

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

PEOPLE AND PLACES

A New Series that Combines Travel with a Look at Life of Men and Women against the Backdrop of Fascinating—and Sometimes Not-so-fascinating—Environment.

CALCUTTA REVISITED Land Odyssey to Pay Homage to a Glistening Guru

Waheedul Haque

It was past the middle of July. The sky was leaking badly. Ten young people started on a pilgrimage. I happen to be sixtyish — by the count of wasted springs. I am grateful to the rest of the team for they wouldn't mind that and even the fifteen year-old Shaorli Shaheed Tumpa would bestow on me indulgences to which only a true peer should be privy. So, from fifteen to sixty—ten very young people set out on a pilgrimage. To Calcutta.

That great and dirty city — a coreherli cage almost literally — can be indeed be a holy place for all those that hold dear to mind the resplendent blossoming of one of the finest cultural reargures in world history—a very special civilization, to borrow from Nirad C. Chowdhury's exuberant homage — that was the four-generation sprouting of the modern Bengali culture. Rammoan and Dwarkanath, Vidyassagar and Bankim Chandra, Jagadish Bose and P.C. Roy — thousands of creative minds of their stature — in science and culture, arts and politics, education and the different professions lived and worked in this town which has been home to at least five Nobel Laureates for some important periods of their life.

There's a category of elderly people to whom Calcutta — holy or not — had always been the subject of the sweetest nostalgic rumination. It was never quite 'their' (the Indian Bengalees) city, it isn't still so now and cannot but be a city of us all even if the future, most of them think. And not without reason. Job Charnock's little town became the second greatest city in the British Empire, and more importantly, the centre-stage of the making of modern India — the subcontinent that is — by internalising whatever was best of all Bengal — most of that best coming from north and east Bengal, specially the latter. A very good proof of that is in our idea of the standard Calcutta spoken Bengali, which is the farthest removed from the true Calcutta local dialect as still extant in the alleys of north Calcutta. The model spoken Bengali as it comes across both from the silver and mini screen and from the theatre stage as from the jatra platform — and above as it lives in the society of all truly cultured Bengali families recognised for generations for refinement — is something that developed over ages through a more than just sizeable influencing of the Rahr spoken base by the profusion of cultural and social incursion from across the river Bhagirati — Hooghly which included the districts of Nadia and Jessore. That the whole of the Bengal literati who overlapped generally with the culture and materially well-off upper crust of the society participated in the shaping of the standard spoken as found in south Calcutta and Shantiniketan is further proved by the urban 'bhadralog' class of the whole of Rajshahi division, particularly of Dinajpur, using this as something very much their own and not acquired from elsewhere at any time.

Calcutta is at the moment in West Bengal and India. But in its essence — in its essential truth it retains a strong link with the cultural life of Bangladesh. What's Calcutta and modern Bengali culture bereft of the Tagores, bereft of Rabindranath alone! And that fountainhead of all that happened in Calcutta and Bengal or to the whole of the subcontinent in the hundred and odd years starting in the second quarter of the Nineteenth Century — Rabindranath and the Tagore phenomenon was very much a Jessore thing transplanted to swampy Gangetic settlements started by Charnock.

A better part of the educated elderly population in our country do remember the very sincere efforts on the part of a section of leaders, including Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy first to keep Bengal in one piece even as India was being partitioned — and failing that to keep Calcutta to the truncated eastern part. Well, both the efforts could be suspected as nothing more than plain greed and the latter attempt was at best an exercise in futile imagining. But then the Sarat Bose — Suhrawardy last-minute, but nevertheless not quite the last-ditch, endeavour to carve out of the confused early '47 situation an independent sovereign Bengal in one piece, with Calcutta and all things in the Bengal Presidency remaining intact — did indeed represent the wishes and dreams of the saner and wiser part of the population of Bengal. If Sarat Bose wasn't at that time in any position to represent any sizeable section of Congress in Bengal — that was not the case with Suhrawardy's standing as a Muslim League leader. He was the Prime Minister of Bengal as the



Victoria Memorial: Reminder of a chequered past.

leader of the Muslim League parliamentary party in the Bengal Legislative Assembly — and if you can forget the command and influence of Jinnah and the non-Bengali nawabs and seths forming the leadership of All India Muslim League — Suhrawardy indeed represented almost all of Bengali Muslim Leaguers. That Suhrawardy could be so bold as to initiate such a heretical move probably owed much to the fact that this idea of an independent undivided Bengal was in full consonance with the Bengali ML leaders' version of the 1940 Lahore Resolution which called for two independent states on the eastern and western region of the subcontinent consisting of areas of Muslim majority.

