

BANGLADESH JOURNAL

by Teresa Godwin Phelps, Professor of Law



*Note: In early February 2004, I traveled to Bangladesh to give two lectures and to visit my former doctoral student, Faustina Pereira. Her dissertation, which I directed, has become a prize-winning book, *The Fractured Scales*. Faustina now works for Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), a human rights NGO in Dhaka, and I was eager to see her work.*

And so, on Saturday evening, February 7, after an afternoon at the Lyric Opera in Chicago, I boarded a British Airlines plane to begin the journey. Two days later I arrived. The following article consists of excerpts from the journal I kept during my visit.

Monday, February 9

6 a.m.

Worst fears realized! After two back-to-back overnight flights and 30 hours of traveling, I arrive half an hour early at the Dhaka airport and there's no one to meet me. I know from long experience that a woman traveling alone should try to look as if she always knows what she's doing, so I paste a confident look on my face and push my luggage cart up and down, hoping someone will recognize me. I'm certainly obvious enough, with my fair hair, blue eyes, and bright blue Ralph Lauren jacket. Men in skirts (a *lungi*, I learn) and headscarves approach me: "You take my cab?" "You go to Sheraton? Good hotel." I keep shaking my head, trying to remember if a head shake means no in Bangladesh.

After about five minutes (that feels like five hours), an anxious young man (not in a skirt) rushes up to me. "I'm so sorry! Your flight was early and there's so much construction!" Faustina's cousin has come to fetch me and take me to my hosts' house.

I am staying with friends of David Burrell: Kamal and Hameeda Hossain. David has told me only that Kamal went to Notre Dame in the '50s, read law at Oxford, is a distinguished lawyer and statesman, and was one of the architects of the Bangladeshi constitution. Hameeda, also Oxford-educated, has been a women's rights activist in Bangladesh for years and is one of the founders of ASK. And, they've agreed to put me up for the week.

Monday, February 9

3 p.m.

Hameeda could not have been more gracious welcoming a complete stranger into her home. I took a much-needed shower, joined her and Kamal for a little breakfast, and fell into bed for a nap. Ronny, a young colleague of Faustina's from ASK, picks me up to visit the Liberation War Museum. I will be speaking here on Saturday; apparently there is a great deal of interest in the possibility of a truth report for Bangladesh, so I'll be discussing part of my new book, *Shattered Voices*.

On the way to the museum, I experience the infamous Dhaka traffic for the first time as the serenity of the Hossains' house quickly gives way to the cacophonous Dhaka streets. Pedestrians, bicycle-driven rickshaws, CNGs, cars, trucks, and buses all vie for space, with no traffic rules in evidence. Ronny explains that the traffic is actually light as it is the end of Eid, a religious holiday.

The museum, privately funded, chronicles the 1971 War of Independence, in which Bengali East Pakistan seceded from its union with Pakistan, declaring itself a new country—Bangladesh. The dispute was largely over language: Pakistan had chosen Urdu as its official language, leaving the Bangla-speaking Bengalis that make up today's Bangladesh feeling unrepresented. Bangladesh (literally "Bangla place") is the creation of a bloody liberation war, during which many war crimes were committed, including ethnic cleansing and genocide. Much of this brutality was perpetrated by the invading Pakistani army on an unarmed population.

Arrows on the museum floor guide me through the displays of newspaper reports and graphic photographs that depict the atrocities of the invaders and the bravery of the resisting citizens, many of them villagers who took up rudimentary arms. The museum is small but powerful and I walk through slowly and silently. Although the international press did report on this war to some extent, very few, including me, know much about the creation of Bangladesh, certainly not about the level of brutality that was endured. Ronny tells me that some efforts have been made to reckon with the past, but there is great concern that the story will go untold; additionally, former collaborators have never been brought to justice or even exposed and some are even in government office. Hence the interest in some sort of truth commission.

Tuesday, February 10

9 a.m.

