

TEENS and TWENTIES

Bangladesh: Blood and Tears

by Akku Chowdhury

THE history of Bangladesh is, and has been, one of blood, toil and suffering of the masses.

However, if we go back a few centuries we will see Bengali literature, culture and textile industry mentioned, with respect, in writings by travelers from far away lands. Unfortunately, today in diplomatic terms, it is mentioned as the 'hard-ship post', while Henry Kissinger went so far as to call it the basket case.

The eastern part of Bengal (now Bangladesh) has always been dominated or ruled by an outside force. These rulers somehow assimilated with the local culture and habitat. Bengalees, being basically farmers, never dwelt on the sophistication of statehood or statesmanship. Therefore the foreigners comfortably ruled over them through their agents, as the rulers avoided the region because of its unfriendly weather and topography Eastern Bengal, being on the edge of the sub-continent.

The foreign rulers did send their emissaries who in turn created local agents to carry out their duties to subjugate the locals. The locals paid their due share of revenues without getting the benefits that come with the rights and obligation of any responsible ruler. Since

tainty (to a limited extent) at different era. None could get rid of the self identity the Bengalees have in their social, cultural and language.

The Bengalees may have accepted the religion but retained their culture, language and social-tolerance towards each other. The Bengalee nationalism was unaffected. In fact during the Bengalee Sultan rule the Bengalee culture flourished and there was a sort of renaissance. The rulers although Muslims, had under their wings many Hindu scholars who flourished. Thus Bengalee characteristic of tolerance is unique.

Unfortunately the Pakistani leadership wanted to change all that and force a blanket Muslim nationalism over everyone. That was an unrealistic approach considering that the two wings of Pakistan was separated by 1000 miles and a large difference of culture, language and socioeconomic outlook. The only binding factor was religion which in Bengal has its own flavor.

It is very unfortunate that politics is made very complex by the politicians. It seems the ordinary people just become the pawns. Similarly, Bangladesh became a case history in the bigger scenario of the Power Play and ultimately Henry Kissinger's derogatory statement 'the basket case' may become the truth. As a freedom fighter and a patriot I will not accept that, same as I did not accept the Pakistan Army's bayonet. We did defeat the Pakistanis and I have every reason to believe we shall rise again with the true Bengalee renaissance. We are only 25 years old, give us a little more time.

The Language Movement of 1952, in reality, marked the beginning of our long struggle for emancipation, liberty and self-identity. Because of its great significance a monument was built for the Martyrs of that movement where they were shot down asking for the license to speak in their own mother tongue. On 21st of February every year, termed as the Shaheed Dibosh, Bengalees would over pay respect to those brave sons. We can see the partnership between East and West Pakistan had cracks from the very beginning. It was not a partnership based on equality, respect and freedom. It was just the opposite. It was another 'colonization of the short, dark, Bengalees by tall, fair, West Pakistanis. The Bengalees were needed to divide India, and make the sub-continent a power base for the powerful but dwindling British Empire. Once Pakistan gained independence, the Bengalees were given the back seat and returned to serfdom. This 'serfdom' resulted in the Bengali distrust for West Pakistan, becoming even more valid and stronger.

Bengali nationalism became stronger. For many socio-politically conscious people, it became apparent that the Pakistani theory was bound to fail. These 'intellectuals' ascertained that, Bengalis must choose their fate as an independent nation to be governed by Bengalis. This idea began to be discussed and argued.

Independence was first argued amongst the liberals in politics, then the students, and then the small trading class that belonged to Bengal. The debate became more and more serious. Soon, it became a dream for many, especially for a small group of radical leftists, whose numbers were minimal, nobody seriously thought Bengalis would rise in a military uprising to secede from Pakistan. On the contrary, it was thought that this was going to be a natural process. The 'birth' of Bangladesh, was inevitable because that is what the people would want and the Pakistani rulers would have no choice but to grant it, since Bengalis were the majority. It was this naïveté that the Bengalis suffered from, that was proved on the night of March 25, 1971. They were totally unprepared for such an army action with so much hatred and apathy.

