



in memoriam Postscript to My Father

by Nuzhat Amin Mannan

IT'S noxious to blubber like this. I know you treasured nothing more than your privacy and the 'decent thing'. It won't be easy to live — even though you showed us by the way you were how to be and what to do. Only if I had your patience and consistency, if I could work as hard and have as much faith, listen as intently and praise as abundantly, cherish what was there and still be so humble, if I had less rancour and more feeling, some of your morals and bit of your optimism, if I could give as much and be as disinterested in taking, if I could at least have as much caution as you had about the words you wrote and spoke! Sparseness was such a beauty when you lived. I am grateful

Death took you in as gingerly as you had lived.

There was absolutely nothing that we could stow away after you died. No possessions, no memorabilia, no favourite junk. Your kindness, affection, lots and lots of good advice, and memories hang around in the air around us because these don't occupy space, nor become redundant because of death.

Your aloneness sometimes worried me. I can only guess how much you missed the parents you had lost so early on. I can only suspect life was terribly hard for you after they died — you were never one to venture to narrate your troubles. Whatever you revisited for us were only good memories — the last

book you read, *The Autobiography of John Stuart Mill*, you told me had washed you with renewed gratitude for your own father.

Your good old days were to be replaced by the bitter-sweet days you lived as a civil bureaucrat. Trudging along was difficult and painstakingly a lonely journey. Words of appreciation from mentors and an obsessive desire to excel pushed you along. Budgets, policies and planning tripped off you with precision. Commerce and trade, finance and planning, external resources and internal revenue, banks and investments were more than your daily bread. Work was religion and honesty the piety you had to show for it. People who you made to

work with you late into the night and even people you did not oblige must have sensed that such unexpediency was perhaps an uncounted blessing.

You survived the retirement only by six years. You talked animatedly about structural adjustments and financial reforms — in your personal life retirement filled you with an irreparable loneliness. A long term habit had been snuffed out. The prestige and privilege of being part of the first caretaker government of the country, the warm patriots you had won during these last six years somehow became a fitting epitaph to your dignified career.

Your aloneness was unshakable but you also moved so much closer to people

— a doting father-in-law, a proud grandfather, a worried brother, a caring uncle, a man of the soil — you seemed anxious to give as much as humanly possible. We took without restraint. The disbelief we all feel is now our thanks for your love to us.

Postscript again: My father is dead. I know I must deal with the stony coldness I feel because of this. Part of my world will always be dark, warmthless and the rest must hungrily borrow light and assurance from the back of my memory where my father happily lives on. Something trumpets in my head, 'The King is dead. Long live the King'. We are blessed fathers never really die.



