

Fulbright Senior Scholar Grant 2640 Report

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A narrative of getting ready for, and experiencing, an exceptional educational and cultural exchange. (Exchanges do not require that all parties visit each others' settings ... I was the one privileged to travel.) I begin with the education I needed to get – and give to family and friends – before I left, and then continue with some experiences.

No, it is NOT an “Islamic State”

Bangladesh, East Pakistan until a bloody war for independence, gained in 1971, *does* have a national religion, and its citizens are, in fact, over 90% Muslim. But Islam plays less of a role in the national government in Bangladesh than does the Church of England in Britain, where it crowns the monarch.

The country is vehement on asserting it has a secular state, and there is even a small debate about abandoning the state religion designation, inserted as an amendment to the nation's original constitution. True, the status of women seems to reflect Islamic standards, and I rarely saw any uncovered female limbs (albeit translucent fabrics seem to appeal to many of the young women students, and I could not help but notice on the street that even a full burka can be tailored to reveal curves). Yet the press regularly covers terrorism by Muslim extremists and the efforts of the national authorities against radical Islamic organizations.

American (mis-)perceptions may well explain the limited volunteer and other US involvements in a country that looks to us as a shining example of good governance and democracy. Our national myopia made it harder to explain my motivation to my friends here before I left... but my 100% Muslim colleagues apparently figured out I was Jewish long before I decided I could tell them, and it seemed not to matter to them at all, despite my concern.

But it turned out that my perceptions were only marginally more accurate than those of my fellow Americans, despite my months of reading the Bangladeshi English language press before I left. Live and learn ... isn't that what the Fulbright programs are all about?

“Hooray!! Someone who will go beyond Dhaka!”

I arrived at Dhaka’s international airport for my month’s stay with two bottles of potent potables, after carefully reviewing Bangladesh’s regulations regarding importation of alcohol by infidels. (But I never figured out whether I could bring in one or two liters of the hard stuff.)

Irrelevant. As a Fulbright Senior Scholar, I was met by a US Embassy expediter even before I got to the Immigration counter, bypassed that barrier with his help, and exited the airport prior to passing through Customs. Certainly I knew that I would be met. Still, the ease with which I entered the country reflected a more positive attitude towards – and better diplomatic relations with – the nation that issued my passport than I had anticipated.

The American Center and our Cultural Attache, Harvey W. Sernovitz, welcomed me to Bangladesh with some reservations ... hotel reservations, that is. They booked me for two nights in Dhaka, rather than the one provided for in my project agreement. A slight glitch had arisen as I was *en route*: Cyclone Sidr was hitting the nation and coming northeast towards the capitol along the route I was supposed to take the next day going southwest to Khulna.

Khulna? Bangladesh’s third largest city, in a metro area of some 2.5 million people, has had almost no American visitors, and Harvey and his staff were very pleased that someone had volunteered to go there. Their support was fantastic, and their encouragement wonderful to get. The briefing book they gave me added to my cultural knowledge base, but nothing really prepared me for the trip to my home for the next month.

I finally got to meet the man responsible for my visit, Assistant Professor Khan Rubayet Rahaman (“Khan”) late on the day I arrived. We got together after my visit at American House and planned some tourist stops around Dhaka for the unexpected extra day in the capitol. Dr. Rahaman had initiated the contact with me last January, and then had done all he could to move the invitation quickly through the university, the embassy and on to Washington. He was taking full responsibility for my visit, despite his relatively junior status, but I still did not appreciate the extent of the hosting obligations he felt he was taking on. (I would learn.)

I awoke up Friday, November 16, to a hotel, a city – and, as it turned out a nation – with no electricity except for buildings with generators (such as my hotel). The national grid had been knocked out by the cyclone. Touring Dhaka was great, since the traffic moved due to the holiday (think a Sunday in the US). My learning continued, when Khan’s friend, the man he told me “had a car” showed up for our tour, with his car *and driver*, an add-on I did not expect. Given the difficulties of driving in Bangladeshi traffic and the income differentials in the country, it appears that very few of those who could afford a car could not also afford a driver, and thus may not even bother to get licenses to drive themselves.

Saturday, and off to Khulna on a 9:00 AM bus ... with unknown arrival time. Why unknown? Try the bus needing to cross a river far wider than any I have experienced in the US or Europe. The vehicular ferry on which we depended operated on a “cross when fully loaded” basis and, to top things off, there was no way to predict the length of the line to get on board. That was the major uncertainty that Khan explained to me in advance.

However, while on land, the bus driver tried to maximize his speed on the national highway: a two-lane wide road that had walkers, bicycles, motorcycles, bicycle rickshaws, “autorickshaws” (motorized versions of the bicycle devices), and ‘vans” (bicycle-drawn flat platforms on three wheels used mostly for short-haul distribution of freight), not to mention cars and massive trucks. Those two lanes, by the way, were one in each direction! Constant passing – and constant acceleration and breaking – made both sleep and reading virtually impossible.

Along the way, the cyclone damage began to become more and more evident as we traveled southwest. Trees downed by the hundreds, many over two feet in diameter, and already cut off at roadside with the pavement cleared, and hundreds, or thousands, of workers cutting up the downed wood. Crops were flattened all over the place, probably lost if not already ripe and, if ripe, possibly still not harvestable. The storm came from the south, but all the flattened vegetation leaned south, not north, reminding us that we were traveling west of the eye of the storm, with counter-clockwise winds hitting from the north.

