

SUMMER 2006



SONGS OF BANGLADESH

... It was a hot and humid Thursday afternoon and I had just paid my rickshaw driver, (a small one seat buggy attached to a bicycle, one of the Bangladeshi versions of public transportation) and was walking up the alley to the Student Friendship Centre (SFC). I was very excited because I was about to have my second interview with a group of young Muslim and Hindu male students who had

formed a music group two months ago with one of the SFC staffworkers, the only believer present in the group.

I walked up several flights of stairs to the top apartment and took off my shoes before I went inside (as is the custom whenever you enter a house). The guys greeted me as I sat down on the floor and began to pull out my recorder, microphone, notebook and pen. They were seated on the floor in front of me in a semi-circle. One of the young men played the harmonium (a small organ that looks like a box) and the SFC staff-worker played the *tabla* (a low and high pitched pair of drums). This being our second interview, my objective was to record more of their music and ask follow up questions. They sang and played for me a mixture of folk music, popular music, what they called "spiritual songs", songs written to a particular deity, or to an unnamed deity so that it could be addressed to any particular god that one chose. After they finished each piece they explained the words to me. The poeticism and metaphoric images were rich with meaning, and I was touched by the depth of emotion that showed on their faces as they sang and talked about their music.

As we began to wrap up our time of music and sharing two hours later, I was getting up from the floor to leave when two of the young men approached me shyly asking me if I sang. I said that I did, and then again shyly they asked me to sing for them. I thought of standing and singing (since that is how the performer in me would do it), but since they sit to perform I did the same. Taking my cue they sat down on the floor too. I told them I would sing an American song that was both a "spiritual" song and a folk song (using their classifications). I began singing Amazing Grace for them, and as I was singing the first verse I thought *I need to sing all three verses, so that I can explain the meaning to them at the end, just like they have done for me when they sang.*

When I finished I asked them if they had understood the words. They had not, and as text is very important in most Bangladeshi music they wanted to know the meaning of the song. So I explained to them that this is a song about God's grace, his kindness and compassion, and how God forgives us even though we don't deserve it. How once we were blind, but because of God's grace, we can now see; and once we were lost but God has found us. As I was speaking I began to see the song in a new light, I told them the second verse is about how hard life is (and life in Bangladesh is truly hard, a fight for survival), and that there are things that try to trap us and keep us away from God's grace. But it is God who gives us the strength to live through life for him. And then when we die, we know that by God' grace we can go to be with him in heaven, to worship him and be with him forever.

When I was finished in my mind *I was stunned that I was sitting in one of the most densely populated Muslim nations in the world and I was telling a group of Hindu and Muslim students about the grace of God, and they were smiling back at me in response! God had arranged such an appropriate context for me to speak so openly, because you see Friends, here in Bangladesh there is so much that you can say in a song, that you are not allowed to say otherwise.* I was so thankful for the opportunity to share with them, not only my music, but also my faith in a way that was culturally appropriate... it was wonderful!



MY MENTOR,
DR. KING
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