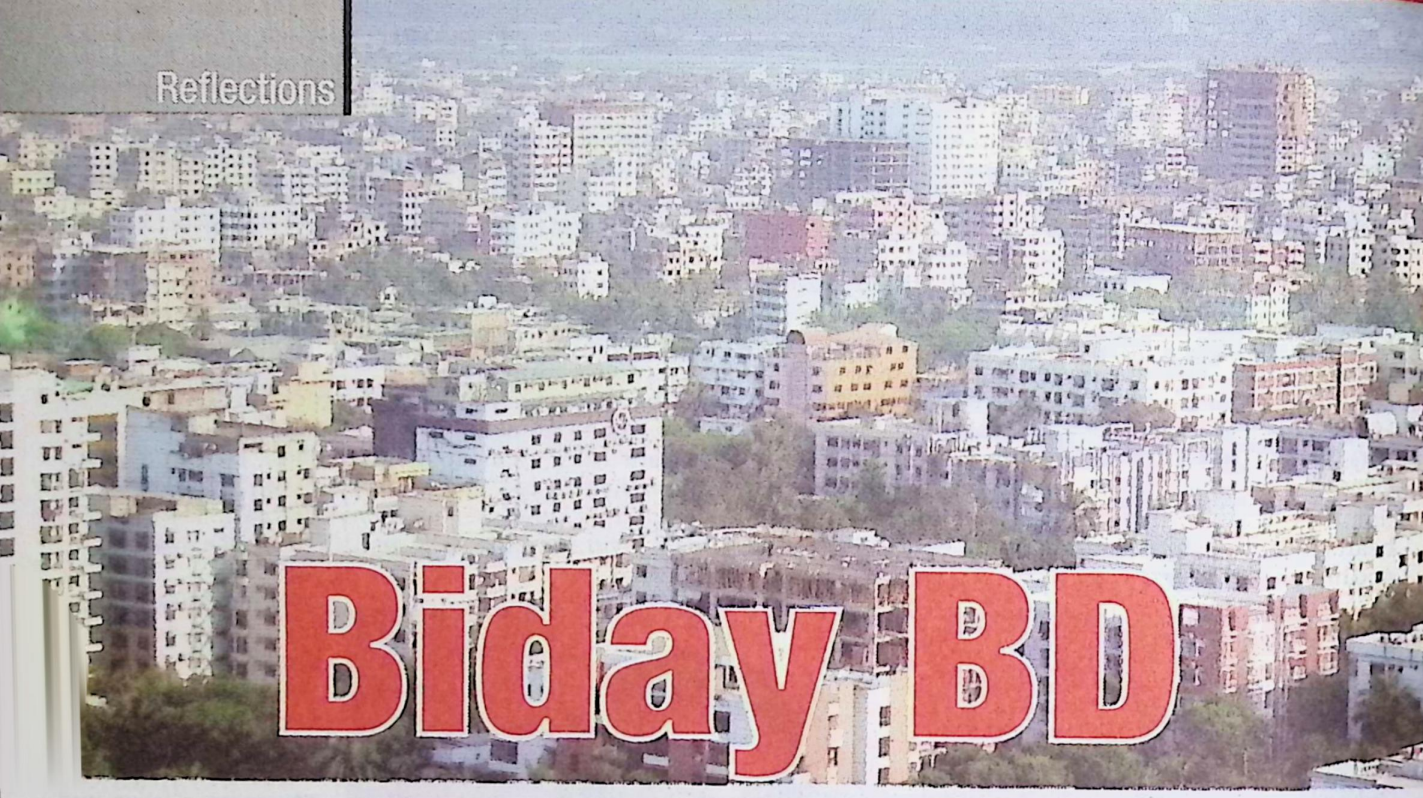


Biday BD

ANDREW MORRIS

"I have a proposition for you." In between sips of coffee, Tom, the fattest and jolliest of my tutors on my Masters in Education course, leaned forward. "I'd like you to consider joining our team in Bangladesh". Trying to appear as calm as I could about this proposal, this sudden and unexpected offer of a free passport to the world of consultancy, I told him I'd think about it and answer him by the next day. I headed for the library, opened the atlas, and zoomed in on the South Asia pages. For me, that spring day back in 1998, Bangladesh was just a name, a splotch of colour the size of a postage stamp on a map. A country I had never given a moment's thought to. The next day I said "yes", largely because I've been unable all my life to say "no" to anything much, and so that day my decade-long involvement with this topsy-turvy, exhilarating, kaleidoscopic country sputtered into life.

What a journey. Beginning with a year in laid-back Rajshahi, back in the days when no one had mobile phones, another one in bustling Chittagong, lots of month-long visits over the years to Mymensingh, and coming to an end now after three tumultuous years in the Big Mango that is Dhaka. Now next week, it's finally time to leave, but how could I fly off without saying thank you and goodbye?

I don't really know what I've done, if anything, for Bangladesh, but I certainly know that Bangladesh has done a huge amount for me. In no other country have I been welcomed with such warmth, accepted as part of the family in so many homes. It's been a privilege to be here, to be met with a level of kindness and respect that visitors to my own country would be lucky to receive. For all the difficult sides of life, which hardly need pointing out, my abiding memory of this place will be of a country of fundamentally good, generous people, trying to get by, make ends meet, maintain friendships, hold families together, celebrate festivals, and struggle daily against considerable odds to live in a decent society.

At the same time, in no other country have I been led to reflect so hard on my values and views, which have been buffeted, challenged and changed in the process. To live in Bangladesh, more than anywhere else I've been, is to stare into the mirror of the inner self, and having done that, no one can stay quite where they were.

Bangladesh has taught me who I am, and I can't think of a more valuable lesson. I came here as an education consultant, married, never having written a word for publication, and never having played music in public. I knew nobody local that first day, and I knew just a couple of words of Bangla. (Useful words all the same: "*Shomosha nai*" and "*Ek cup cha*"). Eleven years later, with a few roller coaster ups and downs in between, nothing of that earlier me has remained the same. For a start, I've since added quite a few words to my Bangla vocabulary, which have considerably extended my range of expression, (for example, I can now say "*Amar mone hoy, shomosha achhe*" and "*Bhaiya, eto beshi chini deben na*"). I'm embarking on a new career in translation. I'm now single. I've written bucketfuls of words (thanks to the support of this very magazine), and have enjoyed rich collaborations with some truly gifted musicians. There's definitely something about the extraordinary effervescence of Bangladesh, which has led to this period of unprecedented change and creativity. But most importantly I've had deeper and more meaningful friendships here than in any other place I've ever lived in, one of which, above all, will remain with me forever.

Tahole shobaike ridoi theke dhonnobad. Right now, I can't say whether *abar dekha hobe* or not, but what I certainly can guarantee is that a part of my mind, a part of me, will be forever Bangladeshi. ■