

Tiger tales

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. What follows is the fourth and final part of the trip diary. The trip wrap-up will be presented in the April issue of the Forum magazine.

MIKEY LEUNG

TWENTY-four hours later, we have arrived in Mongla, and our initial leg of the scenic river journey is complete. We switch over from the M.L. Abohar to M.L. Bonbibi, Guide Tours' smallest and most intimate boat for our journey into Sundarban. We also meet with the CEO of Guide Tours, Elisabeth Fahmi Mansur, who is serving as our guide for the next few days.

Our first stop is the village of Chandpai, where we meet Adam Barlow, Chris Greenwood, and Alam Howlader, all of whom are the leading members of the Sundarban Tiger Project team. The team has worked for four years to get information on the tiger population and learn about the unique eco-system that supports them. They take an afternoon from their busy research

work to sit down with our journalists and describe some of the recent controversy they've been undergoing regarding their work.

The controversy, we learn, stems from a set of articles published in Bengali-language newspapers. They claim that the Sundarbans Tiger Project team

endangers tigers by radio collaring them, because the drug used in the process, telazol, can have an adverse affect on the tiger's central nervous system. The writers of the original articles claimed that the two tigers collared by the team later died. But then Adam explains how these tigers likely died of old



age, and tells us how there is plenty of references to say that telazol, like any drug, has side effects, but very little evidence to demonstrate that there are harmful effects in tigers. He says that the danger of telazol is in fact a kind of "myth."

Despite the suspension of collaring in Chandpai, Adam gives us a thorough introduction to the rest of his team's work. The project is just beginning to change, he explains.

In order to go ahead with its conservation goals, it needs to localise its work inside Bangladesh's Forest Department. Adam explains that his team is helping the forest department officials manage the human-tiger conflict that occurs throughout the Sundarbans, but the forest department doesn't have enough resources to do a proper job of this. However, this is the project's long-term goal. This is the reason that the project is now focusing on building public support for its work, and why this controversy has come at a particularly bad time.

Our journalists leave with a sense that the project's work is

difficult, and at times dangerous, but ultimately worthwhile. Elisabeth points out that Bangladesh has a long way to go in coming to grips with the ecological and biodiversity of the Sundarbans, and that the Sundarbans Tiger Project is one of the first and only teams to conduct research on this unique ecosystem. I am positive that my group will be lending their coverage support to the team in their forthcoming articles.

Natural beauty

After our meeting in Chandpai, we take the boat into the forest and soon come across groups of Gangetic River Dolphins, who appear to be resident in certain confluences of Sundarban river channels. While we watch the dolphins surface, Elisabeth tells us about her project in teaching the younger generation about the value of the dolphins. We are treated to another fantastic sunset on the water, and a cool March evening. I elect to sleep on the boat deck where it is cooler and there are almost no mosquitoes; the moonlight casts its glow over the forest and the water.



The next day we are up early, at the same time as the sunrise. After some hot tea and coffee, we are in a small rowboat at the forest edge, gazing into its depths and searching for the elusive tigers. Unfortunately, we don't see much this morning, save for a pair of chital drinking at the forest's edge, and a whole host of different birds -- the Sundarbans

is really a birder's paradise. Most impressive is the sound: the jungle presents a chorus for the ears, one in which the you feel in awe of nature's presence, and how she will determine our fate regardless of our carelessness towards the planet.

For a nation whose international image is often framed by poverty, natural disasters and

corruption, Bangladesh: the Bradt Travel Guide represents 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, with the assistance of Guide Tours, has organised 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.

The rice price dilemma: Time to worry about low prices?

Thus, direct imports by TCB would presumably lead to lower import costs and would prevent prices being manipulated (by unscrupulous/greedy private importers and traders), while expanded OMS at lower than market rates will help stabilise prices.

K.A.S. MURSHID

THE headlines continue to scream about the high price of essentials while our embattled advisors agonise over a situation that is patently well beyond their control. Many ideas have been bandied about in the press and the electronic media by various "experts" -- strengthen safety nets (i.e. mainly VGD); expand OMS; revive TCB (the state-owned trade corporation); explore new sources of rice imports, and so on.

Each suggestion rests on an underlying belief about the nature of the malaise at hand. Thus, direct imports by TCB would presumably lead to lower import costs and would prevent prices being manipulated (by unscrupulous/greedy private importers and traders), while expanded OMS at lower than market rates will help stabilise prices.

VGD distribution is expected to protect the poorest, while clearly, a more reliable rice import partner needs to be urgently identified given the rather erratic behaviour of our shining neighbour! Its not

that these beliefs have no merit -- some of these strategies have worked well in the past. This time around, however, nothing seems to be working, not even the deployment of border guards to monitor potentially errant merchants, or even setting up of BDR shops (remember the TCB fair price shops of long ago?).

