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KOLKATA / CALCUTTA

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Some scholars reckon that Kolkata's name comes from Kali Ghat, the great Kali temple after which is called the district where I live, near Rash Behari Crossing. Kali is the goddess of time. Black faced and pulling a red tongue, she wears a garland of skulls and holds a sword to sever time and frighten the Brits. She is a good goddess though and local people love her and worship her, asking for shelter and help that she may truly provide. Quite near the huge Kali temple is Mother Theresa's mission. A sign says: 'Missionaries of charity, Nirmal Hriday, estd 1952, Mother Theresa's home for the sick and the dying destitute'. On the balcony, I can see a nun watching the colourful Indian street scene around the temple, and the superman-sized statue of Jesus crucified on his wooden cross. Along the street, thousands of vendors sell holy images, holy food, holy gadgets to a joyfull crowd that flocks for a puja or just a visit to the goddess. I am not sure that full respect and pure friendship exist between Theresa and Kali, though. It's an old story. Kolkata has been straddling East and West for the past four or five centuries. It is among the most Indian of India's megalopolises and it is indeed the most European city in India.

Rash Behari Crossing is one of the most hectic crossroads in the city. It is the beginning of Mukherjee road, the largest north/south flow in Calcutta with Rash Behari, a major east/west axis, in the nearby southern section of town. My hotel is called Transit House and is located one block off this crossroad where Raj Bansanta Roy road meets Sardar Sankar road. You would expect the location to restrain some of the madness due to the chaotic traffic running up, down and sideways. Along with cars, rickshaws, motorcycles and heavy lorries, this crossroad carries a dense bus traffic and also several lines of the famous sky blue tramway that runs from the different edges of the city. Calcutta's transportation system works like a fine-tuned Swiss clock, but a noisy one. Rash Behari Crossing also shelters an important subway station, Kali Ghat, that disgorges hundreds of commuters every few minutes. Three blocks north, tens of thousands of pilgrims converge towards Kali Ghat every day. And to the east of the crossroad is Lake Market, one of the biggest food markets in town.

But, believe it or not, my Transit House hotel is located in the most peaceful neighbourhood you can imagine. This is part of the magic of the city. Outside what is called Central Calcutta and off the main roads, you feel you're in the country. Calcutta is a patchwork of very serene neighbourhoods where village life can be enjoyed. One village is centred round a dam, another one juts up against a temple, a different one surrounds a school or ancient mansion. In a particular neighbourhood, less now than before, most inhabitants know one another. Ask for Shyamal here or for Abhijit there, everyone will point you to the right house with a smile of connivance. They know very well who Shyamal or Abhijit are; they know their habits and most of their friends.

As in most remote areas, life begins with the first birdsong in my neighbourhood. At six o'clock, the day is clear and some bicycles as well as a few cars drive up and down Raj Basanta Roy road. But the first visible economic activity starts at seven when the newspaper is being delivered. 'Life begins with the reading of the news from the previous day in Bengal,' says my friend Dipankar, 'nothing can be done before that.'

The Standard is distributed in English or in Bengali versions by cyclists who wedge their papers up against the handlebar. They dismount their cycle from place to place, chat here, salute there, and slowly dawdle along the streets delivering with languid gestures the last news about Nandigram* and the rest of the world. Curiously, even at this very early hour, some moms or dads will be escorting their duly uniformed schoolchildren to start their learning day.

At the extremity of Raj Basanta Roy, the families who have spent the night on the sidewalk near Mukherjee road still sleep deeply, bodies enlaced. The shops are closed on the avenue; the traffic is scarce. The first real activity begins when the initial Indane truck arrives from the outside world. Indane is a gas company, delivering propane throughout the country. All through the day, these trucks will park along the sidewalk facing the hotel, just a few hundred yards east. Then you will hear the clanking of propane bottles being unloaded from lorries and loaded on tricycles that carry a dozen bottles at a time, delivering them across the neighbourhood, ringing their bells. 'Goods carrier, Public transporter' says the front of the lorry while the back reminds to 'obey traffic laws'. That is Indane's contribution to the world order and local Dharma.

