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Of Fear and Fright: Reminiscences from the Bangladesh Sundarbans in Colonel Ershad's Time

Harald Tambs-Lyche

Abstract

In these reminiscences from the Bangladesh Sundarbans in the early 1980s, I recall the climate of fear that reigned in the area. Among the poor, every spring presented the threat of starvation and death, as their rice stocks became depleted and the price of rice became impossibly high. Rice became scarce, too, since much was smuggled to India at an even "better" price. For those who had a little land, there was the danger that rich neighbours would dispossess them by bribing the village accountant to change the title to the land. For the land-grabbers, there was the fear of vengeance from the Mukti Bahini, the clandestine freedom fighters from the time of the war of independence, who would sometimes kill the wrongdoers. For those who sympathised with the Mukti Bahini, there was the fear of the police. Even the schoolmasters were afraid, for the state coffers would run dry in the summer, and they would not get paid until the arrival of foreign aid money in January. And yet, in the midst of all this, there was the Jatra, the folk theatre, whose rehearsals were held clandestinely in spite of the curfew – proof of the people's determination to enjoy life and art in spite of everything. This article, then, is a reflection on the courage exhibited by the residents of the Sundarbans in defiance of the omnipresent spectre of fear.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Sundarbans, fear, fright, fieldwork, Mukti Bahini

Introduction

As an anthropologist, I have seldom had occasion to be afraid in the field. It is here that my experience of the Bangladesh Sundarbans, in the early 1980s, stands out. At that time and place, fear was a constant and fundamental element of existence for the people around me. I shall describe a situation where violence and deprivation, mainly due to what might be described as the "political situation" – the balance of power and violence combined with the hunger experienced every spring by the very poor – produced a permanent and

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very real sense of insecurity. Though this was in the early 1980s, the situation was certainly "post-colonial" in the sense that violence was not a state monopoly, but distributed among several actors. This differed from a forest camp farther south in the Sundarbans, where the monopoly of violence was squarely in the hands of the forest guards, unlike the particular "balance of power" I observed in the village of Rayenda. The existential condition of permanent fear did not exclude moments of fright, when particular elements suddenly combined to threaten imminent death or destruction.

I distinguish, then, fear from fright: they are not the same. Also, I believe, we must distinguish the frights that result from otherwise enjoyable and voluntarily chosen activities such as a dangerous sport (not to speak of the "pseudo-frights"of a horror movie), from those that stand forth as involuntary moments of crisis while living with fear – as described here but also, perhaps, as associated with dangerous occupations and ways of life, such as underground mining or deep-water fishing, to name only a few. Fright of the latter kind is peculiarly characterised by being, so to speak, the sudden realisation of what we already knew only too well.

Of fear and fright

> He has not learned the lesson of life
> who does not every day surmount a fear.[1]

I shall speak, here, mainly of fear – not of supernatural forces, but of the wheels of a society gone wrong, wheels which might and sometimes did crush anyone in their way. Such fear was not a passing emotion, but a constant presence. Occasionally, fear might turn into fright, when a particular situation of danger arose. But the background, all the time, was the fear of losing livelihood and life in a situation where violence was endemic to social life.

The setting could have been idyllic – the green forests and fields of the Bangladesh Sundarbans, with water everywhere, leading to a cleanliness of the environment I never knew in Western India: here, even poor houses had their own latrine, perched over the water. In Western India, no such luxuries were known: where the fields were distant, the back lanes served as the toilets, with scavenging dogs as the main street-cleaners. The huts in the Sundarbans might be small and poor, but they were picturesque: there were palms everywhere, and at dawn and dusk, birdsong mellowed all other sounds. Here, in the Ganges delta, it was easy to understand why Bangladesh should be the most fertile country on earth.

1 "Courage" by Ralph Waldo Emerson, from the collection "Society and Solitude"; see *Emerson's Prose Works*, Volume III, Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Co., 1879 (original talk held in 1859), p. 156.

