

This is a single chapter from *Make Or Break: Bangladesh In The 1990's*

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ISBN 1-904896-02-2

Available online at  
[www.bdesh.info](http://www.bdesh.info)

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## *Exclusivity*

In an age of lost causes it seemed the crowning folly. Set in a small university town whose citizens were long accustomed to students' (not always well reasoned) late 1960's exuberances, this claim was bizarre enough nonetheless to become a literal landmark. Its sloganed demand was roughly painted on an otherwise nondescript building's side, and served as a pointer for directions: "turn left at ..". "Free Latvia" throughout the decade of rebellion and mistrust was too extreme a wish to raise anything but wry smiles and rapid redeployment of energies to more winnable battles. The run-down building with the no-hope slogan spent the 60's and 70's watching over anti-war marches that championed Indo-China and South Africa's blacks. Europe's lost corners were considered untouchable.

And fact being more churlish than fiction, the rotting hulk itself was demolished before witnessing the '90's ironies. Kampuchea is still on the rack as part of the Vietnamese War's legacy while the USA, in its turn, continues to weaken its world policeman credibility by irritably hindering Vietnam's economic growth. South Africa lingers in a state of flux wherein Inkata and the ANC define each other in tribal opposition while the whites slide toward the realities of being a minority. And Latvia free.

A story of Gautama Buddha intrudes. It seems there were two monks vowed to a celibacy so severe that all communication with women was forbidden. While walking from one monastery to another they had to cross a river. At the same time a young woman was crossing in the opposite direction. Unfortunately, just as the two men approached her, she slipped and would certainly have drowned had not the older monk reached out and saved her. He carried her dead weight back to the shore then resuscitated her back to consciousness. After some time the two monks continued on their journey. The younger man was very troubled at the older's breaking of his vows. Finally, after half an hour's furiously paced walking behind his companion he could keep silent no longer. "Master" he hesitantly started, "about that woman." The leader stopped and turned. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Are you still carrying her?"

America, still carrying the weight of fading memories, looking for gold at the end of the Rambo. If geography re-wrote the maps opposite to plans, simply re-write history. Such a task does ask for constant vigilance though, precluding the chance to let sleeping dogmas rest. Following a lie often leads us around in circles.

And Latvia free. If rubble could smirk, the abovementioned town's university area would have a waste land of laughter. History's component parts seem so totally unpredictable. Just like people, in fact.

Any study of human behaviour encounters the oddity that, while it is difficult to guess how any particular person will react in a specific situation, behaviour en masse is far more easily anticipated. While I cannot say that the Bangladeshi passing my door at this very moment would (given a chance) attempt to cheat me, it is reasonably certain that the next time I'm shopping away from my local market-place someone will attempt an outrageous price at my expense. It's

a kind of sociological echo of Heisenburg's theory. The larger the group under scrutiny, the easier it is to guess how they are likely to behave.

If history was written as geographic headlines, 1992 would be detailed as Somalia/Serbia/South Africa/fragments of the former USSR. Every place name details, in a way none in 1991 seemed able to guess, a narrowing struggle for identity. And yet the broad sweep of the 90's history is far more predictable. In terms of our yard-stick continuum, a jostling along the stretch has been

NATIONALISM ←————→ GLOBALISM

occurring and is likely to continue into the next century. Whole people groups - Uzbeks, Aborigines, Kanaks, Assamese, Tibetans, Estonians, Punjabis (to name but a random handful) - have been re-examining how they see themselves as an ethnic group. The meaning of "nation" has come under close scrutiny. Is it synonymous with "society"? Can, to place names to our question, India with its dozens of languages and races be thought of as a single country? "From Kashmir to Kanyakumari India is One" sloganed thousands of bus flanks in past years, but Kashmir usually gets a bloodier press these separatist days. During the 1970's and 80's India and the USSR felt a comradeship by being equally unpopular with the USA while trying to centrally control a country of continental proportions. The loss of the Soviet's (big) brotherly influence has joined factors such as the end of the Nehru dynasty to add to India's current flimsiness. It remains to be seen whether Delhi will follow Moscow by shattering its nationhood into society sized chunks.

Bangladesh hasn't been immune from this global shaking, although its uniform monocultural nature suggests that nationalistic thrusts dominant elsewhere shouldn't have caused divisiveness here. That cultural one-ness has been deliberately put, piece by piece, into place. The first step was Pakistan's creation, in 1947, which established religious unity in both halves of the country. Hindus travelled West out of the Bengali section while Muslims moved East into it, transferring people from their homes and histories to establish a new nation based solely on faith. Within five years a second refining of national unity was begun, this time language emerging as the issue worth struggling and dying for. The East Pakistani Bengalis refused the West Pakistanis' insistence that Urdu supplant Bangla in the Bengali sector as the official language.

By 1971, the third level of cultural unity (racial, this time) was added as Bangladeshis reacted to Pakistani genocide by seizing their independence. From the land of the pure (as Pak-I-Stan literally translates from its original Urdu), the land of the linguistically and racially purer was thus decanted. From the mish-mash that was British Bengal we had a land populated virtually entirely by Bengalis, all speaking Bangla, 85% of whom were Muslim, in less than thirty years. A seeming recipe for togetherness.

Yet twenty years on from that time (labelled "liberation") unity is as distant a dream as ever. Whereas Sheik Mujib, the father of the nation, could centre tens of millions with the single cry "Bangladesh" in the early 1970's only far narrower calls can now rally people. It may be a favoured football team (Mohammedans and Abahani being pre-eminent). Or a localized union; or a land dispute between two adjacent villages .... such restricted struggles are all that routinely

excite my neighbours into action any more. How did a world view, born in blood, that included 80,000,000 fragment so quickly into countless, separated cells each with their exclusive, competitive aims? For a people who want peace, Bangladeshis see a lot of conflict. As the poem “Hit and Myth” puts it -:

The peace loving people of Bangladesh  
are fighting for survival  
for Islamic revival  
for a bus fare they'll pay  
or the thief who didn't get away.

