set foot in a place outside of Bengal.¹

Saheli Chatterjee 11:33

Your grandmother was born in Rangoon. I am not sure how much you have heard from your grandmother but what was the history of her parents coming to Burma? What were the professions they were involved in? What were some of her childhood stories that you heard from her? I would really like to listen to you speaking about this.

Deep Das 12:17

¹ Rabindranath Tagore was a renowned poet, novelist and social reformer based in Calcutta, in the British colonial province of Bengal. The breadth of Tagore's work was published in the late-nineteenth until the mid-twentieth century. The publication of *Gitanjali*, a collection of poems, was the most significant event in Tagore's writing career for which he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. His works have been translated to multiple languages and his life chronicled in important historiographical texts in the context of tracing the political and cultural expressions of nationalism and belonging in colonial British India. Read more of Tagore's work here, Poetry Foundation, "Rabindranath Tagore", *Poems & Poets*, poetryfoundation.org: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/rabindranath-tagore>.

I am trying. Actually, my grandmother's father used to work in the police department. This was under the British. The British used to mostly post Bengalis in Burma. The reason for this, at least what I have heard from my grandmother, is that people there, the original people there, they habitually engaged in intoxication. But Bengalis then were more work-oriented and in education, Bengalis had mastered the English language. In professions then there was a preference for Bengalis. The high-ranking police officers were apparently were all Bengalis. I have seen a picture of my grandmother's father in a hat, half-pants...when I was really young, I had seen him once in our house, he had come to my grandmother, wearing half-pants.² My grandfather however wears dhotis. And there, my grandmother's father wearing half-pants, wearing t-shirts, eating *cheroot*, it was a totally different culture. It was a *shahebi*(foreign) culture. Grandmother used to live in a bungalow, living with big lawns. And here in North Kolkata, when she comes to a *bonedi*(aristocratic) household, she felt like she became constrained. At her age, she learnt the ways of schools and colleges there. She was born there and naturally she learnt of their ways there. The Indian culture had spread a lot in that environment, I feel. This is what I felt when I listened to her stories. Rangoon city had become a city for Bengalis. In all the higher posts, not just the police department, in all the higher administration posts, apparently Bengalis were there at that time. There were clubs there and in those clubs, officers club and others, Bengalis used to gather there. There were cultural exchanges, cultural programs and other things. Somewhere down the line, there was a mixture of Indians with the English *shobhyota*(modernity) which created a new kind of culture, a better culture, is what I feel. Like I was telling you, my grandmother's dress codes, my childhood, in my joint family other grandmothers compared to my grandmother, there was a difference.

Saheli Chatterjee 16:03

² Half-pants here refer to the colloquial reference in Bengali to shorts.

You are talking about the ways of dressing of what I have read as the gentlemanly class. I find it interesting that you too describe this sophistication. I have also heard this from my paternal side of the family. From my amma's side, relatives and friends were involved in the shipping industries. I heard them speak about this sophistication, of Burmese dressing, in Rangoon too. A reference to this smartness keeps coming up. So when you talk, I find this similarity to what I have read and heard as well.

Deep Das 16:58

The people who come to my restaurant, they too talk about this. Somebody's grandmother, somebody's aunt, they also come and talk about the same thing. Their behavior overall was a lot more sophisticated. The other day I had a guest at the restaurant, even they said that their grandmother who used to live there also had this experience. They said that their grandmother used to dress differently. My grandmother was also like this. Over there, the culture was very sophisticated.

Saheli Chatterjee 17:38

Do you have any idea when your grandmother's parents went to Burma during the British rule?

Deep Das and Saheli Chatterjee 17:48-19:03³

Deep Das: I won't be able to say this probably. In that case, I will have to...find people and see. I will need to find somebody who can talk about this because this is not known to me. I will try to collect this.

³ Interviewer and narrator speaking to each other with multiple overlaps and not in the question-answer format.

Saheli Chatterjee: That is absolutely okay! Thank you! The question occurred to me because I was thinking...or whatever little history I have read... about the connections between Burma and India, I saw that during the British rule, during early 1900s, in 1920s and 1930s, a lot of people, especially many Bengali families had moved during that time. I was trying to understand whether it was in this time period your family moved too. But that is fine, it just made me think of this question...let me ask you something else.

