

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

SUCCESS IS EATING THREE MEALS A DAY

by

Cammy Wilson

You don't need a picture to remember some faces.

A face I expect to stay with me a long time is that of a young man who hung around the currency exchange window at the Dacca airport in Bangladesh when I stopped to cash some travelers checks. Only his eyes seemed well-nourished; round and alert, they darted from one arriving passenger to another. As the money changer counted out the \$100 that I had requested in taka, the local currency, the man's eyes locked onto the steadily rising stack of bills. His frame was so thin it all but rattled inside his faded shorts and tattered shirt. When I reached for my taka, he turned his gaze on me.

"All for you?" he asked.

"Yes," I nodded, puzzled at the gentle question.

Later, reflecting on the matter, it struck me that the \$100 I would spend in the next few days, for meals, taxis and incidentals, is more than the average Bangladeshi earns in a year.

For the rest of my stay, the young man's words, "All for you," automatically came to mind whenever I saw a bountiful plate.

Most of the 90 million Muslims who live in Bangladesh are like the man I met at the airport -- poor. They are possibly the poorest people of any nation in the world. Their lack of national resources translates into a chronic shortage of the basics, like food, which takes on enormous importance. In Bangladesh, success is eating three meals a day and anything else is riches. Dacca, the capital, is populated by swarms of skinny, brown men; hidden away in the houses and huts and swathed in multiple garments are the women, who eat last and look even skinner.

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Once hunger is stanchd, food becomes a status symbol. In well-to-do families, its consumption is conspicuous. Sometimes food is augmented by illegal drugs, such as liquor, the rich favoring imported brands and the common folk managing to brew their own. As anything scarce takes on additional value, a gift of food in Bangladesh is a mark of great esteem.

While the country's population is 40 per cent as large as that of the United States, the Bangladeshis are wedged between Burma and India in an area the size of Florida. Less than a decade ago, Bangladesh was known as East Pakistan. Then civil war broke out and the Bengali-speaking Muslims of East Pakistan won their independence from the Urdu-speaking Muslims from West Pakistan. The civil war, coming on the heels of a disastrous cyclone, devastated the country. Today, the Bangladeshis complain that the international press concentrates on covering disaster news, a tendency no doubt intensified by the periodic flooding, famine and drought to which the country is vulnerable. Indeed, a third of Bangladesh goes under water every year with the arrival of the monsoon season.

As the available quantity of food, rather than its quality, is uppermost in the minds of many Bangladeshis, the country is not known for its cuisine. One guide book on Asia comments on the lack of good restaurants in countries like Bangladesh and then observes, "At least you'll eat; a lot of other people will simply starve."

The lack of local gourmet food does not prevent the well-to-do from using food as a sign of affluence.

"The most expensive food in Bangladesh is Chinese food," said one resident. "So people who have lots of money prefer to go to Chinese restaurants -- to keep their dignity intact."

And, if you ask people in Dacca where to go for a good meal, they inevitably mention Chinese restaurants. Guidebooks on the country, including one put out by the Bangladesh Tourist Association, likewise stress the Chinese restaurants.

The Nandin, one recommended Chinese restaurant in Dacca, has so-so food and somewhat soiled, red-plaid tablecloths. There is so little light you can hardly tell the condition of the tablecloths or the food for

that matter. The place was filled with cigarette smoke when I visited. Nearby diners were smoking Benson & Hedges, which cost 22 taka (about \$1.46) per pack. Local brands sell for two to three taka per pack, but, like the restaurants serving local food, they deliver little in the way of status.

Even when served in the home, food is a measure of status.

"In Bangladesh, we don't just have one or two dishes and maybe a salad at a meal, as in your country," said a well-to-do and well-traveled Bangladeshi. "I go home and there may be six or seven or eight dishes on the table. That's just for two adults and two children."

A different extreme operates in the poor homes but, again, food is a barometer of power and status. A simple rule of thumb seems to be that if the men in the family go hungry, the women go even hungrier.

Nilufar Begum, a 20-year-old Dacca slum-dweller who was pregnant with her third child, described the food she and her family would have during a typical month.

