

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 this 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 Adikhari, 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 their 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, peddlers 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

dal and bhat (spicy lentil soup and rice). Business is good as there are uncountable hungry travellers who can afford these simple meals. You can hear a cacophony of noises as men working in these eating places advertise the food and attempt to drag customers inside.

On the whole it's almost only men you see, travelling women are carefully hidden by their male relations. Single women are usually beggar-women (widows) with tiny babies or prostitutes. When these prostitutes do their business puzzled me as everywhere you go, you are surrounded by people.

On one of my first journeys I could hardly believe what I saw. So many people, all of them very busy trying to fight their way not to the ferries. These become so overloaded that it is no surprise that they capsize at regular intervals and three to four hundred people drown several times a year (this concerns mainly small, badly maintained vessels).

What shocked me very much was the never ending stream of beggars, some of them so horribly deformed you could hardly imagine they were capable of living. Not far from one of the ferry stations we saw a group of beggars who seemed to be regulars. There was this blind man, with large hollow sockets where his eyes used to be; a seriously handicapped man, bent like a hoop with legs like match sticks a man on a trolley who had no legs at all and these three went around begging and singing religious songs. I remember one other beggar without legs, only half an arm who just rolled over in the mud clenching a begging bowl in his mouth, only stopping to praise Allah and to beg.

These images and many more engraved in my memory and I will never forget them. The strange thing about human behavior, to my opinion is that one slowly seems to accept these kind of things. When you start to realize what all this means you become stark raving bonkers.

Travelling on these ferries seems to adjust one to these scenes and I even got to know some of the regular beggars.

This happened mainly in Dhaka itself on my route from home to work and back. Although I'm not supporter of giving alms I always have some small change to the regulars and I even became acquainted with them. Common begging places tend to be near traffic lights and crossings. Some beggars learned my name (Mrs Brown in those days) and always greeted me politely. One funny incident happened when some high Bengali officials and myself were driven through town and I was addressed by some beggars who asked how I was, how my husband was and the boys and asked me to give them regards. You should have seen the gaze of horror and disbelief on the officials face.

Near our house we became friendly with a female beggar with a baby and gave her children's clothes and food. We always had a nice talk and when we announced our departure she was sad and gave me her passport picture from better days when she looked respectable, to remember her. This picture I have pinned on my board to remind me of impermanence and the fickleness of life.

To return to my ferry adventures. When you realize how horrible the lives of all these destitute people are, it's easy to sink in a swamp of depression but that won't help anyone. What I did not see on occasions was to buy some food from peddlers and distribute this food amongst the beggars. The peddlers were happy because they had sold their wares and the beggars were happy to have some decent food in their stomachs. So during these ferry crossings everybody munched away happily and the atmosphere became quite light hearted and we all bade each other a warm goodbye.

My teammates at first were very

puzzled about my behavior but on later occasions started to contribute as well.

On another instance, occurring during early spring, some hawkers were selling ducks and other birds for food. As I was in a funny mood I decided to buy some birds and set them free from the amazement of the crowd. I used to be an amazing sight anyway being the only foreigner, tall, blond, sunburnt and looking like a beanpole to them. The birds obviously happy have regained their freedom flew, but the hawkers straight away encouraged some little boys to catch them again. They failed and the whole crowd joined in cheering at the failed attempts in catching the birds and shouting at the birds to fly higher so they couldn't be caught. It became a scene of laughter and everybody seemed to enjoy the fun aroused by this mad 'lal bandar' (red monkey, as the Bengali's call all white people).

On our many trips my teammates and myself enjoyed being away from Dhaka, we liked each others company, we sang songs, admired the scenery and were lighthearted. You cannot imagine the fun we had together, sometimes laughing so much that tears ran out of our eyes.

