

Oral History Interview Transcript

Course Title: Energy in World Civilizations

Institution: University of Chicago

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Interview Date: May 11, 2024

Oral History: Tuhin Datta

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Date: 5/11/2024

Medium: Zoom Call

Square brackets signify translation from Bangla. Curly brackets signify words that have been kept in Bangla for effect. Parenthesis are words added to fix grammar and structure without altering meaning.

Ahan Datta: Describe the...So, when you were young, describe your village and how life was in terms of how you lived.

Tuhin Datta: Okay, in terms of what energy we used and how we lived, right?

Ahan: Right.

Tuhin: So that's part of the discussion we have. So, see, my childhood is around...it's in (the) 80's, right, 1980's. I was born around that time. So, in my area, native area, village, we (didn't) have any electricity. We (didn't) have any kind of a gas or something to cook (with). If you are talking about living, so, we (had) different things. In your life, aspects are different. Like for food, you need energy to cook. To live, say, you need kind of a light, right, in the nighttime, for studying and all those things, and you also need energy for the entertainment. [You need those things], so [regarding those things], first [let me discuss food].

[When we were in our] childhood, [there was] at that time, we (didn't) have anything other than wood, right. So, used to (be that) we (did) that cooking using wood, burning wood. So it went for some time, then gradually, [when I was just a little older, when I went to high school], at that time, we started using coal. With that, locally, we have back in India, another peculiar source of energy is cow dung. Might be you'll be...it's kind of funny, but people use it as a fuel, [meaning] an energy source. You can burn it, and it actually helps people. So, with coal and cow dung cakes, right, and a little bit of {jute} with oil mixed in. [For us], {chulo}, we call it {chulo}, so it's a, it's kind of a cooking area, means, where the burner is, right. [On that, we used to cook. My mom used to cook on that]. So that was there 'till my undergrad, so I'm talking about in the 90's. [In the 80's], probably wood and everything, and then gradually moved to coal for some years, probably 10, 15 years we used coal.

Then, because, see, India don't have that gas things, right, so they had to import everything, so it's very costly. And there are not much source to import that gas, so gradually they started digging things in the offshore, like Bombay high and all, and some of the states like Assam and all, they found some of the oil sources. So, they started digging and drilling, so by that they started sourcing things. So, gradually, people started using gas. [Now], slowly, slowing, in our, my area, everybody almost uses gas for cooking. [So this has been about the cooking].

Ahan: How do they get the gas? Do they go into town, or is there delivery for the gas? How do they get the gas?

Tuhin: Okay, so gas, there is no pipeline like here, right. Means, we have the pipes and you got connection at home. There, they use cylinder, so there (are) cylinders. Every household got (a) couple of cylinders, and in a cylinder, they get around 20 kg, 15 to 20 kgs of gas, kilograms, and that serves them for almost a month. Means, two cylinders (are) probably enough for a household to cook, for cooking. [So there was that gas]. That's how, right now, it's delivered. It remains same. They don't have any pipeline for gas and connect the house.

Ahan: You were speaking about how energy effected education and entertainment. Do you have anything else to say on that?

Tuhin: Yeah, I haven't came to that topic yet. So, just I'm telling you, means, whatever I explained is about food, preparing food, and basic needs. Now, it comes to education. So, in my childhood, we don't have electricity. Until my undergrad, there was no electricity in my house and in my area. So, for studying during the nighttime, you used to have these kerosene lamps, so that (was) the only source of energy, I would say, and light in the nighttime to study. And we usually finished our studies by 8:30, 9 PM, that's it, for one hour, two hours. That's how we (did). As we (didn't) have electricity, it all depends on nature. Means, you don't have any fan, or anything, or lightbulb. Nothing was there. It's all, during that time, we have to study using the kerosene lamps, and mostly, we are doing our studies during the daytime. In the early hours in the morning to the evening, that was the most productive time for us. Without that electricity, or any kind of energy, right, or battery power, or the generator, we don't have those things. We had to rely on sun, mostly, for our studies.

