

Muzharul Islam: An activist architect

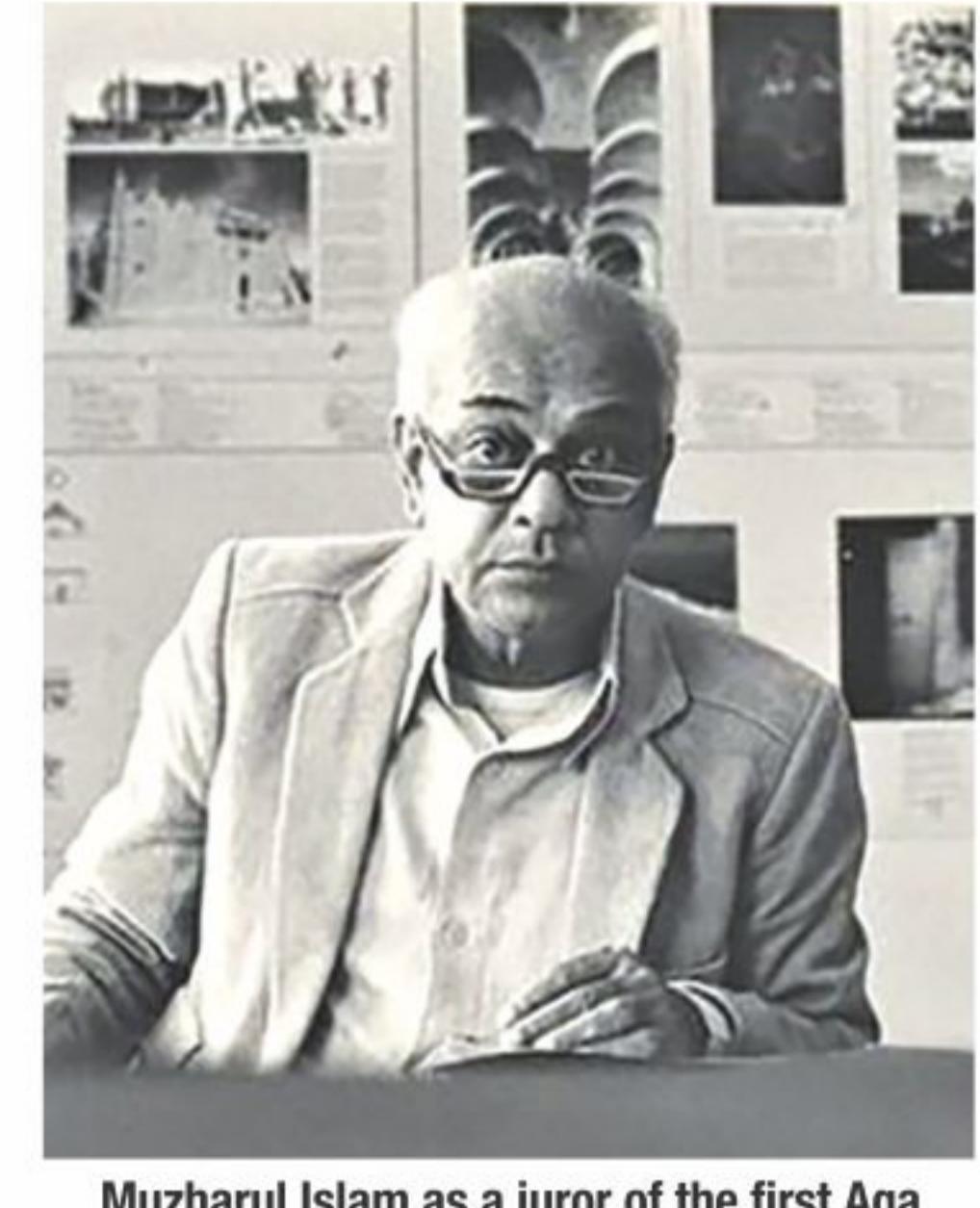
ADNAN MORSHEDE

TO DAY, December 25, is architect Muzharul Islam's (1923-2012) 94th birth anniversary. Not only was he Bangladesh's pioneering modernist architect, he was also an activist designer who viewed architecture as an effective medium for social transformation. His early work shows how architecture was deeply embedded in post-Partition politics.

