

Sunday 6 January

Maria calls me at about 6 to get up and drive out on the truck to meet a new, impressive experience. After a 6 hour drive together with Russell, Firoz's brother and 2 other guys that work for Maria, we reach the village of Sripur, where we are going to hand out the blankets. A crowd gathers shortly after our arrival and before I know it, we are surrounded by a mass of poverty stricken people.

The struggle of life is very visible in their skinny bodies, their bloodshed eyes and their torn and dirty clothes. My smiles of sympathy are once again answered with the warmest and most welcoming smiles, showing broken and rotten teeth, stained red by the habit of chewing beetle-nut, a habit I first got acquainted with during my volunteering in Papua New Guinea, some 12 years back. I was told that that chewing the beetle nut, packed with a beetle leaf, lime and some other herb, gives a high. I guess that is what one needs when living under these conditions. This struggle to survive yet another day, every single day of their lives is the reality to more than 1 billion people in the world. Just imagine waking up in the morning and facing the same torment that left you feeling weak and exhausted the day before, 365 days a year, without any break.



Not the breath of fresh air, not the crack of yummy smelling, freshly washed white bed-linen, no, nothing like that, instead you wake up in a shed containing 1 room only, which houses your entire family on a wooden or stone "bed" with rugs. Hard as the stone itself, because a mattress is for the rich, the walls are no more than dried mud, or if you're lucky and relatively wealthy, they might be made of a steel plate. Warmth is only provided by the bodies of the other family members who all share the "bed".

The crowds gathering are staring at me, what a strange appearance I must be for them.

Here I am, tall blonde woman, dressed Bangla, but by no means comparable to them. Kids start to laugh and giggle, the youngest burst in tears of fright. What a sensation! People just stare at me, some smiling, most just staring. If they'd had a camera, they'd be taking loads of pictures of me. So that's what it feels like when all those tourists visit your country and stick their cameras up your face to catch your exotic looks! Well, as much as I am now feeling a bit of shame for all the staring and photographing I have been doing all these years, I think it is quite funny. I joke to the guys that every Western woman who needs to boost her ego should come here. No lack of male attention here!!! Hahaha.

Once the crowd has gathered, they are all lined up in categories; women and children first, older men second and the other men last. The village elderly has provided a list of the poorest who are to receive the blankets. These people have been given a piece of paper with their name on it and some form of 'not to be copied' marking, which they have to hand over to receive the blanket. It works very efficiently and within 2 hours we have distributed about 2000 blankets here. Time to move on to the next village, Manikhat, for another 1000 blankets.



When we get there, we find a similar scene, a growing crowd of very poor people, eager to receive a blanket to stay warm at night.

It may be hard to imagine the necessity, but being here in January, I can tell that a warm winter jacket isn't a luxury here at night and living in a shed with a night temperature of about 10 degrees makes a shivering night without the comfort of a something as simple as a blanket, a bare basic commodity in our societies of the developed world.

For these people:

Finally, a piece of luxury Finally a night to be spent in the comfort of warmth.



Just looking at the gratitude in their faces makes your heart stop for a while, thinking about all the things we take for granted every day, spending our consumptive lives without a single thought about what life is like on the other side of the scale.

In sharp contrast to the well organized method of distribution used in Sripur, we find a growing chaos here. 3 Hours after we got there, not even 20% has been distributed. The crowd just keeps growing and the noise becomes so overwhelming that it starts to get a bit threatening. Darkness falls and we are surrounded by shouting people, stretching out their arms to get a gift. Since there are many more people than blankets, it is no option to just hand them out to all those present. The village elderly keeps trying by calling the names of those entitled to a blanket, but the noise is such that no one can hear him. When we find ourselves in total darkness and still not even 30% distributed, we decide to pull out. This is not going to work. A very touch decision, but the only one to be made. This situation proves what the development literature writes, giving out freebees is not the always the best thing to do, as it brings out the greed in all humans, regardless the social status. It is painful to see, especially since you'd want to help all those surrounding you, but incapacitated by number of gifts to hand out we have to pull out, leaving so many empty handed. I need to withdraw and pull out my iPod, find a spot on the truck between the cartons and just sit there staring, trying to give this overwhelming experience a spot in my heart, as my emotions are running a-wire on me.



As we pull out, the people start to jump away and become slightly violent. I am glad we can go, as I have gotten a bit frightened. But what to do now? We still have about 700 blankets left on the truck. Firoz's brother, Shahalam, and Russell decide we stop at another village on the way to had out the remaining blankets. Shahalam thinks of a great system upon arrival. All the people are to cue up and sit down. Here too, women, children and elderly first as we have only a limited number of blankets to give. All are to remain seated after they get their blanket. Within the hour we are out of blankets and can leave with a feeling of relief. Back towards Sripur for a village meal at Shahalam and Firoz's mother's and then onwards back to Uttara, where we arrive at 3AM. What a day! One that will go down memory lane and will be thought of and spoken about often.

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