

PREFACE

No one forgets their first meeting with Eqbal Ahmad. My first encounter was in 1971 at an anti-war demonstration at MIT. As a student there, I had come to the US as a normal, apolitical, and indifferent product of the elitist Karachi Grammar School. But the cultural shock of immersion in the new society was that of being doused with a bucket of ice water. My eyes to the world had suddenly opened to fearful reality. The Americans were diligently carpet-bombing Vietnam with their B-52's back into the Stone Age, and the West Pakistanis were busy cleansing East Pakistan with a vigour that would have done the Serbs proud. No Pakistani in Cambridge that I knew, student or immigrant, cared a hoot about Vietnam. And most applauded the Pakistan Army's actions, rejected the harrowing tales of suffering and destruction, and argued that the photographs and TV footage were mere Zionist concoctions.

Eqbal's lecture at MIT left me thunderstruck. Never before had I seen such a devastating combination of knowledge, eloquence, and passion used with unerring precision to shatter the myths and lies that surrounded America's imperial adventure. The audience, almost exclusively American, hung on to his every word as he alternately charmed, entertained, challenged, and educated them. When a crowd of admirers mobbed him subsequently, I too joined them. In the decades that followed, my relationship with him metamorphosed from deep admiration into deep friendship. Equally at ease with kings and prime ministers, as with working people, children loved the attention he gave them and even distant relatives felt close to him. His warmth was such that even those who met him but once felt they had known him for a lifetime. This was a man of the rarest quality with whom every moment spent had been a privilege and a treat.

THE INVETERATE BORDER CROSSER

Born in a small village in Bihar in 1932 or 1933, Eqbal's father, a landowner, supported land reform measures and was killed in revenge by other landowners. As a boy of about four, Eqbal witnessed the murder. A second episode of violence marked his early years: the march, during the blood drenched partition of India, from Bihar to Lahore. The horrors of the time were to cement his commitment to economic and social justice. Once in Pakistan, he fought briefly for the liberation of Kashmir in 1948 but little is known about this episode of his life. A few years later, after winning a scholarship, Eqbal left Pakistan to enroll as a graduate student at Princeton. His dissertation was a study of labor movements in North Africa but very soon he became thoroughly involved in the Algerian war of independence from France. He became a close associate of Ben Bella, and then a member of the Algerian Revolutionary Council. Subsequently, he was appointed member of the FLN delegation at the Paris peace talks.

Algeria was at the beginning of a life which Edward Said, Eqbal's closest friend, describes as,

an epic and poetic one, full of wanderings, border crossings, and an almost instinctive attraction to liberation movements, movements of the oppressed and the persecuted, causes of people who were unfairly punished -- whether they lived in the great metropolitan centres of Europe and America, or in the refugee camps, besieged cities, and bombed or disadvantaged villages of Bosnia, Chechnya, south Lebanon, Vietnam, Iraq, Iran and, of course, the Indian subcontinent.

As one of the first opponents of the American imperial adventure in Vietnam, Eqbal quickly gained national fame and notoriety for the brilliance of his writings and tactics. A nervous American government indicted him in a spectacular 1970 trial, along with the Berrigan brothers, of a conspiracy to kidnap Henry Kissinger and blow up the heating system of the Pentagon. In later years Eqbal would relate, with great gusto, often sending his listeners into fits of laughter, the events surrounding the trial and the futile attempts made by the FBI to nab him and his friends.

Recognizing the internationalist in him, leaders of revolutions in Iran and Palestine, Cuba and Chile, sought his advice. So did many kings and princes, presidents and prime ministers, generals and admirals. There were at two reasons for this. First, his knowledge of cultural, social, and political movements in history was encyclopedic, ranging from early Islam to the European Renaissance, and from the birth of imperialism and colonialism to the age of globalization. Perhaps just as important was the fact that Eqbal was not just a brilliant and powerful speaker, he was also a brilliant listener. You could be sure that he not only understood what you had said, but also why you said it, and that at the end of it all there would always be something that he could add which you did not know. For perceptive and dispassionate critical analysis, he was the obvious choice.

