

# The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

DAILY STAR: Let's start at the beginning. Do you have any memories of our War of Liberation?

MARK TULLY: Well, there is something funny about the War of Liberation. Whenever I go anywhere in Bangladesh, people always say, 'We owe you so much for what you did for us during the liberation war'. But I spent most of the war sitting in London, and I always say to these people, 'You are the ones to whom Bangladesh owes its freedom, you fought and we only reported'.

And actually, most of my time during the liberation war was spent in London as the BBC's chief commentator on the subcontinent. But of course, a lot of the commentaries was done on the war.

I came here in the middle of the liberation struggle for several weeks — I don't remember for how long — and from here I went to Pakistan. I was in one of the first groups of journalists who were allowed to come independently.

If you remember, first of all no journalists were allowed to come in at all, then some journalists were allowed in with escorts, and finally journalists were allowed in independently, without escorts. I was in that unescorted group, but I can't remember the exact date or month.

I managed to travel around quite a bit. I remember vividly a rude conversation I had with some Pakistanis once.

I was smoking a biri, and you know, the Bangladeshi biris were longer than the Pakistani ones which caused the problem. These Pakistani plainclothesmen standing nearby were saying to each other that I was some hippy, and that perhaps I was smoking ganja. I heard them saying this, but they didn't know I understood Urdu. They were debating whether to arrest me or not.

I was so angry, that I went over to them and said, 'You people are so ignorant about this country which you claim is part of your country, that you don't even recognise a biri because it happens to be different to the biris you have in Punjab'.

They were shattered! And I just walked away. I'll always remember that.

I remember another incident. We were taking photographs in a Hindu bazaar area in Shakhari Patti. Then some Punjab policemen arrested us and took us to a police station — Kotwali, I think it was.

I told them that we were told by the authorities we could go anywhere we liked. Then a Bengalee officer came, and I told him that if he let me out I could prove that. So, he let me out and I said to the Bengalee sub-inspector that the people arrested with me were innocent, because all of us had been told we could go wherever we liked.

Then the Bengalee officer looked a bit worried, and he said he remembered seeing something like that in a gazette or some police order. So he got out this bundle of paper, went through them, and there it was, in writing.

Then he turned to the Pakistani policemen and said, 'You people, you come over to our country and you don't even get yourselves properly briefed; you don't even know what your own government is telling you to do, and then you land us in trouble with gentlemen like this, and you make us look bad, and you are spoiling our whole country! And all the rest of it.'

The Pakistanis scampered off the police station in a real hurry, and the three of us came out, drank tea and went back to our hotel.

What struck me was the ignorance of people who came from West Pakistan, about the east wing of the country and about what they were actually supposed to be doing.

Another thing that struck me very much was the road from the other side of Aricha ghat towards Rajshahi. I was struck by the way tanks had just blasted both sides of the road. They had obviously driven up that road virtually firing on both sides. Houses and whole villages on either side were devastated.

Another thing I was struck by, funny enough, was the difference between the Pakistanis at the top and junior levels of command.

At the junior level, they were rude and ignorant about this part of the world. But at the top, they were very suave and gentlemanly. People like General Rao Farman Ali were excellent briefers of the press. They could present their case very well, in stark contrast to

## Conversation

# 'The West Doesn't Know the Answer to Bangladesh's Problems'

Mark Tully is a reporter who fell so much in love with his subject that he opted to make it his life's passion. For the last twenty years — almost — he has been covering South Asia as BBC's correspondent based in New Delhi. During this period — that includes such momentous events as the birth of Bangladesh, hanging of Bhutto, assassination of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, the demise and re-birth of democracy in Bangladesh, the Tamil uprising and Indian misadventure in Sri Lanka, coming of democracy in Nepal — through his in-depth coverage and incisive analysis, of complex political and social issues, Mark Tully has become the most trusted name as a foreign correspondent of any news organisation. It is perhaps due mainly to Mark Tully, ably assisted by his many distinguished colleagues that BBC is the news sources that most people turn to in our part of the world. Mahfuz Anam and Sabir Mustafa of The Daily Star interviewed Mr. Tully, who is almost an institution as a reporter, during his recent visit to Bangladesh in connection with the filming of BBC's documentary on "Twenty Years of Bangladesh".

the junior officers who were basically crude and ignorant.

DS: Did you get the impression that the Pakistan army was a foreign army of occupation?

MT: Oh, absolutely. There is no doubt about that. Armies are no good at winning the hearts and minds of the people.

