

The Wait for another Cultural Awakening

by Waheedul Haque

It was the Statesman's Manash Ghosh who one day in the late seventies asked me, "Where have they gone?" And I couldn't answer. First, because I didn't know the whole answer. Secondly, I wouldn't answer even if I could for that was not the time to go for the many lapses of our generation's golden three years: 1972 to 75.

It took perhaps less than five years for a solidly real Pakistan, embedded in the hearts of 70 million Bengalis, it seemed, for eternity to crumble and slide into an empire of evil. In 1964 military dictator had won hands down in the electoral college BD elections, and a big majority of Bengali basic democrats had voted for him. In the following year war erupted between India and Pakistan and the proceedings brought clearly into the fore the fact that Bengalees thought this was something between India and West Pakistan having absolutely nothing to do with East Pakistan. But then nobody in the then East Pakistan was still ready to be pleased with an Indian victory or a Pakistan debacle. Closely after, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gave his epochal Six Points. These were all signs of a growing disenchantment of the Bengalees with Pakistan. Things that followed politically in close succession contributed to that in ever bigger measure. Even so there would have remained a line that couldn't be crossed in that process even in a hundred years. Short of crossing that line one couldn't say, this is not my state, I simply do not belong. For many Bengalees involved in the events of the day that line was crossed and their identities established as Bengalees and not Pakistanis quite finally by '69. The rest of the population took a year more and by March 25, 1971 the whole of East Pakistan had a totally different idea of their political and cultural reality—different from what Pakistan has been imposing on them for over two decades. And there remained only a handful to be convinced of the truth of the colonial hold of West Pakistan on the eastern wing—the truth of no West Pakistani ever thinking that they belonged to the same nation as the Bengalees did, that they and the Bengalees were the same people. The genocide of March 25 torched all the bastions of Dhaka and in a single night lit up that truth for all to see and know.

How was that impossible line crossed? When did that rice-lasting and Bengali speaking intellectual or student say, I am a Bengali and not an amorphous Pakistani which culturally means nothing. And how? In Pakistan there were Punjabis and Baluchis, Sindhis and Pathans, and only Bengalees were not allowed to be Bengalees and were required to be the only pure Pakistanis. It was a sin for the people in the eastern wing to be culturally what they were. Bengalees were equated with Hinduness. By whom was this straitjacket fashioned and imposed? By a miserable minority who hadn't had any idea either of culture or of democracy. A Punjabi could be a good Pakistani by remaining a hundred per cent Punjabi. But for a Bengalee that was inconceivable—he must hatefully disown his culture and be civilised and Pakistani by speaking Urdu and eating chapatti and donning shilwar and kameez. That was the insistence from the word go in 1947. And how hard did the Muslim League elders like Fazlur Rahman of Shatinpukur try to fit the bill?

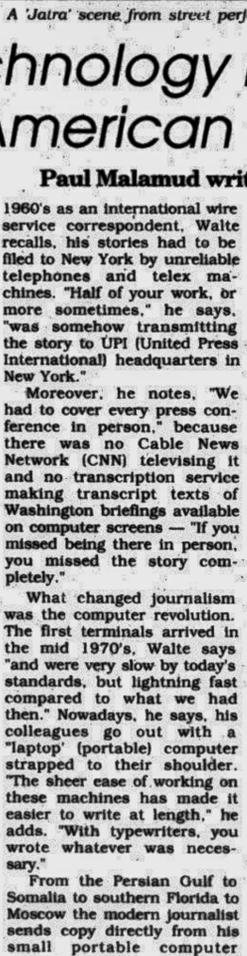
The transformation of one's striving to become a Pakistani into a positive statement that one was a Bengali was made possible by a high-pace cultural movement taking shape alongside the political developments during that fateful decade 1960-70. In point of fact, often times the cultural thing preceded the political in the fashion that the great ideological ferment set in motion by the encyclopedists and the philosophers had preceded the French Revolution. First in the chain to take effect was the celebrations all over the land of Tagore Centenary. That was in 1961.