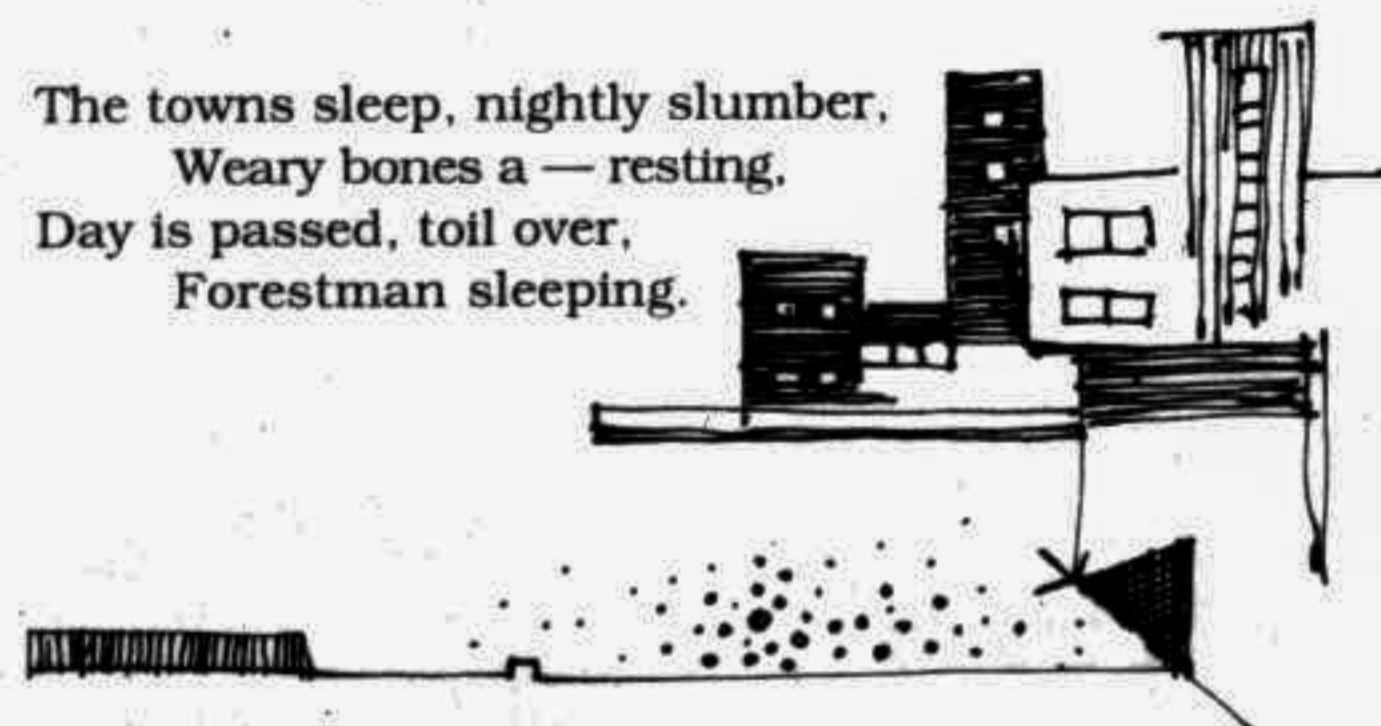
About the writer: Nuzhat Amin Mannan is lecturer in English at Dhaka University.

poem

Bosnia 1994

by Sarbojit Sen

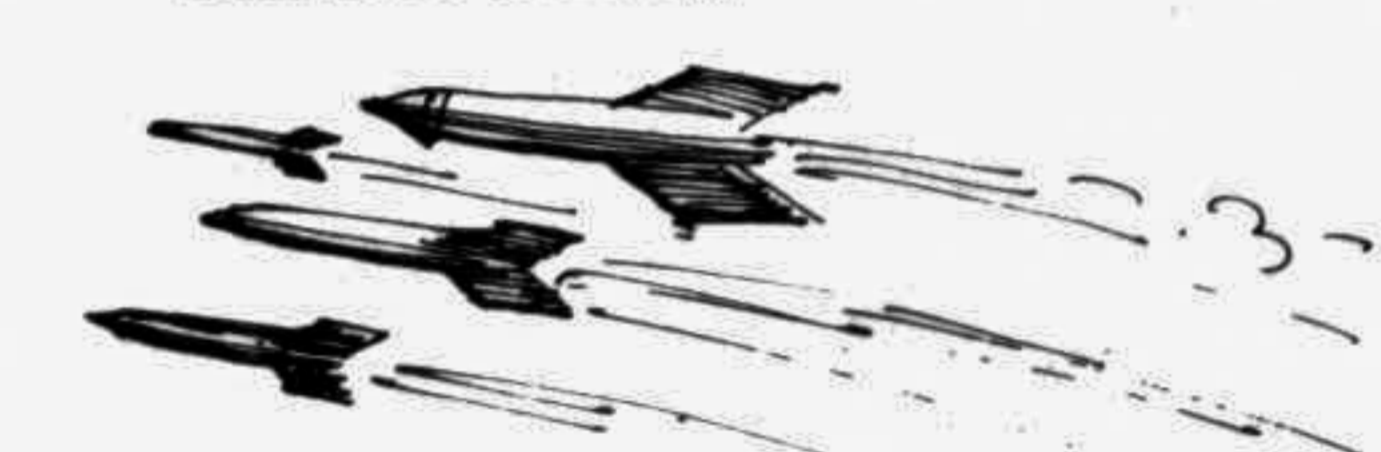
The towns sleep, nightly slumber,
Weary bones a — resting,
Day is passed, toil over,
Foresterman sleeping.



