

A SMAA Ramdan shares her kitchen with a long-dead sheikh. Her living room doubles as a resting place for two recently departed lawyers, and her backyard contains a motley collection of anonymous corpses.

The mother of six is one of thousands of Cairo residents who live in sprawling cemeteries on the edge of the Egyptian capital. "Mind how you go, they buried a woman there four days ago," says Asmaa, peering up her washing over a heap of fading flowers.

It is an amicable arrangement. Asmaa needed a home. The two-room 19th century tomb with underground burial vaults was vacant and the family moved in more than 50 years ago. In exchange for free accommodation, Asmaa and her husband burn incense over the sheikh every Thursday and sweep out the living room when the lawyers' nearest and dearest come to call.

Over the years, Cairo's so-called Cities of the Dead have been adapted to the needs of the living. Today's residents live in what were intended as rooms to accommodate relatives visiting their dead. Tombs have been converted into shops, cafes, workshops and even schools. Running water and electricity have been installed, and the cemetery-dwellers have outfitted their unorthodox homes with all the modern conveniences from video recorders to washing machines.

The graveyards were originally established more than 1,000 years ago outside the perimeters of the old city and reserved more or less exclusively for the dead. But as time went by and the city grew, the tombs and houses crept closer together until eventually the two overlapped.

The area is roughly divided into two parts known as the Northern and Southern Cemeteries. About 90 per cent of the tombs date from the last century, but evidence of earlier generations is still apparent, most notably in the 15th century mausoleum of the Mameluke sultans.

In a city of more than 15 million people, the graveyard's inhabitants have it relatively good. While the majority of Cairo residents live in cramped and often squalid conditions in hastily built high-rise blocks, the mausoleums are airy and solid, convenient to the city centre and free of traffic fumes.

But around the city, cemetery residents — both living and dead — face eviction, as Cairo officials try to cut down on the area's notorious crime problem, and alternate burial grounds and take advantage of the necropolis' potential for property development.

The vast cemeteries with their maze-like, nameless alleys, offer an ideal hideaway for members of the Cairo underworld. Illegal activities perpetrated among the tombs range from the heinous to the downright bizarre. Weapons manufacturing, drugs factories

A grand conference of the officers and employees of the Mujibnagar Government-in-exile and the freedom fighters, presently serving the Bangladesh Government, concluded in Dhaka recently. For obvious reasons, this conference was of much significance, not only to the participants, but to the patriotic citizens of the country as well.

The urgency of such a conference was felt more seriously for we find, much to the dismay of us, the freedom-fighters, that the ideals and pride that inspired us to risk our lives at the battle fronts are indeed put to test at this crossroads of our national life.

I recalled at the conference that on June 6 last, four thousand miles away from Dhaka at Normandy in France, the US President Bill Clinton had addressed a similar grand assembly of the war veterans of the Second World War.

President Clinton told the war veterans of six European countries including USA, Britain and France: "You are the forces of freedom. When you were young, you have saved the world, the world is enjoying 50 years of freedom because of your heroism. We are the children of your sacrifice."

He also said: "We commit ourselves, as you did to keep that lamp of freedom burning for those who will follow. You completed your mission here. But the mission of freedom goes on; the battle continues. The longest day is not yet over."

I was impelled to draw the attention of the audience to that evocative speech of the President of the USA, the most powerful nation on earth.

In all certitude that was a fitting tribute to the dedication

Population: Cairo Perspective Mind the Corpse, Says Asmaa, as She Pegs up the Washing

Helen Miles writes from Cairo

Delegates and lobbyists gathering in Egypt for a UN conference on global population growth need look no further than the host city for a vivid example of what can happen when people multiply faster than governments can cope. Overcrowding is so chronic that tens of thousands of Cairenes live in cemeteries: there is no room for the dead, let alone the living.



In the shadow of death: Cairo children play in front of their cemetery homes

and prostitution rings are commonplace, explains a policeman responsible for one of the cemeteries most notorious areas.

