



Bangladesh - Let's go rural!

Early on my second morning I was ready and waiting when, as arranged, three of my hosts arrived to escort me out of Dhaka. We piled into a jeep, with driver and boss in front, travelling for half an hour or so through the morning rush hour streets. After some time, the outer city slums and townscape began to change to a tropical green of palms and paddy fields: a landscape that I would come to know well over the next four weeks.

The road to the south of the capital was a smooth straight single lane highway, but any real potential for speed was limited by the numbers of people, animals, and vehicles of all descriptions, in our path. In India, I had come to know that the variety of obstacles which could occupy a road like this was multilayered ... with the emphasis on 'multi'. 'Go with the flow' gained new meaning when the flow included: over-laden bullock carts, motorbikes with three or four passengers, zig-zagging tuk-tuks, dilapidated buses and thundering trucks ... most of them *horning* simultaneously! The main difference in Bangladesh seemed to be that the majority of vehicles sported wonderfully colourful, hand-painted signs, depicting politicians and famous movie stars ... not to say that wasn't the case in India, just much more so in this neighbouring nation.

By late morning we had reached the banks of the Padma, which held the waters of the Brahmaputra River from the North coupled with the Ganges from the West, as it flowed towards the Bay of Bengal. At first impression the Padma looked more like a sea than a river. From our vantage point on the Northern bank we could not see the other side. So, there we sat and waited through the heat of the day, looking out across the water as ferry after ferry grounded its ramp on the sandy shore, before swallowing vehicles of all sizes into its bowels. At one stage a truck fell off the ramp, blocking access by others,

Image: rangandatta.wordpress.com

which caused an interminable delay. Finally, just as darkness was beginning to descend, and after more than three hours of waiting, we were beckoned forward and our vehicle climbed the metal tracks to join its compatriots, packed tightly in rows on the deck.



Bus loading onto a ferry to cross the Padma River.

Once safely on deck my newfound companions proceeded to unleash a variety of delectable foods from a range of stainless steel cannisters – or *tiffin* as they are called locally - which had been packed back at base earlier in the day. The crossing, from bank to bank took about forty-five minutes and it was in that time that I came to realise a couple of important points that would make my stay in Bangladesh so enjoyable: firstly that Bangladeshi folk have an extraordinarily friendly and fun-loving quality which is incredibly appealing; secondly, that Bangladesh food - which I found in general to be quite mild, but wonderfully spiced - is delicious; perhaps fantastic is the better word! Forever after that day, whether in London, Sydney, or elsewhere, I would try to seek out Bangladeshi food, to re-live that first experience on the Padma.

After climbing up the Southern bank, it required a good driver, who knew the route well, to get us to our destination, which was a project base on one of the islands of the Bengal Delta. At one stage we dropped down a cliff-like embankment to ford across a smaller river, then up the other side and onwards, our road ahead charted by a tunnel like glow from the headlights, as we as we knifed our way through the overhanging trees.

We arrived even later in the evening than expected after the long wait for the car ferry to cross the Padma. I didn't recall much of the arrival that night, but what I do remember is waking the next morning to find myself in a wonderful tropical setting, with manicured plants and winding pathways between bamboo cottages. I showered in the communal area, then found my way to the breakfast room, where I was offered a range of dishes by a young man, who appeared to be in charge of the kitchen. Opting for safety on that first day, I chose porridge, followed by egg omelette. Inevitably the omelette was slightly curried - beautifully spiced to be more exact - prompting my choice on subsequent days to be more adventurous, even at breakfast time, knowing that almost everything on offer was there to test my unaccustomed taste buds.

I was immediately struck by the communality of the place: everyone did everything together. All things - I was to find out during my week-long stay - were done in a convivial manner, which underpinned an atmosphere of consensus and agreement between the people there. I also discovered the beauty of eating food with fingers; it wasn't a conscious choice I had to make - there was no cutlery - so I was in at the deep end, sink or swim. I soon discovered that I was more in touch with the foods on offer without knife, fork and spoon, and that in the absence of those customary connectors, the culinary delights really did begin to taste better.

With this short one day and two night's crash-course introduction to Bangladesh in my back pocket it was time to get down to work. For this I was assigned the local *Field Director* as my guide to the locality and to some of the *grass-roots* projects he was overseeing in the delta locality. This man *Bacchu*, was, one would say nowadays, a pretty *cool* guy, with longish side-swept hair, a thick, black moustache and dark glasses. Dressed for the part in jeans with the top two or three buttons of his white shirt undone, while sitting astride his gleaming red and chrome Honda Hero, he looked like the lead actor from a Bollywood movie. And if the truth was known, maybe that's who he had styled himself on.

But that must have been all for show, because during the week we spent together, *Bacchu* and I became firm friends and I came to realise that beneath all the exterior

gloss, there was a soft-spoken man, with a very kind heart, who was adored by everyone we met. The kids especially loved *Bacchu*.

We set out on that morning of my first day *in the field* with *Bacchu* at the front end of his bike and me with my bag of cameras and support tools perched on the back. Along the way we travelled sandy palm fringed roads and then, as we came closer to our target, rode along the levee banks between rice fields, before arriving at a small cluster of traditionally constructed, bamboo houses. This was crunch time, where I was to come face-to-face with my prospective interviewees – the people of the villages – and where I was required to start showing some journalistic skills.

On this first occasion, and many more to follow, the young people of the village would come out to meet us. How they knew we were coming I never really found out, but whatever sort of grapevine or telepathy they used, sure enough they would be there, racing alongside the bike, a clamouring and spontaneous guard of honour, heralding our unexpected visit to their home. Later when the time came to leave, that same guard – now greater in numbers – would run with us, until the bike finally powered away, leaving a vision of chatter and laughter and excitement in its wake. It was a wonderful experience and one which I will always remember.



Image: odi.org