Joy and sorrow, daily adjourned,
Resume anew tomorrow,
Life is sweet, sleep sweeter,
Foresterman moaning.



Was a war, missiles flashing,
Blood and children a-mingling,
Living hope mutely dying,
Foresterman dreaming.



Forest sleeps, one eye open,
The deeps are dark and darkening,
Distant, unknown, woe all men,
Foresterman wakening.



Trees tall, yet not taller,
Foresterman a — rising,
Far off land, looming closer,
Foresterman striding.



Woe all men, demon lording,
Mothers are women, moaning,
Mountains shiver, Death is dead,
Foresterman weeping.

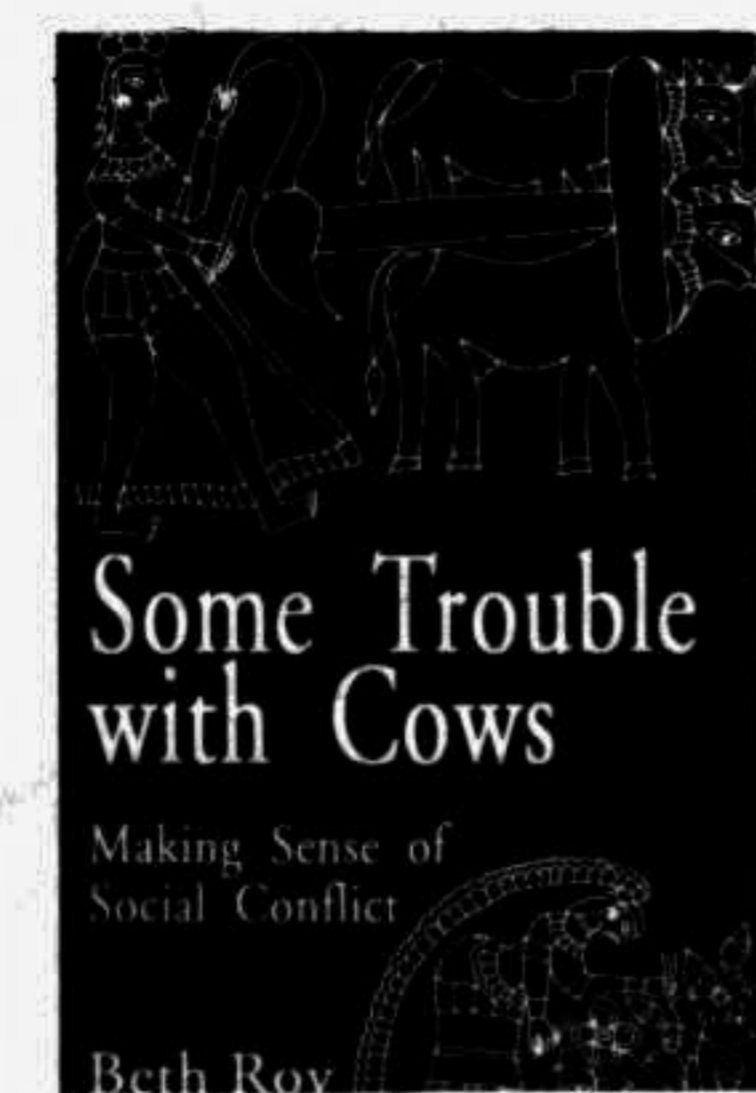


Night is lit, angles flaring,
Storming clouds a — gleaming,
The child is born, Human surging,
Foresterman departing.

review

Making Sense of Social Conflict

by Ashabur Rahman



Some Trouble with Cows by Beth Roy, Publisher: University Press Ltd., Dhaka, 1996. Pages 231 + XVII. Price Tk 300/-.

