

Sunanda K. Datta-Ray Interview – May 17, 2017, in Kolkata, India

### Summary

- Born December 13, 1937 in Calcutta, India
- Father was a civil servant in the East India Railways
- When WW2 broke out, father's office moved to Benares (modern-day Varanasi)
- Moved from Calcutta to Benares to Lucknow and eventually back to Calcutta
- From a Bengali, anglicized, middle class family
  - Anglicized for 4-5 generations
- His son is the 5<sup>th</sup> generation to be educated in England, but to return to India
  - Father went to London School of Economics
  - maternal grandfather attended Downing College
  - great grandfather attended Middle Temple (one of the four Inns of Court exclusively for barristers)
- Brother and a sister
  - Brother died in Canada 2 years ago
  - Sister lives in Hyderabad
- The house where he was born on the "unfashionable end" of Theater Road in Calcutta is now in a slum area
- Calcutta was much quieter in his early years than it is now and everyone knew everyone else
  - That interlinkage still exists underneath the mass of migrants from elsewhere in India
- Ethnically his original neighborhood was populated with Anglo-Indians
  - Anglo-Indians are part native Indian, part English
- When his family returned from Lucknow his neighborhood was Bengali
- He attended Le Martiniere School for Boys, Calcutta's most prominent elementary and secondary school known for academic excellence
  - Located on Loudon Street
  - Le Martiniere was dominated by Anglo-Indians so this is who he had most exposure to
  - Only 3 full blooded Indian students at the school
  - As a boy, he naturally assimilated with the herd as much as possible
- The British Calcutta that he grew up in "doesn't exist now"
  - He was taught to pronounce street names the English way
- Le Martiniere only took full blooded, non-Christian Indians because it gave them some government funding
  - Was the British system of study, the "Cambridge certificate"
- Went to school by bus in the morning and went home at 1 PM
  - Often he stayed late at school for art classes
- Grew up in a "strictly Victorian kind of household" where there was little interchange between parents and children
  - "Children were to be seen and not heard"

- When his family went on holidays, his father had special access on the train which was a luxury
  - Went to Barabanki, Uttar Pradesh where American soldiers were stationed during the war. And one of them had written on the menu of the train station restaurant: “Better to be in hell than to spend Christmas in Barabanki”
- Family was Hindu but not religious in a conventional orthodox way
  - The neighborhood had Durga Puja celebrations (annual Indian festival that takes place in September or October in reverence of the Goddess Durga—it is an especially auspicious festival in Calcutta)
  - As a child he participated in these festivals, though not in a religious way, and his parents never did
- Chinese were shoemakers and dentists but he didn’t know any personally
- Armenian presence was very strong in his school
  - Le Martiniere had a donation from an Armenian millionaire named Paul Chater in Hong Kong
  - School prayer was “we thank thee for Paul Chater, benefactor, and for Claude Martin, our founder”
  - On All Souls Night the Armenian boys used to lead a candlelit procession to the cemetery
- Friends with a Baghdadi Jewish boy named Justin Aaron
- A Jewish family lived in Ballygunge Place near his house
  - He remembers from a Jewish plaque on the gate
- Bishop Liferoy (?) Street had many Jewish families and some Jewish boys from his school, which was less than 10 minutes by car from his house
- Family’s network of relations still exists today and goes back generationally
- Family was not heavily involved in politics
  - although his father “talked a bit to suggest that he was a nationalist but I don’t think he was”
- When his parents were getting married, his father allegedly told his grandmother (mother’s mother) not to include any French chiffon in her wedding trousseau because he wanted Indian silks
  - “but this is as far as his nationalism went”
- Towards the end of the war there was “vague disquiet at home” about a possible Japanese victory
- “We were not a family that leapt at the prospect of Subhas Chandra Bose riding on his white horse at the head of Japanese troops”
  - Bose was a Bengali political leader who was elected head of the Indian National Congress in 1938 and 1939. He did not align with Gandhi’s nonviolence ideology. In 1939 he was ousted from the Congress for his opposition to Gandhi and Nehru’s politics. He went to Germany in 1941 where the Nazi leadership supported Bose’s radically anti-British stance and provided financial support to his branch of the independence movement. In 1943 Bose traveled by submarine from Germany to Japan. He then created the Provisional Government of Free

India in Singapore and reformed the Indian National Army to fight alongside the Japanese. His troops entered Nagaland (a state in northeastern India) and also created a branch of his government in the Nicobar and Andaman Islands. In 1944 the British defeated the Japanese advance at the Battle of Kohima in Nagaland. Almost half of the INA soldiers were killed and the rest surrendered in Singapore. Bose was killed shortly after in a plane crash.