Drug dealers who scrape away the inside of children's skulls to produce an almost perfect cocaine look-alike, single mothers who abandon their newborn babies among the tombs, and rapists are

among those who seek out the necropolis' anonymity.

The cemeteries are ideal for criminals because it is very difficult for the police to find out where they are or what they are doing, says the officer. "As soon as we get a tip-off, we go out there, but the place is full of eyes and by the time the police arrive the criminals are usually long

gone." This is one reason why the city authorities are anxious to see the ancient burial grounds razed. Another reason is that the cemeteries have long since ceased to meet the requirements of the city. As early as 1933 the cemeteries were declared full by royal decree but nothing was done to stop fresh burials.

Freedom Fighters: The Unsung Heroes

by Muhammad Musa

of the war veterans to the cause of freedom. It is unfortunate that there is none to inspire us in the same fashion in our country, Bangladesh. By all reckoning, the freedom-fighters occupy an enviable place of honour and esteem in the annals of our national history. Because they were the torch-bearers for the entire nation during those blood-stained days of our liberation war in 1971. In one of those fateful dark nights, they chose to come out of their homes without informing parents and not

strangely, now those freedom-fighters were being withdrawn from districts and made to rot as Officers on Special Duties. Their claim for promotion and consequential benefits were also being ignored to the detriment of their service career. The freedom-fighters serving the Government in other capacities too continue to be deprived of their legitimate service benefits and promotion. But in case they were the freedom-fighters of a country like, say, USA, then in such a conference, US

Now, how ironically, the freedom-fighters have rather become victims of discrimination for reasons, maybe, of being 'freedom-fighters'.

The prejudiced treatment towards the freedom-fighters now in service aside, their general plight does not present a happy picture either. It is not infrequently that the newspapers and journals carry stories on the freedom-fighters and their families languishing in circumstances too deep for tears. Rabindranath Tagore had written so prophetically

"The mission of freedom goes on, the battle continues, the longest day is not yet over."

knowing what was in store for them. They did not know if at all they would be able to come back home or to their dear mothers. But what they knew for sure was that unless their country was freed, they would never be able to return to their native soil. In those days, they fought in battlefronts braving heavy odds much to the risk of their lives. Before their very eyes their comrades got killed. But nothing could deter them in their resolve to achieve freedom, for that was their cherished objective, the polestar.

Upon freedom, many of those freedom-fighter heroes in their changed role took up the responsibilities to rebuild the war-ravaged country as members of the Bangladesh Civil Service. They played a key role in the sphere of the country's development and also earned praise from their fellow countrymen. But,

President would perhaps have said: "We are the children of your sacrifice."

We look forward to that great day when the authorities in Bangladesh will, in the same vein, tell the freedom-fighters in such a conference: You are to carry the mantle of leadership in the country's administration, for you had already proved your mettle in 1971, and the country was freed from the shackles of the Pakistani occupation forces.

Just remember those fiery days of 1971 when the freedom-fighters had to play the pivotal role on behalf of the entire nation in the liberation war. Those were the days when mothers and sisters used to pray in tearful eyes to Almighty Allah for their victory and safe return from battle fronts. Tragically, now they are to shed tears because the wheel of history has been turned to the reverse course.

for us: "Look, that bonfire now wears a tragic epithet, now you are fated to bear it, suffer it in the depth of your heart."

It is our sheer misfortune that we have now to endure with the devaluation of the role of the freedom-fighters and the distortion of history of our freedom-struggle as well. But whoever engaged in such despicable act should do well to note that the efforts of the Britishers to distort history came to no avail as, however belatedly, the Indians could find out the truth that Mir Zafar was not the people's leader, but a traitor of the first order and now his name is being used as the synonym for a traitor in this subcontinent.

The core objective of the freedom-fighters' conference was to forge unity among themselves to foil any machinations to distort the history of our liberation war and undermine the role of the freedom-

Now the problem is even worse. Although the burial vaults are communal (as one corpse decays, another takes its place), there is simply not enough room for so many dead. Last year, more than 54,000 people died in Cairo, forcing the creation of new cemeteries on desert sites which make huge, remote and expandable burial grounds.

