



BANGLADESH is not a country famous for attracting tourists. But a year ago, when I began to plan my six-month trip through Asia, I knew that I would have to include it in my travels. The reason was simple: I needed to see my roots.

I was born and raised in Canada, a country populated by immigrants from all over the world. My Swedish mother had ample opportunities to expose me to her culture while I was growing up. Trips to Sweden were a frequent event, and Swedish rituals punctuated my Canadian upbringing.

My Encounter With Bangladesh

by Monica Uddin

The national museum exhibited works of art which, were they for sale and I a rich woman, I would have instantly purchased. Particularly moving to me were the black-ink paintings by Zainul Abedin portraying the suffering of his people during famine.

country with adult eyes was what I was after - the chance to experience this part of myself in a way what I was after the chance to experience this part of myself in a way that I would not soon forget.

So at the age of 23 I set out to do just that. I arrived in Bangladesh in March, weary from two months' travel through Indonesia and Thailand. My father had warned me against visiting the country during its hottest months, and

clone or tornado. I half expected to see a countryside in ruins, but instead feasted my eyes on its verdant rice paddies, winding rivers and orange-colored earth, so different from what I knew back home. During the following weeks, trips to the hill tract areas and Cox's Bazar, displaying the wonderful variety to be seen in Bangladesh's rural regions, rounded out my initial impression.

Tourist destinations also held some pleasant surprises for me. Viewing sites such as the Ahsan Manzil and Sonargaon gave me an inkling of the weight of cultural tradition behind this relatively youthful country. The National Museum exhibited works of art which, were they for sale and I a rich woman, I would have instantly purchased. Particularly moving to me were the black-ink paintings by Zainul Abedin portraying the suffering of his people during famine.

A visit to Jatiya Smriti Shoudha was of special personal significance to me. As I discovered soon after my arrival in Bangladesh, I share the same birth date as this nation: March 26, 1971. Seeing the immense concrete tribute to the victims of the liberation war inspired a sense of awe and wonder in me - the three million who died amount to more than ten percent of my own country's population. Had

and do in Bangladesh, the overwhelming reason I chose to visit this country was to better acquaint myself with my family. And as my father was one of ten children - a shocking fact to my friends back home - but not so uncommon here - there were plenty of people to get to know.

Carted about from home to home, I was touched by how warmly I was welcomed by relatives who had not seen me in more than a decade. Family life in North American centers largely around one's immediate kin, and many people share my experience of having few additional relatives to call upon. In this part of the world, one's extended family remains paramount throughout one's life. Having dozens of "uncles," "sisters" and "cousins" is easily possible because no matter how distant your relation, you're treated as if you belong.

Bangladeshi hospitality is an additional experience I'll not soon forget: yes, I was a sister, a niece, a cousin, but I was also a guest. And being a guest in this country is a little like asking for a drink of water and being given a fire hose instead! Food was offered at every turn, bedrooms donated for the duration of my stay, tours and transportation arranged across the country, every conceivable need I could have imagined was met and then some. My

feel they truly meant it.

Among my many relatives are several cousins who fall within my age range. Acting as my guides to Bangladesh society, they took great pains to rearrange the schedules so that we could spend time together. Frequent gossip sessions, of which Bangladesh seems so fond, helped me to understand how different my life would be had the accident of my birth occurred in this country.

