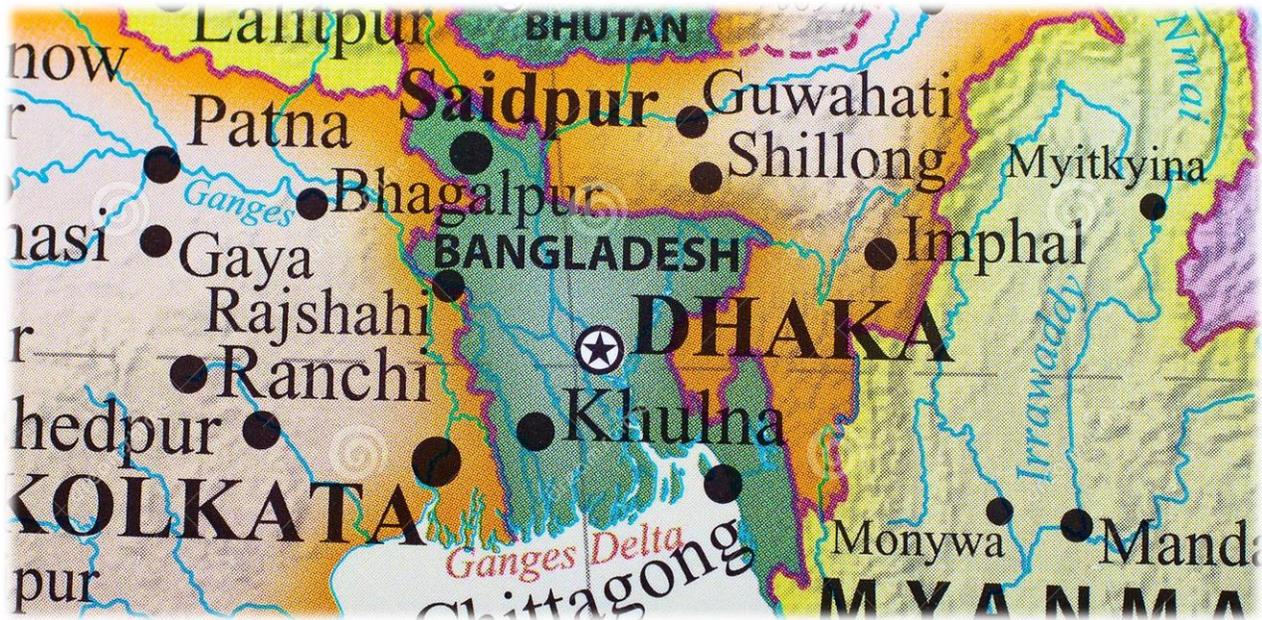


Image: dreamtime.com



Journey into Bangladesh: arrival

When offered an assignment which allowed free licence to write about life in Bangladesh, I jumped at the chance: this was what my dreams were made of. At the time I was working with schools in India and was asked to make a side trip to Dhaka, to study, write and photograph the workings of development projects, within the capital and in rural areas to the South, West and North of the city. My February-March stay was to last for a month, before temperatures began to hit oven-like proportions.

From a distance it was all so exciting; to be able to visit and for a short time work, in the country that was born just a few decades before: the place the media referred to as a *Basket Case*. But once I stepped aboard *Bangladesh Biman*, from Singapore to Dhaka, then a wholly different range of thoughts came into play, starting with: “*Is it safe to fly on this one-star airline? Could it also be an airborne basket case?*”

India was one thing. Yes, it had its fair share of slums and desperately poor people, but Bangladesh? Now that was a whole, new, unknown, ball game. To some extent I knew India and had grown accustomed to living and working there, with a small network of

friends and colleagues to provide support, but I guess I had begun to believe the media hype about Bangladesh ... and for a while I have to confess, it worried me.

To allay my fears, the flight was okay; not quite up to five-star airline standards perhaps, but passable nevertheless. The cabin crew were great, the meals were good, and the flight was on time. What more could one want? Then on arriving in Dhaka, I was met by *The Project People*, who took me directly to my hotel. Slowly, I came to terms with my Bangla-voodooos and began to empathise with the people who lived there ... and to spurn those destructive and damaging myths put about in the West.

Urban reality

My first impressions of Dhaka were quite different to the image that I had managed to conjure up before arrival. I should have known better. Dhaka was not, in its entirety, like one huge Mumbai slum, though I certainly came to see some parts which were similar...or perhaps even worse! But no, on the first day there, I found myself in the central area, with wide, open boulevards, smart office buildings and large houses. It reminded me to some degree of New Delhi.

My hosts who met me at the airport were a very welcoming threesome – all men – and one had been to Australia, so we chatted about that, before they dropped me at the hotel, where their overseas visitors usually stayed. The place was quite adequate, with a large balcony that looked out onto the constant, traffic mayhem. In the West I guess the hotel might have boasted a one or two star-rating.

The next morning, I found my own way to my hosts' offices by tuk-tuk. There was an option to use a cycle-rickshaw, but I needed to be on time - 9.00 a.m. as specified - so I chose the noisier, more polluting version. Later in the day I wandered around the city using the peddle-powered variety, shaded by its umbrella from the hot sun, which was great fun and of course the slow speed of travel meant that I was able to get a really good first impression of street life in the capital.

At the project office, I met the management staff and we mapped out the proposed route I would take, across the country, to see at ground level, the works they themselves had developed, plus the operations of other affiliated organisations. My *Journey into Bangladesh* was to begin on the morning of the very next day. The people I met on that first day of introductions - again all males - were extremely friendly and welcoming. They knew I was there to report on their activities, so this could have influenced how they related to me, but my first impression (which remained with me throughout the visit) was that everyone I met seemed genuinely interested and proud to show me their country and to explain details of the valuable work they were engaged in.

