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Dispatches from Bangladesh

By Nicholas Schmidle

FEBRUARY 8, 2007

THE 2007 ELECTION SEASON in Bangladesh has featured an unexpected — and unlikely — pair of stars: the army and Nobel Peace Prize-winner Mohammad Yunus. Yunus, the microcredit guru and acclaimed “banker to the poor,” recently announced that he was entering the political fray by promising to “build the Bangladesh as we dreamt.” And the army, which took control of the country 11 days before the parliamentary elections scheduled for January 22, has embarked on a merciless anti-corruption campaign. It has arrested thousands of allegedly crooked politicians and sent the rest into hiding. To arrange an interview in Dhaka these days can be trying; dodging arrest, many politicians have changed phone numbers and no longer sleep at home. The only politico freely out and about is Yunus.

Kamal Hossain, like millions of others around the country, is ecstatic. A well-dressed man in his early 70s with a deep, fleshy voice, Hossain sounded triumphant and giddy during our recent meeting. “People are shocked, because suddenly, the law has returned to Bangladesh,” he said. He thinks that if Yunus can leverage his huge public stature and stay committed to clean, principled politics, he could “fuel a real democratic movement.” Thirty-five years ago, Hossain played a critical role in the movement to form Bangladesh, acting first as legal advisor to “father of the nation” Sheik Mujibur Rahman and later writing the 1972 Constitution. But after thirty years, he found his nation’s prospects growing grim. Yunus’ candidacy, Hussein said, is proof that, “God exists for Bangladesh.”

But is serious change truly underfoot? And can the army take credit?

Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country of roughly 145 million people, whose



The Karwan Bazar slum

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army has a history of meddling in politics. In 1975, a handful of army officers assassinated Mujib and his family. That touched off a rapid series of coups and counter-coups. General Ziaur Rahman, who ruled from 1975 through 1981, survived 22 coup attempts before being finally assassinated. Five separate military regimes ruled from the time of Mujib's murder until December 1990, when massive street demonstrations forced General Ershad to step down and hand power to a civilian government.

During three elections since 1991 the army has remained in its barracks. Many considered Bangladesh a model for other burgeoning Muslim democracies to emulate. The United States Institute of Peace published a report in May 2005 that compared Bangladesh to Turkey and added that it "exemplifies the coexistence of Islam and democracy." But regular elections and a functioning democracy are not the same. During this period of civilian rule, the heads of the two main political parties, Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League (AL) and Khaleda Zia of the Bangladeshi Nationalist Party (BNP), fought out one of the world's nastiest personal rivalries. They competed with one another in everything, even in the amount of money they could plunder from the state. Transparency International, the corruption watchdog, ranked Bangladesh as the most corrupt nation in the world for five out of the last six years. Meanwhile, the World Bank estimates that the average person makes \$470 a year.

Throughout the 1990s and the first seven years of this decade, the army sat back and watched. It had secured a sweet peacekeeping mandate with the United Nations and didn't want to see that jeopardized as a result of any

reckless adventurism, i.e. staging a coup. But growing tensions and violence throughout the country in late 2006 pushed their patience to the limit.

The trouble started in October 2006, when the outgoing BNP government handed power to a caretaker administration full of BNP sympathizers. In protest, the AL orchestrated demonstrations, strikes and blockades, during which 40 people died and hundreds were injured. As the elections neared, the frequency and intensity of the street battles intensified. On January 3, the AL announced that it was boycotting the polls. This prompted the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute, two election monitoring organizations, to cancel their programs on the basis that polls without one of the two major parties could never be considered free or fair. As street violence increased, the UN hinted to the army that its inability to keep peace in Bangladesh was threatening its peacekeeping mandate overseas.

I arrived on January 13th, two days after President Iajuddin Ahmed declared the State of Emergency. No one really knew what to think. Had the army staged a coup? Was martial law coming next? On my first night in Dhaka, I met a young couple at an upscale café near the center of town. They hadn't traveled out of their house for the past couple weeks, guarding against the off-chance that they would be caught someplace where protesters might be chucking bricks at the police. They were thrilled about the State of Emergency. The roads were safe and they could get their cappuccinos again. Already, rumors were circulating about Yunus taking on a central political role, perhaps as president or chief advisor to the caretaker government.

