Chapter 23
Bangladesh 2007



Sunday, February 25, 2007, Dhaka, Bangladesh

I don't have time to do this, but I can't seem to do what I need to do, so here goes.

I'm in Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh, and I've finished the first of several days of "mentoring" a group of researchers at the central bank. Before the trip, I assigned them to read a pile of papers on various topics of the international trade negotiations, for discussion during the sessions that begin tomorrow, and I intended to read these papers myself on the trip. But I way overestimated my ability to read on the flights to Dhaka, which spanned two nights, many meals, and lots of attempted sleep. Now, as I try to read here in my hotel room, I find it impossible to stay awake. I assume the problem is jet lag and not that the papers are soporific, but there may be a little of that too. Anyhow, I've made a cup of coffee and am hoping that writing in this journal for a little while will wake me up. I really need to do this reading tonight or I will be struck dumb in front of the group tomorrow.

As for my trip, it started on Thursday evening with an eight-hour 9:00 PM flight to Paris on Northwest. There I connected with a six-hour light on Air France to Dubai, and from there took Emirates Airlines on a four-hour flight to Dhaka. All of this, courtesy of the World Bank, was comfortably in business class. I got to contrast the services and facilities of these three airlines, of which I'm afraid I found Air France to be the nicest. None of the flights had any events of interest to report here, except perhaps for a lively conversation that I had on the first flight with the woman next to me. We both talked nonstop for far more of the flight than we should have, leaving us little time to sleep. She was a realtor from Seattle with a daughter going to Stanford who is currently at its overseas campus in Paris. That gave us lots to talk about, in addition to sharing the many commonalities of our generation.

In Dhaka at 8:00 AM Saturday, I was met at the gate by two men from the central bank, one of them Syed Ahsan, the professor who is in Dhaka for two years on leave from his job at a Canadian university to run this program. Being met at the gate may not sound odd, but since September 11 it is. I'm apparently enough of a VIP for them to get gate passes to meet me, then take me to a VIP lounge where we waited on a sofa while my passport and various forms were processed. Presumably, the normal procedure would have had me waiting in a line surrounded by hundreds of Bangladeshis and tourists to go through immigration.



Syed in his office, from trip

The ride to my hotel didn't make much of an impression on me, perhaps because I was tired despite having slept well on the last flight. Bangladesh looked quite a bit like what I've seen of urban India, except that there were fewer of the signs of English colonial organization under the surface chaos. Just more chaos.

Syed deposited me at the Dhaka Sheraton, which is certainly nice enough, if not as luxurious as I'd imagined for what is apparently the most elegant hotel in the country. Without paying much attention to my surroundings, though, I set my alarm for four hours and crawled into bed.

I gave myself four hours of sleep, then spent the afternoon reading and taking notes for the mentoring I would be doing here. At seven, Syed picked me up to go to dinner with a group he had assembled. We went to a private club that he belongs to. It apparently has the elite of Dhaka as members, although I found the furnishings and décor less opulent than this would suggest, even somewhat shabby.



Sheraton, from Wikipedia 2025

The group included: two twin-brother retired civil servants who were related somehow to Syed; a former teacher of his; an industrialist who seems to be responsible for a fair fraction of Bangladesh's exports; Syed's brother, who is visiting from his home in Bergin, Norway; and a couple of others. One of the twins was at the club before us and at Syed's request had already ordered our complete meal, all was which was Thai cuisine. It was very good, and only one dish approached being disagreeably hot. I sat at the end of the table, with the twins on either side of me, and they engaged me in conversation, alternately, throughout the meal, except for a few occasions when the conversation took in the entire table. It was a nice evening.

On this outing, like every other one while I've been here, we rode in the back of a car with a driver to navigate the traffic. On the way to the club, the driver was presumably Syed's, but after dinner he'd arranged for us to be picked up by the man who would be my driver throughout my stay. He was a typical South Asian, except that his hair was dyed red. I gave him my business card so that he'd know my name, and I got his name, his cell number, and the license number of the car, so that I could find him when needed.

Back at the hotel, after midnight, I attempted to let myself into my room with my key card, but it didn't work. I took the elevator down to the lobby, explained the problem, and the desk clerk gave me a new key, instructing me not to keep it near my phone, which could demagnetize it. I don't keep it near my phone, and I'd thought that the lock had behaved strangely, so I didn't think just using a new card would work. Sure enough, back on the eleventh floor, this card too failed to open my door. I rode back to the lobby, explained this, and the desk clerk rode up with me to try it himself. I supposed that he had brought a key with him to unlock the door manually, but when his key card too didn't work, it turned out he hadn't. Back to the lobby we went, and he parked me on a couch for about 10 minutes while he got someone else. That person then rode up with us and was indeed able to open the door with a proper key. By now I only wanted to go to bed, but of course the lock had not been fixed. We agreed that this second person would return at 7:00 AM to fix it while I was at breakfast. He did return, but at 6:45 while I was still naked and in the middle of brushing my teeth. I answered the door with a mouth full

of toothpaste and asked him to return in 10 minutes. Once dressed, I went for breakfast, and only after I'd been there a while did a woman approach me and ask if it was OK to fix my lock now. It was, they did, and it's been fine since.