While he obviously valued his contacts with world leaders, Eqbal consistently refused to endorse policies that he saw as contrary to the goals of the struggles they represented, especially when they began to degenerate into parochialism. As Algerian revolutionary ideals soured, Eqbal started to distance himself and his relations with Ben Bella cooled. The elegant Havana cigars that I once used to see in his New York apartment, a gift from Fidel Castro, stopped coming when Eqbal differed with Castro on his repression of domestic opponents. Relations with Yasser Arafat, who for years had eagerly sought Eqbal's advice and wanted to give him a seat in the Palestine National Council, plummeted sharply after Eqbal became convinced that the US-sponsored Oslo accord would be a disaster for the Palestinians. This was the price for maintaining integrity, and Eqbal paid it without regret.

The leadership of his own country never had much use for Eqbal. During Pakistan's first martial law government there was a warrant of arrest on him, while in the second he was put on a death sentence. In the third military government, that of General Zia-ul-Haq, he became a persona non grata. With the passage of years, and his eventual return to Pakistan, his efforts gradually focused upon healing the wounds of Partition, and diffusing the poison of intolerance and militarism. He redoubled his efforts after that fateful day of 11 May 1998, when the ground trembled uncontrollably at Pokharan and

the subcontinent was to change forever. Exactly one year later – on 11 May 1999 – Eqbal Ahmad died in an Islamabad hospital. He was 67.

Editorials and newspaper columns published around the world quickly paid homage to a unique and fearless thinker. Egypt's Al-Ahram wrote "Palestine has lost a friend", while the New York Times, whose Vietnam and Palestine policies Eqbal had forcefully criticized, admitted that he "woke up America's conscience". The Economist described him as "a revolutionary and intellectual who was the Ibn-Khaldun of modern times".

An apt tribute was that of the Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan: Eqbal Ahmad was "a shining example of what a true internationalist should be". Indeed, here was a man for whom every country was his own country, the head of an international clan that had no blood linkages, and which was above the divides of religion or race. Its many thousand members were spread across the continents from Vietnam to the West Bank and Morocco, from India and Pakistan to Europe and North America, bonded together only by a shared belief in human dignity, justice, liberty, and all that is rich and precious in the human experience.

A PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

What, people ask, was Eqbal Ahmad? Was he a professor or political analyst? Revolutionary leader or social activist? Historian or anthropologist? Writer or journalist? Being one who crossed intellectual boundaries just as easily and naturally as national boundaries, to put Eqbal into a pigeon-hole is impossible.

Perhaps a concise, but not wholly inaccurate description, would be to say that Eqbal Ahmad was a public intellectual. In that sense, he is to be grouped with the great activist intellectuals who were his contemporaries: Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, I.F. Stone, and Edward Said. Scholarship in social disciplines, as they see it, is empty at best unless the purpose of that scholarship is to service peoples causes and the struggle for justice and freedom. Like Said, Eqbal was critical of the heartless nature of a lot of Western scholarship and historiography, which in its study of the rest of the world, lacked empathy with the object of its study,

From inertia and ignorance no less than active belief in the imperial mission, the intellectuals of the West complied by and large. The fate of the great hemispheric civilizations merited but a rare and eccentric recording. Until very recently, we knew little about the holocaust in the Congo which had gone on right into the twentieth century. We did not hear about the struggles in which civilizations perished and some 200 million people died until a battle occurred in which a Custer was killed or a Gordon was besieged.

Biased scholarship often comes from intellectual laziness and ignorance. Therefore Eqbal would urge his students at Hampshire College to seek diverse view points and diverse

sources of information and, above all, to actively use knowledge for building a better society:

Number one, read. Number two, intervene. For God's sake, let us not be only consumers of information. Each person knows some truth – and I really think that almost anyone who is listening to you and to me right now has some knowledge, some truth, some understanding of the world, that is different from that of the dominant media institutions. The moment you find that your truth clashes with what is being peddled as their truth, intervene. So learn, look for alternative sources, for without alternative sources, without pluralism, there is no democracy. But at the same time, without intervention of the public into power, without balances, without checks, there is no democracy.

While Eqbal wrote prodigiously, enough to fill many books, he authored none. Some of his journalistic writings, which were strewn all over, have been collected and reproduced in this collection. Others will find their place in subsequent collections. But much of his work, being incomplete, will never see the light of the day. In the next four sections, I shall briefly summarize the position that he took on four of the most critical issues of our times: Palestine, Kashmir, the rise of global religious extremism, and the deadly India-Pakistan nuclear rivalry.

