

Some Reflections on the Shattering Events of the Past Week

WITH the shattering events of the past 12 days casting a deep shadow over our feelings, it is difficult, almost impossible, for a writer to focus his mind on any subject other than what has been happening in our region, the madness of communal frenzy sweeping through India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

May be the worst is behind us and soon we will be able to get on with our lives, nursing our bruised souls. Then, we will start rationalising our failures, putting them in our favourite "historical context" and indulging in mutual recriminations. In fact, when it comes to blaming the so-called other side — whether it is a political party, government or a country — the exercise is already on, in full swing. We are thus spared from making one simple admission, in Bangla, Hindi, Urdu or English, "Let's face it. It has been our shared failure. Now, let's see what we can do together to set things right."

To issue such a simple statement may cost votes in the next election or make the leadership of a political party (or the head of a government) look weak before its supporters. Here, resolving a moral dilemma, through an admission of shared failure, is unnecessary, especially when it is weighed against the prospect of making a political gain even out of an ugly situation.

We have no doubt that this is the way most politicians in the three countries saw their roles during the crisis last week when millions of people in South Asia spent sleepless nights in fear for their lives, watched their places of worship being demolished, saw their homes being ransacked.

No one would suggest that most of these politicians did not want the end of this communal frenzy. But they just did not know how to discard their political inhibitions and their partisan approaches to serve a national, humanitarian cause.

This explains why in none of the three countries, we saw all-party peace processions — all-party minus the communal bodies — parading the streets, calling for harmony and peace among all their peoples. Now, looking back, one wonders if it was all that complicated for, say, the Secretary General of Awami League, Zillur Rahman to phone his counterpart in the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Abdus Salam Talukder and say, "Barrister Sahib, the situation has become critical. Let us go out on the street and have a joint peace procession. It will mean a lot for our people."

I assume, the AL leader could not suggest such a move for any or all of these reasons: First, if the joint moves helped in bringing the situation under control, the government would take all the credit; secondly, in her present belligerent mood, Hasina would not hear of a joint peace procession with the ruling party; and thirdly, there wasn't much time to hold a

meeting of the AL central committee to discuss the proposal.

Similarly, we can only guess why Talukder would have perhaps reacted negatively, certainly without much enthusiasm, if Rahman, at a moment of sudden inspiration, had indeed made the proposal for a joint peace procession.

Despite my naivety where politics is concerned, I remain convinced that a joint all-party — yes, minus communal bodies — peace procession would have certainly helped at the most critical hour. We mentioned this idea in one of our recent editorials in which we also commended Sheikh Hasina for asking her fellow party leaders to go back to their constituencies to help in maintaining communal peace. Then, when asked on long-distance phone on Tuesday night by the Bangla service of a well-known radio station in an European country what the political parties

could do in Bangladesh to help in the restoration of communal harmony, my response came promptly. "For one thing, a series of all-party peace processions all over the country."

I wonder if Rahman, Talukder and Co. had the opportunity of hearing my suggestion via a foreign radio station thousands of miles away, even if they do not get the time in their leisurely Friday morning of reading this column. May be I should put a headline to this piece that immediately catches their notice. How about "A Confidential Note to Salam Talukder and Zillur Rahman"?

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

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TO my generation of journalists, writers and members of various professions who saw the "Great Calcutta Killing" in 1946, as the *Statesman* called it, the first outburst of communal frenzy in my personal experience, and later watched a number of smaller but no less traumatic riots in the then East Pakistan, the immediate question is, why have we apparently learnt so little about dealing with the menace of communalism in the past 45 years? Why is it that politicians in non-communal organisations take the same cautious and ambivalent position on how to fight this problem as those of the earlier generation? Why is it that even at the worst moment of a crisis, they count their political gains and losses before deciding on how to handle the situation? Again, one wonders if there has been