On Sunday morning my driver was supposed to pick me up at 8:45, and I was waiting in the lobby for him at that time, watching for a car to arrive with him and his distinctive red hair. It didn't come. Instead, after some delay, a man I'd never seen before approached me, showed me my own business card, and asked if that was mine. I said yes, and he said he was my driver, apologizing for being late. He said that the other driver couldn't make it, and he'd replaced him. So I got into his car. I tried to check the license plate number, but it turns out that the Bengali language uses different characters for numbers than we do, and I couldn't read it. As I rode, I started to think about an easy way to kidnap a rich American professor. Find his driver, kill him, then pick him up as though you were his new driver. These imaginings kept me busy until we arrived at the Central Bank, where a staff member ushered me to a room where I would attend a talk being given by the Governor of the central bank of Sri Lanka.

Syed was there. He explained that plans had changed, and the red-haired driver wasn't available. But he said that was good, as this new driver was excellent. Turns out he was right, as I've found him to be prompt, courteous, and very adept at threading his way through Dhaka's amazing traffic without, so far, hitting anything or anybody. He is at my beck and call for the week. I've got his cell number in case I need it, but always my beck seems to have been enough, whatever that is. Indeed, he seems to appear whenever I need him, suggesting that my beck may be unconscious.

A word about the traffic. The most common vehicles here are bicycle rickshaws. These are three-wheeled bikes, the backs of which are seats wide enough for two and with a back wall, of a sort, and a roof that folds back and can be brought forward to cover the passengers. What is amazing about them is the way that every one of them is decorated, with colorful pictures and designs either painted on them or formed by small pieces of colorful plastic. Each one seems to be different, decorated by its own owner, I suppose. The rickshaw men – they are all men, and I'll call them drivers since I can't think of an easier designation – peddle their passengers through the streets of Dhaka, apparently acting as the primary taxi service of the city. I later noticed that the rickshaws were not all decorated differently; that some patterns were repeated. I presume that means they are owned by a single person or company, although none of them have any lettering to identify who.

In addition to the rickshaws, there are three-wheeled motorized vehicles such as I've seen in other cities and recall riding in Bangkok and perhaps Delhi. Unlike the rickshaws, these are alike, uniformly painted green. Finally, there are a fair number of cars, both taxis of various vintages and quite a few sedans used by people with drivers, like me. There are also lots of buses, almost all brightly painted but with much of the paint scraped off by rubbing against posts and other buses. There are a few roads on which the rickshaws are apparently not permitted, and these are crowded with all the other



Bicycle rickshaws, from trip



Motorized rickshaw, from trip

motorized vehicles. But most roads have far more rickshaws than anything else. Oh, and

there are pedestrians darting among the traffic, dressed in all manner of clothing as I describe later.

It's not quite as chaotic as it sounds, however, for two reasons. One is that, unlike the roads I remember in Delhi, these all have a low cement barrier in the middle, separating the two flows of traffic. Second, the traffic is well managed at most intersections. There are traffic lights, but these are mostly ignored, or over-ridden by traffic policemen. So, at most intersections, there is a steady flow of traffic moving along one route while the rest waits patiently, just as if the traffic lights mattered. Only occasionally (several times in each trip, actually) have we had to nose our way through a flow of traffic that was crossing our path.

But within these well-organized flows, it does seem to be chaos. Vehicles are constantly changing lanes (if you can even call them lanes), cutting in front of one another with lots of honking. My driver is adept at cutting others off and making progress when the traffic is flowing more slowly than he'd like. However, when it is completely stopped, as it often is, he sits quietly. So far, I have not seen anybody hit anybody else, even though they come quite close. The exception is the rickshaws, which routinely bump up against the rickshaws in front of them with their front bicycle wheels. For that reason, or perhaps because more major mishaps are more common than I've seen, most of the nicer cars have extra metal bars protecting their bumpers – sort of bumper bumpers.

The rickshaw drivers are all men, but they all wear skirts. At least, that's the only word I can find to describe the ankle length wrap-around, brightly patterned clothes that cover their bottom halves below their shirts. This is quite a common form of dress for men here, I'm told, especially when they are home relaxing. But the drivers wear them for work. And this strikes me as odd. Because the bikes are all men's bikes, in the sense of having a horizontal bar from the front of the seat to below the handlebars, exactly the thing that I thought was problematic for western women riding bikes in skirts. However, these skirts, though long, are loose enough and of a thin enough material that being pulled up in the middle by the cross bar isn't a problem. I've gotten used to watching these thin men (they're all thin, not surprisingly) in long skirts, standing on their peddles as they cycle their passengers as fast as traffic will permit.

