

CALCUTTA AND DHAKA : A TALE OF TWO CITIES

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THE DEVASTATING CONFLICTS IN BENGAL OVER THE 20TH century denied to Calcutta over half of what would otherwise have been its commercial and linguistic hinterland. Due to these conflicts, Dhaka has now assumed a prominence that, a century ago, was unimaginable.

Religion and language are the two primary factors to explain the regional conflicts. Muslim Hindu mistrust fuelled the violence at time of partition of the British Raj in 1947. Catalyst for the civil war that erupted in 1971 in East Pakistan was the folly of early Pakistani language policy - the attempt to impose Urdu as lingua franca throughout the new Muslim state. The literal meaning of Bangladesh is "land of people who speak Bengali."

It is exceedingly difficult to overcome history. The severity of these conflicts helps explain why both West Bengal and Bangladesh are among the poorest regions of South Asia.

THOSE WHO LIVE ON THE DELTA FORMED BY THE GANGES AND OTHER RIVERS that converge at the northern shore of the Bay of Bengal have been blessed-blessed with some of the world's most fertile soil. On good land, with irrigation, farmers raise three crops of rice a year. Unfortunately, these people have also been cursed - cursed to endure some of the most violent political conflicts generated by the century past. These conflicts denied to Calcutta over half of what would, otherwise, have been its commercial and linguistic hinterland. And they obliged Dhaka to assume powers and responsibilities to which, pre-1947, it had never aspired.

Philip Resnick's quotation from Holderlin ("Language, the most dangerous of all things, was given to man so that he could testify to having inherited what he is.") applies as well to Bengal as to Belgium. Language is not the only factor to explain Bengal's devastating conflicts, but the attempt by Muslim leaders from the faraway Indus Valley to impose Urdu on East Pakistan is certainly among the primary culprits.

A basic principle of the British Raj was to accommodate local languages and cultures, not to impose English. In the 19th century, the British began the process of expanding literacy beyond high caste Hindus and their Muslim equivalents. In Bengal, this meant that many Bengali public officials learned to read and write their language and, as a consequence, vernacular and literary Bengali fused. Calcutta prospered and by the late 19th century, it was the pre-eminent city of South Asia. It was capital of the Raj, a centre of commerce, and home to a lively intellectual elite - among whom Tagore is internationally the best known personality. Two hundred miles to the east, Dhaka was a much smaller and more parochial city.

In the first decade of the 20th century, the British divided west from east Bengal and made Dhaka into the eastern capital. The Bengali elite united in fierce opposition to thus dividing the cultural and linguistic community of Bengal, and thereby accentuating the division between Muslims, concentrated in eastern Bengal, and Hindus, concentrated in the west. After a few years, the British accepted these arguments and reunited the two provinces into one.

For a number of reasons, unity of the Bengali elite disintegrated in the 1930s. First in importance was the difficulty of accommodating religious differences. The British acceded in the 1930s to demands for elected provincial legislatures across India, and the Hindu elite in Calcutta faced the implications of the overall demographic predominance of Muslims in the province. They failed utterly to realize a workable coalition with their Muslim co-linguists. Communal relations degenerated and by 1943, the year of the infamous Bengal famine, Hindu and Muslim leaders were

passionately blaming one another - as well as the British - for the inadequacies in distribution of relief.

Second were the unresolved ideological divisions within the Calcutta elite. Many Calcutta-based Congress leaders were of the left. They sought to submerge linguistic, caste and communal differences in the name of pan-Indian nationalism and a socialist agenda. Other prominent Calcutta leaders concluded that the "enemy of my enemy is my friend" and allied themselves with the Japanese. At the height of Japanese power in Southeast Asia - with the Japanese in control of neighbouring Burma - such a strategy had a certain appeal as a tactic to be rid of the British. Finally, some among the elite interpreted past traditions of Bengali unity as a basis on which to found an independent Bengali-speaking state on the Ganges delta.

In the 1940s, none of these strategies prevailed. What did was a truncated Congress unable to assure tolerance by Hindus, plus the Muslim League, led predominantly by elites in the Indus Valley who were equally unable to assure tolerant behaviour by Muslims.

Hence, what the Bengali elite adamantly refused when imposed by the British, they were obliged to accept four decades later as the price of independence. All that mattered in drawing the boundary separating East Pakistan from surrounding Indian territory was to maximize the number of Muslims on one side and Hindus on the other. There was no respect for natural geographic boundaries or patterns of trade. The result made East Pakistan into the political equivalent of a large slice of cheese at which a family of mice had randomly gnawed. Hundreds of small "holes" were carved from Pakistan in order to place Hindu villages in India, and in turn East Pakistan's territory was augmented by "crumbs" from India in the case of Muslim villages that would otherwise have been in India. Notwithstanding this exercise, millions remained on the wrong side of the boundary and hundreds of thousands perished in the ensuing communal violence and mass migration.