In October 1982, there were several ways to get from Dhaka to Rayenda, the centre of Sarankhola Thana, far to the south in the Sundarbans of Khulna District, Bangladesh. I chose the steamer “Rocket”, which left Dhaka at ten in the morning among a host of river craft, most of them under sail, mounting the river in the fresh morning breeze. In the afternoon, downriver, we passed others at anchor, waiting for the next morning’s wind. The pulse of the river still followed the rhythm of the current and the winds. But the steamer pressed on, and at four in the morning I went on deck to see Morellganj, one of the first settlements in the Khulna Sundarbans, founded in 1830 by the two Morell brothers. Like others who followed, they had bought their land from the East India Company and, unlike the others, grew rice rather than opium – with its attendant horrors – on the land cleared by their dependents. In spite of the enthusiastic description of the Gazetteer (KDG 1976: 53, Rao / Rao 1992, Oddie 1999), Morellganj looked sad now: the river had recently taken away part of the village. A couple of years later, it was to swallow the house of the Morells too, and with it the valuable archives still to be studied for the history of the area.

We were in the “moribund” delta, where silt is no longer deposited to form new islands and enlarge the land, as it is in the “active” delta to the east. Here in the West the salty seawater floods the rivers in winter, so the rice beds must, above all, be kept dry. This prevents farmers from growing a winter crop of rice: still, the quantity of rice grown well exceeds the needs of the population.

As you travel along the rivers, only the high banks are seen, with the tops of the palms behind. You can see the roofs of houses, too, but not the fields, always well below water level. The villages here all have the same origin. The land belonged, at first, to pioneers who brought along with them a whole troop of workers, to clear and till, but also to defend their lands. There was nobody else to protect them. A tradition of violence was there from the start. Gradually, the land was leased to tenants, then there were sub-tenants: subinfeudation led to the division of the land into an infinite number of small plots, with some large farms in between. Merchants and artisans arrived later (KDG 1976: 300–301, Tambs-Lyche 2017: 173–176). The large farmers, merchants and artisans were still there in 1982, but most farmers were still tenants, though some of them had gained ownership of small plots after the war of independence in 1970–71. Others, increasingly, were landless labourers. The result was a society sharply divided by class (Datta 1994): the majority of the people came from the ubiquitous ex-untouchable community of Namashudras (Bandopadhyay 1994), while most of them, converted, now described themselves simply as “Muslims”. Only the smattering of higher castes – and some artisans – designated themselves by a specific caste name. About a fifth of the population remained Hindus.

We arrived at Khulna, the capital of the province, at ten in the morning. A rickshaw from the steamer's quay took me to the ferrymen's place where I negotiated a passage by canoe to the south side of the river. Here you might get a seat in a minibus for Bagerhat – halfway to Rayenda downriver – but you could also, as I did, take the train: slow but safe. Once on the way up, later, I took the bus: I remember a cyclist throwing himself into the rice fields as we heard the crackling noise of the bike crushed under our wheels. The bus did not stop.

I passed two nights at Bagerhat waiting for the opportunity to travel further. One evening, in the street, I was surrounded by a gang of some thirty young boys, eager to get at the American imperialist – me, in effect – who just managed to slip back into the hotel and persuade the owner, with some difficulty, to close his door on the gang. Perhaps this was my first "fright" in the Sundarbans. Then, at six p.m. the next day, I boarded the boat for Rayenda, and, with a quick passage downstream, arrived in the evening. Luckily the Public Works Department bungalow was free, and I got a nice little place to stay.

I was glad to have chosen this itinerary, though a faster one exists – 28 rather than 33 hours of travel, plus intermediary waiting – for the little more than one hundred kilometres as the crow flies. This is the direct Dhaka-Bagerhat launch. But the night before my arrival at Rayenda, the launch had been taken by "dacoits", who had looted the passengers – though nobody had been killed this time, as they said. This happened from time to time, but the "dacoits" had never attacked the "Rocket". There was other news: that morning, a corpse had been found floating in the canal that forms Rayenda's port. The body was beyond identification, but, it was said, "we know who killed him." Who that was, was never said. But there was again vague talk of "dacoits" and of the fortress the police were building as a defence against them, somewhat further south. When people used the term "dacoits", however, there seemed to be some irony about it, as if the "dacoits" were not really to be despised.