Saheli Chatterjee 19:03

When does your grandmother come to India from Burma? If you have an estimate?

(pause)

Deep Das 19:42

She probably came around 1950. Or maybe a little earlier, closer to the 40s. It was before 47. She had come here and seen independence. And before independence, my mother was also born.

Saheli Chatterjee 20:15

Your mother was born in Burma?

Deep Das 20:17

No, no, no. My grandmother was married here. My grandmother's father was still living in Rangoon at that time. But he organized his daughter's marriage there...the situation was becoming

bad...considering going back to the country...considering these situations, he did this. I was telling you right, in the culture that my grandmother had grown up in, my mama's side of the family was not that sophisticated. True that it was an aristocratic, north Kolkata household...but that English culture, English education, they were not that cultured. And after that maybe he organized the marriage because already the situation was becoming bad, a position where coming back to the country was becoming a reality. So, for that reason he organized the marriage, her marriage here to a businessman. My grandmother used to find it hard to adjust to this in the beginning. Coming from one culture and then adapting to another. She had led such a sophisticated life and after that she came to a typical north-Calcutta culture. She used to find it hard to accept it. I remember when my grandmother's father had come to mama's house, everybody from the neighborhood had come to see him. Saying look! A foreigner has come. Wearing half-pants, a t-shirt. Then, people in north Kolkata were not used to this kind of culture. He had come back from Rangoon.

Saheli Chatterjee 22:23

Your grandmother was schooled in Burma? Did it ever come up in conversation about Burmese language, or was she speaking at home in Bengali...how much did Burmese language and Burmese culture...

Deep Das 22:46

Bengali was spoken. For this reason, Bengali and English were predominantly spoken and Burmese was spoken by my grandmother only a little bit. But Bengali, because there were so many Bengalis, big clubs in which they had the cultural programs, Bengali was spoken. Speaking Bengali spread quite a bit. Three times Rabindranath's birthday was celebrated. Can you imagine? How much Bengali influence is needed for that to happen? I heard from my grandmother that in fact, in Rangoon,

it was difficult to find Burmese people. There was a *kaali bari*, pagodas were there too...but Rangoon town was completely Bengali. There were south Indians too but mostly it was occupied by Bengalis. Higher posts professions, the British-offered government jobs, they were all Bengalis. This I can still see. Many guests who come, they also tell me these stories and I realise that my grandmother's stories also have these similarities. The spread of Bengali was significant there. It was as if the Burmese were also speaking Bengali!

Saheli Chatterjee 24:38

In school, did they teach in English or Burmese?

Deep Das 24:48

Yes, it was English-medium.

Saheli Chatterjee 24:56

When your grandmother grows up in Rangoon, as you were saying, there were mostly Bengali families among which she grew up, but were there any Burmese families with whom there was contact? What about friends?

Deep Das 25:26

Yes, there was...when she used to study in school, it is not that everybody was Bengali. There were a few Burmese friends in school. My grandmother could speak in Burmese to an extent. She had many friends; she adapted her cooking from there. Grandmother used to love cooking, so she used to

go to her friends' houses and learnt from there. My grandmother's mother also learnt Burmese cooking and used to cook it at their home. Grandmother's mother also used to cook really well. Learning how to cook was a shared interest. Over there, Bengalis made it a habit to eat both Burmese and Bengali food. Burmese food is so interesting...*ogulo taan-e*(those have a pull). Bengalis also have really nice food but even then, Burmese food has something which Bengalis were drawn towards. For this reason, all Bengalis were used to it there. My guests who come, they too speak of how their mothers used to cook Burmese food. These things I generally hear from people who come to visit.

Saheli Chatterjee 27:05

When your grandmother returns before partition, do you remember how she returned to Kolkata?

Deep Das 27:28

Do you mean how my grandmother returned or how my grandmother's father returned?

Saheli Chatterjee 27:32

I mean your grandmother.

Deep Das 27:36

My grandmother had come because of her marriage.

Saheli Chatterjee 27:41

Do you know how she had come to Kolkata? Mode of transport?

Deep Das 27:54

By ship.

Saheli Chatterjee 27:56

This is interesting to me because during that time, before partition and even a few years after, what we understand now as foreign travel with passports, tickets, visas, but at that time it was not that concrete.