Throughout the 20th century, Calcutta continued to grow in size - it now contains perhaps 12 million - but its political and cultural

significance waned. Early in the century, the British transferred the capital to Delhi, which became after 1947 the capital of independent India. After 1947, Calcutta was merely the capital of West Bengal, one among over a dozen states of the Indian federation. As such, Calcutta presided over the western rump of Bengal, with more than half those who comprised its linguistic hinterland now citizens of a separate country.

Following independence, the political class of Calcutta succumbed to the worst traditions of its city. From the British Raj they took the habits of a mandarin class expecting to preside over a paternalist and excessively centralized administration. Compounding the problem, following independence, many of Calcutta's administrative and professional elite studied in Moscow, and within West Bengal they transformed the Fabian socialism of Congress into a more unadulterated Marxist ideology. To the British colonial administrative culture and Soviet Marxism, they added Brahmin distaste for the worldly interests of merchant castes in low taxes, a lean bureaucracy and sanctity of commercial contract. This mixture has proved an inauspicious political foundation for economic growth. Though Calcutta's Moscow-inspired Marxists are aging and there is more diversity in Calcutta's intellectual life than all this implies, the result remains that West Bengal is among the poorest of Indian states.

The Folly of Pakistan's Language Policy

After partition, Dhaka became the administrative centre of East Pakistan. Despite the near equality in numbers between its two widely separated territories, the leadership of the new Muslim state came overwhelmingly from the West. A prominent feature of the Muslim League's agenda was restoration of the ancient language of Urdu to its former glory, to make it the lingua franca of Pakistan. To make of Urdu the effective state language in the West was itself a formidable exercise in social engineering. At the time of partition, slightly over half in the West spoke Punjabi; small percentages, of roughly 10 per cent each, spoke Pashtu, Sindhi and Urdu. At least Urdu was present. It also enjoyed great prestige - something akin to Latin in Europe during the Middle Ages - and the need for a shared official

language was evident. In the East, by contrast, imposing Urdu was folly. Virtually no one spoke the language, The lingua franca was unambiguously Bengali, a language spoken in the region by both Muslim peasants and Hindu Brahmins. On the basis of number of speakers, Bengali should have become the national language of Pakistan: it was the language spoken by over half the new country's citizens.

The folly of Pakistan's language policy came to a head in February 1952, with protests by students at the University of Dhaka who demanded that instruction take place in Bengali. The demonstrations turned violent and the police shot into the crowd, killing several. Hence, the "language martyrs" of Bangladesh. A monument to their sacrifice has been erected in downtown Dhaka, and the 21st of February is a national holiday marked by speeches on the importance of the Bengali language, on the nobility of the students' sacrifice, on the brutality of the West Pakistanis, and so on. Every year on this date, newspaper editors fill their pages with messages and articles by prominent individuals on these themes.

In the years following, the 1952 demonstrations assumed the symbolic importance that the storming of the Bastille in 1789 has for the French. Pakistani leaders promoted various schemes in an attempt to reconcile Urdu and Bengali, such as writing Bengali in Arabic script. None of them succeeded. A shared language is the indispensable medium of exchange in communication among people and wherever they enjoy a measure of political autonomy, linguistic communities vigorously defend their language. Defence of Bengali became the rallying cry that united the citizens of East Pakistan behind politicians demanding a loose federal structure for Pakistan, and ultimately secession.

It would be a mistake to assume the Indians were a great deal wiser on the matter of language. Initially, Congress leaders expected Hindi to become the sole official language of their federation. Only after analogous violent demonstrations took place in southern India on behalf of local Dravidian languages did Delhi relent. In the 1950s, India redrew state boundaries to accommodate linguistic

realities and reached a workable compromise: Hindi as the country's official language, English as associate official language, and states able to designate a regional official language.

In the case of Pakistan, perhaps it would have been impossible, under the most enlightened of leadership, to maintain intact a country separated by such linguistic, cultural and geographic distances, having religion as the sole basis of shared citizenship. Having achieved a Muslim state, Pakistani leaders primarily concerned themselves with the problems posed in uniting the various interests and ideological factions present in the Indus Valley.

The end of united Pakistan came rapidly, precipitated by the results of the December 1970 election. The dominant East Pakistani political party, the Awami League, headed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, won all but two of the parliamentary seats in East Pakistan and an overall majority in the national Parliament. The Awami League platform called for a thoroughly decentralized federation. The political and military elites in West Pakistan refused the prospect of a government controlled from the East, and Parliament was not convened. In a famous speech at the Dhaka race course in March of 1971, Sheikh Mujib more or less declared unilateral independence. Bangladesh - literally land of people who speak Bengali - was born.

The birth was painful. The Pakistani army, overwhelmingly composed of soldiers from the West, occupied the cities, rounded up suspected sympathizers of a sovereign Bangladesh, and killed thousands throughout the country. The Bangladeshis mounted a guerrilla campaign but could not prevail against an organized modern army. The slaughter and mass migration of civilians came to an end only in December of 1971, when the Indians invaded: forcibly evicted the Pakistani army, and enabled Sheikh Mujib to establish a government.