The main problem stems from low public food-grain stocks, thought to be less than 700,000 MT as of February compared to a safe security level of at least 3 to 4 times this figure, even in normal circumstances. And it is this realisation that fed a frenzy of panic imports of rice "at any cost," both by the private sector as well as the public sector.

The sense of panic continues, even as imports already ordered have begun to flow in steadily. In the coming months, this stream is likely to turn into a veritable flood, competing madly for limited storage space. But these are high-cost imports, and the traders who have invested in the venture fully expect to make good profits.

Traders are not the only ones whose appetites have been whetted by the unprecedented high

prices. Farmers have responded with matching zest, marshalling every inch of available land and investing their last taka on fertilisers or pesticides or diesel into the forthcoming boro crop. My field visits to Rangpur, Bogra, Faridpur and Comilla recently have convinced me that we are headed for a very large boro and wheat harvest this year. I would strongly advise the Ministry of Food to urgently conduct an exercise to estimate the size of the harvest if they haven't already done so. The likeliest scenario, in my humble opinion, is as follows:

- Panic imports clog up the storage-distribution system with the bulk of the imports landing at the worst possible time, i.e. during May-June, to coincide with the boro harvest season. In particular, this is likely to be the case with the remaining 4 lac tons of rice promised by our neighbour!
- Post-harvest prices slump rapidly and farmers tear their hair in distress as they see their profits rapidly vanish. Many become entrapped in vicious debt cycles;
- Experts clog the air waves urging immediate government action

to launch a massive procurement drive to provide price support to farmers on the verge of suicide;

- The government has no budget for procurement (at least nothing nearly enough) but makes bold statements promising quick interventions;
- Even if some resources are mobilised for a procurement effort (not drive) the problem will be to find storage space in the warehouses and godowns.
- Traders burn their hands; Farmers resolve to scale down the area under rice and wheat drastically the next time.

Unfortunately, the above scenario is a very real possibility for which the government needs to be pre-

pared. It should be quite possible for the Food Policy Monitoring Unit to determine the size of the next harvest, forecast the timing of imports, assess public and private storage, and estimate the scale of the procurement drive that may be needed.

An indicative procurement price should be announced well in advance, backed up by some resolve on the part of the government to actually defend it. In other words, the food price saga has just begun, and is unlikely to disappear with the onset of the boro harvest as widely believed.

So what is the moral of the story? Institutions are important and are easy to dismantle

although difficult to build, even bad ones. Our original sin (in the area of food policy) was to agree to dismantle the Public Food Distribution System (or the ration system, as popularly known then). Now, it is quite true that the PFDS was riddled with inefficiencies and problems, but instead of trying to address these, we decided to cripple it before throwing it overboard.

We were fresh converts to the logic of the market paradigm which was being beamed at us from all directions, and we succumbed, taking out not just the PFDS but the skill and knowledge about food crisis management that we had learnt painstakingly over decades. If there was one thing that we in Bangladesh knew, it was how to manage the food-grain

economy. Alas, I fear that skill has now all but disappeared.

There is a second moral: pre-occupation with the immediate is essential, but ultimately of little use unless we are able to anticipate a crisis well in time. Clearly, this is a job that no one is prepared to do.



K.A.S. Murshid is Research Director, Bids and Director, Bids Policy Resource Program. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of BIDS.

Street protest against equal rights: What needs to be done

Islam made marriage a serious business contract in which a man needs to promise clearly what he will give to the woman as a wife, and even in case of a divorce. The Quran directs us to be kind, just and respectful to women. In His last Hajj message the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) clearly told Muslims to be fair and just to women. The Prophet's constant concern for orphans and women is evident in the Quran, and from various Hadiths.

TAYEB HUSAIN

THE recent street protest in Dhaka of thousands of Muslims against the government's move to give equal rights to women in inheritance is regrettable. What sort of society is it where people discriminate against mothers, sisters and daughters, and even go out in the streets in support of such a move?

Is it Islamic? Who are these people talking on behalf of Islam without properly understanding the religion and, especially, the real spirit of the faith?

From a liberal human point of view, one can say that the father who does not give equal rights, or distribute his property and wealth to his children equally, is a monster and should not be a father. How anyone can discrimi-

nate against his own children and still consider himself just? And how can one be religious if one is not just and fair to his own children?

It is not Islamic, either, to discriminate between a male and female child. Islam does not say that one cannot give more to female children than the obligatory minimum that has been suggested in the Quran. Giving the minimum is binding in Islam, but offering shares of paternal wealth equally to all children, irrespective of sex, is not against Islam.

