

Letter from South Asia (Bangladesh, India and Nepal)

Rob Gallagher, QSAIG, 22nd April 2016

This is a note for QSAIG members and others interested in South Asia, with some news items from recent visits to Bangladesh, India and Nepal.

Bangladesh

Visiting Dhaka in January, I was a bit nervous because of some recent events in the country. In particular, in autumn 2015 a couple of foreigners had been killed for no apparent reason, and several others attacked. One was an Italian NGO worker, who was shot dead in Dhaka (Gulshan) while out jogging. That was in September. In November, a Japanese man was shot and killed in Rangpur while riding his bicycle. Since then, there have been other attacks around the country targeting religious minorities, particularly imams and priests of the Shia, Hindu and Christian religions, and some have been killed.

The attacks greatly alarmed the expatriate community. Japanese and Australian volunteers were withdrawn, and in Dhaka expatriates were advised to travel only in cars (a difficult requirement if you don't have one!). I felt rather nervous walking around – there seemed to be fewer foreigners out and about on the streets, and you felt quite conspicuous as a white person. Since then, although there have been some isolated attacks and threats against religious minorities, the threat level seems to have reduced somewhat.

Who was behind the attacks? I haven't read in the newspaper whether the perpetrators were caught, though some arrests were made. The most likely explanation seems to be that it's some form of 'copy-cat' attack, copying other countries and trying to stir up trouble for the government and raise the temperature generally. From a personal point of view, it was the first time I had ever felt nervous moving around Dhaka, which is a sad thing. But as the days went by, I relaxed a bit. I also met a young Dutch person who was doing research on rickshaw-pullers. She is about 6 feet 3 inches tall, very blond hair and very conspicuous! She didn't have a car, and couldn't do her research if she didn't travel around by rickshaw and bus, so she just got on with it. After meeting her, I felt more determined about moving around normally and 'carrying on as usual' (to borrow a phrase!).

India

I worked in north-east India (Aizawl, state capital of Mizoram) for a few months on a transport project. Sandwiched between Bangladesh and Burma, it is a far 'outpost' of India. To reach the rest of the country you either have to fly over Bangladesh to Kolkata, or else travel in a great circle of about 750km to the north via Guwahati. Surprisingly, people in Dhaka seem to know very little about Mizoram, although it is only 240km (150 miles) away as the crow flies. The country is separated by the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and there are no direct road links (though plenty of migrant Bangladeshis are working in Aizawl on building construction).

I was working for a Bangalore-based firm and my colleagues were all from India. Like me, they also felt themselves 'expatriates' in Mizoram, as the local population is from the Mizo ethnic group and quite different to mainland Indians in culture and looks – they are more like South-East Asians. They are also mostly Christian, and in some ways I felt more at home than my Indian colleagues.

Working with my nice and very capable colleagues, I got to hear plenty of Indian politics when we chatted in our spare time. A few items struck me. One was the growth of intolerance that seems to

be affecting India, as in so many other countries. Bans on the eating of beef are being introduced in a number of states, despite sizeable religious minorities who do not have the same constraints. (Even in Bangladesh there is no prohibition of eating pork, and it can be purchased commercially though discreetly). In central India a Muslim villager had been beaten to death by a mob because they thought he was eating beef: it turned out to be goat's meat. Worst of all, when interviewed by the media the Indian premier didn't explicitly condemn the attack.

The T-20 cricket World Cup was recently held in India (and England were beaten in the final by the West Indies). An issue arose because the Pakistan team would not travel to India unless they were given written guarantees by the Indian Government about their safety. On the other hand, the Indian Government's position was that all teams would be looked after, and there was no reason why any one nation should be given special assurances. It looked like Pakistan would not participate, but the situation was saved by the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, who is no friend of the ruling BJP party. She said come and stay in Kolkata and the West Bengal State Government will guarantee safety. She put it in writing too, so the Pakistan team came after all (but lost to India in the group stage). This highlighted for me the extreme tension and mistrust that still pervades India-Pakistan relations, although they are effectively cousins, if not brothers and sisters.

Nepal

Through work I also visited Nepal briefly in October 2015. The country was literally in crisis, due an economic blockade imposed (but not officially declared) by India. The underlying issue was the new Nepal Constitution, which had taken years to prepare and was finally adopted in September 2015. It included sections that did not suit ethnic groups in the south-east of the country, close to India. This area (the Torai region) contains many people who have migrated from India, especially Bihar. India and Nepal have an 'open border' policy, and people are free to move from one country to another, and even live there. However, people in the Torai region felt the new constitution marginalised them, and agitated for change. With state elections looming in Bihar, the Indian Government supported the local demands and imposed an unofficial blockade on goods entering or leaving Nepal. India is Nepal's only outlet, and the latter's vulnerability was sorely exposed. Oil supplies started to run out and traffic in Khatmandu was reduced to a trickle. The Torai region became a no-go area for motor vehicles, which would be burnt if they tried to run the blockade.

I felt it was unfortunate behaviour by India towards a small and friendly neighbour (29 million people in Nepal and 1.3 billion in India), and highlighted how power politics seems to dominate behaviour everywhere.

Six months earlier (April 2015) Nepal had been hit by a major earthquake and several aftershocks. Over 8,000 people had died, particularly in the Ghorka region, and hundreds of thousands had been made homeless. Some historic sites in the Khatmandu Valley were flattened. I believe that Quakers had sent help through some known local NGO's. When I arrived in Khatmandu, I was surprised that there were no visible signs of an earthquake. Admittedly, I did not travel around the city much, and when I travelled out it was to the south-east, in the opposite direction to the earthquake. But I was told by a Nepalese colleague that one of the worst effects of the earthquake was economic – loss of employment due to businesses being closed or bankrupted by the damage. On the other hand, the same colleague told me that the Nepali diaspora had come to the rescue in a big way, and through their help (remittances from overseas Nepalis) had averted the worst of the economic crisis. So India's unofficial blockade could not have come at a worse time.