In India, I remember after Operation Blue Star (when the Indian army stormed the Golden Temple at Amritsar in 1984 to flush out Sikh terrorists), I asked an army officer why ordinary pilgrims staying at the hostels were also tied up.

I said to the officer, 'They are your own people, they are not enemies of the country, they are Sikhs, that's all.'

And the officer replied, 'I know'. But the problem, as he said, was that all armies are taught how to fight an enemy. They are not taught or told that this time half or some of these guys are really your friends. They are told Dushman ko akraman karo, or Hamla karo.

If your average jawan or havildar or subedar major captures someone, then he is a Prisoner of War. And the rule with PoWs is that you stop them escaping, and one way of stopping them escape is to tie their hands behind their backs.

DS: Did you at any point in time, while covering the liberation war from London, feel that the independence of Bangladesh was an inevitable thing?

MT: After I left here, having seen what the Pakistan army was doing, I became convinced that there was no way East and West Pakistan could live in peace together. Now, it was difficult to put a time-frame on when that would evolve into total separation.

Also it became increasingly clear that India was preparing to go to war. When I interviewed Mrs. Indira Gandhi during a diplomatic mission which was seen as a last ditch attempt to make people stop what's been going on, it was quite clear that if the mission did not succeed there would be a war between India and Pakistan.

And very fortunately for India in some ways that Pakistan actually started the war by that pre-emptive raid (on Indian air force bases). So, it was very lucky for India that that had happened, because I'm damn sure that they were going to go to war at some stage or another anyhow.

It is now known in India that Mrs. Gandhi wanted to go to war earlier, much earlier. And some people in the army said she could do so. But others, more sane voices said 'no, we must not rush into this thing, we must get everything just right'. That was why the move was delayed.

DS: What was the role of international powers like China, the Soviet Union, the United States...

MT: One of the most crucial things for India was the signing of the treaty of friendship with the USSR, because that gave India a backup. India hoped the treaty would give the guarantee that would stop China or the US from directly intervening. But America moved its fleet close to the battleships and remained almost consistently in favour of Yahya Khan. As a result, America lost influence with

India for quite sometime.

I don't think India expected anything from China other than what China did. It has always been in India's calculations that China would basically be hostile.

DS: Coming on to the present, what is the film, which you made for BBC TV, on Bangladesh about?

MT: You see, I've always been very fond of this country, and I wanted to make some sort of film on this 20th anniversary (of Bangladesh's independence). But you can't just go along and make a film saying how nice a country Bangladesh is, a touristy or pop-history type of film. Or at least we wouldn't like to do that at the BBC! The BBC is going through a phase where it tries to be more intellectual and thoughtful in its reporting, and not just report news but also trying to give interpretation.

So if we were going to do a 40-minute current affairs programme, we needed to have a theme and interpretation. Now, it seemed to me that, at this time especially when you are 20 years old, when communism is in deep trouble, if not collapsed, when there is an atmosphere of triumphalism in the West, that it was an excellent idea to take this chance and look at Bangladesh.

It would be disastrous if the world fell totally into the hands of Western thinking. What I tried to show in this film was the mistakes many of the aid donors made in dealing with Bangladesh, mistakes which many of them now do realise and are themselves trying to change. The film in fact discussed the whole problem of aid, and whether the West really has any solution for the poorer countries of the world.

What the film tries to show is that the West does not know the answers to the problems of Bangladesh; that the poor record of aid proves that. Therefore the West should be damn careful about its triumphal attitude, and it itself is not omniscient or all-wise. That's a sort of sub-theme of the film.

More than anything else, the film is about how aid has helped this country or not helped this country; whether Bangladesh would have been better if, firstly, aid donors had tried not to interfere so much with policy decisions, which they still try to do, like insisting on privatisation, and secondly, whether Bangladesh might not have been a better country if it had not had so much aid, because that would have forced Bangladesh to go for internal resource mobilisation.

Part of the trouble with aid for Bangladesh is that it provides a soft option. It has enabled this country to avoid having to take the hard decisions and hard options.

The World Bank is talking about privatisation, which is another thing we tried to bring out in the film. Privatisation depends entirely on having a decent private sector to which you can privatise. Now, Zia handed over the jute and cotton-textiles mills that went bust; Ershad went in for privatisation and again you ended up with a huge long list of defaulters at the banks. So, where is this private sector?