On arrival at dusk in Khulna, we were met by colleagues and I was whisked off to the University Guest House to take up my residency. I got the best room in the house, quite large, with double bed, but with few facilities for storing clothing (most of my colleagues appeared to have fewer changes than I brought with me for a month), attached bath. The arrangements were that I shared two “house staff” with others in the guest house. These men could cook, do laundries, and heat hot water for the bucket showers that I learned to take after doing a cold shower the first day, as well as clean my room and change sheets. They were also indispensable for entry and egress: the building had a locked gate in front, and the two of them were the only ones with the keys – getting out in a fire would have been tricky (no, impossible, given the barriers on balconies and windows) if they weren’t immediately available.

Traffic in Khulna was very different from that in Dhaka, I learned even before getting off the bus: about 95% human powered!!! Bicycle rickshaws and vans RULED! The few people with motorcycles could maneuver around the human powered vehicles, but four-wheelers were commonly limited to the speed of human powered vehicles, even on the few wide local streets. Traffic jams and gridlock like in Dhaka? No way! ... but I did learn to brace myself for the seemingly inevitable rear-ending and other as the bicycle “rickshaw pullers” tried to deliver their fares as fast as possible to get another one. (No difference there from US cities, as any taxi passenger could tell you, except for the extent of the vehicle contact sport – and the general absence of damage due to the lower speed impacts of human-powered vehicles.)

The start of the instructional week (Sunday), saw me meeting colleagues in the “Urban and Rural Planning Discipline” (URPD), getting settled in and attending the Khulna celebration of World Habitat Day (a bit delayed from the formal celebration on October 1). That’s when I had to come to grips for the first time in a setting that did not use the Arabic numerals I was used to seeing all over the rest of the world. I never fully learned my numbers, but managed to keep track of when a symbol like “8” meant four, not eight by looking at the symbols around it!

My department chair informed me that the Vice Chancellor had invited me to join a team from Khulna University heading out the next day to provide aid to some of the hundreds of villages and hundreds of thousands of people flattened by Cyclone Sidr. How could I say no?

Peter Meets Sidr – or its Aftermath

What do you say to a man who has just guided you through his village, past a few hundred people still waiting in line for their gift of a single article of clothing and some energy providing biscuits? He wanted to show you his homesite – damaged frame and nothing else... and then managed to communicate in English that he lost three brothers to Cyclone Sidr? How do you react to noticing that next to his house is a 35 foot wooden fishing boat, resting on land some 15 feet or more above the high water line? Or that there is another large boat across the path?

The village I was in was on high ground, had previously enjoyed an earthen dam next to it that held in fresh water in a large lake, and had enjoyed a successful fishing-based economy. But Sidr had come through with a storm surge that had water four feet deep running across the village for over an hour. They “only” lost 40 people. I could see small children, so they were preserved somehow. Their homes – made of thatch, woven leaves, mud and scraps of lumber and tin could not stand against the flowing water, except by remarkable luck (and there were a half a dozen homes apparently somewhat intact (or rebuilt as common shelters by the villagers, I do not know). Even for the homes still standing, one has to assume that most of the belongings in them – and certainly food supplies – were washed away. Much of the village’s high land area (and a number of houses) had been lost to mudslides into the surrounding water, and their dam was gone, and their lake now running into the brackish river, though constantly replenished by some of the country’s myriad rivers and streams.

We were providing some paltry aid to villagers – but much of what we offered was psychological, not physical, as was obvious from their expressions and reactions (and ours). And they RAN to catch up with the launch as they saw it from the shore, and jostled to get ahead of each other, so they still had some energy, four days after the storm went through. But then our team called out “lineup! lineup!” (in English) – and they did! As people had lined up in two-foot deep water in communities along the riverbank we had passed by briefly along the river, giving out similar supplies, but not landing for a major distribution. Three lines formed seemingly automatically: men, women and small children, presumably those too young to work regularly. Sometimes, the frail and elderly were helped by others, sometimes not. Still, the people we met were mostly very controlled human beings, for all their losses and desperation.

They did not mob us as we unloaded from the boat, nor at the end, as our piles of supplies dwindled, nor as our extra bonus to the older and more vulnerable – a hurricane lantern (but with no oil) – ran out. My acquaintance with the missing house seemed satisfied with the photos I took and surprised by the hug I gave him – but I got him a hurricane lamp as an exception for being my guide in the village.

We handed out our supplies to each line separately, starting with the children, then the women, and last the men, This seemed to be the expected protocol, though I would have anticipated men first given past experience in observing social relations in Africa and Latin American, not to mention what I thought I knew about the status of women in a predominantly Muslim culture. But why there always seemed to be twice as many men as women in these river villages remains a mystery to me. In other countries, I know rural women are migrating to massive factory dormitories to live and produce our shoes and

clothing for pennies, but Bangladesh is supposedly a laggard in that insidious form of economic development. Childbirth fatalities alone can't account for the difference in numbers I saw, so I suspect that some women simply did not come out in the presence of strangers, whatever their needs.

