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Dacca: Before The Tourists Come

By Cammy Wilson

Spread across a Dacca street teeming with short, thin men and brightly painted trishaws is a large, lighted sign.

"Welcome (to) Biman City," it says, advertising Bangladesh's national airline. "World Is Becoming Smaller."

Most of the country's approximately 90 million residents don't need to fly to understand shrinkage. Bangladesh is a country where every year more and more families lose their tiny plots of land -- often as little as one-fourth acre -- to larger landowners. It's a country with a burgeoning population and a land area already three times as densely populated as India. It's a country where the great majority of people are already well below the poverty line -- receiving only 78 per cent of needed calories per day (versus 135 per cent for Americans)* -- and every year their food ration diminishes. It is a country where the beasts of burden are people and where many of its citizens are made into beggars by circumstances. It is a country which takes on a quality of science fiction as a visitor realizes one can go for miles through city streets and see thousands of small, scrawny people, none of them women.

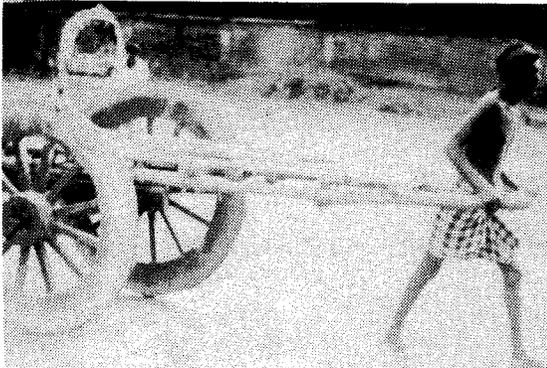
It is a country whose people sometimes seem to cope by concentrating on what is not at hand. One of the hottest selling tourist items in Dacca was a poster published by the Bangladesh Tourist Authority. It showed a tranquil, halcyon scene, the letters above the water lillies reading, "Visit Bangladesh --- Before Tourists Come."

Traveling from the international airport into Dacca gives a preview of what the country itself is like. During the dry season the terrain is scrubby and here and there a cow or goat forages for grass on what appears to be thin ground cover. Plainly visible ribs of the animals are enough to prompt a spell of vegetarianism in even the most dedicated steak-lover. Along the road going into the city buses pass

*Statistics from the World Bank's "World Development Report, 1980."

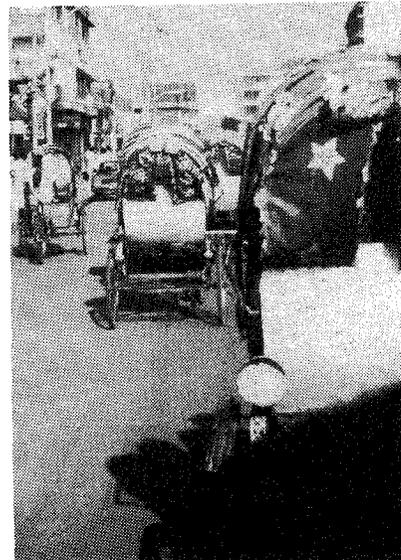
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carts drawn not by animals but by humans. For such labor, each of the three men usually employed -- one in front pulling and two pushing at the rear -- might receive as much as 10 taka, according to a Bangladeshi, or approximately 60 cents for a day's work.



A Bangladeshi pulls a load of bamboo through Dacca streets.

Trishaws, Dacca's major means of transportation, clog the streets.



Taxis as we think of them are generally not available. There are a few city buses that careen through the streets looking as though they might burst apart from the sheer numbers of men packed inside. There are a few "hire cars" available with drivers at exorbitant rates at the local hotels, but the major means of transportation is by trishaw, a rickshaw-like carriage attached to a bicycle. Brightly colored with intricate designs, they swish and dart along the streets, their drivers pedaling furiously, ringing their bicycle bells and dodging cars. The latter follow a "blow and go" policy, that is, automobile drivers rush down streets at break-neck speeds,

blowing their horns madly, as if to announce that the presence of an automobile and its clearly superior occupants is sufficient reason for the street ahead to clear. In conversations with some Bangladeshis, one gets the impression that anyone who makes use of public transportation is of questionable status.