some time in the late sixties, Nanporia, a Parsi by religion, talked a great deal about the rise of Hindu rightwing fundamentalism within a decade or so. If I remember correctly, he attributed this phenomenon to three reasons. First, the unspecified number of conservative Hindus in northern India were yet to come to terms with their country's commitment to secularism. Secondly, too many in the majority community felt strongly that while New Delhi had gone out of its way to make concessions to Muslims, Hindus did not get their due share in neighbouring Pakistan and that, as Nanporia himself conceded, that there was a case for ac-

cording a bit more importance to Hinduism, even within the country's secular framework. Last but not the least, there was a total lack of political education for the post-independence Generation of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and of other religions, with the result that driven by their frustration in socio-economic fields, they fell victims to one form of religious obscurantism or another. So, many young Hindus felt attracted to *Ram Rajya* just as millions of Muslims sought their salvation in Islamic fundamentalism. For this, the Indian journalist blamed the major political parties in his country, especially the Congress and left-leaning groupings, who treated secularism purely in emotional terms rather than in a political commitment. Then, what should an average Indian mean by secularism in his country's socio-cultural structure? Nanporia had asked. After all, the Webster Dictionary which defines secularism as "indifference to or rejection or exclusion of religion and religious consideration" does turn a laudable concept into a controversial one. Not surprisingly, a group of scholars have said that instead of secularism, we should be talking of a political system that treats all the citizens in the country on the basis of total equality, without making a distinction among them on the ground of religion, provides them full religious and cultural freedoms and ensure that no particular faith is accorded a special place in its administrative and political structure.

When it comes to political education of our young generation, the need here, in Bangladesh, may well be as great and immediate as in India. Through such an education, incorporated in classroom lectures and text books, we may one day succeed in making our post-liberation young men and women accept the fact that if anti-semitism or any form of racism is immoral, so is communalism and that it is wrong to treat any section of citizens of a country as a minority on religious grounds. For this kind of political education, time may be running out.

More than 20 years after Nanporia and I had this illuminating but a somewhat disturbing talk in Bangkok, I have just read a superb piece by the noted Bengali writer, Annada Shankar Roy on the demolition of the Babri Masjid, reproduced on the front page by an esteemed contemporary, *Banglabazar Patrika*. Roy who must be now past 80 approaches this question of political education for our young generation from another perspective. Towards the end of his article, he says, "We have given the right to vote to our 18-year old youngsters but we have not taught them the difference between history and mythology... We must tell our Hindu voters that Sri Ramchandra is not a historical figure and that Ayodhya of Ramayana is not Ayodhya of the disputed territory."

Then my weekend house guest in Bangkok

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Poems of Seventyone: Recollections Ninetytwo

by Tarikul Alam

ONE I do write Inspire I am under fright.	FOUR Do not pretend It does not pay, How can you prevent the unbound sun-ray?
TWO Suffocated, Music mutilated But mind undaunted.	FIVE Often told Life no longer warm but cold cold, Behold: for truth is not yet told.
THREE How many more Death will pour? Could care less for I am not alone anymore.	

The Return

by Hubert Francis Sarkar

Your enlightened off-springs will return, Ma.
One day you will hear those gypsies' voice.
Then you rejoice —
Amidst hand-clappings, heart-throbbing and jublations you rejoice.

As I believe,
The combatants will be back.
And, our prolonged slavery will be over.
Those free-and-frank hearts will endure —
Those human prime-movers.

Now, in uncertainties and insecurities
Our hours of exasperation drag on —
Now, we are used and abused like anything. We
Just give up everything to chance-seeking top-notchers' glee.

Time breaks all these bondages, I believe. Heroes of our time
Will be back:
Like angels, they will come and throw off all backpack.

Now, as they break a great many shackles,
As they surpass all frontiers
They serve the message. We see the ripples, the wings of a nymph.
Then nymphs gather, the nymphs move forth, the nymphs never limp.

Your enlightened off-springs will return, Ma...
One day you will hear those gypsies' voice.
Then you rejoice —
Amidst hand-clappings, heart-throbbing and jublations, you rejoice.