Deep Das 28:19

No at that time the whole place was European. India, Bangladesh, Myanmar was all under the same British rule. It was like it was one country. Burma most probably achieved independence two years before us. Most probably 45...⁴I think it was then that my grandmother's father was also forced to return. When the British rule ended, he lost his job and so he comes back. The stories I listened to during my childhood was that adjustment was a problem. He was in Burma for even longer. So when he returned he was not able to adjust at all. My grandmother still returned when she was young. My grandmother was married when she was 17 or 18. Compared to those times, she was older when she got married. At that time people practically got married at 12 or 13. So by that time my grandmother was not so rigid but my grandmother's father and mother found it really hard to accept it again. He

⁴ Historically, India date of independence from British colonial rule was in August 1947 and Burma achieved independence in January 1948.

did not even live very long after he returned. Within a year or two, he passed away. I have only seen him once when he came to visit us in our mama's house. Wearing half pants, eating cheroot. That image remains engrained in my mind.

30:33-32:23⁵ (Couple of Interruptions)

Saheli Chatterjee: You are talking about your grandmother's father?

Deep Das: Yes I am talking about him...

Saheli Chatterjee: So what after the independence...

Deep Das: This was before independence. It was during that time. I hope I am not getting my history wrong but I remember he came back before 47 and was forced to return.

Saheli Chatterjee: This makes me think about the detailed writings on the partition between India and Pakistan. 1947 is a primary reference point. History always brings up this date.

Deep Das: yes, and you can also find a lot of writing on the partition between East Pakistan and India. But Burma's connection and then severance from India you can find very little literature. Even I have tried at one time to understand and educate myself before I started the restaurant. I wanted to try to understand the culture. I had learnt a lot about it from my grandmother but I also wanted to try personally. I could not really find much, you see?

Saheli Chatterjee: My experience too is the same...

⁵ Interviewer and narrator speaking with multiple overlaps in conversation.

Deep Das: Once *Anandabazaar* Newspaper wanted me to submit an article. At that time I had tried to find some information but even then I couldn't find anything. Even for interviews... they couldn't give me any material; I couldn't give them materials. This has perhaps remained unwritten.

Saheli Chatterjee 32:25

Why do you think this is the case? I am interested to understand your perspective on why there is such little information on the stories of connections and severances.

Deep Das 32:46

There were so many Bengalis there. Didn't they every think that we should write down our experiences? This is also something that occurs to me a lot...the why. The reason I have not been able to understand myself. Why there has been so little written about this. Subhas Chandra Bose was based there, it is from there that he gave his call "Delhi *Chalo!*". It is not that you find absolutely no history. Like I said, when I was submitting an article to the newspaper, I found some history but not a lot of relevant things.

Saheli Chatterjee 33:33

Can you tell me again what you were writing for?

Deep Das 33:35

Anandabazaar Patrika had asked me to submit an article about the India-Burma connection. But I couldn't find a lot of material. I weaved together a story by listening to other people speak about their experiences. I found information about how the last Nawab was kept there, little pieces of information but not a whole, vast history. You are a student of history and if you cannot find information, then how will I be able to! (laughs)

Saheli Chatterjee 34:11

I have to say that in school I hardly learnt anything, in Kolkata. When I studied modern Indian history, about British imperial rule, I often found references to how Kolkata was the capital of British imperial rule and from Kolkata Burma was also administered as a colony.

Deep Das 35:02

Yes see, Bengalis used to be taken to Burma to run all the administrative offices. Your research and my grandmother's story is intersecting...you see. Bengalis used to be taken to Burma because they were educated in the English language. My grandmother's father was in a higher post in the police administration.

Saheli Chatterjee 35:37

And after that, when I studied some more, I found some literature on 1937 or 1938 when British India and British Burma become two separate entities.

Deep Das 35:04

Yes, yes, yes, even this I found.

Saheli Chatterjee 36:10

I find this quite interesting you know. When we say partition, we mean the severance between India and Pakistan and we think of it as complete. That there were no connections between the two anymore. But this is not really the case...About Burma and India, I find it to be similar too. Even after Partition, so many people stayed on. What were these connections like, what happened to the families who decided to stay on. And after 1937, 38, I have hardly found any information about what happened to Indians in history writing.

Deep Das 37:24

It seems to me that after Burma separates from British India, you cannot find more information.

