

MUSINGS

POETRY

BANERJEE VS. CHATTERJEE 1945

JOHN DREW

THE TIMES OF SAIGON

I know of Capt. Banerjee, Military Observer, only because he wrote feature articles for the *Times of Saigon*, edited by my father, Bernard Drew, during the last four months of 1945. Capt. Banerjee had flown in with the 20th Indian Division from Rangoon to Saigon in September 1945 to accept the surrender of the Japanese forces. *The Times* was a flimsy, cyclostyled news sheet published daily by Allied HQ.

CAPTAIN BANERJEE ON THE INDIAN SOLDIER

One half-page article of Capt. Banerjee that catches the eye is head-lined: **HOW THE INDIAN SOLDIER "LICKED" THE JAPS IN BURMA**. The headline alludes to a remark made by General "Bill" Slim on a visit to Saigon and Capt. Banerjee supports this contention by reference to incidents of bravery he had himself witnessed in central Burma.

While the Indian regulars belong to a long military tradition, he writes, the wartime army has been mostly composed of volunteers, peasants who have shown cool and calculated judgement and won a number of V.C.'s. Fighting alongside foreigners, the Indian peasant has lost his sense of feeling inferior to them and is altogether "a new man".

BRITISH OFFICERS AND THE INDIAN ARMY

Capt. Banerjee's assessment, in an "embedded" news sheet, mirrors the views of the Allied High Command. The first issue of *The Times* reports Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia, after visiting P.O.W. camps, observing that Indians formed 70% of Allied ground forces in South East Asia and had resisted vicious attacks on their loyalty, preferring "death to dishonour".

Three months later Lord Wavell, the Viceroy of India, makes the same point, saying that of the captured Indian P.O.W.s, 45,000 refused to join Subhas Chandra Bose's Japanese-allied Indian National Army and suffered 11,000 casualties as a result.

The paper does not report on the considerable number of those soldiers who did join the INA, only that Major General A.C. Chatterjee and other of their

leaders are being captured in Hanoi and sent for trial in India not only for making war on the King but for torturing and punishing their fellow P.O.W.s who did not join the INA. *The Times* does report that by Christmas, their sentences to transportation for life have been remitted by General Auchinlech, C-in-C India.

Historians have to weigh in the balance whether it was the Japanese-allied Indian National Army advancing on India or the British-led Indian Army resisting them, if either, that played the greater role in determining and guaranteeing Indian independence.

THE VIEW FROM LONDON

Full self-government for India was announced by the newly-elected Labour Government in Britain immediately after

after negotiating a loan of £1,100,000,000 (a debt only finally paid back in 2006).

THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

On the international stage, the paper records, a serious attempt was being made to hold together the wartime alliance of the Big Three (the Soviet Union, the United States of America and Great Britain) and guarantee a new world order.

Foreign Ministers of the three Powers agreed to work together to establish the peace in China and in Korea. Plans were made to establish the United Nations Organization in London, and separate bodies were quickly formed to deal with such matters as control of atomic power and food distribution on a global scale.

help Dutch women and children being released from internment in the Dutch East Indies: we were on the side of the Indonesians, they said.

A NEW WORLD ORDER?

Towards the end of 1945, there was an editorial in the *Times* welcoming Ernest Bevin's arrival in Moscow for a Foreign Ministers' conference designed to clear up "the terrible mess" the world was in. The editorial warned its readers that it is a world they have made because they have not developed the patience to understand other people's points of view.