There was this incident, maybe a sick joke, to do with a beggar that materialized in front of us. The man had six fingers on each hand and six toes each foot. He waved them around profusely and was given some *bakshesh*. After he left I suggested to my mates that we should hire him as our new typist as he could learn to type with 12 fingers instead of 10. Much to our shame we all visualized this and rolled over the floor laughing. Sometimes you just need these images to keep things in the proportion and to survive.

Sailing in the ferry on the wide rivers of Bangladesh is an exiting experience. Travelling 1st class we used to do cannot even be compared to travelling 3rd class in Europe. You should see the lavatories. But at least one could go on the top deck where you can feel some breeze, compared to 3rd class passengers travelling below deck. This looked more like cattle transport, people travelling in that style carry their meager possessions, food for the journey and I was always amazed how easily they could go to sleep under these cramped conditions.

On longer crossings there was always entertainment like magicians and jugglers who were amazingly skillful. One could also have one's future told by palm reading.

At the same time you could see the scenery go by, I loved it when the mustard fields were blossoming, it was like a sea of bright yellow, also when the jute was turning from green into golden, it was a sight to behold. I Bangladesh's National Anthem words are sung about Bangladesh,

PROFILE

The Professor Tries to Smile His Way into Office

Maria Allen writes from Bologna, Italy

Waving an olive tree as a symbol, smiling at his opponents and promising years of belt-tightening, Romano Prodi is bidding for power by trying to get Italy's fractious centre-left parties to gather under his umbrella. Gemini News Service looks at the new face of Italian politics.

Prodi, a University of Bologna economics professor, put himself forward in February as the man to unify the centre-left forces to counter Berlusconi's centre-right coalition.

In March, recalling a tactic used by Indian nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi, the 55-year-old intellectual started a 'tour of 100 cities'. Travelling by bus, he went to talk to the people using the slogan 'Italy needs affection.'

Making direct contact with people offers an alternative style to Berlusconi's slick television-based campaigns.

With a dove as his symbol, Prodi rejects the aggressive stance and the use of insults of many Italian politicians and speaks of the need for serenity: 'I undertake to smile at everyone, even my adversaries.'

His goal is a more efficient, more accountable 'light-handed state', entailing a radical renewal of the political ruling class from the bad old days of corruption and a trimming down of bureaucratic red tape.

He proposes an austere economic programme and promises no miracles. Instead he warns of 'years of virtue' when everyone will have to tighten their belts to reduce the massive public debt and so keep Italy within the limits set by the European Union.

Italy, he says, needs to be governed by consensus not confrontation. He criticises what he sees as Berlusconi's method of governing by division and instead wants a government which involves and represents as many people as possible.

One of nine children and now married with two sons, he says he is a strong believer in family values. Though staunchly Catholic, he has never been a member of the now disbanded Christian Democrat Party, discredited in a massive corruption scandal which is still convulsing the country. The successors of the Christian Democrats, the centrist Catholic party, has split, with one half joining Prodi's movement and the other half joining Berlusconi.

Though his weakness is that he is still not widely recognised in Italy, he has an international reputation as an economist. In the 1960s, he was a visiting professor at Harvard University in the United States. For a year, in 1978, he was Minister of Industry without being linked to any particular party.

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Italy's Romano Prodi: Tour of 100 cities

WOULD-BE Prime Minister Romano Prodi has little political following in Italy. But neither did Silvio Berlusconi before he began the campaign that swept him to power.

Il Professore (The Professor), as he is widely known, has another poste to charges that he has little support, especially in the south: 'Half of Italians don't know me? That means that the other half do.'

He will need all such dogged optimism if his Mahatma Gandhi-style message of peace and harmony is to make a mark in the elections likely to be held this year.

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Twice, in 1982 and 1993, he was called on to run the Institute for In-

dustrial Reconstruction, the state body concerned with the development of heavy industry.

Before starting his first term he joked that he had more debts than Argentina, but by the end of his second term he had succeeded in privatising the unwieldy organisation and restoring it to profitability.

Following the collapse of Berlusconi's centre-right governing coalition, Italy has been ruled since the beginning of the year by an unelected government of 'experts' led by Lamberto Dini, former director-general of Banca D'Italia (Bank of Italy).

