



essay

# India, West Bengal and East Bengal

By Nirad C. Chaudhuri

I did not send any commentaries for some weeks because I felt could not say what I wanted to say on the subject on which my readers would expect me to write, namely, the awful tragedy in East Bengal. Passions were bound to be far too inflamed for anybody to listen to anything put before them calmly. I do not think that even now those passions have died down. That is not our way, for we have a fatal propensity to nurse our passions vicariously, and an ingrained reluctance to view our defeats or failures objectively with a view to avoiding their repetition in the future and redressing their consequences. So, waiting for the restoration of a rational frame of mind would mean for me not writing at all.

I would repeat that the calamity was avoidable. I have already had a letter from Calcutta in which the writer said that it was not because whatever compromise Sheikh Mujibur Rahman might have been ready for, the Pakistan Government had decided on taking ruthless military action and would have found a pretext for it. Now, this is the typical fatalistic Bengali apology for justifying mistakes. If that were so, why should President Yahya Khan have come to Dacca at all on the 15th? By that date a political situation had been created in East Bengal which was like any recognized in history as rebellion or secession by a part of a state against its central authority. It was worse than what existed in the United States when the bombardment of Fort Sumter began the American Civil War. From the 2nd of March onwards civil Government in East Bengal had been seized by the Sheikh and his party with the co-operation of the Bengal civil administration, and there was a de facto secession. The Central Government could have begun military action from any day after, say, the 6th. On the 23rd March, Maulvi Mashiur Rahman, the General Secretary of the National Awami Party, said in public speech that East Bengal was already independent and the people would preserve their independence at all costs. He also added: 'The people have received orders from the Army and the Awami League and they chose to ignore the Army.' So, if military action had to be taken, there was no need to wait for a breakdown of the talks between Yahya Khan and the Sheikh. I know what answer will be given to

I am now engaged in writing a book in Bengali which I shall call *Atmaghati Bengali*, 'The suicidal Bengali' in which I shall try to show that everything done by Bengalis since 1920 in politics, in economics, in social life, and in cultural activities has been the reverse of what would have maintained the greatness of Bengal and prevented the eclipse and decline of the Bengali Hindus. In my autobiography, in a passage written in the middle of 1947, I said: "All that we have learnt, all that we have acquired, and all that we have prized is threatened with extinction. We do not know how the end will come, whether through a cataclysmic holocaust or slow putrid decay."

this contention of mine — that Yahya Khan made a pretence of conciliation to put the Awami League in the wrong. If that was the manoeuvre why did not the Sheikh take Yahya Khan at his word and accept any of the following conditions. I put them in an ascending order of apparent defeat:

1. Agreed to go to the constituent Assembly on the basis of a qualified acceptance of his four points;
2. Agreed to go to Assembly unconditionally;
3. Even to have restored civil Government to the Central Government and agreed to continue the military regime for the time being.

Would submission to West Pakistan on any of these conditions have involved worse consequences than what resulted from heading towards a collision? I put a second question: Would such submission have been worse than the acceptance of the Allied condition by Germany in two World Wars and by Japan in the second? Yet both Germany and Japan have not only recovered from the ruin and humiliation of the second war, they are now economically the two foremost nations of the world with a level of national prosperity unsurpassed anywhere in the world. They are not also politically dependent.

The fact of the matter is that East Bengal Muslims and their leaders did not know the basic principle of seeking or continuing a political conflict when faced with an overwhelming military superiority of the opponent. Yet this is an elementary lesson to be learned from all history, and the principle is that no military conflict should be sought or continued when it loses all rational character and becomes a gamble, and furthermore threatens the existence of a people. In such situations all responsible political and military leaders say that they would not agree the death of even one soldier or citizen. I give the most outstanding instances, beginning with one far back in time:

1. When in course of the second Punic War Hannibal was defeated in Africa at the battle of Zama (202 BC) and Carthage was threatened with destruction, he without question decided to accept the severe conditions on which alone Rome was prepared to make peace. When in the Carthaginian Senate a member rose to oppose the acceptance Hannibal with his own hands forced him to sit down. He then undertook to restore the finances of his city and made it so prosperous that the fears of Rome were aroused, and anticipating that they would demand his surrender, he went into voluntary exile, to die at last by taking poison himself.

