

To the foreigner getting to the country fair in Bangladesh is an adventure in itself

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It is always amazing to find activities common to ours on the other side of the world.

To the "bideshi" (foreigner), just getting to the "mela" or country fair in Bangladesh may seem like a carnival adventure in itself. After a fairly easy journey from Dacca to Gaurnadi by bus and steamer, we faced a bone-jarring six miles to Agoljara by cycle rickshaw, then boarded a nervously overloaded, chugging old launch that seemed a relic of Disney's "Adventure Land," and put out into the hyacinth-laden canal, finally on our way.

Village side, there isn't any more eagerly awaited event among the people here than the mela. There are small local variety, consisting mainly of bauble-hawkers, misti (sweetmeat) vendors and maybe a traveling minstrel or two, but this one we were going to was in Gopalganj -- the month-long Khali Puja Festival.

After five lazy hours of coasting along the amiable waterway, passing still submerged but ripening paddy fields and the occasional shady straw-and-bamboo village cluster, we at last reached Gopalganj, our destination and seat of one of two subdivisions in Faridpur District. In spite of its relative political and economic importance, there are still no jeepable roads to connect it with the main centers of the country. The only access, as is still the case in many parts of Bangladesh, is by water.

We were fortunate to have our Bangladeshi friend with us, Ali Khan, who could explain a few things we were not familiar with and who reassured us when we discovered the natives' initial curiosity at seeing "bideshis".

And what a crowd! Thousands of people teemed among the waterfront streets, stalls, exhibits and other attractions.

Carnival atmosphere

Many feet kick up dust from the road which curls and settles thinly on the awnings and the deep green leaves of the trees overhead. The main carnival colors are pink, yellow, blue and red against a universal background of white, both in the stalls and the white clothing of the fairgoers. The whole scene is fresh and bright, but comfortably rural and natural, almost as if it had sprouted from the soil on its own in the proper season.

The main thing we had to decide was what to experience first. We chose eating. Things like shondesh, shingara, rashogola, shamosa, chom-chom, halua, doti, chanachur and their almost limitless variations and companion dishes -- swam before us like a dazzling subcontinental smorgasbord. Though the names and forms were alien to us, they still looked and smelled somehow familiar and detectable, and our choice

was hard.

Ali suggested we have sweets this time: doti, a kind of curd, and chom-chom, a brownish, elongated confection made of milk and sugar syrup. Magnificent! We finished it with a cup of Indian-style tea, three-quarters milk and sugar and one-fourth actual tea -- more similar to cocoa than the tea we were used to.

Handicrafts on view

After drinking, we moved on to view more. Handicrafts, a fast growing industry in Bangladesh, were present in dazzling assortment for us to sample. Baskets were lovely, lacey things made more for beauty than utility, though they could be considered sturdy enough for ordinary use. All shapes and sizes of them hung from the stalls like multi-colored fruits on one gay vine.

Other stalls sported wooden crafts: Exquisite tea wood bowls, spoons, ladles, serving dishes, trays, elephants, water birds and other figures of all sizes, as well as more purely utilitarian items such as paper weights, cutting boards, rolling pins, work stools, mortars and pestles and stirring spoons. At one central market we found clay potteries of all descriptions, which are the common every day utensil for the average household: pots for cooking rice, water jars, serving bowls, flowerpots, "ghotis" for the latrine, big jars for storing "pulses" or the seeds for next year's crop. The pottery industry, in contrast to basketry, is more functional rather than aesthetically oriented, and the products all have a rough appearance, so some effort is being made to encourage artisans in clay to excel and take advantage of the rise of the handicraft industry.

Hindu gods and goddesses

There were traditional Hindu craftsmen who work in clay. In their stalls we see Siva, Khali and other Hindu gods and goddesses, along with dog-eyed cattle, horses, village men and women, toy boats, lions and vases, all painted delicately with circles, lines, borders, flowers and other designs in red, blue, white and yellow. These items were favorites with the children.

Again we stopped to eat. Bangladeshis are always game to treat their guests to the local fare. This time Ali bought us shamosa and shingara. Shamosa is a shell of flour much like a fried tortilla, filled with ground goat meat, onions and very hot chilies. The shingara is similar, only with a soft shell and filled with fried potatoes and other vegetables, and again, the inevitable chilies that make their way into everything. Topped off with more of that thick, sweet "cha" (tea) we were beginning to find our favorite activity at the meal. Jute is the main cash crop of Bangladesh, and handicrafts made of jute fiber are by far the biggest items in the handicrafts industry. In this mela we found everything from jute handbags to dresses and "Punjabi" shirts made of jute cloth.

Jute's coarseness gives the handicrafts a rough look, which if worked by skillful hands is appealingly rustic, but in less skilled hands is a little crude. Evidenced in beautifully wrought macramé wall hangings, carpets and mats, planters in native motifs or relatively simple placemats or bags, jute crafts are the star attraction of the saleable items.