All this above — a recapitulation having no better use in the present complicated context that to confound it further — is to say we never for a moment thought Calcutta to be some other people's city to be gifted to them in good time. Quirks of history and politics have played many mean tricks particularly on the Bengali people who were undisputed leaders of the subcontinent for centuries — and then one of its part, Bangladesh, becomes the world's poorest state — and the other part becomes a rather unimportant appendage to the Indian behemoth — in spite of Rabindranath and Calcutta and Jyoti Basu. Calcutta doesn't become foreign in the way Kabul, or say even Delhi, just because we could not get it to be our capital — of East Pakistan or the whole of Pakistan to begin with and of Bangladesh to finish it up. It continues to be the greatest city of that ethno-cultural entity called the Bengalees. So long as we have in us anything coming down from a long and not altogether poor past — we shall find Calcutta strutting at delicate chords deep inside us. If the whole of Latin America can go to Machu Picchu for pilgrimage ostensibly to draw inspiration from the hoary pre-Columbian Inca-Aztec-Maya past, Bengalees living anywhere in the globe can very well go to Calcutta to marvel at the many monuments to their great performances only a century back and to get drowned in a fit of nausea over filth and squalor and the

marked non-Bengaliness of the place.

It was in fact not the city of Calcutta but a bed-ridden nonagenarian man who was the subject of our homage-paying mission. Perhaps this was one own version of the Journey of the Magi from the East. Two thousand years back the wise men went to pay respects to a child later to be called the messiah. Now ten very fresh yet confirmed ignoramuses were travelling to touch the feet of one, who unknown to the glare of mass publicity, has all his life worked as the 'messiah' of the Bengali people's richest stands of 'Katya-sangeet' or great songs having exceptional poetic value in the bargain — called in popular parlance Rabindrasangeet. Although our only mission was

front-ranker Shopna Deb presiding hilariously. And to meet the great novelist Debesh and his singer wife Kakoli, to go and stay wakeful nights at Arun Sen's — but first of all to meet Shankhos Ghosh who I heard was suffering seriously from heart condition and was in some nursing home with visits strictly restricted. I had my days of the coffee-house adda and am now well past that — but on a sunny afternoon still wouldn't mind sitting on the Victoria Memorial greens and lap up phuchka by the dozen. The only snag about this very salinating gastroscopic day-dreaming was that Mr Jyoti Basu's powerfully entrenched government, in their unquestioned wisdom, had the other year driven out the phuchka and bhelpurtiwallah from that

Gupta and Rathin Mitra. For I had in company five she-wolves prancing to pounce upon Dakhin-apon, the state exporium complex and of course Gariahat and lake market and Shyambazar.

The Journey

The great Ulyss made only one odyssey and the world remembers both. We have no Homer and our numerous odysseys from Dhaka to Calcutta via the cyclopes infested Benapole is not chronicled and we are to die unsung in spite of the many heroic exploits and escapades that feature each of our land journey to that city of palaces across the 'tepanor' of stretching from Sabhar to Sealdah.

We had booked ten seats on BRTC knowing full well about its inefficiency. If it was slow and unpredictable it was rather safe on a BRTC bus. And its staff cared for manners — something unheard of in Bangladesh buses. As expected, in spite of having the opportunity of using the newly commissioned Goral Bridge — which should save at least 45 minutes by sparing us the Kamarkhali ferry we made Jessore in exactly eight hours — thanks to a small breakdown near Modhukhali which took quite some to repair.