In April, centre-left parties won most of the votes in regional elections, an indication that the Berlusconi coalition has lost support.

Any chance of victory for Prodi in the next general election depends on gathering the centre-left parties under an umbrella alliance. This will not be easy given Italy's shifting political sands, but already his entrance in the political arena and the subsequent alignment of political forces has accelerated the evolution towards a two-party system.

Maria Allen is an Italian freelance journalist.

FIRST time visitors to New Delhi, be they Indians or foreigners, get the impression that the capital city of India does not have the usual problems that bug most urban centres like pollution, crime, garbage, traffic.

This is probably because of the fact that, at first glance, the city appears clean compared with the country's other urban communities. One's attention is more likely to be caught by the many cultural and artistic attractions with only a few infrastructure eyesores.

In fact, Delhi has all of the other urban areas' social and administrative 'headaches'. But to the credit of the local administration, India's capital has managed to contain them to the minimum. Comparatively, the city is clean, crime is more or less manageable and traffic gets moving. Delhi likewise is green in the physical sense of the word, and quite up to par in matters cultural. There are, for example, museums, theatres and such other centres of the arts and learning as to be comparable with other Asian cities.

Delhi has always enjoyed importance as the capital of big empires. Even the English, who first chose Calcutta, had to move their capital to Delhi out of political expediency soon after the Indian Mutiny (1857-58).

The continuing large influx of des-

asian diary

BY ARJUNA

Land of Opportunity

The city has often been both the political and cultural capital of India as well as a major centre of learning and epicentre of business and industry.

Not only administrators, civil servants and official employees but also men of letters, poets, artists, craftsmen, industrialists and businessmen have always found vast opportunities here. Many have found it to be their own El Dorado (the legendary city of gold). This attraction Delhi continues to enjoy till this day.

In the past, except for Punjabi refugees who were thrown out of their prosperous lands and flourishing businesses and migrated to this city mostly as destitutes, all others were attracted to Delhi by the lure of power.

Now it is simply the possibility of earning a living that is attracting Bangladeshis and others by the multitudes.

The continuing large influx of des-

The migrants earn US\$ 2-3 or even more daily, which enables them to have the luxury of at least two square meals a day. Indeed there is even a chance they could send a little to their relatives at home.

Although the Bangladeshis and other migrants get less than half of what their local counterparts get, still their earnings are three to five times more than what they could get in Dhaka, West Bengal, Bihar or South India, if they ever manage to work there.

Although living is more expensive in the Indian capital, the migrants still enjoy being in Delhi—eating, drinking and making merry. And every month tens of thousands more migrants pour into this city to the warm welcome of politicians who see them as sources of much needed votes come election time and cheap labour.

Despite reports of these people turning to crime to survive in the city, their numbers continue to grow.

Those who care about the newcomers' impact on the capital are in the minority and powerless to withstand the onslaught of migrants who see Delhi as greener pasture. Hopefully, as the problems caused by urban migration multiply, central government officials will take notice and enforce measures to safeguard the city from more migrants flocking to it. —Depthnews Asia.

ART

Islamic Art Specialist Appointed Smithsonian Curator

Farhad Hopes to Revitalize, Publicize Islamic Art

WHEN Masumeh Farhad was named associate curator of Islamic Near Eastern Art for the Arthur M Sackler Gallery and the Freer Gallery of Art six weeks ago, she became the caretaker of some of the world's most widely acclaimed Asian artworks. The neighbouring museums are part of the much larger Smithsonian complex of museums on the Mall in Washington, DC, but discriminating visitors to the capital have long recognized that their collections of Near Eastern and Far Eastern art are well worth an afternoon.

The new associate curator, whose specialty is 16th and 17th-century Persian painting, is responsible for Islamic Near Eastern painting, calligraphy, ceramics and metalwork from the 7th to the 19th century encompassing some 5,550 works.

