

The winding river road

In July 2009, Bradt Travel Guides will release a new travel guidebook for Bangladesh around the world. A group of five international travel writers and travel agents, including the book author, is currently exploring Bangladesh's tourism potential. Their goal is to explore Bangladesh's tourism potential. What follows is part three of the trip diary.

MIKEY LEUNG

It is now day three of the trip and Bandarban is well behind us. We drive back to Chittagong and I consciously realise that driving at night makes me nervous. We board the train once again and head back to Dhaka. Our next road is not made of asphalt, tar or steel: it is the river Meghna. We board the M.V. Aboshar, Guide Tours' largest boat, and begin the 28-hour journey to Mongla, the gateway to the Sundarban.

We board the boat at Narayanganj, where streams of workers load sand from boats on to the riverbank. The anti-like quality of the workers serves to emphasise the repetition of their shape. Crowns of mud top their chiseled bodies, their skin

glistens in the morning sun.

We depart down the river and the members of my crew find their own spaces on the large vessel. I keep to myself today, and begin to contemplate the introspective journey I am taking in trying to capture the immensity of Bangladesh in one little guidebook.

As the scenery scrolls by, I realise that it is the sight of Bangladesh's daily life -- rarely hidden from view or packaged away -- that will stay in my memory long after I have left Bangladesh. It is the raw muscle power of the people that impresses me most -- so much its work is done by the force of so many hands. It is a world far removed from the mechanised cities of the "developed" world.

Eventually, the industrial grittiness of Naryanganj gives way to the farm fields of Mushiganj. We pass boatloads of commuters on their way to work, each of the small vessels filled to their rims with standing people. Their faces follow as we chug by. I find myself contemplating the differences between my world and theirs, for here there is only a river between us.

Mighty Meghna

Over a lunch of delicious fried fish, thick dal, and green spinach, we eventually enter Bangladesh's main river artery. The Meghna holds plenty to see, and soon the river splays to each horizon in front of our vessel. We pass dirt dredgers squirting their brown ooze on to transport vessels, gathered around collecting silt. The rivers throng

with fishing boats of various sizes, some still sporting sun-coloured sails. The riverbank glows with a green shade I have certainly never seen in my native Canada.

Deeper we cruise into the arteries of the Ganges Delta, and finally we enjoy the first still moments of our trip -- still in the sense that there is nothing to do but watch the scenery go by, even though we are still travelling. The Meghna's waters are brown with the silt from the Himalayas and it strikes me how in Bangladesh, the mountains literally crumble to the sea. Romantically, I enjoy imagining the extraordinary power of the monsoonal rains in Bangladesh, and how the mountains are "reclaimed" to the ocean here.

Survivors, not victims

The riverine country is in fact one piece of this monsoonal patchwork and to understand the geographical position of the country is to understand the nature of its terrain and its formation. The geography also reflects the character of Bengali

people. Despite the "victimised" image Bangladesh has around the world, most people I meet would rather label themselves "survivors."

I begin to realise that when I will write about the psyche of the people, it is their ingenuity and creativity I will focus on and describe in my writing, and how, with such limited resources and opportunities, people here have become extraordinarily good at creating life out of what seems to be a wasteland -- to the untrained eye. It is this sort of challenge that inspires me to write about the country, and share its positive story with the rest of the world.

For a nation whose international image is often framed by poverty, natural disasters and corruption, Bangladesh's Bradt Travel Guide will represent a milestone in Mikey Leung's attempts to change Bangladesh's world image when it is published in 2009. To begin promotion of Bangladesh as a tourism destination, Bradt Travel Guides has organized a promotional tour of Bangladesh for a select group of travel writers and agents. The writers will publish a series of articles internationally, mostly in the United Kingdom. To learn more about Bradt's guidebook project, please visit <http://www.joybangla.info>. Mikey Leung can be reached at mikeyleung.ca@gmail.com.



What went wrong with Bangladesh cricket?

They ought to learn which ball to play for runs, which ball to defend and which ball to let go. More importantly, they must learn how to pace an innings and play the whole quota. These are the basics which I am sure their coach has told them time and again. It is now up to them to take them to heart and practice rigorously.

HUSAIN IMAM

THE World Cricket Series 2008 between South Africa and Bangladesh of 2 Test matches and 3 ODIs has just concluded. The performance of the Bangladesh team has been dismal to say the least. They have been, to the utter disappointment of Bangladeshi fans at home and abroad, comprehensively defeated in both versions of the game. To be blunt, they have been literally whitewashed.

Nobody expected Bangladesh, the youngest Test playing nation in the world, to win a Test match against a strong team like South Africa which is at the moment possibly second to only Australia in ICC ranking. What every body expected was that Bangladesh,

given their reasonably extended exposure in world cricket, excellent performance in the last world cup, and having the advantage of playing in home ground, would be able to at least play out 4 days of a 5-day Test match and clinch a victory in at least one of the 3 ODIs.

