

WHO GUARDS

THE GUARDIANS?

Nick Redmayne journeys to the hill country of Bangladesh, to discover a different vision of an often troubled country



Woman, boatman and goat on the banks of Kaptai Lake - whose waters lie over farmland flooded in the 1960s



INSIDE ASIA

In 1971 George Harrison and Ravi Shankar's *The Concert For Bangladesh* provided the soundtrack for the independence of south Asia's newest state. Unfortunately unwelcome bonus tracks featured the 1970 Bhola cyclone, which claimed 500,000 lives, and a short but brutal liberation war that accessed all areas as the country descended into a charnel house of atrocity.

Bangladesh's short history has continued to play out with periods of no news adding resonance to the next apparently inevitable disaster. However, there is another Bangladesh - one that you get to after a lolling, six-hour journey on the sleeper train east from Dhaka's traffic jams and the populous rural lowlands, via the early morning haze and traffic snarls of Chittagong.

At the tail-end of the Himalayas, bordering India and Burma, the highlands of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) turn perceptions of Bangladesh on their head. Here, the gilded stupas of Buddhist temples compete for custom with austere mosque minarets. Ancient forests and

A tribal woman prepares a meal at her home in the Hill Tracts (top); gigging for Bangladesh in 1971 (right, above)



land management techniques replace ubiquitous rice paddies and the Chakma and Marma people stand out from the country's majority Bengalis - with their Tibeto-Burmese heritage they simply look different.

Following the partition of India, despite an almost exclusively non-Muslim population, geography determined that CHT fell under the control of East Pakistan. An undeclared policy promoting Bengali settlement was instituted; indigenous tenure was effectively equated to a vestige of colonial rule. The Kaptai Dam project, completed in 1962, submerged approximately 40 per cent of CHT's cultivable

land and displaced over 100,000 people without adequate compensation. Independence saw a new constitution attempt to impose Bengali identity on non-Bengali Bangladeshis, compounding alienation felt by tribal people.

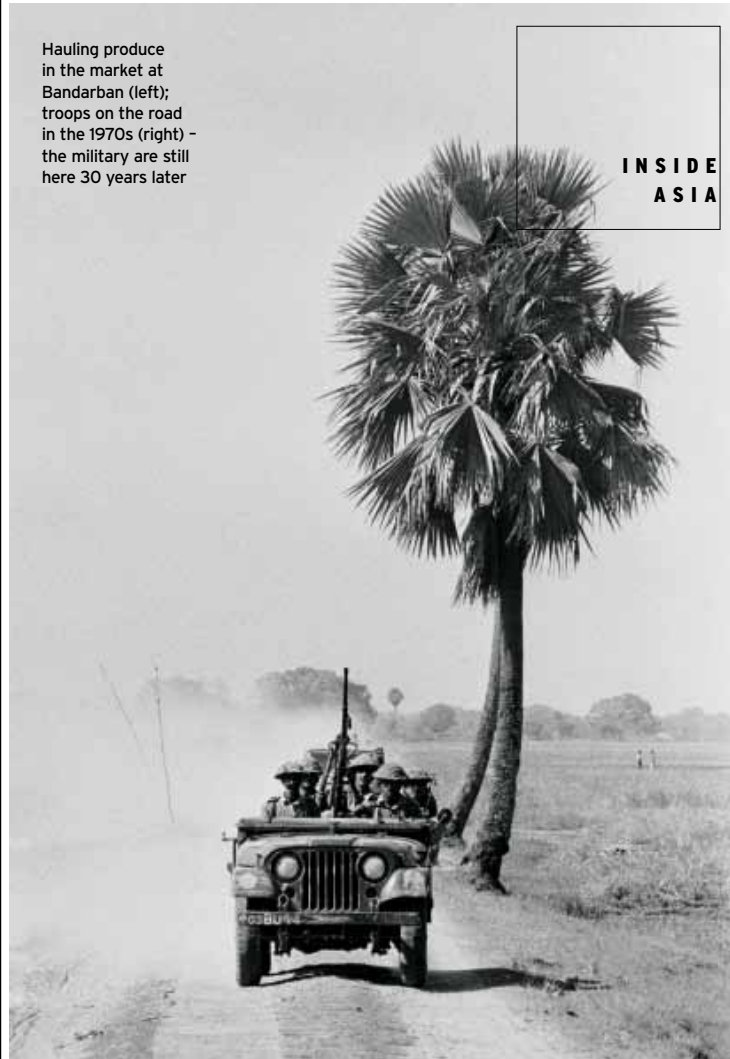
Political impotence led to an armed insurgency by the Shanti

Bahini ('Peace Force'). Attacks on settlers resulted in militarisation of the region by troops operating occasionally beyond political control. The 1997 peace accord gave CHT 'autonomy within Bangladesh' but over a decade later that is still to be fully implemented. Kidnappings of both Bengali and foreign nationals have occurred as recently as June 2007, though the motives and identities of the perpetrators remain unclear.