The plp  
of BD  
put briefly  
fight.

How, in our nationalistic ---- globalistic continuum, did such a marked leftward jump come about? Over the decades that saw many other parts of the world reaching outward and looking for points of agreement with their un-alike neighbours Bangladesh has become increasingly self-centred. A xenophobia made more remarkable by the fact that their starting position was already very un-global, Bangladesh's remoteness tending to make it inward looking at the best of times.

“Stan”, by the way, translates in Bangla to “desh”. As in Bangladesh; the country of those who speak Bangla. Little being fixed in language, however, the story doesn't stop there. I, as a foreigner, will often be asked where my “desh” is. Message understood, I give my answer. But my bafflement grew over the years as I heard Bangladeshis use the word amongst themselves to locate each other's precise birthplaces. “Desh”, I began to realize, doesn't only equate to a country of 110,000,000 but also to a hamlet of ten huts enclosing maybe eighty people. For it is thus, as members of a “bari” (the Bangla word for extended family/hamlet), that Bangladeshis primarily define themselves. At macro level they see themselves as one amongst over a hundred million; at micro level, as one amongst less than one hundred. And, Bangladeshis have decided, small is preferable.

This trait of seeing oneself as one amongst the few, not the many, I guess to have come about largely because of the bari's success in providing emotional stability to its constituent members throughout the centuries. Small enough to give intimacy, yet large enough to present some variety and choice of friends. No-one is left out and hence the feeling of alienation that cripples the West is lacking. The bari is big enough, too, to cover most of the skills required in a slow changing subsistence farming economy. It is the basic sociological cell of society, a macro echo of the biological cell as the smallest unit of life able to exist independently. Bangladeshis avoid facing life alone until death's imminence makes postponement unavoidable. Prior to that, life is viewed through the corporate eyes of the bari.

There are centuries of precedent to buttress the bari's compact success, despite the fact that the Indian subcontinent housed one of the world's first precursors of nationhood, the city-state.

About four or five thousand years ago independently in several parts of Asia the descendants of nomadic hunter-gatherers decided that, if settling was fine, the bigger the finer. Small towns burgeoned, usually at sites that favoured commerce. Mohenjo Daro, then on the banks of the Indus River (in twentieth century Pakistan) is a well-restored example. Inventors of the binary system of counting (a skill which would appreciate in value when computers came on-stream) and worshippers of cattle-headed deity, these settlers established a thrivingly viable city. At least until the Indus switched its course and deserted - literally - the area.

It is poignant to catch glimpses today of this now-vanished civilization in contemporary Bangladesh. That binary system of counting, for example, is echoed every time money changes hands. One taka equals 100 poisa. Yet “poisa” aren’t commonly talked of in rural market-places. Rather “annas” are the more usual division each taka is reckoned to divide into, one anna being one-sixteenth of a taka. Hence the fifty poisa coin goes under the name of art (eight) annas and four annas is twenty-five poisa. Decades ago there were (now extinct) one and two anna coins. Even the way people add small sums (any shopkeeper shows you how) reaches back the 5,000 years to show how history counts. The four joints on each of the four fingers is touched by the thumb to track totals up to - guess? - sixteen. Echoes of a pre-decimal, pre-dozen, binary past. This 1/2/4/8/16 etc counting system is also used in lengths (sixteen gira to the gorj) and weights (sixteen poa to a share). The populous cities, showing their Westernisation, have now begun turning toward poisa, metres and kilograms to shop by; and, although “poas” are still in large scale use, “anna” and “gira” are lesser heard terms. Village stores haven’t yet supplanted the traditional measurements any more than they’ve forgotten the Bengali calendar. Again, the urban/rural split shows itself by the choice of words.

Despite the influence of the ancient Harrapans (who built Mohenjo Daro into the Paris/New York/Tokyo of its day), the bari remains as the basic cell of Bangladeshi social organisation. Blunter than the biologically derived definition above, baris could roughly be said to be that part of rural Bangladesh still above water during the monsoon. Each bari stands islanded on its platform of man-made, metres-raised, hard-packed mud, above the seasonal floods. The village, mentioned as being mythologised into the collective consciousness as “home” actually isn’t a single town at all, but a collection of baris scattered around a central market place.

Anthropologists studying pre-history tell us that such market places, cities-in-the-making, had their genesis when hunter-gatherers exchanged their roaming, slash-and-burn, existence for an agricultural one (a change evidenced by domestication both of crops and animals). With the arrival of larger settlements specialization became necessary, since life was too complicated for everybody to be entirely self-sufficient and people therefore needed to trade for survival. With trade came traders, acting as brokers between various producers with a surplus of one necessity and a lack of another. With traders came the selection of optimum trading sites, usually sited near water and arable land to meet food and transport needs. So the traders (and with them craftsmen) settled. Over generations other people from all directions joined them in the market town. People met and married according to the customs of the day. Inter-breeding led to a mingling of racial types and a widening of the gene-pool. Sociologically, this mingling took the form of new shared mores, gleaned piecemeal from each constituent people group. In gestalt fashion, from these fragments something unpredictable and fresh was made over the course of centuries. The city-state was more than merely the sum of its parts, it was an entirely new society. Mohenjo Daro is thought to have grown in such a manner.