The dress of pedestrians, and also the rickshaw passengers, is much more varied. Plenty of the men wear western dress. But many others do not. Some wear a monochrome shirt that extends part way or all the way down to their ankles. Others wear what I think of as Arab robes, though mostly without the turban. And while I can't seem to describe any more than that, my distinct impression is that men are dressed all sorts of different ways. Many of them wear hats too, also of various sorts but never any that we would see at home.

What about the women? Well first, I haven't seen all that many women on the routes we've taken between the hotel and the bank. I'm told that's because of the neighborhood, and that elsewhere I would see lots of women going to and from work – clothing factories especially. Those I do see are never in western dress. Most commonly

they are wearing Indian saris, beautiful colorful ones, just as in Delhi. In addition, a substantial minority are in Muslim dress, black robes and scarves, sometimes with their faces covered. Presumably most of the women are Muslim, since this is a Muslim country, but only a minority of them wear Muslim dress. I'm told that only a decade or two ago, hardly any would wear Muslim dress, and that conservative Muslim practices are growing.



Dress options, from trip

[The previous paragraph, I've since learned, is not quite right. There is one female participant in the mentoring program, and I've since asked her about the way that she dresses. I would have described it as a sari with an extra portion that covers her head, the latter which she frequently has to adjust to keep it in place. She's told me that it is not a sari at all, but a traditional form of Muslim dress, a "chador" I think. I confused it with a sari because it is made of flowing expanses of colorful cloth, very different from the drab black worn by the more conservative.]

Anyhow, back to my workday on Sunday. The meeting with the Sri Lankan governor was in a large conference room filled with bankers. I sat next to Syed at the far end of the long table from the host governor of the Bangladesh Bank and the visitor. During the introductions, the host governor introduced me as well, and Syed whispered to me to stand, which I did. From there on, I mainly listened to a couple of talks that were, to me as a nonbanker, boring, and I devoted my attention to figuring out when I could courteously eat the plate of snacks that had been placed in front of each of us, along with a cup of tea. For a long time, nobody touched their food, but eventually someone did, and I then tried inconspicuously to partake.

From there we went to the smaller seminar room where our mentoring sessions would all be held, and I met the participants. There are eleven of them, eight from the central bank and three from outside. All are youngish, in their twenties or thirties, and all have some training in economics. The ones from inside the central bank are all part of its Policy Analysis Unit, which was newly formed under the direction of Syed when he arrived for a two-year visit from Canada a year and a half ago. So he is their boss. The three

outsiders are from a think tank, from a university, and from the Commerce Department of the government where she (the woman I mentioned a moment ago) deals with WTO issues.



Meeting room, from trip

I was very unsure of how to conduct these sessions. I had given them a list of papers to read on each of about six topics relevant to the WTO negotiations and developing countries, topics that we were now scheduled to discuss in successive sessions. But I had little idea of how thorough their knowledge was of the economics of trade, trade policy, and the WTO. I felt I needed to give them some background, and to try to do it in a way that would give me feedback about their levels of preparation. I started by telling them that I wanted interruptions that would help me to learn this, and I began a short lecture on the economics of tariffs. This worked fairly well, as I soon got plenty of questions and comments, from which it became clear that a few had a very good understanding of this, that others did not, and that all of them thought they did.

I had also feared that I'd have trouble getting them to talk. That fear was unfounded. The problem instead – and it continued throughout the week – was to get them to talk one at a time so that I could understand them. It seems to be the case, which I noticed at dinner as well as in the mentoring, that Bangladeshis think nothing of interrupting one another. Nor do they seem to mind being interrupted, since they don't acknowledge that it has happened, and they just keep on talking. Since in addition their English is always very rapid and very accented, I find understanding even one of them a challenge, and two or more at once almost impossible.

I ended up spending both the morning and afternoon sessions on this introduction to the issues, putting off until Monday the specific issues on our schedule and the papers I had assigned. I didn't mind already getting behind schedule, though, because the schedule also had us spending two final sessions during the week on "developing a consistent trade policy for Bangladesh," which I didn't know how I would do. I'd be happy to reduce the time available for that.

As for the scheduled topics when we would get to them, I was not sure how to handle them, either. I had interpreted "mentoring" as being different from lecturing, so I had not prepared any lectures. Instead, I had started – on the flights over when I wasn't sleeping, eating, or talking with the realtor – reading the assignments myself and taking notes on my laptop. After this first day of introduction, I was hopeful that I could use these notes as the basis for talking to them about the topics, but also for asking them questions that would turn it into a conversation (or several of them at once), rather than a lecture.

That means that I must catch up with all that reading and note taking before I get to the topics in class, most of which are now scheduled for Monday. Hence my need to be reading rather than writing in this journal. I hope that I can stay awake.

