

## Dida



**Partho Sengupta**

Partho studied at St. Stephen's College, Delhi, and XLRI, Jamshedpur. Cutting short a professional career, he is now enjoying teaching at an ordinary management school in Orissa, where students come from ordinary Indian families. He is married, and his daughter and son are university students.

She was called 'ma' at home by all her five daughters, never called by her first name by her husband, and always referred to in third person singular by her three sons-in-laws. She was born in Khulna District, Bangladesh, and her in-laws were rooted in Dhaka. She gave birth to her five daughters, including one on board a steamer en route to Khulna from Dhaka. She worked but as a subservient housewife and remained a quiet worker/manager of her life from 1947 until 1974, the year she passed away. She lived simply and quietly all her life. This was my **Dida** - my mother's 'ma'.

**Hello everybody! Today is a different day as I put together this final version on my Nani. Today, almost 60 years ago, a simple man was shot at and died in Delhi's Birla Mandir. He was Mahatma Gandhi.**

Like many other Indians who are in their 50s, I had not spent much time writing about my grandmothers until I heard about this website, which has now stimulated my memories of Dida. This remembrance is my small way of paying her a tribute for the many little, nameless, acts of kindness and love she showered on my younger brother and me. She is the only grandparent I am consciously aware of; she was a widow and my father's parents had died when he was barely 8 years old.

Dida's name was Hironbala Sengupta. She was the only daughter among six siblings, and she was the eldest too, if I recall correctly. She grew up in Khulna, and was married to a senior staff

member of British India's Postmaster General's office.

She was petite and fair - a feature none of her five daughters inherited from her. Sometimes the small figure of Mother Theresa reminds me of my Dida! My Dida was just her size; looked as frail and kind-hearted too. She did not have a son, which perhaps became a problem during her widowhood days because it was traditional for sons, not daughters (rather sons-in-law!), to take care of aged parents. What appears outdated today was very painfully suffered in those days. Hindu Bengali women, on becoming widows often went to spend their remaining days at Varanasi - the temple city of Shiva. They 'vibed' with the Lord in their own way, and finally, with due indulgence to Buddha's '... and life is only pain and suffering' antidote, passed into Never land. Dida was spiritually 'unlucky' compared to her peers in Varanasi - fortunately, she was emotionally attached to my family for the better part of her life! She stayed with us all through her widowhood. I would be surprised if we can have a similar journey in our old age! Would we like to? I wonder!

Dida regaled me with stories from her childhood and married days that were adventurous. She was a light sleeper and got up very early in the mornings. She would also describe incidents charmingly through her missing teeth. In fact, when she was in her mid seventies, Dida had a new sparkingly white tooth growing in her gum for us to see and marvel at!

She had had her adventures also. She was brave. She told me of how she outwitted a nocturnal thief in her village-house in Khulna. Those days,

many people slept with their valuables in trunks, which were kept inside the mosquito-net covered bed. Night fell 'early' enough for bedtime, as there was no electricity for lighting. (I sometimes wonder how people in those 'dark' days in large thatched houses, would make their ways in the middle of the nights for their ablutions.)

Anyway, to continue with Dida's story. On one of those unearthly moonless nights, thieves decided to enter Dida's house and aimed at her valuables inside the trunk by her side in the bed. And Dida firmly clutched one end of the steel-trunk with all her strength as the thief vainly struggled at the other end. In the melee, the children woke up and raised a befitting outcry. Naturally, all aliens in the house vaporized swiftly! My grandfather, Dida's husband, was on a transferable job in Greater Bengal. Therefore, very often in her early marriage years, Dida was in her ancestral home in Khulna. Her courage and fortitude on this one dacoity occasion made Dida the Joan of Arc of her village for some time – and for a lifetime for her younger brothers and their friends!

Dida also regaled me with stories of cyclones in her village, located as it was so near the Great Seas of Bengal. They had ropes tied to the rooftops from the inside in those days. And when the cyclone and gusty winds appeared to blow away the rooftops, the family members would hang by the ropes for dear life from all sides *inside* the house and thereby prevent the roof and themselves from being blown away!

Moons later, in independent India, she would confirm her agility and prowess over controlling nitty-gritty of daily life. This was something I much liked as I was used to early hours because of my boarding school routine. And so inevitably, I followed Dida into the kitchen early in the mornings most of the times. She would prepare the coal-burning *chula*, which, over the years, gave way to a kerosene stove, a heater and finally the LPG cylinder. She always warmed up the milk first, and then made morning tea for herself. Then she sorted out the vegetables, which ma came and brooded upon later, whilst seeking her advice as to what to cook for the day. Dida, of course, had a separate *chula* for herself – a strictly vegetarian one, which was deemed a must for Bengali widows those days.