Consider his "master piece", the Faculty of Fine Arts (1953-56) at Shahbagh. At first encounter, the building presents the image of an international-style building, with a quiet and dignified attention to the architectural demands of tropical Bengal. Closer inspection, however, hinders the Eurocentric tendency to measure the building's "modernity" exclusively through a "Western" lens. A host of nuanced architectural modulations and environmental adaptations reveals how Muzharul Islam's work cross-pollinates a humanising, modernist architectural language with conscious considerations of climatic needs and local building materials.

The literature on South Asian modern architecture usually identifies the Faculty of Fine Arts as the harbinger of a Bengali modernism, synthesising a modern architectural vocabulary with climate-responsive and site-conscious design programmes. What has not been examined in this iconic building is how Islam's work also provides a window into the ways his architectural experiments with modernist aesthetics were part of his inquiries into the ongoing politics of Bengali nationalist activism.

After completing his Bachelor of Architecture degree at the University of Oregon, in June 1952, Muzharul Islam returned home to find a postcolonial Pakistan embroiled in acrimonious politics of national identity. The fragility of the pan-Islamic polity that sought to consolidate the impossible geography of Pakistan was evident. The religion-based, two-nation partition of the Indian Subcontinent into India and Pakistan was designed to create two separate domains for Hindus and Muslims respectively. Yet, Muslim Pakistan was already in trouble soon after the Partition of 1947. The newly minted country's two regions—East and West Pakistan, separated by 1,000 miles



Muzharul Islam as a juror of the first Aga Khan Award, Genova (1980)

of Indian territory—clashed over their asymmetric power relationship, different languages, and, most of all, conflicted attitudes regarding how their divergent ethnicities and Islamic nationalism intersected.

The country's political power was centred on West Pakistan, while this lopsided power structure was further exacerbated by an ideological difference. The ruling elites of West Pakistan embraced a brand of political Islam that they believed would not only work as an ideological buffer against the perceived threat of Hindu-majority India, but also unify the different ethnic groups of Pakistan with an overarching Islamist spirit. Such a state policy alienated many secular-minded leaders, intellectuals, and professionals in East Pakistan, drawn more to a mediating relationship between humanist Bengali tradition and faith than to greater Pakistan's Islamic nationalism.

On February 21, 1952, less than a year before Muzharul Islam arrived home from the United States, the police opened fire on Bengali East Pakistanis protesting on the streets of Dhaka. The people of East Pakistan demanded the right to speak their language, Bangla, not Urdu—the language of the ruling

elite in West Pakistan—which West Pakistanis had proposed as the national language of Pakistan. Some Bengalis, including students, killed during the political demonstration in Dhaka, were lionised as martyrs of the Language Movement in East Pakistan.

Muzharul Islam interpreted the prevailing political conditions in his homeland as a fatal conflict between the secular humanist ethos of Bengal and an alien Islamist identity imposed by the Urdu-speaking ruling class in West Pakistan. The turbulent politics in which he found himself influenced his worldview as well as his fledgling professional career. The young architect began his design career in a context of bitterly divided notions of national origin and destiny, and his architectural work would reflect this political debate. He felt the need to articulate his homeland's identity on ethno-cultural grounds, rather than on a supra-religious foundation, championed by West

With his iconoclastic building, Islam sought to achieve two distinctive goals. First, the building introduced the aesthetic tenets of modern architecture to East Pakistan. For many, its design signalled a radical break from the country's prevailing architectural language for civic buildings. These buildings were designed either in an architectural hybrid of Mughal and British colonial traditions, popularly known as Indo-Saracenic, or as utilitarian corridor-and-room building boxes, delivered by the provincial government's Department of Communications, Buildings, and Irrigation (CBI). The Faculty of Fine Arts was an unambiguous departure from the colonial-era Curzon Hall (1904-1908) at the Dhaka University, within walking distance of Islam's building, and the Holy Family Hospital (1953, now Holy Family Red Crescent Medical College Hospital).