I was at Rayenda to study the problems of infrastructure, transport and agriculture, with a small grant from NORAD, the Norwegian development agency. I was to indicate possible measures to ameliorate the economic situation in the area. To do so, I did a series of interviews among the poor – a rather melancholy task, as many of the interviewees were in a state of hunger and bad health that made one doubt their capacity to last until the next monsoon. Lack of food was not the problem: there was plenty of rice. But merchants and the few large landowners hoarded the rice in the autumn, and when it was sold in the spring, it would bring a profit of more than one hundred per cent – at which time, it would be far too expensive for the local poor. Considerable profit, too, was gained by smuggling the rice to Kolkata, where the superior

Bangladeshi variant fetched a high price. Crossing the border was not entirely without danger, however.

Here in the moribund delta, the salty river water prevented a winter crop of rice. But what about vegetable crops that did not need irrigation? The local market was too small to grow them on any scale. But what if they could be brought to town? Thus, I started wondering about the potential of a road from Rayenda to Morellganj – or even all the way to Bagerhat – to transport and market the vegetables that, it seemed, the area around Rayenda might be able to produce. Agricultural activity during the winter would provide work to at least some of the starving poor.

Mukti Bahini

Then one day, somebody knocked on the door of my bungalow and I was confronted with some fifteen women, of all ages, come to see me. "We have come to tell you we have no use for a road," they said. "There is a path already, and we can go there by walking. A road for vehicles would help only the rich – and the police. We do not want that road."

I wanted, of course, to know who these women were. "They are the women's branch of the Mukti Bahini," explained my best friend and informant. This was the corps of volunteers of Mujibur Rahman, dating from the war of liberation. I knew that organisation already. One day, as we were walking towards a forestry village some twenty kilometres to the South, we had been stopped on the road by half a dozen armed men. "The Malik wants to see you," one of them said. They led us to a school rather incongruously placed in the midst of the rice fields. A few minutes later, we were standing before a small assembly in the classroom. This, I think, may well be described as another fright. But then I recognised the malik, or "commander", seated at the teacher's desk. He was playing the part of Tipu Sultan in the piece of Jatra folk-theatre that was being rehearsed in the village, and I had already been told that he was the head of the Mukti Bahini in the area, and of their military wing, the Mukti Judda Sangsha, both formally banned in Bangladesh at that time.

The first question – translated into English – was neat and clear: "We just want to know what your connection to American Imperialism is." Other questions, rather less general, followed. In fact, once I realised that they had decided I did not really represent the enemy, I began to feel rather at ease with them. Were the "dacoits", in fact, these Mukti Bahini? Unsurprisingly, I could obtain no clear answer to the question. Certainly, they were among those the

police was supposed to fight, and certainly, arms and all, they were not supposed, officially, to exist.

I should explain that these freedom fighters – who had played an important part in the war of liberation – were not universally popular. Many high-caste Muslims had opposed the separation from Pakistan, and there had been a series of bloody massacres of those suspected of supporting Bangladeshi independence. The latter, represented by the Mukti Bahini, had fought back. They may be regarded as Bengali nationalists, and in a nutshell, one could see the conflict – still very much alive – as one between those who are Bengalis first, Muslims second, and those for whom it is the other way round. Colonel Mohammed Ershad, then dictator of Bangladesh (1982– 90), could be seen, at the time, as having steered a course of compromise: he had banned the Mukti Bahini, which had gone underground, while he also seemed to view them as a useful counter-force against the Islamists. As a true Bengali, Ershad was also a romantic and a poet: every day a poem of his – on subjects such as "the village of my youth" – appeared on the front page of the national newspapers.