When I asked the cappuccino couple what they thought, the girl nodded her head approvingly and said, "This country could use some new people." By the time I left a month later, Yunus had officially announced the formation of his party, Nagorik Shakti, or Citizen's Power. He talked about saving the country and rescuing the poor. I knew that the café crowd and the elite loved him, but what about the poor?

MOHAMMAD ABDUL IS A SEVENTY-SEVEN-YEAR-old slum dweller with a long, white beard, stained at the tips like the mustache of a two-pack-a-day-smoker. On the day we met, he wore a green, crocheted prayer cap and button on his left breast pocket to commemorate his service as a freedom fighter in the 1971 war. He stood in front of his home



— a tin shack suspended by a few knobby-kneed bamboo poles above stagnant water, rotting celery stalks and shimmering pieces of plastic chip bags — and explained how he was about to be evicted.

As part of the its anti-corruption and lawlessness campaign, the army was working in conjunction with police units and detachments of the elite, anti-crime force known as Rapid Action Battalion, or RAB, to demolish numerous settlements deemed illegal for encroaching on government property. Three days before my visit, RAB was in the Karwan Bazar slum to give Abdul a three-day notice to leave. “I spilled blood for this country because I believed that the poor would live freely, but we are still being harassed,” he told me while exposing a mouthful of teeth the size of dominoes, the result of an aggressively receding gum line.

I expected him to continue berating the joint forces for their plans to demolish his home. But in fact, he was sanguine. He granted that he had no place to go and would probably wind up “roaming the streets,” but he didn’t blame the army. They are doing the right thing, he said. “These crooks must be arrested.”

It wasn’t until I brought up Yunus that he became animated. When I asked Abdul if he could consider supporting Yunus in the next election, he sucked on his domino-sized teeth and pretended to swat at invisible flies. Microcredit is one thing, he explained, but running for prime minister is quite another. “Yunus was fine before winning the Peace Prize,” Abdul said. He stuck to what he knew best. “But he doesn’t know what he is talking about when it comes to politics. He is just talking.”

JANUARY 29

RECENTLY, NURUL HAQ HASN’T BEEN SLEEPING AT HOME. In the middle of night, he slips away from his wife, tiptoes out of the house, and lies for hours along the muddy bank of the Naf River. Every night for the past week, Bangladeshi police and army personnel have stormed his refugee camp in search of criminals — or any able-bodied male with the capacity to act as one — as part of a nationwide anti-crime and anti-corruption campaign. Nurul, a gaunt man in his early 20s with a trimmed mustache and a floppy hairstyle, claims that dozens have already disappeared. To avoid arrest, most of the men hide in the jungle. When I asked Nurul why he opts for the riverbank, which seemed to provide less cover, he answered frankly, “I am terrified of the elephants.” (Wild elephants roaming the dense hills bordering Bangladesh and Myanmar impale, maul



“I spilled blood for this country because I believed that the poor would live freely, but we are still being harassed,” said Mohammad Abdul.

or stomp to death at least 20 locals every year.)

Nurul is a Rohingya, an outcast community of Muslims from the Rakhine State in western Myanmar (formerly Burma). The military government in Myanmar considers Rohingyas to be migrants from Bangladesh, having moved to Myanmar only in the last few centuries, and refuses them citizenship rights. “They are treated like dogs,” an official from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) told me. Their national ID cards, under “nationality and religion,” read “Bengali Muslims.” The junta debases Rohingya religious and cultural traditions at every opportunity. Most mosques stand in disrepair. Those in passing condition are turned into police and fire stations. Rohingyas wanting to marry require official permission and pay a whopping tax. Should they evade payment and the authorities find out, the groom is sent off to a labor camp for several years until he works off his debt.

In 1992, 250,000 Rohingya refugees crossed into Bangladesh after rumors circulated that the Myanmar army was torching Rohingya villages. UNHCR immediately established 22 camps from Cox’s Bazar, a resort city that boasts the longest natural beach — at 75 miles — in the world, to Teknaf, the southernmost city on the mainland of Bangladesh and a renowned hub of smuggling activity. Since then, most of the refugees have gone back and only two official UNHCR camps remain, housing 26,000 people. But there is also an unofficial camp just north of Teknaf with some 10,000 refugees — commonly referred to as the “makeshift camp.” Options for work are scant; Nurul pulls a rickshaw a few days a week and fills the rest of his time as a fisherman. Neither pays more than

a dollar a day. Myanmar's government asserts that rebel fighters belonging to the Rohingya Solidarity Movement (RSO) operate and recruit there. Others allege that international jihadi outfits poach from the ranks of desperate refugees.