Development on the Bengali delta area took a different route, however. Perhaps it was simply because the land, being river silt, was so fertile there was never much need for specialisation and so traders never emerged. For whatever reason, although the region has been inhabited for thousands of years, large towns (as permanent centres of trade) never blossomed. Different people weren't drawn from afar to settle in a central town, mingling their thoughts and genes. Instead, the "hart", or impermanent market was developed. Farmers would regularly (weekly probably) walk from their bari to the trading place. Once there they would carry out what trade was necessary amongst themselves, thereby cutting out that middle tier of commerce that led elsewhere to the evolution of cities. After selling, buying, and gossiping, they would then walk (perhaps for hours) home. In this way towns never usurped the extended family (located within the bari) as the cell of society, the group within whose membership people measure and define themselves, within which they see themselves as having responsibility.

Later, when the British invaded the Bengal delta, this trend towards compartmentalisation was reinforced. Although the Raj wasn't overly troubled by military opposition, the region's topography wasn't so placid. With several massive rivers - some almost 10 kilometres across in the dry season - dissecting the 55,000 square mile flatlands, travelling across the region was (and still is) awkward. A normal monsoon can inundate a third of the country. If there is a simple way of stretching a communications network over such an area, the British (understandably) never found it. During their zenith when they ruled from the Khyber Pass to Rangoon, they basically sidestepped the whole region. For the transport of both humanity and chattels over their Asian empire they preferred to carry everything overland only as far as Gopalpur-on-Sea, on the Orissan coast south-west of Calcutta. There, ware-and-boarding houses kept goods and people waiting until the following scheduled boat arrived. The port was unsuitably shallow, so all shipping relied on lighters (that class of smaller boat which transfers all stock from shore to outlying ship). This laborious double-handling was, despite the extra work involved, deemed easier than trying to cross the dozens of waterways that road transport to Burma would have entailed.

In fact the area now comprising Bangladesh has, for this riverine reason, always been marginalised in Asian interchanges. Whereas Central Asia throughout the centuries was busy with populations moving west or east, and South Asia too had its whirlpools of movement, no mass transfer of migrants ever went via the Bengali area. The topography was, in its deceptive way, as effective a barrier as the Himalayas and acted as a buffer zone with opposing currents sliding beside each other like the border of oceans. South East Asians went as far as Western Burma, then stopped. Westerners (whether Moghuls or Mongols, Biharis or British) travelled no further than Calcutta and then moved East only seasonally, tentatively, and marginally. The huge river delta offered centuries of settlement, but not passage.

Even recent history hasn't coaxed Bangladeshis to look at the outside world with much hope. From 1947 (when the British were expelled) until 1971 it was still "them" (non-Bengalis, although admittedly Muslim) attacking "us" (Bengalis). While this had a vital part in firing Bangladeshi nationalism, it also had the negative effect of fuelling mistrust of any outsider. This wariness still scars the Bangladeshi psyche deeply and turns people back inward to the bari. There (at best) trust is rewarded and not abused; while (at worst) there is at least the chance for retribution.

Nothing reflects the importance of the bari than the bari itself. From the inside it looks idyllic. Clean, orderly and welcoming. Windows and doors of the several homes open wide onto the central courtyard. Swept every morning, then (in the dry season) sprinkled with water to keep down dust in actions so regular they're almost ritualistic. Those celebrations which imprint the stamp of time on Bangladeshis, centering on birth, marriage and death (none, interestingly, happening at the celebrant's choice) all happen here, in the decorated-for-the-occasion courtyard. This zone of packed and hardened earth watches over all facets of rural life. The mundane and the elevated, the joys and more frequently, sorrows. Home, in a word, to rural Bangladesh; to 85% of 110,000,000.

Seen from outside, though, the bari is very different. Those windows along the outer wall that cut out the rest of the world routinely remain tightly (and probably permanently) shuttered. Tidy inner gardens backing up to bamboo perimeter fences, with their broken pot crowns on top of the highest posts (to keep the ghosts out) give way within centimetres to dusty scrub land. Rubbish, used condoms as a common example, collects in desultory piles. ("Used" is perhaps a misleading suggestion since children's games have been one of the major beneficiaries of family planning's efforts. Real balloons are far more expensive.) Rotting piles where dogs forage, little mounds of human excrement pointing to the vacant sky as silent reminders of the pre-dawn ablution ritual. All this is outside the walls, and thereby beyond the bari-dwellers' sense of responsibility.

The very success of the bari as a complete emotional life-support system has inevitably weakened the importance of outside influences. This, in turn, has made change and innovation unlikely. "Nothing seeds failure like success" as it may be said. Which may sound unlikely until we remember that one of the twentieth century's brightest success stories was disastrous for many of those closest involved in it. Although the 1969 moon landing was a clarion call for adventuring, it almost proved to be the death knell for space exploration. Reaching our nearest floating neighbour became such a shared obsession that its achievement became an end unto itself instead of what it should, from a scientific stance, have been; merely one small step forward in humankind's on-going discovery of outer space. The astronomers' aim was never to stop at the dull moon but to leapfrog the nearby on our way to the distant. The 1969 landing was so emotionally cathartic, however, that it had the force of finality. This far we've come, now no further. And so the heavens breathed outward and receded. So too have Bangladeshis' horizons in the past stretched only from the immediate to the extended family. From the one to the plus-or-minus eighty; home is with the bari. Individual rights are willingly abdicated in order to belong to the group. Then, with a sigh of relief and a sense of fulfilment can Bangladeshis stop exploring as if deciding "this far we go but no further".