The presence of the Mukti Bahini was strongly felt at Rayenda, and their malik enjoyed both popularity and a degree of prestige. It was also said of him, that he knew all the important officers in the army. The army, mind you, not the police, which was a different matter altogether. The malik was tall and handsome and enjoyed a reputation for honesty – something that was rare in Rayenda.

In fact, the lands of the village often changed ownership, without any notice being given to the peasant who supposed himself to be the owner. As one informant recounted, one day he had seen the henchmen of his neighbour, a rich Islamist farmer, ploughing what he knew to be his own land. He could not fight them: they were several, and they had a gun. So he went to the village accountant, to check that the land was still in his name. "Sorry," said the latter, "there is no land in your name." Clearly, the rich farmer had bribed or coerced the accountant to change the owner's name in the land register. "It happens all the time," said somebody else. In such cases, the only recourse was the Mukti Bahini. Sometimes, they would succeed in coercing the accountant to have the land restored. Sometimes, they would kill the land-grabber. Perhaps, but nobody said so, the corpse in the canal was one such case. That the ownership of property was a matter of force and political clout, and not a question of law, was in any case abundantly clear.

I had, in fact, recruited a young man as my assistant: he had recently lost his land and was in dire need of money. But when I visited the District Commissioner, accompanied by my new assistant, he at once told me to get rid of my aide. "He is too political," said the D.C., and indeed, I learnt that my ex-assistant was a member of the Mukti Bahini. I found another assistant, the

son of a merchant who had a sawmill. The mill was inoperative since it depended on electricity, and there had been no current for a long time. Diesel, as an alternative source of power, could be had only at impossible black-market rates. So he was free, and proved invaluable, since he was on speaking terms with the D.C., as well as with the malik of the Mukti Bahini, and even with the head policeman, as with almost everybody else.

He was not with me, however, when I visited the most important landowner of Rayenda, the very one, in fact, who had grabbed the land of my first assistant. He invited me to stay overnight with him – not a pleasure, assuredly, but all went well until we were returning to the village in a canoe escorted by one of his henchmen with a gun. There he presented me with a bill for lodging with him, at a price equal to some of the best hotels in Dhaka. I told him, then, that this was the behaviour of a dacoit: he had invited me, and I was certainly not going to pay. The henchman was shocked, the assistant I had brought from Dhaka was terrified, and the landowner began to cry. "How can you call me a dacoit," he said. This situation, too, I would qualify as a fright. But the henchman did not use his gun, and as I returned to Rayenda, the word had already spread. Strangely, most people seemed to be smiling at me, some shook my hands, and even the D.C. seemed to be amused. Clearly, I had scored a point, answering back to a man they hated and feared – but it may be understood that the general situation was somewhat tense.

Those who still had a little land were afraid of losing it, and, as we have seen, and as they well knew, becoming a landless labourer could in fact be just a slow way to die of starvation. Resistance might bring death more quickly. For the land-grabbers, the threat of vengeance – perhaps by the Mukti Bahini – was a real danger. The police hardly offered protection: they might stage an attack on the "bandits", but even if they should manage to kill a couple of them, this would in no way guarantee future security. More likely, it would lead the "bandits" to kill some of them. The police, too, were known to have killed troublesome people – or rather, it was said, people said to make trouble – the truth of the accusation did not matter if the police could be seen to act. Such cases of setting an example hardly assured anyone and the police were not discriminating in their choice of victims. After all, the policemen were afraid too, hoping to survive until they could return to the city, and to less dangerous pursuits such as tear-gassing demonstrating students.

