

# A JOURNEY TO BANGLADESH

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I was fortunate enough to be awarded a Millennium award to visit a third world country with CAFOD, who had received funding from the Millennium Commission to send parish workers, youth workers and teachers to experience the work of CAFOD in a developing country. Each of the awardees was to travel to a country for three weeks. The sixteen teachers were the last group to go and we were to visit Kenya, Zimbabwe and Zambia, Peru and Bangladesh. I was chosen to be in the group of four teachers who visited Bangladesh. I heard in March 2000 that I had been successful, and that the visit would take place in October/November 2000. During the subsequent months there were many training sessions to prepare us for our visit and to enable us to get to know one another so we could work as a team.

On 29th October, after a twelve-hour flight I arrived in Dhaka airport in the middle of the night. We were taken to the guesthouse of CARITAS Bangladesh who were to be our hosts for the next three weeks. I must admit that when I realised that my room was to be in a different building from my fellow travellers and when I saw the room, I was ready to get on the next flight home. However, after a sleep and a very cold shower I felt much refreshed and looked forward to what lay in store for me.

We were given a tour around Dhaka! What an eye opener; the noise, people everywhere, the traffic, the rickshaws, the apparent lack of 'rules of the road', the people living on the street, the rubbish strewn over as people search through it. It was almost too much to take in. We visited The National Museum to give us some background knowledge of Bangladesh and its history. I had been told to be prepared to be stared at because I was a white woman, a rarity in Bangladesh, but I was not prepared for the intensity of it as I was followed around the museum by a constant group of young men who just stood and stared and stared and then went to get more companions to stare and stare.

We saw many projects that aim to help all people, irrespective of race, caste or creed but particularly the poor. I was struck by how much of the work was done by hand with very little use of machinery. One project, The Mirpur Agricultural Workshop & Training School (MAWTS) was set up in 1973 to train young boys in light engineering. Their motto "Judge each day not by the harvest, but by the seeds you plant" has certainly been successful as the project is now self-funding.

Ahason, 16 years old, told me he had come from Chittagong to train. He will stay in the hostel for 3 years and will only visit his family about 3 or 4 times. He is the third brother of 5 and when he is finished he wants to go to Singapore to earn money to help his family. Ahason likes it here and in the evenings he gardens in the grounds of the residential hostel.

In the Mymensingh region we visited a silk factory where women and men weave, print and embroider silk which is then sold, all profits being shared among the workers. There is also childcare so that women can come to the factory to work. The women I spoke to all said that being able to earn money had made a big difference to their lives. They were more respected by their husbands as they could contribute to the household budget.

While in this region we learned about The Integrated Women's Development Programme (IWDP), a project supported by CAFOD for the empowering of women for their emancipation from less human conditions to better human conditions and to establish gender equality in the society. IWDP is a programme with the women, by the women, for the women. Many women are given small loans to start a business like poultry production, spinning jute, selling milk from a cow or having a small tea stall by the roadside. This enables the women to earn money and so become self-sufficient. The women then have more status in the family, husbands rely on them more and incidents of domestic violence become less. By meeting together regularly, the women also discuss among themselves politics, become more aware and confident and are now be-

ginning to vote on their own rather than the way their husbands vote. I heard this called 'The Silent Revolution'; the women are making changes as they become more and more empowered.

The Integrated Community Development Project (ICDP) helps to motivate and organise ethnic communities in Mymensingh by way of human development through training, income generation and awareness on health education. Carmella Jenchan told me how she had been trained by the mobile training school as part of the ICDP programme. She borrowed 2500 Taka to buy a sewing machine and now she works in her own home as a seamstress in a small Garo village at Baromari. She takes orders from the local women to make their clothes. They provide the fabric and she charges 10 Taka for a blouse and 20 Taka for a skirt. When I spoke to her she had 24 orders to make up and was continually getting more from the surrounding villages. The villages are widespread and often divided by a road or even a river, but now all people get to know one another through these projects so there is a greater community spirit at work.

Bangladesh has many, many problems to solve. This was very evident in all that I saw in my three weeks there. The people work very hard, mainly with their hands and need all the help we can give through CAFOD. I saw many other projects funded by CAFOD and other partners of CARITAS as I travelled around Bangladesh and it became very apparent to me that the people of Bangladesh have to solve the problems of their country in their own way. We will never solve the problems for them but we must ensure that they have the support and the finance to make a better life for all in Bangladesh. What we have to ensure is that they have all they need to make their journey to a better way of life.