2. Skipping centuries, I come to the end of the American Civil War. Lee, who remains in the judgment of all military historians one of the greatest generals known to history, found himself outflanked by Grant and immediately agreed to surrender without inflicting further loss of life on the South. One of his aides said: "General, has it come to this?" "Yet", replied Lee, "I know they will say hard things of us. But we have to save the people of the South."

3. After the close of the operations of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, Thiers rejected the idea of mass resistance and accepted the German terms, though they included the cession of Alsace and Lorraine to Germany. After that terrible humiliation the French people adopted the motto: "Always to think of it, but never to speak about it."

4. In August, 1918, Hindenburg and Ludendorff called for immediate opening of peace negotiations because the war had lost all rational character for them, and they did not feel justified in causing the death of a single German any more. Those who have read the terms of the armistice will realize what that surrender meant.

5. In August, 1945, the Emperor of Japan and his advisers decided for unconditional surrender, even though the Japanese people would have died to the

last man, continuing the war. The Emperor did run great personal risk, and some of the Japanese statesmen had to die afterwards, though they were not responsible for the original declaration of war. But the Emperor thought that after the explosion of two atomic bombs the Japanese people had to be saved.

6. In 1968, as soon as the Russian army began to move into Czechoslovakia, the Government asked the people not to offer any resistance. I might recall that in 1938, too, after the great betrayal of the country by Great Britain and France, the Czech Government did not offer any resistance, though the Czech army was still intact.

The fact is that no responsible political or military leader has ever played with the security of his people when military resistance seemed irrational. In such situation there is no room for emotionalism. It should be added that if a people are determined to act positively, energetically, and persevering for a recovery of national prosperity or realization of national aspirations, no temporary defeat can frustrate them. In the scale of history and the national existence of a people ten, twenty, or fifty years are nothing.

Why could not the Muslims of East Bengal think on such lines? The creation of a state like Pakistan with two parts so disparate in geography, ethnic character, cultural and social life, as well as personal outlook and traits was so artificial that in time the combination would have dissolved. In the meanwhile, there was no reason to court such an applying loss of life and misery by being impatient and rash. Why then did the people of East Bengal and their leaders behave in that fashion, and why even now there is no realization of the situation among those of them who are outside East Bengal and safe?

I shall give an answer to the retrospective question. The Muslims of East Bengal did not know the nature of mili-

tary violence, and did not believe, that it would be applied. They judged wrongly from the analogy of the nationalist Hindu Bengalis and the British. They never anticipated that military force would be brought to bear on a political movement. In any case, they were misled by the behaviour of the British Government of India towards the Hindu nationalists. The Bengali people have not seen any military operations since the raids of the Bargis in the middle of the eighteenth century, while the UP knew what such operations could be like from the great Sepoy Rebellion. In recent times troops were deployed twice in Bengal to counteract the revolutionary movement: once from 1914 to 1915, when a platoon or two of the 94th Punjab Regiment and the 16th Rajputs were stationed in my native town, Kishoreganj; and again in 1932 when about five brigades of troops were posted in the different districts of the province. They were sent only to boost morale and to show what the ultimate sanction behind the Governments was. They were never employed to carry out any operations but route marches. Even for rounding up the raiders of the armoury at Chittagong only a detachment of the Eastern Frontier Rifles, a paramilitary police force, was sent for a few days from Calcutta. These operations, the Bengali nationalist represented as military repression. The East Bengal Muslims were clearly deceived by such precedents into thinking that the military measures against them would be of that kind.

Next, I shall raise another issue which applies both to the past and the future. One of the extraordinary features of the Bengali Hindu character is that if it wishes for something ardently, it also wants to realize it at once and cannot wait. It alternates between fits of excitement, and fits of gloom. Unfortunately, this peculiar instability of the Bengali Hindu intelligentsia was taken

over by the new Muslim intelligentsia of East Bengal, though by stock they belonged to a more robust type. In other words, in becoming politically conscious the Bengali Muslim approximated to the Hindu type. But being without the experience of political agitation of the Hindu Bengali he did not know where to stop, recognizing the limits of the agitational method. Taken as pure resentment, the grievances of the West Bengal Hindu against the Central Government of India have not been less sharply felt than those of the East Bengal Muslim against the Central Government of Pakistan. Yet the aggrieved Hindu Bengalis have seen two Governments enjoying their electoral and moral support dismissed by the Centre without rising in rebellion. The very newness and inconvenience of the Muslim intelligentsia of East Bengal has been a factor in their ruin.