I recently rented a microbus and went to Teknaf to see the makeshift camp. The road from Cox's Bazar to Teknaf passed through a religiously conservative area. *Madrassas*, or Islamic seminaries, appeared every few miles on either side of the road. The few women out wore black *burqas* that cloaked their faces; from a distance, it was difficult to tell which direction they were walking. Lush hills, like giant, green gumdrops, formed the landscape to the west. The unimaginably wide Naf River, the natural barrier between Myanmar and Bangladesh, formed the other. I was marveling at the natural beauty when we arrived at the camp.

At first glance, the makeshift camp looked like a burlap city; hut after hut made of brown, floppy material. But it wasn't burlap or canvas, rather tarps and patches of plastic garbage bags caked with dust. Along the roadside, sections of homemade, bamboo lattice pretended to act as a fence. Yet the refugees spilled across the street. Naked children with drippy noses and medicine-ball bellies chased each other back and forth through traffic. In the hut he shared with his teenage wife and another couple, Nurul sent someone to bring tea while his 2-year-old son stood by his side. The boy was naked and snot dripped onto his lower lip. (Médecins Sans Frontières — Holland, which runs a clinic across the street, estimates between 30

to 40 percent of kids to have respiratory infections.) He twiddled and toyed with his penis the entire time.

The Rohingya camps are filled with disease. More debatable is whether criminals infest the camps. In one of the UNHCR camps, a Bangladeshi security officer explained that almost every male, at a minimum, was involved in muggings and thievery. I couldn't gauge the veracity of such claims. On the one hand, no one would know better than the man in charge of security for the camp; on the other, Bangladeshi officials exaggerate the Rohingyas criminal activities in order to expedite their repatriation to Myanmar. The government accuses them of being terrorists. *The Daily Star* reported in August 2006 that, "Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB)" — the group responsible for detonating 500 bombs simultaneously throughout the country in August 2005 — "emerged with its militant activities by sending trained Muslim Rohingya rebels to Afghanistan and Kashmir war fronts in the 1980s." When I asked Nurul whether he had witnessed recruitment in the camp, he at first denied hearing about any such things. Then he spoke up: "Last year, fifteen people suddenly disappeared and went off to get military training in the hills. When they came back, we asked them where they had gone. They said, 'We went for the greater benefit of the Rohingya people.'" Nurul said he didn't know for sure the name of the group that offered the training, but assumed it was RSO. The fresh recruits told Nurul that they were "preparing to fight for the liberation of Myanmar."

Until then, the Rohingyas will keep squatting in



A crying boy leans on his mother while she separates rice in front of their hut in Teknaf



Teknaf camp

their squalid camps, thankful for every day they aren't arrested, evicted, or forcibly repatriated. The UNHCR camps aren't accepting new refugees and the Rohingyas believe that the Bangladesh government is looking for any excuse to deport them. For a long time, they've had no place to call home. Now, with a State of Emergency declared in Bangladesh and the army being given more leeway to chase criminals and "cleanse society of unwanted elements," the Rohingyas fear a more aggressive campaign against them may be in the offing.

token in his hand that he had paid a Bangladeshi border guard a few hundred Taka (around \$5) for. (The Myanmar border guards make no effort to keep the Rohingyas from leaving.) When Nurul returned to the border area after his token expired, a fellow Rohingya warned him

If people like Nurul returned to Myanmar, the military would kill them before long. The Myanmar army keeps track of the Rohingyas in Rakhine State by conducting unannounced head-counting sessions. Those who are absent are considered rebels. According to Nurul, one of the army's preferred methods for punishing traitors is to bind them to a pole under a low, tin roof in the sun, and then leave them to bake to death. Nurul came to Bangladesh for the first time nearly 10 years ago, holding a 20-day work



Goodbye from Teknaf



Worshippers during juma, or Friday, prayers.

that roll call had been done. He was listed as missing. He immediately turned around and has been in Bangladesh ever since. I put a question to him and the other people who had joined us in the hut: Could you ever return to Myanmar under the current government?

An old man with a goatee who recently fled to Bangladesh spoke up. He said he was cheering for leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Laureate who the military junta has kept under house arrest since 1989, and desperately wanted to see democracy in his home country. Only then could he consider returning. But being a Rohingya has made him skeptical of all governments. "It doesn't matter who is in power," he said, "If I see cops in the road, I have to run and hide in the forest."

