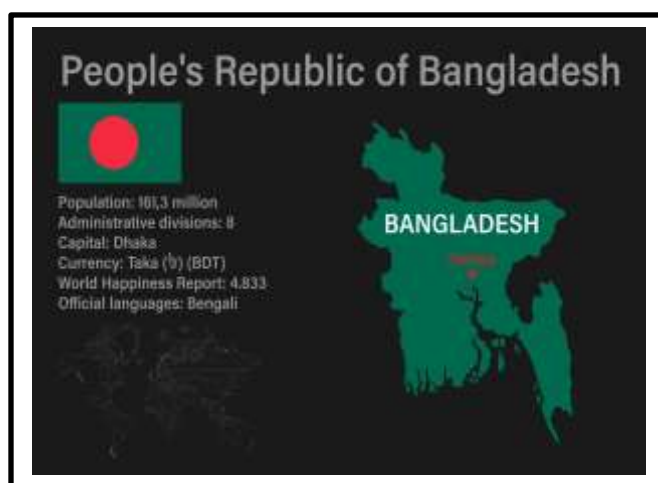




Cow educates boy!

I arrived at a small gathering of traditional huts in the far west of Bangladesh, with ludicrous visions flashing through my brain which included the humble cow - sacred to a multitude of Hindus on the subcontinent - scratching out letters in the dirt or counting off chickens with a nod of its head, as they crossed the village path. The modern-day image of the bovine beast, currently undergoing a state of decline, might suddenly rise again to worship and widespread acclaim.

But not so. My visions were dashed! The education of boy by cow was not a miraculous event, purely an economic fact. The real story was much simpler, though still fascinating.



It turned out that Mya, the boy's mother - a likeable lady and leader amongst her peers - had bought a cow with the help of a small loan; the cow gave milk which when sold, paid for her son's schooling.

I chatted to Mya (with the help of an interpreter) as the heat of the day faded with the setting sun.

Mud-walled houses and coconut palms became silhouettes in the receding light: atmospheric to say the least. She was a woman of character, tall with dark eyes and strong features. We sipped a hot spicy chai as other mothers with their children gathered around, joined later by men back from the fields. Mya was adamant that although she herself had received no formal education, her burning ambition was to make sure her children did much better.

During my Bangladesh travels I came to admire the way in which women were involved, as if they - and not the men - were the real pillars of society; adept at doing whatever they could to support themselves, their families, and their communities.

On another occasion South of the capital Dhaka, I met two younger ladies (Roshni and Lakshmi) seated on a levee bank; rice paddy on one side, road on the other. We sat in the shade of one of the trees they had planted and tended over the previous two years. The results of *their* work stretched as far as the eye could see, on either side of the road: according to the ladies, 250 fruit-bearing trees that promised future income. They had a clear understanding of the links they were making to economic, social, and environmental aspects, which was impressive.

One older woman I came across in the North of the country (Mazeda) was a Traditional Birth Attendant (TBA) and her remit involved a group of villages. She was small in stature, with eyes that sparkled, showing her devotion to the work she had been involved in for



almost ten years: the well-being of young mothers as they approach and pass through the rigours of childbirth. I spotted her two days later at a training session for TBAs: perhaps the most respected amongst her 20 colleagues. It was fun to see her laugh, with a mixture of pride and embarrassment, when I pointed out we had met before.

My recollections of travels in Bangladesh are built around the fortitude of these and other women I met there, who expressed a profound dedication to the future of their children ... and their communities.

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