In the Winter of 1970, the then military dictator of Pakistan gave us a general election. A mass upsurge led by students had earlier overthrown the autocratic regime of Field Marshal Ayub Khan. The new army chief General Yahya Khan, promised an election on the basis of adult franchisee. True to his word the election was held. The Awami League, led by 'Bangabandhu' (friend of Bengal) Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, got a landslide victory. Of the 313 seats in the National Assembly the Awami League got 167 seats, the remaining 9 parties got 132 and Independent members 14. In the then East Pakistan, except for two seats, the Awami League got all the 167 seats.

The election result surely came as a great surprise and shock to the West Pakistani Leaders, especially People's Party chief Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. With only 88 elected members to his credit, he began to dictate terms and conditions for the National Assembly sessions. On December 20, 1970,

Bhutto declared in Lahore (Pakistan), that no constitution could be framed nor could any government at the center be run without his party's co-operation. The PPP, he added was not prepared to occupy the Opposition Benches in the National Assembly.

In other words, he was not willing to accept the victory of the Bengali people and their verdict by sending Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his party with an overwhelming victory to decide their own fate. On February 13, 1971, the President of Pakistan General Yahya Khan, summoned the National Assembly to meet in Dhaka on March 3 for framing a Constitution for the country (Pakistan). On February 15, Bhutto declared that his party would not attend the National Assembly, as he felt the Constitution would not be framed objectively but would be one-sided and be totally dominated by the majority Party—the Awami League.

On March 1, 1971, President Yahya postponed the summoning of the National Assembly. He cited the reason as Bhutto's People's Party intention not to attend the session on the 3rd of March. Immediately following this announcement, the Chief of the majority party, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman announced, 'only for the sake of a minority party's disagreement, the democratic process of constitution making has been obstructed and the national Assembly session has been postponed sine die. This is most unfortunate. As far as we are concerned, we are the representatives of the majority people and we cannot allow it to go unchallenged. He further said, 'that a summit fight has to be put for ending the colonial treatment to which Bengalees have been subjected for the last 23 years'. Not only Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, but every Bengali saw betrayal and conspiracy in the postponement of the National Assembly session. At last they realized their fate and trust on Pakistan was a mirage.

Bengalis were meant to be the slaves of Pakistani overlords. The socio-economic exploitation was supposed to have been accepted unconditionally by the docile little brown Bengalees. How dare they even think to govern over the superior West Pakistanis? However, the docile Bengalees were no more docile. They realized that the time had come for them to curve their own fate and be their own 'boss'. It was fortunate for the Bengalees that they had at that time a leadership in Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who could lead the nation at the most crucial moment, by guiding the people through a complex process of political jigsaw.

A 'parallel government' was formed, after the postponement of the Assembly session, in Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, under the directive of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. There was no going back now, the Bengalees were now determined for their emancipation. The Pakistani misrule had come to an end. Unfortunately, the Pakistani leadership could not afford the loss of Bengal but they underestimated the Bengali resilience. With their insensitive attitude and miscalculation of the complex Bengali characteristic, the Pakistani Generals figured a good 'mopping up' operation of the trouble makers would end

all problems. The problems were not that simple.

The 'mopping up' operation ended up in a full fledged military 'clean up' operation comparable to NAZI operations in the Jewish Ghettos Warsaw. In fact in nine months 3 millions Bengalees were killed a result of the Pakistani operation, which by all means outnumbers the Jewish Holocaust. Even that did not scare the Bengalees. Tens and thousands were uprooted from their homes. Some fled to India taking shelter there.

some time. Eventually, they had to take shelter in bordering India, regroup themselves and formed the Mukti Bahini. These Mukti Bahini (freedom fighters) comprised of not just former military, but along with there were students, peasants, workers and people from all strata of life, who joined them right after the Pakistan Army star the genocide code named 'Operation Searchlight'.

Thus began the ratag Liberation Army which in no time formed into a very discipline and determined force carrying out devastating operations against the Pakistan Army.