Social fear

Here we are clearly talking not of individual fears but what Tudor (2003) calls social fear. This is an important point, since fear was for a long time the do-

main of psychology. In sociology, fear was at first approached in terms of constructionism (Harré 1986). But later, Lyon (1998: 43) argued that emotions like fear should also be understood in terms of their foundations in the social structure. In our case, we should realise that people in Rayenda had real cause for fear: it was not a case of projections, as Glassner (1999: xxvi) held of the "culture of fear" in American society. Nor does Furedi's stress on the importance of "the precautionary principle" in late modern societies (1997: 4) seem pertinent here. The source of fear in Rayenda seemed to lie, as Tudor puts it, in "the unanticipated consequences of changing social structures" (2003: 249). A structure of land tenure is supposed to exist, but who knows if the land will be yours tomorrow? Officially, the state and its police are supposed to monopolise and control violence, but in this case one might be killed by the police, by the Mukti Bahini, by the landlord's henchmen, by unidentified "bandits" or simply by the free market forces, through starvation. Fear in Rayenda, then, was clearly caused by the failure of the social structure, as well as the social organisation, to provide basic security.

This generalised fear was different from what I had experienced in Praj, a Saurashtra village where I stayed for some time. There, the agricultural labourers and the low castes were afraid of violent raids by the Rajputs, when their huts would be burnt, some of their women raped, and – sometimes – a few of their men killed. But such raids only happened when there was a conflict, such as a dispute about agricultural wages. In Praj, then, fear was part of the power structure of a relatively stable, unequal society, and violence would generally take place only when that structure was felt to be threatened.

Jatra rehearsals: the policeman and "Tipu Sultan"

But then, there was the theatre. There was, of course, a general curfew, and nobody was supposed to be out after dark. One might have thought people would be afraid of assembling illegally. But when my assistant – the son of the sawmill's owner – assured me there would be no problem, we went to the theatre. The company was rehearsing a couple of pieces, among them "Tipu Sultan", in which the malik of the Mukti Bahini played the title role. The symbolic link between the king who had fought the British and the malik who fought the authorities was abundantly clear. Still, apparently, the head of the local police had decided to tolerate these rehearsals.

I was enchanted by the performers, and by the art of Jatra – so different from the realist theatre of the West. In Jatra, every performer is a specialist of certain sentiments: the female star, a professional, was reputed to be the best weeper in Southern Bangladesh. The rehearsals went on from nine in the

evening until two in the morning every night, and the most impressive of all the personalities was the director, a fruit-seller who owned his cart and, apparently, a single set of well-worn clothes. He knew all the pieces more or less by heart, though he had a little book in front of him: when directing an actor, he would jump to the middle of the scene, show how he wanted it done, and have the performance repeated until he was satisfied. The actors, professionals as well as amateurs, had great respect for him, and only occasionally proffered an alternative interpretation. When I talked to him, he admitted to having heard the name Brecht – unhappily he had not been able to find his books. The Jatra was not a small operation: the company included some fifty members.

The people who came to watch the rehearsals – I estimate there were about two hundred to two hundred and fifty of them – were all there in defiance of the curfew.[2] Their safety lay in numbers; there was nobody else to be seen in the village streets at night, where only the dogs ignored the curfew. Thus the curfew was effective, except for the Jatra.

One night, to our surprise, we found the chief of police seated in the director's chair. The vegetable-seller kept himself on the sidelines. We learned that the policeman had threatened to ban the rehearsals, which were, of course, illegal, taking place as they did during the curfew. But then the officer had added: "All my life I have dreamt of directing a theatre piece. Thus I will allow the rehearsals if you let me direct the company." There was the hint of a smile on the vegetable-seller's face: "Let us see," he seemed to be saying. And indeed, the atmosphere was very different that night. The policeman did not demonstrate how a role should be played: he shouted orders. The actors seemed to obey, even Nilima the star: executing her role precisely to the policeman's orders, she presented a perfect caricature of her own play. Sosanko, the comedian, managed to play his role without compromising himself. But Nomita, the actress specialised in silent protest, became the favourite of the spectators that evening. Every time she received an order from the policeman, she would play her role of voicelessly saying no, to perfection. The louder the officer cried, the more perfectly she played her protest. In the end the policeman had to dismiss her, finding her performance unsatisfactory. In the shadows, the vegetable-selling director smiled. So, I think, did most of us, when we were out of the sparse lights and the view of the policeman.

