and say 'India will decide'. And decide she did.

Long before we came close to Bangladesh, I would say, I'd changed as a person. Once we'd relaxed in the face of poverty unimaginable to us; once we'd realised that the poverty didn't mean every single person was out to rob or cheat us, that in fact the level of honesty was staggeringly high; once we'd begun to understand that the world, as bad as it can be, was indeed populated, by and large, with essentially good people, we could properly enjoy the trip.



It was a question of faith: use your best judgment but leave a space for the rhythm of the Subcontinent to be your compass.

Now that I've thought about it more, I might put it this way: logic itself is cultural. That was the lesson.

I mention the change because it let me open, upon finally reaching Bangladesh, to the soft flurry of a Bengali breeze and the brute force of Bangladeshi hospitality; we were ready for the living poetry of Bangladesh. We had hired bicycles and ridden uncharted to Rajasthan villages, we had discussed culture and life at length with many Indian locals, we'd enjoyed impromptu home visits and unexpected movie shows in small towns. In Varanasi I learnt the theories of kite flying. In Sawai Madhopur we saw tigers and talked Indian recipes with the cook and at a Jain temple in Ranakhpur I turned twenty-one. We wanted to know the Subcontinent, that was the point, and it seemed, by letting go, we might have gained the opportunity to know most of its people personally. That was the surprise.

Bangladesh slipped from our minds for the first two months of our trip, around Rajasthan and roughly following the Ganges towards Bengal. It was really only in Bihar that Bangladesh re-emerged, and it wasn't a pleasant experience.

We were on one of those timeless Indian train journeys: 'timeless' here meaning 'duration of uncountable hours', which is not to say we didn't enjoy the Indian railways. However, on this occasion, sitting opposite us was a Bangladeshi family, the first Bangladeshis I had ever seen, and their children were running riot through the carriage, jumping on the seats, screaming full-lunged and howling like wolves. Their parents were entirely overwhelmed and underwhelming. Secretly I was scared those hours of noise might dissuade Lachlan from crossing the border in Bengal: I was already attached to the idea. Fortunately Lachlan wasn't dissuaded!

First-hand accounts filtered in when we reached West Bengal. One or two foreigners we met had been to Bangladesh, and their comments were negative: there was more to see in India and we'd be better to spend time in South India. The Indians had a different idea: Bangladesh was beautiful, the people friendly and we would really enjoy our visit; any Indians who had been here wanted to come back one day. And the western-written guidebook we had agreed with the Indians.

I didn't need to, but I'd bargained with Lachlan, 'we have the visas, let's go for five days and if we don't like it we'll just come back to India. After five days we'll go to South India regardless.'

On the day we set off from Sealdah I was sick. The Kolkata hotel we'd found on our student budget was directly above noisy Sudder Street and it had no glass in the windows, which for me meant the end of sleep. We bought the tickets and took our place in the carriage of a Bangaon-bound train.

And there, in the carriage at Sealdah, Bangladesh was waiting.

Mahbub (not his real name) was a Dhakaiya businessman on his way home from a business trip to India. It wasn't hard for him to guess, from our bloated backpacks, that we were on our way to Bangladesh too. He asked anyway, in English, and our affirmation was received with a broad smile. I don't remember the specifics of the train ride adda so there can't have been anything unusual in it. We must have talked about our trip around India and his, we would have asked about Bangladesh: exchange rates for Taka, tips on what to see and where to go, all the usual things. Mahbub promised to help us all the way to Dhaka.

Three years later I can say it's not surprising that this country would send an advance welcome, Bangladeshi hospitality being what it is, but I didn't know that then.

At Bangaon, Mahbub organised a baby taxi (I'd never heard that term, for in India we'd always called them auto-rickshaws) to take us from the train station to the border. We cleared Indian immigration and customs without fuss and found ourselves at the Bangladesh gate.

And so I took that first fateful step inside this country. ■