A rewarding experience of US undergraduates with IUBians in Bangladesh

Lyndel Owens (A student participant from USA)

WHAT could we expect? Twenty undergraduates, coming to Bangladesh for the first time for a month of study and direct experience of village life? We arrived on Thursday, January 3 2008 and were welcomed by our host Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB). It is a collaborative programme with IUB and every year a group of US students come to Bangladesh for similar studies.



Led by Jim Laine, Professor of Religion at Macalester College (USA), and Haroun Er Rashid, Professor at the Independent University, Bangladesh, our group studied community development until the end of January. Planned by an urban studies and development institute in Minnesota (USA), our program strives to have students live what they are studying by combining experiential field-work with the typical lecture and class discussion format.



Comprised of students from several colleges in Minnesota, the cold, upper Midwest of America, we have left the land of ice and snow to spend two weeks talking with villagers in Manikganj, and three days learning and touring in Srimangal.

After outfitting ourselves with salwar kameezs, punjabis, and overcoming jetlag our first day, we departed Dhaka for field work at Proshika, an NGO near Manikganj. There, we split into five research teams: health, education, microcredit/village economy, gender, and agriculture. Each morning the groups ventured into nearby villages and markets where people received us graciously and patiently answered our questions. The IUBians, I mean, IUB students who accompanied us were crucial to our studies. In addition to interpreting, they helped us contextualize information and provided insightful perspectives on subjects we struggled to understand. Along the way, they became great friends.

Though each group maintained a focus, we drew from one another's experiences as a class and as a close community. More than once I would ask questions about health or education in an interview session, then happen upon a well of information that pertained to my subject, microcredit. As the diffuse boundaries between our interest areas became clear, so did the complex nature of the villager's troubles and the proposed solutions. We realized that microcredit, often hailed as a beacon of development in America, is seriously flawed, that the ability to take time for health care is a rare privilege, and that education cannot be viewed as separable from poverty. Nothing is as singular as we expected.

We returned to Dhaka and joined a fitting dinner in our honour hosted by IUB on Tuesday, January 22. During our fulfilling final days in Dhaka, we had discussions with directors of national NGOs and visited IUB campus, national monuments and urban slums in Dhaka city.

As I look back, our time in Bangladesh has been thrilling, sobering, fun and eye opening. We are extremely grateful to IUB, Proshika, BRAC, IUB Prof. Haroun Er Rashid, our IUBian friends and countless other kind and gracious Bangladeshis for this unparalleled opportunity and rewarding experience.