The private sector isn't a whole lot of individuals sitting there and saying 'I want some money so that I can start a little factory'. The private sector ought to be properly organised small industries managed by professional people, and of course, big corporations with

share-holders, boards of management, annual reports, full and proper discipline. To say that you are going to privatise when what you really mean is you are going to hand out loans to every Tom, Dick and Harry who comes along and says, 'I can do this or I can do that', and that sort of thing, then that's really no privatisation.

Now, the irony which we tried to bring out in this film was that one could argue that one of the reasons why there is no private sector is because of the aid system.

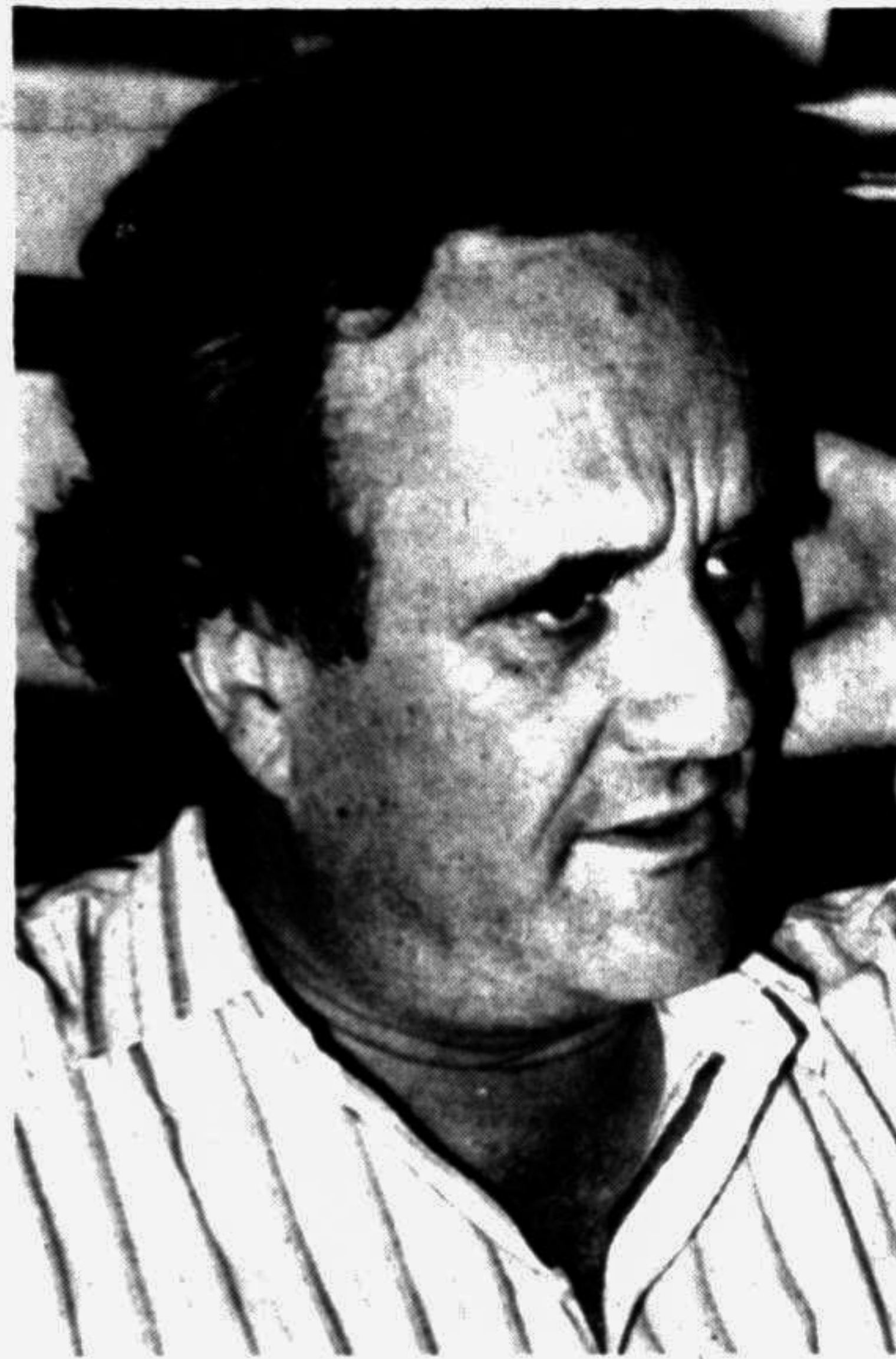
Aid has in many ways stopped the private sector from coming up, by bringing in imported goods. But more importantly, aid has created a new class of businessmen, contractors or dalals. As a result, the entrepreneurial effort in this country, instead of go-

problems.