Saheli Chatterjee 37:31

I have been introduced to one professor who is based in America and has begun to work on the India-Burma connections. She has written about other histories of interconnections between India and other countries...such as Uganda, Zimbabwe and eventually came upon the topic of Burma. I am very much looking forward to reading her book and seeing what research she has been able to do.

Deep Das 38:38

But this is true this work has to be done! I have tried to find this history in so many books but simply could not find it. It is nice that professors and you students have begun to work on this. Maybe this

lost history can now be found. It will be nice. Especially for those of us who have some relatives or memories intertwined with Burma

Saheli Chatterjee 39:08

I wanted to come back to talking about your restaurant, Burmese Bahar. But before we go on any longer, I wanted to ask you if it has become too late for you? We can have this conversation another time as well.

Deep Das 39:12

No no no. This is not a problem at all.

Saheli Chatterjee 39:20

Alright, perfect! I was really enjoying to listen about your inspiration behind Burmese-Bahar restaurant. I wanted to know some more about when you started the restaurant and how you continue to run it. Do you have any help in running the restaurant? For cooking or designing the restaurant?

Deep Das 40:08

Actually, I started in 2018. In 2018, in October, I think. And before this I had tried to see about Burmese people or people who had connections to Burma but then I couldn't find anybody. Everybody is so scattered. In Barasat there is a Burma colony. But there aren't any proper Burmese anymore. The few that are there are really old and they practically only speak Burmese and do not understand any other languages. I could not find any interpreters. But when I started the restaurant, I found that many people, from varied places, find my restaurant. The nostalgia draws them to my

restaurant. There was a principal from St Paul's, who is retired now. Her mother used to stay there. They are South Indians. She travels really far just to eat my Burmese food. I didn't know her. She found the restaurant by herself and now comes to visit me regularly. She talks about her mother; she loves to spend time with me. People with some connection to Burma, either they stayed there themselves, or knew somebody who stayed in Burma, have perhaps eaten the food before, they come to my restaurant to brush up their memories! I have found just one person who has some interest in cooking. She too loves cooking herself. She used to work in commercial shipping and in her childhood, her parents used to live in Rangoon. She has given me some guidance about cooking when she has the time. But she is old now, a retired person. During *Pujo*, I introduced coconut rice because of feedback that my customers gave me. My guests tell me "Why don't you make us this, or make us that, I want to taste that food again", so you see, this is how they give me directions to new recipes too. I introduce them then in the restaurant.

Saheli Chatterjee 43:15

When they talk about this nostalgia, do they talk about it in terms of food? Or in other ways too?
What kinds of memories do they share with you?

Deep Das 43:34

The people who have spent their childhoods there have many memories. Their schools, the roads...some people tell me, "Which house was your *didimas* house? Was it the one next to the Ghosh's?" I of course don't remember it in so much details. And I do not have my grandmother to ask her again. Stories about how they used to get together in the *kaali bari*. So not just food, many stories relating to how they lived in India. But I think how food has had an intermixture, other things have not. So painting, songs, other forms...these have not had much intermixing. Maybe cooking is

the first thing that gets mixed up first. Cooking is one of those things that every person is engaged in it. There might be some people who do not like listening to music, people who do not like painting, but everybody has to eat! And everybody wants to eat well. Everybody eats to feel better. Every person derives a joy out of food. So food is an art form that perhaps first influences people. People who returned from Burma, still make Burmese food at home. But other things from Burma, for example, fashion, painting, instruments, nobody does this anymore at home. I myself have worked with many art forms. For example, I was trying to find the Burmese umbrellas. But I couldn't find anybody who make these umbrellas here. String instruments, harps...one of the oldest harps are in India...but these things do not find any continuance here in India anymore. But food continues to remain seeping in. Bengalis, South Indians, they still continue to make Burmese food.

Saheli Chatterjee 46:56

I was told about Indian families from Burma living in Kolkata when I started this project in 2018 by a professor in Calcutta University. I was so young then, my first year in my BA. I did not entirely understand how to go about finding these families who were scattered in and around Kolkata and how to speak with them about this history. The office where I worked, I was introduced to the personal assistant of my professor who had moved from Burma in the 1960s and 70s. Under military dictatorship, a lot of Indians were then forced to move back. And he moved during that time. Even after so many years he speaks very little Bengali and Hindi. Mostly he speaks in Burmese. He took me to Kamarhati repatriation camp. I found it so nice that when he, Munna, was in Kamarhati with me, he would get so excited to talk to the residents there in Burmese. That was their point of connection...they were also telling each other that they would make the other Burmese food at home. And after that...when I came in 2020, I heard that Kamarhati complex had been broken down due to lack of maintenance and the residents had been relocated to Barasat. In Barasat too I got acquainted with a few more families. In Bon Hooghly too. I think there the pagoda is in Bon Hooghly.