Second, the Faculty of Fine Arts' modernist

ture—was a conscious critique of the politicised version of Islam that had become a state apparatus for fashioning a particular religion-based image of postcolonial Pakistan. By abstracting his design through a modernist visual expression, Muzharul Islam sought to purge architecture of what he viewed as the political associations of instrumental religion.

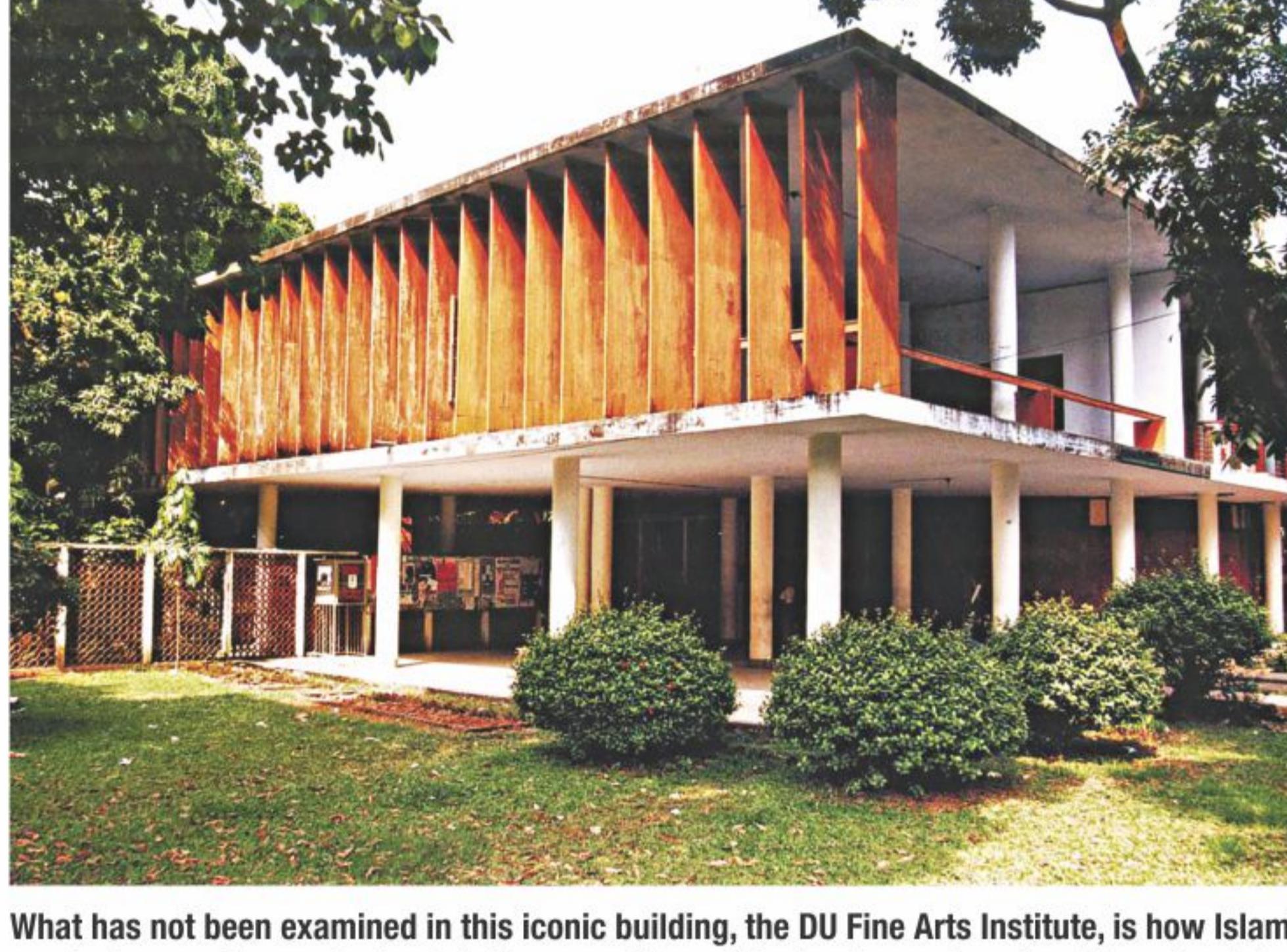
At Yale University in 1960, where he pursued a Master's degree in architecture, Islam met Stanley Tigerman, with whom he formed a design partnership to work in East Pakistan. Tigerman claimed that Islam's architecture was part of the same search for a Bengali identity that helped define the secular ideological foundation on which the new nation of Bangladesh was eventually built.