- Bose was a hero in Bengal – “the last great man Bengal produced”
  - As a child, Datta-Ray remembers hawkers selling currency notes for the “Azad Hind” (Free India) government that would be formed when Bose took India— people believed that these were real currency notes with value
  - Conspiracy that Bose is still living somewhere
- Many Indians, especially Bengalis, were not frightened of a Japanese invasion because they saw it as Bose’s liberation of India
  - Bengalis welcomed anything that wasn’t the British
- Datta-Ray’s family was not in favor of Japanese/Bose, however
  - His mother said that if the Japanese invaded, it would just be another 300 years of foreign rule in India
- Visible proclamations in support of Bose:
  - Colored pictures of Bose were all over Calcutta
  - The INA songs were played and sung
- Bengal was more in favor of Bose than Gandhi’s Indian National Congress – why?
  - Bengal has a history of friction with the “Hindi” center
  - Example: When Bose won INC presidency in 1938, Gandhi said about the man Bose defeated: “Sitaramaiah’s defeat is my defeat”
- Datta-Ray’s family went to Benares in 1941 and returned to Calcutta in 1943-44
- Benares was part of the OTR, whereas his father was part of the East Indian Railway
  - EIR officers were higher in the pecking order than OTR office so his family had two bungalows facing each other
- His father’s sister lived in Dhaka (present day Bangladesh)
  - She and her family were forced to move to Benares in fear of the Japanese invasion – they stayed in the second bungalow
  - The British army requisitioned their home in Dhaka
- After Partition when East Bengal (and Dhaka) became part of East Pakistan, his family sold the house to a Muslim family
- “Difficult to separate the strands in one’s mind—what I knew then and what I knew later” regarding Hitler and the situation in Europe
- He has a feeling that there was a certain sense of pride among Indians relating to “Hitler’s claims of Aryan mythology”
  - Indians assert that they descend from Aryans of Central Asia. One branch went to Europe (i.e. Aryans of West Europe), while the other branch went downward to India. The idea of a pure Aryan race in India is prominent among right-wing Hindu nationalists and is attaining increasing legitimacy through the politics of current Prime Minister Modi’s BJP, Hindi nationalist government.

- Indians saw a commonality in Hitler's use of the swastika
- "One of the great gurus of learned India (Bengali Hindus)" was Max Mueller, a German scholar, who worked on the Aryan heritage of Sanskrit and the Sanskrit heritage of the Indian languages
  - He has a vague feeling that this was known and there was a "warmth towards Hitler"
- Reasons for this "warmth" towards Hitler:
  - "An enemy's enemy is always your friend and Hitler was perceived as an enemy of the British"
  - Hitler went back to "India's glorious past" – here Datta-Ray is again referring to India's past of Aryan self-rule before the Mughal (Muslim) invasion of India and British imperial conquest.
- Datta-Ray was not aware of Hitler's persecution of Jews
  - Remembers that an English teacher at school told the class about a friend who escaped from the Nazis wearing three fur coats. Now, he assumes that this person was a Jew fleeing persecution.
- He was familiar with biblical Jews
- One of the class games ("it sounds cruel now") was to throw rulers at the Jewish student, Justin Aaron, and say "turn it into a snake"
  - When Datta-Ray repeated it at home to his mother she got very angry and said "this is what's called persecution of the Jews"
  - He and his friends only saw it as "ragging another boy in class"
- In Benares and Lucknow, his family lived in cantonments (a garrison town) so they were very isolated from the city life around them
  - In Benares the other families in the cantonment were Anglo-Indians
  - Lived in Lucknow from 1945-46 at "6 Church Lane"
- The first intimation independence that he remembers is an Anglo-Indian boy at his school said that they now would all have to wear "dhotis and slippers" (traditional Indian men's garment)
  - He felt some dismay at this idea of independent India
- Growing up he spoke only English, speaking in Hindi only to servants as in the Calcutta tradition "that has now died out"
  - Did not learn Bengali at school
  - At school he took "alternative English" in lieu of an Indian language
- His father was a devotee of Sri Aurobindo
  - Aurobindo was an Indian nationalist and politician of Bengali descent, who eventually left politics to establish himself as a guru, yogi, and philosopher. After returning from college at Cambridge University he became involved in the nascent Indian independence movement. In 1907 at the meeting of the Indian National Congress, he allied with Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the first leader of the India's independence movement. This meeting led to the fracture of the INC into moderates and extremists, including Tilak and Aurobindo. Aurobindo was

arrested and charged, along with over 63 other revolutionaries, for planning and overseeing a 1908 attack on a train carrying the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Andrew Fraser, which is known as the Alipore Bomb Case. Following his release, he withdrew completely from politics and dedicated himself to spiritual pursuits, eventually opening an ashram in Pondicherry (a former French colony on the Southeast coast of India) and developing the philosophy of Integral Yoga.