Then, in my undergrad, almost, in 90's, we got our first electricity connection, and then, it changed a lot. We can use the night, right. Now, means we can study a lot during the nighttime. It helped us, but as my habit grows, right, to use the daylight most, so it continues. Means, it never changed, mostly I use the daylight, and during the nighttime, it's mostly for me to take rest. So that's how the studies were impacted by this energy.

Ahan: Good. So, how... You said you continued this habit of working mostly in the day. Does that affect, did that affect your life when you moved, got energy, and moved out of India, or no?

Tuhin: See, I still believe if we use the daytime, our biological clock, it's meant to take rest during the nighttime and reboot, right. So that helped me a little bit to move with nature, right...so if you say that, like, moving out from India and all, it's not really that any way impacted, I would say. It's not that. It helped me to be more healthy, I would say. Because of that, I was forcefully...had to take rest in the night, so it helped in the health-wise, I would say.

Ahan: What was, this is a different topic, but what was transportation like when you were in school or in your undergrad later? How did you move from place to place?

Tuhin: Oh, that's a very interesting topic. So, from my house, my school is around 3 kilometers, around 2 miles you may say. We used to walk, during my basic school and during my high school, right. So we don't have any bus or anything, and after, probably in middle school, I got a

bicycle. So, I used to ride bicycle and go there, and after my high school, during my college days, I got a scooter¹, so that I usually (didn't) use it so frequently, but whenever it (was) need, whenever I (was) in a hurry, I used that scooter to go to college. Sometimes, it's not really regular, it's once in a blue moon you may say, so that was there.

Other transportations, say like, I used to have to visit, like, I used to go to my maternal uncle's place and all, right. Earlier, our train was in steam engine, so those steam boiler engines were there in 80's. Then, what happened, they gradually moved to diesel engine, which is less polluting, right, and then, nowadays, or probably I would say in 2000-, around one to ten, mostly things switched to electric-powered engines. So, train is really good on that, as well as in the bike or the scooters, I used to have the gas-powered scooters. Then, around 2010, we got this battery-powered scooter as well. We bought a battery powered scooter at that time. So that as well helped a little bit of the environment.

Ahan: Right. Do you think, otherwise, was this normal for other people? Did most other people use bicycle, or use bike, or use car? What was most common mode of transport?

Tuhin: Yeah, mostly in my high school, (most) people, I don't think anybody got scooter at that time. Mostly everybody used bicycle.

Ahan: Okay. And did this change in undergrad, or when you moved to work in other places?

Tuhin: Yeah, so once I completed my studies and started doing job, right, I moved around (to) different countries like Australia, then (the) U.S., and other countries as well. So what happened, gradually, when I (got a) job, I bought a car. That was definitely a gas-powered car. So that (was a) little bit of (a) luxury at that time. In a way, because of the traffic congestion and all, it's very difficult to use those cars, right, and, it's not really fuel efficient as well as, smoothing the life, because you have to wait long in the traffic congestion because of the narrow roads and too much of cars in the road.

Even though I had a car, most of the time, I used to (take) the public transport. It's more comfortable. You go there, you got an AC bus. Earlier, the buses are not AC, right, in my childhood. Probably, recent years, probably say 2010 onwards or so, things changed there. (Meaning) we got those AC Volvo bus. Those busses are very comfortable. You can use it. That helped, means, to the people. If you want some comfort, you can have those busses.

Ahan: How did this use of public transport change when you went to the U.S. or Australia? Did you use more? How did it change?

Tuhin: Come again?

Ahan: When you moved to Australia or the U.S., how did the use of public transport change, both for yourself and what you saw for people around you?

Tuhin: Okay. In Australia, it's, I would say from environmental perspective, it's better. They have really...I used to live in Perth, so we (had) really good bus transportation, they had. Busses are

¹ "Scooter" in this context refers to a gas-powered moped.

very frequent, and very comfortable too, so you got the AC busses, and you can have the monthly pass. You can use it (an) unlimited (amount). It's not really that expensive. You can use it all the time, right. It helps, so in Australia, it's good.

