

Bangladesh Travelogue

By Dana Curran, World Savvy Executive Director and Co-Founder

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I recently returned from a month long trip to India and Bangladesh. I originally conceived of the trip as a way to reconnect with Madiha, the co founder of World Savvy who returned to live and work in Dhaka last May. Later, my motivation expanded to include a long overdue exploration of a continent known to me only from books, articles and, well, Madiha. Instead of a list of must-see sites, I had one broad, simple goal as I set out on the journey: experience as many new and different perspectives from my own as possible. In this highly abbreviated log of my travel experience, I wanted to describe one of the fresh perspectives I experienced on this trip.

When you first touch down in Dhaka, and begin the trip into the city from the airport, you are immediately struck by the sheer number of people. Things around you are perpetually in motion – people, rickshaws, animals, cars – and there are millions of them. 11 million people in Dhaka, to be exact (more than an estimated 150 million people live in Bangladesh, which is half the population of the U.S. in a country the size of Georgia). The other thing you notice is the traffic. Traffic in Dhaka is organized chaos. Families of five somehow fit onto a single moped, helmets are rarely if ever seen, and seatbelts – if they are available – feel like a foolish gesture. I stopped looking for crosswalks and learned that red lights were really more like loose suggestions than laws to abide by. When I asked someone whether automobile insurance exists in Bangladesh, I got a bewildered smile in response. I am not suggesting that all of the above things are safe or ideal; but in this city of approximately 11 million, somehow the chaos works more often than not. Without the expected safeguards of traffic lights, crosswalks, and lanes, I thought carefully about each step I took and felt responsible for my own welfare. For Bangladeshis' part, people seem to count on themselves to navigate the whirling sea of traffic and perhaps other aspects of urban life as well, however difficult they may be.

Politics are another example. It is a new democracy (independence in 1971) and is quite poor, with at least 45% of the population living below the poverty line. The unstable political situation truly affects every citizen, from entrepreneur to day laborer ; when hartals (strikes) shut down ports, roads, schools and businesses, the economy is in a stranglehold. When I visited, elections were scheduled for mid January. These elections did not happen because of a host of political problems in Bangladesh that would require much more space and time to elaborate on. To generalize, however, there was a pervasive feeling among the people that we spoke with that neither of the two main political parties represented (or cared about) the greater good. Yet, despite this sense that the public has very little faith in either party to affect change, 75% of the voting age population turned out for the last elections in 2001.

This is compared to only 64% percent of American citizens who voted in the 2004 presidential election. The comparison in voting statistics is even starker when you compare literacy rates in these two countries. In the US, 99% of the population reads while in Bangladesh slightly more than 43% of the population is literate. Over the course of the trip, I learned about the accommodations made for the large illiterate population including the use of symbols representing various candidates so voters can discern who's who at the polls without reading their names. Yet even with these barriers to voter education and skepticism

regarding the government, Bangladeshis employ a sense of self-reliance and seem to feel responsible for using the voice they have been given, despite the barriers.

From where I sit, these facts are very revealing. Nearly all Americans can read, and yet more than one-third of us do not exercise our right to select the leader of a democracy which offers *substantial* economic and social protections, relatively speaking. This is compared to Bangladesh, where fewer than half of the citizens can read, but three quarters exercise their right to voice an opinion about a democracy that offers very *few* economic and social protections, relatively speaking. I couldn't help but leave Bangladesh with a perspective on how much we have access to in the U.S.—material and non material—that we take for granted, and expect that someone, somewhere, is responsible for providing to us, regardless of how engaged we are as citizens. 36% of us do not vote in elections, even though polls are never far from where we live and great pains are taken to ensure equal access. Perhaps this is because we are disheartened by government generally, or perhaps it's because we don't believe one vote has any impact. While this is understandable in some ways, by the time I left Bangladesh, this had never seemed like more of a luxury.

I had time to consider how I have the luxury of complaining. And it is a luxury that we enjoy freely, because we know that somewhere, someone can be held responsible for everything we experience daily—from the temperature of our coffee to the quality of our children's education. And more often than not, we aren't always considering how as individuals, we bear some responsibility too. This can pervade all things, from educating ourselves, to reading the paper, to voting, to so many other aspects of everyday life.

Our month-long trip took us from Delhi to Mumbai, Goa, and on to Bangladesh for two full weeks. During that time we were fortunate to experience a range of new and remarkable things, including the highlight of meeting Dr. Mohammed Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank and recent recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. We traveled to Chittagong to tag along with Madiha's mother, Yasmeen Murshed, an advisor for the Caretaker Government, on state business. We got an exclusive inside tour of the Parliament building, designed by Louis Kahn, not otherwise open to the public. We went to a lecture on Christmas Day with a keynote by Amartya Sen, the renowned Nobel Laureate economist and development scholar, who was joined by Dr. Yunus and George Soros. Most notably, however, we were received with more grace and hospitality by Madiha, her extended family, and the people of Bangladesh than I've ever experienced. The perspectives we were exposed to—on politics, culture, social issues—were incredibly insightful, and they came from people everywhere, within government and without.

Now, home again with so much to digest about the journey, this new view on our own agency and responsibility still stands out clearly in my mind. In addition to learning how to bob and weave through some of the more intimidating traffic I've seen, I gained a fresh perspective and a heightened awareness of how litigious our U.S. culture and society has become. We are, despite what you read in the paper or see in the news, a relatively *careful* culture. We have elaborate protections for even small things in our daily lives—from helmet laws to laws barring trans fats. As a result, we have an expectation that someone is or should be responsible for most things we encounter in our day to day lives—from how much we weigh, how healthy we are, traffic flow, public safety and efficiency in transportation, to the safety and cleanliness of water and food (never mind the availability of it). It occurs to me that often as a result, we think less critically about the things we do, and

some of the pressure to feel responsible for our individual actions is relieved. If you feel protected at all times, you rely on your own faculties less than you otherwise would to make decisions. Sometimes the decisions are critical in immediate, tangible ways, like traffic safety. Sometimes they are critical in less immediate ways, like casting one vote in a national election.

The best thing about traveling to this part of the world is the perspective you gain as a visitor. It forces you to consider the way you see the world, and the assumptions you make about your own role in society. I'm hopeful that the perspective I gained in my short time there forces me to consider the steps I take, literally and figuratively, and how I am individually responsible for taking advantage of the freedoms I have access to, every day. I imagine I will still complain that my morning bus is running late, or that my crime in my neighborhood is on the rise. But perhaps now I'll get up earlier to catch that bus, and work harder to be a part of a solution that makes the neighborhood safer.