From 1963 the great festivals of the seasons started: Barshamangal and Basanta-utsav. Soon enough the Bengalees started celebrating the Pahela Baishakh, the Bangla new year's day. So on and so forth. There was now something glorious in feeling that one was a Bengalee. A surge for Bengali literature and music followed. How can one forget about that great cultural awakening?

Manash was enquiring about what happened to that awakening of the sixties in the post-liberation Bangladesh as also where the people involved in that had gone. The answer is a complex one. And no one answer, however good and exhaustive, can hold all the truths of the matter. The situation to which Bangladesh woke up to on December 16, 1971 was one of a war-devastated country crying to be set on the proper rails of recovery and reconstruction. And as a corollary of that the political situation was also very fluid and things after all needed some time to take shape and a perspective to emerge. The state leadership which was for many months after independence also the leadership of the society as a whole, had hardly any mind for finer things of life right then. But then they did go for things cultural. They started with making education free for girls upto the eight year level. And they offered books free for the whole of the primary level. Bangabandhu was bent making Bengali the true state language of this land—and this was yielding very encouraging result.

As for music, the government did an unprecedented thing by arranging for a Woodstock kind of festival concert for ten of thousands of listeners with the difference that the fare presented here wouldn't be pop but very sedate Bengali songs. It was in game of these great festival concerts at the Suhrawardy Uddyan that the masses first heard Suchitra Mitra and Debabrata Biswas. Drama commenced its march of victory at what was to become Natak Sarani as soon as Aly Zaker and others were back in Dhaka from Mujibnagar, without waiting to be told to begin. It was left for Bangabandhu to make dramatic and musical shows exempt from taxes, and he did that with a will. In all, whatever the yet-to-settle down government of Bangabandhu, occupied as it was with things of weightier concern, did on the cultural front, has as yet not been, in all these 19 years, matched not to speak of being surpassed. The great cultural awakening of the sixties, could be seen to have supplied the initial momentum to drama and music and the different festivals. There was no point of its continuing unaffected by the liberation war and the emergence of the new state to which it was geared. For another such movement to take shape would require another set of cultural realities free from social taboos and prejudices. With *fatwabaqi* stamping dark minds working to ban Tashlima's novel on communal realities, time is perhaps already-ripe for that. That time the vehicle was Tagore and his songs. What will be the rallying point this time? Perhaps folk music. Only that has the potential to take on and ultimately break the anticultural hold on the society by fundamentalist zealotry. In order that folk music is able to deliver on its possibilities, we should all be wary of its abuse by cheap commercialisation.

A 'Jatra' scene from street performance on Independence Day (March 26) evening.



As for music, the government did an unprecedented thing by arranging for a Woodstock kind of festival concert for ten of thousands of listeners with the difference that the fare presented here wouldn't be pop but very sedate Bengali songs. It was in game of these great festival concerts at the Suhrawardy Uddyan that the masses first heard Suchitra Mitra and Debabrata Biswas. Drama commenced its march of victory at what was to become Natak Sarani as soon as Aly Zaker and others were back in Dhaka from Mujibnagar, without waiting to be told to begin. It was left for Bangabandhu to make dramatic and musical shows exempt from taxes, and he did that with a will. In all, whatever the yet-to-settle down government of Bangabandhu, occupied as it was with things of weightier concern, did on the cultural front, has as yet not been, in all these 19 years, matched not to speak of being surpassed. The great cultural awakening of the sixties, could be seen to have supplied the initial momentum to drama and music and the different festivals. There was no point of its continuing unaffected by the liberation war and the emergence of the new state to which it was geared. For another such movement to take shape would require another set of cultural realities free from social taboos and prejudices. With *fatwabaqi* stamping dark minds working to ban Tashlima's novel on communal realities, time is perhaps already-ripe for that. That time the vehicle was Tagore and his songs. What will be the rallying point this time? Perhaps folk music. Only that has the potential to take on and ultimately break the anticultural hold on the society by fundamentalist zealotry. In order that folk music is able to deliver on its possibilities, we should all be wary of its abuse by cheap commercialisation.