As the Liberation forces gained ground with the popular support of the people, the Pakistan Army began to become



Photo: Amiya Tarafder

Courtesy: Muktiyoddha Museum

Many decided to take up arms and fight the Pakistani Army and free their land.

There was no possibility for the Bengalees to remain a part of Pakistan on the basis of religion anymore because, in the name of that religion they raped and killed the very people who were to be their 'sisters', 'mothers', 'brothers' and 'fathers'.

The military crackdown of the 25th March 1971, was the final and decisive turning point in the history of Bengali nationalism. Before this period, the Bengali awareness or recognition that was demanded, had always been within the framework of Pakistan. But after the 25th March, the Pakistani attempt to impose a military solution on the simmering constitutional crisis was to be matched by resistance.

The genocide, thus begun on that fateful night, March 25, 1971, was to be the 'cleansing process.' This the military regime of Pakistan intended as a solution of the political problem. Hand in hand with it would go an equally brutal colonization process of the province. A simple but brutal solution that would backfire.

Right after the crackdown, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested. Most of the other leaders managed to escape. In the early hours of March 26, a pre-recorded declaration of independence, sent by 'Bangabandhu' to Chittagong, was transmitted over the EPR transmitter. On March 27th, Major Ziaur Rahman, (later Major General, and later yet President), read the declaration of independence, on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, from the Chittagong radio station.

To give an idea what the Pakistan's thought of us I quote a few lines from the book 'Witness to Surrender' by a Pakistani Army officer Siddiq Salik, who served in Bangladesh during the nine-months struggle, as PRO of Pakistan Army. Describing the day after the crackdown i.e. March 26 '71. 'The officers chatted in the officer's mess with a visible air of relaxation. Peeling an orange, Captain Chaudhury said, 'The Bengalees have been sorted out well and proper at least for a generation. Major Malik added, 'Yes they only know the language of force. Their history says so.'

Most other areas of Bangladesh outside Dhaka, were still not occupied by the Pakistani army. In the cantonments, the attempts by the West Pakistani officers to disarm the Bengalee officers failed, because of the previous twenty-four days of political activities and awareness. The Bengalee officers — commissioned and non-commissioned — along with the soldiers were prepared for such a betrayal.

The EPR (now BDR), the Police and the Bengalee elements of the Pakistan Army with the help of the general people kept the Pakistani forces at bay for

TAG SPECIAL

About the Essay Competition

Yes! This is your opportunity to tell us how much you know about our glorious Liberation War. Already, people around the country are celebrating the 25th Anniversary of our independence, and TAG, for the same purpose, has organised this competition. We are certainly looking forward to your participating in our programme.

Before I mention the essence of and divulge some hints about this competition, let me first tell you who we are. TAG is run by students who work in collaboration with local schools and colleges to create awareness among the teenagers about their common concern. Our main motto is: 'Learn more about Bangladesh'.

No doubt, the Independence from Pakistan is the proudest of all our achievements. And it is imperative on our part to know about it thoroughly. We believe that your involvement in this particular competition will inspire you to read books and talk to the people who saw this war, and thus broaden your knowledge of our Independence.

Hints About the Essay:

* If your exams are over, start right away you have enough time to read books on our Independence or talk to people you think could provide you with information.

* Unlike other competitions, we have asked your parents to assist you in this matter. Since today's teenagers are unfortunate not to have seen the Liberation war, we think that if your parents tell you some stories about the war, you will not only be inspired but also confident to write the essay.

* Please read the instructions carefully. Only students from class eight to twelve can participate in this competition. Under no circumstances should your essay exceed more than 1400 words. And remember, we are looking for an informative essay and not a political one.

* Your essay should be written in eligible handwriting (you may send us a computer generated copy).

* Although the essay should be written in English, Bengali Medium students should not feel that they are at a disadvantaged position. We are not interested in your stylistic approach. An essay with simple structures but with coherent ideas and full of information, will be valued more than an essay with many poly syllable words but little substance.

* Send your essay by the stipulated time to The Daily Star Office. Once the essays are checked by our honourable judges, in a special occasion we will award each winners attractive prizes, as well as a certificate and a crest.