This neighbourhood shows signs of its colonial past. At that time, one and an half

centuries ago, it was an Indian district. The British, as in all their colonies, had the peculiar habit of not mixing with the 'locals'. They had invented the Centre where Imperial architecture of the proudest style can still be admired on decaying facades, rotted by the many monsoons, with the complicity of a communist rule that controls the level of rents and keeps them low. But, around Kali Ghat, the Indian bourgeoisie had built fairly big mansions of a design mixing British building technology with a discreet traditional Mughal style: bow windows, long free-running balconies, floral symbols upon delicate cornices and peacock images in stained glass. Those houses have now been sectioned into many apartments, reduced every year by the pressure of urban speculation that strikes Calcutta as savagely as all big cities of the world.

In the early morning the sugarcane juice vendor who will later take his post on Rash Behari and Sardar Sankar road, follows a personal path. He stands for short ten minutes periods on selected crossroads inside the neighbourhood at fairly precise moments; he waits for local customers to come down from their apartments and enjoy a long glass of sweet, green, delicious juice. At that time of the day, the carpenter who runs a workshop on Sardar Sankar, spreads out his work on the sidewalk: with many tools, large pieces of plywood and friends or helpers, he uses the public space for private matters.

Five meters away, towards Rash Behari road is a public fountain. There you are in urban India! Throughout the day, this fountain will be used by children, men and women alike, as a public bathroom. The user squats on the kerb and splashes his or herself with running water, foaming the soap on his/her body with vigour, then rinsing the soap before letting the sun dry his/her shining dark skin. From that fountain a permanent parade of carriers also irrigate nearby houses. Two, and sometimes four, 20 litre cans are suspended on both sides of a wooden pole. The pole is set on a man's shoulders and carried from the fountain. The man walks barefoot with very short paces, eager not to spill the precious liquid he is paid a few rupees to carry to some distant kitchens. Sometimes women also carry water, but in a different fashion for they use the bright yellow, copper, balloon-shaped pitchers that they carry on their head like they used to do in the remote Bengali, Behari or Tamil villages where they come from. This is the mellow life that seems to flow in Calcutta.

When asked about themselves, my Calcuttan friends tend to reckon that Bengalis are proud, brilliant and nonchalant. Most of my friends here are middle class urban professionals turned sceptical about economics and big prophecies, thus search-

ing the keys to, or the outposts for a new world. They meet several times a week in informal but determined encounters called addas where they read poetry and short stories aloud, discuss politics and philosophy, drink not too much beer, smoke cigarettes but also bidees, and enjoy their life as it goes. Brilliant, they are indeed. My presence first of all switches them into English. Then it induces debates about the wake of colonialism in the day-to-day life, about the creativity of contemporary Indian cinema or about the history of the Naxalite movement. But we also go into very up-to-date subjects, offered by a rich and intense political activity. Everyday, the papers bring new evidence about Nandigram and the topic seems to inflame most Bengalis. All these debates are precisely argued and most of the speakers can quote VS Naipaul, Tagore, but also Edward Saïd, Fukuyama and, to my surprise Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze. Nonchalant, they probably are; they never worry about time and love to meet in the Jadevpur coffee house whenever they can. In a way, they even pretend to be irresolute, but that, I can assure, is untrue. Two accidental discoveries gave me an hint of how active Calcuttans are.

One is the number of modest but active magazines published here. Small format, from 50 to 80 pages, treating many subjects from art to politics, from economics to literature, and so on, each of these reviews offer a specific perspective on the world and the city. Not reading Bengali, I cannot give an opinion on the content but I can testify to the determined effort made by those sustaining these reviews and the radical viewpoint asserted by the managing editors who invest most of their life into this achievement. In Calcutta there is even a museum of those reviews where they can all be found and compared by readers who have missed an issue or want to deepen their knowledge of a subject. Apart from serious discussions, my friends were a joyful bunch of good humoured people, men and women alike, from different origins and apparently harbouring no suspicion of caste borders or social backgrounds.