We were lucky in getting a microbus to take us to the border. And also in having one smart and lovable man to see us through the nerve-shattering customs and immigration guarding on both the sides of the no-mans-land. We missed a train at Bongaon for minutes and were punished by an hour's wait for that, more punishment lay in store for us. For the first time in my journeying through this very route for over thirty years — I was now to encounter the Indian version of mastans or the bully-boy gang. They came up into the train at some wayside station and took hold of every nerve in every man and woman in that rather crowded compartment. I rubbed my eyes and twisted my ears in disbelief. This after so much toning about Jyoti Babu's grassroots cadre development throughout West Bengal! The whole bogey was seething outraged and the hawkers and vendors were trying to humour the seven or eight-strong gang in an abject

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to assure this man, beleaguered as he has been, specially of late by all kinds of mean calumny, that we in Bangladesh, of Bangladesh, stand by him and would want to take from him as our charge whatever he would wish us to do as part of valedictory instructions — I for one was a little factively though, frantic in my longing to rush to our little 'adda' at the Protikhon office in the Metropolitan Life building on the Esplanade with the overpoweringly invasions and wide-awake journalistically

wonderful evening promenade and robbed possibly all of India of its best bazaar of month-filling and indeed somefilling poisons and hygienic horrors. I had a premonition that I would neither be able to mount a raid on College Street bookshops or realise my dream of walking the whole of old Calcutta with my dear dear jaani yaar Vishnu Bose, who beside being a recognised authority on the theatre, was possibly the best guide to the cities standing memorabilia — after may be Radha Prasad

Rumour has it that Calcutta's famous College Street is on its way to extinction because, in conformity with India's new import policies, importers would have to deposit 200 per cent of the order's worth in the Reserve Bank for each order of foreign books.

Ailing College Street

by S. Bari

An original Tennyson. A copy of Shakespeare with nineteenth-century water colours. The only remaining copy of 'The Satanic Verses'. The discerning bookworm can find any rarity in the dusty stalls of College Street.

Generations of book-lovers have found solace and pleasure in Calcutta's book Mecca. But a shadow of gloom hangs over the Indian Coffee House, where fiery intellectuals once met and shoppers still congregate, their arms loaded with Kafka and Sagan. Rumour has it that the famous street is on its way to extinction.

Last March, the Government of India announced new import policies. For each order of foreign books, importers would have to deposit 200 per cent of the order's worth in the Reserve Bank of India. The sum was to be returned after three months. India's burgeoning foreign debt and the necessity to discourage imports were cited as reasons for this move. Booksellers were caught unawares. "I had a shipment ordered before the new arrangement. But since the actual date of shipment was later, the government now demands that 200 per cent. If I had been given some advance warning I would not have placed the order," says R.N. Burman, partner in the publishing firm of Rupa and Co., agents to Penguin, and Collins.

To add fuel to fire, the Indian rupee was devalued last month. "I bought books on credit when the pound was 36.90. Now I have to pay the British publisher at 43.90 rupees pound," laments one major importer. "Rates always vary, and there is a risk in buying on credit, but this sudden jump is almost impossible for me to meet." On the reader's end, the story is equally disheartening. A book that cost Rs. 140 may cost 200 the very next day. Shoppers are dismayed: "I save up for weeks to buy a particular book, and then I need much more than I thought. Books were already too expensive, and now I have to give up my greatest pleasure," says Partha Roy, a medical student.

Most publishers and readers agree that the government had little choice but to expand the list of restricted import goods to include, among others, books. But they are unanimous in doubting that the 200 to 250 per cent deposit will be returned. "I place a one lakh order, and I have to give two lakhs to the Reserve Bank.

Do you believe the government will ever give that money back?" asked the director of an import house.

As a few months have gone by, College Street is beginning to feel the impact. Imports have come to a halt, partly due to the high deposit rate and partly due to distrust of the Reserve Bank. Students are the first to suffer. University-prescribed books, especially technical and medical textbooks, are mainly imported. These

the latest literature is available. Asked if there might be a silver lining to this cloud, and if Indian publishing might actually get a boost from the situation, Mr. Burman replies negatively. "It is not viable to print 600 copies of one book. Specialized books and textbooks are necessary, but not in huge quantities, so publishers will avoid them," he insists. Others in the trade voice doubts about obtaining the rights to print certain books.