The Faculty's modernism hinges on Muzharul Islam's dual commitment to a secular Bengali character and universal humanity, a post-nationalist worldview rooted in the enlightenment ideals of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), as well as his own education in both the East and West. A life-long student of Tagore, Islam refused to see any ideological conflict between Bengali mythos and modern notions of progress and rationality. What makes Muzharul Islam's work particularly important is that his architectural search was triggered by a peculiar political predicament resulting from the inversion of the very pan-Islamic argument that was used in the creation of Pakistan.

Today, the Faculty of Fine Arts has become an icon not only of art education in the country, but also of its modernist national aspiration. The much-celebrated cultural procession on April 14, the first day of the Bengali calendar, begins here. Art students create giant papier-mâché masks, birds, animals, and fish, which symbolise Bengal's agro-pastoral heritage. The building is part of the national narrative.

Happy birthday, maestro Muzharul Islam!

Adnan Morshed is an architect, architectural historian, and urbanist and currently serving as Chairperson of the Department of Architecture at BRAC University. He is the author of *Impossible Heights: Skyscrapers, Flight, and the Master Builder* (2015) and *Oculus: A Decade of Insights in Bangladeshi Affairs* (2012). This essay has been excerpted from his recently published article "Modernism as Postcolonial Politics: Muzharul Islam's Faculty of Fine Arts (1953-56)" in the Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians. He can be reached at amorshed@bracu.ac.bd.



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Pakistani power-wielders. Muzharul Islam's Faculty of Fine Arts embodied these beliefs.

minimalism—rejecting all ornamental references to Mughal and Indo-Saracenic architec-

A message of peace and harmony

This Christmas, let's ponder upon the powerful words delivered by Pope Francis during his recent visit to Bangladesh



BR HAROLD BIJOY RODRIGUES, CSC

THIS year, while Christmas celebrations take place as usual, there is an opportunity for the people of Bangladesh, especially the Christian community here, to look at Christmas from a different perspective

following the visit of His Holiness Pope Francis to Bangladesh.

The Supreme Pontiff Pope Francis visited Bangladesh from November 30 to December 2, 2017. His visit has had a number of aspects that have significant implications for all to take into cognisance.

The Pope met with the highest authorities of the land: the president, the prime minister, dignitaries, and various other groups. The highest point of his visit, from the perspective of the Catholic community in Bangladesh, was being the main celebrant at the Holy Eucharist at Suhrawardy Udyana, where more than 100,000 Catholics were present and where he ordained 16 young men to priesthood. He also had audiences with the leaders of the Catholic and other denominations of the Church and leaders of other religions, a number of Rohingya refugees, the youth, Catholic clerics, and sections of disadvantaged groups.

Apart from what he talked about with government officials, let me highlight some of his words and thoughts that he shared with people of different religions, the youth, the Rohingyas and the disadvantaged groups. His message to these people can evoke some reflections relevant to the celebration of Christmas this year.