Now it was Tipu Sultan's turn, played by the Mukti Bahini's malik. He played the "freedom-fighter" king with mastery. But the policeman, hurling his instructions at him, was not satisfied. Like Nilima, the malik started to follow the instructions to the letter, turning the Sultan into a caricature: there were giggles at the back of the audience. Furious, the policeman threw himself on the actor and started to kick him with his heavy boots. The Mukti Bahini

2 Rayenda Thana had about 3,000 inhabitants at the time, but many of them lived too far away to frequent the theatre. Attendance must have accounted for some fifteen to twenty per cent of those who lived within reasonable walking distance.

commander leapt from the stage and into the woods, followed by the police officer: we could hear them fighting in the dark. Nobody smiled: there was a fright, this time on behalf of the popular malik. Would he be killed? Many, in the audience, may have seen him as the only protection they had.

A little later the policeman returned, and tried to continue the rehearsals. But the minds of the actors and spectators were elsewhere. A little later, the malik returned too, alive but bruised, his clothes torn and covered with mud. The chief of police gave the order that the rehearsals were over for the night, and we all went home.

Later, when I returned to the theatre, the policeman had withdrawn and all had returned to normal. Yet the events of that evening continued to intrigue me. They seemed to illustrate a certain balance of power. The policeman, of course, might be seen to represent authority. He well knew that the Jatra rehearsals were going on during the curfew. Normally, he should simply have turned up with a troop of policemen and closed the theatre. But probably he also realised how unpopular this would be, and the police needed a minimum of cooperation from the people. My ex-assistant once said that the chief of police was known for his "social work", but he said this in the policeman's presence, and the nature of this "social work" was even more obscure than when the term is used – ubiquitously but imprecisely – in an Indian context. The policeman may have been trying to gain some cooperation by joining the rehearsals, which he probably hoped to control. His role as director, in fact, gave him the opportunity to humiliate and publicly beat up his main adversary, the malik of the Mukti Bahini. In a way, then, the policeman did manage to prove that he was the boss. But it did not really work: everyone else clearly sympathised with the malik, though they could not defend him there and then. They also knew that the malik, bigger and stronger than the policeman, must have decided it was more prudent, politically, to let the policeman win the fight. There was no sign, in fact, that the malik's popularity was reduced by this incident – and so the policeman's efforts were in vain.

In the forest

You will remember that our trip to the forest camp in the south, a few days later, had been interrupted by the Mukti Bahini and the malik's interrogation of me. I had wanted to know more about the forest economy. As we arrived after a walk of some twenty kilometres, we were soon surrounded by the locals. The foresters were absent, they said: they were having a meeting at one of their posts in the jungle. Thus I received a rather full account of the foresters' activities, how they would sell off valuable timber to contractors who

would smuggle the logs across the Indian border. For the locals, there was repression and badly paid forest work. In fact, I was asked to write the complaints down and bring them to Colonel Ershad himself (I did not get past his guards, but they assured me he would get the letter). Needless to say, we walked very quickly back to Rayenda, since the forest guards would soon return and "there was no telling what they would do to us" – the guards were said to have killed some of those who denounced corruption. Again, I would say we had quite a fright. There was no police in the forest village: the forest guards have police authority. There, too, fear was pervasive, but the forest village seemed to lack the counter-balancing forces that, however imperfectly, made possible the co-existence between land-grabbers, police and the Mukti Bahini at Rayenda.