PALESTINE'S UNENDING TRAGEDY

Ostracized by most of the American academic community for his passionate advocacy of Palestinian rights, Eqbal had remained an itinerant professor at several US universities for much of his life. He recalled that his colleagues at Cornell chose to stand elsewhere rather than sit with him at the same cafeteria table. Finally, in 1982 Hampshire College in Massachusetts awarded him a full tenured professorship where he taught international relations, comparative revolutions, and Middle East history.

A young Pakistani student recalls Eqbal's visit to the nearby Dartmouth College in 1992 to speak on Palestine. Her roommate, who was Jewish by birth and Zionist by conviction, started crying during Eqbal's lecture because she thought he was biased. But he then gently spoke with her and swung her around to seeing different dimensions of the situation. Students, even those who disagreed with him politically, flocked to his lectures and courses. Eqbal recalls one, Nathan Krystall,

Five years ago he [Krystall] came to me seeking admittance into my seminar on the Middle East. "Why do you want this course?", I had asked. "I am Jewish and Zionist", he had said, "and I have decided to migrate to Israel. Since I am going to live in the Middle East I want to learn about it." I informed him that I regard political Zionism as a sectarian ideology, view Israel as a discriminatory state, and advocate the restitution of Palestinian rights and democratization of Israel as essential conditions for peace in the Middle East. "I have heard that", he had said, "I want to know

how you see it.” Nathan rarely spoke in class; asked questions occasionally; and read a lot. He did, it seems, migrate to Israel where he is now in prison. By choice!

Eqbal’s message to the Arabs was different. Arabs must learn to live with a democratized Israel, abandon exclusionary ideologies of Arab nationalism and Islamic extremism, and respect the democratic rights of all peoples of the Middle East. Jerusalem as the capital of Israel was unacceptable, but so was the control of all holy places by any one contender. For Eqbal, an ancient heritage shared by Arab and Jew meant that its protection should be a joint responsibility as well.

When Eqbal criticized the Oslo accords, even as they were being negotiated, as an unjust peace made under duress, I was not quite convinced. At least the Palestinians are getting something after all the years of suffering, I argued. No, he replied, it will be a situation worse than that of South Africa. The Israelis will create Bantustans, absolve themselves of responsibility, yet remain as occupiers. The Palestinians will get only the illusion of autonomy, but will have no control over their land, water, and economy. This is not peace but a sellout, he said. Years later, the renewed intifada and death of the “peace process” proved conclusively that Eqbal had been right, and I was wrong.

REFLECTIONS ON KASHMIR

The young boy who had fought in Kashmir was never to forget that struggle, but circumstances of life had placed him elsewhere. As he began his gradual move over from the US to Pakistan in the early 90’s, Eqbal re-engaged with Kashmir, spending considerable time and effort in seeking to understand this unending blood-soaked tragedy. Traveling frequently, he met a wide spectrum of leaders advocating Kashmiri independence, as well as government leaders in India and Pakistan, hoping to find a lead into one of the world’s most intractable problems. This was not easily done for, as he often remarked bitterly, both countries were willing to fight down to the last Kashmiri. In Eqbal’s opinion, India’s leaders bore much of the responsibility,

The reality is that New Delhi’s moral isolation from the Kashmiri people is total and irreversible. It might be reversible if India were to envisage a qualitatively different relation with Kashmir, one which meaningfully satisfies Kashmiri aspirations of self government, but so far New Delhi has evinced no inclination in this direction.

But, argued Eqbal, it was foolish of Pakistani leaders to believe that India’s chronicle of failures could ever translate into Pakistan’s gain. Kashmir had become a zero sum game in Pakistan’s thinking. In spite of the fact that the cards were heavily stacked in Pakistan’s favour, its Kashmir policy was so fundamentally and severely defective that it had repeatedly “managed to rescue defeat from the jaws of victory”,

Pakistan continues to wage a half hearted “war of position” replete with private doubts, symbolic posturing and petty opportunism. Its support has

not helped unify or energise the insurgency in Kashmir into a winning movement. The resulting stalemate appears 'stable', and unlikely to be upset in the absence of a conventional India Pakistan war. Since war is not an option, Pakistan's policy is reduced to bleeding India; and India's to bleeding the Kashmiris, and to hit out at Pakistan whenever a wound can be inflicted

With a catastrophe, possibly nuclear now, lurking in the background, peace between India and Pakistan had become an urgent necessity. Eqbal urged decision makers in both countries to accept four basic realities:

One, a military solution of the Kashmir dispute is not possible. Two, it is equally difficult to envisage, as India does, a unilateral political solution. Three, while the US has a stake in peace between India and Pakistan, neither the great powers nor world opinion shall make a decisive contribution towards resolving this conflict. Four, direct negotiations offer the only effective path to a peaceful solution. However, meaningful negotiations are not possible without Kashmiri participation. Hence the most sensible way to resolve the dispute is tripartite negotiations involving Pakistan, India and a representative Kashmiri delegation. Direct negotiations do not preclude a facilitating role for the United Nations or the US.

RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

Events of the past decade, from ethnic and religious cleansing to the deliberate destruction of architectural treasures, confirm that we are entering a dark and stormy period of human history where the forces of unreason are on the ascendancy. Militant religious movements, some armed to the teeth, have sprung up across the globe. Each proclaims that it exists to fulfill a divine mission, to put into force those laws of social behaviour which are sanctioned by divine authority, and to nullify those which humans have arrived at by exercise of logic, reason, and need. When the question arises as to who, among the members of a given faith, shall interpret the divine will, sectarian conflict becomes inevitable. In such a context religion is an instrument of power with which to attack and discredit political rivals. Political movements associated with religious beliefs, in Eqbal's view, negated the essence of religion,

All religious systems are made up of discourses which are, more often than not, dialectically linked to each other as in light and darkness, peace and war, evil and goodness. Hence, it is possible to detach and expropriate a part from the whole, divest it of its original context and purpose, and put it to political uses. Such an instrumentalist approach is nearly always absolutist, that is, it entails an absolute assertion of one, generally decontextualized, aspect of religion and a total disregard of another. The phenomenon distorts religion, debases tradition, and twists the political

process wherever it unfolds Neither Muslims nor Jews nor Hindus are unique in this respect. All variants of contemporary 'fundamentalism' reduce complex religious systems and civilizations to one or another version of modern fascism. They are concerned with power not with the soul, with the mobilization of people for political purposes rather than with sharing or alleviating their sufferings and aspirations. Theirs is a very limited and time bound political agenda.

The reduction to fascism that Eqbal notes above is possible precisely because religious-political parties cannot accept secular legislation, since legitimate legislation can come only by way of divine sanction. Hence they are absolutist, exclusionary, centralist, reject pluralism, and are inherently undemocratic. Grim and humourless, closely regulating the cultural life of society, each creates a menacing image of the rival faith, exhorting their own faithful to be ever watchful and on guard. Minority communities become automatic victims to xenophobia.

While addressing a western audience, Eqbal was emphatic that this xenophobic world-view was not exclusive to Muslims but a disease of our times which was far more widespread than is customarily acknowledged,

I am a Muslim myself, but the truth is that every day in the media here, and by politicians, there is talk about the threat of Islamic fundamentalism. And the other truth is, the most secular, multi-ethnic Muslim community in the world has been destroyed, in our time, before our eyes, in peacetime, in the heart of Europe, by a clear-cut fascist Christian group which engaged in ethnic cleansing. These same people who have been silent, how would they have reacted if it were the Muslims who were doing the killing, the ethnic and religious cleansing, and Christians who were victims?

For a man who treasured Gandhara relics and possessed a fine personal collection, the destruction of the ancient Buddha statues in Afghanistan would have been excruciating. Eqbal was never to see this, but he had already reserved his harshest words for the Taliban much earlier,

..... the Taliban's is the most retrograde political movement in the history of Islam. The warlords who proscribe music and sports in Afghanistan, inflict harsh punishments upon men for trimming their beards, flog taxi drivers for carrying women passengers, prevent sick women from being treated by male physicians, banish girls from schools and women from the work place are not returning Afghanistan to its traditional Islamic way of life as the western media reports sanctimoniously..... They are devoid of the ethics, aesthetics, humanism, and Sufi sensibilities of traditional Muslims, including Afghans of yesteryear. To call them "mediaeval" is to insult the age of Hafiz and Saadi, of Rabi'a Basri and Mansur al-Hallaj, of Amir Khusrav and Hazrat Nizamuddin. The Taliban are the expression of

a modern disease, symptoms of a social cancer which shall destroy Muslim societies if its growth is not arrested and the disease is not eliminated. It is prone to spreading, and the Taliban will be the most deadly communicators of this cancer if they remain so organically linked to Pakistan.