It took centuries to establish and stabilise the bari as the optimum life support unit. Nothing less than an outside threat could ever goad baris into forming a larger union ("me and my brother and the neighbour against the foreigner") and since 1971 all threats to Bangladesh have been internal (which begs the question of why around two thirds of the GDP goes to the military). It isn't therefore surprising that after the early 1970's "Bangladesh" as an entity has ceased to rally anyone. In this way the country's historical fragmentation into local cells is still continuing. At a political level there are mentions of other countries while the media does coax attention outward via sporting events and world conflicts (particularly if Muslims are central in achievement or suffering. Bosnia is currently featured). Nonetheless, peoples' attention and

emotions remain narrowly fixed inward and even places that have become global obsessions, such as South Africa, don't reach beyond headlines and body count newsbriefs. Provincial insularity, then, hasn't yet broken down. A partial sense of belonging to the Ummah (the Islamic world brotherhood) does exist but it generates little more than official greetings to other "brotherly countries" on their national days and regular empty messages of support for the Palestinians. Furthermore, Bangladesh is trying to stop SAARC (the grouping of seven South Asian nations, a couple of whom have no more than town-to-city sized populations) from disintegrating; whether successfully or not time will decide. Hence Bangladesh has largely been deprived of that interchange of world views that occurs when populations mingle.

Not only has the country been isolated from other countries' views, but also the bari "small-is-beautiful" mentality has even worked against the development of cities within Bangladesh. Dhaka has rightly earned its reputation as a 6,000,000 strong village by having family ties retain its major role in deciding each individual's sense of identity. Work acquaintances tend to remain secondary; "visiting family" is still the average weekend's recreation. Some fledgling sense of belonging outside blood-lines is beginning amongst the young males via their clubs, although membership often hinges more on which bari-sized territory you inhabit (ie how much money your parents control) than who you feel an affinity with. Marriage is still the dominant way friendships are extended. Even in the cities arranged marriages (often to an unknown spouse) are far more frequent than "love" unions and therefore a coming together of two entire families is to some extent involved. Each side's elders weigh the other's status and wealth, while the younger begin forging friendships amongst those allocated by others' decisions. You can't choose your family; nor, therefore, your friends. And since the modern Western city is in part a conglomeration of members who clump together along affinity-of-ideas lines, reflecting their origins as places where specialists gathered, a feeling of city identity such as (for example) Europe has, is yet to start here.

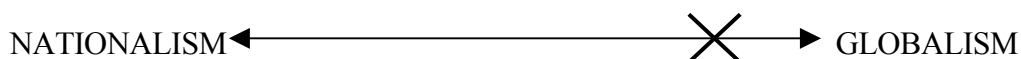
European ancient history, in fact, unfolded in a very different manner. Tradesmen did settle in market towns which then grew. Craftsmen did form guilds, people groups did mingle, world views were shared. Therefore, by this century, a European inevitably had come to view "us" in less narrow terms than either their antecedents or a 1990's Bangladeshi bari-dweller does. Europeans evolved a greater sense of inclusivity in their world view. Perhaps in reaction, the nuclear (and not the extended) family grew as their basic cell of social organisation. The city/province/country then gave each individual a secondary, although still strong, sense of belonging.

This European tendency to widen and not narrow horizons has taken many forms throughout the centuries. An example drawn from the naif suggests itself. Medieval theologians imagined that all life was held in linear unity by a "golden chain of being" stretching from highest heaven to dreariest hell. They not surprisingly postulated God at the top, then the angels (seraphim then cherubim ... or is it cherubim then seraphim?), descending to the earthly ranks headed by humanity (then posing under the title of "man"). Naturally, not all people were thought equal, so royalty sloped down to the peasants in this God-ordained (as then believed) order of importance. Below the illiterate poor came the animals, topped by the cleverer ones .... dogs, horses, cats, .... and so on down the line to rats, cockroaches, name-your-preferred-nasties. A favoured brain teaser was to work out how far along the chain true empathy could extend. Could a person have true affinity with a cherub? A horse? A cat? Presumably, God (being perfect) loved every

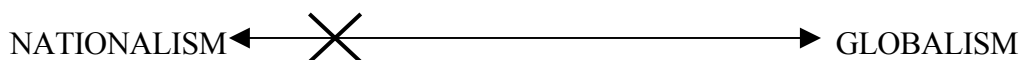
creature to perfection; how far then could His saints emulate Him? (To the medievals there was no question of Her.) Could the most pure amongst us love a cow? A pig? A spider?

Well, I guess European winters were long in the fourteen hundreds and people had a lot of time to talk. But it was an intriguing question; how inclusively can a person stretch their sympathies? And it has the germ of what, in the near-twenty-first century, being European entails. Europeans tend to define themselves via those they forge friendships with, those living in the same city or town. The family does give an emotional foundation, but it is unsatisfyingly small. Going to the other extreme, the country (particularly in EEC Europe) can be uncomfortably universal. Perhaps the city-state, as the basic human grouping, is making a comeback. Although modern technology provides advantages that would have been beyond the Harrapans belief, the modern city also has a number of additional complications; such as how to identify with a group so large and dispersed that personal contact with any but the tiniest fraction becomes impossible. Not to mention the variations of culture that are spread across any medium sized European country. Can a French-for-centuries Parisian identify with the just-arrived-in-the-suburb Polish Jew, Malian Muslim or Lebanese Christian? What is such a person to make of the Algerian souks in Marseille, or the German enclaves in Alsace? If monsieur can successfully include these elements in deciding who is “us” why couldn’t a Catalan in Barcelona or a born-again capitalist in Berlin equally be part of his sense of nationhood? What in the 1990’s is a French citizen’s definition of “desh”? What “desh” can Europe’s new settlers call their own? (This is, in fact, one of the questions “les harkis” - first generation descendants of those in the Maghreb who were French supporters during the Moroccan and Algerian independence wars - are currently struggling through in French suburbia.) Europe’s uniqueness comes partially because (except for anachronisms like Andorra) European country’s borders encompass diverse collections of world views; many “us” groups mingle within the single state. Conversely, Bangladesh’s uniqueness comes partially because a single ethnic group is separated into innumerable autonomous baris. Many “us” groups co-exist but barely mix.

