

Day 7: Reflection, recuperation and Kamlapur train station!

After our super 'full on', busy and very exciting day yesterday - today was all about reflection and recuperation for Catriona and I.

Sometimes it is only when you step back from a situation or environment do you fully appreciate the true reality of what it is.

Dhaka is a crazy city. It is jam packed with the most hospitable, interesting and friendly people I have been lucky enough to meet. It is also full of some of the worst poverty and suffering I have ever seen.

Bangladeshi people are very proud people. They do not seek massive handouts from international sources, rather they seek to be empowered 'to help themselves'. The eagerness and willingness of the trainees yesterday really brought this fact home to us.

Whilst at Khokon's house yesterday evening (he is one of the founding members of Photoshisu) we were shown the library of literature and knowledge he has accumulated over many years. Khokon believes that 'with great fortune comes great responsibility'. He uses his own money to print and copy books to distribute to those who would otherwise have no other access to them (this one among many other inspirational philanthropic projects he is involved in). The books included those on educational techniques, sociological theories, inspirational biographies, poetry and great works of literature. As he so aptly put it: 'I want to provide the people with the tools and knowledge to empower themselves'.

Yesterday was a day of prayer. One of the 5 pillars of Islam is 'giving Zakat' which means 'supporting the needy'. As such the streets were filled with many more cases of suffering than we had come across previously. These included maimed and seriously injured people, some with eyes gauged out and others with lost or severely damaged limbs. Some had bodies riddled with rickets and polio. It was hard not to be acutely affected by the suffering we witnessed.

We are so lucky in the UK. We have a wonderful service - the NHS - that is free and available for all those who need help. We are also provided with vaccines to protect us against polio and other preventable diseases. The people we see daily here have nothing and if fate deals them a blow then they have nowhere to turn and no medical service to care for them. How fortunate Catriona, Christopher and I felt yesterday. How lucky that by being born in a country nearly 4000 miles away we don't have the worry and fear of what would happen to us if severe illness or accident should strike. A sobering thought indeed.

By Menna Cook

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Today I visited the area around the notorious Kamlapur train station, the area that Mina has blogged about in previous trips. I took a local bus from Farmgate to Kamlapur, I was helped onto the correct bus by a lovely young man taking food to his father in hospital and was then forced to sit down amongst the crush on the bus by a man who demanded I take his seat. Two people in the U.K had given me money to buy food for children who live on the streets whilst I'm here and so that was my mission for this afternoon. Initially I armed myself with bananas and singaras (large samosas) and water. On the road leading to the station I saw a small girl, around 3 years old with her mother sitting on the pavement dressed in a tiny pair of dirty ripped shorts. I gave them some food and the monkey teddy from one of the wash bags. The girl was so happy, she wrapped the monkey around her upper body and around her neck and ran around playing with it. A cycle rickshaw pulled up and she kept peek-a-booing it through the slit in the canvas at the back! A simple donation from our supporters made this girl's day. A boy between the age of 7-11 appeared and stood in front of me completely naked, he didn't request anything but just stood and looked.

I went to the concourse outside the station and met a boy of 10 years old, he kept saying 'Amma' (Mother in Bengali) and sticking his tongue outside as if to say she was dead. The locals were very bemused and kept trying to usher me away from the boy and also from the roadside with the little girl, trying to persuade me that a café would be a cleaner and less dusty and smelly place to sit! I tried to spend some time with him, give him some affection, some smiles and also some physical attention by placing my hand on his shoulder. Attachment specialist Louise Bomber from Brighton promotes the use of touching on the shoulder as a safe place to touch but also an area that calms, soothes and regulates the body. Everyone was very appreciative, shook my hand and gave praise to God.

When I moved over to a different area, a covered walkway on approach to the main station area there were lots of groups of people some sitting down and some lying on mats and old concrete bags, I continued to give out the food but at this point lots of people started to crowd around very close and one man started to get very angry and shout in my face. At this point I left and calmly walked away, he followed me blowing a whistle in my ear, as I continued to calmly walk away he disappeared.

Thinking back now I guess it's most likely that he had mental health issues, as a group this is a topic of discussion that has come up time and time again over the last week. A well-dressed man had come up to me and told me he was telling me I was mad. Catriona and Menna have suggested that he might have been 'translating' any possible problems on to me.

As I walked through the door of the school this afternoon the paper lanterns made by children hanging from the ceiling started to blow, people started to wail outside, thunder followed and then the rain, the storm continued for the next few hours as the sky became angrier and louder. The electricity cut and remained out for around an hour just in time for dinner so my roommate Josh and I and some of the Jaago staff had dinner under mobile-phone torch light whilst the sky provided a very dramatic soundtrack. I had planned to finish on a positive note, Josh and I now

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have a working AC in our room, meaning sleep is a more likely possibility at night time but the back-up power is providing electricity only for the internet and the corridor light.... and as if by magic hey presto! The AC rumbles to life!! Hurray!

.... And after checking through what I've written the electricity has once again gone.....

Goodnight people, see you tomorrow for day 8.

Christopher Downie