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The best of times and the worst of times Rajshahi 1961-1972, reproduced with the permission of my father David C. Morgan.

The years 1961 - 72 were fraught with danger for the people of Rajshahi. Periods of martial law were interspersed with various attempts to build what was called "guided democracy", which, as it was imposed from above, always failed. Tension between India and Pakistan, never far from breaking point, exploded into brief conflict in 1965. Though the fighting took place in the West, the East too was placed on a war footing, and expatriates were required to leave Rajshahi. When China invaded India her army came perilously close to the Pakistan border before they returned home, as though surprised they had got so far so quickly!

There were communal riots in which those Hindu communities which had not already fled to India were exposed to persecution. The bigoted eye of the fanatic made no distinction between Hindu and Tribal communities and Christians too, whether Tribal or Bengali, lived in fear. Sometimes their fear was justified. Later on tensions between Bengali and Bihari communities were to explode into violence. There were days and nights when the stench of the burnt hair and flesh of humans choked our lungs.

They were also the years in which a rift between West and East Pakistan grew into a yawning, unbridgeable chasm. Student riots would flare into civil war only to be ruthlessly suppressed with great loss of life. The countless graves of Bengali martyrs were laying the foundation of what was to become Bangladesh. Finally, India exploited, for her own advantage, Pakistan's fatal weakness and enabled the East to throw off the West's hated stranglehold. But that only happened after a year of huge disruption in which great numbers of persons became refugees, unknown numbers died, whole villages were razed to the ground and great tracts of the countryside were left uncultivated. Bangladesh was born in blood, tears and almost unimaginable poverty. In the first flush of freedom many said the price had been worth paying.

As though all this were not enough they were also years in which the country was battered by the most appalling natural disasters. A succession of cyclones funnelled their way up the Bay of Bengal, carrying walls of water before them which swept destructively across the fertile delta lands where concentrations of the population lived. Lost lives were counted in hundreds of thousands, some would reckon in millions. Though the full force of these storms had weakened by the time they reached Rajshahi, our District too had to cope with storm damage, flooding and consequent economic chaos and food shortage.

A spectator to these events might be forgiven for thinking that no regular pattern of life could be maintained in such a chaotic kaleidoscope of happenings. But most people, living apart from the urban centres, were only directly affected when disaster struck their particular locality. For them "normal" life continued come what may. It had to! So did the life of the Church. But even "normal" life was a struggle against great odds.

These years were "the best of times and the worst of times" for Elaine, Gareth, Catherine and me. I think they were so too for the people of Rajshahi.

The best of times

We lived on a sprawling mission compound alongside Bengali and Santali families and British compatriots. Neighbours included Danes, Americans and Norwegians. Because Rajshahi had

recently become a University town there was, in peaceful times at least, a constant stream of visitors seeking a place to stay. In that remote, isolated town we were immensely privileged! Guests included Kathleen Kenyon, Margaret Miles, and the Bristol Young Vic. Mother Theresa called once but decided to stay somewhere more restful! People would ask us whether we were lonely. But that was the last thing we ever were. In any case the village congregations were less than a day's travel away, and there we always knew that we would be surrounded by friends wanting to talk, to play and to pray.

For Catherine and Gareth it was heaven. They were free to wander and play safely, since they were surrounded by known faces who would not let them come to harm. When night came we would go searching for them and often find them in someone's home put to bed with their Santali or Bengali friends. They grew up speaking Bengali and Santali fluently, though their English was rather less accomplished. Their unvarying custom was to speak Santali to each other, Bengali when required, and English to us. We never heard them confuse their languages.

The Christian community in Rajshahi was representative of many denominations. Christians were drawn to the town to work in the hospital and the high school for which the Church was responsible, or to other work that became available in the growing town. So worshippers at the Sunday service far outnumbered actual members of the church, and the more forceful leaders in the community were not always able to participate formally in decisions. When India and Pakistan briefly went to war in 1965, and foreign nationals were excluded from the border area, the community met the emergency by agreeing that all its worshipping members would be full members of the Rajshahi United Church, without being required to give up their membership of their "home" churches. It was a practical and fruitful decision that smoothed the path to wider union when in 1971 the Rajshahi United Church entered the Church of Pakistan, which in a matter of months, through political necessity, became the Church of Bangladesh.