When I came to U.S., I lived in California as well as Ohio. In most of the places, you need to have your car, your own car. Without a car, you can't do anything here. It's kind of a lifeline. I am now totally dependent on my car. Means, without my car, probably, I think my life will be halted. Means, if I don't have a car, it's very difficult to live here. So, that's a really a big change for me, and the dependency on the vehicle, it's really kind of a, here, it's out of (the) way. I never thought about it, that my life will be like that. Without a car, I can't live.

Ahan: Do you think this car allows more freedom, or do you think it's more restricting that you have to maintain your own vehicle?

Tuhin: I would say it's both ways. It's a freedom one way, like if I want to go somewhere now, I don't need to depend on anything. I can just take my car keys and go, means start my journey, even (if) it's hundreds of miles. Might be that I can think about it and start moving. I don't need to go for an airport of something. Even though, say, I want to go (to) Kansas, or somewhere, it's a ten-hour drive. If I want, I can go, in emergency or any kind of a situation, if anybody calls me. That's really a big flexibility I would say.

At the same time, as there is no public transportation, it's kind of a, and this shopping malls and everything, it's not so near for us to go. You cannot go, walk, and go there. You have to have either a car or something, or truck, or anything, any of the vehicle, when you need to go, because there is no way you can reach there. I know there is some options like Uber, or any kind of a things are there, those apps, they are expensive too, but at the end of the day, you need a vehicle. So that's a restriction which sometimes bothers me.

Ahan: How...because of this restriction, has your perception of how far things are changed? For example, when you were in undergrad, was it a big journey to take a three-hours in train, versus now, is it a big journey to take three hours in drive.

Tuhin: Yeah, means definitely it's a comfortable thing. Means, you don't need to worry about going and look(ing) for the train schedule, and based on that, you need to plan accordingly, means your plan all depends on the train schedule, whereas if you have a car, you can start driving anytime. It's definitely a big flexibility, and it's comfortable too. I cannot deny on that.

Ahan: Okay, final topic. What was entertainment like in India, and how has it changed?

Tuhin: Okay, yeah. In my childhood, we didn't have any electricity, right. The entertainment was more of an, means, I would say manual, like these drama things and all. Sometimes, it happens, and those singing, and gathering, those things happens at my childhood times. It was more of an interactive, so lots of people gathered together, and it's a big social event. Now, with time, right, how it changed. As in my undergrad, the electricity came, so (the) first time I started using this electronic media, like television and all.

Television changed a lot. In India, probably, in 90's, they started having all the big television networks. They called it {Doordarshan}² and all. Those are the Indian government, the channels run by the Indian government. Those are the only television channels available at that time. Whatever shows they produced and telecast, right, those things you can only see at that time. Options are very limited. Though people are very interested in it, whatever the program comes. It's always a hit because they don't have any other choice.

Things changed with this globalization and (the) Open Door policy, so all the different media houses came, and thousands of television channels came. What happened, the entertainment part, where the social gatherings are big, and mostly depends on the individual capacity of the people, right, who can sing, dance, or do dramas, and all this stuff, so those things are really big at that time. With the advent of this television thing, and the mobile phone later on – I'll come to that mobile phone in my next discussion – for now, on the television, as well as cinema, right, cinema hall and everything.

Those things flourished in 90's, though the cinema halls are there from the beginning. People used to go to watch movies and all, and that was a big event for everybody. That was kind of a you can say recreational thing at that time: watching movies together. There (were a) few halls, movie halls, and everything, and this. Slowly what happened with these television things, right, slowly, slowly, those local arts and cultures (are) getting lost, I would say. Not really destroyed, but it's getting lost, because of the other things, more entertaining things you (can) always get. And it's a global thing, so (if) anything happens in U.S., you can see it in India, and (if) anything happens in India, you can see it here, right. You got (a) lot of options, so slowly, it probably killed the local talent.