Faustina does not intend that I see this trip as a vacation. My schedule for today is jammed, with visits to government officials and ASK programs, and ends with the official dinner at Notre Dame College for the celebration of 150 years of the presence of the Holy Cross Order's ministry here. The day begins with a visit to Mahmuda Islam at the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs. The elevator is not working, and we climb eight floors to the office. Faustina apologizes and I joke that I see the climb as replacing a visit to the gym. As I talk with Dr. Islam and receive an armful of brochures, any misconceptions I might have had about people in countries such as Bangladesh lagging behind the West in attention to women's issues quickly disappear. Dr. Islam's project, PLAGE (Policy Leadership and Advocacy for Gender Equality), leaves few stones of sexism unturned. The relationship between a country's overall well-being and the status of its women is clear and drives many of the project's initiatives: mainstreaming women into the country's economic sector; supporting women's entrepreneurship; developing policies that dismantle the obstacles to women setting up businesses; focusing attention on problems that women face, such as violence, that prevent them from becoming economically independent; and many, many more. The level of knowledge and sophistication about the multiple factors that keep women oppressed surpasses that of many Americans who tend to think that applying formal equality is all that women need. I am impressed—and humbled.

Next, I visit with Sultana Kamal, the executive director of ASK; I will see a good deal of this lovely woman before the week is out. Sultana's office is a former closet and she explains that the philosophy of ASK includes giving over most of the space to the clients' needs, rather than to the staff's. She introduces me to a group sitting on the floor waiting to give me an overview of ASK's many projects. ASK's goal is to facilitate access to justice, particularly for the poor and excluded, primarily women. It works on multiple levels—research, education, advocacy, mediation, and support—and spreads its work from the capital to the villages by partnerships with local NGOs. Its staff, many of whom I meet in this room and throughout the building, are young, committed, and enthusiastic.

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After lunch with Faustina, Sultana, and Hameeda, I risk the Dhaka traffic once more to visit a drop-in school for working children and a halfway home for victims of domestic violence. We stop at the end of a main street and I'm directed to climb into a nearby rickshaw—my first rickshaw ride thus occurs without warning or fanfare. The rickshaw is required because the drop-in school is in a poor neighborhood with narrow rutted streets that a car can't negotiate, near where the children live and work so they can attend whenever they have time. "Working children"—the very phrase dismays me, but my two ASK guides try to explain to me that my Western view is simply wrong. These children have to work; their families are so poor they would starve without the money that the children bring in. Besides, if these children don't work, their lives will not automatically become good and sheltered (my own grandchildren's faces dance before me). The situation of the poor in Bangladesh is so dire that if these children cannot work legally, they will be driven into underground jobs, such as prostitution. I will hear this argument again and again during my stay and every fiber of me tries to resist it. Every Bangladeshi I meet—the most liberal, bleeding-heart do-gooders—shares my guides' opinion, some even going so far as to demonstrate against the Harkin Bill (see www.banglarights.net).

At the school, my heart breaks and bleeds. These beautiful, friendly children line up eagerly to tell me their names and what they do. "This one is a garbage collector; this one an assistant in a tea shop." I watch a class in which the children are as engaged as any American school children I've ever seen. The purpose of the school is to provide a place where the children can receive an education even if they work. They can drop in when they're not working; they don't get in trouble if they're tardy or absent. The teachers work around the children's sched-

ules, doing what they can in the time they have. The walls are decorated, as in any school, with colorful children's artwork. My worldview shifts forever.

Wednesday, February 11

11 a.m.

I am delivering the first of my two official lectures, this one called "Improving Women's Lives: How Much Can (and Should) the Law Do?" My talk was moved up a day and away from the university because of a *hartal*, a general strike, tomorrow. Earlier, as I donned my usual suit jacket for the talk, I realized that I haven't seen a single woman in Western dress. Older women wear saris and younger women—including Faustina, Sara (the Hossains' 30-something Oxford-educated barrister daughter) and all the female staff at ASK—wear a *salwar kameez*, a long tunic worn over baggy pants topped with a long scarf.