There is a question that begs for an answer: from where did the cancer of religious-political militant movements come from? In the tradition of Ibn-Khaldun and Karl Marx, Eqbal offers a material explanation, but first chooses to excise from his vocabulary the loaded epithet, “fundamentalism”,

The mistakenly called “fundamentalists” are a modern phenomenon, a response to the crises of modernity and identity. Modernity is a historical process. It refers to the development of societies from one mode of production to another, in our age from an agrarian/pastoral mode to the capitalist/industrial mode of production. The shift from one to another mode of production invariably brings revolutionary changes in society. It compels a new logic of social and economic life, threatens inherited styles of life, and forces transformations in the relationship of land, labour and capital. As such, it requires adaptations to new ways of being and doing, and demands drastic changes in human values and in the relations of sexes, classes, individuals, families and communities. It transforms the correlation and arrangement of living spaces, requires change in how the workplace is organized, how new skills are gathered and distributed, and how people are governed.....When this process of change sets in, older values and ways of life become outdated and dysfunctional much faster than newer, more appropriate values and ways of life strike roots.

Adapting to post-renaissance modernity seems to have been harder for Muslims than for others, the implied social and cultural mutations being seen as a threat and loss. This price for this has been tragically high. Indeed, when it was at its brilliant best about a thousand years ago, Islamic civilization had made remarkable contributions to science, particularly mathematics and medicine. But, among Muslim countries today, not one has a viable, democratic, political system or can boast of having a significant level of scientific or technological achievement.

Faced with this fundamental crisis and manifest decline in the colonial and post-colonial period, Muslims have responded variously. Eqbal saw these responses as belonging to one of three principal categories: Restorationist, Reconstructionist, and Pragmatist. The Pragmatist prefers to treat requirements of religion and faith as essentially unrelated to the direct concerns of political and economic life, or to science and secular knowledge, and is satisfied with a vague belief that Islam and faith are not in conflict. The Reconstructionist, on the other hand, seeks to reinterpret the faith in order to create consistency between tradition and belief with the demands of modernity.

It is the Restorationist response – a belief that the fall from greatness was in consequence of Muslims having distanced themselves from orthodox religious practices, and a call for returning to the past – that lends itself most easily to purposes of political mobilization and “fundamentalism”. As Restorationist movements gained currency world-wide, Eqbal asked,

What then is the future of these “fundamentalist” movements and parties? I think it is limited and quite dim. The reasons for it are multiple: Their links to the past are twisted. Their vision of the future is unworkable. And their connections to contemporary forces and ideals are largely negative. Yet, in their limit lies the reason for us to fear. Between their beginnings and end, right wing movements are known to have inflicted great damage upon countries and peoples. So help us God!

FIGHTING THE NUCLEAR MENACE

Ronald Reagan's America saw the biggest anti-nuclear demonstrations in history. Upon reaching his saddle, this virulent anti-communist cowboy from the Wild West first sent his country into a quick trot, then into a gallop. In no time a full-blown nuclear race with the Soviet Union had erupted. Star Wars and Nuclear Winter became subjects of intense discussion and, as fear of holocaust swept through the western world, a million demonstrators demonstrated in New York's Central Park in 1982. Even the Vietnam war days had not seen such huge mobilizations. The peace movement was ecstatic.

Eqbal felt ambivalent and uncomfortable. To eliminate nuclear weapons was unquestionably moral and right, but why was the US peace movement so deafeningly silent on Israeli nuclear weapons? This was 1982, the year of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The fully televised destruction of Beirut, block by block, was being systematically completed by Israeli armour, artillery, and tanks. It was also the year of the gruesome Sabra and Shatilla massacres, massacres that occurred with the full knowledge and complicity of the Israelis under Ariel Sharon. Eqbal was burning from within, helpless and frustrated by his inability to prevent the carnage. This emotional state probably had something to do with the fact that he suffered his first heart attack in this very year.

Eqbal related to me the following episode: the organizers of the mammoth Central Park anti-nuke rally had asked him to address the meeting. He agreed. Then, just as he was walking to the podium, one of the organizers and a friend, pulled him to the side and implored him not to mention Israel in his speech. This is New York, she said to him, we must understand why people have come to this rally. Eqbal was stunned, rendered motionless for a few moments. Then he started walking – away from the podium. He kept walking until he reached the other end of Central Park and then, sick from inside, vomited into a bush.