How do you deal with your sense that the launch hired by Khulna University, on which you traveled to this village, could have been better used to provide more foodstuff than people to distribute them? What is your feeling when you remember that you passed tons of rice being distributed long before you boarded to launch for a two hours trip to the village and you had had room for a few hundred-weight bags but instead were distributing small packets of crackers to each man, woman and child?

When we had arrived in our university bus at the spot where the ferry was to take us across one river to then drive further down into the devastated area before taking a launch for distribution to the more remote villages, the ferries were not running. A pileup of loaded trucks and people resulting, with some jostling to hire launches.. (Disasters always seem to be bonanzas for those not immediately impacted – federal contractors in the case of Katrina, and the boat owners in the case of Sidr.)

This was my first encounter with the common experience that the problem in disaster relief is all too often more one of distribution than of supplies of goods. I suggested quietly and privately to some of the leaders of the Khula U team that we turn over our goods to others to distribute and not monopolize a launch for the day. (Doing so privately made it easier for them to ignore me, which I felt I needed to give them the opportunity to do, despite my seniority – and ignore me they did.)

How do you handle your own seniority, the apparent antipathy of some members of the Khulna faculty who wore more formal religious dress (graduates of madrassas, perhaps?), and presence of a crew of 10 or 12 in what seemed to be military uniforms along as 'security?' Do you wonder if they know you are from the US, and consider how your behavior might affect the anti-Americanism that many in Bangladesh share with much of the rest of the world?

Seniority – in my case, that includes age on two levels: (1) at 64, I exceed the mean life expectancy of the country and (2) that age also makes me oldest faculty member at the University. In addition, I am foreign, and that gives status (and lots of staring, wherever I go). It also generates a bit of awe and uncertainty on the part of those I meet, including students and my trip companions, which made the fisherman's approach to me to show me his lost house all the more remarkable. The most senior permanent faculty member at KU (ex-Vice Provost, same as President) was clearly my escort on the relief trip and that gave me status senior to his. Finally, if anyone asked why I was along on the trip, the answer would have been, "the Vice Provost asked him to go." All that established a massive initial social distance.

A distance largely overcome by the end of the day, I'm happy to record. Method: be yourself and do your share. I hauled goods to the launch from the bus with everyone else, to the surprise of many (those who stood on their station, who did not help the younger uniformed crew until I started to do so – and even then not all did). They offered me a bale of clothing for a soft seat, but I sat on the launch gunwale like most of the rest. First one

‘soldier’ and then the rest came to talk. One turned out to be a PhD and Asst Prof in Agrotechnology, an entymologist, and I got snippets of similar backgrounds from others. (It turns out that they were civilian volunteers – the BNCC on their camouflage fatigues stood for Bangladesh Naval Cadet Corps – a volunteer emergency service group, never carrying weapons.) Obviously, I participated in distributing goods, since hands-on alms to the poor is a higher order charity than just giving money (also true in Judaism – no surprise).

My openness and participation led to my being invited by one of the more religious professors (both of them were full Profs in Agrotechnology) to tour the village where we landed. At the end of the day, back in Khulna, I get the ultimate acceptance, I guess, when my village touring companion gave me a hug as he left the bus, saying, “Until next time, ‘Insh’Allah.”

It turned out that no one, except for my escort and the department head from Urban and Rural Planning, knew I was from the US, unless they had asked. My more religious colleagues both asked me about my nationality, perhaps to see how I would present myself (my routine response is city, state, and country last, to de-emphasize it, and because most people in other places seem to identify their home first). I suspect that the overall anti-Americanism was not affected by my presence, but it was interesting that several people asked me on the ride home about similar disasters in the US and if we had similar problems in responses. Katrina is an obvious parallel (and I used it).

And so ... To Work

But I was not there as a relief worker ... I was there to work with the URPD faculty and students. That work started in earnest after my stint as an aid worker.

To be really honest, I had started that work far earlier. I knew from prior third world work was that the university and its faculty could be expected to have very limited access to the most current literature, especially journal materials and books, due to the cost of books or journal subscriptions. So I worked with a graduate assistant and arrived with over 3,000 relevant journal articles on a laptop and thumb drive. From my correspondence with my Khulna University hosts, I also knew they had erratic and slow internet access. So I also downloaded and brought with me electronic copies of hundreds of reports available free on-line to those of us with unlimited free and fast access to the web. I delivered United Nations, World Bank, Asian Development Bank and other international agency and nonprofit organization reports about Bangladesh itself, let alone broader international or global matters, to which my hosts did not have access. I also brought information about possible research and training funding support.

This pre-departure work made a huge difference in the job I could do, since I had four distinct, but inter-related, tasks:

- (1) Lecturing to students (and, in one case, to faculty as well), ranging from introducing myself and my research to discussions of the economics of sustainable development to a very specific session on survey research methodologies and the intersections of (often-overlooked) qualitative methods and the headlong quantification that is characteristic of

most data collection efforts. The lectures led to in-person consultations with students, and to e-mail exchanges that continue today, long after I left Khulna.