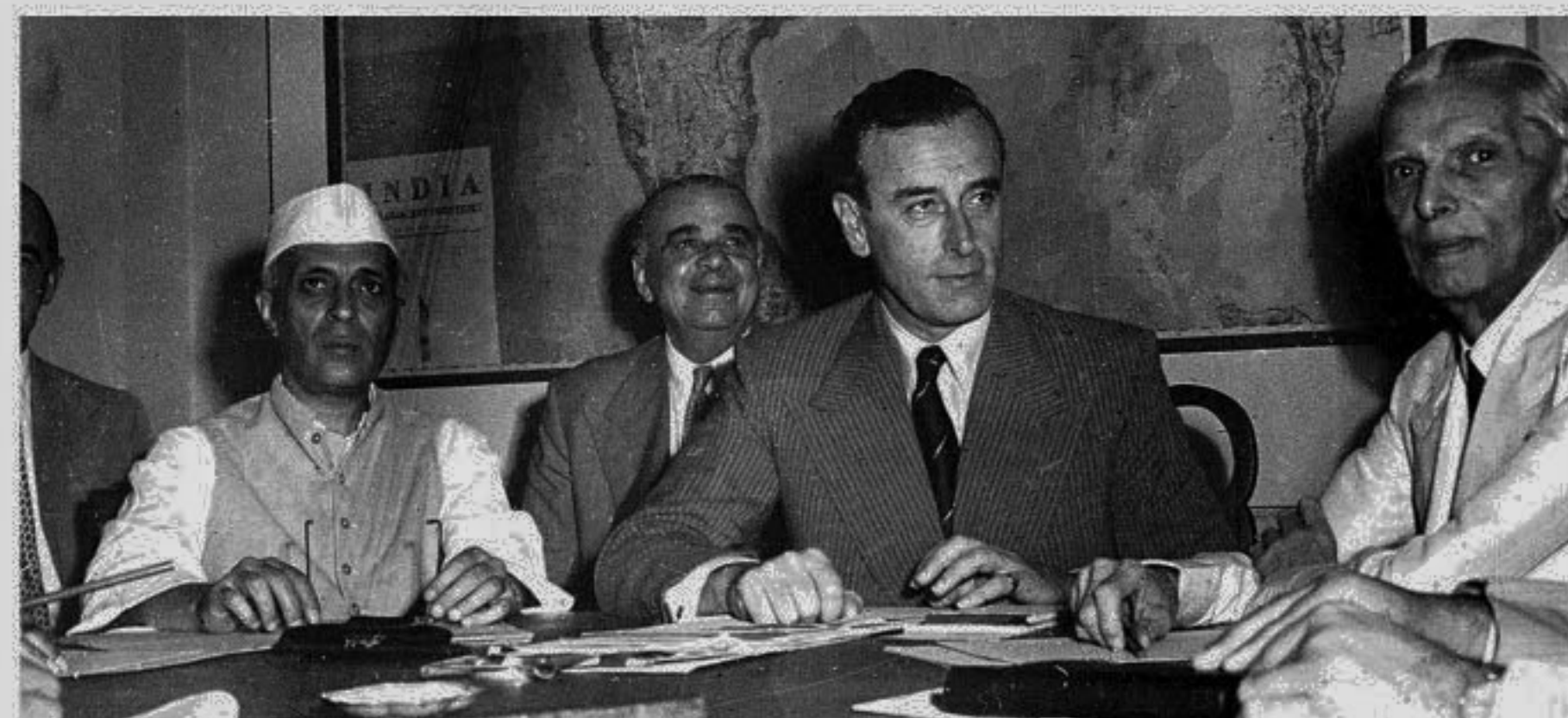
The final editorial of the *Old Year* bade a heartfelt goodbye to a year in which, at the end of "the greatest slaughter of all time," all had been stunned by the effect of two small bombs. One good effect of the war, it added, had been the responsibility given to young men that they would never have had in a lifetime of peace. So it was now up to them to ensure that the century of the Common Man passes from phrase to fact.

This post-War possibility of a new World Order in favour of the Common Man suddenly vanishes. President Truman makes a decision not to support those anti-colonial movements for independence that include any form of Communist constituent. This reversal of Roosevelt's policy on colonialism was partly determined by his decision to back western European countries in their fight against Communism within (Italy, France and Greece all have strong Communist Parties in repudiation of Fascism).