In those first few days, the fact the people I met at the airport and in the central office were all male, was a little concerning. It was an issue that I would later come to discuss and deliberate on, with a range of staff members.

The project people – a gender divide

I was connecting to the *grass roots* in Bangladesh through a number of indigenous, non-government organisations. The people who actually made this happen for me worked at different levels for these groups, from CEOs through to field workers, and on to volunteers. In the initial stages of any such contact I would meet with key staff at management level, such as those who met me on arrival, at the airport – all English speaking in their thirties or forties ...and all male.

In fact, almost all my contacts at the higher levels during the time I was in the country were men: not surprising perhaps, in a largely Islamic country. Once I had established contact with the top-rung, I was then able to reach the people working either as paid workers or as volunteers at lower levels of the organisational structure. These people, at the *grass roots* were the ones I really needed to meet if I was to do an effective job of reporting on the realities of project life.

The organisations I connected to were not always Muslim-based (though Bangladesh is 90% Muslim). Some were Hindu, others affiliated to the Christian church. But, regardless of faith, as one progressed down the ladder, the gender balance of people

involved would always swing from male to female. At the base level of volunteers or lowly paid village workers, the comparatively larger numbers were usually all female.

For organisations that professed to direct efforts towards upliftment of women in rural communities - whether through health, education or industry - this situation was a paradox. But it was at least recognised by the hierarchies as an issue which needed to be addressed, though as often happens in male-dominated situations, this change towards equality across the pyramid, was not happening quickly enough. The answers to my questions around the topic were in the nature of:

“Yes, we recognise the problem and yes, we are trying to fix it, but the change to include more women at management levels will take time ...it can't happen overnight”.

I wondered about that response.

Journey into Bangladesh: departure

As the plane powered up and away from the runway, I thought back to the incredible range of learning experiences Bangladesh had offered me, during my short stay there. I was sorry to be leaving and vowed to come back. How stupid I had been to believe all the negative stories about the place; It had given me the best time of my life!

Bacchu and *Dilip*, my motorbike guides; *Mosela* and *Mya*, such strong women amongst many. And all the children, especially *Shefali*, whom I met in school then visited at home; I would surely like to come back to meet her again in a few years, to find out if she had realised her ambitions. The two tree-planting ladies, *Roshni* and *Lakshmi*, plus *Akram*, my amateur from the North, and many others. The country was beautiful, but it was the people that showed me it was amazing. I would miss them.

Bangladesh had been a very different experience, because unlike nearly all the other places I had visited, for work or for leisure, it was a one-off encounter. In many ways it impacted on my conscience more than all the others, because of the intensity of the visit

– I covered a lot of the country in a one month period – and its multi-layered nature, where, for example, I could be dealing with Muslim children in the city on one day and a Christian, women’s literacy group in the village, the next. My first trip out from Dhaka took me to a Christian community on the Padma delta; a contrast in the extreme, to a later stay with a Muslim family, living on the banks of the Brahmaputra, to the North.

The Bangladeshi people themselves were a vital contributor to this unique experience. The gentleness of people I met in all regions and from all walks of life, was quite remarkable. Most people outside the upper-echelon were not aware that I was on a reporting mission, yet everyone, including the boy bringing my meal to the table, or the trainee TBA helping me to understand her job, were so friendly and accommodating, whether speaking in English (as a few could) or through my Bengali interpreters. OK, so I was a white man from the West – an unavoidable fact - but I still adjudged they simply wished to be welcoming and congenial hosts to this visitor from afar.

Food was another very positive feature of my travels, from that unexpected *tiffin* meal, as we first crossed the Padma, to early morning breakfasts as a part of the project community, through to curry for dinner in a street-side restaurant. All spiced so delicately, and all so delicious, especially when eaten with fingers instead of a fork!

Because of that intensity and diversity - the people and their foods - Bangladesh got under my skin and memories of the visit remain with me many years later. Now, whenever I come across a Bangladeshi person, with their golden complexion and jet-black hair (with grey/white streaks if they are a little older) I smile, remembering my time in their country. And of course, they smile back at me, warmly too, understanding that I appreciate, at least a small portion of their heritage. If I pass a Bangladeshi restaurant, then of course, I always want to enter, because there is nothing on Earth as wonderfully aromatic and tasty, as Bangladeshi cuisine!

So, I exited as I had entered, on *Bangladesh Biman*; this time proud to be a passenger on an airline which represented such a wonderful country. Now the job was to make something of my trip to the *basket case* country: to try and translate the optimistic

feelings and flavours of Bangladesh that I had absorbed, so that a largely unaware Australian population could read, digest, understand and empathise

My favourite, from all the articles and pictorials I produced, was a four-page centre-spread for an Australian primary school magazine, which focused on literacy, and used materials from the Bengali literacy newsletter, as well as a detailed account of my visit to Shefali's literacy class, and her home, in the slums of Dhaka. (Photos of Shefali – in school and at home – were also included in a photographic exhibition, that toured Australia, later the same year).

It was important that the items I wrote, published and exhibited should convey those relevant and much more optimistic perspectives of Bangladesh - the country and its people - that I had acquired during my visit there. If the stories and photos that came out of my ***Journey into Bangladesh*** could have a positive impact on people (both adults and children) in an economically developed country such as Australia, then I had done my job.

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