Late in the afternoon, I said goodbye to Nurul. His son gave me a high-five with his penis-twiddling hand. Just outside the hut, another toddler sent an arching stream of urine into a pool of stagnant water where, on the other side, a woman was washing her hair. Teenage girls carried bundles of sticks on their heads and the glow of the setting sun filled the alleys of the camp. In a few hours, it would be dark and the army would come looking for criminals. If he's lucky, Nurul would tiptoe, undetected, out of his house again to go sleep in the muck along the side of the Naf River.

FEBRUARY 2

THE BISHWA IJTEMA IS NO PLACE for homophobes. Of the three-million Muslims who attended the gathering in early February, about 10 were women. The rest walked the grounds donned in a variety of man-

dressess — the Bangladeshis in their traditional, plaid man-skirts, the Arabs in ankle-length tunics, and the Pakistanis in slightly shorter tunics, paired with the sort of baggy trousers that would make MC Hammer envious. I've worn each outfit and can confidently say that no one in the mass of three million people was wearing underwear. Men strolled hand-in-hand while others sat drinking tea, sometimes caressing one another's head, arm, or earlobe. Still, this is Asia, where such behavior is perfectly acceptable for heterosexual men.

The brotherly spirit arose when three million men thronged to a quarter-square-mile campsite the first weekend of February in Bangladesh. The event included three days of prayers, lectures, and ruminations on how to be a good — and peaceful — Muslim, and took place about an hour north of Dhaka, the capital. I showed up on Friday, the first day, at around noon. The call for *juma* prayers, the biggest congregational prayer of the week (like Church on Sunday morning) had just sounded — "Allahu Akbar!" — and worshippers promptly unrolled prayer rugs in the middle of the street. When one worshipper gestured like he was going to place his rug on the hood of our car, I advised our driver to park, marooning us in the middle of the road. I opened the passenger-side door enough to squeeze out before the faithful closed in around us. Latecomers searched frantically for a space to pray, while rugless attendees swarmed around a man selling straw mats. When he sold out, the truly rugless tore black plastic garbage bags into pieces and laid them on the concrete.

The *ijtema*, or gathering, was hosted by Tablighi Jama'at, a massive organization of Muslim missionaries that espouses a strict, yet non-political, interpretation of Islam. *Tablighis*, as the group's followers are known, shun bristle toothbrushes in order clean their teeth with *miswak*,

an aromatic stick used by the Prophet Muhammad. They also drink every glass of water in three sips, the same way the Prophet did. They are fundamentalists in every sense of the word. But they are mostly harmless. "This thing is really like an emotional sedative," said Abdul Badi, a Caucasian man with a wiry beard and a thick street accent marked by slow, measured enunciations. Badi is an Islamic contemporary artist and former imam of the MCI-Cedar Junction Supermax prison in Walpole, Massachusetts. He made the pilgrimage from his hometown of Boston. "This is truly a peace movement within Islam," he said, stressing the second syllable of Is-LAM. Badi and other dedicated tablighis commit at least 40 days a year to traveling and preaching Islam. Christiane Amanpour described Tablighi Jama'at as "secretive" and hinted at its links to terrorist groups, in a recently broadcast CNN special, "The War Within." "People are scared," she added, referring to the group's growing influence.

Amanpour missed the mark. Tablighi Jama'at doesn't have a website or a publishing house (like several earnest militant outfits do), and they didn't want to meet with Amanpour. Does that make them secretive? Not when anyone can walk in and listen to their sermons, including me. Do terrorists attend? With three million people there, it's hard to rule it out. "There is so much ignorance about Islam," said "Brother" Eisa (EE-SA, which means "Jesus" in Arabic), an African-American and another Boston native who Badi introduced me to. Eisa explained that he came for the message of peace, whatever reasons a few others might have. "We are only accountable for the message of our elders."

I went to the ijtema in part to find out just what the

elders had to say. And all in all, their message is quite tame. Here's a sampling: the world's problems result from a lack of religion, not an excess; Allah's power transcends the physical and conceptual limits of *this* world; and "when a good action pleases you and a bad action displeases you, then you are a true believer." Pretty simple. Yet contrary to what Eisa said, what sets Tablighi Jama'at apart is not so much its message, but its method. Tablighis are missionaries who see converting a non-Muslim to Islam as a ticket to Paradise. Their eyes glowed at the sight of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed American wandering around alone.