(2) Reviewing, reacting to, and making recommendations on the syllabus for the undergraduate degree in Urban and Rural Planning, including looking at the content of each of the classes offered in the four-year curriculum and commenting on the materials and topics included (and excluded), with recommendations for altering contents and topic sequencing. The faculty syllabus committee threatened to e-mail me with additional questions of me as they reviewed my 10 pages of comments and notes on the curriculum, but I hope they will be satisfied with the materials I brought for them to use in updating.

(3) Facilitating development of a broader unit research agenda, supporting individual faculty research efforts, and providing some guidance on funding for research and for faculty pursuit of advanced degrees from other institutions, including both non-US and US institutions, while also helping to build some bridges to possible US partner universities. I am waiting for their 2-3 page proposals, so I can share them with possible US funders.

(4) Participating as a faculty member in the responses to both preliminary and final presentations of seminar papers by students, mostly those from graduating seniors, adapting to the styles of commentary and criticism that are the norm of the institution and faculty.

The first three items were expected. I was prepared with a massive collection of powerpoint materials I have developed that could be reconstituted for lectures. The library of scholarly and applied materials that came on my computer was a goldmine for much of the curriculum discussion. Several US institutions wanted me to recruit Bangladeshi students for them and I wanted to see if we could continue the dialogue that my visit would begin, using funds from NSF or foundations that support international collaborations. (Ironically, the Cyclone Sidr event made it easy to build a tie between colleagues at the University of Louisville and Khulna University dealing with issues of disaster management.)

The fourth posed a greater problem with classic “culture shock” than anything I encountered in the status of women, the degrees of income inequality, the reliance on human powered transportation and any of my other experiences of the differences between Bangladeshi and American lifestyles. Final year students were required to present the results of empirical research and associated policy proposals before their classmates and as many faculty as could manage to be present that day (the presentations took place over long days of meetings with meal – and prayer – breaks, but no other activity allowed to interrupt). I was not ready to do was excoriate, mock and otherwise go out of my way to be as nasty and argumentative in my criticism of student work as possible. Snide comment, sarcasm and nit-picking was the norm for opening comments, challenging each student presenter to stand up to a withering attack from faculty ganging up on him or her before suggestions got made for improvement in the study presented. Ordinarily, I would never be that nasty to any of my US students, not even behind closed doors in a private meeting after the student failed to follow my directions for designing a study – and in Khulna these attacks took place in public. I doubt any of my PhD students, defending their dissertations, could have stood up any better than did these undergraduates.

But I learned – and eventually found myself engaging more than once in a “can you top this” serial attack on a student, trying to outdo the withering critiques offered by one or more of my colleagues. (We would cheer each other’s attacks, egging each other on and “piling on” the presenters.) That’s when the students started answering me and responding, not quite in kind, but not backing down and challenging our critiques. And that’s when I discovered that those women behind the veils were just as willing to stand up to me as the young men in tee shirts – and at least as good at doing so!!

Who was learning the most? I still wonder ... and I cherish the present given to me on my last day by one of those veiled women. She approached me and asked if I would accept a present. I agreed to do so, and she handed me a small box. Opening it then and there at her request, I found a collection of brightly colored hair elastics, much more interesting than the black one I had been using to hold my ponytail together! We shared a laugh and I immediately donned a purple band. Only later did I spot the note enclosed with the bands, which read, “Pray for us.”

Inferior Education? NOT!!!

Our students were not just good at arguing and defending themselves. Despite the lack of books and journal access, and the dated instructional materials in use, the *undergraduate* planning students emerging from Khulna University are entering the job market with skills and knowledge bases that far exceed those of the typical new member of the American Institute of Certified Planners who earns certification through examination. They go through a four year curriculum with no elective courses and *all* have some knowledge of the diversity of sources of remote sensing data on land use and geographic morphology and their different uses in planning (which no Masters level program I have worked with in the US requires), advanced geographic information system skills (albeit used more for mapping and presentation than statistical analysis), and field data collection techniques including the conduct of surveys of individuals, households, businesses, and the like, not to mention experience in conducting economic analyses of change in local settings from job mixes and their sources to the factors driving land value changes. Sure, they don’t have computers on their desks or at home, but their computer labs are well equipped ... and their powerpoint presentations were works of art – no templates permitted.

By law, they do all their post-secondary education in English. Thus, all their academic readings could come from US and other English sources if they had access, since their only Bangla language course or research materials are government documents and the like. Improve the web access speeds in the country and these young people could accept outsourced orders for mapping, analysis and other services from budgetarily-limited planning departments in the US!

What was I doing, nominally improving their curriculum with my comments? Basically, I was bringing it a bit more up to date; little more. So, why was I working so hard?

All Work and No Play ...

I wasn’t. (Working that hard, that is.) At least I was not working that hard on educating the Bangladeshis. My hardest job may have been educating myself: My colleagues wanted me to learn about them and their country. I wanted to live up to their expectations, to feel like I earned

the respect they showed me. How many books and other document in English on Bangladesh did they press on me, mostly materials they had written? I lost count ... I read what I could.