SEVENTH-GRADE students at Calabar High School for boys, on the outskirts of Kingston, Jamaica, are in for a shock when they turn up for their first Drama class. Expecting to horse around and play make-believe, they are confronted with some of the realities of their lives — including their nascent sexuality.

At Calabar, Drama is a required course for seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grades, boys aged 10-15 years. Another 100 of the school's 1,700 boys participated in extra-curricular

Stage Fright

by Abid Aslam

gold medals and six national awards for the Jamaica Festival Commission, for its 1991 national schools' festival production of "Ghetto Child", a play written by Cecile Dixon, who also teaches Drama, and directed by Matthie.

There is more at stake than awards. Some 57.8 per cent of males report having their first

He gets a gun. Miguel, the eldest child and family idol, finds Junior with the gun and tries to wrestle it away from him. The gun goes off in the struggle, killing Miguel. Junior's father returns to console the family, and sees his sixth child for the first time — sees in the little boy the hope of replacing Miguel.

"Many topics in the boys' lives emerge during drama sessions. We discuss them in terms of cause and effect, problems and their solutions. Then we incorporate them into our plays" and other dramatic forms, including monologues, speech choirs, and dance.

Such topics include anger, alienation, and vengeance, which form the basis of "Trapped," a play about the spiritual struggles of a young man sent to prison for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Sex was the subject of a

10 girls and one in 10 boys used contraception the first time they had sexual intercourse.

In their skit, the Calabar boys made these recommendations:

First, teachers should not think of their students as pervers for asking questions about sex and sexuality; the boys are simply not educated at home.

Second, teachers should be thick-skinned about awkward questions. As one student put it: "If I ask the teacher, 'What's a period, Miss?', she shouldn't take it personally. It's just a question."

Third, teachers should speak their students' language. Matthie explains: "Normally, boys don't discuss sex in biological terms. They are not accustomed to words like penis and vagina, which make them uncomfortable and can be disruptive in class. The words they are used to are more acceptable, words like cock, wood, or long John, or even teapot. Many parents use this word at home when the boys are small."

Sex education is not on the class timetable at Calabar, but is offered by the school's female guidance counsellor. Many other schools provide some form of family life or sex education in this way. There is no mandatory national curriculum, so not all of these schools provide information on contraception and safe sex. There has been talk in official circles about making family life education compulsory, however.

Many teachers are uncomfortable about the prospect of having to answer questions about sexuality in class, Matthie says, adding that sex education can make it tough for them to maintain control.

Matthie smiles for a moment. "Students test you as teachers," she says. "If you can't hold your ground, especially on issues like these, you get nothing worthwhile from them."

By arrangement with the UNEPA magazine POPULI which the writer Abid Aslam edits.

number of skits produced and performed by Calabar students during family planning week last October. In one skit, the boys made recommendations on how best to conduct sex education. The significance of their effort is underscored by the National Family Planning Board's survey report, which states: "A greater proportion of females used contraception at first intercourse if they had sex education in school and discussion of contraceptive methods was part of the course. For males, having sex education seemed to make little difference in whether they used contraception or not." The report adds that four in

sexual experience before they were 14 years old, according to the findings of the 1987 Young Adult Reproductive Health Survey conducted by the National Family Planning Board, a government-funded independent statutory body. The average age at first intercourse for males is 14.3 years. One in four births is to a teenage mother, according to official figures.

"Ghetto Child" is about a boy named Junior, whose father abandons the family in its crowded tenement home when Junior's mother gives birth to an unwanted sixth child. Junior wanders out of the ghetto, and resorts to stealing.

passed by. My Khalu asked the family members to leave as the situation turned grave. Uncertainty clouded the political movement and the War of Liberation.