Friday, March 1, 2007

It's been a busy week. Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday were each filled with mentoring sessions both mornings and afternoons. Wednesday was my public lecture, with the morning free. And today was also free from work, but it was filled with a drive to the country and then a bit of shopping and dinner with the female student and her two children. Two of the other evenings were also filled, Tuesday with a dinner hosted by the Canadian Embassy honoring some visitor of theirs, and Thursday by a dinner at the home of the Governor of the Bangladesh Bank honoring me. Add to all that my scramble to prepare for both my mentoring sessions and my lecture, and I have not done much else.

As far as the mentoring was concerned, we settled into a routine that seemed to work pretty well. When on Monday I first fired up my laptop to see the notes I meant to talk from, they asked me to project that on the screen. I did, and that worked well to structure both my discussion and theirs. The plan was also for them to make several presentations on these topics toward the end of the week (there are two of these left to do tomorrow), and as soon as they saw these notes, they all wanted to copy them onto their flash drives, which they did.

These sessions took place in a room on the fourth floor of the building where the Bank Governor's office was located one floor below. Syed's office and the desks of the Policy Analysis Unit were all on the 26th floor of a neighboring building, which we all went over to during the lunch break. (Yes, in contrast to my recollection of Delhi, Dhaka does have some tall buildings.) The first few times I sat on a couch in Syed's office, talking to him as I ate the box lunch that had been ordered for all the participants. This consisted, on the first day, mainly of a single bun, like a hamburger bun but not sliced and with nothing inside, plus a cold can of (non-diet) RC Cola. I still wonder if that bun wasn't a mistake, as the next day the lunch again had such a bun, but this time with something like a burger inside it.

By Tuesday, as I'd been told to expect, an office had been prepared for me within the unit. It was a decent sized office, furnished with a large wooden desk, a comfortable desk chair, and nothing else. Someone brought me my lunch, which this time was a box of hot rice and chicken, along with the drink. But there were no utensils, at all, and not even a napkin. I stared at this for several minutes, alone in my new office, wondering how to eat it. I finally went over to the office of Syed's second in command – one of the class participants named Mr. Akhtar – and asked him for something to eat with. It took a moment for him to comprehend what I needed, as apparently he and others are accustomed to eating this sort of food with their fingers. I had, in fact, considered that option, but without a napkin to use afterward, and not feeling overly confident of the cleanliness I'd achieved in the bathroom earlier, which lacked both soap and a towel, I'd

decided against it. When he understood, he returned to his office and emerged shortly thereafter with a metal fork. The lunch was delicious.

A word about Mr. Akhtar. I had known that he was supposed to be the senior member of this group from before I'd arrived, as I'd read a background document that had been written under his direction. It was clear from the attitude of the others toward him, and of him toward them, that he deserved deference, even though he was certainly subsidiary to Syed. In our group discussions, he would weigh in occasionally, seldom with a question but instead giving us his answers. Unfortunately, his answers were more often than not wrong. As the week progressed, he did occasionally make some good points, and I did my best to reinforce that by acknowledging that when it occurred. But overall, I came to wonder how he had achieved this higher status than the others, since I really don't think he compares all that favorably with them. In his position, however, it was he who accompanied me back and forth between the buildings and basically took care of me. He did that well, except perhaps for the fork.

One of the places he accompanied me, one afternoon after lunch, was to the office of one of the Bank's Deputy Directors. I've forgotten his name, although I met him again at the dinner on Thursday, and the conversation across his wide desk was not memorable for me. But I do remember that he shared with Mr. Akhtar a feature that I am not accustomed to: his two eyes seemed to look in slightly different directions. Perhaps as a result, I was never sure which one, if either, was looking at me, and I didn't know where to look myself.

Tuesday's dinner, hosted by the Canadian Embassy, was not at the embassy itself but at a restaurant on a high floor of a downtown building. After the sort of pre-dinner reception that always makes me uncomfortable, we found seats at various tables, and I ended up with two people from Canada as well as with Syed and some others. It was nice not to have to struggle with accents or people talking at once. And the food was good, Chinese as I recall.

For my free Wednesday morning, I looked the night before in the Lonely Planet guidebook that I'd brought along and decided to go to a place called Sadarghat, where the book suggested hiring a small boat to take me out on the river. Seeking further advice, I went down to the hotel lobby and consulted a young man at the desk that arranges tours. He discouraged me from the boat trip on the grounds that the water would look and smell so awful that I wouldn't like it. Instead, he suggested that I ask the captain of one of the bigger boats to let me go up on its roof and look out at the river from there, while still at the dock. That would put me far enough away from the water that the smell would be bearable, and then if I really wanted to go out on the water I could. Realizing, too, that I had no way to speak to the boat captain, he very kindly wrote out a note in Bengla (i.e.., Bengali), asking the right questions of the captain and signing it respectfully with my name, in Bengla characters. On Wednesday morning I tucked that note into my guidebook and set out for Sadarghat with my driver.