Most of the 160-acre campground consisted of thousands of bamboo shafts stuck into the ground, each one holding up part of a long piece of canvas, draped like Gulliver-sized bands of ribbon overhead. A few tin-sided barns posted signs welcoming foreigners.

The first to invite me into their quarters was a group of tall men with bulgy turbans from North Waziristan, one of the tribal areas in Pakistan where the Taliban have taken over. We drank two rounds of milky tea and discussed, in Urdu, the Taliban and the changes they've brought to North Waziristan. "The law and order is much better," one said. "But it's very dangerous for someone like you." After a few minutes, the leader was fetched. This must be King Missionary, I thought, the moment he arrived. As he circled his quarry, he cracked his knuckles and rolled his neck like a boxer in warm-up before he sat and faced me. He had no sooner begun imploring me to "come to Allah," when an exterminator entered the barn, wielding what looked like a military-grade leaf-blower. The bug man sprayed a lethal poison, only for mosquitoes he assured, that shrouded our circle in a cloud of toxic fumes. Taking advantage of the smokescreen, I skirted away.

After stumbling out of the Pakistani tent, coughing and holding my shirt over my mouth, a teenage Bangladeshi boy stopped me and flashed a creepy smile. He tenderly rubbed my chin and repeated, in a breathy voice, "Oh, oh, Allah." After this, I resolved to find the American tent, where I might have fewer problems with cultural nuances.

There I met Abdul Badi, the artist from Boston. Badi, who converted to Islam "back in the '60s," traveled with his teenage son. Both father and son wore full beards and shaved their upper lips



The rug-seller enjoys the business opportunity of a lifetime.

in the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad. They acted and sounded, well, American. Undoubtedly, they had pitched the nicest tent on the premises. "Yup," Badi said while slowly nodding and admiring the blue-and-white, eight-man model. "We brought tha' Coleman," decisively accenting the first syllable of KOHL-man to emphasize that it was a cool thing. As we talked, a bottle of perfume was passed around, which the tablighis dabbed on their neck and wrists. Sensing my apprehension, Badi suggested: "Smell it first. It isn't for everyone." Grateful for Jabi's intercession, I passed the bottle to my left.

Later, I asked Badi what compelled his conversion to Islam and decision to join Tablighi Jama'at. During the 1960s, he said with a cocksure grin, "I was a faithful worshipper of earthly beauty. But I reached a plateau of consciousness." He searched for some spiritual calling. Eventually he found it in a stethoscope. "People say if you listen to your heartbeat, it makes the sound, 'LOVE, dove,' 'LOVE, dove.' One day, I took a stethoscope and placed it on my heart. You know what it said? 'AL-lah, AL-lah.' You don't need to formally convert if you can hear the sound of your own heart."

When the evening's last sermon ended at around 10 p.m., I joined Badi, Eisa, and another African-American, a real-life boxing coach from New York City, for dinner. We sat on the ground and plunged our hands into mounds of rice, meat and salad. The Coach asked if I was a new convert. When I replied that I was just a journalist, he pushed out his lips, as if he were trying to hold a pencil in place with his upper lip. "But I can tell your heart is getting softa' and softa'," he said in a gravelly voice while holding out his upturned palm and opening and closing it as if he were kneading dough. Meanwhile, Eisa lectured on how I couldn't fully understand Islam without becoming a Muslim. When he noticed me trying to break the conversation by looking around, he snapped: "Listen! I am not talking to hear myself. If you are going to quote me in your article, you better be listening to everything that I say." I smiled nervously, somewhat embarrassed, and grabbed another fistful of rice.

The rest of dinner continued with various American Muslims working their own missionary angle. Between Coach kneading, Eisa demanding my attention, and the spicy food, my face broke out in a heavy sweat. Just in the nick of time, my friend called to say that he was heading back to Dhaka for the night. I had an excuse and I stood up to leave. Abdul Badi got up to walk me to the gate. "This must be an overwhelming experience for you," he said along

the way. "I think you need a full-on Arabian experience," Badi added, alluding to Mecca, where only Muslims are allowed.

I saw what he was getting at. And with one last nervous smile, I bid him farewell and stepped out into the night.