That did not happen. In neither of the Test matches could they barely step into the fourth day before surrendering defeat to the visitors. The scenario of the ODIs was no better. In all the three ODIs, they suffered comprehensive defeat, the first one by 9 wickets, the second one by 7 wickets, and the third one as well by 7 wickets scoring only 178, 173, and 143 runs respectively. Let us forget, on all the three occasions, the home team won the toss, and, as expected, decided to bat first.

True, Bangladesh is a young team. Its oldest player is only 26 years old. But one must not forget that they have by this time played more than one hundred ODIs. If we talk about world exposure, I think they have had enough to be able to put up a good fight with any team. If they could clinch a place in the super eight by defeating India and then win a comprehensive victory against South Africa in the second round of the last world cup competition, is it unfair for the local fans to expect them and that also in their own home ground to put up a much better performance than what they have displayed? Certainly not.

True, there have been a number of controversial decisions from the umpires, that too from the local umpires, most of which unfortu-

nately went against the Bangladesh team. Probably the Bangladeshi umpires were more eager in proving themselves neutral than anything else. For minnows like Bangladesh, such decisions do matter. But that cannot be an excuse for not performing up to their talent and capability.

Let us see what went wrong with the Bangladeshi tigers. They say Bangladesh is a team full of vibrant and talented boys. I do not disagree with them. Frankly speaking, I am a great fan and admirer of the Bangladesh team simply because they are young, talented, and courageous. Look at the boys the team is now comprised of. They are all between 20 and 26 years of age. It has players like Ashraf, Aftab, Shariar, Sakib, Tamim, Mortaza, Sadat, Razzak, Nazimuddin, Junaid and so many others that the team can genuinely boast of. Each of them is young, talented, and courageous. They can flare up any moment. They have shots in their bats. They have the essence in their bowling. They have agility in their fielding.

But that is not enough. Patience, technique, intelligence, sense of responsibility, and commitment are all as important as talent and courage in any good cricketer. Our boys seem to be miserably lacking in most of these areas. Patience and sense of responsibility are the words that seem to be totally missing from their dictionary.

Take the case of skipper Ashraf. He is certainly the most talented batsman in the team. He has the technique. He has all the shots in his bat. He has in the past proved more than once that on a particular day he could be as scintillating a batsman as any other world class batsman in the modern game.

Yet, look at his performance, more importantly his approach, in the just concluded series against South Africa. His total score in the two Test matches was 62, and in the three ODIs only 17. Take the case of second ODI. Opener Tamim who played a splendid innings of 82 in the first ODI got out cheaply in the very first over of the second ODI, going for a cut shot too close to his

body. Then came Ashraf, the skipper and the best batsman of the team. In the very fourth ball of the second over, before even feeling the pitch or pace of the wicket he went for a hook to be caught out for duck by the only fielder placed in that area. The fact that even a superb fifth wicket partnership of 115 between Rakibul Hasan and Shakib al Hasan could not take his team to the 200 mark (173 all out) tells the rest of the story.

Take the case of third ODI. Opener Tamim got out putting only 8 runs on the board on a controversial caught behind decision. Camera replay showed that the ball had actually touched his pad, not his bat. Nazimuddin, the young debutant of the series came in as number three batsman and showed some good batting but that was to be short lived. Scoring 20 runs in 30 balls he probably thought it was enough. Coming down the wicket he went for a wild miscued shot that was enough to show him the way back to the pavilion. Then came Ashraf, and he followed suit. In the very third or

fourth ball he went for a similar hook shot which got him out in the second ODI. Luckily, this time he survived -- but not for long. With only 9 runs on the board, he went for a lofty on drive to find himself caught at mid on. That was enough to put the seal on the game.

Take the case of Shariar Nafees, another talented batsman of the Bangladesh team, playing the third ODI as an opener. In the very first over of his turn he went for a big shot of a ball way outside the off stump which could have been even called wide. Luckily the ball did not find the edge of his bat and he survived at least on that occasion. Now, how do you explain these happenings and whom do you blame for such terrible performance of the Bangladesh team except the players themselves? They have batted not only poorly but also in a highly insensible and irresponsible manner. It is high time they get their mindset right.

I have a feeling that our batsmen want to score from every ball and that also in boundaries. That is not

possible even for a superstar. They ought to learn which ball to play for runs, which ball to defend and which ball to let go. More importantly, they must learn how to pace an innings and play the whole quota. These are the basics which I am sure their coach has told them time and again. It is now up to them to take them to heart and practice rigorously.

Finally I have a few words of advice for Ashraf. He should, if need be, step down from captaincy, fully concentrate on his batting. He has to first learn how to consistently bat 10 to 15 overs without taking any risk whatsoever, never mind what runs he scores in these overs. What must know that he has shots, talent, and technique. What he lacks is temperament and application. He must set his mindset right sooner rather than later. The cricket fans want to see the future of Bangladesh cricket through him. If he can lead his team by example, surely the others will follow.

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Boeing! Boeing!