As for music, the government did an unprecedented thing by arranging for a Woodstock kind of festival concert for ten of thousands of listeners with the difference that the fare presented here wouldn't be pop but very sedate Bengali songs. It was in game of these great festival concerts at the Suhrawardy Uddyan that the masses first heard Suchitra Mitra and Debabrata Biswas. Drama commenced its march of victory at what was to become Natak Sarani as soon as Aly Zaker and others were back in Dhaka from Mujibnagar, without waiting to be told to begin. It was left for Bangabandhu to make dramatic and musical shows exempt from taxes, and he did that with a will. In all, whatever the yet-to-settle down government of Bangabandhu, occupied as it was with things of weightier concern, did on the cultural front, has as yet not been, in all these 19 years, matched not to speak of being surpassed. The great cultural awakening of the sixties, could be seen to have supplied the initial momentum to drama and music and the different festivals. There was no point of its continuing unaffected by the liberation war and the emergence of the new state to which it was geared. For another such movement to take shape would require another set of cultural realities free from social taboos and prejudices. With *fatwabaqi* stamping dark minds working to ban Tashlima's novel on communal realities, time is perhaps already-ripe for that. That time the vehicle was Tagore and his songs. What will be the rallying point this time? Perhaps folk music. Only that has the potential to take on and ultimately break the anticultural hold on the society by fundamentalist zealotry. In order that folk music is able to deliver on its possibilities, we should all be wary of its abuse by cheap commercialisation.

As for music, the government did an unprecedented thing by arranging for a Woodstock kind of festival concert for ten of thousands of listeners with the difference that the fare presented here wouldn't be pop but very sedate Bengali songs. It was in game of these great festival concerts at the Suhrawardy Uddyan that the masses first heard Suchitra Mitra and Debabrata Biswas. Drama commenced its march of victory at what was to become Natak Sarani as soon as Aly Zaker and others were back in Dhaka from Mujibnagar, without waiting to be told to begin. It was left for Bangabandhu to make dramatic and musical shows exempt from taxes, and he did that with a will. In all, whatever the yet-to-settle down government of Bangabandhu, occupied as it was with things of weightier concern, did on the cultural front, has as yet not been, in all these 19 years, matched not to speak of being surpassed. The great cultural awakening of the sixties, could be seen to have supplied the initial momentum to drama and music and the different festivals. There was no point of its continuing unaffected by the liberation war and the emergence of the new state to which it was geared. For another such movement to take shape would require another set of cultural realities free from social taboos and prejudices. With *fatwabaqi* stamping dark minds working to ban Tashlima's novel on communal realities, time is perhaps already-ripe for that. That time the vehicle was Tagore and his songs. What will be the rallying point this time? Perhaps folk music. Only that has the potential to take on and ultimately break the anticultural hold on the society by fundamentalist zealotry. In order that folk music is able to deliver on its possibilities, we should all be wary of its abuse by cheap commercialisation.

As for music, the government did an unprecedented thing by arranging for a Woodstock kind of festival concert for ten of thousands of listeners with the difference that the fare presented here wouldn't be pop but very sedate Bengali songs. It was in game of these great festival concerts at the Suhrawardy Uddyan that the masses first heard Suchitra Mitra and Debabrata Biswas. Drama commenced its march of victory at what was to become Natak Sarani as soon as Aly Zaker and others were back in Dhaka from Mujibnagar, without waiting to be told to begin. It was left for Bangabandhu to make dramatic and musical shows exempt from taxes, and he did that with a will. In all, whatever the yet-to-settle down government of Bangabandhu, occupied as it was with things of weightier concern, did on the cultural front, has as yet not been, in all these 19 years, matched not to speak of being surpassed. The great cultural awakening of the sixties, could be seen to have supplied the initial momentum to drama and music and the different festivals. There was no point of its continuing unaffected by the liberation war and the emergence of the new state to which it was geared. For another such movement to take shape would require another set of cultural realities free from social taboos and prejudices. With *fatwabaqi* stamping dark minds working to ban Tashlima's novel on communal realities, time is perhaps already-ripe for that. That time the vehicle was Tagore and his songs. What will be the rallying point this time? Perhaps folk music. Only that has the potential to take on and ultimately break the anticultural hold on the society by fundamentalist zealotry. In order that folk music is able to deliver on its possibilities, we should all be wary of its abuse by cheap commercialisation.