In an inter-religious gathering of people of different faiths, the pontiff said that his visit



Br Lawrence Dias, CSC with Pope Francis.

"marked a further step toward respect and dialogue between Christianity and Islam."

His Holiness Pope Francis, on his return to the Vatican on December 6 during his general audience said, "In the faces of those young people, full of joy, I saw the future of Asia: a future that doesn't belong to those who build weapons, but to those who sow brotherhood."

With regard to the Rohingya refugees, he "praised the country's care for religious liberty and its welcoming of thousands of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar," and observed, "I wanted to express my solidarity with Bangladesh in their commitment to aid the Rohingya refugees flowing en masse in their territory, where population density is among the highest in the world."

Listening to the stories of 16 Rohingya refugees at this Inter-faith religious gathering, he talked to each of the refugees and said, "In the name of everyone, of those who have persecuted you, hurt you, above all, for the indifference of the world, I ask for your forgiveness. I'm sorry. It is imperative that the international community take decisive measures to address this grave crisis."

Referring to the religious leaders, especially the Buddhists by quoting Buddha, the pontiff also added: "Overcome the angry with non-anger; overcome the wicked with goodness; overcome the greedy by generosity; overcome the liar by truth. May that wisdom continue to inspire every effort to foster patience and understanding, and heal the wounds of conflict that through the years have divided

Do we as people of Bangladesh, as members of the Christian Churches, as followers of different religious convictions, as clergy and religious, and as the youth, embrace the sentiments of the Pope expressed through his messages?

people of different cultures, ethnicities and religious convictions."

At the gathering of the clergies in Tejgaon Holy Rosary Church, the Supreme Pontiff, highlighted, among other things, an important quality for them to be attentive to. He said, "Attentiveness to the Lord allows us to see the world through his eyes and thus to become more sensitive to the needs of those whom we serve."

One of the speakers at this gathering was the Ashram Guru of Mariam Ashram, Brother Lawrence Dias, a Holy Cross Brother. Reacting to Br Lawrence's address, the Pope said, "When you spoke of your ashram, you helped us to see the importance of assisting people to satisfy their spiritual thirst. May all of you, in the great variety of your apostolates, be a source of

spiritual refreshment and inspiration to those you serve, and enable them to share their gifts ever more fully with one another in advancing the mission of the Church."

When the Pope visited the Nirmal Hriday Home of Compassion, where Missionaries of Charity (Sisters of St Mother Teresa of Kolkata) Sisters take care of the orphans and people with disabilities, he commended the Sisters by saying, "Sisters who pray together, who serve the suffering continuously with a smile. It is a beautiful witness. I thank these little sisters so much."