THE word "communalism" has a special meaning in South Asia. It means Hindu-Muslim animosity and the clashes between them is popularly known as "riot" in common parlance. These two words can be compared to "racism" and "violence" as used elsewhere. Nevertheless, communalism is a difficult subject to analyze.

Hindu-Muslim strife has now become one of the basic social relations which guides our individual and collective behaviour and it is deeply rooted in our psyche. The first thing a child in South Asia learns from the elders is his/her religious identity and the barriers that separate him/her from the other religious groups. A fellow being is not known as a human but rather as a Hindu or Muslim, to be loathed or loved according to his/her belief. It is an universally accepted social value and the most divisive of all regulations in South Asia. Democracy, Socialism, Communism, Secularism, Humanism, Liberalism, Nationalism no ideology or thought has proved as powerful to influence our behaviour and control our emotions as this tribal sentiment of religious collectivism. Communal or racist behaviour has almost become an instinct in us.

Naturally, politics in South Asia in the 20th century has been the politics of religion. It reminds us of Marx's famous dictum: 'the history of the Orient appears to us the history of its religions.' Hindu communalism united hundreds of castes who were alienated from each other in their occupations, beliefs, rituals, eating and dressing habits. The idea of nationhood on the basis of common language, territory and culture was totally absent in South Asia until late 19th century. Similarly the Muslims were never a homogeneous people belonging to a single ethnic group. They were as differentiated as the Hindus. But in the 20th century under the charismatic leadership of Jinnah, the Sindhis, Punjabis, Hindustani, Bihari and Bengalee Muslims were transferred into a Muslim

nation.

As the mid century was drawing near, the independence movement of South Asia gradually turned into a savage, brutal and bloody war between the Hindus and Muslims instead of a united fight against the British. The ultimate humiliation was the elevation of the British to the position of final arbitrator for the division of territories long regarded by the Bengalees and Punjabis as their indivisible motherland. Thus the erstwhile colonial masters gained tremendous respectability and departed from this region with great pomp, fanfare and honour. The last Viceroy became the first Governor General of the new state of India. The sins of General Dyer and Charles Tegart who shot and tortured untold number of political activists seemed paltry and were absolved in the massacres of innocent women, children and old perpetrated by the Hindus and Muslims on the eve of partition. The world did not witness such gore since the days of Genghis Khan and Tamarlane.

The partition and the killings left indelible mark on the psyche of South Asians particularly on the Punjabis, Bengalees and Biharis. The riots have permanently sealed them into separate compartments of religious communities. The British boasted that uniting India was their greatest achievement. But they left South Asia more divided and pervaded with religious obscurantism than they found it. Hindu and Muslim fundamentalism have become powerful ideologies in South Asia today. All political parties from the left and the right have to formulate their policies and programmes by taking cognizance of the religious factor.

Having born and brought up in such an environment of mental hatred and bellicosity it is very hard for the social scientists of South Asia to define communalism and explore its roots. It is doubly difficult even to explain why it is more dominating than the Western liberal ideologies. Nevertheless, there have been several attempts. The oldest position was taken by the scholars of two-nations theory from both sides. Professor Ishtiaque Hassain Qureshi of Pakistan expounded that the Muslims of South Asia were immigrants and their descendants and their culture could never be assimilated in Hinduism. Therefore, creation of Pakistan was the logical consequence of separate Muslim culture and civilization in South Asia. Professor Romesh Chandra Muzumdar from the other side held that the Muslims are aliens who have maintained their separate identity based on a West Asian creed throughout the entire period of their sojourn in South Asia. Therefore, Hindus cannot

live as one nation with the Muslims under a common statehood. There are various soft down versions of this approach from both the Hindus and Muslims.