India, its independence already conceded, might have had hoped to be free of the Cold War divisions that followed upon this, notably in Korea and Vietnam. Instead, as we know, it suffered the appalling trauma of Partition and its constituent countries, notwithstanding India's place in the Non-alignment movement, suffering from the way the Big Three were able to play upon internal divisions.

At least before the 20th Indian division left Saigon, in a football match refereed by my father, the Other Ranks beat the Officers 2-1. The Common Man won that one. How about that?

John Drew reports on a bit of family history that marginally overlapped with India's.



the War ended, a fact relayed by the sixth issue of the news sheet. Prime Minister Atlee's panacea was of a free, undivided India based on the Cripps' proposals of 1942 with constitutional guarantees provided for minorities.

As M.N. Roy (the Bengali Radical Humanist who had been the one member of the Communist International besides Lenin to propose theses concerning the liberation of Asian peoples) had seen in 1940, when he offered his services to the (British-run) Indian Government, Britain would be a spent force after the war, unable (even if it wanted to) to hold on to India. And spent force it was.

One issue of *The Times* reports that Britain has "become a debtor nation for the first time in its history," Lord Keynes having returned from North America

So what was the position of Britain? For a while anyway, the new Labour Government looks to be an ideal mediator between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. With Churchill out and Atlee in, abroad as at home, it promises a new deal for ordinary people.

In late September, Jack Lawson, Atlee's close friend and Minister of War, on an extensive tour of the Far East, is quoted by official SEAC radio in Singapore as saying that it is not the policy of the new British Government to support the French in Indo-China or the Dutch in the Netherlands East Indies.

This is in line with American attitudes towards European colonialism in Asia. The late President Roosevelt had sent Special Forces to support Ho Chi Minh in his campaign to overthrow French rule in Indo-China. American sailors refused to



Enduring Life

(a haiku sequence)

RONNY NOOR

racing ahead
cars buses taxis rickshaws
crisscross

rickshaw puller
singing of far-flung love...
dripping with sweat

homeless man
enthroned on the traffic island
watching life flash by

old tourist
tripping on the sidewalk
crouched on the hawkker's wares

squeezing out
of the crammed double decker
torn sleeve

traffic jam
between ambulance sirens
cries of a newborn

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REVIEWS

A G Stock's Memoirs of Dacca University

REVIEWED BY MARZIA RAHMAN

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"The book is a memoir, not a history, and makes no claim to a historian's detachment or research." With this statement, A G Stock makes her point clear at the outset of her book, *Memoirs of Dacca University 1947-1951*, even though the memoir fervently records the tumultuous period in East Pakistan after the Partition and gives an insight into the causes leading to the Language Movement. First published in 1973 by Green Book House Limited, a new edition of the title went into print in 2017 by Bengal Lights Books with a forward by Kaiser Haq, and the current editor Khademul Islam's note, both stressing on the paramount significance of the book.

The memoir begins with Stock narrating the preface of her choosing a career in the East. After graduating from Oxford, she had happily settled into a life, wittily identified as a double life in London, teaching part time at a training college while also 'hard at work in colonial freedom movement,' an interest she developed during student time by collaborating with the anti-colonial student forum. It is this interest that finally led her to choose the job of a professor and Head of the English Department of The University of Dacca in 1947 where she stayed till 1951.

It was just an aftermath of the Partition. The new country Pakistan was yet to settle down as Stock correctly discerned "unlike India, which had been preparing for independence for years, Pakistan had only just begun to believe in its own existence." No doubt, both the country and the university were going through a rough patch. And in midst of this chaotic confusion, Stock landed, settled down and mingled with people from various walks of path with an easy grace and compassion.

