How to Write About Bangladesh Peter Born

Always use the word “impoverished,” “crowded” or “teeming” in your title. Subtitles should include “hungry,” “diseased,” “beggars” “impoverished” or “skeletal.” Both “noisy” and “noisome” are perfectly acceptable. “Subcontinental” is sometimes useful, too. Remember that “European” means any white.

Treat Bangladeshis as if they were made up of only two groups—millions of hungry beggars, and a very few fat, wealthy oppressors. Never include a picture of a fat Bangladeshi unless he is greasy and thieving, and shouting at a reed-thin servant who is carrying a heavy load for him.

Describe the landscape in glowing terms, but be sure to call all human habitation vile; refer to overflowing sewage often. This reference forms a useful lead-in to your account of cholera, diarrhea, and other diseases. In fact, a defecating group squatting on an early-morning riverbank adds the perfect touch of verisimilitude as well as a excellent metaphor for man’s role in the delta paradise that is Bangladesh. He shits on it.

Avoid images of middle-class clerks in suits (though there are many)—you’d be misunderstood, or well-adjusted women getting on with their daily lives—far better to excoriate this Muslim society for its oppression of women.

Only mention Sheiks Hasina and Zia as feuding, corrupt Prime Ministers, never as examples of the empowerment of women in a Muslim society.

Happy, well-adjusted married couples are taboo—they’d only confuse the picture. Instead, show wives slaving in smoke-filled kitchen outbuildings while their husbands recline in the larger hut’s main room smoking, and are waited on. This domestic tableau provides a wonderfully clear image of women’s exile and overwork.

Mention Mohammed Yunus and microfinance, but avoid the 18-50% interest charged; that would detract from the ‘economic miracle’ that won him the Nobel.

Finally, do not under any circumstances describe your own living conditions; 12 bedroom mansions served by dozens of staff can only bring down disapproval without adding clarity.

Mention NGO’s often, especially in their struggles against government corruption and local cultural resistance to their noble efforts to improve the lot of the common man. Never mention the $100,000 Mercedes 4 X 4’s the NGO managers drive—that would distract from the main point.

Always include a plucky, bootstraps-out-of-poverty translator who has managed to get ahead through hard work at school. Don’t let the many thousands who did the same work and ended up without work muddy the waters—after all your point is that education can solve many problems. It hardly helps the point if you mention the near total absence of work for these educated, or the equally absent upward mobility.

End with an image of yourself—the plucky, adventurous journalist riding a rickshaw through the throngs, absorbed in the stream of humanity that is every Dhaka street, working tirelessly to understand and convey the lives you observe, even if you cannot see beyond your own and your readers preconceptions. Why? Because you love humanity.