How many were killed in the Bangladesh war of liberation? Estimates vary widely and range up to 3 million. As with 1947, great uncertainty surrounds all estimates. At a minimum, half a million died.

After two blood-soaked episodes in the space of a quarter century, Dhaka found itself the capital of a sovereign country. Architecturally, it was exceptionally well prepared for its new role. In the 1960s, Louis Kahn, the famous American architect, designed a new Parliament building, intended to house the assembled legislators of a united Pakistan. The building is in the massed concrete style favoured by international architects at the time. One guidebook describes it as "a huge assembly of concrete cylinders and rectangular boxes sliced open with bold, multi-storey circular and triangular windows... The interior, which includes an octagonally shaped Assembly hall, features bizarre Piranesi-inspired spaces." An apt description of a massive and expensive structure that such a poor country could ill afford. The building sits on 200 acres of cleared land, surrounded by an artificial lake and apartments for the families of out-of-town Members of Parliament. Multiple flights of broad steps lead down from the Parliament to a wide avenue.

Architecturally well prepared, culturally Dhaka was quite unprepared to become a capital city. As in Calcutta, many among the small number of Dhaka professionals endorsed Marxist notions about the desirability of centralized administration and were indifferent to requirements of a market economy. Sheikh Mujib proved far more able as leader of the Dhaka University students and as opposition politician than as administrator. In the years following liberation, this very poor part of the world suffered a famine and became poorer yet. Four years after the country became sovereign, the Bangladeshi military mounted a successful coup. Sheikh Mujib and most of his family were murdered. From 1975 to 1990, the country experienced a succession of military governments. Not until 1990 did the generals retreat to the well-appointed apartments of the Dhaka cantonment and allow elected politicians to contest the right to occupy the Prime Minister's residence.

This residence is another massive building that Bangladesh can ill afford. Over the first half of the 1990s, it was occupied by Khaleda Zia, widow of one of the generals who governed the country until his 1981 assassination. She inherited leadership of his political party.

Over the second half of the decade, the residence was occupied by Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Sheikh Mujib, and inheritor of the leadership of his party. Following the latest general election in fall 2001, Khaleda Zia has once again moved in. Like King Lear's daughters, the lives of these two women are united in mutual mistrust. For supporters of Sheikh Hasina, Khaleda Zia is a puppet whose apron strings are pulled by those who murdered her father in 1975. For supporters of Khaleda Zia, Sheikh Hasina is perpetuating the cult of personality and administrative incompetence of her father.

As rural people migrate in search of better schools for their children and better jobs, the population of Dhaka has come to rival Calcutta's. Both cities contain more than 10 million residents, including millions in unplanned slum neighbourhoods. Neither city can claim to have produced decent public administrators. Indeed, Dhaka is the seat of what one group of experts (Transparency International, a German organization that evaluates such things) judged to be the world's most corrupt government in 2001. Any such ranking is open to challenge, but even if, say, Nigeria rightfully ranks higher than Bangladesh in terms of corruption, this is an indictment of public administration in the country - as presided over by Sheikh Hasina, by Khaleda Zia and by the generals before.

History matters in determining whether leaders successfully manage public affairs and promote economic growth. The sad history of these two cities illustrates that it is not enough to banish a colonial power, or to send soldiers back to their barracks and proclaim democracy. Both in the state of West Bengal and in Bangladesh, Bengalis remain among the poorest of South Asians. Why is this so? World Bank economists come to Calcutta and Dhaka, and they make long lists of inefficient economic policies starting with the inadequate school systems. But underlying bad policies is the cumulative heritage of political mistrust and administrative centralization: centuries of caste divisions among Hindus and colonial rule, Hindu-Muslim mistrust, plus more recent decades of political instability and elite ideological intransigence.

Conclusion

Today, Bengalis have concerns other than past battles over imposition of Urdu. To the extent anyone worries about language, the concern here - as elsewhere in South Asia - is with the inroads being made by English as a super-language across the subcontinent. English, the language of American culture and international business, is becoming the lingua franca of the cosmopolitan. Calcutta and Dhaka are now home to a bilingual English-Bengali elite, many more at ease writing in English than Bengali. The new role assumed by English is reopening the linguistic divide between elites and masses, something that the 19th century expansion of Bengali-based education under the British began to close. The masses remain unilingual Bengali speakers, the more fortunate able to read and write Bengali script.

One question repeatedly posed by Indians is, how might the communal violence of 1947 have been avoided? Another question, less frequently posed, is premised on the importance of language in enabling a sense of shared rights and obligations of citizenship. Had the Bengali nationalists of the 1930s prevailed over the pan-Indian nationalists within Congress and over the Muslim League, and had Bengal become a sovereign unilingual but multicultural country, there would now exist a country of some 225 million in the Ganges delta. Perhaps the religious divide would have paralyzed such a country. But Calcutta would not have lost its commercial hinterland, and the population would have avoided the political trauma of attempts to impose an alien language. Had all that come to pass, might Bengalis be better off today than they are? The question is purely hypothetical, but the answer is, I think, yes.