A Few Words

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I don't pay attention to dates. But it is eighteen years since I first came to Bangladesh as a tourist. It was January 1996. There were street processions in the lead up to the election the Awami League boycotted. Ramadan was beginning. With an Australian friend, we'd only decided to visit because we knew nothing about Bangladesh and because the visa was free. There was no way to imagine that simple journey could alter a life's course. But I used to try to visit Bangladesh every year thereafter. It's a deeply fascinating country. There is so much for a westerner to learn.

A few months later in 1996 another significant event occurred, while I was in the middle of an Australian university year. In May the first issue of The Star magazine was published.

Of course I had no idea. With many new experiences to absorb reading newspapers is not a tourist's priority. The only newspapers I recall were the ones from which we ate *muri*, *jilapi* and *boot* when invited for Iftari.

I don't recall when I first saw The Daily Star but it would've been several years later. What I do remember is that when I did start to read newspapers here I was shocked. I could not believe how candid and bold they were. "They even wrote that?" I used to ask myself, bewildered. With a few exceptions, in Australia the media is far more subdued, indeed, surreptitiously controlled.

Were an Australian journalist to write as courageously as Bangladeshi journalists often do, especially on socio-political issues, it would be called a 'career limiting move.' Despite the challenges and risks – Sagar and Runi spring to mind, and acknowledging the practices of yellow journalism that unfortunately form a part of the mix in some newspapers – it remains true that in Bangladesh I learnt what freedom of expression actually means. The substantial role that a vibrant media can play in improving society was a revelation.

There are many Bangladeshi journalists who need to be congratulated for their commitment to the profession's ideals and to the country. While I personally do not write politically – partly from fear of sounding like a *Britisher* and because many others do it so well, I admire those that do. Of course it is widely acknowledged that The Daily Star is at the forefront.



Writing an article in the office the villagers of Hatiya – my 'home' village organised for me, courtesy of the local bazar committee. For many years the villagers of Hatiya have been supportive of everything I do!

For both *The Star* magazine and for me there has been an eighteen year journey. I have discovered that Bangladeshi culture seems to have no limit to its diversity or depth. I have come some of the way to understanding Bangladeshi thinking, the country's history and values. And in recent years working for The Daily Star has allowed me to spread my wings and explore more of the country. I am still learning. I remain fascinated.

It continues to be a pleasure to help the regional correspondents of *The Daily Star* further refine their English skills. I thank them for their hospitality while introducing me to their districts. It is an honour to contribute to The Star magazine which I believe excels in diversity of opinion and in providing a platform for issues and achievements that might not find an easy space elsewhere, and also for tolerating creativity in writing. Australia for one has no equivalent.

I would take this eighteenth anniversary occasion to express sincere thanks to our editor Mahfuz Anam and to the editor of *The Star* magazine Aasha Mehreen Amin – a remarkable person and the world's best boss – for their constant support and encouragement. Equally I thank The Star magazine team and our readers.

I hope you can forgive such self-indulgence – this once. You see, it's just that I have the world's best job, one that combines my three passions: travel, writing and Bangladesh. I imagine there are others who feel that theirs is the best job in the world. I can hardly help it if they are wrong! But don't worry – from next week the focus must return to where it should be – on our ever-surprising, always-enlightening, beautiful, soulful Bangladesh. I promise.