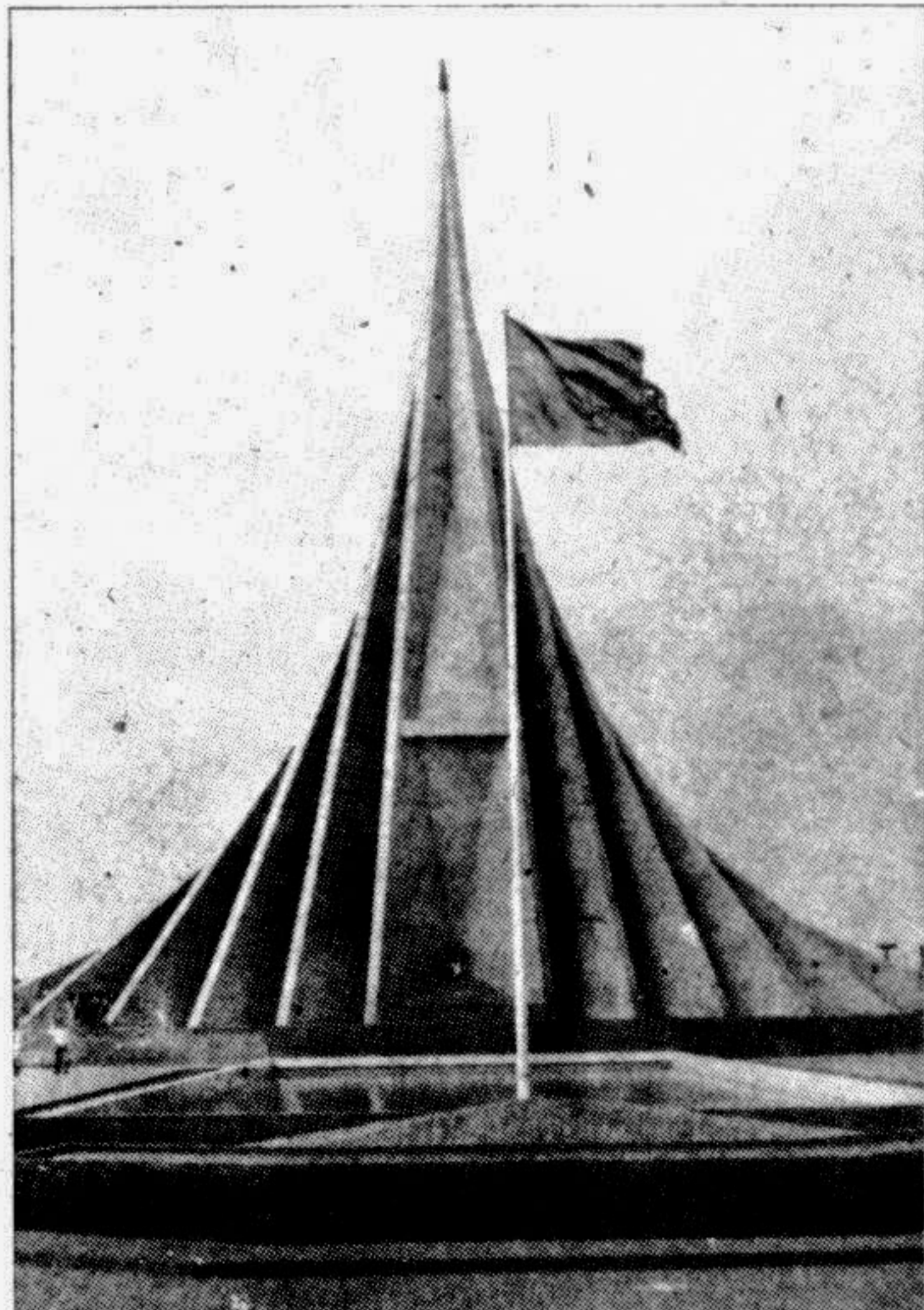
I would most certainly not have been living on my own for five years by now, attending school and holding down various jobs. My parents' house would likely have remained home until my marriage. Education would also take on a different meaning. My choice of subjects might have been determined not by personal interest or market potential, but rather the number of seats in a particular department.

And, in terms of that most fateful occasion - marriage - the selection of a marital partner would most likely not be made by me alone. My family would have a large say in the matter, perhaps making arrangements for my engagement while I was still a teenager. It amazes me to think that by my age, my grandmother had already been married ten years and was the mother of several children!

The overwhelming experiences I had during my stay in Bangladesh were not without their difficult moments. Physically, there was the usual un-

familiarity with the food and water that left me out of commission for a few days, hovering near the bathroom door.

The language barrier often proved to be an obstacle to my full participation in family life. Although English is widely spoken by many in this country, intimate feelings are most naturally communicated in one's native tongue and do not lend themselves easily to translation. Emotionally, the strain of being a young woman in a society radically different from my own was sometimes frustrating as I tried to accommodate myself to a different lifestyle while still retaining my own identity. Discomfort, however, was something I fully expected to encounter and I tried to remind myself during these times that they were minor, temporary events. My stay in Bangladesh is



The Shalup Shalupha at Savar. — Star photo

My father's background, however, remained, more of a mystery to me. Bangladesh was his native country, that much I knew. But as my father was far removed from his family and busy with the demands of a medical career, learning about his heritage proved a bit more difficult.