At the dock, I found eight or ten very large boats blocking my view of the river, but at either end of the dock a slightly sloping mud embankment was filled with the small wooden boats that their operators were offering to hire for transport across the river. From there I could see the whole river scene more than well enough, and I didn't even notice much smell. I decided to forego using the note and just take pictures from the shore.



Boats on shore, from trip

After that I spent about an hour walking through the narrow streets slightly away from the river, all of which were lined by small shops of the sort I've seen many times before in India and other very poor countries. The shops were specialized, and so were the neighborhoods, each with at least a dozen shops side by side selling the same things. One section's shops all sold electric fans, for example. Another large section sold fabrics. And so forth. None sold anything of the slightest interest to me, however.

This was my first time spending more than a few minutes outdoors, and you may wonder about the weather. It was wonderful. The temperature has been in the 70s all week, usually the low 70s, and until the last couple of days it has been sunny. In fact, Dhaka is just in the transition from winter to summer, going from temperatures in the 50s and 60s recently to 80s and 90s a few weeks from now. And it is spring, with new leaves growing on many of the trees. It couldn't be better. Unfortunately, although I found the Sadarghat neighborhood interesting, I can't say that anything about it was particularly

pleasant except the weather, so I wasn't sorry to head back to the hotel and get back to work.



Fabric shop, from trip

My so-called public lecture went well. It was in a larger room next to the room where we had been having our mentoring sessions. It was a long, thin room with a very long table lined with chairs and microphone/speakers so that all could be heard. All the chairs were filled, as well as quite a few chairs along the walls, so something had been successful in attracting an audience. My lecture on what developing countries could do with respect to the Doha Round of trade negotiations wasn't anything many others couldn't have given, but the audience did seem engaged. After I finished there was time for questions, led off by a well-known professor whose name was Wahiduddin Mahmoud. He said some very intelligent things, things that I hadn't thought of and that were worth writing down. Others who spoke after him were not as good, but a few said plenty of things that I could easily respond to. A couple of others, however, were simply unintelligible, and I couldn't tell if it was their English or their minds that made no sense. Fortunately, I ran out of time in my responses before I could address the points they had made, so all was well.

Thursday evening the Governor of the central bank held a dinner at his home in my honor. I'd met him earlier and liked him; he has a sense of humor and is not pretentious. The dinner was attended almost entirely by stuffy old men. One exception, though, was the High Commissioner from Canada, who I gather is something rather like an ambassador. This was a tall, blond, Canadian woman. I had a good time talking with her before the dinner, as she told me what it was like to suddenly find herself a celebrity, due more to her looks than to her office. She was delightful.

The dinner was a buffet of dishes that I was told were Bangladesh cuisine. Having been part of India, Bangladesh food isn't always noticeably different from Indian food, as far as I can tell, but there was one dish that I particularly liked that I wouldn't have seen in India: beef meatballs in gravy. The gravy didn't taste like what you'd find on Swedish meatballs, but it was very good, and I ate more of that than of anything else. Once we got our food at the buffet, we then went to tables that were set in several rooms, and I somehow found myself sitting at the end of one, up against a wall, and with only Professor Mahmoud sitting next to me. We talked through the whole dinner, and I learned fascinating things about many subjects. We were interrupted frequently by servants who brought all the dishes from the buffet, one at a time, to the tables for us to take more. I took more meatballs, rice, and sliced eggplant.



Bangladesh, from Web 2025

Of course, I've forgotten most of what we talked about by now, but I do remember learning more about the frequent flooding of Bangladesh, and also about the two opposing forces, driven by water, that could both expand and contract the country. Bangladesh is situated on a giant river delta, which is formed by the convergence, within the country, of the Ganges River from India, south of the Himalayas, and another river from the north slope of the same mountains. Much of the land is under water every year during the rainy season, the people living on raised areas among the fields, which are lower down, bordered by levies. During the rainy season these fields flood and people live and travel on the raised areas and levies between them. Every five years or so, however, they get more rain, and then the floods cover the land where they live as well, and that causes lots of hardship. This seems like an awkward arrangement, but historically I gather that the flooding has kept the soil fertile, and it is part of what has attracted such a large population to the area. Bangladesh is the most densely populated country in the world, as I was told frequently. [I now question this, since Singapore is almost all urban, and indeed I've now confirmed from the data that it is over seven times denser than Bangladesh.]

Anyhow, about the expansion and contraction. You know about the latter: global warming is going to raise the sea level and put most of Bangladesh permanently under water. As that begins to happen, presumably gradually, this huge population will be pushed off its land and will have to retreat away from the encroaching sea. It's not clear where they will go, or how this will be managed. Wahiduddin said that there are no plans being made to deal with this.