Deep Das 50:52

Barasat also has a pagoda. Many Burmese people come to Barasat. I think they come and go for medical treatment in Kolkata. I have found this source. Very few Burmese people actually live in the Burma colony. The colony is mostly occupied by people from Chattogram. Burmese people who are there I think have some problem with paperwork. The young generation have mostly left Kolkata because they have not been able to find jobs. Although these people have been in India for many years, their paperwork has not been done properly. And is true, no maintenance work is done for them. The minimum paperwork that they needed was not done for them.

Saheli Chatterjee 52:45

You were telling me about the similarity between Burmese food and Bengali food. Can you tell me a little bit more about this? Where does the similarity lie? Is it the ingredients?

Deep Das 53:03

It is really in taste. But also, ingredients—Bengalis love fish and rice. In Burma too, there are many kinds of fish, salt and fresh water. Tea...although tea was learnt from the British, Burma too I hear, in little lanes, you find roadside teashops just as you would in Kolkata. The taste is the most similar. The spices are close.

Saheli Chatterjee 54:18

Food is a form of art, as you said...

Deep Das 54:30

Yes! We make art forms to give ourselves comfort. We listen to music...so that we are comforted...we watch paintings to enjoy it. There are so many senses that are heightened with the help of food—taste, smell... it will give you so much comfort. I believe there isn't an art form quite like food. It can really bring everyone together and give joy to everybody. Everybody loves it! With food, you can conquer everybody's heart. With music you cannot do the same, people like different kinds of genre of music. See! Every country's cuisine more or less is worked with. Any place that you visit, you will always find more than the local food. But other art forms remain confined...north India will have north Indian music and dance, south Indian classical music you will not find in north India. But you are sure to find a south Indian restaurant! In South India, you will find Mughlai food. But you won't find anybody researching north Indian musical culture or language. But food in various ways and places is researched.

Saheli Chatterjee 57:03

In Geneva, there isn't a Bengali community really. There are a lot of Indian families and students. But it's like what you said, even though they are not Bengali, food always brings the various families and students together.

Deep Das 57:39

Food is a subject that pulls on everyone.

Saheli Chatterjee 57:50

Can you tell me more about the logo of Burmese-Bahar restaurant? It's so interesting! Do I see a pagoda?

Deep Das 58:00

Yes it is the pagoda, cilantro and a pepper. This is done by me. If one says Burma, you immediately think of the pagoda. I have tried to encapsulate the Burmese culture in one logo.

Saheli Chatterjee 59:12

I remember seeing on Instagram after I found your restaurant. You described Burma as "India's cousin". That really interested me.

Deep Das 59:36

I did all this because I do not want it to be a history that is forgotten. We have so many connections and similarities. The people who come to the restaurant...they do not just come to eat but also come to share their memories. Through food, I have become acquainted with so many people with similar stories. Food for this reason I think is an extraordinary art form. It strings people together.

Saheli Chatterjee 1:00:19

True. Generations after generations perhaps won't be able to keep all memories intact. But perhaps the food will help to keep the memory of these interconnections alive.

Saheli Chatterjee and Deep Das 1:0052-1:10:25

Exchanging last words, setting up a new date for an interview, goodbyes.

Deep Das Interview 2/2 , December 22, 2022

Saheli Chatterjee and Deep Das 0:00-0:32

Greetings permission to record, declaring date.

Saheli Chatterjee 0:33

The other day when we were talking, we spoke about your grandmother and the inspiration to your restaurant. Today, I wanted to talk to you about your childhood. Can you tell me a little bit more about yourself and your childhood interests?