I begin my talk by saying that a few years ago I would have thought that a woman like me, a Western feminist, has no business discussing women's rights with women in Bangladesh, that such a discussion was a feminist version of Western imperialism. But I had changed my mind and my two short days in Bangladesh had further convinced me that oppression against women knows no borders. Women in America, just like women in Bangladesh, suffer from "traditions" that perpetuate violence against women and continue women's economic marginalization. We should come together and insist on justice for all the world's women, not remain fragmented by fears of "imperialism."

My audience is sizable and composed of both women and men. The formal question-and-discussion period is lively and informative. A Dhaka university student approaches me during the reception that follows my talk with a story about sexual harassment at the university. The university failed to support the complaining student, and a group of women students are at a loss as to how to get redress. This could so easily be a conversation with one of my own students, who often experience all the same obstacles.

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Wednesday, February 11

2 p.m.

My taskmistress Faustina allowed me a quick lunch after my talk and herded me into a car for a two-day trip to Kushtia, a village in the Khulna Division of the country. It will take us five hours to get there, including a ferry ride across the Patna (called the Ganges in India), and we must arrive before dark. Tomorrow there is the *hartal*, and no cars are supposed to be on the road. We are joined by Mothar Akand from ASK's Popular Theatre Unit. I am particularly interested in seeing ASK's version of popular theater, as I've been researching popular theater as part of my next book project.

On the way to Kushtia, we stop at a BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee—the largest NGO in the world) office, mainly to use the restrooms. But we cannot leave without a brief tour and tea, a seemingly requisite ceremony for the hospitable Bangladeshis wherever I go. At BRAC, village women are engaged in making textiles and clothing for sale at Aarong, a large store in Dhaka. Along with this skill-development work, BRAC's activities include a variety of development work, including micro-credit and health care. It's best known for its nonformal primary education system that has over 30,000 schools operating in the poorest sectors of the country, enabling destitute rural children to become educated.

Wednesday, February 11

8 p.m.

I have crossed the Patna by ferry and been taken with Faustina and Mothar to our lodgings in a school dormitory, which is more than adequate but slightly rudimentary, with no hot water and with mosquito nets draping the narrow beds. Two ASK fieldworkers have joined us, Nazly and Zahirul. During a quick dinner at a Kushtia restaurant, I told Zahirul that he reminds me of Johnny Depp (a little in looks but more in a certain likable quirkiness)—so “Jonny Dep” he becomes for the rest of my trip.

Now after dinner, Zahirul takes us to a gathering of disciples of Lalon Shah, a revered guru, singer, and composer who was born in Kushtia in the 18th century. We sit on the floor of this center dedicated to Lalon, a humanist who rejected all distinctions of caste and creed, listening to a group of young men play instruments and sing incredibly lovely and haunting songs. It is only three days into this trip and I am already close to overwhelmed by new experiences, new people, new outlooks. But I have little time for reverie; tomorrow is the *hartal*, and because no cars may be on the road, we must travel to our many visits in this area by rickshaw and walking. I need a good night's sleep.

Thursday, February 12

9:30 a.m.

“Jonny Dep” has scurried around the village to find us (me, primarily) coffee, a task he has claimed as his own (on the ferry ride on the way back to Dhaka, he will show up with coffee service for us all). Less than an hour later, I am watching school children (ages 8 to 12) perform a play that they have written as part of the School Theatre Team project. The school is closed because of the *hartal*, but the children have come to school anyway because they want us to see their play. As soon as we walked in the room, the children rushed up to Mothar, hugged him, and demanded to know why he hadn't answered their letters. It's clear they love him and that for him this project is not just his job. I see this attitude over and over again in ASK workers: their hearts are in what they do and they reach out with love to the people with whom they work.

