

No Please No Thank You

ANDREW EAGLE

It was Gulshan, for dinner. 'Do you enjoy living in the East?' the Australian woman said, her first words to me on that evening, with enough vitriol in her tone to strip rust from a pole. Why the bitterness? I was confused. I rarely think of East and West: and if I did, East might mean Russia or China, not Bangladesh. Bangladesh is a South Asian nation but mostly I think of it as: Bangladesh. It requires no reference point.

My Bangladeshi friend Situ was there, thankfully, and in the short conversation that followed she made mention of how she cannot tell the difference between Bangladeshis, Indians and Pakistanis, which might be alright if she didn't work with these communities in Sydney. She challenged my saying that Bangladesh was not India and required Situ to attest the fact the two countries actually differ. And when I suggested Bangladeshis might be flashier in style than at least their Paschimbangan counterparts, she indicated Situ and said 'I don't see any gold anywhere!' She'd been in Bangladesh for less than twenty-four hours. It was her first visit.

She spoke of her trip, maybe a week, to a village in Western Ukraine. The scene was of poverty, despair and people who didn't know how to fix the village water pump. They had kitchens smaller than her Australian bathroom. 'The country's been ruined!' she declared, 'It will never recover.' Then she almost spat out the word 'Russians!' I might not mention such unfortunate inanities except that she was certain her pending visit to a village in Jessore would be identical. 'I already know what it's going to be like.'

For an Australian, a visit to a Bangladeshi village is a significant opportunity to learn, not only of Bangladesh but of oneself. It seemed a shame that