Deep Das 1:22

My schooling has been scattered. During the holidays I used to come to my *mama bari*. As long as *didan* was there I used to come often. After that I have disconnected from my family. Sometimes I am here, sometimes I am there. When I was really young, my parents died from an accident. And after that, you can understand...it was a really directionless life that I spent. Sometimes I stayed with relatives, sometimes at the hostel. One benefit of this is that I have stayed in various types of places. From a very young age, I have had an interest in food and cooking. Perhaps because I have visited so many places and saw the local culture, local ways of cooking. Throughout, I was always interested by this. During holidays when I used to come to my *mama bari*, I used to spend a lot of time with my

didan. *Didan* before death had never forgotten about Burma. The memories about her childhood and her lifestyle they, she used to always talk about it. Rangoon town, Burma...she used to specially make the Burmese dishes for me. I saw Burma through my *didan*'s eyes. And that completely was through food and stories. Graduation was from Kala Bhavan, Shantiniketan. What I try now is to preserve cooking as a great art form. I don't think there is an art form greater than this.

Saheli Chatterjee 3:52

What did you study in Shantiniketan?

Deep Das 3:55

I studied sculpture. I do not know if you have an idea about Kala Bhavan. It was the center for fine arts for receiving masters' degrees.

Saheli Chatterjee 4:16

I have been to Shantiniketan but this was years ago.

Deep Das 4:18

There is a center of music and a center for fine arts...the one which Nandalal Basu self-created... You must have heard of Mohar di...Kanika Bandopadhyay? I have seen a Burmese umbrella in her house. She had a Burmese connection. She used to cook Burmese food and bring it for us. She used to take an umbrella to class. I had her for only a few days at the university. Three months after I joined Kala Bhavan, she left. But even then, I have seen the Burmese umbrella that she carried. I listened to

stories from *mejdi* (sister) about the Burmese umbrella and in fact I have also seen it at her house. The Burmese umbrella is very beautiful. It is made out of bamboo and over it is various art forms. I have seen Mohar di carry around an umbrella like this. Shantiniketan had a big connection with Burma too. Many Bengalis are wrapped in nostalgia for Burma.

Saheli Chatterjee 6:04

What kind of connections did you see in Shantiniketan?

Deep Das 6:06

For example, somebody or the other had someone in their life who had lived in Burma. Like I was telling you...Mohar di's *mejdi* (sister), I had asked her several times about where the beautiful umbrella came from and what culture it belonged to. I never heard this from Mohar di directly. At the most I have sat at her feet and listened to her sing. But she left 3 months after I had joined Kala Bhavan so we never had the time to talk about other things. Later, I interacted with her family and got close with them. And after I spoke with them, I realised they had family members who had lived in Burma and actually had regular connections and exchanges through business. So, umbrellas and other art forms were all kept in their houses. I had seen these Burmese dolls too. Bengalis' connection to Burma was through art and culture, through business and through professions. Like my *didima*'s father went to Burma for work. But many people also used to do business there. In many ways there was a Deep Das connection with Burma at some point. Why did these connections sever, I haven't really been able to understand. It is also a big question that I have. See what answers you can find through your research.

Saheli Chatterjee 7:55

I think of it in terms of not being able to imagine a connected space across the Bay of Bengal. Especially after debates about citizenships started, it just drew a strict line between the two countries. That they were once connected...or how so many connections persisted... it is just very difficult for people to imagine or remember.

Deep Das 8:51

It is true. Perhaps only those who had relatives in Burma are the only people who can imagine this.

Saheli Chatterjee 9:01

So maybe if we can write about these stories of experiences of Indians in Burma and how they remember Burma, we can shed some light on the India-Burma connections. But yes, it is a difficult history to write. Most people who used to live in Burma and returned are either very old or have passed away.

Deep Das 9:43

When I visited the Burma Colony in Barasat, I went and saw that everyone is so elderly. They live with a lot of medical complications and are not in a position to talk. Otherwise I would have offered myself to conduct interviews on your behalf. They are also involved with problems relating to their paperwork and simply do not have time to spare.

Saheli Chatterjee 10:17

Coming back to your childhood, after your parents passed away, did you spend a lot of time with your grandmother when you came for your holidays?

Deep Das 10:38

Yes, exactly. Before I went to school, I practically spent all my time with my grandmother. Which is why my grandmother influences my life very deeply. Even I have not been able to discard it. This is why I thought about creating the restaurant. Until 6 years of age, my grandmother had a huge influence on me. In my life, I have travelled a lot, lived in many places and have interacted with many types of people. But even after that, the span of time spent with my grandmother, has been deeply etched into me. It was as if, through stories, I learnt about Rangoon town.