A more cynical reason for the urgent removal of the necropolis is that it is sitting on more than 2,400 acres of inner-city land ripe for development.

The planning of the city in general necessitates removing all informal areas inside the city, including these cemetery sites," says Cairo Governor Omar Abdel Akher. "The area could be exploited as a new lung for Cairo and be developed with small villas with their own gardens, as well as clubs and youth centres."

The idea sounds ambitious given the logistical nightmare of relocating the tens of thousands of people who live in the graveyards, as well as exhuming generations of Cairo's dead. Undeterred, however, the city officials, with the help of a 50 million franc grant from the French government, has already made detailed plans to relocate and redesign the Baab el Nasr section of the Northern Cemetery.

The plans recommend that the cemetery and its 2,000 tombs should be bulldozed and turned into a landscaped park with a few strategic mausoleums preserved as tourist attractions. That is only the beginning. The Greater Cairo Master Scheme 2000 proposes that all the large inner-city cemeteries could be moved to alternative sites outside Cairo.

"We are ready to start work but we can't go ahead because the owners of the tombs have complained to the Prime Minister about the removal of the dead," Akher says. "We have to convince them that there is nothing wrong with moving the deceased before we can continue."

Rumours of the move have already prompted families whose ancestors are buried in the city graveyards to buy plots in the new desert cemeteries, where they can be confident that their dearly departed can rest in peace without the threat of reinterment and without having to put up with the clank of pots and pans overhead.

But life in the cemeteries carries on regardless of the winds of change. Mohamed Sayed el Medani, a caretaker in Cairo's Northern Cemetery, sits drinking tea among the graves. Mohamed's home, in which he raised his seven children, is the tomb of a minor aristocrat with an additional storey tacked on for extra legroom.

Despite the offer of alternative accommodation, Mohamed has no plans to move. "I don't have any problems with the dead," he says. "They are nice and quiet." — GEMINI NEWS

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Odyssey under the Seize of Siren

"Every profession is a conspiracy against the laity".

— J B Shaw in *Woman's Profession*

THE 'Oxford of the East', nowadays, seems to become only an empty phrase overburdened by the so-called intellectuals and pandits. And its gravity is determined, as the Halley's Comet did for Newton, by the unfortunate act of the teachers — igniting 'students in arms'. The political factions of the Blue-White-Pink have radiated the 'ever green' with the very ardent colour of life — the red. The teachers appealing to the students in the name of Tagore's verse: *Adh morader gha mere tui bancha* (liven up the half-dead by the blow), and thereby pull Nazrul to flash humiliation upon their own face furracing the blood-stain: *Jouboner hom-kundo pashe briddha boshe agun pohabe* (the old comforts by the 'burn at stake' of the youth).

One of the recent gunfires at the campus marked the 'beginning of an end'. For the first time one teacher was slightly injured by the splinter. The apparent action of Chhatra Dal and Chhatra League on behalf of the Blue and White panels dawned a morning with a different sunshine: that the horse behind the wheel came out front. The 'backbone of the nation', in all its meaning, focused itself as the 'backbone of disaster'.

From the cradle of the modern academic institutions, the 'powerhouse' of civil service, a Chinese philosopher remarks: 'Abandon wisdom, discard knowledge, and the gang-star would stop'. Eventually, modern universities have had their role providing lives for the state machine: namely bureaucracy, army and politics. While bureaucracy and army have their own institutions, politics becomes the 'heart and soul' of the university — like a hot-house fashion. And, within this very vicinity of 'virtue is the luxury only the poor can afford'. Though this verse never matches Tagore, the celebrated sufferer Kazi Nazrul Islam, the rebel poet of Bengal, certainly admired 'dariddra' or hardship for his achievement. Yet, Tagore and Nazrul were akin to conventional education. While Nazrul had to earn his living as a child labourer, Tagore remarks on conventional education with a sorry tone that he never received any prize in his life but the Nobel Prize. The world poet never had a pleasant affair with his school: 'hide and seek' from school was the game of the day for him. Reading the boundless nature within the very boundary of one man's (teacher) idea never satisfied his thirst; 'for he who has access to the fountain does not go to the water-pot', as Leonardo da Vinci felt indeed.