FEBRUARY 5

THE PEOPLE OF GOSAIPUR, a village in north-western Bangladesh just outside the city of Dinajpur, regard Khokan as their finest hunter. Yet in his turquoise *loongi*, a traditional Bangladeshi man-skirt, and navy blue t-shirt with a screen-printed portrait of a female Bengali film star, he didn't strike me as a fearsome figure. But the skills needed hunting for turtles and *kuchia*, a species of eel that lives in the swamp, don't require bravado or great strength. "You need to be quick," Khokan said while describing his technique for catching *kuchia* with his hands. "You watch for the fin print in the mud, and then you pounce." And the turtles? He shrugged, feigned nonchalance, and added, "I just chase them down and stick a spear through their shell."

Khokan belongs to a caste of Hindus known as "Mushaheris," a Sanskrit word meaning mice-eaters. The Mushaheris are Dalits, the lowest of the low according to the Hindu caste system. They were known as Untouchables before the Indian subcontinent became P.C. Some say that if so much as the shadow of a Dalit touches a person from an upper caste, the aristocrat should bathe



Khokan with BBQ kuchia



Gosaipur's temple to Shiva

thoroughly to cleanse any impurities. Dalits, numbering about one million in Bangladesh (and well over 100 million in Hindu-majority India), are socially immobile; potential employers shy away from hiring someone labeled an Untouchable by their co-religionists. Most are left toiling as a brick-breaker. Yet the wage from breaking bricks is meager — around 70 cents a day — and not enough to buy meat. To compensate for protein deficiencies, Dalits hunt and eat anything they can find. Mice are the most common, thus their name, “mice-eaters.” But mice season recently ended, Khokan said. Kuchia were abundant. He ran off to retrieve the spoils of yesterday’s hunt: two barbequed eel heads, skewered on a knobby twig.

After showing me his tools for breaking bricks and spearing turtles, Khokan offered a tour of the village. A distinct smell of urine wafted through the air. In one corner, the village pig rolled in dirt while a cow on a short leash circled around a pole. Both animals, Khokan explained, are investments for a rainy day; a Christian village will buy the pig for about \$100 next Christmas, and the cow could fetch several hundred dollars.

Gosaipur’s main attraction is a soccer-goal-sized temple dedicated to Shiva, the Hindu God of Creation and Destruction. Apparently, Shiva liked to get stoned, and in order to fully show his veneration, Khokan smoked a lot of pot. He pulled a hash-packed chillum from his pocket and suggested we light up. I declined as diplomatically as possible, not wanting him to think my refusal reflected some bias against sharing a pipe with an Untouchable. “It’s only nine in the morning,” I said. “And I still have

a day’s worth of meetings to attend.” Picturing an afternoon of the munchies with the eel heads was not the most glamorous invitation.

Upon saying farewell to Khokan and leaving Gosaipur, I learned that Muslims inhabited the neighboring village. Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country of approximately 140 million people, but around 10 to 12 percent of the population is Hindu. Bengalis boast that their vibrant, liberal culture is a product of Hindus and Muslims living side-by-side for centuries. Rabindranath Tagore, a Bengali poet, artist and novelist who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 and is hailed as Bangladesh’s Shakespeare, was a Hindu. He later wrote both the Indian and the Bangladeshi national anthems.

Still, there are others who think that the rise of Islamist groups in Bangladesh poses a threat to the Hindu minority, especially the outcast Mushaheris. “Jamaat-i-Islami has taken advantage of their weaknesses,” said Shah Mobin Jinnah, the Director of the Community Development Association, an NGO based in Dinajpur. Mobin believes that the Islamists are using the Mushaheris’ illiteracy and destitute poverty to encourage conversions. Can you blame them? I asked Mobin. Wouldn’t you consider converting to another religion if the one you belonged to classified you as Untouchable? It’s been done before. On August 14, 1956, B.R. Ambedkar, a primary author of India’s constitution and a Dalit by birth, converted himself — and 380,000 other Untouchables — to Buddhism.

After my meeting with Mobin, I headed to another

Mushaheri village about 30 miles outside of Dinajpur. The company that normally runs buses between the main road and the village had, for unknown reasons, scrapped their service for the day, so we rented a “van.” I’m unsure how a bicycle pulling a flatbed with two wheels and a lantern dangling underneath was ever dubbed a van, but a friend and I loaded onto the back of it, held the sides so as not to slide off, and went bumping along. After a chilly, 45 minute bike ride on a two-lane road that meandered through rice patties, we arrived in the second village, Subarna Khuli, or “golden field,” at dusk. Three kids played catch with a ball of tape. Across the village, one family performed *mundan*, a Hindu ritual in which the male child’s first haircut involves shaving the boy’s head. Fellow villagers gathered to celebrate and the family distributed handfuls of rice wrapped in banana leaves. The village had toilets and a schoolhouse. A few people even had jobs.

