



The **Methodist** Church



Anglicans in
World Mission



Bangladesh Bits

Letter 19. February 2009



Dipty Linda & James Pender

*Advisors with The Church
of Bangladesh Social
Development Programme*

C/o The Director
Christian Mission Hospital
Rajshahi 6000
PO: Rajshahi Court,
Rajshahi District
BANGLADESH

Dear Friends

It's been a while since I've written but now we've settled back into Bangladesh let me fill you in on life in Rajshahi. Yes, as you may have noticed in the last letter we are no longer in Meherpur but Rajshahi, although we will continue support to CBSDP-Meherpur and in fact since being back I have already visited it half a dozen times! It is stimulating to be in a new place and we are now busy getting involved with the work of CBSDP-Rajshahi. So let us tell you about our new home Rajshahi.....

Rajshahi is a small city about the size of Edinburgh (sorry Scots but compared to Dhaka's 20 million they are both rather small), with lots of historic old buildings (another connection with Edinburgh) rather than Dhaka's high rise skyline. It is also very peaceful, with few cars and mostly rickshaws plying the roads, with a few pony and traps, and the occasional red double-decker bus to remind me of London (though they have a lot more dents here). In fact Linda found the lack of noise and mass of people a little unsettling at first (she grew up in Dhaka). I suppose the sound of roaring tigers at night didn't help too much, but don't worry we felt a lot safer once we realised the sounds were coming from the nearby zoo.



Even the roads tell you to relax in Rajshahi (Photo: Neil Stubbens)

In the Greek language the word *oikos* denotes house, household or home, and we love our flat on the top floor of a three story building in a very green Church of Bangladesh compound, it is a nice size, with a balcony that looks out at canopy level at the large fruit trees at the front. One of Linda's younger sisters Angela, loved leaning out to pick the small black sour fruit when she visited. I much prefer the delicious mangos from the other trees around the flat! It is in a good location with a nice government hotel to the south, the mission hospital to the north, base of an elite police unit to the east and church to the west. So we don't have to worry about spiritual support, security, medical needs or even accommodation if a large group of you come to visit!



Our flat (top floor, left side) in Rajshahi

The word *oikos* can also mean 'community' and it is the friendship of the small community on the compound from hospital staff, to the priests family, to the family of the caretaker/groundsman, that has made us feel so welcome and helped us to settle. This has been especially the case with the mission hospital director Andrew and his wife Bonnie who live just below us, in fact if we do not visit their flat for a couple of days they begin to get worried.

The word *oikos* in the New Testament (which was written mostly in Greek) also has an expansive meaning that includes notions of, 'nation' or 'world community' and in an increasingly connected globalised world is very relevant to us. In fact as 'mission partners' part of our role is to connect churches in the UK and friends around the world with people in Bangladesh. Hopefully to build a meaningful solidarity for you with the people in Bangladesh through hearing their stories and finding out how your financial, friendship and prayer support has made a difference to their lives. This is very different from simply donating impersonally to a big development organisation, as the relationship that develops is much deeper, holistic and two-way. For on this side of the world through hearing about you through us, people in Bangladesh also develop a link in the other direction and when visitors have come it has often been said by my Bangladeshi colleagues to them: "Because of your support we feel that we are not alone in this world, that you are there for us".

A concept that has its root in the word *oikos* is the word 'ecumenical' in the Greek *oikoumene* meaning 'the whole inhabited universe' and today tends to mean different Christian churches working together. It is our joy to be connected to so many different brands of church from Anglican, to Presbyterian, to Reformed, to Congregational, to New Church, to Baptist as jointly supported mission partners and the friends who support us through prayer and giving to the mission agencies extend further to Pentecostal, to Catholic and to Orthodox traditions. As people who believe that the Christian family should stop petty squabbling and work together to see the world transformed in a positive direction it is great to part of a united church; for the English Presbyterian Mission's churches in the Rajshahi area united with churches of two Anglican missions the Oxford Mission (centred on Barisal in the south and Haluaghat in the north) and the Church

Mission Society (Meherpur) to form the Church of Bangladesh which recognised that the denomination differences were a European invention and largely irrelevant to being a small Christian minority in an independent Bangladesh where unity was more useful.

The Church of Bangladesh Social Development Programme (CBSDP) takes this concept of *oikoumene* a step further and the Bengali motto *manus manus e jonno* (there is even a famous song that we sing) is often used which literally translates as ‘human for human’. Recognising that all people on this earth are connected and are brothers and sisters and that we should work

with and for all to establish freedom for the oppressed, healing for the sick and justice for the poor, as Jesus Christ eloquently articulated in his ‘Nazareth Manifesto’ in Luke 4:18. In that sense in Rajshahi the CBSDP is working to uplift a very diverse group of people (Rajshahi its much more religiously and racially diverse than Meherpur) from:

Muslim Bengalis, to Hindu Untouchables, to a small but fast growing Christian Santali community, to Hindu tribal Oroans, and to mainly nature worshipping Paharis and Santals.