To show the contrast diagrammatically, whereas Europe would be represented by a -:



position along the continuum, Bangladesh’s orientation would appear as -:



In other words, Bangladeshis have high barriers against seeing non-Bangla speakers, non-Muslims, non-Bengalis, as “one of us”. Such people are intrinsically “them”. As was all-too evident with the already mentioned anti-Hindu violence prompted by uncertainty thousands of kilometres away concerning the religious orientation of a specific shrine (is it the Babri mosque or Ram temple?). Most people accepted the media reinforced slant that the Islamic viewpoint was just. The mind-bind my neighbours had to contend with came, not in judging mosque-or-temple over there, but in deciding who to support here following the anti-Hindu killings and looting that took place in Old Dhaka and Rayer Bazaar (a poorer area, near the river). Most teashop chats conceded that the looting was motivated totally by greed. Young Muslim mastans

with an eye for the main chance saw an opportunity to get away - literally - with murder and robbery and grabbed it. Yet for my Muslim friends to therefore side with the Hindus and publicly speak out against those few Muslims who were fighting, or even actually physically protect those Hindus who were attacked was too much for my neighbours. (There were rumours of a very few exceptions to this group solidarity.) “He might be wrong, perhaps even evil, but he’s still my brother and I must support him” was the tacit assumption that underscored the majority’s acquiescence of the mob’s cruelty. The fact of shared Bangladeshi nationality is less weighty than communal variations. What exactly, then, makes a nation? Where should we draw the boundary lines? Who is “us”; who is “them”. A hard won lesson from apartheid (a word, semantically, that means nothing more sinister than separate development) is that “not-us” inevitably leads to “not-our-equals”. Therefore exploitable, mistreatable. Basic training for a torturer is to learn to perceive his victim as somehow fundamentally different, foundationally them. The basic requirement for whole countries to fragment into sectarian chaos is the same.

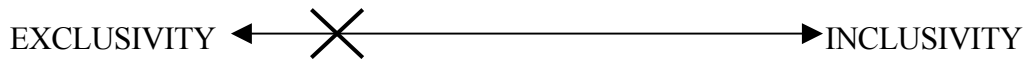
Theologically speaking, having a large number of people groups seems desirable. The Qur'an clearly states that God deliberately developed more than one race of humanity from the single pair that originated us all, while Biblical passages (such as the Tower of Babel story) would imply that divine allowance was granted to such a proliferation. Presumably this is so we can learn from each other. The theologians’ choice seems reasonable, since a God who favoured solipsists might tend to cause disquiet. Solipsism, or exclusivity carried to its logical final solution, is the belief that only the self’s existence is certain (in other words, are you really there or am I merely imagining you?). As such, it runs contrary to the expansive and all embracing love that theologians of all camps say is part of God’s unchanging nature.

A love that is well illustrated by (another) Buddhist story. It seems that a Bodhisattiva (or an enlightened one to those of us who are not) noticed some tiger cubs starving because their mother was too weak to hunt and thereby produce milk. Taking a razor-sharp sliver of bamboo, the Bodhisattiva carefully approached the tigress and then slit open his own veins. Weakened though she was, the animal had strength enough to crawl forward and lap the blood. Then, as nourishment came, she devoured the body which, in turn, fuelled her ability to hunt and save her family. This, according to the parable, is the greater, God-like love we should aspire to. To lay down our lives not for a friend but for a wild, heedless creature.

With all these thoughts in mind, our nationalism ---- globalism continuum seems to be both too narrow and too broad. Too narrow because we have stretched as far as bleak solipsism on the left and Bodhisattiva-like identification with all life forms on the right. And too broad, conversely, because we’ve seen how reluctant people are even in melting pots such as Europe to stretch their sense of identity across linguistic or racial boundaries within their own city.

It is probably more useful, therefore, to replace the concept of nationalism ---- globalism with the more general dichotomy of exclusivity ---- inclusivity. Exclusivity implies that people have a narrower sense of who they see as “us” and they are quick to exclude others from their circle of acceptance. Inclusivity means a population accustomed to including people of wide superficial differences in their sense of who is “us”.

To refine our previous representation, then, Bangladesh’s tilt could be shown as -:



Exclusivity is human; the extent of its expression depends on environment. We learn from birth how tightly to draw our us and them boundaries. It may seem that having single-race nations would reduce any chance of tension between dissimilar groups, but Bangladesh's monocultural battleground belies such an expectation. It rather seems that an exclusive attitude expresses itself by "divide and rule" narrowness, regardless of the actual circumstances prevailing. An exclusive minded person will always be seeking reasons to exclude others. Just as Shakespeare wrote Iago's wife into characterising Othello as jealous not because of evidence but because of the bent of his own warped mind, so narrow minded people are bound to cut others out of their care. An exclusive minded woman inevitably pushes men into her outer group. If she is white, blacks won't be befriended either. An exclusive Asian veers away from Europeans. Swedes, for all I know, may target Danes while Samoans tackle Tongans. Though races change, the spirit of exclusivity is constant in its world-wide drive to divide.

Perhaps the perseverance of this spirit is shown most biting when independence brings a change of rulers but, despite magnificent promises, nothing else. This "plus ca change plus c'est la meme chose" - the more things change the more they stay the same - (as Alphonse Karr enduringly put it nearly a century and a half ago) was shown, for example, when Rhodesia became Zimbabwe. Instead of white and black, Ndebele and Shona became the call signs. Zanu and Zapu were set up, overnight, as their banners. Smith was no longer the villain, but N'komo or Mugabe, depending on one's stance. And the fighting went on. Zimbabwe's story varies only in body count and battle tactics (the Sudanese government, for example, uses starvation) from other post-colonial Africa countries. Africa is a list of seats-in-the-UN countries that are dissected by tribalism and thereby quickly bleeding themselves to death. Inclusivity's assumption of racial equality, with its expression as democracy, remain a distant goal in that vast continent.