A short and thin man named Donasher, shivering and wrapping a blanket snugly around his chest, introduced himself as a rice farmer. He had just finished a day’s work, standing knee-deep in grimy water planting rice. A frequent and violent cough sounded like someone was beating him on the back with a two-by-four. Soon enough, Donasher said, the rice season would end and he’d have no work. How do you make your earnings last

through the year? I asked. “We can’t,” he said. So previously during the off-seasons, he hunted and ate mice. But lately, Donasher hasn’t needed to go out hunting. About two years ago, village life improved dramatically when everyone converted — to Christianity.

Donasher recalled how two teams of missionaries, one from the Bangladesh Lutheran Church and another from Thali Ta Khumi Church, entered Subarna Khuli and told the village elders: “We will look after you.” They immediately built a church. They followed that with a school, where the children received one meal a day. “They have given us winter clothes, and in workless times, they have given us money,” Donasher said. Before long, responding to the churches’ persistent requests, government engineers installed a tube well to pump safe drinking water. “They have helped us both spiritually and economically,” he said.

I thought back on what Shah Mobin Jinnah had told me earlier in the day. And he was right: the Mushaheris are a vulnerable lot. Their own religion doesn’t seem to want them, so why should they feel compelled to stay a Hindu forever? More than that, however, the story of Subarna Khuli illustrates how religious conversions take place. There are plenty of stories with domineering missionaries using force or manipulative tactics to convert.

But often, it is just a matter of satisfying people’s basic needs. Whether it is Christian, Muslim or Buddhist missionaries, whichever group can improve the lives of people like Donasher will ultimately win their allegiance.

Nevertheless, neither church has delivered electricity to Subarna Khuli yet. An hour after we arrived, the sky fell pitch black and Donasher ran off to get a bottle of molasses moonshine. Four of us sat on the floor of his single-room home and passed around the bottle, using the light off the LCD of my cell phone to find one another’s hand. I took one gulp that immediately sent a burning sensation down to my toes. After another swig, we boarded the van, and holding tight, meandered back through the rice patties. □



Gosaipur

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Current Fellows

Richard D. Connerney • INDIA • January 2005 - 2007

A Phillips Talbot Fellow, Rick is studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture, and politics in India. Rick is a former lecturer in philosophy and Asian religions at Rutgers University and Iona College. He holds a bachelor's degree from Wheaton College and a master's degree from the University of Hawaii, both in religion.

Kay Dilday • FRANCE/MOROCCO • October 2005 - 2007

Kay is studying the relationships of the French and North African immigrants in France and in North Africa. A former editor for The *New York Times* Op-Ed page, Kay holds a master's degree in comparative international politics and theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a bachelor's degree in English literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the Universiteit van Amsterdam in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*.

Suzy Hansen • TURKEY • April 2007 - 2009

A John O. Crane Memorial Fellow, Suzy will be writing about politics and religion in Turkey. A former editor at the *New York Observer*, her work has also appeared in *Salon*, the *New York Times* Book Review, the *Nation*, and other publications. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1999.

Nicholas Schmidle • PAKISTAN • February 2006 - 2008

Nick is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion, and politics in Asia. He's in Pakistan as an ICWA fellow, examining issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he reported from Central Asia and Iran. His work has been published in the *Washington Post*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and elsewhere. He holds a master's degree in International Affairs from American University.

Raphael Soifer • BRAZIL • April 2007-2009

An actor, director, playwright, musician, and theatre educator, Raphi Soifer is a Donors' Fellow studying, as a participant and observer, the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil. He has worked as a performer and director in the United States and Brazil, and has taught performance to prisoners and underprivileged youth through People's Palace Projects in Rio de Janeiro and Community Works in San Francisco. He holds a bachelor's degree in Theatre Studies and Anthropology from Yale University.

Andrew J. Tabler • SYRIA/LEBANON • February 2005-2007

Andrew's ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he reports on Lebanese and Syrian affairs. He has lived, studied, and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. He was an editor with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon, and Syria, where he worked as a senior editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the *Economist* Intelligence Unit. In 2004, Andrew co-founded *Syria Today* – Syria's first independent English language magazine. He has contributed op-ed pieces on Syria over the last year to the *New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune*.

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

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