On the other hand, and if global warming were not to happen, the two rivers keep bringing more dirt down to the delta which then gets deposited into the sea. This forms what are first islands and then usually become connected to the mainland, so that the country is slowly growing into the sea. So far, the sea level has not risen enough to matter, so the country is still slowly growing instead of shrinking. This creates interesting situations, as people try to lay claim to this new land as it arises. Of course, the result is that, in a country that arguably ought to be organizing a retreat from land that will become inundated in a few decades, the population instead is moving toward the sea, not away from it.

Friday was my day off. It's the day of prayer for serious Muslims, so it's a holiday. Syed had hoped for me to visit a couple of the factories of the industrialist I had met at

the dinner my first night. But he begged off, saying that he wasn't well, so instead we took a drive in the country. I thought this would be wonderful, but unfortunately most of Friday was rainy. Had I spent the whole day just with Syed and my driver, that might have gotten tiresome. Fortunately, Syed's brother Quamrul Ahsan is visiting (he was at the dinner that first night as well) with his 12-year-old son Sabeel, and they joined us for the trip, which was to be the basis for a report that Sabeel has to write for school. Quamrul and Sabeel live in Bergin, Norway, and Sabeel speaks only Norwegian and English, not Bengali. As a result, it was quite natural for almost all our conversation to be in English, even when it didn't involve me, since Syed doesn't speak Norwegian. Only occasionally would Sabeel speak just to his father in Norwegian, which is his native language. This was always startling to hear in this context.



Bangabandhu, from Wikipedia 2025

We did manage to keep up a steady flow of conversation through the whole trip, the object of which was to visit a bridge, said to be the 7th longest bridge in the world. Somehow it took us about three and a half hours to get just short of the bridge, where we stopped for lunch at a resort. We then crossed the bridge, drove a short distance with no apparent purpose, then turned around and went back. We got back to Dhaka at about 5:00 PM. [I didn't take a photo of the bridge when there, so I looked for one online in 2025. This may be it.]

The most memorable thing about the drive was the driving. I mentioned earlier that in the city most of the streets have cement barriers in the middle keeping the two directions of traffic apart. Once we were outside Dhaka, the barriers were gone, and the road was only two lanes. So of course, cars routinely pass the slower traffic. This is necessary much more often than it would be in the U.S., though, because the traffic includes such a variety of vehicles going at different speeds. These include bicycle rickshaws – not as many as in the city but enough that we'd pass one several times a minute. It included the three-wheel green taxis, and an even larger number of three-wheelers on which the back was like a truck with two benches along the side, seating eight people. Then there were much larger trucks (not allowed in the city), heavy duty ones carrying cargo and unable to drive very fast but blocking plenty of road. Finally, in addition to the occasional car like ours (a large Toyota SUV), there were buses. Lots of buses. During the entire trip, there must have been always a few buses in sight in front of us, a few more behind us, and a steady flow of buses also going the other direction past us. Big buses, that wanted to go as fast as possible. All were packed with people, and they often also had people sitting on their roofs with their possessions.

Fortunately, the road was pretty straight, since this is a flat country. But if you wait to pass any vehicle until there looked to be room, you will hardly ever get to pass. So, we didn't wait. Our driver would pull out to pass even though a bus was bearing down on us, get part way around whatever he was passing, then nose in front of them, perhaps

forcing them onto the shoulder. Mercifully, there was a bit of a shoulder, though not wide enough for even a rickshaw. One time he even passed a car that was itself passing another vehicle, so that there were four of us abreast for a moment. It may sound like there wasn't enough room for all of this, but fortunately the normal distance between any two vehicles side by side is only an inch or two, so there was plenty of room. We pretty much got used to it.

What we had a harder time getting used to, judging from the exclamations by Sabeel right up to the end of the trip, was the buses coming the other direction when they passed another vehicle as they approached us. Sometimes one bus would pass another, seeming to block the entire road. Somehow our driver was able to squeeze by, or the passing bus would pull in just in time. We always made it, but I suspect I may have heard some Norwegian swearing from Sabeel.

Less memorable, but worth noting nonetheless, were some of the things we saw along the road. In one area, we saw tall smokestacks scattered around the countryside, and these turned out to be the stacks of brick kilns. They use lots of bricks here for building, because they don't have many trees to spare or much gravel to make concrete, and the earth has lots of clay. We saw fields that were filled with stacks of bricks. There were big piles of red ones, neatly stacked and ready I suppose to be taken to where they would be used. And there were also rows upon rows of shorter stacks of gray colored bricks. These, I learned, were bricks that had been formed but not yet fired in the kiln, and they were sitting in the sun to dry.

Near some of these places there were also large piles of broken up bricks, and men sitting with stacks of whole bricks using hammers to break them up. Why? Because Bangladesh needs gravel for lots of purposes, but it doesn't have any (the land having been formed from silt in the river), so they make bricks, then break them up to use in all the ways that we use gravel. I gather that the roads are often built on a base of broken bricks instead of gravel.