Exclusivity is only partly a numbers game ("how many are we?") however. More important is how quick people are to build their "us and them" walls and how strong these walls are. How resistant, in other words, are the insiders to allowing others to enter and how fiercely they will defend "what is ours". Bangladesh is distinguished by its setting of about 100 souls as optimum to include as "us". Europe is deciding whether "we" are the three or four (nuclear family members) or the hundreds of thousands (the city/state). The central question is what impact does varying the degree of exclusivity have on any given society. To what extent does Bangladesh's slant towards rigid exclusivity affect its development? A development directed in part by Western inclusivity in its idealistic mode (aid) and its cynical style (exploitation). Although aid is undoubtably an improvement over the colonial era's exploitation, it too suffers from the same tendency to reduce a complex task (the efficient running of Bangladeshi society) into "they all look the same" -type simplicities.

Treating Bangladesh as such a homogenous mass has, in fact, contributed enormously to Bangladeshi problems. It supports an attitude whereby money given to a Bangladeshi - any Bangladeshi -can be seen as helping Bangladesh as a whole. If (as some argue) money gathers in the country, what does it matter how many of whose hands it concentrates in. Gold smuggling or

embezzlement from an aid organisation, running a small business or exploiting children in a garments factory; money is blind (some argue) and any successful way of grabbing it is valid. What does it matter if the rich are saintly or satanic? So long as someone in the community has purchasing power surely it can be argued that “society” as a whole has profited?

I find any view of development that is content to leave most community members as poor as when they started while benefitting an elevated few cynical in the extreme - yet such a model of development may actually be better than the reality in Bangladesh now. As has been written, the glut of (mostly aid) money amassed in the 20%'s hands has effectively risen prices overall thereby effectively lowering the (poor) majority's ability to buy. Therefore they are forced to sell - their land, their labour, their products - to the rich. It's a buyers market, of course, with too many poor, too desperate for hard bargaining and too powerless to intimidate. Little wonder that the rich/poor gap widens. Some who pass me in the street have maybe 10, maybe 20 taka (if it's been a good day's begging) a day to live on. Others can spend a thousand taka on a meal and not notice it. A single top level signature on a government contract is reputed to demand a bribe as high as 100,000 taka. At three seconds work, that sums quite an hourly rate.

Throwing money at Bangladesh knowing that the few will therefore get richer at the cost of the many's impoverishment obviously doesn't help the majority. Moreover, even the minority's gain is both belittled (at best) and (almost certainly) jeopardised by the divisiveness caused by inequalities. Frictions are inevitable when such different worlds rub together, frictions that waste energy and decrease efficiency as surely as a rolling stone gradually stops. Friction dissipates the initial driving force until all progress ceases. Were there no friction, there would be no energy loss (via heat and noise) and the rock would be on an endless roll. (Which, presumably, is why heaven is eternal, being free of friction and therefore never losing any of its substance.)

In sociological terms, friction equates to competition (ie conflict in regulated or anarchic form) amongst its constituents. Deciding whether competition or co-operation solves problems more efficiently has been as almost as long a debate as the nature/ nurture inquiry. Experimentation does tend to suggest (as experimentation often does) that what we'd guess from experience is true; competitiveness has the short-term edge. Aiming to vanquish a tangible flesh-and-blood foe drives us to higher efforts and greater efficiency. It is over the long term that co-operation proves more effective. The spur to succeed over a brief time span bleeds us dry over a longer. Running a race is a short-term task which explains why no solo athlete will ever be swifter than those in the pack. Running a country effectively requires planning that spans generations and juggles priorities. Without co-operation between the various factions in any particular country, the constituent groups' conflicting appetites will drain, not supplement, each others' output. All will suffer a measure of loss. The country will be held back.

Bangladesh's competing appetites aren't hidden. Indeed, if it could be (somewhat sardonically) suggested in an earlier chapter that a village's physical health could be guessed from the diarrhoeal piles left in the communal toilet fields, Dhaka's emotional health could equally be gauged from the dried peaks of brick dust that are encountered from time to time on the city's streets. They intrigued me at first, when I couldn't imagine how they were formed. Then I realized that I noticed these tiny piles concurrently with peoples' talk of “today's demonstration/ march/troubles”. These smears of crumbled clay, which may be strewn across whole stretches of

tarmac, mark where flung bricks have crashed down. The dust spreads away from the direction the missile was thrown so you can read the battle's story in passing.

A sense of exclusivity, therefore, directly results in societal friction, fragment grinding against fragment, leading to overall impoverishment. The recent (and future? I hope my misgivings prove false) anti-Hindu pogroms that lead directly to Hindus wanting to leave the country show how easily oppression arises when "they" are weak and live close to an angry "us". Having a common foe can unite a community and give some brief benefits, but only at the cost of sustainable long term growth. Rioting takes effort, just as construction does, but its results don't bear as much fruit. Energy used for attack (or for that matter defence) can't be spent for manufacturing as well. At a macro-level, building bombs cuts the education budget.

At the neighbourhood level, local marauding gangs spend so much time in organising themselves into gangs of mastans, arranging extortion rackets (taking as much as possible from the small, local shopkeepers while giving as little as possible to the police), fighting internal leadership battles, battling rival gangs' territorial raids, etc, to have much time or energy left over to run a productive business even if the inclination were there. In other words, exclusivity's second cost to a community is that it requires energy to maintain - energy that therefore can't be used for growth. To turn again to a scientific example, the terms "vector" and "scalar" both refer to the movement of an object, but only vectors include an element of direction. If the aim is to walk to Mymensingh, a person who has strolled one metre northwards from Dhaka has achieved more - in vector, though not scalar, terms, - than an unfortunate who has hiked one hundred kilometres incorrectly south. To develop a country, effort is required; but cleverness and toil expended in extortion and terror all equate to a scalar-type effort. Ill directed and therefore useless.

