

Bivarani Recalls Famine and War in Bengal

by Lindsey Das

My grandmother is named Bivarani. In our household we call her “Tacoma,” the Bengali word for grandma. Tacoma was born in 1931 on the island of Sandeep in the Bay of Bengal. At the time it was part of the British colony of India. Today it is in the country of Bangladesh. Tacoma does not know the exact day or month of her birth because births were not registered at that time. Her father was the village doctor and her mother kept house. Tacoma has three brothers and one sister. Her sister was the oldest. On the island, her family was considered relatively wealthy. They owned their own land and had their own house. Her father had a respected position and reputation in village society.

As a child Tacoma attended primary school until the third grade where she learned to read and write. After Tacoma’s primary school education was completed at the age of eight she stayed home. Her parents did not see the point in sending their daughter on to higher education. As a child my grandmother led a privileged life. She did not have to learn how to cook, clean, or do any household chores because there were other people to take care of that. She spent her days playing with her cousins and female friends. They would play ball games and make believe. At night, her father would teach her how to count, add, and subtract.



Famine and War

The famine started in 1943. Tacoma describes it as a “terrible time.” The rice crop was diseased and the entire crop was destroyed. Great Britain was at war at the time and did not provide help. Thousands of people would go to a wedding or a funeral of a person they did not know just so they can get some kind of food to eat.

Although her family was well-off, they rationed what they had so they could share the food they bought with the entire village. Every day the family would put together packages to give to their neighbors. Her family and the village were amongst the lucky ones because three million people ended up dying of starvation and malnutrition.

Tacoma also recalls the day the war came to Bengal. She was playing in the yard and climbing a tree with her cousins when they heard a sound they had never heard before. It kept getting louder and louder. Her cousin on the ground told them to get out of the tree and run to the house, but they stayed in the tree. When they looked up they saw an airplane. It was the first time they had ever seen anything like this. Now they all ran into the house and hid in case it came back. The plane was part of the British airforce.

Independence and Partition

In 1947, India gained independence from Great Britain. The only catch was that instead of staying a united people, the two largest religious groups, Hindus and Muslims, decided they wanted their own countries. Bangladesh fell under the control of the Muslim country of East Pakistan. My family, which was Hindu, had always lived in harmony with their Muslim neighbors. After 1947, that harmony was shattered. Neighbors who had been like family to each other become enemies. There was rioting in the streets and an effort to drive all Hindus out of Bangladesh. Islamic extremists wanted Islamic law in Bangladesh and in order to accomplish this they wanted an all-Islamic population. Tacoma lost many family members in the riots of 1947 and she wondered if getting national independence was a good thing.

Eventually things began to calm down. In 1948, Tacoma got married at the age of seventeen. Her groom was twenty years her senior. He had been married to her cousin, but she died and left a young son behind. Two and half years later, Tacoma and her husband welcomed a son into the family. They went on to have a total of eight boys, although two died shortly after they were born for unknown reasons.

In 1989, Tacoma and her husband left the island of Sandeep for India. The river was rising and they were losing their home and their land. In India they had no home of their own and had to live with their daughter-in-law. They decided to move the United States temporarily, but it turned out they never returned to India or Bangladesh.