Bangladesh Waiting

My first trip to Bangladesh

(Part One)

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Before leaving Sydney we had the kind of bold plans only youth can muster. We wanted to see everything in India, preferably twice, before our three-month university holidays expired. I would be travelling with my old school friend Lachlan, who had proposed the India trip. It was our first foray to the Subcontinent, in the winter of 1995-6 (summer in Australia), and we were young and ambitious.

I remember the farewell at Sydney Airport: my parents and his. His mother was just saying how important it would be for us to look after each other while on the road, when I accidentally dropped my passport on the terminal floor and nearly walked off without it!

There was, of course, too much to see and experience in India to make definitive plans, but ultimately, pre-arrival, we'd settled on a direction: ours would be a clockwise tour from Rajasthan and Delhi to Kolkata, then somewhere South India and back to Delhi.

Bangladesh, embarrassingly, was something of an add-on, although I'm pleased the suggestion was mine. I was studying the map one day in Sydney, dreaming of all we would experience and where we could go, when I noticed just how close to Kolkata the Bangladeshi border was. 'Now there's a country I know nothing about,' I thought, 'might be a chance to find out.'

Lachlan was a worthwhile travelling companion for he would agree to any reasonable idea. He was also more practical, which did me good. He agreed to Bangladesh dependent upon whether or not we needed a visa and how much it was going to cost. We asked our travel agent who had a 'where's that?' expression on her face. She'd never sent anybody to Bangladesh before, but had enough curiosity of her own to like the idea. She was insistent we tell how it was on our return. After a few days and a little research, she got back to us with the answer: we did need a visa but it was free! As there could be no harm in having a free visa stamped into our passport, of course we did it; we could decide later whether or not to use it, but at that moment both my dreaming and Lachlan's budgetary concerns were satisfied.

After that I started reading about Bangladesh and my excitement grew.



It's funny because, even to this day, all these years later, when people still routinely ask why Bangladesh?, the first thought to come to my mind is 'well, the visa was free so what could I do?'

India had much to teach: there were sounds never before heard, sights unseen, smells un-smelled and a feast of novel tastes to make us feel like Rajasthan kings. More than that, it taught us to let go. Western societies have a small obsession with logic and systems: it has its advantages but feeds the human trait of control over environment, experiences, everything; and in somewhere as exotic for us as India, it simply couldn't work. If you've ever tried to buy a train ticket there, you'll understand: it could take hours, lining up in several queues before a special trip to the office building out the back to see if we would be allowed to travel on the VIP quota. And it could happen that, setting out to take a train we would find ourselves on a bus; if we set out to see a historic site, we could easily find ourselves chatting over tea in a side street with the locals instead. India didn't allow our western desire for micro-management, and when things didn't go as we'd planned, we learnt with time to shrug