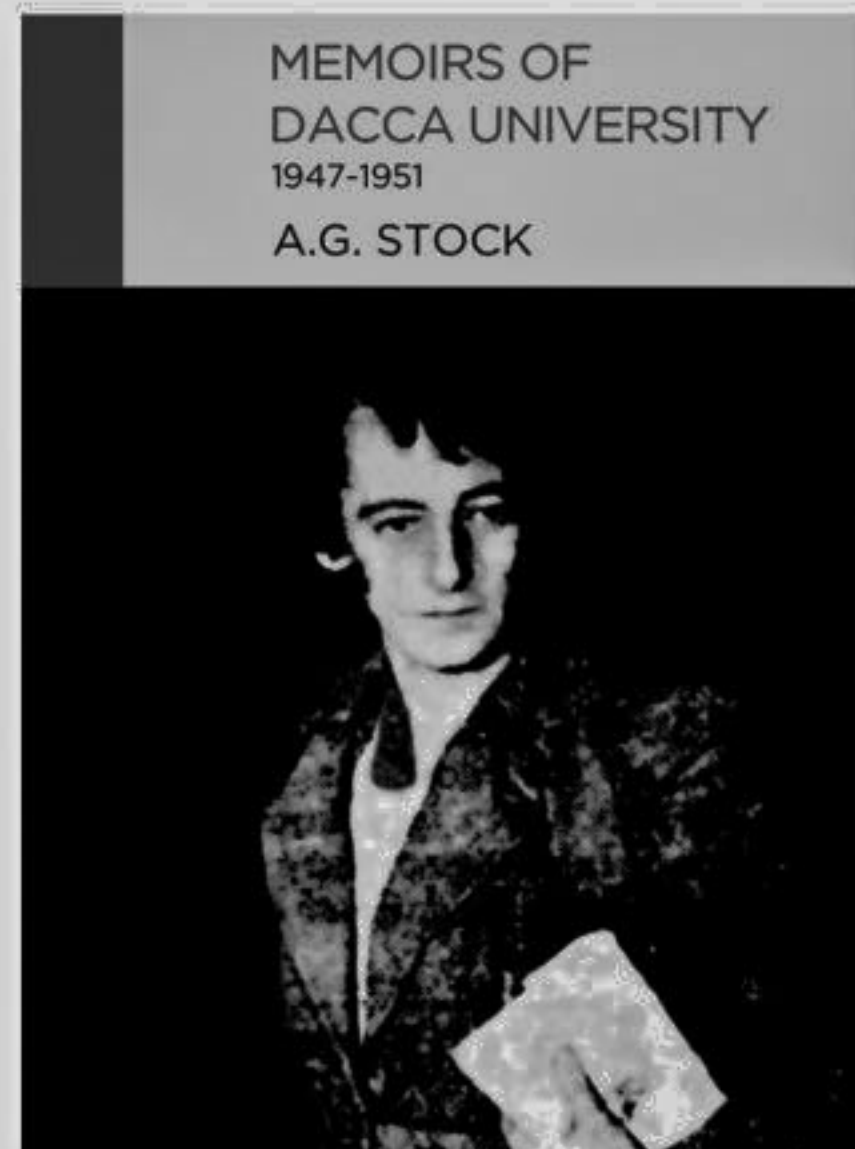
A keen observer of people and places,

Stock in her memoir launches into an evocative description of all the people she met and all the places she visited during her four years of stay in East Pakistan. She accurately describes her brief encounter with people on the SS *Franconia* like the young Pakistani army cadet who naively believed, "We simply can't visualize a country divided forever... we shall come back to a united India" (5), or the Bengali girl from Santiniketan who came up with this beautiful poetic line, "One should never hold on tightly to life." She portrays the activities of the small village boys who offered their services as porters: "A troop of brown boys in loincloths leapt from the bank and raced towards the steamer... they went through the water like drapers' scissors through bales of cloth." (9) As a literary scholar, Stock's narrative is often lyrical. The exotic natural landscape of Bengal that had immensely moved Stock were narrated in nothing short of a musical prose: "The Gangetic plain spreads out under blazing sunlight like a tapestry, endlessly monotonous, endlessly varied." (7)