Opposed to this, the pundits of liberal democracy and secularism put the blame on the British for their policy of "divide et impera" which fostered Muslim separatism in order to counter the Indian nationalist independence movement led by the Hindus. According to Bipin Chandra, the most noteworthy scholar on the subject, communalism has to be understood as a clever colonial policy devised by the British for combating freedom movement. This means that Jinnah and Muslim League were creations of the British imperialists.

The spokesmen of the empire justified communalism as a sentiment of the socially disadvantaged Muslim minority who aspired to 'get even' with the Hindus within the structure of the Raj. The local government institutions created by the British in the late 19th century as an exercise on constitutional reform and the expansion of franchise in the early 20th century promoted Muslim separatism. Similarly Bloomfield, the Berkeley sociologist said that a rising Muslim elite challenged the entrenched position of the Hindu *Bhadralok* class. This elite conflict gave birth to communal politics in 20th century Bengal. This view has been echoed by Calcutta historian Rajat Ray who explained that competition for scarce jobs and social position in a colonial framework compelled mobilization along communal lines which consequently turned into communal conflict. Recently, historians Partha Chatterjee, Sugata Bose and Taj Hashmi defined communal politics in relation to the agrarian structure of colonial Bengal where a predominantly Hindu landowning and money lending exploiting class stood against the subaltern Muslim peasantry. To the Muslim peasantry, Pakistan appeared as an utopia which would deliver them from the clutches of Hindu zamindars and *mahajans*. Establishment of Pakistan was the resolution of land question for them.

In his seminal book on communalism, the eminent Marxist intellectual Badruddin Umar distinguished it from actions inspired by religious doctrine. Umar argued that religion is conviction in a set of precepts and in a code of conduct believed by the faithful to be handed down or transmitted to men by a supernatural being residing outside the realm of humans who expect reward in the afterlife from the Deity in exchange of observance of his commands. Communalism, on the other hand, is an

attempt by a group of followers of a particular religious creed to obtain worldly goods and advantages from the member of other religious faith through unfair means or violence. Religious violence is caused by doctrinaire discord whereas communal conflict is triggered by fights over political power and economic resources by the adherents of two different religions. Therefore, there are religious wars and communal clashes originating from two different causes.

Some sociologists have held that community consciousness is, primordial and pre-colonial, its origin lay in the depths of human psyche. But communalism emerged as a result of British perception of South Asia as a social formation composed of different religious communities each occupying a well defended compartment and to utilize this concept to pursue policies to bolster colonial power thus turning it into social reality. Suranjan Das in his Oxford dissertation on communalism argues that: "The penetration of colonial rule into the indigenous society and economy on the one hand, and the endeavours of nationalist politicians to incorporate popular forms of collective behaviour into a wider struggle against imperialism on the other, meant that the world of organized politics had made significant inroads into the unorganized realm by the 1940s and incorporated large parts of the latter into its 'own forms of power'. In this background once communalism made a headway in the institutional politics in Bengal following the ascendancy of the Muslim League after the 1937 elections, the convergence of the tradition of popular protest with the world of organized politics increasingly assumed a communal configuration". Das explored this process of convergence in the shape of Hindu-Muslim riots in 20th century Bengal in his thesis.

Now we have a new study on communal conflict in East Bengal. This book is an extraordinary work in many respects. It is based on empirical work undertaken by an American sociologist Beth Roy. The author declares that: "To unravel the psychological realities of collective behaviour.... we must look to shared areas of understanding and social location.... group actions are formulated from experience of identity....the complex construction of an individual's location in the community and her ties with others. Similarly, the will to action is born of detailed ideologies that often are experienced as common sense or unexamined assumptions about rights and powers. Both identity and ideology making draw deeply at the well of community memories, those shared histories

constructed through storytelling that serve to define memberships within groups and relations among them, and that bound the formulation of protest."