Santal boys doing a traditional dance at a church meeting

Another concept derived from *oikos* is ‘ecology’ in the Greek *oikos-logos* meaning ‘the study of the household’ and today means study about the natural world. Ecological study has been important in drawing our attention to the threats to biodiversity and human society from damage to the environment. In Genesis 2:15 we are told ‘the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to do work in it and take care of it’. Sadly humans have done a lot of working but much less caring as ecology has been neglected.

The whole of Rajshahi Division used to be Sal forest with the originally migratory ancient Santal, Oroan and Pahari communities practising shifting cultivation and hunter-gatherer lifestyles. However, as settled agriculture pioneered in this area by cultures from central Asia and India spread eastwards and as these colonists settled and mixed with native populations the trees began to be cut down, intensifying as the British Empire introduced large scale commercial logging. Clearance has continued up to the present day so there are now no natural forests left in the districts in which CBSDP works. This was the first step that began to lead to a dryer and drought prone environment. Deforestation in India and in the Himalayas from where Bangladesh’s rivers originate has further reduced water flowing through the area and regional weather patterns, while more recently massive dams in India now divert roughly 60% of water from the tributaries of the Ganges river (known in Bangladesh as the ‘Padma’) to irrigation and the largest the Farraka Barrage on the Ganges itself was shown to reduce average monthly flow of the remaining water into Bangladesh by 86%.



Boat on the River Ganges during the dry season

I love to walk by the river, which is only 5 minutes away and its good for birdwatching too, but when I recently took a visitor with me, we could not even see the main channel from the bank, only sand and mud! Irrigation can be helpful but ground water levels are falling fast and last week a villager told me that the water table in their village had fallen 40 feet in only 2 years, so their well was now useless. As climate change will reduce rainfall and river flow in the dry season even further, one of my main areas of work will be looking how to help communities cope with more frequent droughts, in terms of crop cultivation, drinking water supply and through making the environment friendlier through tree plantation.

A further concept derived from *oikos* is 'economy' in the Greek *oikos-nomos* meaning 'the rules of the house' and today meaning the process of buying, selling and making a living. Especially in light of the difficult situation in which they are surviving CBSDP-Rajshahi's focus on developing livelihoods is a lifeline. One of the first things I did here was to organise a survey of the people we work with and compare it with government data and villages in which we do not yet work: The results were very illuminating and the increase in incomes was striking for those that CBSDP had given small microcredit loans (at low interest) and various types of vocational training, compared with villages outside our working areas. Even land ownership had risen above the national average as people invested in their futures, while use of compost which retains soil moisture (as well as emitting less greenhouse gases than chemical fertilisers) was markedly higher after training, and the numbers of household/kitchen gardens that improve nutrition and give 'food security' had also risen as a result of their promotion by CBSDP staff.

In an area where now most of the ethnic minority Santals are now farm labourers working on a 'per day' basis with no job security and where many are landless or with very little land, having lost it due to coercion, trickery or simply due to a migratory lifestyle without a traditional concept of 'ownership'; as the agriculturalist Bengalis increased, CBSDP-Rajshahi has prioritised this vulnerable community. Due to the national language being Bengali and they speaking in their own Santali tongue in their villages, they are further disadvantaged. As a result CBSDP has been running schools where its teachers who speak Santali can explain concepts in the children's own language when they have difficulty understanding the Bengali curriculum. Linda is now involved in pioneering an approach which would use much more of the Santali language in a more formalised pattern where education would start in Santali and then gradually phase into Bengali in order to further increase academic performance and to preserve the Santal culture. She is

also working with SIL, Bangladesh to develop a broader countrywide movement for the Santal empowerment focussing on their language.

Thank God...

- For good fun and fellowship as we visited all our supporting churches last year
- For opportunities to catch up with friends in the UK
- That we have settled back into life in Bangladesh
- For peaceful and fair elections in Bangladesh

Please pray...

- Please pray for the complete recovery of my Father's sight after a recent stroke, as since the wedding it has deteriorated a little
- Pray that the Lord would keep watch on Linda's mum who has been quite sick lately, pray she makes a full recovery and Linda has God's peace.
- That God would guide James in developing the Climate Change Programme of the CBSDP
- That Linda would settle into the CBSDP, and be able to have positive impact on it's work
- God would bless our attempts to introduce MLE into Rajshahi schools and empower the Santal community focussing on their language.
- Pray that the effects of the Stop the Traffik networks in the UK, Bangladesh and elsewhere would be successful.
- Also, pray for our colleagues in the CBSDP, that God would supply his wisdom and blessing to their life and work.
- That I would have time and motivation to improve my Bengali language skills
- That we will be able to wisely develop the arsenic mitigation project.
- That the love of God would really touch the hearts of the men, women & girls we are working with and that we would be effective in our activities to uplift them.

James & Linda