Couples that Bridge the Colour Divide

Arlene Getz writes from Cape Town

SIYA and Judith Twani are an unusual species in South Africa—they are optimists. More remarkably, they remain so in the face of prejudices that would plunge most people into despair. Firstly, there is their marriage. Siya, 30, is a black preacher from Cape Town. Judith, 31, is a white teacher from Ipswich, England. They met in Judith's home town five years ago and, after a rocky courtship (Siya fell in love at first sight, Judith, nee Riley, did not) were married in Britain in 1992.

Today, they are happily sharing a flat in the Cape Town suburb of Rondebosch. Judith is pregnant and Siya is able to joke about sleeping with the enemy. Yet the difficulties for a mixed-race couple in a society still obsessed with race are no laughing matter. Their marriage may no longer be illegal under now-defunct apartheid laws, but the sight of a black man holding hands with a blue-eyed blonde is enough to stop most South Africans on their tracks. Often the curiosity is confined to amazed stares. "We usually see them adjusting their car mirrors for a better look," laughed Judith. Other times, it turns nasty. Siya is used to Afrikaners bellowing "Hey kaffir, what are you doing with a white woman" at him. Judith often feels that people "look at me and really despise me."

The Twanis prefer to look on the bright side of his bleak picture. Talk about the positive things, Judith urged her husband. Like the four black men who blew their horns and cheered for peace when they saw the Twanis embracing. And the two young whitemen who delightedly sang "Ebony and Ivory" when they encountered the couple in Rondebosch. "I've found a lot of people who almost see us as a symbol of hope," said Judith. "We often hear people whispering in Xhosa (a local language): Look here, here's the new, South Africa."

Sadly for the Twanis, however, the new South Africa is bringing a different range of problems. One of the spinoffs of the country's growing wave of political extremism has been rising anti-white sentiment among radical black youth. Black townships are turning

Couples that Bridge the Colour Divide

Arlene Getz writes from Cape Town

SIYA and Judith Twani are an unusual species in South Africa—they are optimists. More remarkably, they remain so in the face of prejudices that would plunge most people into despair. Firstly, there is their marriage. Siya, 30, is a black preacher from Cape Town. Judith, 31, is a white teacher from Ipswich, England. They met in Judith's home town five years ago and, after a rocky courtship (Siya fell in love at first sight, Judith, nee Riley, did not) were married in Britain in 1992.

Today, they are happily sharing a flat in the Cape Town suburb of Rondebosch. Judith is pregnant and Siya is able to joke about sleeping with the enemy. Yet the difficulties for a mixed-race couple in a society still obsessed with race are no laughing matter. Their marriage may no longer be illegal under now-defunct apartheid laws, but the sight of a black man holding hands with a blue-eyed blonde is enough to stop most South Africans on their tracks. Often the curiosity is confined to amazed stares. "We usually see them adjusting their car mirrors for a better look," laughed Judith. Other times, it turns nasty. Siya is used to Afrikaners bellowing "Hey kaffir, what are you doing with a white woman" at him. Judith often feels that people "look at me and really despise me."

The Twanis prefer to look on the bright side of his bleak picture. Talk about the positive things, Judith urged her husband. Like the four black men who blew their horns and cheered for peace when they saw the Twanis embracing. And the two young whitemen who delightedly sang "Ebony and Ivory" when they encountered the couple in Rondebosch. "I've found a lot of people who almost see us as a symbol of hope," said Judith. "We often hear people whispering in Xhosa (a local language): Look here, here's the new, South Africa."

Sadly for the Twanis, however, the new South Africa is bringing a different range of problems. One of the spinoffs of the country's growing wave of political extremism has been rising anti-white sentiment among radical black youth. Black townships are turning

For the first time in South African history, blacks are taking part in government as members of the newly formed Transitional Executive Council. Apartheid has officially ended. Social segregation has not. It is still fairly rare to find a black man holding hands with a blue-eyed blonde. Mixed couples face difficulties in a society still obsessed with race. Siya and Judith Twani tell Gemini News Service of their efforts to end the great divide.