Then we went to the Grameen Bank, which is one success story, by Bangladeshis and for Bangladeshis. You look at their recovery of loans, and compare that to the Shilpa Bank which has taken all this money from the donors to dish out and ended up with a long defaulters list.

Then we looked at this big flood action plan, to point out that for 20 years donors had been rushing in when floods had been taking place. But this was the first time they sat down together and said we must do something to prevent this.

But again, the World Bank is saying that the great achievement of Bangladesh in increasing food production was through privatisation, but privatisation has hardly started.



Mark Tully: 'I've always been very fond of this country.' —Star Photo

ing towards setting up enterprises, has gone into buying foreign contracts and doing dalali between aid donors, the government and companies.

So, the very thing the World Bank wants to create or hand over things to i.e. the private sector, is non-existent partly because of all the aid that has flown into this country.

DS: To prove this point, which particular areas did you focus on?

MT: Basically, what we did was we investigated one who had had loans. We went to see a government diesel factory and spoke to the man who made diesel engines on government commission. But he said he couldn't compete because the World Bank, which provided the money, had a phrase in its document which said that nothing could be distributed through the public sector. So he says, 'How can I distribute my engines or compete?' That's one angle.

Then there is the drive by the present government, which has realised the need for internal resource mobilisation. Then there are the aid agencies themselves, of course, and we talked to the World Bank about one or two

have, and how much of it has been surrendered to the aid donors.

DS: Perhaps it is not fair to make villains out of donors, because we are all groping for answers.

MT: I don't want to make villains out of donors. What I intended to say was that we in the West do not have an answer to everyone's problem. I think many people in the West behave as though they do, and quite often donors do that. My only point is that, in the end, it is upto Bangladesh to look at its own problems and decide what help it needs and get that, or try to get that.

DS: But perhaps another reason why historically donors became so decisive, was the nature of governments in Bangladesh itself. With the government of Hussain Muhammad Ershad, for instance, more and more people preferred that the donors bypassed the government and dealt directly with non-government organisations. The nature of the government inadvertently strengthened the hand of the donors.

MT: Oh, I'm certainly sure there was that, especially with the political instability until the last election. But we still don't know how stable the new government is going to be.

And there is another great problem, and it is that you run down whichever government is in power. I was joking the other day while driving past the airport that, hardly has the prime minister been sworn-in before he or she has become the worst prime minister Bangladesh has ever known! You are incredibly critical of your governments. You don't give them a chance. You can't have a democratic system of government where people are not prepared to allow a government to run its course.

Under a democratic system, no government is going to last forever. But once you have chosen a government, you must allow it reasonable time to work and get over the problems it may encounter. And also very importantly, it must be allowed to put right the mistakes it might have made.

DS: How does your home beat, India, look now?

MT: India has a lot of troubles.

India is changing a lot now. The death of Rajiv Gandhi was a major political event and a tragedy. It means that in the absolutely immediate future, as possibly in the long-term future, it is the end of the Nehru dynasty. It has already meant some major changes, as the prime minister, Narasimha Rao, is operating in ways very different to the Nehrus. He is much more low-key, much more consultative, and works for consensus much more.

If the Congress party is to survive, it has to be a party of consensus, generally a democratic party, a party which has a strong say. And if there is no reversion to the tradition of dynasty, then I think this may happen.

There are many people in India looking carefully at the scenario. There are not many direct parallels with the Soviet Union, because India is not an empire, but the Soviet Union was. There is a certain thing as Indian-ness. There is a joint market feature. There is, apart from states in the periphery, no desire to break-up the unity of India.

So in many ways it is dissimilar to the Soviet Union.

but in one way it is similar, in that it had a decrepit bureaucracy which tended to run an over-centralised administration. That I think is the lesson for India from the Soviet experience. If India is really going to progress it has to devolve more, lot more powers to the states, and the centre has to become the model of a genuine federal state with much restricted powers.

Therefore, like in all federal states, the chief minister should be as important — more important — a person in his state than the prime minister of the country. I think many people in India are now thinking along those lines.

I think if you get greater democracy within political parties, then you will get greater demands within political parties for decentralisation as well.

There is a great debate, a tremendous debate going on in India at the moment, and I know which side I'm on, though I don't expect they will win. They are those who are very doubtful about the Western consumerist answer for India. These are people who feel that consumerism will create an enormous political tension in a country of such differences, and run the risk of the 'haves' having more and the 'have-nots' getting more and more frustrated, and therefore more and more turbulent and therefore bigger and bigger a threat to law and order.