* Finally, we wish you Good Luck! If you wish to know about the judges who will check your essays, you can read about them in a special issue of TAG which will be printed in the Teens and Twenties, sometime in mid-December.

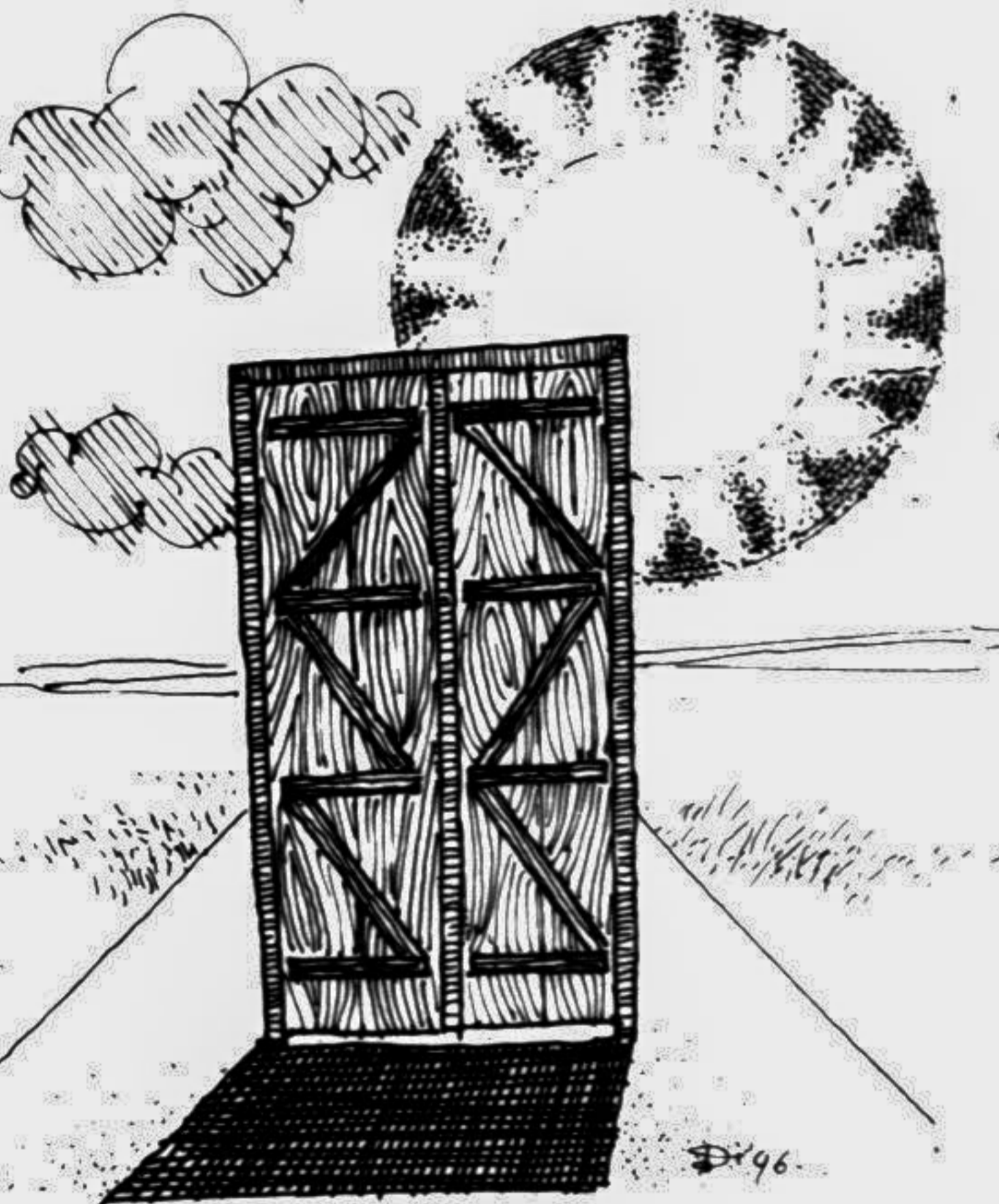
— By Romel, with Muna, Zaki, Raihan, Zareen, Shaila, Mustasin and other TAG members.