Hazy memories of a trip to Bangladesh were in my mind: a family pilgrimage we made when I was only 12. Seeing the

after a claustrophobic hour at Zia International Airport I began to see his point. Fighting my way through the crowds at the exit doors, I finally managed to step outside and my whirlwind, four-week tour of Bangladesh began.

The beauty of the landscape was one of the first things that struck me. In the western media, one hears little news about Bangladesh except for the odd report on the latest flood, cy-

I half expected to see a countryside in ruins but instead feasted my eyes on verdant rice paddies, winding rivers and orange coloured earth, so different from what I knew back home.

I was born in this part of the world, would I have been lucky enough to survive?

Beyond the things to see

relatives jokingly referred to my visit as a Canadian version of Hilary Clinton's, but the treatment I received made me



The rice field during the harvesting season. — Bangladesh/Ahmed & Ahmed

now drawing to a close, and I will be travelling for another two and a half months before returning to Canada. Of all my travels, this leg of my trip has been the most personally meaningful. Already I feel as if I've achieved my goal of becoming better acquainted with my roots, though I realize this experience has been of the kind that I'll continue to learn from long after it's finished.

Special thanks must go to my relatives, who have expanded my idea of what "family" means. Though the distance is far and the expense considerable, I have a feeling that this will not be my last trip to Bangladesh.

Acknowledgement: The author thanks her cousin, Asrarul Islam Chowdhury, for encouraging her to write this personal tale.

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The cargo automation will provide clients with cargo-booking - confirmation, reconfirmation, cancellation and arrival details of each shipment and also cargo in transit.

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The company will launch a container service in April using two B-type feeder ships - the Ever Bridge and the Ever Better.

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Lufthansa fully privatised by 1995: The German Government is aiming to privatise Lufthansa completely in the course of next year.

In a debate in parliament in Bonn on govt. Policy declaration, transport minister Matthias Wissmann announced plans to reduce the govt. stake in the airline to zero in 1995. Other govt. owned transportation companies will also be privatised, he said.

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Travel Briefs

Improve tourist facilities: Bangladesh has earned Taka 73 crore in foreign exchange from tourism sector in the year 1994 and total earning in this sector was about Taka 60 crore in 1993. State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Major (Retd) Abdul Mannan has urged upon the officials and tourism professionals to continue their efforts to improve tourist facilities and the service standard and efficiency in order to increase the earnings in this sector.

He was speaking as the chief guest in the installation ceremony of the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation Officers' Association in Dhaka last Thursday evening. In this connection he mentioned that a three-star hotel will, soon be established in Dhaka by the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh to meet increasing demand of local and foreign visitors. Moreover Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation and Biman Bangladesh Airlines has been advised to jointly establish another similar standard hotel in Dhaka. He also mentioned that three floating boats will be constructed at a cost of about three crores as a part of planned development of tourism facilities to promote visits to the Sundarbans.

In addition eight small and medium size project proposals to create accommodation and restaurant facilities at different attractive tourist spots of the country have been prepared and are under the active consideration of the Government.

Inland container Port: The physical work of the inland container port at Keraniganj opposite Pagla is expected to start from the next fiscal year (1995-96).

According to ministry of ports and shipping, the revised engineering study of the inland container port project will be completed this fiscal. Pacific consultant of Japan is engaged in the engineering study at the moment.

Syria to spend \$ 1 b on tourism: Syria will spend \$1 billion on projects aimed at boosting tourism. Tourism minister Amin Abu Shamat said "Syria needs to continue building up its infrastructure in the tourism sector so that it can host the growing number of tourists, and this needs investments."

More than two million tourists visited Syria in 1994, a quarter of them from non-Arab countries.

COSCO wins arbitration award: China Ocean Shipping Co (COSCO) has won an arbitration award in a dispute over bad debts incurred by china's state organisations. According to a report in Oslo - based shipping weekly Tradewind's, a panel sitting in London has awarded COSCO US \$ 517,750 plus costs for outstanding hire charges on the charter of its handysize bulker Xing Su Hai.