Another discovery was more accidental but, a late one, I had no time to really investigate it. Dozens of pocket theatres are spreading throughout the city. One of those theatres was next to my hotel so I could observe it. Beyond a tiny courtyard edging Rash Behari Crossing, you can guess by a blackboard filled with names, titles, prices and dates that you are near a performance hall. Actually you already had that premonition because in front of the blackboard was the kind of ticket kiosk you are accustomed to see at alternative theatres. If you carry on across the courtyard, you pass a porch and there you are in front of a stage, facing the steep slope of an amphitheatre. Lights and rails, curtains and velvet, you are indeed in a theatre. There, my guide tells me, you can attend many kinds of plays, mostly mod-

ern adaptations of long running traditional dramas such as Mahabarata or Ramayana. But some theatres perform only modern stuff, some only satirical reviews, some poetry, some contemporary authors, etc. These groups are not funded by state or federal institutions. Sometimes they get money from a philanthropist. But the great majority are militant, that is to say, free. The chic du chic for those dramatists is to perform in the country. If they've had some success in town, and gathered some dough, they can offer a couple of days or a week of magic to Bengali villagers.

Network of addas, network of magazines, network of theatres, everything is about connections in Calcutta. 'I was glad to meet you at such network, but I would like to invite you in my more private adda...' a former history professor tells me and another one, a communist activist. Calcutta is a network of networks.

I dropped into the vortex of a network once. It was not entirely by accident for I had been told about it by a French friend, who was once almost a Calcuttan. The place is deep in the heart of the city, what local people call the centre, the most active, vibrant, crazy neighborhood of the city. I took my meals at Punjabi dhabba, a small restarant nearby, between Park street and Middleton street; they had rich and cool lassies and Punjabis are supposedly reliable. Customers of the dhabba were of the kind that could not or would not be satisfied by a fast meal caught standing on the sidewalk of Mukherjee road like most local yuppies: those who would fancy a good ten minutes in the fresh and clean atmosphere of the dhabba, eating a real bowl of rice with spiced vegetables and dhal.

A five minute walk from my Punjabi dhabba, off Middleton street, you follow a sign that promises Drive Inn. That is another type of restaurant, a strictly vegetarian restaurant for executives needing to talk business, and families in search of a peaceful retreat. Surprising high flamboyant and tall pipal trees welcome you in their shade, casting a mellow atmosphere. Drive Inn restaurant prices are not for anyone in town and neither are the cars sold under the same name, SUVs and rutilant limousines. But if your eye is sharp enough, you will notice a hand-written sign that says 'Bookstore' with an arrow. That is what you were after. So walk on along this path under the tall pipal trees. There it is, the cabin in the tree. You wouldn't have believed your eyes had you not been informed beforehand. Made from the woven vegetal fibres that you had noticed in the remote Bengali villages where they had already reminded you of the early black-and-white movies of Satyajit Ray, the cabin defies gravity and urban traditions in that hectic part of the city. Another sign repeats 'Earthcare Bookstore & resource center/ inside, classic

books/ organic rice and potatoes for sale here'. There, the last sign by the door encourages you, if you find a closed door, to ring the bell. That I do.

After a while a pretty lady comes down the stairs from the cabin. Vinita is frail and her eyes shine. She asks me where I come from and what are my centres of interest. Then she introduces me to the bookstore. The store itself is tiny, hardly three rooms piled with books turned face up, thus easily displaying their titles and author's names. The 'centres of interest', as Vinita put it, are diverse. Good Indian classic and contemporary fiction, a fine choice of gender studies, selected religious and philosophical stuff such as the Vedas, the classical Upanisads, Vivekananda, Krishnamurti and so on, anthropological surveys of India and elsewhere, Indian mythology. But what Vinita is rightly proud of is the environmental fund. This fund proposes both high scientific studies and political debates by authors from all over the world. That is when I realise that all those books are in English. It is not the case at the huge bookstore on Park street that sells books in English, Hindi, Bengali and other Indian languages. 'That is my choice,' explains Vinita, 'for English is, as a matter of fact, the scientific language and the only language spoken in all of India.'