One needs to consider the history of mankind, especially Arab history, to understand the situation clearly. Before Islam, in that age of ignorance, Arab women had no rights; the Arabs often used to bury newborn females, as the status of women was the lowest among the Arab citizens in those days.

Islam is the first religion that

gave women some legal and social rights. Islam made marriage a serious business contract in which a man needs to promise clearly what he will give to the woman as a wife, and even in case of a divorce. The Quran directs us to be kind, just and respectful to women.

In his last Hajj message the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) clearly told Muslims to be fair and just to women. The Prophet's constant concern for orphans and women is evident in the Quran, and from various Hadiths.

In different revelations in the Quran we can find strong warnings to Muslims, and suggestions for being very careful about their treatment to women folk. "Give unto them their portions as a duty." "Give unto them their portions in kindness." "And unto each we have appointed heirs of that which parents and near kindred leave; and as for those with whom your right hands have made a covenant, give them their due" -- such instructions were given in the Quran on many occasions.

What we know as Islamic inheritance law is the minimum one must give to the female child, and violating this instruction is a sin. But it is not against Islam to

give equal rights to females, by any dictum. Nowhere in the Quran or in any Hadith is it said so. Let those who are objecting show where in the Quran or in the Hadith it says that giving equal rights to women is against Islam.

In this context we can mention slavery. Arab economy was based on slavery in those days; indeed, slavery was a way for cheap labour for the wealthy and the powerful everywhere in the ancient world.

The Prophet of Islam despised slavery, and he advised Muslims to set the slaves free if they could. That was the best way to deal with the slavery question, he proclaimed. Otherwise, he very strongly pleaded, the slaves must be treated kindly, they must be given the same food and clothing that the master eats and wears and, most importantly, the master must not ask a slave to do heavy work that he cannot do himself. To be kind to fellow human beings was the prophet's sincere and clear instruction, and an obligation for a Muslim.

As said before, Islamic family inheritance law that was formulated later through Hadiths, suggests giving the minimum.

Not giving this minimum share to a female member is against Islam and a sin, and certainly not giving equal shares to all children is not and cannot be against the Islamic faith.

It is unfortunate that some people, without understanding, try to impose on the society that which has nothing to do with civility, morality, ethics or the religion they claim to adhere to. I suppose it is the price the society is paying because the long overdue reform in our educational system has been ignored for too long.

The government and the civil society at large need to take note of those who are instigating the controversy.

Most importantly, the madrasa people and the imams must not be the only source to speak authoritatively on religion. A board for religion must be organised immediately with highly educated people and true scholars of Islam, and nobody except the board shall talk authoritatively on religious issues, if and when it is required. Otherwise, such unfounded controversy would drive Bangladesh backwards.

Tayeb Husain is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.



Arthur C. Clarke and the Ego Chamber

SIR Arthur was lost in his own world, as usual. The last time I saw Arthur C. Clarke, the visionary author of 2001: A Space Odyssey, his hearing had gone.

This columnist was interviewing him on stage in Sri Lanka last year. I shrieked each question into his left ear until I was red-faced. But he misheard everything I said.

Thank goodness. The result was that (a) the audience got a good laugh at the total disconnect between what I asked and what he replied, and (b) Arthur ended up ignoring me and talking about whatever came into his head, which was a darn sight more interesting for all concerned.

Sir Arthur, who died (on March 19), had a wicked sense of humour. Talking about claims that UFOs regularly visit this planet, he said: "They tell us absolutely nothing about intelligence elsewhere in the universe, but they do prove how rare it is on Earth."

He first approached my family in 1956, when he was diving addict hanging out on Unawatuna beach on the south coast of Ceylon. He wanted my father, a newspaperman, to print something he had written. The stuff was bizarre, mind-boggling and unrealistic, but kind of fun -- so my Dad agreed.

Good call. To be brutally honest, Arthur wrote some of the most forgettable human characters in literary history, but his non-human ones (such as HAL 9000 the computer) were absolutely riveting.

Our families became friends. His house in Colombo was famous for three reasons. It had a satellite dish on top, long before anyone knew what a large metal dinner plate on one's roof could do. It had its own elevator -- an unheard-of luxury in a private home. And there was his souvenir-filled study, which he called The Ego Chamber. "This is a bit of a spaceship, and here's a chunk of the moon," he would say, holding up items from his shelf.

"Yeah, right," we said, not

knowing whether we dare believe him.

Clarke became totally Asian. He wore a sarong on his lower half and a Nehru jacket on his top half. His friends were all locals. He lived on curry.

But he never lost his sense of humour, which infected everyone. When US astronauts returned from the moon, one of them phoned him: "We want you to know that we were sorely tempted to call Nasa and say, 'Hey, Houston, we found this big black monolith thing on the dark side of the moon.'"