Karl Marx had the vision to view Italy and India on a same platform, as these two countries have had suffered the pain of survival of ruthless plunder. It is also true that these two countries have illuminated the Earth with their gifted talents, and thereby, marked the two different epochs with a single phrase called Renaissance (or the new birth). But the new birth was, in fact, the rebirth of the golden past. And with Italy, it was the revival of the mighty and holy Roman Empire with the delicacy of Athens, the sit of wisdom, where even Aristotle ("the master of those who know") proclaimed Dante in 'Inferno' dressed up in a saintly cloak. The battle between God and man reached its peak, and from the high of the Everest the Earth came out with its slightest details and the nature as natural — human vision acquired the falcon look detecting the smallest prey from the mountain top.

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by Avik Sanwar
Rahman

The two Renaissance in Italy and India presupposed the cosmopolitan atmosphere in which talents grew like mushrooms. Dante Alighieri was the common verse to the Florentines, and Tagore and Nazrul led language movement with mastery; while Italy saw Machiavelli, Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael, India, in the like manner, had the opportunity to gift the world with Chandrasekhar, Sattendranath Bose, Jagadish Chandra, Tagore, Nazrul, Mahatma Gandhi, and so on. Master minds were, in virtue, the 'jack of all trades'. Unlike the modern professional man, Marx's man echoed within the walls of Renaissance — 'We need another Dante' — 'ridiculous idiosyncrasy of rural life. Indeed, the two Renaissance had produced great men as common as peaks in the Himalayas, leading one to believe that the ability to draw or carve is no rarer in man than mathematical skill and only requires the appropriate social circumstances to call it forth in abundance.

The prince of Machiavelli and the princely states in British India played the vital role for Renaissance to advance. The merchants of Venice won their independence by playing off the two greatest powers of medieval Europe — the Papacy and the Empire; and, therefore, it was only a matter of shuffling cards to them to lift the Renaissance prince to power. On the other hand, in India, 'praising the British yoke the Princes hurry to bow their heads just to drop their jewels of the crown', remarks the grandson of a Bengali prince, Rabindranath Tagore. Though Tagore was knighted by the British in

1915, he rejected the honour in protest against British suppression of Indians.

Like the Prince of India, the professional middle class was created by the British to meet her administrative demand. It was not possible to staff the huge state machine by bringing in educated people from Britain other than to fill the upper post. Consequently, the British aimed at creating an educated class of imitators (an ape man) rather than a Renaissance man, an originator of new values and methods. (And the powerhouse, the educational institutions, still remains within that very colonial mood. Ironically, even our lawyers still advocate 'Right of Citizens' from the old pages of the British law.) But 'Minerva's owl sets its wings at dusk'. The bourgeoisie learned nationalism in the market and constituted a political element in the Indian body-politic. As the very Prince enjoys in *Gitanjali* (song offerings): 'All things rush on, they stop not, they look not behind, no power can hold them back, they rush on. Keeping steps with that restless, rapid music, seasons come dancing and pass away — colours, tunes, and perfumes pour in endless cascades in the abounding joy that scatters and gives up and dies every moment.

The revival of the golden past, as well. New values and methods spring up like the fountains of nature. Men of letters lose control within their arrogance of book-learning. Mahatma Gandhi sweats his brows experiencing Machiavelli on the Indian soil; Tagore seeks refuge in nature under the vision of Lalou (the *baul* of Bengal); and Nazrul evaporates with 'Biddrohi' from the crumbles of the street. Like Leonardo, the Renaissance men of India took experience as their mistress and to her in all points made their appeal.