Hand-operated Ferris wheel

But there was more to do at the mela than visit the stalls. Toward evening, the focus began to shift to entertainment. Do you want to ride the Ferris wheel? Yes, even here they have one, though it's not exactly like the one at the County Fair back home. In the states, we had hydroelectric or nuclear power; in Bangladesh, a land of 80 million people, manpower is the ultimate resource. This Ferris wheel was a wooden contraption spun by the backs of two village lads who had all the cheek of a pair of Billy Bigalows. Creaking, it slowly turned into action, with our two "carneys" jumping up and throwing their weight onto each arm as it came into reach. Faster, faster, until the girls and the children squealed with delight.

It was nearly sunset and time for the circus to begin. On our way there, Ali took us to enjoy a delicacy of the Middle East Central Asia: the pan leaf. This is the leaf of a betel vine, ordinarily filled with chopped nuts of the shupari palm. Taken with a lick of lime paste, it's probably more commonly used among Bangladeshis than chewing gum in the West. Normally a simple affair costing 10 to 15 poise, there are pan gourmets here who can concoct a masterpiece that will run upwards of 2 taka. We moderated, and bought 1 taka creations. The abundant juice has a soothing effect on the stomach and is said to aid digestion. For this reason it is normally taken after meals. As we passed one of the bauble vendors, we caught a glimpse of ourselves in one of his little mirrors and saw the characteristic red mouth so common among the pan-chewing villagers. The tell-tale sign drew audible giggles from some passersby.

Under the 'Big Top'

Now we hurried to the "Big Top." This was a Dacca company with a one-ring tent and most of the standard acts we know and love in the West. One man skillfully rode a bicycle on a tight rope -- no easy task with the heavy, clumsy Bangladeshi model cycle he used. We applauded wildly at his prowess, but became a little embarrassed to discover that applause isn't a common practice among the local people, who looked on in silence.

There were trapeze and acrobatic acts through most of the show, performed with varying degrees of gracefulness by children or muscular men and women. As in any circus, the highlight was the clowns. These clowns weren't the type we're used to, with oversized shoes and big red noses, but they could perform their art with even greater skill. With only a slightly different costume to distinguish them from the other performers, or the audience, for that matter, they cavorted and spoofed about the ring, having narrow escapes with the actors, or playing practical jokes on each other. Invariably, at the close of each act, the "straight" performer got to pop them in the jaw.

Actually, the clowns made the show and were able to out-perform all others in the troupe in every kind of act. Just to watch the clowns by themselves would be entertainment enough. The program ended with the entrance of an enormous Indian elephant that literally filled the tent. One could not help feeling a little claustrophobic.

We went home after this to Ali's place where, as guests, he served us spicy small-grain rice fried in "ghee" or clarified butter. This is one of the best fares we could be treated to in Bangladesh, and we were encouraged by Ali and his family to gorge ourselves. This we did without any problem. But just as we were prepared to settle back for a peaceful evening (it was now past 11:00) and reflect on our pleasant day, Ali announced that the main event was still to come. It was time for the "natok," or drama.

Jam session

So we returned to the mela grounds and took our seats inside a huge tent erected as a theatre. The play was supposed to begin at midnight. By 1:00 a.m. it showed signs of getting organized. First the band performed. The Bangladeshi band is an unlikely conglomeration of different instruments: trumpet, village fiddle, lute like "dutara" cymbals, drums of all kinds, bells, and about anything that can make a melodious noise. They were assembled more for the sake of diversity than harmony, but the natural talents of the players pulled together a surprisingly unified and stimulating "jam session." And their stamina was a minor miracle: they continued non-stop until nearly 6:00 a.m.

The dramatic troupes who perform at these melas are usually comprised of Hindus, and their themes are largely taken from the "Mahabharata," or "Ramayana," the two great Hindu classics from which most of the traditional stories and mythologies are derived. The actors portray Bramha, Durga, Khali, Narayan, Protima and other great or divine personages, and the speech is so grand, the manners, so glorious.

THs particular drama depicted the events leading up to the marriage of Brahma, one of three main Hindu gods. It was filled with intrigue, battles, love and virtue, and even if the language was alien, the universal message could still reach us as it did the audience; the ultimate victory of Good over Evil.

We made it through the night, dropping off to sleep once or twice, and proudly walked home with Ali in the light of the coming dawn. After some rest and the traditionally light breakfast of the Bangladeshis, we began our long journey back to Dacca, this time by country boat since the launch was much too crowded with return passengers. As our boat slid forward to the gentle thrust of the boatman's long pole, we heard the splash of water against the bow and felt the gentle rocking of the waves.

Reclining on the deck, we reflected on the heart of the people of this land we were passing through, so broad, so green, so intense, so still. We just shared one aspect of their life experience, from the fruits of their labors to their ultimate hope and view of the meaning of life. There was a deep, active, heartfelt intensity in their simple faces, and there was much more to them than their simple lives indicated.

This is a land on the verge of happening, every moment, in every season. We felt their hope and confidence and shared their proud dreams of the future.