

REMINISCENCE

Memories from Bangladesh

Marianne Vreeburg writes from the Netherlands

YOU may find it strange, but I have very fond memories of Bangladesh. When you tell us to people, they look at you in a peculiar way. Bangladesh is always associated with over population, starvation and desperation. This idea that you can have fun, laugh with people and make friends among very poor people doesn't seem plausible.

I lived in Bangladesh twice altogether for two and a half years and experienced living in villages, travelling extensively all over the country. I feel I can paint a different picture to already existing one of doom and despondency.

What struck me as very strange after the initial period of getting used to the country, was that I felt so much at home and familiar with the countryside, the food, the smells and of course the people. Now after all these years, (my first assignment was mid 1977), I have a strong feeling that I must have lived in the Bangladesh area in one of my previous lives.

Of course this is my conviction and you may find it ridiculous, but it explained a lot about me being familiar with the place and working in a team of people I knew I had met before.

This was particularly striking when I met my Bengali counterpart called Babul Adikbari, a Hindu from the Brahmin cast. (Hindu's living in Bangladesh make up to 3% of the total population).

Right from the beginning we struck a rapport, we got on very well, our work together went very smoothly and many times we knew without words what the other meant. We developed a warm friendship and we used to call each other brother and sister.

I was very fortunate to meet his family on several occasions and stayed in their house in a tiny village, about 200 km South of Dhaka. I met his mother, a very strong personality, she was a widow and her husband used to be the Brahmin village priest. She also possessed a lovely sense of humor and we joked a lot together (in Bengali). Babul's wife and children always made me feel very welcome and their hospitality was overwhelming. In Bangladesh express hospitality means feeding you up like a fighting cock. Even when you arrive late at night you are invited to have a meal and the women disappear into the kitchen and prepare scrumptious meals.

As I was only working with Bengali people, being the only foreigner, I had this marvelous chance to come into contact with the local people. Part of our team used to be a group of five female motivators, girls around the age of 20 years, and I happened to meet their families and stayed with them as well during our extensive travels.

The organization I worked for had projects (at grass root level) all over the whole area of Bangladesh. This involved a lot of travelling and in our project minibus we criss-crossed all over the country.

Travelling in Bangladesh is a different matter entirely compared to travelling in Europe. Distances take you about 5 to 10 times longer than in Europe. Bangladesh has so many rivers to cross and sometimes one has to travel for 4 to 5 hours on a connecting road. As road transport is very important, ferry ports are usually overcrowded and specially during the monsoon season when vehicles are queuing up you come across scenes that look almost like Dante's inferno. The place is swarming with people, drivers blow there horns, some vehicles get stuck in the mud and are pulled out with the help of co-travellers. Everywhere you find little road stalls for food, paddlers selling water, tea, little snacks like spicy peas, spicy peanuts, boiled eggs and chanachur (a mixture of peanuts, fried noodles plus spices). Also little food stalls are established along the road sides where one can eat simple curries (chicken and goat), mainly

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