Saheli Chatterjee 11:44

How would you describe Rangoon town?

Deep Das 11:52

My grandmother used to paint a vivid picture with her stories. She used to say, “the house next door was like this, this was the Chakraborty’s house...the house in the corner? That was the Mukherjee house.” All of these descriptions float in front of my eyes like a picture. Every Saturday they used to go to the *kaali bari* for festivities and prayers. All Bengalis used to gather there. These stories are also shared by the guests who come to visit me. They tell me, “Which was your *didimas* house again? Oh...is this Das Bari? Maybe it means the house next to Chakraborty’s *bari*!” They tell the stories in exactly the same way as my grandmother used to. Till now, the elderly persons who come to visit me, who were in Rangoon at a really young age, they all tell the stories like my grandmother. They also

try to recognize one another. They identify houses...what does this mean? It speaks to a unity and a bond. It was a Bengali-para, a shared-community and how everybody gathered together for festivities—at the *kaali bari*, for Rabindra Jayanti. It was exactly like a *Bangaliyaana* culture. Sometimes in my childhood I used to feel that my grandmother favoured Rangoon town a bit too much. Maybe she did not manage to make Kolkata her own. But I see the same thing among my guests. They probably came to Kolkata at the age of 10 or 12, slightly younger than my grandmother. Even among them, there is a strange fascination over Rangoon across everyone in a very similar way. This gives me joy in a strange way. Somewhere down the line, it has helped me remember my grandmother's stories better.

Saheli Chatterjee 15:40

Was your grandfather still alive when you stayed with your grandmother?

Deep Das 15:44

No. I never saw my grandfather. He died much before I was born. I have always seen my grandmother as a widow throughout my childhood. My *mama bari* was a joint aristocratic family. They were strict and conservative. My *boro-didan* was very strict. She also enjoyed cooking but she cooked typical North Kolkata food. There, my grandmother I feel only found me to share her stories. The stories from Burma and of her childhood underlined all her conversations. Because she didn't have a husband anymore, she wanted to hold on to her childhood memories of her mother and father, their stories, their work. She weaved a web of dreams to comfort herself. And when she had me around, she used to express this world to me.

Saheli Chatterjee 17:08

I really loved how you described her—how she weaved a web of dreams. I feel grandparents really love sharing their childhood stories with their grandchildren.

Deep Das 17:25

Yes, yes. They like to tell their grandchildren about how they lived their childhood. After two kinds of age difference, perhaps they really enjoy sharing it with grandchildren. My grandmother, I could understand, didn't really fit into Kolkata. She was brought up in a very different atmosphere. In Burma, everything was open and free. In Kolkata, she felt constrained. She never really got to know Kolkata as a city either. At the most she knew directions up till Shyambazaar. Beyond this, she couldn't and didn't even want to get to know Kolkata. But about Rangoon, she knew from north to south, from east to west. She was influenced mostly by the culture there. In North Kolkata, in a business family, she could never really adjust. Her sitar only lay hung on the wall but she hardly ever played it. After I pleaded with her a lot, she would play it. But in Rangoon, she used to play at the radio station. Since she left her life of music and entered a life dedicated to family and marriage...so I think it is quite natural that she could never forget about that culture. In her childhood, she used to always sing...singing while cooking...when I went, on many evenings, I would listen to her sing while we would stargaze on the terrace. This did not go along with the North Calcutta culture. Her father was foreigner-like...wearing hat and half pants...had a big lawn at the quarters where they stayed, I have seen pictures of this. And to shift from a culture like this to a North Calcutta culture...just did not work out for her. From end to end, I think she remained Burmese. (laughs)

Saheli Chatterjee 20:44

Do you remember the songs that she used to sing? Was it Bengali songs?

Deep Das 20:54

She used to sing many Burmese language songs as well. She used to explain the meanings to me. Mainly Rabindra Sangeet but she used to make me listen to many Burmese songs.

Saheli Chatterjee 21:19

Can you tell me about some of the meanings to these songs that she sang to you?