But ... dinners – I was invited to University events on a regular basis, whether or not it had anything to do with my department. I remain in regular e-mail correspondence with the Vice Chancellor, Prof. Dr. Md. Mahbubur Rahman, with whom I discussed everything from world political issues to plans to augment the university library, possible partnerships with US institutions, plans for redevelopment of the Sunderbans region that was devastated by the cyclone, and my opinions of the quality and commitment of the faculty and students. Half the time we dined, he put me at the head of the table and let deans from across the university grill me about everything under the sun. How I got the time to eat mystifies me ... as does the fact that I was apparently diplomatic enough that the deans all asked me to lecture to their students and faculty (I did some), and Dr. Rahman wants to continue to work with me. But those events were always fun – both interpersonal/cross-cultural and intellectual challenges I could rise to meet.

Trips ... the day in the Sidr impact zone was one of many ventures out of the routine paths I followed in Khulna. We ended up canceling a trip to the small town where Khan, my host, had planned for me to see where he grew up as an impoverished child who latched onto education as a way out of his status. It might have been interesting – but heart-wrenching: some of the boys with whom he grew up now make their livings as rickshaw pullers. There was also the cancelled trip to the disaster planning and response pilot project another of my colleagues was running, which would have shown me forms of rural planning we don't see in the US. The days lost to staying in Dhaka and going on the Sidr aid mission limited our options.

The major loss in terms of trips for me was cancellation of a planned multi-day trip to the Sunderbans, the world's largest mangrove forest and home to the Royal Bengal Tiger. I'd been dreaming about that one for months. However, after the cyclone hit and destroyed the livelihoods and homes of hundreds of thousands of people in scattered villages, not to mention the overnight lodges, the tour and boat operators suspended operations due to both the lack of ground facilities and the real danger of attacks by desperate people who had lost everything. But my colleagues – and students – did their best to make up for it.

There was the Saturday spent visiting the largely derelict jute presses and mills in Khulna, lining the riverfronts upstream from the city. A journey by bicycle rickshaw with a single colleague, Dr. Murtaza, whose family used to be involved in the industry and thus could get me into one of the few still operating mills. Comparisons may be odious, but I couldn't help but draw out the parallels between the problems Khulna faces with jute and those that confronted Pittsburgh in the seventies with steel: (1) Huge facilities lining riverfronts that the city did not own and could not afford to remove, though the land under them might be valuable for current housing and/or business development efforts, and tens of thousands of displaced workers who once held high wage jobs despite their limited educations. Their work skills just did not translate. (In Khulna's case that was because most were employed as part of a human conveyor belt moving bundles of jute, one indication of the limited parallels.) (2) Slums emerging in the mill neighborhoods as the old worker housing, some owned by the mills, was not longer maintained and as people who could moved away from the area to places with better job prospects.

Another one day trip was to a nearby fast growing town, replete with new textile, leather and even jute product mills, accompanied by another colleague, Dr. Haque, and some students, guided by the locality's planner, a graduate of the URPD program. Nowapoura Pourashava showed classic boomtown problems, planning lagging the emergence of new housing and other land use conversions, overcrowded and virtually dysfunctional road systems, and two different plans for transportation improvements, one being put forward by the local government and another by a planning authority with power over the area, with no coordination between them and the potential for investing in redundant infrastructure in a setting in which such waste is not tolerable. Fascinating, learning, exposure to new places – but still, arguably, work ... and certainly another lesson in the parallels between planning problems in very different settings.

But my visit to “sunset at the bridge” with a gang of students was certainly not work. About a dozen of us piled onto three “vans,” 5x4 foot platforms on two wheels pulled by a cyclist, for the 30+ minute trip to the bridge, the (literal) high point of a bypass road around the city. The gang of students even included two “females,” to use the Bangladeshi terminology. My faculty colleagues seemed nervous that I would leave myself in the hands of the students, but the formality they maintained was just not my style (and the fact that some of my escorts had been the “victims” of my sarcastic comments on their presentations suggested that they wanted to bridge the gap as well). No sunset that evening, unfortunately, but lots of good conversation, and even some new forms of street food. That trip was a first for me on another level: I got to pay for everything!! Admittedly that took some argument, but I did treat everyone to food, drink, and transportation, mainly by getting help from one student in paying before anyone else could.

My solo walks around the city also were pure recreation. But “solo” is not an accurate term, to be honest. Wherever I went, there tended to be some people following me. Whenever I stopped, whether with colleagues or alone, I was quickly surrounded. Why? My colleagues could count on their fingers the total number of foreigners they knew of in the city – and that included some Chinese! So I was a walking side show for the residents of Khulna and the other places in the southwest that I visited. ... and there was that time I stopped for a glass of tea at a little stand, and the two elderly gents sitting on facing benches in front of the vendor seemed ready to come to blows over who would get me to join him. (Elderly? Well, they looked old to me, but for all I know I may have been older than they were, just less worn.) The sitting decision was aided by a young man who came over and managed, in more than passable English, to help me negotiate my five minute rest without causing conflict between old friends. But the crowd grew to five deep around me.

Those walks were also less solo since I was accosted by faculty and students I encountered who knew me (or of me) and stopped to talk. Some of the best talks took place in those settings, and they gave me the opportunity to educate people about the US as I learned about them and their (mis-)perceptions. I twice had to quash the myth that the Jews who worked in the World Trade Center were warned off so that the Zionists could blow the place and blame the Arabs. (And if those myths persist among the educated elite in Bangladesh, consider the masses ...)