Want to join Tag? Simply write to us!

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"The Tale of a Nation"

by: Mir Saaduddin Ahmad.



HERE is the tale about a land. Of her people who fought hand in hand; Armed without guns but with their will. To free their mother land, they would gladly die And even kill.

Farmers', tailors', doctors' sons They made the Freedom Force in seventy-one. They marched against the mighty Pak force. And Lo behold, they won the battle in due course. But in the nine months war that they had to face. The blood shed spared not a single place. Mothers lost sons, families were torn apart. Events took place that would maim even the savages heart.

Humanity was violated, but had anyone cared? It seemed as if the rest of the world had stood and stared. They tried to squeeze the juice of our life Plunging in despair, as if a knife.

Yet, we did not give up without a fight. And Bangladesh was formed to our delight. A prosperous future, it so did seem. Dreams were seen of honey and cream.

But as our heroes swung away from impending doom. After independence, history is a smeared vacuum. Indeed, came cyclones, floods and famine. And life was worse than it ever did seem.

What did happen in the next score of years? What has happened to our lives held so dear? What can a father say about the history of his nation. When corruption has even infested education?

'Power leads to corruption,' a well stated law. Our politicians seem to follow it, without the slightest flaw. They've dragged this nation practically into the dirt. O Lord, my aching heart, how it does hurt.

Darling Motherland, will you let it end like this? Yours son's blood running all amiss! Or will the youths try and start afresh? Answer me now, my beloved Bangladesh!



People's protest at central Shahid Minar against Yahya's declaration. Photo: Rashid Talukdar.

the region was ruled by proxy, this neglect went unnoticed. Eastern Bengal always remained a granary for India. Other economic activities were never developed to make this region more self-sufficient. One can assume that self-sufficiency simply didn't fit the bigger picture of the global outlook of the great rulers of the sub-continent.

During the Second World War, Bengal faced a great man-made famine that caused many deaths and misery to countless more. Unfortunately, Bengal never recovered from that famine. At the end of the World War II the global political scenario was fast changing. The colonies were gaining their freedom. The Indian freedom movements had been put on pause during the war. However, with the end of the war the British kept their part of the deal and gave India her freedom. This however, was not the same India they had colonized, but, a divided India.

Pakistan was created to make the 'homeland' of the Muslims, Pakistan had two wings East and West Pakistan. The People of East Bengal, being dominantly Muslims, had opted to join Pakistan with the hope that their lot would be better with their Muslim 'brothers'. Unfortunately, very early on it was apparent that we had just replaced one ruler with another.

If I may go back in history, the 'identity' assertion that became manifest during the colonial rule culminated in the achievement of Pakistan as a home of the Muslims. This 'identity assertion', although apparently religious and communal in nature, was essentially a reaction of a marginal community in quest of its due share in economic and political arena.

A practical approach by the Hindu leadership to accommodate the identity aspirations of the Muslims would, in all probability, have averted a communal divide of the sub-continent in 1947. Unfortunately, shortsightedness of the congress leadership, ulterior motives of the Muslim elite, and British policy intertwined to negate such a possibility.

The nationalism that emerged in the post-1947 period in then East Pakistan was not only of the Muslims, but of the entire Bengali community cutting across religious differences. Thus, whereas the pre-1947 nationalism was cloaked under the religious and/or communal surplice, the post-1947 nationalism was entirely secular.

Such a secular element was retained throughout boundless twists and turns to the end of the liberation war. It was, therefore, quite natural that the constitution of the independent state of Bangladesh drafted in 1972 had to accommodate secularism as one of the major ideological foundations of the state. There is a historical significance. This region has seen the awakening of many religious philosophies: from Hinduism to Buddhism to Islam and Chis-



The then governor house (now Bangabhaban) after an air attack. Photo: Rashid Talukdar.