In December 1971, nine days before Victory, came a van. Strange people in strange clothes poured into the house picked up my Khalu and his brother in law and left. The whole "operation" lasted only a few seconds. All but my Khalu knew that was the LAST she was seeing of him... her beloved husband. The man who had conquered the hearts of the poor as much as the rich, was the only man known to me who did not believe in taking 'rest' while his patients suffered with 'tooth aches.' He

believed any person on whom Allah has put the responsibility of taking care of the suffering masses had been gifted with the greatest task — freeing the needy from pain, no matter what time of the day or night it was. The poor never had to pay anything for their treatment. The rich generously paid him for his magnificent performance — his dedication to his profession and his behaviour so 'artful' that even the envious of envious affluents would bow their heads in shame. No human on this earth could 'live' and not be a 'saint'. My Khalu never returned.

Today if any one possessing a 'good' heart landed at the Chittagong Railway station and asked to go to Dr Shaif, several hundred rickshaw pullers would jump. For to them, Dr Shaif is still alive.



Dhaka street scene

Sketch by: Jeremy Trainor

St Gregory's — a Portrait of Glory

Continued from page 11

first "Gregorian" came out in 1933. The present "hostel building" went up in 1931. In 1936 the school had one student snare the First Place in the City Examinations, beginning a long list of merits to extend over the years. Bro. Walter went home to die. In 1938 Bro. John Heim, a dynamic and friendly Headmaster, died in Shilong from Blackwater Fever. Bro. Bernardine then became headmaster in 1939.

From 1940 to 1950, a third eminent educationist became Headmaster, Bro. Jude; during difficult times. Brother gained the highest reputation for the school by his infinite patience and devotion to duty. Our boys took the First to the Tenth Places time and again. He maintained a 90% and better average on all Exams. Like Bro. Walter, he endeared himself to all.

The Years 1947 and onward were perilous years. In an emergency, St. Greg's opened its doors to offer space to Collegiate School. Notre Dame College began here as St. Gregory's College. To offer opportunity to students pouring into the country and whose mother tongue was not Bengali, English Medium was started. It ran parallel to the Bengali Medium sections. The immediate rise in standards was proved by our boys winning in exams, in debating an oratory, and in dramatics.

Under Brother James, from 1950 to 1955 St. Gregory's experienced its Golden Era. Education authorities urged increased enrollment and this encouraged many enterprising boys to add lustre to their Alma Mater. Mr. Nicholas Rozario, returned with his cubs winning the First Prize in Chittagong. In 1954 six rooms were added on the roof to house the Brothers. On July 17th, our team won the City Football Championship.

In 1955 the school enjoyed peace and progress. How blessed the school has been with teachers of the highest calibre: Bros. Martinian, Thomas More, Fulgence, John, Peter Nolasco; Mr. B. C. Choudhury, Mr. P. C. Sarker, Mr. Peter Costa, Mr. Nalini Sarker and Mr. Ganguly. In the years of Bro. Bames' administration, we had an excellent administrator and a literary genius as well. He has published several books, most notably and entirely new and pleasant format of Tagore's "Geetanjali".

Brother Bames humbly stated, "A father tries to educate his son more than he himself has been educated; so I tried to educate my boys to the best possible limit, and prepare for the best which I could not achieve".

Bro. Martinian was headmaster in 1956. Bros. Peter

Nolasco, Eligius, Beville and Donald Allen were with him. For the first time, the school became a matriculation center.

From 1957 to 1962, Bro. Fulgence was our Headmaster. The enrollment had gone up to 894. Our cricket team took the School City Championship. On June 21st, 1958, our Bengali Medium boys presented a programme of Tagore's works. In 1959 we had 1,017 boys pushing the walls out. The Matric gave us 1st, 7th, 18th, 19th and 27th places. Brother Donald Becker put on the Gregorian Science Fair for the first time. Bro. Paul Malich helped out the science teachers in encouraging our boys. In 1960, Ahmed Shafee secured the First Place in Matric. Our Scouts went with Mr. Nicholas Rozario and Bro. Paul to the 1961 Rally in Lahore. Mahub Hossain Khan of St. Gregory's took First Place on the Matric Exam.