Then there was the trip to the edge of the Sunderbans, to give me at least a hint of what I had missed. (And, perhaps, to give me a stronger motivation to work to make a return visit possible.)

By Houseboat to the Sunderbans???

Well, that is what the vessel felt like. Speed well under a US houseboat, and ¼ the size of those plying the Ohio River or around the Land Between the Lakes in KY. But a two story job, with some bunk space below, a “head” out back, and a canopy over a dozen plastic chairs on the “roof” or top deck. The controls from the captain at the tiller to the ‘engine room’ were – literally – bells rang by the crew member on deck signaling the one at the engine on forward/backward, and speed, not exactly automated controls. And the waterway wasn’t like anything in the US, except at the far end of the Mississippi delta – log expanses of water several miles wide

But we didn’t really go *into* the Sunderbans, but just as far as a tourist trap location with some cabins, penned-in animals except for birds and monkeys running wild (and deer tracks visible in the mud). Saw penned deer and alligators, but nary a tiger. (Too rare to hold in captivity, I guess.) As Khan and others remind me, I have to come back to truly see the forest.

It was a funny trip and typical of the partial information I get from Khan, for all that he did great things to facilitate my visit and provide me with good experiences. The day before, he had told me that we were heading for the Sunderbans with the University micro-bus and one of our junior colleagues, Mustaphis. So, lo and behold, what did I find at 8:00 yesterday as we went for breakfast before departure? Two students, out of three invited (both of whom were part of the expedition I took with students to see the sunset at the Khan Jahan Ali bridge outside town, one the instigator of that junket and an inveterate e-mailer, Shovon), the man who acts as department secretary (whose name I never learned, now that I think about it), Rufiq, the ‘peon’ (Khan’s word) who pampered me with food, tea ‘chini chara’ - without sugar all day long, Professor Ahmed, the planning law specialist and, yes, also Mustaphis; we added a friend of his after breakfast and headed out toward Mongla Port, our embarkation point.

The micro-bus and driver were the same as I took regularly to go to and from campus (privilege of rank – I rode with the full professors, not on the big bus that hauled the rest of faculty and staff from our part of town) every day. We took it slow and easy, with no rushing along in the manner of the bus on the relief mission (and that down from Dhaka) had done. The result was that, even though we were retracing a route I had previously been on, and were going far faster than human-powered transport, I could see much more ... the irregular patterns of Sidr destruction in particular, suggesting to me that the types of mini-twisters we see in Kentucky in big storms proliferated in the middle of the Cyclone. We saw two huge trees of identical height and apparent age, one ripped out of the earth, the other, 20 feet away, mostly intact. Tree disease does not explain that, nor erosion. What does? We all speculated a lot as we passed case after case, and saw some intensification of the damage as we drove south.

At Mongla, the nations’s # 2 port after Chittagong, and the object of many southwest region hopes for economic development, our first stop was the Coast Guard station, to get someone to watch the vehicle, since all of us, including the driver, were to embark together. I stayed in the van as Khan and Mustaphis went to negotiate for a vessel, since my participation would raise rental price! Then we boarded the silly little vessel (silly because it looked like an imitation of the classic little lake tourist boat in the US, and seemed absurdly small and unwieldy – top-heavy) and headed out into a huge river (I still need names for all these waterways eventually,

preferably with a decent map), heading seaward (south) just as the tide rushed in and the feeble engine on board had trouble making headway.

Hugging the shore most of the way down, to avoid the incoming tidal flow up the middle of the river, we eventually moved into a side channel and the first tourist stop for the Sunderbans. Raised manmade paths to keep feet dry in high water were the indication that we had not come far, nor were we likely to see much wildlife running free, except for the ubiquitous monkeys. Students wanted to lead me as far from the developed area (with food concessions and other stands), but most of my colleagues were not all that interested. Of course ... this was not *really* the Sunderbans, for all that it *was* all mangrove. It was pacified and sanitized for the least adventuresome tourists.

At that, it cost to disembark ... BDT 200 for me alone; BDT 99 for the other nine in our party. About the same 10:1 ratio as many other places I've been that distinguish between locals and foreigners (The Hidden City in Beijing was some 20 or 25 to 1, as I remember correctly; the Galapagos Islands are stricter: \$100 for foreigners; nothing special for Ecuadorans.) Apparently the permit for really going in further is higher; I saw a sign mentioning BHT 700, but at an exchange rate of 60:1 that is still a steal relative to the Galapagos. I can't help but wonder what the government *could* get per foreign visitor, if it pushed the envelope to maximize returns. (I am back to thinking in ecotourism and natural tourist resource conservation strategy terms, I fear, something I haven't done since I worked on that issue in Fiji.)

Among other fun stuff at this tame place was seeing an alligator at the shore of an enclosed pond/lagoon that did not breath visibly, with an open jaw and leaf lying on its tongue, seemingly bait or just another part of the ground for the unwary rodent who might come along and not notice the teeth as being such. Then feeding leaves to the deer was fun as well ... but they were knowledgeable beggars. Students, especially Shovon, who really wanted to show off his country to me, were very frustrated at it all ...