At the same time, because of all this reality shows and everything, if people are interested, they have some kind of a platform to show their talent as well. But it's not like the social gathering and all. Those things (were) mostly lost over time. Though there (a) few things (that) happen. I'm not saying (it was) completely lost, but there was definitely that gel between the people, right. The gathering and all, the social interactions and all these things, those things are getting slowly, slowly, getting (fainter) I would say. Not really vanished, but it's definitely less nowadays.

And the entertainment introduction of these smartphones. That changed completely, I would say, people's lives. Right now, without these smartphones, and the dependance on the smartphone, right, even (if) I go to any vacation or anywhere, I always think in back of my mind, I had to always think about (the) backup of (the) power of this phone. If it dies, what (do I) do? Because it's completely dependent on the mobile phone. Any financial transaction, any communication, everything is on this single device. *Unintelligible*. Say I'm going for a vacation in India, and we have (different sockets) in India than in (the) U.S. The sockets are different, the sizes are different, electrical sockets and everything are. We need to always calculate that and estimate what are the energy needs for my mobile phone, what would be my power bank, what would be the capacity of all these things? If you are travelling, (you) need to make sure the

² One of the public service autonomous government-funded broadcasters of the time.

phone is always charged so I can communicate to the world. It probably changed...it's impact is...most impactful thing in my life (is) the mobile phone now.

Ahan: Okay, many things have changed with the phone and television. You can speak on this with education or anything generally, but what, if anything, has stayed the same from your childhood in terms of energy use in your life?

Tuhin: I think the transportation, I would say, nowadays though the battery-powered cars are coming up, but mostly over 50 years of my life, it's kind of the transportation is almost, remains the same, especially the busses. It's not changed at all, as well as these motorbikes, and all, those are not changed. Transport sector, nowadays it's kind of a changing a lot, with the introduction of the battery-cars and all, but so far, it's still dominant, those gas-powered cars and gas-powered busses are dominant. It's not changed. Other than that, I don't think anything continued from my childhood 'till (today). Energy needs kind of completely changed, I would say, and energy usage as well. So (many) transitions happened over 50 years.

Ahan: Final question, is there anything you want to talk about, discuss, or say that I have not asked you about?

Tuhin: No, I think we discussed about everything. Like the basic energy need for living, like food. Maybe we haven't discussed about the comfort, like the fan, AC, heat, and all these things, right. Nowadays, because of the global warming and all, in India, in my childhood, it was kind of a, not that we are dependent of the energy, because we (didn't) have even electricity, but we lived a good life without electricity. With time, the temperature rising, and all these extreme weathers happening, right now, nowadays only, it's around 110, 115 temperatures going in our native areas. It's kind of unbearable. People cannot go outside from 10 AM to 5 PM kind of a thing. There are restrictions. Most of the people are not going outside because of the extreme heat, right. So those things are changing a lot, as well as the energy need there. Most of the people are (getting) ACs, right. The fan, electric fans, are not sufficient nowadays, mostly, so people try to have ACs in our area.

In my life as well, say I moved to the U.S., right, and here, we have this HVAC, so the heat and AC system. Without that, we cannot survive here. So that (has) probably completely changed, but I never thought about (it). Even here, right now, it's little bit hot outside. It's nothing for me compared to India, right, but still, as I am habituated with the AC, if I go outside, I feel the heat. It's kind of a...definitely it changed a lot for myself, for my life. It's impactful because I am now habituated with these air conditioning and heating systems. Even (if) I go with my car, I turn on my AC right there, and it's very comfortable. At the same time, I am dependent on that. That part, I think we haven't discussed. That's the only thing.

Ahan: Okay, thank you. Very interesting interview, thank you for speaking with me. Any last comments, anything, or is this okay?

Tuhin: Yeah, I'm good. Thanks for asking all this. I enjoyed the interview, thank you.