This fills me with immeasurable grief. I am now engaged in writing a book in Bengali which I shall call *Atmaghati Bengali*, 'The suicidal Bengali' in which I shall try to show that everything done by Bengalis since 1920 in politics, in economics, in social life, and in cultural activities has been the reverse of what would have maintained the greatness of Bengal and prevented the eclipse and decline of the Bengali Hindus. In my autobiography, in a passage written in the middle of 1947, I said: "All that we have learnt, all that we have acquired, and all that we have prized is threatened with extinction. We do not know how the end will come, whether through a cataclysmic holocaust or slow putrid decay. But regarding the eventual extinction there does not seem to be any uncertainty". I have now seen that for us Hindu Bengalis the lot putrid decay. But I thought a stronger, simpler, and more vital Bengali will emerge among the Muslims of East Bengal. They, too, have caught the disease of the Hindu Bengali, but not with their incapacity for action; retaining some of the vitality which their basically peasant descent gave them, they acted with fatal misjudgment, and invited a cataclysmic holocaust. Nonetheless, I still think that there is a way of recovery, if only they will be strong and patient enough in their present sorrowful predicament.

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To be continued

poem

## Grave

Jasimuddin

Translated by Akhter Ahmed

Here under the pomegranate tree lies  
Thy grandma in eternal sleep  
For thirty years have I washed  
Her grave with tears deep.

Immature with a golden face was  
She, when wedded to me;  
Her doll's marriage being broken, bathe  
In mournful tears did she.

While roaming hither and thither  
would  
I ponder in lone wonder,  
Who all around my house did  
So much of gold scatter.

Quenching my thirsty eyes with the  
Morning glow of her face,  
Plough on shoulder would I go  
To farm with hasty pace.

While going I looked back at  
Her face time and again;  
And this led my sister-in-law a  
Lot of fun to spin.

I know not how her life  
Has been espoused to mine;  
And how I have lost myself  
Into her smile and pain.

While walking to her father's house  
To me she did implore:  
'Pay a visit to me there  
I will wait at door.'

Selling melon at Shapla Market I  
Made a bit of earning;  
And then I bought a garland  
Of beads for my darling.

Inside rolled rim of my loincloth  
Taking some dentifrice and tobacco,  
With the dawn of evening to  
My father-in-law's house I would go.

Don't chuckle, listen, getting that cheap  
Gift of tobacco and dentifrice,  
Would sparkle with a dreamy joy  
Thy grandma's very ruddy face.

A moment of separation from me  
Would make her heart burn.

I know not how she is  
Sleeping in grave without turn.

Pray to the Almighty with folded  
Hands and fervour of heart  
To shower upon thy grandma His  
Bounteous mercy and heavenly  
comfort.

Thereafter have I dragged this life  
In full despair and agony  
Everyone whom I tried to grapple  
Has left me to drudgery.

I draw a hundred graves and  
Coffins on my heart's canvas;  
I count them and err, thus  
Days and nights I pass.

Holding the spade in my hand  
Many graves have I dug,  
To send those to permanent rest  
Who have left my hug.

Much do I love the Earth  
And hear her pathetic sighs;  
Darling, let us alleviate our grief  
By a spell of cries.

Here thy father and there thy  
Mother lie in eternal rest;  
No sound of crying can ever  
Bring life to their breast.

That spring thy father came and  
Called on me to say  
'Father, I can not just express  
How I do feel today.'

Spreading the mat on the floor  
I asked him to lie,  
But nobody could realize that he  
Would so very fast die.

Having put his dead body into coffin  
As I started to walk,  
You asked me in depressed tone  
Where would him I take.

Rendered was I dumb and speechless  
When I attempted to reply;  
All human expression was too poor  
To console thee and satisfy.

Clutching thy father's plough and yoke  
With her two obstinate arms,

Thy mother raised in her eyes  
Waves of tears and storms.

That pathetic scene made the leaves

Of trees fall and groan;  
And the Spring winds fill the  
Fields with their doleful moan.