We saw lots of rice paddies, of course. Since Bangladesh is such a densely populated country, I was a surprised to see rather vast expanses of green rice paddies, with only a very few people actually working in them. The people that were working, though, were always bent over doing something with the plants, either transplanting them or pulling weeds. I commented that they must get very sore backs from spending their days in that position but was told that these people are in very good shape and very thin, so they can handle it a lot better than I could. Indeed.

Part way through the trip, we stopped for gas. No, not gasoline – natural gas. That's what our Toyota ran on. It seems that Bangladesh legislated a few years ago that all but the largest vehicles had to switch to liquefied natural gas as fuel, since it is cleaner. And it worked. The air here, at least during my visit, has been clear and fresh. I was curious about what a liquefied natural gas pump would be like, but I didn't learn much. An attendant just attached a hose to a valve to transfer the fuel.

Perhaps more interesting was the conversation we had while waiting in line for the gas pump (8 or 10 cars were ahead of us, and there was only one pump), as we discussed the facilities at the filling station. I had said I needed a men's room, and Syed was very concerned that the men's room here might not be clean enough for me. He explained that Bangladeshis are being very slow to switch to toilet paper. Instead (and I now realize I'd seen this in India too), their custom is to wash with water. But they don't have bidets, like the French would have. They just have a faucet down near the floor that they use, or even just a bucket of water. And the result is that the floor of a men's room is normally very wet. He seemed embarrassed about this, but I found it reassuring. I'd certainly noticed wet floors, and it was nice to know how they got that way. Incidentally, later in a much more upscale rest room (at the airport, I think) I saw a solution to this problem that I think I prefer to the French bidet. The faucet was there, but it had a hose and nozzle attached to it that would reach to the toilet, rather like the sprayer we have at the kitchen sink.

The whole trip reminded me a lot, as I had expected that it would, of my short drive in India between Agra and the site outside Agra that I visited. In India I was amazed to be in the countryside and still see the road lined with people. The same was true here, except that I wasn't amazed. The biggest difference, I realize now, is the absence of animals here. In India there were cows, of course, but also lots of other animals pulling carts and being ridden right alongside all the vehicles. Here I don't think I ever saw a cart being pulled by an animal. I saw plenty of carts being pulled by people, or sometimes both pushed and pulled by as many as four people. But never any animals. I don't know if that's a sign of greater poverty, greater wealth, or just a different culture.

After we returned from this drive, there was one more activity planned for me today. The woman student, Azizun, had offered to take me to a shopping center, and we'd agreed to meet after I got back from the drive. I thought she might be waiting at the hotel, but she was not, and there was no message. I went to my room, made a cup of instant coffee, and rested, expecting maybe that we had failed to connect. But after about half an hour, the phone rang and it was her, calling from the lobby. I went down and met her, accompanied by her two children, a boy 13 and a girl 11. Together we headed in her car (with her driver) to the shopping center. I had told her earlier in the week, in response to her asking, that I want to buy a pink pearl necklace and earrings for Pat. Her objective now was to help me do that. The task was complicated by the fact that, just this week, Dhaka instituted a rule that all shops must close at 7:00 PM to save electricity, which is in short supply. Since it was already almost 6:00 PM, we didn't have much time. At the shopping center – which was very modern and big – she led me to several shops, only to find that they didn't carry pink pearls. We took the car to another store that specialized in handicrafts, where she was sure that we would find them. We arrived at 6:30, only to find that the store was already closing and wouldn't let us in. Azizun didn't accept that. While I and the children waited in the car, she asserted herself with the men guarding the door. Some women get what they want by using their looks. That would not have worked in this case, and Azizun doesn't need it. She uses the power of her personality (and perhaps her connections) to get what she wants, and she did. Soon she fetched me from the car and led me up the stairs into the store. We very quickly found what I

wanted. I made my purchase, and we were out of there in less than ten minutes, long before the store had cleared of other customers, and long before 7:00 PM.

From there our pace was able to slow, and we went to an international restaurant that she likes near her home. It was incredibly elaborate in its decoration, and the food was very good. The menu had several pages each of different cuisines – Indian, Thai, Indonesian, and Chinese. We ordered Chinese and shared several dishes. After the dinner her son entertained us by doing a little skit with his sister in which he was Mr. Bean. Of course it was in Bengali, so I didn't understand the words, but with Mr. Bean that doesn't matter much.

Sunday, March 4, en route from Frankfurt to Detroit

I'm flying business class, so I can plug in my laptop and work on this. Yesterday our group met for our last session, including presentations by some of the students, another box lunch, and then presentation of certificates by Syed and me. By this time, we've gotten to know each other well, and I expect that I will hear from some of them by e-mail. The course seems to have gone well.