In recent years, many American museums have cut back on the expensive 'blockbuster' exhibitions that attract large crowds, but Farhad sees her exhibitions quite differently. Part of her role, she says, is to create maximum public involvement with limited funds through small exhibitions focusing on various aspects of Middle Eastern art.

The Iranian-born curator earned a bachelor's degree from Wellesley College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, in 1977 and received her doctorate in art history from Harvard in 1987. She

Joanne L Nix writes from Washington

speaks fluent English, French, German and Persian and reads Arabic. Since 1991, Farhad has served as research curator and coordinator for a project on the arts and cultures of the Islamic world that was jointly sponsored by the Sackler Gallery and the National Museum of African Art.

In a recent interview with USIA, Farhad said she applied for her present position 'because the Sackler and the Freer Gallery together represent one of the finest collections of Islamic art anywhere in the world. The privilege of working with this collection will provide me with opportunities I would not have had anywhere else.'

Farhad will be working closely with scientists and conservators located in the basement of the Freer Gallery. 'Before anything goes on display, they have to check it. If they say it can't be shown, it can't be shown. The conservators also determine the ideal light level for paintings and objects.'

During her first weeks as associate curator, Farhad has found that visitors to both the Sackler and Freer Galleries 'want to know more.' She hopes to broaden interest in Islamic Near Eastern art, especially within the local Iranian community and to expand the already popular cultural offerings of the two galleries.

She also hopes to help organize a festival of community-supported programs in a festival of contemporary Middle East films. 'After the revolution, Iran has produced some wonderful films. Turkey and North Africa are also very active,' she said. 'Movies are something people relate to. They can complement the exhibitions by conceptualizing the artworks and giving you a sense of the life and concerns of the people.'

'People will always find a means to create works of art,' Farhad said, adding that she hopes to put together exhibitions featuring innovative contemporary works as well as the historic works that made the museums world famous.

'Every curator hopes to do a big show,' Farhad admitted, 'but with budget cuts, we must adjust.' She expressed optimism that although the days of large, elaborate art exhibitions are over, the rich collection of art housed in the Sackler and Freer Galleries still can provide many opportunities for innovative exhibitions and publications.

'Because the Islamic world is so vast,' she concludes, 'smaller exhibitions can be effective in introducing the various aspects of the different culture. It is easier to look at three or four manuscripts in detail than to look at 100. Stylistic characteristics of certain art forms can also be studied in shows presenting the arts of Turkey, the arts of Syria or the arts of Iraq, Farhad suggested.

The name 'Islamic art' is com-

Amazing Japan



Continued from page 13

spill. It is absolutely true. If you want to see beautiful nature specially the autumn colours, a visit to Hakone is strongly recommended. There is a beautiful lake high in the hills, surrounded by trees, whose leaves change colour to flaming red to yellow.

For us Gaijin Japanese language is a real barrier to enjoy Japanese cultural manifestations. Japanese Kabuki and No Theatre, which runs for the whole night are worth a visit but we left out. Since the Japanese do not want to exhibit their style of life to foreigners, they invite guests to Geisha houses. It is children frolic and really too strange for a Gaijin.

The Japanese Emperor, who used to be a distant figure, has started moving with the times. The present Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko, while maintaining Japanese traditions, are no longer the distant figures but visible among the people.

Japan Today

The Japanese, who have created the economic miracle, have recently started mending their fences with their Asian neighbours. They have visited those countries they overran in Asia and openly asked for forgiveness for the pain they caused. They have gone to Korea, with whom they have had a stormy past. Japan is today the largest donor country of the world, having replaced the US. Japan appears ready to play her full role on the world stage.

Political scandal and particularly corruption in high places, which used to be unknown, has made its appearance in Japan recently. Japan has continued for centuries an isolated existence. The question is—in an age when we live in the Global Village, is it possible any more? A visit to Japan may not answer this question but the country, with its traditions intact and economic achievements will not fail to captivate any visitor.