A quarter century later, the nuclear issue was to engage Eqbal once again.

The Indian nuclear tests left Eqbal fearful for the two countries he so deeply loved, Pakistan and India. Would the new nuclear hysteria drive out all hope of reconciliation and goodwill? Were the two countries now destined to become radioactive wastelands in the decades, or perhaps just years, to come? India's mindless right wing leaders who started it all were to blame, driven by their misguided view of nuclear weapons as a currency of power. "They will soon realize that this is a counterfeit", he wrote, arguing that the religious chauvinism and intolerance of the BJP made it ineligible for guiding India towards becoming a truly great and powerful nation:

Each historical time has had its own temper. But one factor has been common throughout history to the attainment of progress and greatness. Historians of culture describe this one factor variously as syncretism, openness, pluralism, and a spirit of tolerance. Where ideas do not clash, diverse influences, knowledge, viewpoints, and cultures do not converge, civilization does not thrive and greatness eludes. Nuclearisation of nationalism has further degraded India's environment. The tests have worsened the xenophobia of Hindutva supporters.

Soon the drums started beating on the Pakistani side, the initial wave of fear giving way to shriller and shriller cries for retaliatory tests. India's belligerence was no longer veiled; it was a time when even the thoughtful were puzzled. "What then should Pakistan do?", wrote Eqbal in his weekly column in Dawn on 17th May 1999,

My advice is: do not panic, and do not behave reactively. This translates as: do not listen to people like Qazi Husain Ahmad and Benazir Bhutto who, either out of ignorance, or more likely crass opportunism, are advocating nuclear tests, here and now. The arguments for steadyng the jerking knee are compelling. For these reasons and more, it is much better for Islamabad to stay cool, calculating, and utilizing the opportunities Delhi has presented. May reason prevail!

Would reason tame rage? Moderation prevail over extremism? There were some hopeful signs in the first week after Pokharan that a Pakistani nuclear test was avoidable. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and some of his close associates in the cabinet, notwithstanding what they were to claim a year later, were not enthusiastic about testing because of the heavy international sanctions that would inevitably follow. This feeling was shared by the Chief of Army Staff, General Jehangir Karamat, and it extended to many others in the government. Some with impeccable hawkish credentials, such as Riaz Khokhar, then Pakistan's ambassador to the US, told me privately that they had campaigned hard against testing. Pragmatism, not pacifism, drove them to this conclusion.

But reason was destined to lose. By the second week the Pakistani leadership had capitulated; the Chagai tests came just 17 days after Pokharan. What the decisive factor had been may never be known, but it could be one of several: the warning by L.K. Advani, India's Interior Minister, that Pakistan should note a change in South Asia's

“strategic environment”, Prime Minister Vajpayee's statement that his government might forcibly take Kashmiri territory under Pakistan's control, the handing over of Kashmir affairs portfolio to the hardline Home Minister who had so enthusiastically overseen the destruction of Babri Mosque, and heating up of a limited but live conflict along the Line of Control. On the domestic front, a pack of opposition leaders, led first by the Jamaat-i-Islami, was soon overtaken by Benazir Bhutto. Wrote Eqbal,

She seems to have sensed in this national crisis an opportunity to restore her flagging fortunes. I know of few gestures in the ugly repertoire of Pakistani politics as revolting as her demagogic toss of bracelets at Mr. Nawaz Sharif.

The debate stopped abruptly after Chagai. Eqbal was devastated.

I saw on television a picture more awesome than the familiar mushroom cloud of nuclear explosion. The mountain had turned white. I wondered how much pain had been felt by nature, God's most wondrous creation.

Large crowds danced that day in the streets of Islamabad and Lahore. Similar orgasmic celebrations had taken place 17 days earlier in Delhi and Bombay. The men of faith were triumphant, although which faith had triumphed was not clear. Grains of holy radioactive sand from Pokhran, blessed by Lord Shiva, had been sprinkled in temples by the Vishnu Hindu Parisad. In Pakistan the Jamaat-I-Islami transported a cardboard "Islamic Bomb" around the country, while right-wing Urdu magazines like Zindagi wrote about the wondrous miracles of Chaghi. They told stories of divine intervention that protected the mard-e-momin from poison-spitting snakes as they prepared the nuclear test-site, of four chickens that sufficed to feast a thousand of the faithful after the tests, and of Prophet Mohammed taking personal charge of protecting the centrifuges of Kahuta.