Tagore seems to be the pioneer of Bengali literature and culture, caging two generations, bridging the gap in between, within his enlivened eighty years. The man empowered by his own confidence and independence, from the riddle of ages, prides himself in being Bengali, pronouncing: 'What Bengali thinks today the whole of India thinks tomorrow. The world-poet had the vision to conquer the heart of the universe; astonishing Plato and Aristotle, who criticized poets for their emotional works without reasons, and engulfing Dante, Shakespeare, Milton within his 'verse of the verses'. And therefore, while lecturing in the United States in 1913, the world paid tribute to him with the Nobel Prize worth about \$40,000. Throughout his life Tagore clung to everything straight at ease, as natural as nature.

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A section of participants in the conference

fighters, and also the ideals that inspired us to fight for our cherished freedom. I recall a memorable event:

FF Commander Sector 8, Alamgir, fought valiantly also to revenge the murder of his late lamented father who got killed at the hands of the Pak soldiers at the beginning of the liberation war. Along with others, he too had heard over the BBC that Bengalees from all corners of the world were donating to help our freedom-fighters and he could not miss the interview of justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury over the BBC. Encouraged, Alamgir wrote to Justice Chowdhury right from the war front: "Sir, we are fighting for our motherland ignoring the grave risk to our lives. Everyday many precious lives are being sacrificed. I may also have the same fate anytime. I lost my dear father

in this war. We are not certain if we would be able to return alive to see our freedom for which we are fighting a grim battle. We heard over the BBC that you have raised a storm in favour of our freedom in London and other democratic countries of Europe. As one of the most venerated Vice-Chancellors of Dhaka University, may I implore on you, Sir, that in case we die in the battle you must not die before freedom is achieved for our country."

Despite his busy schedule in London in those days, Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury did not forget to send a reply to this emotion-charged letter in the care Mr Anwarul Haque Khan, then the Information Secretary to Bangladesh Government in exile. I was asked to deliver this letter to FF Commander Alamgir. Replying to that let-

ter, Justice Chowdhury assured Alamgir: "You, the best sons of the Bengali nation, are fighting for the liberation of your motherland at the risk of your lives. Your heroism and sacrifice at the war front are a source of inspiration to all of us and beckons a new life to each and every soul of our dear homeland. Till we liberate our country none of us shall rest. So long Bangladesh lives on the world map, her people shall have to pay the debt they owe you."

Regrettably, now there is none to honour that commitment to us. The father of the nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is no longer alive. Acting President of the Government in exile who conducted the liberation war, Syed Nazrul Islam, then Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed, Minister Janab Monsur Ali, and Minister

Janab Kamruzzaman also long departed. The C-in-C in-charge of the liberation war is no more. Commanders, national hero General Ziaur Rahman, General Manjur, General Khaled Mosharraf and most of the sector commanders too are gone. Now there is none left who would acknowledge the debt.

I recall here the British poet Tedd Hews. In 1988-89, Tedd Hews, known as the best interpreter of nature, came to Dhaka as guest of the then President of Bangladesh to attend an International Poetry Conference. On his way back, I, as one, then serving in the President's Secretariat, was detailed along with the Military Secretary to the President to see off the poet at the Dhaka Airport.

At the VVIP Lounge, the poet kindly read out one of his best poems to us. The three lines of the poem had particularly won the hearts of the young poetry lovers of England. In those lines, he told that the humanity is indebted to a tree, to a bird, and also to a waterfall. If that poet, a noble soul, had come to Bangladesh again, he would have been shocked to find that the freedom-fighters, who at the risk of their lives wrested freedom for their country, are now being humiliated at every step, and he would surely then venture to change those famous three lines and write: when a nation does not feel indebted to their freedom-fighters then certainly man owe no debt to the poor tree, to the little bird or to the insignificant waterfall.

Even if presently the historic debts the nation owes to the freedom-fighters for achieving country's liberation are just forgotten, however

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