We didn't even stay there a whole hour, and headed back – only to find the tide now running OUT by the time we were halfway back. A slow passage, but on a pleasant river on a nice day. No complaints. Then back to Bagerhat, where we had originally planned to visit the tomb of Shah Jahal Ali and the mosque of 60 domes he built there. That mosque and settlement at Bagerhat was the beginning of the population's move into the Sunderbans, now a much smaller mangrove forest than it was a century and a half ago when the process began.

But due to currents (and getting a slower than expected boat, I would surmise), we were behind schedule, so we headed for our pre-arranged meal instead, with sort of plans to visit the mosque, etc., later. (It was a Friday, so we couldn't really go in, anyway.) We were further delayed by the first of the afternoon calls to prayer – the driver and the secretary were very observant (and dressed the part), so we had to stop while they went to a mosque to pray. The rest of us had tea and biscuits while we waited – and then a chunk of sugar cane. I hadn't had a piece of raw sugarcane since some time before 9th grade, when I got it at a Latin American market under the old New York Central railroad viaduct on Park Avenue at about 116th street in New York. I tore at it and learned how to eat it again, and would have enjoyed myself more had not

Shovon gotten obnoxious about my not doing it right and offering me his (mouth-) peeled stalk. Good stuff, nonetheless, whatever its impact on my gums and teeth!!

We eventually got to Bagerhat and then went looking for where we were to eat. I assumed a restaurant of some sort – man, was I wrong!! A new bridge across the river there was what we were supposed to take, but couldn't find... Then we spotted the bridge and drove towards it, only to find we were driving *under* it!! Retracing our steps, we then went off on a series of very narrow little tracks through a largely residential area (dense with houses, but substantial ones, with grounds and relatively few informal units), and eventually wound our way – after 5-6 stops to inquire – to the bridge. The detour was a great visual for me, and I even got a few photos. The bridge span was sturdy, but the final pavement hadn't been laid yet, and the approaches at both ends were not graded – they just had the equivalent of the rock base. Bumpy, yes, but more than that: with no granite for road foundations, Bangladesh uses broken bricks and then pulverized brick for pea gravel ... and the sharp edges of the broken brick could easily have torn a tire!!

Still, we made it across and then did some lefts and rights, heading out into the country it seemed, until we stopped for a man standing in the middle of the road, took the next right at his direction, went 100 yards and stopped in front of a curved brick wall with overlapping end – an entryway. Into a farm courtyard, as it turned out ... a family farm of Mustaphis' grandfather!! We were expected ... and treated to a feast at the hands of the lady of the house, the mother of who I gathered was a cousin who operated that farm. We wandered around to look at the compound, looked at some substantial Sidr damage (they were lucky nothing came down on the house), washed up at the tube well next to two cattle fattening themselves at a feed trough, and went up to the porch to sit down to the best meal I had in my stay.

The rice was fresh from the farm processing, and had a flavor that helped me to understand the capacity of regular rice consumers to tell where rice comes from, something we can't do in the US. I could have eaten my plateful with no other flavors – and when do we ever experience 'plain' white rice like that? First, a veggie dish, with green and beet red colored leaves and some tiny shrimp – but no taste of beets, then a salty shrimp paste, beef, chicken, and fish. Each dish totally different, none really exceptionally hot, or overwhelming of the other tastes, and all outstanding ... except that the fish seemed to have no flesh at all that was not replete with tiny – but sharp and sturdy – bones. (As usual, my hosts scrambled to find me a spoon with which to eat, but I was proficient with my right hand, a fact that seemed to always surprise someone when we sat down to eat.)

Lunch over, and it was time to go fishing!! I demurred, never having tossed a net, but our two religious companions both changed into what I would call old sarongs (I never learned the Bangla word for them), removed their sandals and went at it! The stocked pond was actually a shrimp and fish farm, a four foot wide moat surrounding a rice paddy. The shrimp caught were the size of the largest giant prawns I have ever seen – 7-8 inches!! The fish were of a comparable size. The non-fishermen followed the fishers around the edge of the moat, a 3-4 foot wide berm between that plot and the next ... and we had the gloriously funny scene of Mustaphis actually waking into a tree trunk – the classic man walking into a pole on the sidewalk routine, but in real life and on that narrow berm!! I laughed so hard I had to hold on to a tree myself, lest I fall in ...

Lots of conversation, teasing, talking (some translated, but not all ...), and Khan was ecstatic at interacting with some real rural people, as he explained later (and not just the people who worked for Mustaphis' family by any means...). I just enjoyed being outside, seeing more of the countryside, noticing that the women my age did cover their heads, but that few of those under 40, say, even in this rural area, appeared to do so ...

We got back after 6:00, which was the hour at which the mini-bus was supposed to return. That was attributable to Khan, who does not appear to practice as a muslim, forgetting the need for the stops for prayer, including one after 5:00, when he planned the trip. (Actually Khan had commiserated with me about my greatest adaptation problem, getting back to sleep after the 5:30 morning call to prayer, from loudspeakers from all the mosques in Khulna. He argued that the call was appropriate but the PA amplification not acceptable, especially for those who were ill or needed sleep. So, I assumed he was not observant – and the, the day I left, when we boarded a car at 6:00, he mentioned having prayed when he got up! I guess he figured, “why not, since I am up anyway and it is time to pray?”)