SIYA AND JUDITH TWANI
'People see us as a symbol of hope'

into no-go areas for even the anti-apartheid activists once welcomed by local residents.

The militants in the "one settler, one bullet" brigade may be only a small minority, but their actions have rendered it increasingly difficult for the few whites who spend time in black townships.

Amy Biehl, an American student, became one of their victims when she drove black friends through the Cape Town township of Guguletu. Black youths ignored her friends' pleas and stabbed her to death because she was a "settler." In other, less-publicised incidents, a pregnant white health worker and two white lecturers hailed by students as "honorary blacks" were stoned and shot in nearby Khayelitsha.

For the Twanis, the hatred has grave personal implications. Once when driving home in

Guguletu they encountered a crowd apparently returning from school. Some of the students immediately targeted the pregnant Judith, chanting "burn, settler, burn." One punched her in the face without warning. Siya climbed out of the car to explain that Judith was his wife. Their reaction: "We'll burn you, too."

The couple drove off and Siya cried for a week. "I was shocked and angry," he recalled. "But I have a deep compassion for those kids who abused my wife. I was there myself 14 or 15 years ago. I was a very bitter young man and I hated whites from the depths of my heart."

Siya's attitude changed slowly as he became a committed Christian dedicated to working with the youth. He and his wife are now passionately involved in attempts to

"reclaim" the townships from the radicals.

The couple took part in a peace march through Guguletu to carry the message that South Africa belongs to all of us. It was Judith's first return to Guguletu—home to her mother-in-law—but she is determined it will not be her last.

"I decided I was never going to let fear rule my life," she said. "If I don't ever go [into Guguletu] I may as well just go back to England—I can't live in a cosy white world."

The Twanis are looking at more creative ways to bridge the Gulf between blacks and whites separated by more than four decades of segregationist laws.

Both believe the real problem is that apartheid prevented the two communities from getting to know each other. Siya, for example, ruefully recalls his shock when some children at his church admitted they would kill whites—but would not kill Judith because they considered her black.

"I'm convinced the key to this is interaction," said Judith. "People have never sat down and had Coke and Pizza together."

The couple have begun their personal reconciliation programme by taking whites on walks through township streets. They recalled how some students at their Bible college started out feeling petrified and ended up in tears over their appreciation of the experience.

They also hope to start a resource centre to provide recreation for people whose black townships lack recreational facilities.

"I will fight a sense of hopelessness," said Siya, "until I die."

Added Judith: "I'm determined to make a difference. I don't just want to be pathetic somewhere."

Occasionally, despair does pierce the optimism. What would happen if South Africa slides into civil war after the April election? "Siya wouldn't be safe in the white community and I wouldn't be safe in the black," she said. "But we're living one day at a time. Tomorrow must take care of itself."

— Gemini News
ARLENE GETZ is Southern Africa correspondent for the Sydney Morning Herald.

New Technology Rapidly Changing American Journalism

Paul Malamud writes from Washington

HEADQUARTERED in a shiny glass skyscraper in Arlington, Virginia, across the Potomac river from Washington DC, the newspaper USA Today exemplifies how technology is changing the newspaper business.

As Juan J Walte, a longtime wire service correspondent and current USA Today staffer explains, one aim of USA Today, a daily distributed across the United States, is to make print journalism competitive with television.

USA Today's use of short articles, colourful graphics and satellite technology to print the newspaper in plants around the United States, as well as in Europe and Asia, makes the attempt possible. "If you can't beat them," Walte acknowledges, "join them."

USA Today printed its first issue in 1982 and now claims a national readership of about six million people. After a decade of enormous expense creating its high-technology production and distribution system and building circulation, it turned a profit in 1993.

Though criticized for superficiality ("Market research shows that most people are not willing to read an article that continues beyond one page," Walte explains), the newspaper is nonetheless an exemplar of the efficient use of information technology—a technology now increasingly employed by many North American newspapers.

When he began work in the

1960's as an international wire service correspondent, Walte recalls, his stories had to be filed to New York by unreliable telephones and telex machines. "Half of your work, or more sometimes," he says, "was somehow transmitting the story to UPI (United Press International) headquarters in New York."