In mid-August, 1962, Bro. Thomas More became Headmaster, after being with us for so many years. St. Gregory's took 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th places in the Junior Group of the E. Pak Science Fair. On August 14 our Scouts and Cubs hosted a rally at the school of 2500 city scouts. In a stadium function, our Scouts became "Quaid E Azam Scouts". How effective have all the Scout Masters been in the past. Bro. Eugene, Bro. Bertin, Mr. Palmer, Mr. S. C. Dutta and Mr. Nicholas Rozario. National Awards were presented to Bro. Bertin, our former Headmaster, and to Mr. Nicholas Rozario.

The Year 1964 brought us the "Gregorian", and a flurry of farewell parties by all the students. Bros. Paul and Bro. Donald Becker were leaving. March 4, 1965 had our boys winning the Provincial Basketball Championship. In 1966, February 2nd to be exact, our first "Spotlight" came out. Again we took the basketball championship. And, on Matric, we secured the 5th and 9th places. Bro. Donald was back with us, and the Science Fair was fantastic.

The S.S.C. for 1967 gave us the 1st and 8th places. Tagore's "Dak Ghor" was staged in mid-August. Our boys took all the prizes in the English Handwriting Competition of the British Council. Ragibul Hasan, became Intermediate Champ in the City Sports. In the Pak Science Fair, our boys won the majority of awards. Abid Hasan, S.S.C. received a gold medal in the All-Pak Science Fair, and the title, "Junior Scientist". Our Scouts and Cubs won four Firsts and one Second prize in the Comilla Rally. St. Greg's won the Basketball Championship again.

On June 15th our boys gave a sad farewell to Bro. Thomas.

Bro. Robert became headmaster and then started civic disturbances. On a holiday day, after an operation and recuperation, our good... Bro. Robert had to walk all the way to the airport. On Feb. 27 Brother Gerald went to Mohammadpur St. Joseph's and Bro. John took his place. On Matric we secured the 2nd and 11th places in Humanities. In August of 1969 Mr. Hardiment staged Shakespeare's "Macbeth" Dacca T.V. gave broad coverage to our Science Fair, also to a special programme by our Scouts. Then Mr. Hardiment's production "Macbeth" was filmed in the studio.

The story is told that one guardian wanted the best, and so persuaded Bro. Walter to admit his girl into the primary. Each day, and as far as Class Seven, the girl came dressed as a boy. No other student even doubted her. "We never suspected that Shankar was a girl". Not long after she had left, some boys were caught pelting stones at the St. Francis' girls. Bro. Walter brought in one of the girls from next door to point out to the boys. A brighter boy remarked, "She looks like our friend Shankar". Brother Walter explained the whole thing to the boys, about Shankar, then over at St. Francis'. Believe it or not!

The year 1971 is momentous for us all, for in that year we gained our independence. Before that could happen, the Pakistan army cracked down and massacred so many people. The holding of classes was almost impossible, for people were fleeing for their lives. At the beginning, the school acted as a shelter, but on Mar. 31st, Pakistan soldiers — without reason or mercy — hauled some of them into trucks. Mr. N. C. Sutradhar, Paul Palma, and Dr. D. N. Pal Chowdhury, and his two sons, Subal and Utpal, were among the innocent victims. Bro. Hobart and Bro. Robert tried in vain to reach them in Jagannath college hall, where the hapless people were no doubt shot that very night. Another of our retired teachers, Mr. Peter D'Costa, was also shot in the villages. With the attendance at almost nil, the teachers left here in the city, tried to conduct classes. In a haphazard way, even three or four boys attending, were instructed; the class also kept them off the streets and safe from the Pakistan soldiers. For the Matric Exam in July only 58 of our students felt safe enough to take it. In October we found that Khandker Fazlul Quader was placed First in the combined merit list. It was small consolation for the heartbreak of the entire year and the savagery of man against man.

Written for the centenary souvenir