

Regional Update: Bangladesh

Southern Asia & South Pacific

April 2013 By: Rod Matthews



Bangladesh

“What is the Kingdom of God like?” Jesus asked. “It is like yeast that a woman took and hid in three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch was leavened.” And so the Kingdom expands in Bangladesh - mostly hidden in rural areas and down the little lanes of the big cities but slowly impacting the lives of the Bengali people, one valued and loved person at a time.

I've recently returned from visiting several of our groups and the mission center of GCI's mission arm in Bangladesh, the Bengali Evangelical Association (BEA), accompanying its director, Dr. John Biswas. Mr. Ron Boyer of Southern California joined us. Flexibility was our first requirement. The day after our arrival in Dhaka, when we had intended driving the 280 km south to our mission center in Sathsumulia, there were anti-government strikes (protests) and demonstrations in the city some of which were violent and dangerous. The owners of our rented van declined to release their van and driver lest it accidentally attract the stones and random wrath of angry demonstrators. Since we would have been in the van, we agreed!! So we stayed in our hotel in Dhaka for two days until the strikes ended. On March 20th, we left early for the 7-hour drive to the regional center of Barisal where we were staying the night. The drive is...well...eye-opening....or perhaps eye-closing is a better way to travel. It's a long battle with the trucks, buses, cars, motorcycles, cycle rickshaws and ox carts on the mostly narrow roads. The driver seemed to have been trained on the F1 circuit.

Three hours into the trip we take a vehicle ferry across the mighty Padma River (it's called the Ganges in India before it enters Bangladesh). On the ferry there are hawkers of fresh fish, fruit, snacks and educational *books for children*. John Biswas tells one young book-seller that he too once sold books in order to fund his education for a meaningful future in life. The young man listens attentively. John challenges him to do more than just survive.



When asked if he had heard of Jesus, he said he had - but all he knew about him was that he was a Christian! John offers him the opportunity to come with us – right there and then - and be employed in the physical care of our mission centre with the promise of food and lodging and education. It's too good to be true. He just can't bring himself to accept. So John buys a few of his books and gives him some extra taka (the local currency) with the instruction to save it for his education – and the young man moves on.

Late in the day we detour off the main road to visit the congregation at Anandapur. Nearly 60 people, mainly women and children since the men are working in the fields, are waiting to welcome us, all dressed in their beautiful best. We are honoured with flowers and lots of food, and give several short messages of encouragement before we have to be on the road again. The next day there are now strikes in Barisal and we are advised to stay put for another day. That evening we meet with a little group of Christians in the hotel. It's a delight for me to talk about the resurrection for short while (with John translating into Bengali). Then they surprise me with a cake and gift celebrating my birthday two days earlier. I



am struck with what a privilege it is to be visiting brothers and sisters in Christ in one of the most challenging and more remote environments in which to be a minority Christian.

On Friday we set out early to visit two rural congregations I haven't seen before. In both locations, we were met with a large group of beautifully dressed and prepared people where at



least half were children. At Batajor (above) we were again presented with flowers, a welcome song and a graceful dance performed by a lovely young lady. We have brought Bengali Bibles to distribute to literate adults who have never owned one. You should see the delight in their faces (see picture at right above). In return we offered short encouraging messages and appreciation for their hospitality. Then we drove on more rough and narrow roads to a river where we had to cross over in a small boat and walk the last kilometre or two to the meeting place of the Bagdha congregation. It's amazing and humbling that God has chosen to plant congregations of poor yet very responsive Bengali people, in remote rural villages amongst the rice fields and rivers in the flood plains of southern Bangladesh – and given us the wonderful opportunity of serving them. The leaven is doing its work.



Later at the BEA mission centre in the village of Sathsumulia, we were honoured with a shower of flower petals as we entered the facility through an honour guard of members and workers. We are led to the chapel building for a short service and welcome ceremony. The compound is a hive of activity with construction under way for the new building that replaces the old original “Canadian” building which had to be demolished after it was condemned due to cyclone damage. A large part of the compound is taken up with piles of building materials as construction has reached the second level of the three-story building. It will stand as a partner to the Herman L. Hoeh building and will provide much needed facilities and accommodation for the training of nurses' aides and gospel workers, and other building fund, our specific thanks go to the Canadian churches for their special contribution to replace the original building they first funded many years ago.



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BEA has designed and is constructing a facility that is cyclone-resistant and sits above the local flood level so activities are not curtailed during the monsoon rains of the wet season and with flooding often associated with the not infrequent cyclones (hurricanes) coming inland from the Bay of Bengal.



I cannot overstate the urgency for this building to be finished and construction completely funded so that the needs of GCI's mission efforts through BEA can be fully met again. It's a very worthy cause if you are considering where to utilise funds dedicated to the work of the spreading the gospel.

On the return to Dhaka, we met with about 30 gospel workers from several of our groups so John Biswas could have opportunity to discuss plans for the year ahead, evaluate projects and assess the means to continue the outreach and evangelism in a wise and appropriate way in a most challenging environment. I encouraged them to let their already significant light shine (rather than their horn sound) and that patience is clearly one of God's key qualities applicable to our involvement.



For more information, please contact Dr. John N. Biswas at:
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Bangladesh News Update: Anti-government Strike.



Houses, business shops, and minorities' places of worship set ablaze.



Report - More than 185 people got killed, thousands wounded.



Violence - protesting for blasphemy law.