- ***Note: Datta-Ray gets the dates and certain aspects of Aurobindo's story incorrect, so I detailed the correct information above***
- In the 1940s, Datta-Ray's father used to travel to Pondicherry to visit Aurobindo's ashram
  - By the time his father became affiliated with Aurobindo's movement it was entirely spiritual, not political
- On August 15, 1946, Datta-Ray and his family were in Pondicherry because it was Aurobindo's birthday, one of the four times a year that he showed himself to his disciples
  - Coincided with August 16, 1946 - "Direct Action Day"
  - Direct Action Day, also known as the Great Calcutta Killings, was declared by the Muslim League to express their support for a Muslim homeland to be called Pakistan. Calcutta was a site of particular contention because it was a Muslim majority state (concentrated in East Bengal), the only one controlled by a Muslim League government. Calcutta, however, was Hindu majority. 3 days after Direct Action Day, an estimated 4,000 were dead and 100,000 homeless in Calcutta.
- His family arrived home to Calcutta by train on August 17, 1946 and "the city was like a battlefield"
  - From Howrah train station, he could hear the "Muslim war cries" of "Allahu Akbar" (God is Great)
  - They couldn't go home so they stayed at someone's flat in the train station compound and the next day his father arranged for them to have a military escort them home
  - "Remembered houses blackened, dead people lying on the pavement, vultures tearing them apart, and lots of slaughtered cows"
  - Remembered one particular man—a vulture "pulling out his entrails" and his suitcase lying opened and its contents all around him
- Does not remember feeling fear, but remembers the awful stench
  - His family was safe in their neighborhood
  - His father went out of the neighborhood to check and make sure their other relatives were safe (they were)
- These memories have affected him as a journalist and editor
  - when he has to decide whether to publish a story or not, he keeps in mind the implications and possibility of inciting religious violence both in India and when he lived in Singapore
  - Makes him more cautious in his decision to publish
- Partition was met with "great despair and dismay at home"

- His family originally was from East Bengal, which became East Pakistan and later, Bangladesh
- Eastern provinces of Bengal – middle class was Hindu and working class was Muslim, maybe 6 landowning Muslim families
- Lost their house and property to the Muslim family—but were not only upset about losing property, but losing their roots
- Following Partition in 1947, he saw waves of refugees coming in from East Bengal
  - Violence was concentrated at the border, but sporadic violence in Calcutta
  - When violence broke out at night his family would huddle and could hear “Allahu Akbar”
- He had relatives forced to evacuate Burma (at this time, all British India) before the Japanese invasion, but this was less of a refugee-situation and more like the government transferred them to Calcutta
  - They were well placed and not destitute
- Was in Calcutta until he was 16 and then went to Manchester University in England
  - Before going to England, he did 1 year at St. Xavier’s College in Calcutta
  - Returned to India at age 22 or 23
- England was “great”
  - The locals were welcoming and recognized he was there for study
  - Studied economics and then left a course to become a chartered accountant, taking a job with a newspaper in England
  - Would probably have stayed in India “forever” if *The Statesmen* (Calcutta) hadn’t made him an offer
- Before going to college, he hadn’t met Europeans (British) although his father had British business associates
- He had always liked writing and had only agreed to study chartered accountancy because it gave him the chance to go to England
- Worked for *The Statesmen* for 30 years
  - *The Statesmen* was the last British owned newspaper in India
  - Changed a lot because it fell into the hands of a swindler
- Before England, Datta-Ray didn’t “see Calcutta...didn’t experience Calcutta” because he was only 15
  - He was aware of European Calcutta “which was power and money” but had “no direct experience of it”
- After he came back in 1960, he was exposed to European Calcutta and Jewish Holocaust refugees in Calcutta
- In his great aunt’s house there was a set of ornate, inlay Chinese chairs that he was never allowed to sit on as a child
  - His mother’ cousin was gifted the chairs as a wedding present but they were eventually sold to the Traub family (of Flower Silliman’s interview)
  - When he was at George Traub’s house, he learned that when the chairs had been refurbished they were found to be stuffed with ancient Chinese manuscripts