Moreover, he notes, "We had to cover every press conference in person," because there was no Cable News Network (CNN) televising it and no transcription service making transcript texts of Washington briefings available on computer screens—"If you missed being there in person, you missed the story completely."

What changed journalism was the computer revolution. The first terminals arrived in the mid 1970's, Walte says "and were very slow by today's standards, but lightning fast compared to what we had then." Nowadays, he says, his colleagues go out with a "laptop" (portable) computer strapped to their shoulder. "The sheer ease of working on these machines has made it easier to write at length," he adds. "With typewriters, you wrote whatever was necessary."

From the Persian Gulf to Somalia to southern Florida to Moscow the modern journalist sends copy directly from his small portable computer

through telephone lines and receives instantaneous computer messages from supervisors, colleagues and contacts back through those same lines. He or she can also use the computer to access wire service reports to keep in touch with breaking news.

When far from telephone service, Walte notes, journalists "routinely link their laptop computers to small, portable satellite dishes (antennae) anywhere and transmit their reports directly to satellites, which then direct them downward again to their editorial headquarters."

If, all else fails, he continues, "almost every major hotel" in the world has fax (telephone facsimile transmission) facilities available, "and you can print out your story on paper and send it in. You may be physically away, but you're never really outside the office."

The pervasiveness of information technology in the form of faxes and CNN, which is also available at many hotels worldwide, is a mixed blessing, he says. On the one hand, "You're never away from anything." On the other hand, "Your bosses see the news on CNN sometimes before you do on the ground."

While "the basic legwork of good reporting hasn't changed that much," he notes, "every newsroom now has half a dozen television sets tuned to CNN and similar news outlets."

For some, he says, it is more efficient to stay in the newsroom and watch a press conference on CNN—then a half hour later call up an accurate transcript from a commercial data-base on an office computer terminal—than to take a taxi and cover the event. Thus for some journalists "the personal contact thing is gone" as his colleagues get "more and more of what they need" via electronics.

USA Today, Walte explains, also makes use of advanced telecommunications to distribute newspaper. Once the electronic reports have been sent into its Arlington headquarters and edited, they are combined with graphics and photographs and then "laid out" on a page by illustrators. After the layout has been approved, it is photographed and the photographic negatives beamed up to orbiting satellites, then beamed down to 32 printing plants throughout the United States—as well one plant in Hong Kong, one in London and another in Lucerne. "If we had to distribute the newspaper by truck throughout the United States," he says, "of course we couldn't possibly do it."

The electronics revolution, he notes, has altered front-page content for USA Today and its rivals. Now that people receive breaking news immediately by television, the function of a newspaper, he says, is no longer just to "tell people

Continued on Page 9

State of Mind of Litterateurs in South Asia

by Ayesha Parul

WHAT is common among the people in South Asia? The region is fragmented into several political units. The people belong to many ethnic and linguistic communities. Cultural diversity is so extensive that there could be as many as fifty nations states. Within this whole range of diversity, it is frequently expressed, may be as a wishful thinking, that there is a common bond among the billion peoples of this region. This is the bond of history, heritage, culture, struggle and aspiration. The claim of such bond often appears as a mockery when we see that the States are busy in preparing

their respective war machines against each other, spending more than six billion dollars every year for buying military hardware.

How this situation is addressed by the members of our literary world? How these realities are portrayed by the guardians of our mental faculties? Mainly two trends in this respect have been evident. One trend represents the most radical thoughts and struggles of the people. Youthful romanticism coupled with left orientation has shaped their ideas and actions and has made them rebellious. They are many in number. But they are

scattered and weak. There is another trend, a trend of convenience. This trend is in the hegemony which draws authority and patronage from the State and its institutions. The litterateurs belonging to this trend speak the language of the State. They do not involve themselves in any activity which may undermine the official State policy and jeopardize their interest which they have accumulated through their relationship with the State based on mutual convenience.