Stock's depiction of characters deserves special mention. The undersized twelve-year old boy, dressed in a shabby *lungi* carrying a small suitcase presented himself one day before Stock announces proudly, "I businessman" (23). Then, there is Abdul, the superb cook reluctant to serve native guests; Kalipada, the English Department chappassi who practically ran the department in the first month. He was theoretically illiterate but would look over Stock's shoulder and correct her spellings of names. Stock had the chance to meet and befriend some prominent personalities like Munier Choudhuri, Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta, Dr. Khan Sarwar Murshid and a few others. It was at this time when

Mahatma Gandhi was shot dead, making Stock a witness of a memorable moment of history.

As mentioned earlier, the university itself was afflicted with numerous issues. It was also the primary centre of the revolution movements, full of marches, demonstrations and protests. Yet, it was no battle zone, and Stock and her students did engage into various literary and cultural activities. One such



MEMOIRS OF
DACCAL UNIVERSITY
1947-1951
A.G. STOCK

venture led her to translate some of the old Muslim poets of Bengal as well as modern Bengali poets like Kazi Nazrul Islam. Some of the translated versions were published in an English journal, *New Values*, a project of Stock's student Khan Morshid. She came across Jasimuddin, the poet who gave tremendous efforts and time to revive the Bengali folklore. Stock was instrumental in producing an abridged edition of *The Vicar of Wakefield* for use

in the Intermediate course. Moreover, she delved deep into the issues of English teaching and the faulty examination system in the sub-continent. In some crucial ways, she was able to take more or less an objective view of the socio-political issues whether it was the Hindu-Muslim rifts, the communal riots, the language trouble or the student and chappassi strikes. Throughout the memoir, she recorded the political ferment of that time, often raising important observations: "What's the use of an Islamic state if it doesn't translate the principles of Islam into a social order?" (84). With an insight so rare, she could predict: "I had an unacknowledged presentiment that the language question would issue in bloodshed" (204).

From the very beginning, Stock was aware of the tensed, troubled relationship between the East and West Pakistan. Though Pakistan was born as the homeland for Muslims of the subcontinent, there was nothing similar between the two regions except religion. The West Pakistan again and again launched assaults on the language and culture of the Bengalis leading to a series of fierce protests and strikes. Though Stock repeatedly claimed herself "as an onlooker, not an actor," her sympathies were all for her students who lightened the tough days and the colleagues whom she deemed a privilege to know. Her tone is marked by empathy for "the impracticable Bengalis" (112) and their causes throughout the memoir. It is this compassion for her pupil and colleagues that made her visit them in jail or stand as a guard in the women's hostel during communal riots. After a brief holiday in New Zealand, when she

returned to East Pakistan, she claimed it was "like an odd homecoming perhaps but it felt like dropping back into a life where I belonged" (162). Her close association with the students and colleagues eventually caused indirect friction with the Pakistani authorities. She was under surveillance to the extent of her private correspondences being traced by intelligence agencies. It was at this time, she decided to leave East Pakistan. But her profound feelings for Bengal and the Bengalis did not lessen by any means which perhaps compelled her to make a comeback after twenty years in 1972 to a newly liberated country, Bangladesh.

Finally, it cannot be denied that memoirs often tend to be monotonous and could be taken as a dull, rambling work that readers read with feigned interest. But Stock's memoir is an exception not only for its palatable prose spiked by utter lucidity but also because of its vast range. It's a fine blend of historically significant events or merely a topical event, meeting with some very well-known or perhaps totally unknown characters, a trip to the village or abroad, the description of the beauty of Bengal or simply some facet of nature and her acute observation of various socio-political issues. Some may find it to be more than a memoir with its wide canvas, giving the readers a slice of the sub-continent. Be it philosophy, history, rhetoric, or any other focused discipline that one finds interesting, he or she can always read Stock's *Memoir* in order to conduct both a factual and a narrative investigation regarding the post-partition, pre/post Liberation War times in Bangladesh.

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