Dida spoke in English with me on occasions. She was highly educated by the standards of those days - she had finished her matriculation. And she was smart too. She dressed herself in her white (in keeping with her widowed status) linen sari – spic-and-span all through the day. When the Dutch managers working with my father came to our house, Dida's broken English of '*helloa*' adequately compensated theirs!

She was, in her own small way, for me, a living legend - doing things that appeared 'impossible'. Perhaps her simple life-style would appear 'ridiculous' to some modern women! For example, during all the festive seasons, Dida would make sweetmeats (*pitha*) for all of us and send these over to the neighbors as well. We had a *tulsi* plant in the open verandah of the house. Every Saturday, Dida would make sure that the whole family, including Dad, would be there in the evenings for brief chanting to *Shani* (Saturn). This always ended with wonderful *mishti* (sweets), and we had to rinse our mouths before we re-entered the house. She would gently reprimand anyone who was late – even Dad.

Her eldest daughter was only fourteen years younger than she was. Dida got her married to a very resourceful person in the insurance sector as she did with the two others that followed, which included my mother. Strangely enough, much after the death of my parents, my eldest cousin sister told me that my parents had had a love-marriage in 1947! My mother's father was alive then and I wonder how he and Dida reacted to this unconventional act. Dida never talked about this with us nor mentioned it even in passing to my mother- *even* when she reprimanded her like any mother would her child. Was this love-marriage a quick manner of having one of the five daughters married? Who knows – but I guess my father was not a bad catch either!

Dida had been through some tough times. For example, her cousin Dinesh Gupta was one of the three of the trio of Benoy, Badal and Dinesh – revolutionaries who entered the Writer's Building in pre-independence Calcutta and blasted a few bombs inside this citadel of British administration. After this, Dinesh *babu* and his friends had fled deep into the forests, moved from place to place, but finally were arrested. Those days were the days of joint families - having grown up with this cousin, watching his

end come from a distance must have strengthened Dida mentally even more ... she learnt to bear her pain in stoic silence. And perhaps this quality sustained her through those few decades of her widowhood – when she had no home of her own, nor a son and watched her daughters from far and yet so near.

She hardly ever talked about the bygone days in nostalgic terms or in remorse. There was an element of Wittgenstein philosophy in her life pattern. One day gave birth to another, and one other and yet another. She persevered, she never had a breakdown, she managed- her body language and her language conveyed the firmness and strength. How did our grannies learn to overcome stress and strain in those vintage days? What was so unique in their quality of life that so contributed to their quality of living? We talk of the future and planning ... but how much have we learnt from our past? From our interactions with peaceful souls who meant no harm for the people around them nor for the Nature? Greed was not part of their credo; abounding love and duty were.

Have we been unfair to our grannies? In our quest for materialistic gains – of possessing a mobike today, a car tomorrow and a helicopter day after – have we missed out on a few things that they did not miss out on? We did not understand them as we ought to have. We could share the beauty with them when we were young. But, as we grew up and were sucked into the so-called ‘corporate’ compulsions of emerging Business Societies, did we lose our innocence? Our grannies managed their lives with dignity. They bore the brunt of human existence silently.

So, in that sense, her daughters having ‘love-marriages’ was not beyond her imagination from the realm of possibilities, I guess. She was no Bohemian. She understood change and seamlessly moved toward refreezing into her new environment. Peacefully and without creating disturbance to anybody. Unlike most of us today, with our advanced doses of ‘knowledge is power’ syndrome, our grannies were silent rebels – they did things differently. I believe the strengths these women had are incomparable to the strengths touted in our business schools on topics such as ‘personality development’ and strategic marketing techniques. After all how can a person like me

recall and write about my granny, who passed away 30 years ago with such gratitude? Each minute I have spent writing about my Dida has been exhilarating for me.

In those days of Gandhi & Subhas Chandra Bose, I believe two distinct generations of people from 1930s were moved into a life-style that made them suffer silently but with self-dignity. This was the period when people suffered from the Bengal famine. Dida told me that during the Bengal famine she and her family saw people in the Calcutta streets begging for rice-water as succor for their hunger. There were dead bodies on the pavements. Death came due to a dishonest food-distribution system. And the problems were barely over, when the Partition that left mutilated bodies all over Bengal. People scrambled for survival as millions crossed butchered borders. My Dida also underwent turbulence with the rest of her extended family.

My Dida, like thousands of other grannies, kept the fire burning in the kitchen and food ready for all who came for help. The riots saw deaths outside her house, seen through terror-struck eyes from the windows. She clutched on to her children and prayed for safety and salvation for those butchers. Our leaders pontificated with their egos but our poor grannies bore the brunt at the bottom of pyramid level. Dida gave us these stories in bits and pieces.

In the 1950s, the economic geography of Bengal was mutilated hundred times over, by the human fratricide on either side. It still hurts – three, four generations later. Dida was one of those millions who were, willy-nilly, at the receiving end of the political ‘largesse’. She had neither pension to fall back upon, nor any son to care for her or even an ‘old age home. And she had forever been uprooted from East Bengal, which she always considered her home, even as she lived in India.

She became part of our family, in good times and bad. She came to live with my parents when my father was himself struggling to make a living. He had served in the British Army and then the Indian National Army – what he got for efforts was a railway pass to begin his career from Jabalpure, the POW Camp for INA officers. He too was uprooted from Dhaka. Slowly we moved on – my parents, younger brother and me with Dida. Eventually, I got my

MBA and then my first job. Dida lived to see that day, but a few months later, on a wintry evening, she passed away.

Dida, like many other Bengali widows of those days, never ate with the rest of the family at meal times. She ate separately in the kitchen, on a mat on the ground and ate slowly. She ate vegetarian food without onions – as per fables and best practices of the ancient times immemorial. Yet, sure enough, her *bhajis* and other mixed vegetable dishes were simply wonderful. I was often a co-traveller with Dida at lunch times when she shared her food with me.

During her last few weeks on planet earth, Dida got an infinite urge to eat fish curry, which she had deprived herself since her husband's death. Mother obliged. All rules, hitherto strictly adhered, were broken except of course the rule of death. Death claimed her like it does any other mortal – silently but surely. She succumbed but with dignity. I remember carrying her dead body as one of the four pallbearers from the hospital to the near-by electric crematorium in Kalighat Temple area. That was my first and only experience in carrying a dead body and remembering the mortal who once lived all the way until the crematorium. We did not have to wait for long, as there was no long queue. And shortly, after a respectable wait, my Dida was gone – confined to the dust that we all come from.

What lessons did I learn from my Dida in my formative days that I use now? She left me neither heirloom nor any bank account. She left me sweet memories, of course! But thinking about the matter very objectively and rationally, from a utilitarian perspective, I believe that as I manage my daily life today, I owe a deep sense of gratitude to my Dida. A gratitude for showing me why it is stupid to be ostentatious; for teaching me how to manage my life alone as and when required and of being able to practice detachment from the materialistic world.

How do these ideas come floating into my brain? I am on a different trip now- anything but corporate. I am into teaching ordinary management students in India. For instance, I live 600 kms away from my family, and I am learning to take care for myself since May 2005, all by myself. As I do my cooking in my own

small way, I am reminded of Dida – of how she added some sugar to the brinjal before putting it into the frying pan; of her tastefully done water-rice, which we call *pantha-bhat* or *pakhal*; of her tasty sweetmeats made of rice pudding paste (*pithas*). Of how carefully she would pour out the water from the cooked rice. Of course, my wife and daughter are forever guiding me over the phone, and when I go home for a week every now and then. But when I am alone, it is towards Dida that my memory floats back. Her tenacity and quiet fortitude enables me to organize my life and give my best to my students. I share my experience and knowledge with nearly 500 students, and in so doing, I am aided by Dida's acts of kindness and love.

I have today given up the so-called comforts of the corporate Indian lifestyle. In my own small way, I am now on a *Gandhigiri* type mission to radically improve human capital development. And in teaching ordinary Indians from ordinary families with extraordinary aspirations, I find my Dida's acts of doing things differently aiding me in moving on. I realize on occasions that I too am doing things differently and that is all that matters!

### ***Postscript***

This is what I remember of Dida, and truly speaking, I cannot just talk of her cooking methods, the love she showered on us, or even the simple way she lived without making it meaningful and **application oriented** to what we are today and how at least I see the scenario unfolding around me. I believe my Dida was a silent worker/manager of her life and in so living she lived silently, almost non-verbally she taught me many nuances and meanings of life's subtleties for which I am ever grateful to her ... as I am to my parents and my teachers in school, college, university and management school for what they did for me.❖

---

© Partho Sengupta 2007