

Pakistan, a prize anomaly:

East is east, West is west and the result is tragedy

By EDWARD A. O'NEILL

In 1933, the year of Hitler, Franklin Roosevelt, worldwide depression and revolutionary change, an obscure Asian student at Cambridge University named Chaudhuri Rahmat Ali wrote a pamphlet called "Now Or Never." It was a revolutionary pamphlet of the sort that students in all parts of the world were writing in those days.

Unlike most student writings then, Rahmat Ali's pamphlet has not been forgotten, although he did little else of note

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and died in England without ever returning to his homeland.

In his pamphlet Rahmat Ali coined the word "Pakistan." He explained that the word in Persian and Urdu meant "land of the Paks—the spiritually pure and clean," but also was an acronym composed of the initial letters of the Punjab, Afghanistan (Northwest Frontier province), Kashmir, Iran, Sind, Tukharistan (in Central Asia) and Afghanistan.

Rahmat Ali took in a little too much territory (Iran, Tukharistan and Afghanistan), but the rest of the areas he chose in what was then British India are parts of Pakistan, although control of Kashmir is divided and disputed with independent India.

Left out of the acronym, however, was East Bengal—the most populous part of the country Rahmat Ali named—which is today East Pakistan, an area torn by a savage civil war.

It is quite likely that Rahmat Ali never

even thought of East Bengal when he coined the name, for he was a Punjabi. To a Punjabi of his faith, the millions of brother Moslems inhabiting the Far Eastern arm of British India were as alien and unknown as Moslem Javanese.

Rahmat Ali's oversight is of utmost importance for understanding today's tragic situation, illustrating as it does the basic "west" orientation of the idea of Pakistan.

Among all the nations born in the years following World War II, Pakistan is without doubt the prize anomaly. Its two parts, officially known as the West Wing and the East Wing, are separated by 1,100 miles of unfriendly India, which does not allow air or surface passage across its land.

Eleven hundred miles is only the distance from Washington to Oklahoma City, but in South Asian terms that distance must be multiplied by 10 to get

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even an approximation of the degree of separation between the two "wings."

But this physical separation possibly could be encompassed if the two parts of the world's fifth most-populous country were not so vastly different.

The land and climate are different.

The people are different.

Their cultures are different.

Their historical backgrounds are different.

Their languages are different.

Most of East Pakistan is an enormous delta built of soil brought down over

millenia from India. Tibet and China by the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. It probably is the largest deltaic region in the world, and unbelievably watery. The Maryland marshlands are as nothing compared to it. Seventy-five per cent of East Pakistan, an area as large as Arkansas, is less than 50 feet above sea level. Through this flat land slowly flow countless rivers and streams. Bridging is practically impossible because of their constantly changing course; they are crossed mostly by isolated ferries and country boats.

Because of its geographical configuration, much of East Pakistan is actually inaccessible and largely out of touch with the world. This inaccessibility was dramatically illustrated after the terrible storms, tides and floods that took the lives of from 300,000 to 500,000 persons four months ago. Relief workers could reach those who survived only by helicopter.

West Pakistan is a different and a harsher land. It is an extension of what used to be called Asia Minor and reaches up into the towering mountain barrier of the Hindu Kush. From Mount Godwin Austen (K-2), it runs down through the arid plains of the Punjab, through Salt Desert and the Indus Valley to the Arabian Sea. The area is as big as Texas—which parts of it resemble—and its climate is "continental," with sharp changes in temperature and changing seasons.

East Pakistan, on the other hand, is tropical with a humid, warm and languorous climate. Soon the monsoon rains will come, flooding a large part of the delta and movement, except by boat, will be virtually impossible.

The differences in the peoples of East and West were gruesomely illustrated recently by a newspaper photograph of Bengali rebels holding aloft the severed head of a West Pakistani officer. The dead face bore more resemblance to Anwar Sadat, president of the United Arab Republic, than it did to his erstwhile countrymen in the picture.

People, Culture, History

It is difficult to generalize ethnically about the West Pakistanis for they come from diverse strains and racial stock—Muslim conquerors from Central Asia, Persians, Afghans, Pathans, Turks and indigenous peoples ranging from fierce Rajputs to outcaste Hindus converted centuries ago to Islam. There are even genes in West Pakistani blood from the Macedonian troops who followed Alexander the Great into the subcontinent until he "found no other lands to conquer."

The Bengalis, on the other hand, are a small, dark, volatile and, most important, homogeneous people. Until the coming of the first Muslim conquerors into Bengal in the Eleventh Century, a large part of the populace was practicing a diluted form of Buddhism—the last large group of that faith left on the subcontinent. Although the Muslim conquerors were largely Central Asians and completely alien, they apparently seemed better than the Hindu Brahmin kings who ruled the area. The Bengalis became eager converts to Islam, a religious tie that 900 years later brought about formation of the improbable Islamic republic of Pakistan.

Ethnically, the East Pakistanis are virtually the same as the Indians in the state of West Bengal. Excepting regional differences and honorific locutions, their languages are the same. The written language, Sadha Bangal, in its "chaste" form is identical.

But, the Indian Bengalis are Hindus. The difference in religions, backed by age-old memories of oppression, slaughter and prejudice on both sides, makes the Catholic-Protestant upheaval in Northern Ireland seem like a doctrinal difference in the Southern Baptist Church.

Languages

The predominant West Pakistan language is Urdu, an agglomeration of the Hindi used around Delhi when the Muslim conquerors set up their kingdom and of Persian, Turkish and Arabic. At the time of independence an attempt was made to make Urdu the lingua franca of the new Pakistan, but Urdu is as different from Bengali as English is from German. Mohammed Ali Jinnah, revered as the "father" of Pakistan and a West Pakistani, went to Dacca in 1948 to try to persuade the Bengalis to accept it as the official language. He had to make his speech in English.

The ferocity of the Pakistan government's reaction to the Bangla Desh uprising may possibly work, for Bengalis are notoriously unwarlike. In the days of the British raj, they were clerks and functionaries, but not soldiers. Rudyard Kipling used to make fun of them (though he used one as a "good guy" in his famous Klm). Kipling lived in what is West Pakistan. The British Indian Army recruited few Bengalis.

The Bengalis, however, have always been revolutionaries and "bomb-throwers" in the old sense. The East Pakistan countryside is ideal for guerrilla warfare, not unlike the Mekong Delta where the Vietnamese rebels held out so long after the French left and then struck against the Saigon government and the Americans. But there is a question whether the Bengalis have the stomach to stick at the task as the Vietnamese rebels did and to mount a campaign that can force the West Pakistani Army and the central government in Islamabad to come to some accommodation. At present, such an outcome would seem doubtful. But if the Bengalis do not force an accommodation, they will be back beyond where they were when this whole thing started.

And the differences, as old as history, will remain.