As the years passed, my participation in the management of the Hospital and the High School increased, but my first responsibility was to the scattered Santal communities of Christians in Rajshahi, Kharmarmaria, Shibpur, Nosrotpur, Pailorpukur, Belghoria and Jalalabad. When in the crisis of 1971, practically the whole of the Rajshahi congregation became refugees in India, it was the strong ties of friendship and ministry with these wonderful people that made it impossible for me to leave.

Our hope for the Santal congregations was threefold: [1] to nurture their Christian faith as the generation that had made its 'decision for Christ' was succeeded by a second generation that was growing up in the church; [2] to enable the children to receive a basic education in their own language so that those who moved on to study in Bengali at a later stage would not be too disadvantaged; and [3] to give these most poor and hard working people security by enabling them through loan funds to own land for themselves. It was an uphill struggle! Against a background of economic hardship, political uncertainty, war and natural disaster, families were torn between a desire to flee for their lives and stay to protect the little they had.

But some of the best times of my life were spent in their company. When we went as a family as we frequently did, eating as they ate and sleeping as they slept, barriers of race and money and education seemed to crumble to nothing as the hours passed in story telling, teasing, laughing and prayer. Sometimes I have been asked what my chief memory of those years is. Some of the sad ones follow, but chief of all is a feeling, of joy and harmony on entering a Santal village after walking or cycling many miles to get there, and being greeted

with frank and open smiles of welcome, the laughter of children playing and the sounds of village life.

The worst of times

Jalalabad was the largest of the congregations. The village always seemed to be bursting with children! In a time of communal riots and movement of population, with the promise of land settlement in India dangled before them, the community moved across the border lock, stock and barrel, leaving only the growing crops in the fields for others to harvest. I walked through the empty ghost village in despair, my hopes of a flourishing settled Christian community dashed by their dispersal. I returned eighteen months later and it was as though no one had ever lived there, their mud houses now ploughed into the ground for cultivation. Only the fruit trees remained as evidence of the life there once had been.

Rajshahi was a ghost town. A battle had been fought over it. Mortars had exploded around the house, mercifully missing it. The bulk of the town population, including most Christians had become refugees in India. The Pakistan army had reoccupied the town, in the process shooting everyone they encountered. Bodies were left to lie where they fell at the road side - it would be almost a year before the bleached bones would be buried. I had become separated from the family; it was to be some time before I learnt that Elaine, with great courage, had taken the children on a horrendous, frightening journey across the Ganges to safety in India. I had never felt more frightened and homesick. As dawn broke that morning, just as every other morning, the call went up from the mosque: "God is great. God is great. I bear witness that there is no God but God. Come to prayer!" I had thought the town to be empty of people and God forsaken. It took a faithful Muslim to teach me otherwise.

Years after we had settled back in Britain I was leading worship on Good Friday when, unaccountably (as it seemed then) and for the first time in my life, I broke down in tears as I read the story of the Crucifixion of our Lord. As I later reflected on what had happened I realised that at a level other than conscious thought I had made in that moment an emotional connection between Jesus' Passion and the sufferings of the people of Bengal during the time we lived among them. Tears, pent at the time, flowed out of control. One memory, in particular, haunts me. In the hysteria of the weeks following the defeat of the Pakistan army when ordinary people were wreaking their vengeance on "collaborators" (real or imagined) I met in the road a mob that was dragging along one such "traitor". His arms, bound to a heavy length of bamboo, were held out horizontally so that his figure made the shape of a cross. Passers-by hurled pieces of brick at him, or spat at him; some ran up and kicked him so that he stumbled and fell; his face, ashen grey, showed no feeling. He was moments from death. As I watched, as people had watched Jesus carry his cross all those years ago, I understood that Jesus' suffering face must have been identical to his. There is then no way of distinguishing any suffering human face from the face of our Lord.

I place on record my thanks to Christians in Rajshahi, Bengali and Santali, who took us to themselves in a kind of love/hate relationship for all that we represented of our imperial and racist history and all that we were as Christian brothers and sisters, strangers and guests: who when we were frightened helped us find courage; and when we were hungry helped us find food; who led us, at least part way, out of a narrow, western, tunnel vision of God's world.

I cannot tell how significant those years were for the future of the Church in Bangladesh. The passage of time alone will be able to demonstrate that. One thing I learnt was that a

few committed people can accomplish remarkable things. The Church should never be afraid of being small.