

NON-FICTION

Looking Backwards: 1947 and After

MAHMUD RAHMAN

When the white crescent on green flag was hoisted in Dhaka, as the Raj took leave, I was yet to be born. The only family story I have heard of that day is that my Dada -- really my Nana, my mother's father -- lit a cigarette. He was not a smoker.

Lighting a cigarette can have different meanings. Some smoke to calm their nerves. Some light up after they make love. I was never a habitual smoker. Now and then I smoked with friends, enjoying their company. One winter I even tried cigarettes to ward off cold.

For my grandfather, it was an act of celebration.

There would have been others that day smoking with different feelings. For many, their lives turned upside down, that day was not a happy one.

I was born in Dhaka seven years after Dada's cigarette became ash.

My hometown, in that first decade after 1947, saw a new mix. Houses of many Hindu residents, with deep roots in the city, emptied out as the families felt pressures, hot and cold, to leave for India. Some of those houses, and other newly built ones, such as Azimpur Colony, were filled by Muslims coming across the new border. White men vacated positions of authority. Poorer migrants from Bihar streamed in.

My immediate family, on both my father and mother's sides, was not much affected. My father's roots were in rural Chandpur, my mother's in Bikrampur and Narayanganj. My older siblings, the children of my mother's first husband, had relatives in Pirojpur. We were solid Bengals from East Bengal. My father, mother, and older siblings' father -- they had settled in Dhaka in the '30s or early '40s.

Each had spent time in what was now West Bengal. Stories from that other side trickled down in conversation. They recalled a life splashed with a bit of romance. In his late teens, my father jumped on boats, first to Rangoon, then to Calcutta. The capital of Bengal must have seduced him more; he returned there for college. He joined the Calcutta Police. In 1942, he quit and moved to Dhaka. In his twilight years, I asked him why. He said he didn't like it there any more. Perhaps it was *desher taan*, the desire for closeness with the delta of his childhood. Or he might have felt tremors from the volatile mix then churning in Calcutta: the pressures on the police from the Quit India movement and communal

tensions swirling in the air. He alluded to resentments among colleagues. Meanwhile his heart had found other attractions: designing boats, tinkering with cars, and the desire to try his hand at business.

In my childhood, he spoke of life in a metropolis far more glamorous than the small town that the Dhaka of that time. This would be confirmed from the *Calcutta Statesman* that we received until Pakistan banned Indian periodicals. I learned to read English from that paper.

My mother's family had lived across Bengal since Dada worked as a school inspector. In her stories, one place stood out: Darjeeling. As a child, she spent some seasons in that hill station, and she spoke of cold and snow, as well as the joys of being a Bluebird and being a princess in a school pageant. Just as we received *The Statesman*, my Nanibari just up the road read the *Calcutta Ultrooth*. This monthly was popular for cinema news and carried an entire novel in each issue.

Both my father and grandfather marked Pakistan's birth by starting businesses. My father launched Pak Motors, a car dealership. The name would later attach itself to the local bus stop, becoming today's Bangla Motors after 1971. My grandfather opened Azad Pharmacy.

With the names they chose, both men appear to have welcomed Pakistan. My grandfather chose Azad, ('freedom' in Urdu), a word popular at that time. My father chose Pak, though not quite Pakistan.

The opening of businesses by two Bengali Muslim middle class men signalled that they, like others in their class, recognized in that moment an opportunity.

Both businesses collapsed within a few years. Neither man had the mettle for business. In the end, both ended up renting storefronts. The renter mentality afflicted the Bengali middle class, a group not quite ready for the rigours of capitalist enterprise. Though not as bad, it's still around.

Still, the two men and their families would prosper in the coming years. To some extent, to people of this class, Azadi did deliver.

Of course 14 August 1947 was not just a day marked with promise. Though officially it was independence, we knew it was Partition.

The background to Partition was marked by distrust and hostility that exploded into unspeakable violence between Hindus and Muslims who had long lived side by side.

There would continue to be riots afterwards, big ones in 1950 and 1965. A vivid image

of the 1965 riot that Hindus left.

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurban, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shabe-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My