Deep Das 21:30

Yes...if I remember it slowly, I can remember. There were songs about the Thingyan festival, songs about people swimming in the water, about yellow flowers... yellow flowers are symbolic of Thingyan festival. This happens sometime around the month of April...the same month as the Bengali New Year. It is also very humid at that time there too. In songs, they talk about eating cold rice. The songs brought up the culture and the stories about it. The Burmese culture used to float in front of my eyes like a dream.

Saheli Chatterjee 22:50

Let me ask you about your restaurant. From the pictures that I have seen, the interior is extremely beautiful. It feels very Burmese.

Deep Das 23:07

Yes this is what I have tried to do. I have tried to create a little Burma. I have designed the whole thing by myself. I have tried to keep 16th century pagoda paintings, Burmese teak... actually in my grandmother's room, there were many furniture made out of teak that was sent to her by her father. *Burma bollei Burmese teak er kotha money hoy!* So I have used teak and bamboo in the restaurant. I tried to hold on to a typical Burmese culture. I try to play traditional Burmese music. I personally really love listening to the Burmese harp. I listen to it otherwise too, not just in the restaurant. I try to give a small touch. I think along with food, ambience is a huge factor for a restaurant. It makes a restaurant complete. Sometimes I see that in a restaurant, the food that is served and the interior do not really match. It feels odd. This is something I have tried to preserve in my restaurant. I wanted to keep the ambience Burmese along with the food.

Saheli Chatterjee 25:40

When your guests come, who especially have stayed in Burma, what kind of feedback do they give you when they experience this ambience?

Deep Das 26:04

This has helped to work the nostalgia of guests who have come to my restaurant. This gives me so much joy, I will not be able to explain to you...the objective that I had set out with when establishing this restaurant feels fulfilled when I see these people indulging in their nostalgia. Nostalgia about when they were 8 or 12 years old. Many people sing along to the songs that I play. I ask them, 'Do you know how to sing this? Please sing!' Sometimes I stop playing the music so that I can hear them sing. When they come to my restaurant, they want to touch their childhood memories. This gives me comfort. So many individuals' lost memories...that perhaps I am able to give them a feel of, I feel so comforted by that.

Saheli Chatterjee 27:20

When I come in January, I will bring the Burmese-Indian gentleman that I got acquainted with. He too is from Burma but he came a lot later. He came in 1960 or 1970. You were saying your grandmother came before independence. He had explained to me that a lot of Bengalis and Indians had stayed back in Burma even after independence. But when Burma had its military dictatorship that's when he was forced to come back. I met him first in 2018 and since then we have had contact. Let me see, I will try to bring him.

Deep Das 28:57

Yes anybody who has a memory of Burma...somewhere maybe Burma has this greatness, which pulls people. The stories themselves pull me so much and I haven't even lived there! I eat all kinds of food and like all kinds of cuisine but then why did I end up making only a Burmese restaurant? Wherever I have stayed, I have eaten the local food and met the local people. Food, art and culture have a pull on me. But still, I can never leave behind...or forget...the image of Burma painted in front of my eyes by my grandmother. I take it along with me somewhere.

Saheli Chatterjee 30:11

Why do you think this is the case? Do you think it is because of your childhood spent with your grandmother?

Deep Das 30:30

A lot of it is my grandmother's stories and my memory of her. But Burmese culture...it symbolizes a lot of kindness, which I think. Like I was saying, I like listening to traditional Burmese music, not just in the restaurant. Basically, I like listening to classical music—South Indian and North Indian classical music. I listen to Rabindranath Tagore's songs too. But still, I will listen to Burmese music as well. I do not understand the meanings of the songs at all but I really like listening to the instruments. The rhythmic drums...there are some fantastic instruments in Burma, which pull me a lot. And food of course, pulls me too. I learnt about Burma through my grandmother but after that I got to know Burma even more, on my own terms, which impacts me more I feel. That is perhaps because of the cultural *udarata*. Culturally it is very rich, I feel. Currently it is outside of discussions, perhaps because of its low economic position and because of the numerous state crises...people forget there is a country called Myanmar. Still, people who go, gifts they bring, there are some things to marvel about Burma.

Saheli Chatterjee and Deep Das 32:05-42:18

I remember from our last conversation how we discussed Burmese culture. I wanted to talk to you about that a little bit more. But it is getting late for you, shall we organize this another time?

Closing remarks: Discussing possibility for interview in the future, making plans to meet at restaurant in Kolkata in January, goodbyes.