Buyers at a College Street bookstall.

are slowly disappearing off the shelves, with none arriving to take their place. For such "essential" books, deposit is 200 per cent; for "non-essential" literature, the rate is 250 per cent. "Some supplies are still around, but students in next year's batch will be buying third-hand books at outrageous prices," says an employee of Chukkravarty and Chatterjee Booksellers.

"Nonsense," counter College Street observers. According to regular visitors and many students, the prevailing Doom-day attitude is exaggerated. English books are not the mainstay of sales, and even in that field, Indian publishers already offer a wide variety of titles. As for rare books, "all the old ones are already in town, it's not as if they're being imported any more," says Mr. Mohandas, who tours houses in the older neighbourhoods of Calcutta to buy second-hand books.

Die-hards also contend that the spirit of College Street is not so easily defeated. But the foreign editions on many shelves are dusty, and none of

Foreign publishers are turning wary of the weakened buying power of both their agents and the public. The government has waived the deposit fee for those who can bring in books on one year's credit from foreign publishers. But as one importer says, "Who is going to give me a year's credit with the state of the Indian economy as it is?" Normally credit is offered for a maximum of three months.

Together with import restrictions, devaluation has made prices rocket while sales have dropped by 30 to 40 per cent. Publishers and booksellers are progressing from disbelief to worry and anger.

But as one Coffee House optimist pointed out, "College Street has been through a lot. It takes more than a new import policy to knock it off." Every bibliophile hopes so. If the pleasure of browsing through College Street, of stumbling upon some rare edition, of good reads at affordable prices, all become a thing of the past, with them will disappear much of the charm of a visit to Calcutta.

Hallo... Is That a Miah, Shaheb or Madam?

by Sabir Mustafa

Hallo ..... hallo. In most other parts of the world that would mean somebody greeting an acquaintance. Anywhere else perhaps, but not here in Dhaka. Here it invariably means somebody trying to attract the attention of a complete stranger, possibly in a busy street full of complete strangers, saying hallo ... hallo to other complete strangers.

It's a hard job trying to pinpoint the year when this hallo thing really got hold of our everyday vocabulary. Even as recently as the mid-'70s, bhai or dada was the usual way to catch the attention of somebody who was neither a bhai nor a dada.

But the address had overtones of intimacy, almost a clever way to instantly become a long-lost family member of nobody in particular.

But hallo? That sounds suspiciously like a conspiracy to let the stranger-in-the-street know he will remain a stranger-in-the-street as soon as non-pleasantries like 'Hallo ... hallo ... you are walking off with my umbrella', are done with.

For most people, how to address others never poses much of a problem. If you happen to have a beard and look slightly older than the driver of the bus you are travelling on, then you become an instant Chacha or Kaka.

But that certainly doesn't mean the hallo gang will leave you alone. If you don't respond first time to the call of chacha,

then the second call may well be, 'Aai-je chacha ... hallo'.

That can be very confusing, because then you will be in some trouble trying to figure out whether the man is trying to get in or get out of your family. What's more, Bengalee chachas or kakas don't take easily to being hallo-ed by bhatijas, known or unknown, real or fake.

"Why", indignant chachas and kakas would say, "there should at least be an assalam-ualaikum or a namaskar, preferably with a bending-down-and-touching-of-the-feet thrown in for good measure".

But there is more to the bhaas, dadas, chachas and kakas than simply producing words out of a hat. Dhaka is a village, some say, where urbanisation has failed so far, despite the havoc created by the hallo-wallahs, to penetrate the solid rural psyche of the majority.

As a result, everybody walks around the place expecting to see a near, distant or very distant relative falling off a rickshaw any moment (people fall off rickshaws every moment all over the place, so at least half their expectations are met without really trying).

But the real expectation of seeing chachas and mamas wandering around aimlessly probably compels people to call out chacha to anyone looking remotely like an older version of his father (or anybody else's father in the village back in his home district).

A knowledgeable person, when asked why people were so rude in Dhaka or why they never bother to say sorry after bashing someone with their shoulders, gave the village theory as an explanation.

"Dhaka is a city of concrete buildings but with true villagers living in them", he said, "that makes this place a big, ugly village where everyone is everyone else's chacha. Now, you really don't go around saying sorry or excuse me to chachas or bhatijas, do you?"