Currently travel to CHT requires special 'permissions', which must be applied for in advance, and foreigners are obliged to have armed guards. At the first checkpoint I encounter questions ►

AFP, Corbis

ADS



Hauling produce in the market at Bandarban (left); troops on the road in the 1970s (right) – the military are still here 30 years later

INSIDE ASIA

similar to those I have received from every Bangladeshi I've met so far. 'What's your country?' is the opening gambit, but this time the tone is distinctly authoritarian. We are assigned an escort, a whole truckload of soldiers no less, which precedes us in a circuitous route around the local town, evidently taking in as many domestic errands as they can possibly include. After a number of steep switchbacks, accompanied by the grinding engine noise of a military lorry, we arrive at The Guide Tours' Hillside Resort.

Here, a delightfully calm and breezy enclave of seven indigenous-style bungalows caters to an even mix of Bengali tourists and foreign workers, all seeking relief from the lowland mêlée. The hills over which the resort looks may not be huge, but the mere existence of a remote and sparsely inhabited upland in one of the world's most densely populated, and flood-prone countries, is in itself a revelation.

Also a revelation is the fact that all excursions by foreigners beyond the

resort's perimeter are accompanied by Bangladeshi soldiers. The resort's manager, Robin Barua, a rare Bengali Buddhist, says: 'Since 2004 the situation has improved and at the same time new roads have improved transport. Some government people are thinking there's more of a problem with foreigners than

My armed guard, Mahmoud, and I soon dismount and walk up a steep incline to give our hard-pressed rickshaw-wallah a break.

there actually is. My family village is just 25km from here and I have known the area all my life. I think the soldiers are now not necessary.'

Later, the comic potential of tight security arrangements becomes apparent when we set off to visit the nearby Buddha Dhatu Jadi temple in an armed convoy of bicycle rickshaws. My armed guard, Mahmoud, and I soon dismount

and walk up a steep incline to give our hard-pressed rickshaw-wallah a break.

We then cross the Sangu River and stroll into the town of Bandarban to find the Marma Bazaar choked with activity. Cafés offer warm milk and sweet bread, stalls sell hard-boiled eggs, and alarming though effective mangles crush

mangos, sugar cane and limes to yield fresh juice.

Elsewhere, stalls proffer all manner of domestic goods, from pots and pans to 'fully guaranteed' 100-taka (\$1.50) watches, generators and satellite TV systems. Mobile phones

are notable by their scarcity – effective network coverage, already made difficult by the terrain, being apparently limited to hinder insurgent activity.

While our guards relax in a barber's shop, I go in search of indigenous flavours across the street behind the Marma Hotel's gauzy green curtain of intrigue. In a country whose constitution espouses an Islamic way of life, here is a restaurant ►



offering pork 'any style' complemented by *na-pi* (fish stew), a dish that if not already *haram* probably should be, and *goram pa-ni*, literally 'hot water', a powerful rice hooch served from innocuous mineral water bottles of increasing size.

Next day, local guide Royal Lian Sang leads the way to Nilla Chol (Tiger Hill), a great place for an overview of the hill tracts. At its summit, two hopeful peri-