He took revenge on people



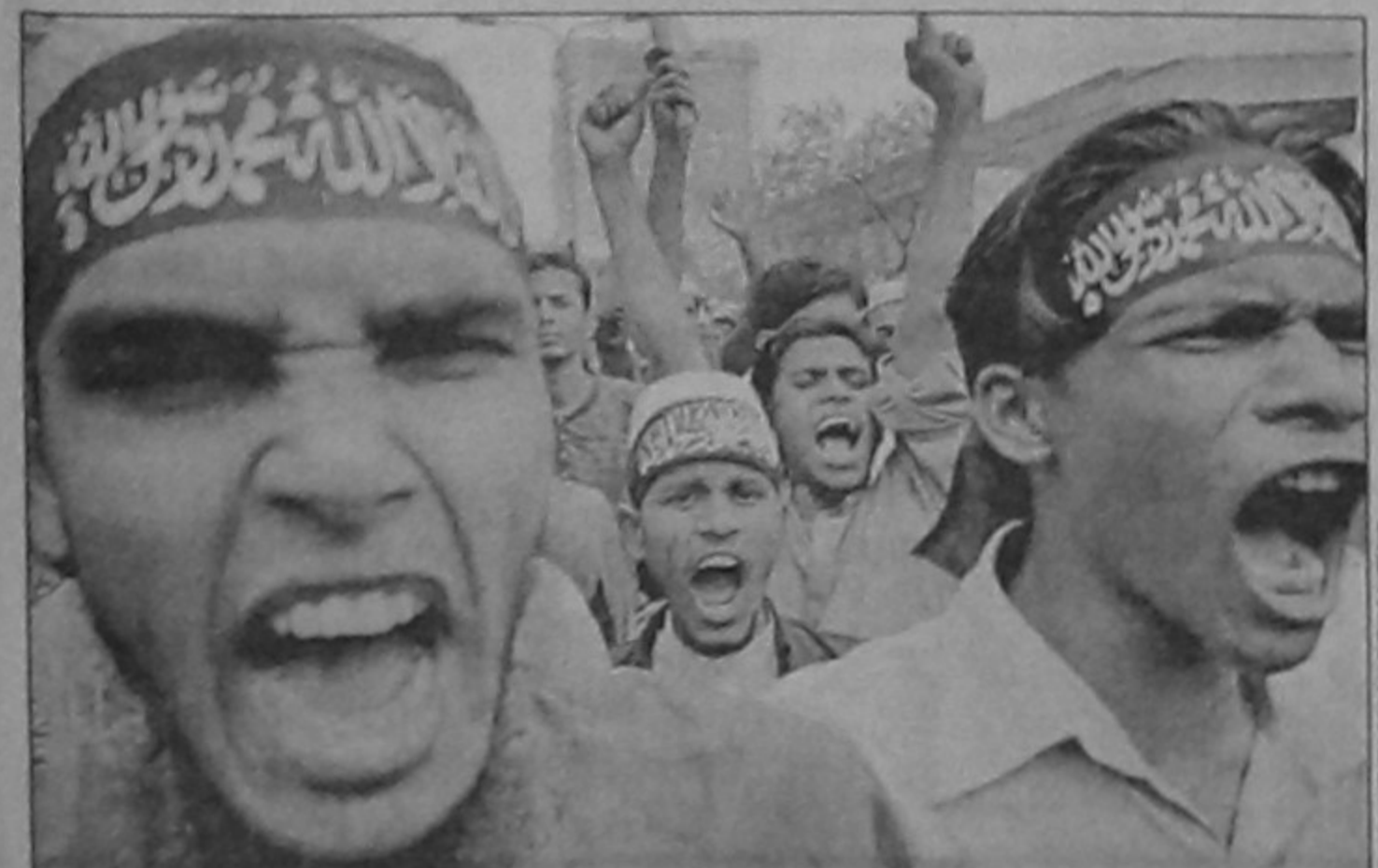
who didn't take him seriously. He revealed to everyone that the short story that became 2001: A Space Odyssey was written for the BBC, but was rejected.

And then there was his dig at a lawyer who gave him bad advice. Arthur famously came up with the concept of orbiting satellites. A lawyer friend thought the whole idea was too far-fetched and told him not to patent it. Arthur put this anecdote into an essay entitled How I Lost a Billion Dollars in My Spare Time.

At his birth anniversary party in December, Arthur C. Clarke told folk that it wasn't his birthday. "It's my 90th orbit of the sun," he explained.

Goodbye, Arthur. We'll miss you, but your tales will orbit forever.

Brickbats, bouquets or memories to Nury at www.vittachi.com.



MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/DIARY NEWS