Filling my basket with selected publications I discover that some of them have been published by Earthcare Bookstore itself (www.earthcarebooks.com); and that this place with the cabin in the tree is only the geographical centre of a large network of various merchandise among which is rice, potatoes, books, literary reviews and probably political discourse as well. Before I leave, Vinita registers my name in her e-mail address book so that we can keep in touch. That is the point. When I talk about my visit to Earthcare Bookstore to my Calcuttan friends, some of them agree that this is not only an original place but also an important spot in the the city. 'You cannot imagine how much energy this city gives me,' reckons Vinita when asked about her cabin in the tree. 'Someone wrote a book saying that, in a way, Calcutta resembles Naples. Have you ever been to Naples? In which way could those cities look alike?'

I recall a photograph seen in Paris just before I left for India. This photograph showed the shore of the Gulf of Bengal within fifteen years when the waters have risen up because of global warming. Calcutta didn't exist any more in the photo, inundated by the flooded delta of Ganga, the Ganges. This threat is much nearer than that of the Vesuvius in Naples. And also nearer than the threat of the San Andreas fault upon the city of San Francisco. However, citizens of those three cities should have many feelings and facts to discuss. Would the imminent destruction of a city give a special energy to its inhabitants? To me, this energy is a constant sur-

prise.

On my first night in Transit House, I understood I was in a Tamil district by the drums of a wedding procession. A South Indian wedding procession is one of the most curious urban scenes in India. The bride disguised as a prisoner princess from the Thousand and One nights is carried, still, silent and alone, on a huge chariot, inside a red and gold throne flashing with a million electric bulbs. The bridegroom follows ten meters behind, disguised as a defeated Baghdad prince. The third chariot carries the many batteries and electronics that dispatch a deafening musical din across the neighbourhood. The chariots I saw were not pulled by tractors but by well paid Brahmins behind the drummers beating their drums and followed by a meagre crowd of family members. This part of town is indeed a Tamil colony. Later I noticed the Madras style lunghees worn by the men and jasmine arrangements in the ladies' plated hair, typical of the South. Also there seems to be a specific pride in the slow gait of people, but of that, I am not sure. Those South Indians work, I was told later, in Lake market where they are shoulder carriers.

Lake Market almost reaches my Transit House but stops half a block away. For the past year, the building of the market has been under reconstruction, letting the vendors and customers spread all over the adjacent streets. Like a tide they come from early morning to mid afternoon. But in Raj Basanta Roy, as this streets lies on the fringes of the market, you only find small stalls selling on the sidewalk fruit and vegetables of all colours and fragrance - probably villagers selling their own crops.

In the late morning, the summer heat begins to hit, slowing pedestrians and cyclists alike. Only few of the old orange Ambassador taxis cruise around along with some small Maruti cars. A gang of five children invade the roadway. They are three or four years old, dressed in rags and barefoot. They play cricket. One of them holds a piece of wood pretending to be a bat. The other four run after a moss ball, catch it, throw it and pitch it like they have seen on TV. No, actually, they never catch and always miss the ball. But that doesn't matter. The catcher wears a cross around his neck. Christian? It could be. Keralite? Who knows? A motorbike passes with four people aboard, daddy wears a helmet, mum is riding side-saddle. As I am sitting near the door of my hotel, chatting with the doorman disguised as an army officer, he calls the pitcher and slips a couple of coins into his hand. The other boys instantly rush towards the lucky one to check what he got. Two coins of two rupees, great day! They already talk eagerly about what they will buy with this unexpected wealth.