Living in fear

I have tried to give an impression of a society where everybody lived, every day of their lives, in fear. First, there was no security of property or livelihood: land belonged to those who could grab it. Every time a large farmer chased a neighbour from his land, the other small farmers – or tenants – knew they might be next. And life without land was precarious, to say the least: there was not enough work, and every year some labourers and their families would succumb to starvation. Moreover, those who protested were rumoured to be "troublemakers" – say, suspected of sympathising with the Mukti Bahini – and would have great difficulty in finding any work at all. Again, such rumours would make you an excellent target for the police. If, on the other hand, you succeeded in making peace with the land-grabbers and work for them to gain a living, you might become the target of the Mukti Bahini's counter-violence, as well as your boss. Moreover, as shown by the case of my assistant's father, the sawmill-owner, being an "independent" entrepreneur was not easy either. If he had the money or power to save his business, he might become the Mukti Bahini's target, and if he was in difficulty, some powerful landowner might take over his business. Even the teachers were in trouble, since the state's coffers were empty in July, and there would be no pay until the next instalment of international aid, some time in the New Year. No wonder the only teacher I met looked so thin and hungry.

Fear for property and/or life was endemic, then – and sometimes broke out into real frights. Bangladesh at that time already represented what we would now call a typical postcolonial situation, where central state processes (Krohn-Hansen / Nustad 2005) as well as the agency for violence (Comaroff / Comaroff 2006) were distributed among several actors, rather than concen-

trated in the state. These factors were at the roots of insecurity, as violence and pressure might come from many sides.

What impressed me most, however, was the capacity to live with fear: in short, what I can only call courage. It was not the courage that comes from ignoring or minimalising danger, but rather the kind that recognises that fear can destroy everything and must therefore be fought, continuously and consciously. Without the courage to stand up to fear, life in Rayenda simply would not have been tolerable. This kind of fear, which reminded me of stories told by my father's generation about the German occupation (1940–45), must not be confused with the fright of singular, dramatic situations, though the latter are certainly no less frightening when lived in the context of quite rational and endemic fear. The latter provided the rationale for being frightened: danger was real. It is against this background that the Jatra was significant: not just in defiance of the curfew, not just because they staged the drama of Tipu Sultan's resistance, but also since the people of Rayenda had the courage to insist on art and enjoyment in the midst of fear. This, to me, was real courage.

Did not Emerson say: "Fear is an instructor of great sagacity, and the herald of all revolutions"?[3] I certainly felt that the situation at Rayenda strongly resembled what my Maoist friends in Norway would have called a revolutionary one. Once, I put that question to one of my friends in Rayenda. "We already tried that," he said, referring to the war of independence of Bangladesh. "It did not work." What was left for most people, then, was basically what Scott (1985) calls silent resistance – backed by the presence of the active but illegal Mukti Bahini.

Thus fear was generalised, and it spread to me too. This was the ever-present fear, very different from what I felt one night in Moradabad, in the mid-1970s. I had been invited to stay with a Muslim acquaintance, but when I arrived at their house, they quickly escorted me to a guesthouse. In the night, a crowd was banging on the guesthouse's gate: there was in fact a communal riot going on, and having got wind of it the Muslim family did not want to be responsible for my safety. This was a fright without previous fear, though I did notice the tense atmosphere in town as my friend took me to the guesthouse and asked me please not to go out. An anecdote of yet another fright I had, however, illustrates the contrast between fear and fright, and also shows how the time and place had rendered me rather nervous.

One night, as I had gone to bed early in my little bungalow in Rayenda, I woke up to the sounds of a roaring crowd. Angry? It seemed so. It sounded as if the crowd was spoiling for a fight – violently, by the sound of it. I remembered the gang of young boys in Bagerhat – was the crowd again looking for the American Imperialist? I kept my lights out and hid in a corner, experienc-

3 Ralph Waldo Emerson (1898): Compensation. In: *Selected Essays and Poems*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon (first published in 1808), p. 15.

ing a real fright. Then, in the early hours of the morning, the noise died away, and when the Chowkidar, the keeper of the bungalow, came, I asked what all the noise had been about. "Oh that," said the Chowkidar, "that was the televised transmission of the Ramayana. They had put up a generator and brought a television especially for that. Everybody was there." It need hardly be said that this, too, was in defiance of the curfew.

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