In the seventies, the poets in Bangladesh brought a new dimension, not only in the

field of their literary works, but also in their social commitment. They assembled with the slogan: *Only Poetry can counter the occurrence of the third world war*. Solidarity for the people in struggles in different corners of the globe, from Chile to Vietnam, and the pursuit for peace for the humankind were cherished as a general goal. This solidarity and commitment have been reflected in many literary works, forums and movements participated by the cultural activists. But particular situations within the region, which are responsible for strenuous relationship between the States, have largely been overlooked

Continued on Page 10

How Fish and Ceres Made Fools of Us All

Nicola Cole writes from London

HIS voice sounded authoritative yet agreeable: "...so, would you just do that small thing for me, madam?"

Entirely unsuspecting, the women said Yes, she would. At once. So saying, she plunged the telephone into a bucket of water...

...and became another victim of one of the most impractical practical jokes ever inspired by April Fool's day.

The Hoax was so widespread that it prompted the telephone company to publicly issue the memorable advice: "Wet telephones will not work."

What did the bogus telecom engineer get out of his prank? "He hopes to hear the splash and then a gub before the line goes dead," confided a company official.

Then there was the trick devised by ingenious inmates of Pennsylvania State Penitentiary in the United States. They devoted April 1 to sending out prison-made car registration plates in packages deliberately stamped with the wrong number. It meant that Philadelphia motorists received plates bearing one number, a registration certificate with another.

You have been warned: April Fool's Day is approaching, when practical jokers have free reign to embarrass their victims by convincing them that absurd fiction is actual fact. Gemini News Service looks at licensed trickery.

monies for illegal parking on days when they had not been in the city, while the real culprits temporarily escaped detection.

In Britain, All Fools Days rituals are so entrenched that serious national daily newspapers can— for 24 hours—get away with printing spoof news stories and advertisements. Like the alleged "Government Announcement" concerning "A proposed shift of the Earth's Axis" or a spurious vacancy for a "Senior Rhubarb Consultant."

A prestigious BBC television news programme conned millions of viewers with an apparently serious report on a spaghetti tree. The art of ensnaring the unwary arguably reached a peak earlier this century with the activities of Horace de Vere Cole.

An English practical joker of genius who waged a life-long war against pomposity, Cole specialised in hoodwinking the Establishment with elaborate impersonations of visiting potentates and dignitaries.

His take-offs of the Sultan of Zanzibar and a senior Prussian army officer were dry runs for his classic prank—the Dreadnought Hoax of 1910.

This began with a telegram purportedly from a British government minister to the Royal Navy's Home Fleet asking for "full honours" to be accorded to "the Emperor of Abyssinia and his retinue" on their visit later that day.

Having sent his message, Cole swathed himself in curtain material, blacked his face and, accompanied by similarly disguised friends (including the writer Virginia Woolf), left London by special train... and travelled into history.

Everyone from the railway authorities to admirals was bamboozled by the party as it inspected the Dreadnoughts and other battleships, graciously expressing their admiration in an improvised mix of Latin and gibberish.

"Bunga, bunga!" was their most frequent exclamation and it became a catchphrase—the more so when questions were asked in parliament about the

jape that "rocked the Empire with mirth or anger," as the London Times reported.

Succeeding generations of tricksters have followed Cole's lead. Such as the example of the Canadian rescued from the sea off Brest, in France, claiming to have crossed the Atlantic solo in a home-made nuclear submarine which unfortunately had sunk.

His story was believed—until police found a Paris-Brest rail ticket in his pocket.

Hapless victims are known even now as "les poissons d'Auril"—April fish.

April Fools Day is old, but how old is not clear. According to a 1760 rhyme "...why the people call it so/Nor I, nor they themselves do know."

Modern folklorists think it is a relic of Cerealia, the Romans' early April festival honouring Ceres, the pagan goddess of fertility.

Myth says that her beautiful daughter Proserpina was abducted by Pluto, ruler of the Underworld.

Hearing the echo of her cries, Ceres searched in vain for the voice—the supposed origins of "a fool's errand."

So if a plausible stranger seeks your help in push-starting a car on April 1, just check under the bonnet: chances are the engine will be missing.

NICOLA COLE is a British freelance writer and journalist.