Worse than useless. As I've written, those who abuse, torture or exploit others can only do so by perceiving them as somehow deeply different, profoundly "not-us-but-them". Exclusive minded people, therefore, are pre-disposed to exploit other people since (by definition) they view others as "them". This inclination towards exploitation because of exclusivity provides its third (after fighting and wastage) negative effect on Bangladeshi society.

In general it can be said that societies generate wealth either by directly exploiting a nearby natural resource (such as water or fertile soil, minerals or cheap labour) or by transformation of such a natural resource. The comparison between exploitative Bangladesh and transformative Singapore has already been given. The economic point being that any society's economic strength ultimately rests on their middle class entrepreneurs, on those who create prosperity by adaptation or processing of raw products rather than their initial gathering. Uncut emeralds don't sparkle with value; gold mined waits until the goldsmith's skill to appreciate fully. The finely worked final product and not the raw material brings wealth to a community, with trained labour adding the real margin of profit. Hence widespread material poverty is always preceded by a poverty of thinking, a poverty of imagination. Those who, envisaging an improvement, use their creativity to alter raw materials are the powerhouse for any society's economic strength. Conversely, thwarting entrepreneurs always rips the heart from any corporate body's growth. Raiding Old Dhaka's gold-shops may help India's economy (since that is where worried Hindus tend to emigrate, despite Government hindrances on Hindus removing their own savings from their own bank accounts), but the loss of skilled craftsmen can't be counted Bangladesh's gain.

It must also be said that an all-inclusive entrepreneurial spirit is not inevitably a blessing. Bangladesh need only look to its Raj-period history to see what happened when the UK joined the post Renaissance rush to conquer the world prompted by inclusivity at its worst (ie greed). It may be irony, or perhaps karmic certainty, that post-Thatcherian UK itself now wonders how to control its flock of expansionist business people who had the legal freedom to explore their voracity. Maybe it is naive to expect inclusivity's best face (altruism) to invariably be the spur for business enterprises and a need for some measure of legalised containment will always remain. Nonetheless, frustrating the middle class entrepreneurs seems to have a disproportionately large negative economic effect, as Eastern Europe wasted decades proving. Communism's demise was sealed by its complete inability to motivate its entrepreneurs - a demise made sadder by the radically courageous nature of communism's experiment.

Exclusivity, then, cripples the very group central to economic strength because it promotes the weaker strategy of exploitation for generating income. Exploitation as a income generating mechanism can target either raw materials or people (it would be interesting to investigate whether the two are linked. Do manufacturing countries have better human rights records?). Bangladesh has a surfeit of people and little else beyond its miraculously fertile soil to exploit. Natural gas is said to be plentiful (reserves of 12 trillion cubic metres which should last until about 2030) but until either the government lays pipelines across the nation or foreign companies sense political stability will last long enough for profits to accrue, it will stay mostly buried.

Exclusivity also prompts Bangladeshis to consider it unlikely that an outsider's thoughts and opinions will be valid; and this adds the fourth tier of inefficiency. Perceiving "them" as lacking credibility makes it certain that any new ideas of "theirs" won't be fairly viewed. For those in Bangladesh that equates to anything from "the West" (ie Places Unknown But Not Islamic) will not be unbiasedly examined. (As always, there are other factors too. The opposing doctrine of low dignity tends to assume anything Western is superior. Paradox ... again. A most succinct illustration of which I noticed when two rickshaws scooted past me along a crowded road. The first was painted with a decoratively smiling Saddam while the second had a blazing Rambo.) Exclusivity dictates that anything outside Bangladesh's narrow cultural band is suspicious and unworthy. This helps to explain the apparent incongruity whereby a hospitable society relying on Western aid is able to treat its resident Westerners with routine racism. This usually stops at verbal abuse, although physical attacks aren't unknown. More sinister, perhaps, is speculation about what will happen as the realization grows that neither the local police nor (all too often) foreign embassies choose to provide any effective protection for the strangers in Bangladesh's midst.

With such a mistrust of anything "not of us", potentially useful outside influences are obviously less likely to be recognised and adopted into local traits. India is fortunate since there is no need even to look beyond her own borders for such outside influences. A huge pool of cultures jostle inside the country, all with their unique world view. A single office in any of the major Indian cities is likely to have Gujeratis, Punjabis, Tamils, Telugus, Adivasis, - and more - racial groups on its pay-roll. If a sense of unity is able to predominate over the diversity of upbringings a range of experiences is therefore available within a single room to streamline problem solving.

India thus has the sociological equivalent of a gene pool, while Bangladesh is a strict monoculture. Ecologists warn that the loss of our planet's tropical rain forests will involve

losing innumerable (potentially useful) plant species altogether, with a corresponding decrease in the resources available for human use. Medical science could be particularly weakened since so many drugs are synthesized from, or replicate, tropical vegetation. Moreover, as the total numbers of plant species decreases there is an proportional decline in the biosphere's corporate ability to withstand a range of ecological pressures (drought, flood, cold, pest attack, etc). Where many plant species live in close proximity an unexpected disaster may decimate some, but not all, species. Monocultures, on the other hand, are easily ravaged, being only as strong as their shared weakest link. They don't, therefore, make stable ecological systems.

As with nature, so it is with people - still, after all, little more than walking trees. Bangladesh's three-tiered unity means firstly that there is a noticeable sameness throughout most of the country. There are tiny, diverse tribal minorities, but they are oppressed and sidelined (and sometimes massacred, but that doesn't impress a local news machine so reluctant to appear anything other than optimistic that when a Bangladesh Biman jet landing from Saudi Arabia verged on disaster by overrunning the runway TV news didn't dare to broadcast the story). An ideal place to view Bangladesh's uniformity is its ubiquitous teashops that have taught my stomach endurance and my mind flexibility. See (and smell) one teashop and you've tasted the genre; they don't vary much. Tea is always made the same way. Tinges of cardamon or hints of ginger are Indian variations untasted this side of the border. Blue Cross condensed milk is trickled into a stained cup and topped up with tea which is strained through a cloth rag. Sugar is added, stirring sloppily completed, and the beverage is prepared. The only way. Even the topics of teashop conversation come round again and again. Sly gains, courtesy of "chalak" dealings. Wandering mendicants meanderings about Allah, often in fanciful stories wrongly attributed to the Ahadith. Interesting to the addicted and relaxing to those not in a hurry, the teashop is an institution that pleases those who prefer things tomorrow to be as they were yesterday..