My driver then took me to the airport, with stops first to pick up my bag at the hotel and then at another handicraft shop (not the same one where we bought the pearls, but the same chain) where I did some shopping. At the airport, following Syed's instructions, my driver dropped me at the VIP entrance, enabling me to avoid some of the crowds. Once I checked in, there was a business class lounge as well that I used until the flight. For the last 24 hours or more, I have been alternately waiting in business class lounges and flying. One of those lounges, in Doha, Qatar, was the biggest I've ever seen and very fancy, with reflecting pools and other water features throughout. It even included a nursery area for small kids, a game room for bigger kids, and a clinic for whomever.

The Frankfurt lounge was nothing special, except for one thing in the bathroom that was new to me. As I entered a toilet stall just after another man had left it, I saw that the toilet seat was turning. When I was finished, I stayed to watch what it did. When it detects that you are done (hopefully), a device emerges from behind the seat and sprays something, probably disinfectant, on the inner edge of the toilet seat, which rotates 360 degrees so that all of it gets the treatment. German ingenuity!

Odds and Ends

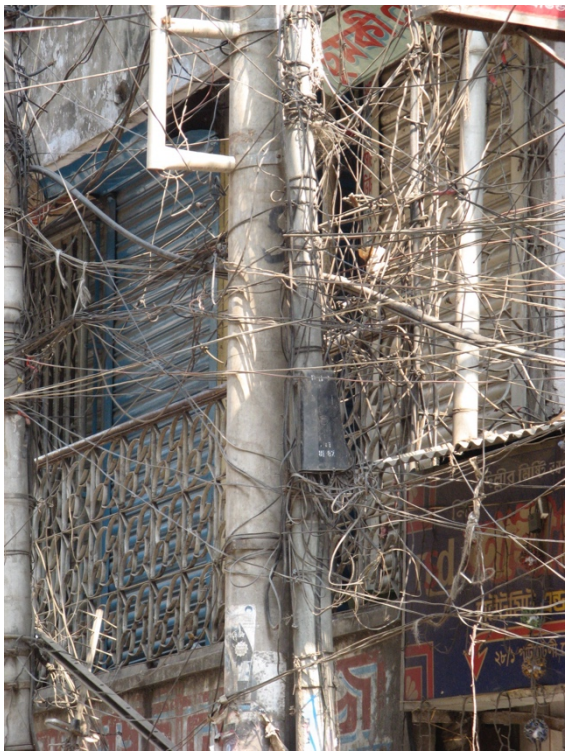
As usual, I've a few more things to mention that didn't fit in above.

Wires. The streets of Dhaka have poles, as you'd expect, carrying what I presume are electricity wires. But these are not the neat two or three that we see on our utility poles, nicely separated from each other. These are by the dozen, and they are bundled together sometimes so that it just looks like a big tangle. Also, there are wires spidering up from these to the walls and windows of the buildings behind, and I gather that many if not

most of these have tapped into the lines to get power for free. It's hard to believe the system functions at all.

On Monday the news was filled with the horrible story of a 9-story building that had caught fire, killing several people. Some of the dead had jumped from the higher floors when the fire department was unable to reach above the 6th floor and they thought they would be burned alive. A few days later it occurred to me that my room was on the 11th floor. I lay awake thinking about this, for minutes.

I'll close with quite a few more photos that I find interesting, but that I didn't mention in the journal:





Dhaka from above, from trip



Camels? From trip



Dhaka intersection from trip



From trip



from trip



From trip



From trip



From trip



From trip



Barbers from trip



From trip



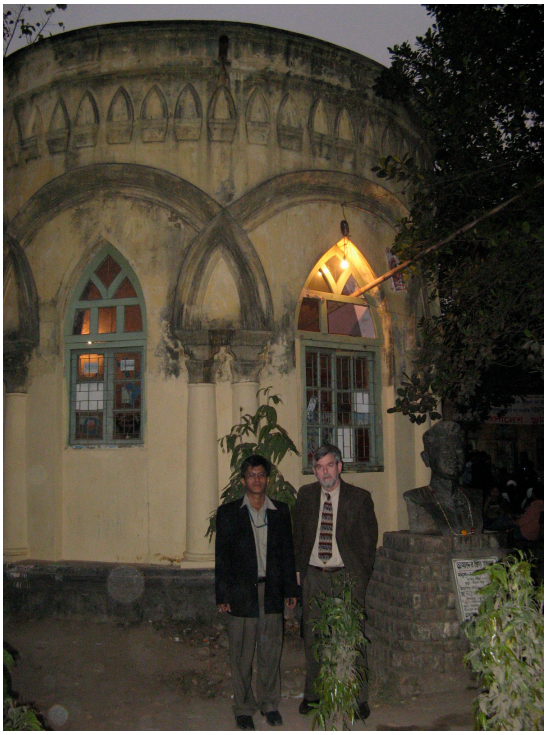
From trip



From trip



From trip



From trip