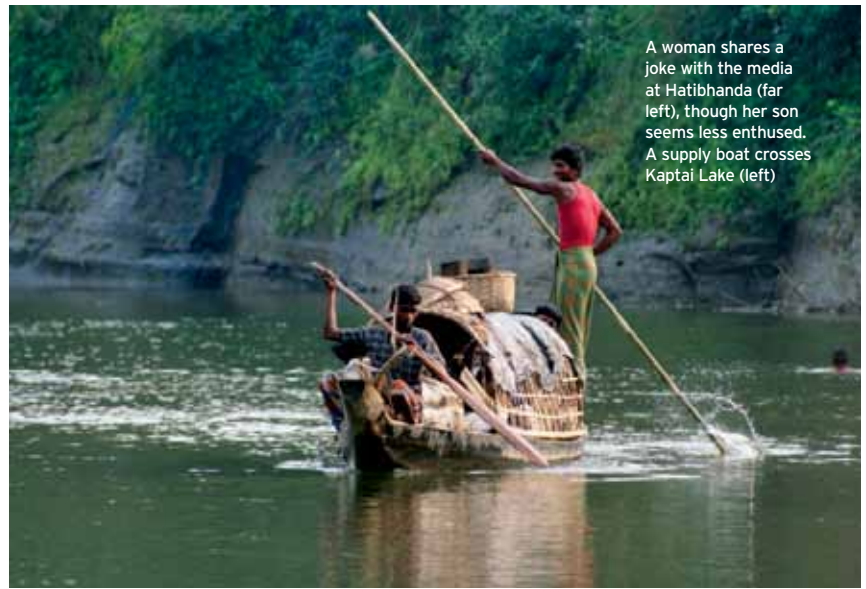
businessman, Charlie Marma (not his actual name) at a Bandarban hotel. Sipping tea and looking dapper in a light suit he is keen to talk. 'I'm not speaking for me, but for our community, our village. I'm not a political leader. Political leaders don't tell the truth because they're afraid. I've seen many people taken away by the police just for speaking out. They haven't had a trial, they haven't had a judge, they've just been sent to gaol.'

Marma adds that he knows where the problem lies. 'Since 1998 we've been a minority. Now, we make up 48 per cent of the people in Bandarban. In 1978 we were 80 per cent. The government makes

to speak Urdu. We are 16 tribes – only five still have their language.'

Marma dismisses official warnings to foreigners and the need for military escorts. 'Kidnappers are people who've fled from Burma. They've lost their country and their families and they're after money.' He is also sceptical of government aid from foreign sources. 'The United Nations Development Programme and NGOs are interested in indigenous people, but only 25 per cent of the money they give ever reaches the ground.'

At this point, my astute local fixer butts in on our conversation. 'Time to put your notebook away. We should go now.' The cause of his obvious discomfort is a group of men, some with walkie-talkies,



A woman shares a joke with the media at Hatibhanda (far left), though her son seems less enthused. A supply boat crosses Kaptai Lake (left)

'Political leaders don't tell the truth because they're afraid.'

patetic vendors await sightseers amid fragrant stashes of *katal* (durian), *bel* (wood apples) and *tetir* (tamarinds). We move on past stands of bamboo in flower, a once-every-50-years event, and one that is causing an already fecund rat population to move into reproductive overdrive.

Soon the stilted bungalows of Hatibhanda appear through the trees. Despite our platoon of rifle-armed guards we attempt to look as friendly as possible. Though their men-folk are absent, brilliantly dressed women invite us into their homes, an episode that speaks volumes about the divide between indigenous and Bengali culture. Inside, beneath a naïve image of the Virgin Mary, a halo of light illuminates a young woman at a loom weaving an intricately patterned cloth. Each cloth equates to one week's work, and sells for around 700 taka (\$10).

That evening, having given the military the slip, I talk to an indigenous

special buses and trains for Bengalis. It gives settlers 300 taka (\$4.50) per family, 5kg or 10kg of rice, two, five, maybe 10 hectares of land. There are 26 hotels in Bandarban and only two are owned by minority people. Maybe these two will soon be gone.'

He believes indigenous tribes are seriously disadvantaged. 'We don't have schools, teachers, doctors, administration. Other countries support their minority groups, but our government doesn't help us. Since 1971, Bangladesh has been an Islamic country. But we're not Muslims and we look different to Bengalis. Our language is more like Burmese than Bengali but the authorities want us to speak that language just like [Muhammad Ali] Jinnah wanted everyone

who have congregated nearby in the hotel lobby.

Marma is seemingly unconcerned: 'The Bengali is like a cow; he comes, he stays, he eats. Like Superglue, they stick. Once here they won't ever go.' Momentarily catching the eye of one of the newcomers, I know a tactical retreat is sensible.

History states that Bangladesh was born out of religious intolerance and an attempt at forced cultural and linguistic homogenisation. The irony, seemingly lost on successive Dhaka administrations, is that these same injustices are now being visited on the country's indigenous hill tribes. I call Marma later and attempt to continue the interview, but he is more cautious – concerned his phone may be bugged. In what could be Bangladesh's Shangri-la you could be forgiven for thinking the main security problem is the security itself. ■

HOW TO GET THERE
Emirates flies to Dhaka from the UK and several other destinations.
www.emirates.com/uk

ON THE GROUND
Nick Redmayne travelled with The Guide Tours, Bangladesh's leading tailor-made and small group operator.
www.guidetours.com