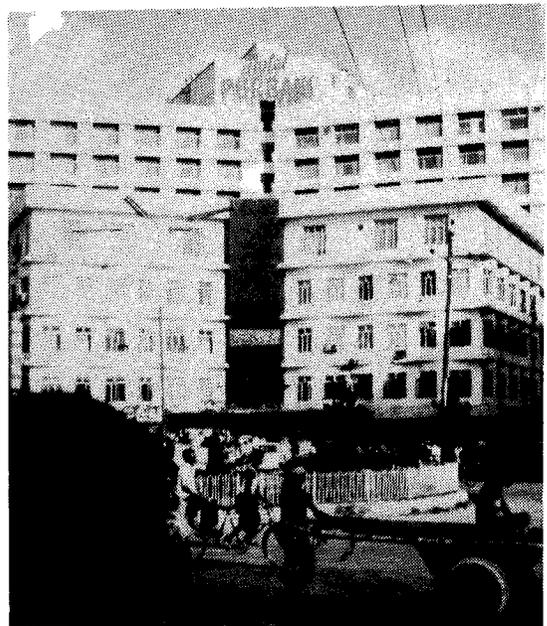
At night the trishaws become veritable fireflies. The kerosene lanterns underneath the seats glow gold as the drivers dart back and forth through the traffic. The only other transportation which appears to be available in Dacca is "baby taxis" which are three-wheeled motor driven vehicles which cost about three times or more the fare commanded by trishaw drivers.

Dacca itself looks as if a building blight has struck, leaving structures decayed and mottled in its wake. The tedium of grayish, nondescript buildings is relieved by the trishaws that jam the intersections and by occasional herds of sheep or goats being driven straight through the city streets.



The old ways and the new:
A herd of goats passes under
a billboard advertising
nipples for baby bottles.

Carts pulled by people
roll past the Hotel
Purbani.



There is not a lot of accommodation for visitors in Dacca that is up to even middling Western standards. There is the four-star (on a scale of five) Intercontinental -- known to trishaw drivers as the Inter' Con'), which for \$72 a night will give travelers accommodation similar to that provided by a U.S. Hilton.

"There are only two hotels I would possibly recommend for a visitor," said a Bangladeshi diplomat to me before I left. "The Intercontinental and the Purbani."

I stayed at the latter. I was not reassured by an advertisement I spotted for the hotel on my way into the city.

"Hotel Purbani," it said. "Luxury At A Price Well Beyond Your Reach." This is ironically true for most Bangladeshis, even professionals.

"I might like to take my wife to one of the hotels for dinner," a prominent journalist told me, "but the Purbani and the Intercon are beyond the reach of the middle class." A senior teacher might make as much as \$80 per month, "the highest paid journalist here might be drawing around \$333," I was told. At US \$31 per night in a country where the average income is less than \$100 per capita per year, one might indeed expect luxury. Such was not the case.

The room was outfitted as follows: a large mirror framed in scalloped, oak-colored wood, looking vaguely as if it had been rescued from a brothel; a sagging vanity shelf with one small drawer; a dilapidated stool, the brown plastic seating sagging to one side; two brown plastic headboards fixed to the wall above twin beds covered in green tattered spreads; and a blue wastepaper basket, dented throughout. Each time I looked out the window I became momentarily dizzy, as the glass shivered and danced before my eyes. Here and there on the wall -- covered in a gold linoleum-like material, were small metal plates covering what appeared to be rat holes. That night my suspicions were confirmed.

I awoke as my feet hit the floor, ready to do battle with the burglars apparently battering down the door. All was intact, however. Then my attention was drawn to the air conditioning duct in the ceiling above the door. There, staring back at me were several pairs of tiny eyes. Only rats. Still, I was puzzled at the loud thumps I had heard. Surely the rats weren't that big. The next day when I described my experience to a hotel resident, he solved the mystery.

"The big bumps weren't rats," he said. "They were the cats; the hotel puts them into the vents to chase the rats." I was never able to confirm this but it seemed to be a more

comfortable explanation than the idea of 12-pound rats cavorting over my head.

The single most striking thing about traveling the streets of Dacca is the virtual absence of women.

"Where are they?" I asked a male journalist.