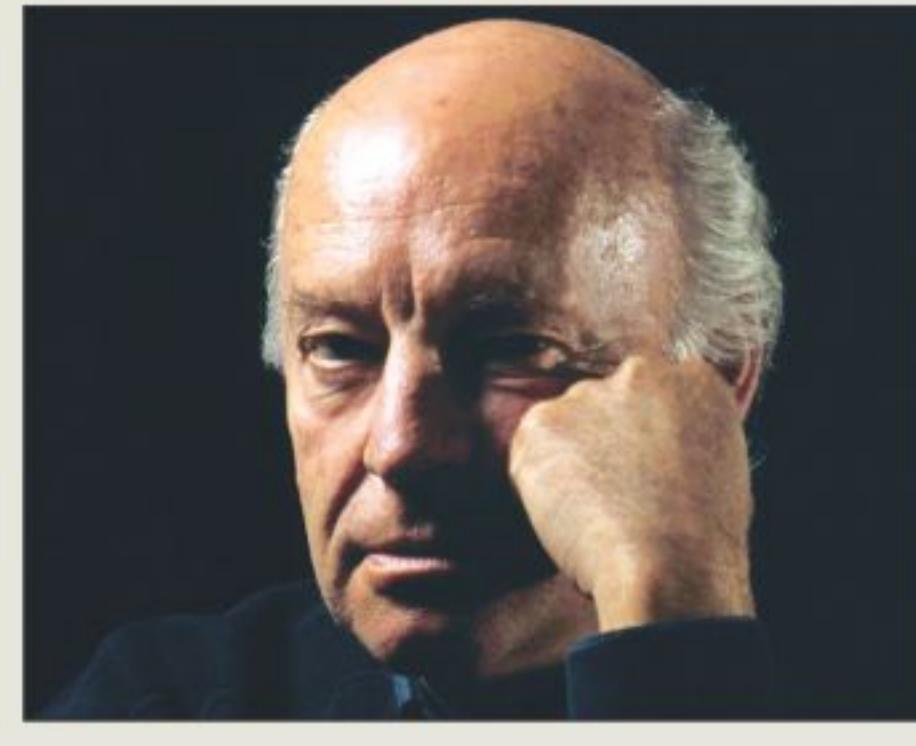
In the various gatherings that the Pope addressed during his visit to Bangladesh, the following messages were loud and clear: (i) respect and dialogue between Christianity and Islam, or for that matter, among all religions; (ii) a future not to build weapons, but to sow brotherhood; (iii) commitment to assist Rohingya refugees and to be sorry and seek their forgiveness for the persecution, the hurt, the indifference of the world; (iv) attentiveness to the Lord to be more sensitive to the people being served; and (v) to serve the suffering people continuously with a smile.

Do we as people of Bangladesh, as members of the Christian Churches, as followers of different religious convictions, as clergy and religious, and as the youth, embrace the sentiments of the Pope expressed through his messages?

Let us dive deep down into our hearts' depths and make this Christmas something more significant and meaningful by loving all and sowing brotherhood, be sorry and seek forgiveness for our wrongdoings, be attentive to the inner voice, and avail every opportunity to serve others with a smile on our lips.

Br Harold Bijoy Rodrigues is Provincial Superior of the Holy Cross Brothers in Bangladesh.

Quotable Quote



EDUARDO GALEANO
Uruguayan journalist, writer and novelist (1940-2015)

In this world of ours, a world of powerful centers and subjugated outposts, there is no wealth that must not be held in some suspicion.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Postal delivery
- 26 Farrow of film
- 29 "Get a move on!"
- 30 Stadium group
- 31 Museum subject
- 32 Christmas stealer
- 34 Creator of 32-Across
- 35 Debate
- 38 North Pole boss
- 39 Goes off course
- 40 Pencil part
- 41 Goes off course

DOWN

- 1 Madison's successor
- 2 Soft yarn
- 3 That is: Latin
- 21 Pro vote
- 22 Snow source
- 23 Winter gliders
- 24 Seasonal songs
- 7 Dodged
- 8 Tart fruits
- 9 Eccentric
- 11 Transmitted
- 15 Christmas symbol
- 19 Fishing poles
- 20 Astronaut Grissom
- 22 Plumbing problem
- 23 Dads to jrs.
- 24 Breakfast choice
- 25 Harmonize
- 26 Creche part
- 27 Sustains
- 28 Hearn stuff
- 29 Young girl
- 30 Boss, at times
- 33 Gushing review
- 25 RR stop
- 6 Flamenco cry

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

A	W	L	S	C	A	R	O	L
CHA	O	S	O	P	E	R	A	C
MAN	S	E	A	T	B	A	T	B
ETC	C	O	T	O	C	O	T	C
SIE	ST	A	R	O	L	E	O	E
FRU	I	T	C	A	K	E	E	E
NOM	A	M	D	A	D	M	A	A
PAN	N	E	T	O	N	E	O	O
DAL	Y	A	N	N	A	L	S	S
ARC	F	L	A	D	E	W	P	P
ELV	E	S	T	A	R	C	I	I
SEED	S	A	N	S	A	T	A	T

BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT