



"The Repression of Bengal"

Here we publish Reginald Prentice's article titled "The Repression of Bengal" which was published in Sunday Times (London) on July 11, 1971. Mr. Prentice, as a member of the British Parliamentary delegation, visited both East and West Pakistan during the Liberation War.

REGINALD PRENTICE

IN the absence of a political solution the crisis thrown up by the events in East Pakistan can only get worse. This applies to both Pakistan and India. In East Pakistan there is bound to be continuing repression, using the most brutal methods, simply because this is the only way in which a few thousand troops can maintain power over 70 million hostile people. The troops are heavily out-numbered. Their supplies and reinforcements have to travel 3,000 miles round the south of India. Parts of the country are very good territory for guerrilla forces. The guerrillas can take shelter in India and will be reinforced by recruits from among the refugees. More than one observer has predicted an escalation of the fighting into a Vietnam type of situation.

From the Indian side the prospect is equally depressing. In the border states the local officials, doctors and nurses are doing a wonderful job in keeping most of the refugees alive. But this is happening in a country which is desperately poor and most of it is happening in West Bengal, which is one of the poorest and overcrowded areas in the world. The local administration is obsessed with the refugee problem at the expense of other duties; local development projects are postponed; schools are closed to the children because they are packed with refugees. An explosive situation may well develop in the refugee camps as a result of months of enforced idleness. An equally tense situation may develop among the local people, who see the refugees getting more food than themselves and getting it free -- although they do a full week's work. But this cannot be solved by

letting the refugees work, because there is already very high unemployment.

The world must take a larger share of this burden. So far the total aid committed from the rest of the world amounts to well under half the estimated cost to India for a six-month period. All countries must commit much larger sums of aid and recognise that this may have to continue for a very long time. But however large the aid contributions, India will inevitably pay an enormous price and this will become much greater as time goes on.

This downward spiral can only be reversed by a political solution acceptable to the people of East Pakistan. In practice, this must mean a solution acceptable to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League. The pattern is the familiar one of a colonial situation breaking up, in which the only people who can make an effective settlement are the leaders of the political party which has the confidence of the population. Yahya Khan must either accept this, or continue with his policy of suppression -- a policy which is bound to fail sooner or later.

Supposing that Sheikh Mujib were released from prison, the Awami League recognised again and genuine discussions were held, what would be the outcome? The six-point programme on which the Awami League won the election last autumn provided for East Bengal to be self-governing for most purposes, but with the central government controlling foreign affairs and defence. The idea of one Pakistan would be preserved, but the provincial government in the East would have effective control over its own destiny.

It is very doubtful whether this solution is still possible. There has been too much bloodshed and bitterness in recent months. The essential point is



Reginald Ernest Prentice (1923-2001)

surely this: whether the settlement is to be some kind of loose federation, or whether (more probably) it is to be complete independence for Bangladesh, will have to be decided by the Awami League, as the only credible representatives of the people of East Bengal. They must make the decision and the military rulers of West Pakistan must accept that decision.

At present the military rulers are in no mood to do anything of the kind. They persist with their threadbare claims. They repeat that the army had to restore "law and order," that the remaining trouble is caused by a few "miscreants," aided by the Indians; that the refugees would like to return home but are forcibly prevented by the Indians; that life in the east wing is returning to "normalcy," that the world should not be misled by India's lies, etc., etc.

The real hope of a change must rest

on two factors -- their continuous failure to pacify East Bengal and the growing economic cost. Pakistan is a poor country to start with. It is now suffering a heavy loss of export earnings from East Bengal, where the economy is badly disrupted and is showing few signs of recovery, despite the claims about "a return to normalcy." (East Pakistan, so much poorer than the West, has always earned the larger share of foreign exchange.)

There will be a serious food shortage in the East later this year, perhaps of famine proportions, owing to the disruption in the sowing of the crops due to be harvested in a few months' time. This will be aggravated by the breakdown of the transport system. Meanwhile, drought conditions have caused a poor harvest in the West, which normally makes up part of the grain deficiency in the East.

On top of all these difficulties the consortium of Western aid donors has decided not to make fresh pledges of economic aid to Pakistan for the new financial year which started on July 1. Existing projects will be completed, but this decision, provided the Western powers persist with it, will mean a rundown of overseas aid and a deepening foreign exchange crisis in the coming months. Even in normal circumstances, this would have been a very serious blow to the Pakistan economy. The group of generals who run Pakistan knows very little about economics, but sooner or later the hard facts of the situation may compel them to change course. It is our only hope.

I believe that there are three ways in which pressure can be maintained in favour of a political solution. First, the Western Powers must stand firmly by the decision not to renew economic aid (apart from relief aid, properly supervised by the UN, for the victims of the

likely famine in East Pakistan). There are powerful arguments against using aid as a political lever in most cases, but this is a very exceptional situation. Quite apart from the political circumstances, effective development projects could not be carried out in East Pakistan in the foreseeable future, so that any economic aid to the country would be channelled into projects in West Pakistan alone. This would have the effect of easing the economic situation and releasing resources for the suppression of the East. Speaking from my experience as a former Minister of Overseas Development, I believe it is wrong to attach political conditions to aid in 99 cases out of a 100 -- but this is the 100th case. Any power lever must be used which might help to bring about a political settlement.

Second, there should be an immediate end to the shipment of arms from the USA to Pakistan. World opinion should back those senators and congressmen in Washington who have urged the Administration to reverse its policy. That the United States should line up with China in supplying the armed forces of Pakistan at the moment is something that defies any rational explanation.

Third, there should be the most explicit condemnation from governments, parliaments and influential commentators of all kinds. It must be made clear that the governments and peoples of the world identify themselves with the aspirations of the people of Bangla Desh, and that we are united in demanding a shift of policy by the government of West Pakistan.

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Where has the tolerance gone?

MAHFUZZUR RAHMAN

SOMETIME ago, a leader in this newspaper wondered what had happened to our sense of decency. The thought-provoking article struck a chord in many hearts, including mine. I have been wondering, in addition, what has happened to another human trait called tolerance. Decency and tolerance often go together. Still, they do not mean the same thing. Of course one can be intolerant without being indecent. I suppose it is quite possible for one to have his enemy taught a good lesson in fairly decent ways. Nevertheless, it is useful to see decency and tolerance as separate traits.

Tolerance will be noted as a noble human trait. Long reflection on the matter has been edging me to the belief that we Bangladeshis are becoming an increasingly intolerant lot. A point has perhaps been reached where rampant intolerance has virtually obscured the idea of decency.

Many years ago a noted Bengali litterateur famously said that all Bengalis are good humans; it is the neighbours who are wicked. This is of course a literary exaggeration and not all of us hate all our neighbours, though some certainly hate some of theirs. And he was talking of individuals, not social groups. Still, he would have been amazed to see how intolerant we have become as social animals. Intolerance today goes far beyond mere neighbourly ill-feeling.

Physical violence is of course the most blatant manifestation of intolerance. No society is ever free of it, but its nature changes over time. Not so long ago, the most important instances of violence in our society arose from dispute over possession of land. Today, intolerance and violence that take on 'political' colour dominate the social landscape. There is a widespread feeling in the country that violence fostered by politics is sharply on the rise. Much of this takes the shape of inter-group as well as intra-group rivalries. A recent newspaper report suggests that the number of people killed in the past few years as a result of factional rivalries within the 'student' and youth wings of the ruling political party can be counted in the hundreds. Long knives, fat bamboo logs, and even handguns are freely used in intra-group fights. Newspaper photographs of marauding 'students' are among the common media sights.

AVAILABLE IN ALL COLORS



Rivalries that lead to violence are rampant among the corresponding wings of the party in opposition as well. Those of us who remember student politics of the 1950s and a little later will recollect that an occasional push or shove was generally all that happened between factions. One is tempted to ask, what has changed? Perhaps a good hypothesis is the monetisation of politics. Tolerance vanished as lucre took over.

The orgy of violence in the run-up to the January 5, 2014 general election was commonly seen as something unprecedented. The rage behind it was entirely political: the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's demand for elections under a caretaker government collided with the Awami League's insistence on holding them under the current government. Some would argue that the feud was not so much over their claim to championship of democracy; it was more a reflection of the sorry state of the personal relationship between the paramount chiefs of the two parties. Tolerance has been the chief victim of the impasse. The Jamat-e-Islami's reaction to the trial and conviction of many of its leaders for war crimes further fuelled the pre-election political rage. The period of remarkable post-election calm did not last and we are now in the midst of the longest era of unmitigated political violence in the

nation's history. The halcyon days of families merely being intolerant of their neighbours, or where violence is confined to an occasional flare-up over possession of land, seem to have gone forever. Nowadays, intolerance translates into indiscriminate killing. Unconscionably, the instrument of the killers' choice is arson. Burning vehicles, charred human bodies, and burnt men, women and children in agony in crowded hospitals are common sights in the media.

Perhaps violence of this nature will abate in the not too distant future and a semblance of normalcy will be restored in the relationship between the main political parties. It is hard to see other kinds of intolerance going away anytime soon. They appear ingrained in our national psyche. And there are a great number of areas where tolerance often abandons us. Use of abusive language about prominent national leaders can land the perpetrator in jail. Contrast this with prime ministers or presidents in Europe and America taking all kinds of criticism and even insults in their stride. The British prime minister is routinely subjected to ridicule, which he routinely ignores. The US president does not care if someone calls him stupid, which of course he is not.

The killing of Avijit Roy represents an entirely different genre of intolerance, one which is also an increasingly menacing kind. It also has immense consequences for our society. Roy, author of several thought-provoking books, free-thinker and blogger, was murdered on the evening of February 26 this year. He was killed, as the writer Humayun Azad was only a few years earlier, because of his views. A person's views, lest we forget, is a fundamental right enshrined in the country's constitution. Roy's views were based on reason and scientific evidence. He rejected what did not stand the test of reason. He debunked what to him was superstition and blind faith. And in all of this he was of course following the path laid out by the great inquiring minds of history who revolutionised the way we look at the world around us and beyond. Some of these great minds were more critical of faith than others. Roy undoubtedly belonged to the critical school of thought. It is precisely such thinking that proponents of modern Islamic radicalism found it difficult to tolerate. They had been threatening the undaunted Roy for some time and finally killed

him. They have been threatening other free-thinkers too, and there is little reason to suppose that they will not bring out the long knife again soon.

Such killers are never found and brought to justice. That is among a long list of reasons why radical Islam continues to be a threat to rational thinking and free speech. I am inclined to suggest a list which will also include a virtual competition among political parties to demonstrate that they are better Muslims than their opponents. Defending a person of dubious religious commitment is also politically inconvenient at best. Hard to ignore too is a certain pusillanimity of the mainstream media.

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critical thoughts on religion, have also often been subject to threats for their alleged 'insult' to faith. The fuzzy idea of 'hurting the religious sentiment' of Muslims has often been used to raise hackles. It is enough, for example, for a cartoon that was not intended to insult the prophet of Islam, but was construed by some to have been so designed, to heighten passion and raise demand for the culprits' imprisonment or even worse retribution.

Can we hope to see a significantly more tolerant society in the foreseeable future? No. There is no magic wand to remove intolerance from society. Still, can we afford not to talk about them openly and loudly?

The author is a former United Nations economist.

ACROSS

- 1 Inspector in Poirot mysteries
- 5 Satyric
- 9 Female friend, to Femondo
- 11 Tiny Bubbles singer
- 12 Deep pink
- 13 Bitter
- 14man -- mouse?
- 15 Money business
- 17 Support
- 19 Horseshoe shape
- 20 Deception
- 21 Peas' place
- 22 Baggy
- 24 Do something
- 26 Waits in the dark

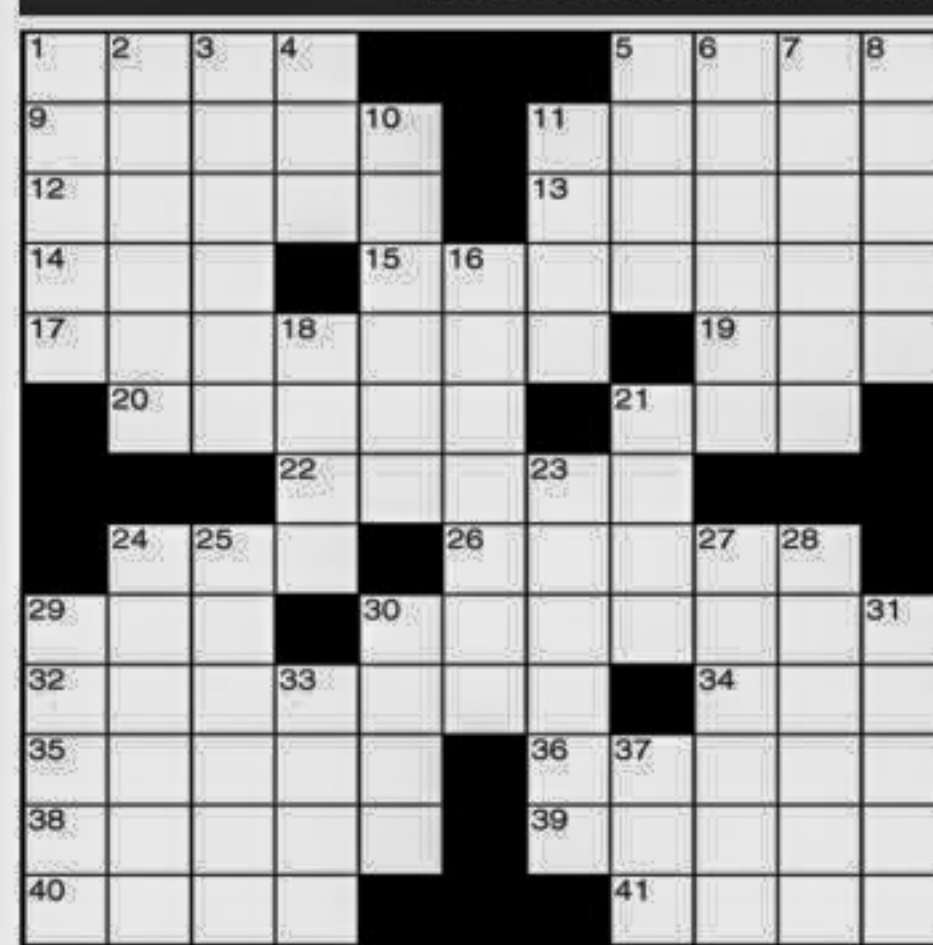
DOWN

- 29 In the style of
- 30 Watch dog's activity
- 32 On the sundeck
- 34 Writer Rita- Brown
- 35 Pale
- 36 Conjure up
- 38 Onion layers
- 39 Hamlet extras
- 40 Painter Holbein
- 41 Plane part
- 1 "Twilight" werewolf
- 2 Unconcerned with ethics
- 3 Illegical copying
- 4 Links org
- 5 Door feature

6 Fermi of physics

- 7 Belly ached
- 8 Avoid
- 10 White rat, e.g.
- 11 Phooey!
- 16 Luanda native
- 18 Tartan garment
- 21 Job extra
- 23 Swelled
- 24 Denali setting
- 25 Redeem
- 27 Geisha garb
- 28 Medusa's hair
- 29 Disconcert
- 30 Storage spots
- 31 Gagle group
- 33 Burns and Berry
- 37 Mover's truck

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH



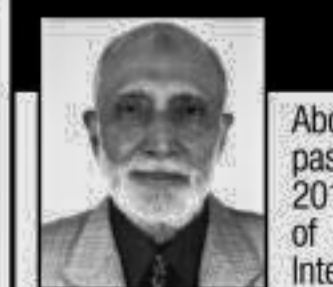
YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

G A E L I C C R A W
 M A L O N E L U C K
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 G A G S S T P A T S

QUOTE

A nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people.

Mahatma Gandhi



OBITUARY

Abdul Malek Choudhury, S/O Late Asadur Ali Choudhury of Sylhet, passed away at his Dhanmondi residence on Friday, 13th March 2015, aged 90. Mr. A. M. Choudhury retired as the Chief Conservator of Forests. After a period as the Country Representative of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), he had been actively involved with a number of social organizations including Retired Government Officers' Welfare Association, Jalalabad Organization, Swanirvar Bangladesh, Bangladesh Cancer Society, Dhanmondi Walkers' Club and Dhanmondi Taqwa Masjid Society to name a few.

His wife Syeda Bulbul Choudhury, former Deputy National Commissioner, Bangladesh Girl Guides' Association, passed away last year.

His qukhani will be held at his Dhanmondi residence after Asr prayers on Tuesday, 17th March 2015. Well-wishers are requested to attend.

Dr. Shaheen Malik, Rezia Sultana Malik, Anika, Ruhani, Raima, Shahnaz Malik Ahmed, Nazim Ahmed, Tareem, Tanzeem, Shadmani Malik Amin, Dr. Ruhul Amin, Ikram, Saheel