The driver, beyond being a skilled fisherman, was unbelievable behind the wheel, judging widths of openings, reacting to needs to break and so on ... very impressive. When asked, I told him he could drive in the states, but that it was much harder to drive in Bangladesh and I wouldn't dare to try. Too true.

... we never did go to that old mosque in Bagerhat, but I've seen it four times, driving by!

Commencement – or is it Graduation, Conclusion, Departure ...?

Fairly early in my stay, I was invited to the graduation send-off of the fourth years, who were in their last semester. (Dec-Jan is like June in US, too, with most weddings then – it's the dry season!). I sat at the head table with Dean, Head and senior faculty member/speaker, Prof Murtaza, and had to speak. (I learned that, though no one warned me I would expected to speak, if was ever at the head table, such a request was inevitable.) We handed out certificates and little desk souvenirs to all the graduating URPD students. Raucous cheers from the students accompanied each presentation. I was not prepared for the fact that some of the women students (including the one who gave me a gift later) would accept the certificate and the desktop item from the (all male) faculty, but not make contact – not shake hands.

There were performances afterwards by students, everything including a drum trap. A lot of songs using the lyrics of Rabindranath Tagore, their great poet (well translated into English; I read him in HS or college). Faculty also got in on the act, despite the general pattern of a huge barrier between students and faculty: songs were sung by two of my colleagues, one a duet with a female student.

There was also dance. Once piece, seemingly Indian, by a woman in sari rather than muslim dress, involved a garland of flowers, and seemed to be using arm, hand and finger positions to tell a story (as in Hula). The garland was - intentionally - thrown at my feet during the dance, to applause and laughter. I still have great memories of the scene when, after the dance was over and we had applauded the performer, I reached down and put on the garland! I had to stand and

bow to the young women in the room, who were literally screaming! The young men swarmed to take photos, an apparent male preserve -- I saw none of the “females” with cameras.

That celebration was on Friday, the Muslim sabbath, and took breaks for prayers, but it totally involved the kids in gleeful play, notwithstanding the holy day. In the absence of the covering garb of the women students, had I dropped in on the scenes in that celebratory room and not known what country I was in, I would have claimed that all the students were drunk! They obviously can generate their own euphoric mood without the chemical support on which we in the US tend to lean.

The end of year “football” tournament – soccer to us – was another more or less expected appearance by yours truly over two weeks. Luckily for the URPD side, I was only asked to spectate the matches between students from the different disciplines. Special seating for the faculty, with an awning and tea service available, was further evidence of my new exalted status.

But the highlight of the graduation season was an open air concert of one of the top bands in the country that the students invited in after raising the funds to pay them. Once again, special seating for faculty – to listen to a rock band that could have played in the US or Europe as well. Just watching the stage, the entire scene seemed transferable and a measure of globalization of tastes. (Khan, my host, is a heavy metal fan, my senior colleague, Murtaza, digs Dixieland ...)

Yet the audience for that rock concert showed that I was *not* on familiar grounds: they occupied a space divided into two split-rail corrals, one in front of the other. The people in the one directly in front of the stage were sitting (on the ground), and those in the second corral standing. People jumping up and down in place, including bouncing off the ground while seated (quite a feat), but no other response to what seemed to me to be good dance music. Why? Women sitting in the front, men standing in the back ... very simple, albeit alien to my world.

So I had a celebratory send-off, including another dinner with the Vice Chancellor. Then I really lost out – I had plotted for some 10 days to take all the junior faculty, who had devoted their time to me while I was there and never let me pay for a meal, out for a meal in the fanciest restaurant in Khulna, with menu to be selected by a gourmand colleague. (This would have cost me \$4 a head at most – a high cost from the perspective of the first year instructors, my most junior colleagues, make about \$180 a month.) But at the last minute the Department Head, Dr. Ashraf, decided he was hosting yet another meal. So I had an inferior repast in terms of cuisine, and never did really reciprocate decently to those who gave so much to me in my visit.

Khan and Ashraf and the Vice Chancellor piled on the generosity as I left, having a university car to take me to the Bangladesh-India border, which I crossed on foot, with the assistance of the Chief of the Port there – a relative of my host! Yes, in some minor sense, I benefited from what might be called corruption, and saved 15 minutes in line for an exit pass thanks to Khan’s relative who sent a senior port official to help me cut through the red tape.

All this spectacular hospitality, of course, set the stage for my current position: interest in doing all I can to further international contacts, the educations, and the careers of some people who really went out of their way to welcome me into their world, were generous in overlooking

the many gaffes of which I was not aware, and were always willing to discuss and explain Islam, their practice of it and perspective on the roles of religion in theirs and the larger world with this infidel when he felt the need to ask for guidance. I left Khan and the department the laptop I had brought with me, but that is minor recompense.

Now, I want to return to Khulna, and to continue the work I started, strengthening the university and its programs, and building up the research capacity and international status of an exceptional faculty with whom I had the privilege to engage. ... as I wonder how many e-mails I'll get from Khulna University students over the coming year ...

.... And I can't wait until I am again eligible to act as a Fulbright Senior Specialist, and can find another part of the world to visit ...