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Japan plans port amenities: The Japanese government hopes to make cranes and warehouses at ports more earthquake-resistant, especially in the vulnerable Tokyo and Takai regions, so that they can remain functional even after a big tremble. The ministry of Transportation after examining damage caused at Kobe port by January 17 earthquake, plans to conduct a comprehensive review of building codes of port facilities.

Travel Editor's Note

The Forest Guards of the Sundarbans

THE forest guards of the Sundarbans have four responsibilities: crocodiles, jagalashu (the famous water crocodiles of Bangladesh), tigers and deer.

One of the forest guards, Mohammad Masud Mollah, shows me a mother deer and a her child, as they disappear behind trees in the distance.

"I feed her with my own hands," he says, "rice and uncooked vegetables."

He then shows me a Sundari tree (in Katka) that has been photographed at least 300 times.

He's young, very dark from the sun. He wears a brown shirt, cream pants and a checked jacket. He moves lightly, and speaks softly, but we can all sense an inner power in him. Because we all know he's come face to face with the Royal Bengal Tiger more than once.

"They usually hide behind these narrow Gewa trees," he

says, pointing at the circular grove of trees around the clearing where we stand. "They're never very far away."

The forest guards walk through most of the forest. On any night, they can be ordered to patrol any part of the forest. They walk all night.

They live in the forest, in one-story wooden houses. Chicken run around the fenced yards.

"The soil's too saline," says one of the forest guards. "Not good for vegetation."

"Aren't you afraid of tigers?" I ask.

"No, not the tigers. But we live in fear of dacoits," they answer.

During the tidal waves, the whole forest area is submerged in water. When the floods come in, crocodiles are swept in also.

"We need a cyclone shelter," say the forest guards. "So many of us live here, with no

proper shelter against any of the natural elements."

I ask about the dacoits, more out of tourist curiosity than sympathy. They come often. I am told: to loot the very houses I see around me. They kill if resisted.

We walk back to our launch, past the forest guard houses, built about four feet above ground (insufficient protection indeed). One house is made

out of unpainted wood, with a red painted stair, and a goal pata covered fence all around. It stands serene against the sunny winter sky.

I want to ask them some more about their problems.

"Do you have any more complaints?" I ask eagerly.

But they move away, start pointing at rare trees, deer, a spot where crocodiles are seen.

PS: Any suggestions or contributions to the page are welcome - nay, eagerly sought.

Touring in Dhaka

This hot season, it's impossible to travel more than an hour away without getting dehydrated. But still, the Dhakaite wants to tour a little, see a few amazing sites. Ms. Naseem Huq writes about a few places within Dhaka, just a rickshaw ride (or an air-conditioned car trip) away.



The Dhakeshwari Temple. — A K M Mohsin

Dhakeshwari Temple

A legendary temple of the 18 century. The story as narrated is that Raja Ballal Sen's mother went to Langabandh on pilgrimage. On her return, King Ballal was born in a forest near the road. To commemorate his birth place, Raja Ballal Sen built the Dhakeshwari Temple and set up a huge idol of the Hindu goddess Durga. The Hindu community of Dhaka considers this temple as one of the oldest.

Joydepur Palace

The Joydepur Palace was built in the last half of the 19 century. It is situated about 40 km. north of Dhaka city in

Gazipur under the district of Joydepur. The palace was popularly known as "Rani Mahal" and became famous during the 1930s because of the sensational "Bhowal Murder Case". The historic palace which has at least 360 suites, now accommodates the Gazipur district administration.

Baliati Zamindar House

Built in the last decade of the 19 century, the Baliati Zamindar House is located about 64 km north-west of Dhaka in Manikgang district. At one time all passers-by used to stop and admire the beauty of this majestic building. The Jagannath University College building in Dhaka was a gift from Babu Kishorilal Roy

Chowdhury, a member of the family of the Baliati Zamindar.

Armenian church

Among the few landmarks of Dhaka that authenticates the existence of the Armenians in Dhaka, the Armanitola, a locality in old Dhaka, and the Armenian Church within it still seems to carry the banner of its past heritage. During the end of the 18 century, and the beginning of the 19 century the Armenians, though small in number were very rich and influential. Built in 1791 AD the Armenian Church which now stands as torch bearer of a lost community, has four doors, seven windows and a high bell tower. The whole Church is seven hundred feet long.



He takes a moment of rest in the middle of a nightly vigil. — Star photo