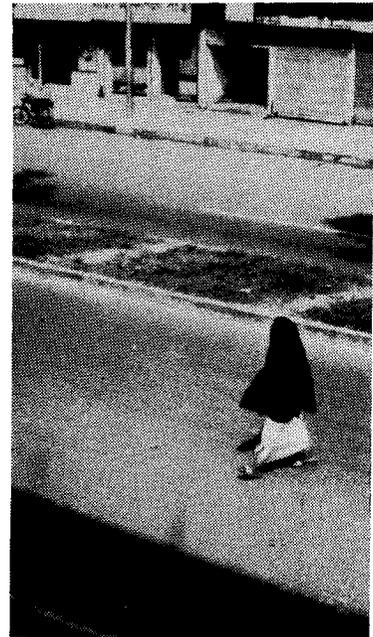
"Our women aren't walking," he replied.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Our women aren't walking. They don't go out in the street," he said, becoming a bit exasperated. "We're a little conservative."

Men in Dacca shop for groceries, men do office work, men clean hotels and operate switchboards. They ride the buses and pedal the trishaws. In the city the only women you see generally on the streets -- maybe three or four in a journey of two miles -- are either beggars or professional women who tend to work for the government or members of the upper class.

A Bangladeshi woman, wearing a chador, walks toward the camera. Few women walk along the streets.

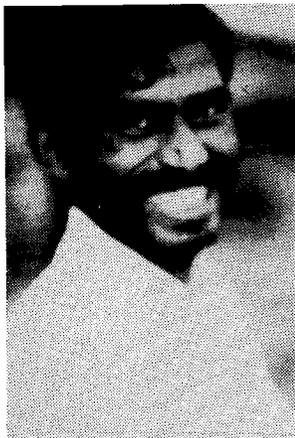


Women do work. They perform much of the hardest work of the country, handling all the household and food preparation chores for large families with a lack of conveniences Americans can only imagine. In many families, every day's

supply of water, for instance, must be carried; if a woman lives in Dacca and is fortunate, she might only carry water for a few blocks. In the countryside, it might be miles. Moreover, many poor women in both city and country work at whatever they can get, usually the least desirable jobs for the very least pay.

Most Bangladeshis, approximately 89 per cent, live in rural areas, where all the arduous tasks of rice preparation -- the threshing, pounding and boiling -- are likewise left to women. For this, they may never receive any cash payment (either because they are working for the family or else payment is made to the woman's male relatives). If the woman's family is landless, she may work for an occasional coconut husk filled with rice which she then shares with her household. And though Bangladesh is a Muslim country with harsh injunctions against sexual contact outside marriage, women sometimes are forced into prostitution.

A woman moving about conducting even the simplest semblance of business is a novelty in Dacca. In fact, Bangladeshis, at least in their knowledge of English, seemed to have learned no words to describe such an anomaly. I felt a bit like a character from the Peanuts cartoon strip (remember Marsha in the use of "Sir"?) each time I had dealings with room service personnel. Whenever I dialed room service, the attendant would say, "Good evening, sir." After I gave my order, he would say, "Thank you, sir." One day as I took a trishaw to an appointment, the driver half turned as he pedaled and asked "You businessman?"



"You businessman?" this trishaw driver asked.

Temperatures in Bangladesh vary considerably from lows in the high 40's during the winter months to temperatures of over 100° in summer. Occasionally I'd glance at the bathing suit I'd brought and groan. Regardless of the heat, Dacca is not much of a place for a swim. There is a pool at the

Intercontinental, but considering the incredible amount of staring a woman encounters by merely walking down a street, donning a bathing suit is difficult to imagine.

Tourist literature touts Cox's Bazaar, a city on the sea south of Dacca, as having the "longest natural beach in the world."

"What difference does a beach make if putting on a bathing suit can cause a riot?" I asked a Bangladeshi businessman. He laughed.

"I took a friend down to Cox's Bazaar a few months ago, thinking she'd been in Bangladesh long enough to understand," he said. "I left her in her room and came back about an hour later. She wasn't there but when I looked out the window I saw a huge crowd on the beach. I knew immediately what it was. I had to ask the hotel management to get a jeep and rescue her."