Now was the time of the Kalams and Khans, the Chidambarams and Mubarikmands. Catapulted into the role of subcontinental heroes, but unknown entities in the world of real science, they basked in adulation pretending to be the Oppenheims, Tellers, and Bethes. But it was the political leadership that had it even better. As the Sharifs and Vajpayees strutted and preened themselves before roaring crowds, Eqbal had sober words of warning for them:

I still believe that, notwithstanding Delhi's provocative muscle-flexing, Pakistan's security interests have not been served by matching India show-for-show-plus-one.... The leaders of India and Pakistan have now appropriated to themselves, as others had done before, the power that was God's alone to kill mountains, make the earth quake, bring the sea to boil, and destroy humanity. I hope that when the muscle flexing and cheering is over they will go on a retreat, and reflect on how they should bear this awesome responsibility.

But all those who were then busy stoking the fires of nationalist frenzy had little use for such advice. Drunk with the new-found power to commit mass murder, they blew raucous trumpets and beat drums in macabre, insane, officially sponsored celebrations. It mattered little that that very year Pakistani newspaper had reported cases of 300 people having chosen self immolation and death to living yet another painful day of grinding poverty and deprivation. Uranium there was plenty of, but certainly not enough bread and clean drinking water.

More insidiously, nucleomania was giving birth to a dangerous vision, propagated with the full force of the state media. Commentators and spokesperson daily harangued television audiences that Pakistan had become impregnable, and was now at least India's military equal if not superior. But Eqbal argued that beyond the change in atmospherics, which rarely endure, Pakistan's passage from an ambiguous to an explicit nuclear power had not substantially changed its strategic position. Economically it had become weaker, its domestic situation would grow graver, and the forces of fanaticism yet stronger and more divisive. The illusion of security provided by nuclear weapons would, however, have fearful consequences.

In the months after Chaghai, Eqbal spoke at anti-nuclear meetings throughout the length and breadth of the country. I accompanied him at many such events. He spoke eloquently and passionately, as was his style, frequently drawing upon exemplars drawn from his vast store of experiences and knowledge. He would remind listeners of the Soviet Union, and its satellites such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, which became highly sophisticated arms producers, but whose states and societies grew dis-organically and eventually collapsed. For Pakistan to avoid that fate, it must resist falling into the trap of seeking strategic equivalence with India.

India-Pakistan proxy war, more than anything else, worried Eqbal. Look at the history of the Cold War, he would say. Since nuclear weapons had made direct confrontation impossible, the US and USSR had exported their conflict to the Third World where millions of Koreans, Vietnamese, Africans, South Americans, and Afghans had died soundlessly, mere pawns in the great global grab for power. Eqbal feared that bloody times were up ahead for the Kashmiris, who he predicted would be the worst losers of the nuclearized subcontinent. Safely hidden behind their nuclear shields, the leaders of India and Pakistan are perfectly willing to fight their game down to the very last Kashmiri, he said.

It was sometime in early March 1999 in Islamabad when Eqbal telephoned me. His usual good-natured banter was missing today, there was an edge of tension. I went to see him as soon as I had finished teaching my class at the university. I had not seen him in such a foul mood for years. Yesterday he had had a long session with Pakistan's top general – paradoxically, one of his many admirers – and had come back greatly disturbed, his fears confirmed. Terrible things were to happen in Kashmir but nuclear weapons would ensure that war would not spill over into Pakistan. Such was the plan, a plan which was to explode into full view 2 months later. Eqbal did not live to hear about Kargil, where Pakistani soldiers of the Northern Light Infantry secretly crossed the Line of Control,

taking up positions high up in the mountains and inflicting severe casualties on Indian forces in the valley below. By the time hostilities had ended, and Pakistan was forced into a humiliating retreat, thousands on both sides had died in the bleak snowy wastes, and a new chapter of bitterness and distrust had been written.

FINAL DAYS

In 1997 Eqbal retired from Hampshire College. He asked me to come to his festschrift, organized by the College and his many friends. Hundreds flocked to the event from the New England area, others from places as far as California, Canada, Algeria, Morocco, Turkey, and Pakistan. Noam Chomsky was to start it off on Friday evening with "The Prospects For The Third World And Abroad". But the numbers kept swelling until initial plans had to be abandoned and the venue was switched to the college gymnasium which too was soon packed to capacity. My guess is that there were 2000 people there. It was Woodstock once again, I thought to myself. This time the performers were some of the finest, committed intellectuals of the international left.