Don't we? No, if we have our wits about us, then we touch their feet, in best Indian tradition. But that is quite impossible, even dangerous in the street. As soon as you bend over, your wallet is most likely to emigrate from your hip pocket and take up permanent residence in a foreign side-pocket.

But you can't do anything about it, not even if you manage to detect your travelling wallet's illegal port of entry.

"But dada", the new owner of your wallet would most probably say to you in a deeply hurt voice, "you look like Jobed Ali's son's wife's fourth cousin's brother-in-law from Gadhagam in Barisal. I too am from Gadh, how could I do such a thing to a fellow Gadh?"

By then you are bought, lost, stock and wallet.

So much for the wild life in the street. The picture doesn't change much as you

stroll around a neighbourhood or inside offices.

But the migration from rural villages to this urban village, apart from pitting hallo against or alongside bhai and chacha, has claimed a major casualty. And that's Miah.

Not many people are address as miah around town these days, unless that happens to be an actual, registered part of his name.

Back in the village by the paddy fields, Taleb Ali Sikdar is more likely to be simply Taleb miah than anything else.

"Taleb miah", — his contemporaries would say with a tone of respect.

"Taleb miliaaah", — young brats with nothing better to do than throw stones at ducks in ponds all day would say with a tone of ridicule.

"Taleb myaaoh", — his first or second wife would say with a tone that is decidedly sarcastic, after she had found the much-younger third or fourth wife snoring away at mid-day.

"Taleb MI-AAA-H", — the village money lender would bark, while his private army put an extra coating of grease on their bamboo sticks.

Whoever or whatever, miah was the suffix for all seasons. Even the bamboo-wielding thugs would no doubt shout mm-t-t-t-a-a-a-hh! as they explained to Taleb all he needed to know about the risks involved in borrowing

money at 2,500 per cent annual rate of interest.

But those days are gone. Here in the metropolis of high-rise office blocks and water-logged and un navigable streets with sodium lighting (O, this is Europe, no?), we have become something else.

We are now Shahebs (a slightly Bengaliified version of the Hindi word Sahib). Taleb Ali Sikdar strolling along a leafy Dhanmondai lane or sitting in a cool Motijheel office would certainly be Sikdar shabed. Or sir at the very least ( unless he was a peon, in which case there wouldn't be anyone below him to call him sir).

You can't be called a miah unless you are wearing a lungi and a punjabi (lot of people are calling the latter kurta these days, which is another example of the penetration of that monster called alien culture). And you certainly can't be in a cool Motijheel office wearing a lungi. Oh, no, sir, that just wouldn't be the done thing!

But if you did, then you would definitely be mistaken for a miah who had just arrived from the paddy fields, looking for a shaheb he probably knew.

People with miah in their names often face a different kind of problem. Somebody with Miah at the end of the name is looked upon as a simple Miah; but if he has it at the beginning, then, well, he is a MIAH! This is true even in other parts of the

subcontinent. The Punjabi politician Miah Ifekhar-uddin would probably never have made it had he been called Ifekhar-uddin Miah!

So much for miah and shahebs. How about the bibis? That too seems to have gone by the wayside. Mercifully, the address Apa, along with chachi or kakti-ma, is still in widespread use — in the streets, offices and at home. But even their days are numbered.

Madam is one outright foreign thing that is being used rather too frequently these days. It's a mystery why. In the offices especially, Mrs. has made some inroads, perhaps because apa leaves the issue of her marital status quite open.

With dada, bhai, chacha and kaka struggling to stay alive against the onslaught of hallo and shaheb, one wonders how long the universally accepted and rather sweet-sounding apa and the more head mistressly chachi or kakti-ma will manage to repulse the invasion of the madams and Mrs.

"Hallo ... madam ... you've dropped your purse", is a line coming to swallow us sooner than we think.

"Oh, so kind of you to tell me, sir", is the line which is sharpening up to kill us all.

Unless of course the reply is delivered in a vastly amended form.

"Yes, I've dropped my purse, and I'm going to drop you too if you don't drop that hallo madam rubbish".