Women in Bangladesh wear saris which fully cover them from shoulders to toes. When they go outside, even the Westernized women often pull part of their saris over their heads. Some wear the chador, an all-encompassing black garment which covers even the face, including the eyes, over which a small patch of veil presumably allows one to see the world though through a black shroud.

The influence of Islam is pervasive. Sitting in my seventh-floor hotel room, I slowly realized that what I had taken to be a loud radio broadcast was the mullah's call. At set times throughout the day, loudspeakers atop the mosques call the men to prayer.

"We are not allowed to go to a mosque," one woman said. "We are to pray at home."

Haj pilgrims on their lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca crowded the cavernous lobby of the Purbani. Some groups came from the Moslem provinces of southern Thailand, and Biman Airlines keeps one of its five planes for use solely in carrying the pilgrims, according to an airline public relations officer. Pilgrims came in by the hundreds -- tiny, elderly people, the men in little white, embroidered caps and women in full-length saris or dresses. The women swathed their heads in lengths of cloth, and men and women alike were often so thin they looked as if they'd mortgaged their last meal to make the Haj.

So many people are poor in Bangladesh that even for the rich, there is no way to shut them out.

Yet ostentation exists in Dacca, as elsewhere. There is one suburb called Gulshan where many foreigners and wealthy Bangladeshis live; however, houses begin at the US \$200,000 level and go up to wildly extravagant sums.

The haves in the city sometimes display little regard for the have-nots, perhaps because there are so many of the latter. Repeatedly I watched the well-fed and the well-to-do when they took trishaws -- only when a car was unavailable -- and the standard practice seemed to be to take a single taka (less than 7 cents) out of one's pocket after a long ride, hand it to the driver, then wait for him to protest. Hesitantly, and very slowly, the rider would pull out another taka, cram it into the driver's hand and dash away. Both rich and poor seemed to adopt a philosophy somewhat similar to the reaction of a bellboy at the hotel. On entering my room one day my ears were assailed by raucous hammering and nailing on the floor above. I summoned a bellboy.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Sir?"

"All that noise. I can't stay here with that noise." He pointed to the ceiling and said with a smile, "Not here, up there."

Despite the apocalyptic terms in which foreign surveys and voices speak of Bangladesh, there seems to be no sense of urgency in Dacca. Everywhere you go, men are sitting. Office after office after office is filled with seats, chairs, couches, all occupied by men, often smoking. Foreigners with their acute sense of time can easily become frustrated. The usual response to an inquiry is something like, "Mr. Islam is out. Please wait."

"How long will he be gone?"

"I do not know. You wait."

"But how long?"

"Maybe 30 minutes, maybe one hour. You wait."

Then there are those whose duty is just that.

"They are the peons," I was told. "The messengers." If you go into a government building, for instance, outside every door, all the way down a long hall, will be row after row of chairs, one for each official's peon.

Government jobs are highly desirable in Bangladesh but official salaries are not high. The pay scale is generally 400-3,000 taka per month (\$27-\$200). However, civil servants are assured food -- no trivial guarantee -- through access to the government ration shops. And a wide range of people are regarded as civil servants: teachers, bankers and most journalists, along with police and government administrators.

Biman Airlines has something of a reputation for its irregular flight schedule. This is partly due to attempting to service a route pattern that extends from London to Tokyo with essentially four planes (with a fifth plane tied up with ferrying pilgrims on Haj).

"If anything goes wrong between London and Dacca, the flight to Tokyo won't go," as an airline spokesman explained. A passenger must repeatedly call flight operations to check if a scheduled flight is still expected to depart.

As we lifted off the Dacca runway -- bound for Bangkok -- I breathed a small sigh of relief. After all, the next flight was a week later and I'd encountered many Biman passengers stranded at the Purbani. I'd not reckoned fully, however, on Biman's facility at implementing its "World is Becoming Smaller" slogan.

"This is Biman Flight No. 080," the stewardess said over the intercom. "Flying from Dacca to Tokyo via Abu Dhabi."

Abu Dhabi? Passengers cast startled looks back and forth. After all, Abu Dhabi is in the United Arab Emirates, a couple thousand miles in the opposite direction.

"This is Biman Flight 080, Dacca to Tokyo, via Bangkok," a new voice intoned.

Visit Bangladesh. Before the tourists come.

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