The play has two parts. The first part depicts a sick, coughing mother lying on the floor with a concerned child hovering nearby. The child goes to get a doctor, but the doctor says he won't come without being paid. “But I have no money and my mother is dying,” the child says. The “doctor” shakes his head and folds his arms. The child returns to the dying mother and promises, “on her head,” that when she grows up she will see to it that no one is denied medical care because of lack of money.

The second part depicts a child marriage. A broker comes to arrange a marriage for a young girl, but other family members and neighbors object and harass the broker. “How would you like it if she was your daughter, or your sister?” The broker is driven away and everyone celebrates.





ASK's Popular Theatre Unit is designed to educate people in the rural areas about their rights and about the law, and is particularly directed at

changing people's perceptions about women's rights. After the play, Mothar, Nazly, and Zahirul engage the children in a discussion about the issues raised by the play. The children, boys and girls, earnestly discuss how important it is that girls stay in school and get an education. They talk about how boys shouldn't harass girls on the streets, how girls should have more freedom and shouldn't be forced into marriage ever, let alone at 14.

They are very curious about me, asking me where I'm from in surprisingly good English. I say "Chicago" and hold up my hands to form the coasts of United States and point to the middle. They want to know how I like Bangladesh ("very much") and if I will come back ("sometime, I promise").

Thursday, February 12

2 p.m.

We have crossed the Gorai River on a small boat on which we had to stand and climbed on flatbed bicycle-driven rickshaws that take us to a small village outside the town. We are meeting with union groups (brought together by Mukti, the partner NGO in Kushtia) in a tin assembly hall where people have gathered to plan activism about gender and social justice. Of particular concern are *fatwas*, which are illegal but nonetheless issued against women who break rigid social mores, who somehow step outside their "proper" roles. And the custom of *salish*, village mediation of disputes over which a local *iman* presides, is a good idea in theory but in practice often brutal and patriarchal. The room is very, very hot and people speak heatedly and too fast for Faustina to translate fully for me, but the zeal in this stifling room needs no translation. "He is talking about how his friends have ostracized him for his stands," Faustina whispers to me, "but he says that he has found new friends in this room." What surprises me is that there are as many men as women; gender justice is not just a women's issue in Bangladesh (perhaps they'll come to give a talk on campus).

We walk about a mile on dusty roads to an even smaller village where I can meet with village women who have received microloans from Mukti, a project modeled on but separate from the renowned Grameen Bank loan program. Faustina translates my questions and I learn how much money they borrow (up to 5,000 takas—about \$90), what the conditions are (they must have some small savings, they must repay on a schedule and with interest, and they are part of a group of women who work out the loans together), and what they use the money for (to buy some chickens to raise, to buy a rickshaw, to start a small textile business). "I'm not sure how you should say this," I say to Faustina, "but I'd like to know how having this money, this economic independence, makes them feel." Faustina speaks in Bangla and the women's faces light up and they all want to talk at once. This question has hit a nerve and their replies make it clear that having money and a business of their own has changed their lives, drastically altered the way they see themselves. "But there are problems," one woman says, laughing. "My mother did everything my father told her to do, and they never argued. But I have opinions of my own, and my husband and I argue all the time." All the women laugh and nod their heads, joining in the general merriment that signals this radical transformation of women's lives in a single generation.

Thursday, February 12

6 p.m.

We have traveled for an hour on another rickshaw to still another village to see a performance of the Popular Theatre. This group of adult amateur actors performs in a crowded village square. We sit on chairs opposite the improvised stage, children sit in front of me, the village women stand on the left, the men on the right. The place is mobbed. This play is about a dowry killing; the girl's father mortgages all he owns to finally make the dowry payment, but, alas, too late—his daughter has already been killed by her husband because he has failed to pay on time. It's a bit comical, and people laugh at the wrong times; yet the discussion afterwards is rowdy and serious. "Jonny Dep" steps into the center of the gathering, spreads his arms dramatically, and asks for silence. He then focuses the discussion on the issue. The villagers are not shy, and opinions abound. He then calls on a surprised Faustina, "the lawyer," to say something. Faustina takes his place in the middle, talks in Bangla for a brief period, and has the villagers repeat a phrase several times. Later she tells me that she had them state the law, that the "giving of or asking for dowry is against the law."