"Breakfast is bread only," Begum said. The two-year-old daughter she held in her arms looked no older than five months; its belly was swollen and distended, already showing signs of severe malnutrition. "At lunch there is a little rice and there is rice at dinner. On maybe ten to twelve days of the month, we have fish with dinner; once a month there is meat. If there is little (food), I sacrifice it for my husband." Begum takes what is left after everyone else has been served. The order of service she described is: adult males (including her teenage brother-in-law), her mother-in-law, the children and then Begum.

Why do you give your brother-in-law food before you give to your children? I asked.

"Well, if I give it to my mother-in-law, he is her son," she said, speaking of her husband's brother. "She will give it to him so I may as well give it to him myself."

Since hardly anyone, with the exception of government officials and the well-to-do, looks well-fed, there is no need for organizations like Weight Watchers in Bangladesh. Before

one meal, I recalled what the guidebooks for Asia say about how you can judge the sanitary state of restaurants by the condition of their workers. That is, if the staff looks healthy, the food should be all right. But I gave up. If you tried to apply that principle in Bangladesh, you wouldn't eat. Everywhere the effects of poor nutrition are evident. While most Bangladeshis are reed-thin, some are also bent and many cough much of the time.

In the hotel where I stayed, I developed my own system for holding down a particular kind of food contamination. The latter emanated from the room-service waiter; though young, he already breathed with the rattle of an elderly man with emphysema. The first time he came to my room, he uncovered the dish I had ordered with a great flourish and instantaneously dissolved into a spasm of coughing. From then on, it was a race to see whether I could get him to take the money for the check before he could uncover the food.

As a food substitute, the Bangladeshis may turn to liquor, marijuana or hard drugs, all of which are illegal as well as anathema to the Islamic faith.

From the passenger seat of a trishaw, a three-wheeled, bicycle-powered vehicle, I caught a whiff of what I imagined is a palliative for hours, if not years, of peddling bodies over the city.

"Does it bother you?" asked my companion when I commented on the marijuana smoke drifting over the driver's shoulders. "If it does, I'll tell him to stop. They do it to stop the pain."

Liquor is likewise available. The well-to-do serve it in their homes and, though illegal, imported liquor can be had for \$3-\$4 per drink at the major hotels and even at some restaurants. The common people brew their own. The police routinely arrest people for drinking in public and conviction for drinking may carry a jail term of three to six months, Bangladeshis told me.

However, the Dacca Club -- Bangladeshi's most exclusive club -- serves liquor to both members and guests. When a prominent Bangladeshi I was with ordered beer at the club, I asked whether he should worry about being arrested.

"We're part of the privileged class; these penalties are not for us," he said. They (the police) can come into the private places anytime they wish ... What you or I do is part of the high life; what they (the poor) do is a crime."

One high-ranking government official offered another reason for the seemingly hypocritical policy.

"Bangladesh is a Muslim country and the mullahs (religious leaders) have a lot of power here," he said. "It wouldn't do to come out for liquor. You know what happened in Iran (referring to the fall of the shah)."

Food not only signifies status and power, it also conveys warmth and friendship. Bangladesh, while poor in resources, is rich in hospitality. A Pepsi Cola offered in a refugee camp; sweets ordered from a special baker; endless cups of strong tea with milk and sugar; all these take on special significance. When you weigh them against the resources of the country, you can tell the Bangladeshis are sharing the best they have.

Just as I remember the young man in the airport and his, "All for you," query, so do I recall the kindness of my coughing waiter. When I first checked into the hotel, he and the other staffers made me feel like a growth industry, as one after another appeared at my door to pick up laundry, bring tea or fill the water pitcher, always with the expectation of a tip. On each return trip, however, the staffer might bring a little something extra in return, like a teabag or a pot of hot water. And, on the night before I left, my consumptive waiter, after depositing the tea tray, reached not for the food cover but into his pockets. He fumbled about for a moment, then found what he sought.

Open in one hand lay a gardenia, in the other a single lime, cut so that the multiple pieces formed a small lily.

"For you," he said.

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