

January 30, 2006

Day One

We have arrived! At about 4:30 this morning our plane touched down in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) country representative, Jerry Shenk, said he heard a plane pass over the house about that time of morning and thought that it must be us arriving. It is still dark, and all we can see are foggy outlines, but immediately we can feel that the air is different. We are in the tropics and the air feels moist and a little heavy. Suraiya, artist and designer from the Dhaka office, is here to greet us, along with two MCC drivers and vehicles

On our schedule, it's already day three and while we are just arriving, the journey so far has had some significant moments. Karen Taylor, from Ten Thousand Villages Richmond, bought a cup of fair trade coffee in the London airport! That caused a stir of excitement. Also a group of 14 women traveling to Dhaka, Bangladesh captures the attention of numerous passengers and flight attendants. Already we have had many conversations about who we are and what we do. One traveler, heading for Chennai (Madras), India, was delighted to hear that there was a Ten Thousand Villages store in Baltimore, where he lived. Another passenger, who was just listening in, said she already shops at the store in Richmond.

We directed our flight attendant, an Italian who lives in Glasgow, to the fair trade store, "Aarong", in Dhaka and also told him to look up the fair trade shop in Glasgow when he gets home. On British Airways, flight attendants collect passengers' unwanted foreign currency for UNICEF. Here in Dhaka they regularly visit a UNICEF sponsored orphanage. It is heartwarming to meet others who share our passion for making a difference.

Upon our arrival at the YWCA Guesthouse, we find ourselves assigned to a large dormitory room. A group of Norwegians decided to stay an extra day, so some temporary arrangements are needed until our rooms are cleaned and ready. The beds look mighty tempting and after breakfast, we stretch out for a quick rest. All sense of time has escaped us. If we didn't have a watch, none of us could guess what time of day it might be.

Elizabeth, from the Prokritee (handicrafts) office, is our guide for the short walk to the MCC office. We are warmly greeting and offered our first cup of tea (cha). Derek d'Silva, long time MCC administrator for the MCC Bangladesh program, gives us a history lesson of MCC's involvement in Bangladesh and talks about how handicrafts have been a significant part of MCC's program of reaching many desperately needy people over the past 35 years. We hear stories of war and floods along with stories of how the work of MCC has made a profound impact and improved the lives of many people.

The Prokritee office is just a few blocks away. Prokritee is the handicrafts division of the MCC program. It is progressing towards becoming more independent of MCC

although the spirit of being part of the same family is strong. We are introduced to staff, poke our noses into the sample room and then it's time for lunch with the staff. After lunch, we hear from Sajid, the director of Prokritee, who was also instrumental in the development of the many "Aarong" stores (it means "village fair") selling clothing and handicrafts in Bangladesh. Aarong has an export division, which also supplies some crafts to Ten Thousand Villages.

It's still our first day in Dhaka and already we head off on our first artisan visit. In what began as an outreach to young women in refugee camps in 1975, Shova Handicrafts still produces greeting cards with intricate artwork cut from wheat straw. There are presently 47 women and the management team includes several women who were among some of the first young girls to be employed back in 1977. Some of these women are still the only supporters of their families. Joanne, our tour leader, spent many hours working with these women way back in 1982-1985 when she was a marketing consultant with MCC. She and the manager, Badrun, smile and together remember some of the work they did together more than twenty years ago. The visit finishes with a cup of cha (tea). We were happy to do some quick shopping for cards and bookmarks and there are warm smiles all around as we complete our visit.

There's time before supper to go shopping at Aarong. It's a party in the clothing section as we try on these beautiful three piece outfits known as "Shelwar Chemise." A number of beautiful purchases are made before we head off to have dinner with Gerry and Ethel Shenk, the MCC country representatives who live nearby. They are welcoming hosts but we are weary guests. Eyes start to droop as dinner finishes and we take our jet-lagged bodies back to the Guesthouse. What a great first day!

Tomorrow includes a visit to one of the Jute Works' artisan groups...