Because Bangladesh is so ill equipped to absorb new ideas, being inward looking and ethnically singular, it is inevitably destined to remain conservative. The fear of regression makes any chance of progress unlikely. Any new idea with potential to change lives for the better has either to arise within the community itself or scale the high walls of prejudice that maintain the seige mentality. The lack of enough outside input contributes to the poverty of ideas that in turn translates to material poverty.

Not only does suspicion of the outsider mean new ideas are rarely accepted in their entirety, it also makes equally unlikely even the adaptation of outside ideas. In biological parlance, hybridisation only occurs very rarely. Such hybridisation's value is well demonstrated by Japan's development of the VCR and video camera, for example. Both are machines it is reasonable (but wrong) to assume were invented in Japan, so dominant is its current market share. Bangladesh, on the other hand, can imitate cunningly but the creativity needed to adapt and extend an outside idea (as Japan has done with many American and European creations) hasn't shown itself yet. It is a local joke, when buying spare vehicle parts stamped "Made In Japan" to ask whether "Japan" means "Japan Japan" or "Jinjera Japan". Jinjera is the area over the Buriganga River in Dhaka where many of these fake parts are made. In appearance they have improved markedly from the "Made At Singapore" cups I once bought and it is only when the product wears out far faster than the real thing that the difference becomes obvious to all but the experts. In fact, "a local joke" isn't quite correct, since all accept this false labelling as

normal business. I've heard vendors soberly say "this is made in Japan - Jinjera Japan of course, but really good Jinjera Japan".

While governmental policy contributes to the second-rate nature of these copies (it is extremely difficult to import top quality raw materials, such as the metals needed in engine parts) there is also a lack of interest in trying to learn from the outsider (in this case, Japanese) the lessons centrally important in generating income. For local business, concepts like quality control, reliability, customer service, research and development, innovation etc - those things that have made Japan an economic giant - remain foreign and therefore of little perceived value. It is enough to merely copy the appearance as closely as possible and keep out of mind what is out of sight. Make a quick killing; no questions asked about what, in the long run, is being killed. Not only does such a suspicion of outside cultures mean that, for example, the Toyota's engine will need rebuilding twice as often as the manual suggests, it also robs its citizens of the chance to develop their creativity, since creativity never operates in a vacuum but is the active response to outside stimuli. It adapts others' insights and applies them to one's own specific needs. A decision not to react with the outside except in a superficial manner is therefore a choice that mitigates against the exercise of creativity. Like other nebulous realities (quality control, reliability, etc) creativity is also downgraded for a further reason that the next chapter will examine.

For now it is enough to note how deeply the habit of exclusivity bites into Bangladeshis' lives. Fissures appear throughout society. Middle class doctors refuse to live in the countryside; any responsibility they are likely to shoulder doesn't reach as far as "them" illiterate villagers. (A mid-70's Dutch funded project to improve traditional village healers' skills foundered within a decade when the town doctors realized that if poor villagers stopped travelling to them for treatment, they'd lose money.) Rich landowners recruit the poor as their militia against the poorest, or send them share-cropping on the low lying, disaster prone, islands. People from one town dismiss their city neighbours as being "only from Sylhet /Barisal/the village." It's a sad irony that many Bangladeshis now see 1971 as a time to be proud of. A year that saw 3,000,000 murdered, numberless raped and maimed, 10,000,000 made refugees, and India liberate Bangladesh is "our finest hour" "The only time we all stood together" is how many ruefully recall it. "When a college professor could arrive with no money in a village and be fed, housed. When a villager could get help from the wealthy .... " One person sadly dated "the beginning of Bangladesh's end" to the day in 1972 that medical help at the free government clinics began to cost money again. The timing may be questioned but the subsequent lack of unity can't . As I've suggested, the way we treat the powerless reveals the true state of our heart. The way the majority persecute minorities reveals a harsh sense of exclusivity ruling hearts and minds. One poem pictures the conflict within Bangladesh by describing a winner, thus -:

I'm fat and I'm proud  
and I wear my stomach loud.  
Stuff myself  
stuff you,  
I can eat enough  
for two.

Such exclusivity increases overall poverty. Which then turns people further inward, mistrusting the unfamiliar even more. Which makes them more poor. Which in turn makes them more exclusive. Which then..... Every basic text in rural health shows the disease/malnutrition cycle that circles the poor like a vulture. At a less tangible, but no less real, level a refusal to accept others as “one of us” impoverishes a nation and gives part of the reason Bangladesh’s impoverishment is compounding.

The sufis tell a story about someone drowning in a pond. In such a case, they ask “does the floundering swimmer demand those on dry land tell them their name, or job, or wealth, or family, or status? Would they feel insulted to be rescued by a social inferior? Not at all. The dying person screams for help and is thankful for whoever dives into the water in response. Once helped and recovering on the bank will the saved belittle his saviour’s race, or appearance, or habits? Of course not. He will just express his gratitude.”

To assume that every outside influence is motivated by benevolence would be dangerously naive. Conversely, and more importantly to Bangladesh’s situation, to think that nothing outside the (actual or metaphoric) bari walls should be allowed influence is a mistake that could prove fatal. Progress is available; the hanging question is whether Bangladeshis find it acceptable.