Early afternoon is the time of real heat. A very tall mango tree lets its branches loaded with still green fruit, hang from atop. The flamboyant that here is called Krishnachurra spreads out its shining red-orange flowers next to a Gulmohur that displays a yellow firework of bright flowers. They are supposed to play the roles and recite the dialogues of Rada and Krishna, the mythical lovers. Facing me, from the other side of a hoarding, a tropical garden overflows banana leaves and bouganvilleas' violet flowers. The rare passers-by tend to slow down to refresh under this unexpectedly heavy shade. It is naptime. Khanai, the decaying dog protected and fed by the young hotel boys, sticks out his tongue and avoids moving.

Later in the afternoon, a barber squats on the sidewalk, ten meters from my seat, in front of his client who maintains the same position. They chat gently and have good stories to laugh about. The barber holds his client's face with one hand while the other brushes his black face with a thick white lather. Then he gently passes the razorblade on his cheeks. He guides over his face holding the bridge of his nose. The next two customers wait in the same position, commenting through gestures and talking very softly about nothing. Gestures and words go very slow. A few yards further, four men play cards on a blanket displayed on the sidewalk. No superfluous words here either at this time of day, but still a sense of great attention, proving that money is probably at stake.

From where I sit, I can decipher two signs. One is about Sikkim Manipal University. It celebrates the many diplomas available from this supposedly prestigious institution located, as written, near Kali Ghat: 'BBA, BCA, BSCT, IT, Education guaranteed, Career assured, Future secured', all this proved by the photo of a sexy blonde girl smiling with 32 shiny white teeth and a couple of phone numbers. The other sign is pitched above an electrical transformer. It says, in huge red letters on a yellow background, that 'in case of power interruption, you can call 1912'.

Life returns with the lengthening shadows. Ladies walk like princesses after their working day, their hair still perfectly plated, draped in flawless pink or bright blue saris, their back straight, in gracious flocks. Men hold their attaché case like high-ranking executives. Kids ply their way back home in stylish uniforms. Middle class India is a proud population that has a real project to conquer the world and some ammunition for that. Calcutta is not an industrial city. Overcrowded by the two waves of refugees from East Bengal or, say, Bangladesh, Calcutta needed a couple of decades to digest its huge population. The asset of this city in the global race is culture. Bengal is a state of refined and prolific artistic production. In Calcutta what is mostly sought after is education. The city is rich in high priced schools where phi-

osophy, sports, electronics and languages are taught by selected teachers. Middle class India comes back from its working day, having much more to conquer but proud of the past achievements. Some old fashioned nababs cross the neighbourhood in man-pulled rickshaws. The night falls. In Bengali, this time of day is called khonedekhalu, when the pink light turns girls into stars encouraging fathers to introduce their unmarried daughters into rich and educated families.

When night comes, the first fires of the families living on the sidewalk can be seen where Raj Basanta Roy meets Mukherjee road. The ladies cook food in big cauldrons upon charcoal grills. Young children come back from a day of fight for life as usual. Babies are laid upon mats. Men will come later or will never come. The homeless are extremely poor and hunger is often suffered, but most of those families are proud and little misery can be observed on this sidewalk. On the very crossing of Rash Behari a huge image of Mother Theresa, whose little statues can also be seen among saints and gods, reminds of the harshness of time, but charity might very well be a westerner's fantasy. Bengalis do not beg. Those street families will come to sleep when the fires vanish and the Bengali night will be another time for oblivion.

When I leave Kolkata, my taxi drives me across Salt Lake City. This is a new town, north of Calcutta. The 9% GDP increase flows huge investments into the future seen here as an opportunity for a kind of greedy revenge as well as a chance to escape poverty for the poor. It is nighttime again and the landscape is still, looking dead. Hundreds of cranes have been working all day to contribute to this super city supposed to compete with Bangalore in developing new technologies that make the international success of India. My taxi wallah is very proud of Salt Lake. I can't find the words to express my doubt without offending him.

* Nandigram is where a peasants' revolt took place against an industrial project fomented by the communist led government that threatened to expel villagers from their land. The official toll is 14 people killed. Unofficial figures are more like 100.

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