From the above mentioned premise Beth Roy proceeds to discover the true meaning of a riot that occurred in a Madaripur village in 1954 and interprets its hidden message. The methodology she followed is listening to the story of the incident as narrated by the participants and observers both Hindus and Muslims. It may be described as an exercise in oral history recording. On this ground she presents her thesis by using various theories of group psychology, collective behaviour, consciousness, culture, communalism, community memory and religion. She states her thesis as follows:

".....communalism is a means of renegotiating social relations within limitations imposed by oppression....those limitations are represented in the grammar of consciousness. Just as dominant power is reflected in hegemonic functions of cultural institutions, so too the forms in which individuals think about their world embody hegemonic strictures on their capacity to rethink fundamental power relations."

Put simply, Beth Roy tries to prove that the riot was a social action by the Muslims to rearrange the power relations in an East Bengal village which changed due to establishment of Pakistan. She explains further: "Communal conflicts are grounded in realities that exist outside the mind, in very concrete and coercive institutional arrangements....a theory of social conflict....must weave together the many levels of reality on which life is lived: individuals pursuing livelihoods in particular ways, thinking and feeling in response to their experiences and deciding at specific moments to protest or accept injustice; groups bound together by shifting ties of common interest and by culturally constructed, shared identities that help to legitimate their public behaviour; and institutional arrangements that are ideologically defined and broker the uses of political power."

Such fine theoretical exposition makes the interpretation of the communal conflict in Panipur somewhat cloudy. Several factors are at work here: consciousness, social and power relations, hegemonic ideologies, group action, religion, cultural symbols, peasant communities, character of state and exercise of political power and rights. What emerges from this tangle of concepts is that the state of Pakistan had constituted itself in terms of religious identity. Thus the state induced the Muslims to enforce a new set of power relations and social rights on

their Hindu neighbours. By rioting or through a violent action the Muslims made that power relations actual. By abducting Golam Fakir's cow which ate the lentil crop of his field Kumar Tarkhan violated the new set of power relations that came into force with the establishment of Pakistan. Lacking clear moral authority to justify their decision to move against their Hindu neighbours, the Muslims draw on that particular incident to demonstrate the change in the power relations which the Hindus could not recognize till that moment because such action was totally against the traditional community rules and conduct prevailing in a peasant society. It was doubly so because the Namasudras of East Bengal sided with Jinnah in the Pakistan movement.

Beth Roy also explains why there is communal harmony in Bangladesh now (the field work was done in 1988 before the 1990, 1992 and 1996 riots). She speaks through one of the informants of the riot, a prominent local Muslim politician Mofizuddin, "The Hindus are too weak to fight back, and they all know it." And in the words of a local Hindu, "We keep silent, in fear that it might lead to a repeat of the riot. If something like that were to happen now, we could not defend ourselves. We would not have any avenue of escape." That incident expressed what was in the minds of the Muslims. They thought, "even if we harm them, they have no right to protest". Thus the Hindus have become defenceless frightened hostages in a state which identifies itself with Islam.

Beth Roy says further that: "The story of the riot was a mechanism for enforcing particular power relations and the conveyance of a particular set of ideas. It is precisely through such experience that implicit ideology is conveyed. Those who made their fears explicit were Namasudras who worried about reprisals from their neighbours.... As we followed that trails of story telling, a map of this community's public memory began to emerge. Boundaries were composed of lines of power, complexly interwoven with community.... after the state became Muslim, Namasudras could no longer resist the assertion of superior Muslim rights."

Beth Roy's book is a valuable work and would be useful to both sociologists and historians. It provides a tool to explore the mystified world of peasant consciousness, communal identity based on religion, ideology and social conflicts. It shows us how the nature of the state changes the perception of the peasants about the distribution of power and rights in rural Bangladesh.