Saturday, February 14

6 p.m.

Another *hartal* today has forced the cancellation of some of my visits—to Mother Teresa’s home and to Holy Cross School and College. (Thursday’s *hartal* resulted in some violence in Dhaka and the opposition’s action to topple the government is getting serious.) My talk on truth commissions at the Liberation War Museum has been moved from 4:30 to 6, when the *hartal* ends, so that people can get there. Hameeda and Sara Hossein have been on the phone all day, calling people about the new time, and are worried that there won’t be much of an audience because of the last-minute change and the anxiety about being on the streets that the *hartal* produces.

They ask me to wait until 6:15 before starting; by 6:10 the room is filled to overflowing. There are journalists, academics, activists, all sorts brought together in the hope of hearing something that can lead to Bangladesh’s accounting for the past. I summarize my findings about the value of truth commissions and the drawbacks, and I talk a little about the four reports I analyzed for *Shattered Voices*. My talk is fine, but the discussion that follows is mesmerizing and contentious. It’s obvious that something must be done, but very little agreement as to what. I am exhilarated because this discussion moves my work in a new and fascinating direction. Cameras flash and reporters stay afterwards (on Saturday my face is everywhere in the Bangla press).

My presence in the villages and here tonight has been a subject of curiosity but also something more. It signals a moment of recognition that someone like me—light-skinned and so obviously Western—acknowledges the people of Bangladesh and sees, if not understands, their struggle.

Sunday, February 15

10 a.m.

It’s my last day and I put my foot down—I am going shopping for a couple of hours! Leena from ASK picks me up and we go to a gallery where I buy a woodcut by a well-known

Bangladeshi artist (turns out he’s a friend of the Hossains—everyone knows and admires them) and to Aarong where I buy a *salwar kameez* that I will wear at dinner tonight.



Sunday, February 15

8 p.m.

It’s been another long day. I met with more reporters at ASK who are writing pieces about truth commissions and want to publish my talk. I visited a government-run shelter for girls, a visit that took hours, with an official reception, tea, a tour, and a show (I think they mistook me for a potential donor). I watched a film at ASK that depicted women telling their stories about the war, one of the many disconnected pieces of an untold, fuller story about the past.

Hameeda has invited a few people for a farewell dinner. Zahirul stops in to say goodbye. I am a bit sad and quiet as I look at this gathering of people I have come to like and respect so much: Hameeda and Sara Hossain, David (Sara’s British husband who arrived from London on Saturday), Sultana, Faustina, and others.

Tomorrow is another *hartal* so I must arrive at the airport before 6 a.m.—or go in a rickshaw. The trip has been exhausting, yet I am reluctant to leave. I am leaving a piece of my heart in Bangladesh, with these people who work tirelessly to improve the lives of others, with these beautiful, smart, friendly children, who deserve a better shot at a life filled with real choices. Will I return? Sometime. I promise.

Note: These excerpts skip so much that I must say something about the omissions. My first evening, I had a lovely meal at Faustina’s home with her parents. I had numerous meals with Kamal and Hameeda Hossain, discussing everything from their roles in the emerging Bangladesh to the care and feeding of grandchildren. After the military coup in 1975, they lived in Oxford for many years, but Kamal was always determined to return to his home, Bangladesh. Whenever he has been at home during my stay, I have seen a stream of visitors coming to seek his counsel. Kamal is more than respected here; he is revered. I had the privilege of getting to know their daughter, Sara, a committed legal aid lawyer, who is one of those beautiful, larger-than-life women who electrify every room they enter; and Sara’s British husband, David, who is smart, funny, and easily her match. Sara and David have lived in London for the past 10 years, but now they have a daughter of their own and have come back to live in Dhaka. Sara wants her daughter to know where she comes from.