While walking along the shady path  
Rural pedestrians wiped their eyes,  
And leaves they trampled, would fill  
The air with their cries.

Two young bullocks casting their eyes  
Towards fields from their shed,  
Would rend their heart constantly  
Bellowing  
And weeping tears extremely sad.

Grappling their necks would thy mother  
Wall and torrential tears weep;  
And plunge the entire village in  
Her pool of tears deep.

So she invited the evening of  
Life in her early age,  
And put on crown of death  
Herself from worries to salvage.

Call thee she did and said  
On the eve of departure:  
Dear child! I go with sorrow  
That thou be without mother.

My darling! Apple of my eyes!  
I leave thee quite forlorn;  
And this thought of eternal separation  
Leaves my heart terribly torn.

Drenching her cheeks with dripping  
tears  
Mutter she did indistinct words:  
Perhaps, invoking Providential  
blessings for thee  
Only intelligible to heavenly lords.

Call me she did and said  
In frail voice, moments after,  
Please do hang over my grave  
My husband's umbrella of wicker.

That wicker-umbrella has decomposed  
and mixed  
With the grains of earth.  
The pangs of heart never die  
But live on life's mirth.

The couple lie in eternal rest  
Under the shade of tree,  
And its branches are fanning softly  
Falling upon them in spree.

Waking all might the glow-worms  
illumine  
The graveyard with non-stop twinkling;  
And crickets lull them to sleep

With their ceaseless musical droning.

Pray to the Almighty with folded  
Hands and fervour of heart  
To shower upon thy parents His  
Bounteous mercy and heavenly  
comfort.

Here sleeps thy sweet elder sister  
Who was beautiful as fairy,  
Married she was to the Quazis  
A family of high pedigree.

Although dearest was she to us,  
She couldn't win their heart;  
Their cruel treatment to her did  
All art of torture subvert.

She sent me news after news  
To go there next day;  
And bring her to father's house  
For a very short stay.

Her father-in-law cruel as a butcher  
Would not permit her leave;  
After many a request I succeeded  
His reluctant consent, to achieve.

Gloomy has that rosy face become,  
And no smile blooms there;  
Tears stand in her black eyes  
Where is mirrored only despair.

Sitting near graves of her parents  
She passed time shedding tears;  
None knew that Death would cast  
Upon her life black snares.

A sort of fever attacked her  
And never she rose again;  
My darling! Come hither and see  
This grave does her contain.

Stricken by deepest grief was she  
And none did her love;  
Wild black grass over her grave  
Guards her like a trove.

The wild doves, sighing and weeping,  
Pass all day and night;  
Leaves of trees shaking in breeze  
Reveal the grief to sight.

Pray to the Almighty, with folded  
Hands and fervour of heart,  
To shower upon thy sister His  
Bounteous mercy and heavenly  
comfort.

Here rests thy younger aunt who  
Was only seven years old,

Superb was her beauty like rainbow  
And so was it told.

Obsessed she was by the grief  
Of her mother's early loss  
None could ever realize that she  
Should soon go to doss.

As I beheld her flower-like face  
With a depth of emotion,  
On my heart's screen would thy  
Grandma's image appear in reflection.

Embracing her eagerly with my arms  
Would we weep incessant tears;  
And thus wash the painted evening  
To free it from smears.

One day I went to Gaznahat  
Leaving her at home alone;  
And when I returned I found  
That she had already gone.

Intact were her golden, rosy face  
And hands of meticulous make;

Probably she died from snake bite,  
So none could her wake.

Digging the grave with my hands,  
I sent her to sleep.  
Hold me, darling! My heart breaks,  
For my sorrows are deep.

Here she rests beside this grave,  
Come, come closer my darling;  
Be quiet and do not talk  
Lest she should be waking.

Here beside this lone silent grave,  
Beneath the mute hard earth,  
See with your own eyes, how  
She sleeps in her berth.

Dipped in deep-red does the evening  
Sprawl the distant forest  
Do I foster a strong desire  
To prostrate in such vest.

The pathetic sound of 'Azan' comes  
From the minaret of mosque;  
I am thinking when I go  
To finish my life's task.

Pray to the Almighty with folded  
Hands and fervour of heart,  
To bestow upon all the dead  
His mercy and heavenly comfort.

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