



## Shefali: doctor from Dhaka.

The big brown eyes of one child in particular, were like a magnet to my camera. Towards the back of the hot sticky bamboo hut, and amongst three dozen kids of similar age, she was planet Venus, shining out like a bright beacon in a starry sky. In reverse, I must have appeared as an alien to them, dropping in from Mars.



The poorest slums of Dhaka, far away from the diplomatic precincts, were places where few westerners strayed. To reach there, my carriage was a simple but beautifully-painted bicycle rickshaw. We wound our way from the city centre through ever-narrowing lanes, filled with ever-mounting numbers. When the squash became too much, my guide Achmed, spoke to the man pushing the peddles up front,

and we disembarked.



Walking across a series of six or eight railway lines, we jostled with a continuous stream of people moving in either direction, along the mainline tracks. A variety of stalls laid out alongside the rails made the most of this steady flow of customers.

Climbing down from the railway embankment, we found more people-packed lanes leading to an open space; a piazza you might call it in Italy, though the only real resemblance was the quadrangle shape. Set to one side was a small rattan building. We were ushered inside, to witness a literacy class for youngsters, Dhaka-style.

We squeezed onto a narrow bench just inside the door. The teacher, with his back to the board, was armed with chalk and wall charts. Each child, sitting cross-legged, had a soft-backed coursebook, along with a small slate board and chalk. They were learning the *Bangla* alphabet, along with simple words. After some time, they almost



forgot I was there, and began responding to the teacher in animated fashion.

Once the class had ended, I was pleasantly surprised when the child who featured in many of my photos came to the front. Her name was Shefali, and together in the dim light of early evening, Achmed and I followed father and daughter back to their home.



Shefali lived in a very poor slum area of squat shacks, supported by bamboo and garlanded with rusting metal, plastic bags and old sacks. It had rained during the day, so the ground in the narrow passage between the makeshift dwellings was ankle deep in mud. The young girl proudly showed me her house and her charpoy-style bed. She introduced me to her elder sister who was busy cooking the evening meal of rice and vegetables, over an open fire, outside in the muddy lane. Before leaving, Shefali told me (via Achmed) that she wished, one day to become a doctor.

I tried to conceal my surprise, knowing only too well that in her current situation, if the young girl ever progressed to formal schooling and a job, it would be a decent achievement. To rise to the level of university, let alone university with a career in medicine, would require something of a minor miracle!

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Now some years later, I sometimes wonder if the young bright-eyed girl I met on that moonlit night in the slums of Dhaka, did go on to achieve the impossible and become a doctor. It would certainly have motivated many others around her, if she did.

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*Duncan Gregory*

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