Spending 1.265 billion dollars of taxpayer money on eight luxury aircraft is a scandalous case of misplaced national priority. It is a sum larger than what was spent to build the Jamuna Bridge. Spending this sum on a national works program to build roads and cyclone shelters and seawalls against storm surges would have revived a moribund economy and created millions of new jobs.

M. FIROZE

ONE of the cardinal principles of the business world and sound economic management is that success is rewarded and failure is penalised. In a successful business organisation the CEO and his team of managers are rewarded with pay raises and bonuses for turning out a profit for the company and its shareholders. If the company makes a loss or is found guilty of breaking the law the CEO and his team are unceremoniously booted out or sent to jail.

A perennially unprofitable company usually goes bankrupt; the assets are sold off to pay its creditors and employees and the investors count the losses.

This is a truism and the basis of wealth creation across the globe but not for the government of Bangladesh (GOB). Its recent decision to acquire a fleet Boeing jets for Bangladesh Biman is a brilliant example of how to reward failure, inefficiency, and corruption with taxpayer money. For a government which came to power with a pledge to uproot corruption and inefficiency this action is even more unpardonable.

If Biman was a successfully run and efficiently managed corporation it would have managed to raise the money from its retained earnings and creditors at home and abroad to buy a new fleet of aircraft. Nobody would have a quarrel on that issue.

Having a national flag carrier

is not a strategic or a security issue; it is a simple case of national vanity. One of the best known and legendary airlines of yesteryears was PanAm. In fact PanAm was an American icon; it was a symbol of the good life, its smartly attired beautiful stewardesses were featured in a Hollywood movie which forms the title of this article.

PanAm and another American giant TWA both lived beyond its means and succumbed to the harsh realities of the market place. Uncle Sam did not step in with taxpayer money to save them.

Today, it is Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Atlantic, which is the most notable airline in major US international airports. If the lone superpower on this planet can live without a

national flag carrier so can we! Biman has to fold its wings and its assets sold off, there are many entrepreneurs at home and abroad to step in to the country's aviation market. The GOB will be richer with licensing fees and tax income from the private airlines.

Spending 1.265 billion dollars of taxpayer money on eight luxury aircraft is a scandalous case of misplaced national priority. It is a sum larger than what was spent to build the Jamuna Bridge. Spending this sum on a national works program to build roads and cyclone shelters and seawalls against storm surges would have revived a moribund economy and created millions of new jobs.

Let us stop imagining being the oil sheikdoms of the Middle East who have money to burn. The GOB has to learn a lesson what a toiling rickshaw puller and garments worker knows very well: There is no free lunch!

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Incredibly, Asia has world's freest media



MONDAY: It was the worst possible start to the week. Someone tampered with my morning fix. At the coffee-shop my barista/pusher shouted out something I didn't catch and placed a paper bucket on the bar. A woman approached, saying: "Oops, sorry -- that's mine. I picked up the wrong one." She guiltily puts the one she's holding back. I pick up the drink she has returned and take it to the office.

I take a sip and spit all over my keyboard. In the 30 seconds she had my drink, she'd added cinnamon, a slice of ginger, and something which smells suspiciously like garlic. The day gets worse when the boss gives me an impossible assignment. "I want you to write a piece proving that the media in Asia is freer than the media in the West." "But it isn't," I object. He waves away this inconvenient obstacle and me. TUESDAY: Last night I sent out a request to regular contacts asking for examples of Asian media freedom. This morning my inbox contains a report from a Manila newspaper about an assassinated politician. The victim "was widely believed to

have been corrupt, so perhaps it's not such a bad thing," says a quote from a policeman. I phone a friend at the New York Times and ask whether he'd be free to quote a thumbs-up to murder? "Of course not," he replies. "It would be utterly tasteless." Can't help thinking about the woman in the coffee shop who likes ginger and garlic in her coffee. Talk about tastelessness. WEDNESDAY: I receive a news clipping from a reader in Indonesia. After a hotel guest committed suicide, a hotel public relations officer said: "Please tell the public that if they have to die, they should not do it here. They can use the river for example." Now that's pragmatism. Decide to slip a bit of ginger into my coffee just to see what it is like. Surprisingly nice. THURSDAY: I've been sent a link to a Tokyo newspaper report in which an official at JR East railways says people who throw themselves in front of trains should use other lines, as dead people cause delays. I call a

friend at The Guardian in London. "Media relations officers in the West just don't say such insensitive things," she replies. "Although I'm sure they think them." FRIDAY: I am in the boss's office. "You're right," I tell the editor. "The Asian media is freer than the Western media. We are not bound by limits on decency, taste, political correctness, and soon." "Hmm," he says. "Is that good?" "You didn't ask me whether it was good. Just whether it was free." SATURDAY: I see the woman in the coffee shop. "Why do you put garlic and ginger in your coffee?" I ask. "You the guy whose coffee I spiked by accident on Monday? Sorry. Garlic and ginger give you clarity of mind," she says. "Did it work for you?" "That's absurd," I reply. "But I think it did."

Tomorrow: I don't know, I haven't written it yet. Visit Nury at www.vittachi.com to be as tasteless as you like.