- George Traub was his wife's dentist and he saw his mother, Rachel, around Calcutta
  - The Traubs had a house in Shillong "which was very unusual"
- The Traub's background was gossip in the bar at the Shillong Club
  - They called her "Jewess"
- Believes that the underlying reason for throwing the ruler at Justin Aaron was that "we had imbibed a lot of Anglo-Saxon attitudes about Jews"
  - The boys would tell Justin Aaron "don't be a Jew" and he would say "but I am a Jew." Justin's answer would cause Datta-Ray to be taken aback because he thought of Jews to mean something else
- This attitude towards Jews was pervasive within the Anglo-Indian community
- Nahoum, the last name of another Baghdadi Jewish student at Le Martiniere, did not attend the school's 15-minute morning Anglican service
  - "His Jewishness became apparent then"
- Datta-Ray's grandmother knew Sir David and Lady Ezra and attended Lady Ezra's "purdah parties" (for women only)
  - The Ezra family, part of the Baghdadi Jewish community, was one of Calcutta's most prominent and wealthy families. They were active in the import-export business and Calcutta's budding real estate market. When David Sassoon died in 1882 he was the largest property owner in the city.
  - The Ezras had a menagerie and the tortoise is still in the Calcutta zoo today
- In his grandmother's mind, the Ezras were no different from other English people in Calcutta
  - They were not English but identified with the English
  - He also knows Calcutta Jews who went to England and came back and have "become English Jews"
- He did not perceive the Traubs as English
  - Mrs. Traub had a thick European accent so she couldn't pass
  - She also looked Jewish
- Morris Shellim was a Calcutta doctor who had a collection of Victorian prints, paintings, furniture
  - Datta-Ray thought for a long time that he was English
  - Shellim was one of 4 European doctors who shared an office on Middleton Mansions—they were known as the "murderers of Middleton Mansions"
  - Later on his colleague, Ellis Abraham (a Baghdadi Jew), mentioned that he had grown up in Hong Kong with his mother and his mother's "female companion" Mrs. Shellim, Morris's mother
  - Only then did Datta-Ray realize that Morris was not English, but a Baghdadi Jew, and a poor Baghdadi Jew at that
- Morris had lived in London and learned to speak English like an Englishman
  - This was not uncommon
- Discusses Sally Solomon a Baghdadi Jewish author who had an Indian boyfriend in her teenage years
- Tibby Lantos was a Hungarian Jew and dermatologist in Calcutta

- Very effeminate and lived a bachelor's existence
- Involved in Calcutta's community theater
- He never spoke about fleeing Hungary – "life was a joke for him...even if he had horrendous experiences he wouldn't go into them"
- Jewish refugees he knew lived their whole lives in Calcutta as part of the white community
  - Until late 1960s Calcutta's commercial establishment was European (i.e. white)
  - Business was controlled by London-based "Managing Agencies" that each ran a number of companies across sectors
  - "managing agencies" controlled the Bengal Chamber of Commerce
- Calcutta was in limbo after independence – the Brits "had the upper hand"
  - Until 1961 or so, Indians weren't allowed to be members at the Calcutta Club
- 1967 the Naxalite Movement took off in Calcutta
  - Began when tea garden employees in Naxalbari, a village in West Bengal, went on strike, starting an uprising that led to the mobilization of a radical student movement in Calcutta through the early 1970s
  - Naxalites were affiliated with far-left, Maoist communism
- Massive strike among Presidency College students in Calcutta who voted for a leftist student government for the first time
  - Idealists were for a utopian communist society while some participants were just thugs
  - This was not an indigenous ideology of revolution but imported from Stalinism, etc.
- Datta-Ray does not remember any violence of great magnitude attributed to Naxalites, only sporadic stabbing
- Considers himself to be a left liberal
- He is officially retired as a journalist, but still writes columns
  - However, finds it more and more difficult to write because "India is collapsing all around you"
  - "India is not interested in the world"
- Used to tease Justin Aaron in school "Aaron, king of the Jews, sold his wife for a pair of shoes"
  - There was a second verse about him wanting his wife back when the shoes became old
  - He thought the rhyme was all in good fun
- One day, however, an Anglo-Indian, Christian teacher noticed that Justin wasn't in his usual seat and asked "where's our Hebrew prophet today?"
  - Datta-Ray "hadn't expected that from a teacher"
  - The teacher never expressed personal remarks to anyone else, so he was surprised
  - Reflected the Anglo-Indian/Englishmen's "instinctive feeling coming out"
- Some of the boys teased Datta-Ray for being a "Bengali Babu" but the teacher never would – this differed from Justin's treatment



- He attended Justin's birthday parties, where he saw Hebrew writing for the first time
- Justin's cousin, Gerry Gubbay, who rode a horse to school one day
- The Gubbays, a prominent Baghdadi Jewish family, had a house known as "the Bamboo Villa"
  - Today the income tax office is located there, and it's still called "Income Tax Bamboo Villa Circle"
  - One of his childhood memories is the "meticulous orderliness of that house...at 4:00 every afternoon, you would see white gloved servants pulling up the bamboo curtains from the long veranda" and then tea would be served