But fundamentally, which I think are the biggest challenge facing India and which have not been dealt with, are the institutions left behind by the British.

Government ministries are really beginning to fall apart at the seams now. The judicial system, the administrative system are all beginning to crumble. Again, I think India will have to, at last, be serious about an administrative structure, indeed a political structure, which are necessary to run a modern country.

Take this example, which applies to Bangladesh as well. You see the way the Indian and Bangladeshi police forces behave. If your grandfather was a policeman, or even your father, he would say that there is no difference in the attitude of the police force towards the people they are meant to be serving and administering, between the colonial days and now. I think that has to stop in India, and I'm sure it has to stop in Bangladesh. You have to get administrative systems which are responsive to the needs of the people.

There is one old thing still in India and Bangladesh. You go to a district town, which is a shambles, but the one bit of the town that is well looked after is where you will find the DC, the PWD engineer, the SP of police, all in their little colony, all playing bridge with one another at night or whatever it is that they do. And none of them have an attitude of service towards the community in which they live, and none of them is evinced with the attitude. After all, if you live in the middle of a town as a member of the citizenry, then you will have a deep, personal interest in the upkeep of the town like having the drains in working conditions, adequate public transport etc.

But they don't live in the centre of town. They have their little compounds on the outskirts, well-insulated from the problems of the townspeople. So, they don't have any sense of belonging towards the community. But especially because, after you get posted, if

you don't like the place and you find it nasty, you probably can get yourselves posted somewhere else in six months to a year.

DS: So, what you are basically saying is that 44 years of democracy in India has not really filtered down...

MT: Yes, that's right to an extent. This is an interesting thing about this part of the world — India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka. Time and time again, its been in and out: should we want democracy, or we want democracy. The last elections in Bangladesh was all about 'we want democracy'. There is hardly anything in this country about what you can do with that democracy or how you are going to build up the institutions to preserve that democracy.

Democracy does not come just by holding movements and elections, does it?

That is the way to discredit democracy actually. And there is another thing. When in opposition, if you are going to spend your time trying to destabilise the government by holding movements and that sort of thing, then you are going to pay a price when you come to power, because your opponents are going to do exactly the same thing to you, and people are going to be used to that sort of thing. It's a hopeless cycle.

DS: Comparing Bangladesh and Pakistan, which have had long periods of military rule and failed to reform colonial systems of administration, with India which despite 44 years of democracy still has the same problems of outdated bureaucracy and police, would you say democracy has failed in India?

MT: I wouldn't be so extreme. Democracy hasn't failed in India because it has manifestly survived. One of India's greatest strengths is that it is a very free country. You go there and you can say what you like, you can do almost anything you like, some would say that it is too free. So you cannot say democracy has failed. But one of the failures of democracy has been to construct and keep nurturing and reforming institutions that are suitable to democracy.

DS: Although you have said that the tragic death of Rajiv Gandhi was also an opportunity for India's Congress Party to be more democratic. Judging by the member of people still lobbying for Sonia, do you think the dynasty has really departed?

MT: Well, what you have to realise is that the dynastic system practised by the Gandhis spawned a whole lot of ruthless beneficiaries. Now, one of aspects of that dynasty was that you surrounded yourself with people who were dependent on you and who benefited from you. So obviously, those people are going to go and see Sonia Gandhi or anybody else they can in the hope of reviving the dynasty. Even Narasimha Rao himself has said that if she wanted to enter politics, he was sure she would take the right decision and he wouldn't stop her. So no one in Congress can afford to say that Sonia shouldn't come into politics. And there is an obvious reason for that.

But underneath all that, there is still a political battle being fought to keep her out by some people, and then it is very much upto her what she wants to do.

DS: How do you rate Narasimha Rao?

MT: Well, I wouldn't rate anyone at this stage of the game. If you remember, there was such a sense of relief in 1980 when Mrs. Gandhi came back to power, but she was in such a mess by 1984. And then Rajiv Gandhi enjoyed a tremendous honeymoon period, but then he went out like a damp squib in 1989. So, all I would say about Narasimha Rao is that he has handled himself with great skill. But it is still much too early.

DS: How you think he is going to finish his full term?

MT: You just can't tell at this point. But the odds must be on a mid-term election. If he starts to do well, he may want to cash in on it; or if he is doing badly, then the opposition may seize the chance.

Rao has no firm block of support, the only guarantee he feels he has is that nobody