Yes, it was the Eqbal Ahmad clan which had come together at this occasion, and it left me slightly breathless. I knew that Eqbal had helped many people and engaged their affection and loyalty. What I simply did not know was they were so many – so different from each other and from so many different parts of the world and that they loved him so much. It wasn't just his students whose voice cracked from emotion, but also Edward Said, his closest friend and the leading intellectual light of Palestine. I suppose what gave this celebration special meaning was that, in part, it was reliving the 60's and 70's of the Vietnam days and Eqbal's contribution in mobilizing the American resistance to the war.

The Hampshire celebration was the last high-point of Eqbal's life and marked his determination to spend almost all his time in Pakistan. Hitherto he had been splitting his time between teaching in the US, writing his newspaper columns, and working on setting up a university of arts and sciences in Islamabad, Khaldunia. This was a project which Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif ensured would not ultimately fly. How could you expect otherwise, people asked him, when you refuse to tone down your pen? He had no good answer, but remained optimistic.

And then Death began pursuing her quarry in earnest. From the time she first cast her pale shadow, to the time she enveloped him in her bosom, was but a matter of days.

I wonder now if I should write any further, or just stop here. Death is every individuals' intensely personal and intimate final encounter, and is it not being voyeuristic for another to try and describe it? But death also brings with it the defining moment of truth, leaving no room for pretences, no place to hide. If you want to know what a person was to the very core, perhaps you must know not only how he lived but also how he died. Though tears blind my eyes, my fingers shall not stop on this keyboard. I want to tell you, the reader, how Eqbal Ahmad died.

Two weeks before the end. When we took him to the hospital he was in an awful state, although we did not yet know that it was an advanced stage of colon cancer. He was vomiting violently and feeling sharp pains in his chest but there were quiet phases when he asked about the world outside. He shook his head in silent disgust as I told him of the official preparations to celebrate Pakistan's anniversary of the nuclear tests. Little badges with mushroom clouds were to be distributed free to children, poetry competitions would extol the greatness of a newly nuclear nation, and missile replicas would be placed at major intersections. "Eqbal, when you get well I'd like you to look at an article I've just written against the celebrations", I said. No, he replied, give it to me now. He carefully adjusted the intravenous drip to take hold of his pen, asked me to crank up his hospital bed into a semi-sitting position, and then went through my article adding his editorial comments – incisive and useful as ever – here and there. That's what he's done all his life, I thought to myself, helping others, concerning himself with their problems, worrying about where the world is going.

The next day medical tests revealed a large growth in the colon. It was a tense moment when the doctor came into the room. "Is it cancerous", Eqbal asked? I watched his face intently as the doctor silently nodded. There was neither fear nor resignation, just brief reflection. Moments later he was fully engaged in discussing strategies for surgery.

It was painful as could be as he lay in the ICU after the 3 hour long extraction of the cancer. The morphine would knock him out for a while, but you could see the pain would still be there. But he remained the quintessential Eqbal, his mind incisive, critical, analytical. He wanted to know about every medicine – the dosage, the effects and after-effects. His wit survived the pain. "Mrs Diamond" (his mother-in-law, now over 90 years old), he remarked to his niece, "is for all practical purposes indestructible". After one of his quips I remarked that his sense of humour too was indestructible. "It's a useful thing to have sometimes", he said, "so I like to carry it along with me".

He knew he was dying but made no useless supplications, made no prayer, asked for nothing, expected nothing. His intellectual integrity and dignity remained intact till the very end. Let others apply soothing balm for themselves in whatever form, indulge in whatever religious rites they believe in. He would have none of that for himself, but if others felt better he didn't discourage them.

The doctors were awed by him and the nurses fell in love. Eqbal must have been the weirdest patient at the ICU they have experienced in their lives. Strapped in a maze of tubes and wires, and hovering at the very edge, he still engaged them, insisted on knowing everything, scolded one monumenally incompetent nurse who had stabbed him 5 times in search of a vein, praised the two good ones, but charmed even the one he had scolded.

It was 5:25 am, the morning of 11 May 1999, when he asked me to raise him into a sitting position. Moments later his ECG went flat. I saw tears trickling from one nurse's eyes when they finally covered him up.
