

TRAVELOGUE

Boi Para, Rain, and the Smell of Old Books

The tale of an evening in Kolkata

ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM

My uncle and I stepped onto the cracked pavement in front of our hotel with some apprehension. The weather was less than ideal – the heat oppressive, the humidity stifling – our experience of venturing out in Kolkata alone was next to none.

Being avid readers, we ventured out into the city with a SIM card, purchased the previous night from a dubious shop in an alley that can only be characterised by its extraordinarily narrow size and conspicuous smell of urine, and the data package it came with, forming the backbone of our confidence for taking off in this strange city.

The first stop on our adventure was to be College Street, locally known as *Boi Para*. With uncertain footsteps we approached the battered, yellow taxi sitting idle at the end of the street. The taxi driver was standing in front of his old Ambassador Classic, chewing a betel leaf with gusto. Seeing us come over, he rose out of his stupor and enthusiastically agreed to take us on.

Contrary to the decrepit exterior of the vehicle, the interior was spacious and clean, and, adopting a hurried pace, the driver pulled the taxi into the crawling stream of traffic. He took us to our destination in appreciable time by utilising the obscurest of paths, the knowledge of which only came from spending his entire life on the roads of Kolkata, he assured us. All the while he engaged us in

the enthralling, and oftentimes dramatic, history of his family, dating back to the partition.

Thus, it was in good humour that we set foot *Boi Para*. Much like Nilkhet, the footpaths were lined with rows upon rows of hawkers selling any number of books from any number of genres. Behind the signs calling for discounts on medical and engineering books lay small stores specialising in vintage books, both academic and non-academic.

Beside Percy Bysshe Shelly's *Selected Poems*, bound in a rich green leather rugged



PHOTO: AUTHOR

with age and use, sat a brand new copy of *The Love Hypothesis* by Ali Hazelwood in yellow print. The shelf below was decorated with Agatha Christie and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, all the volumes being in some form of decay. It was bizarre, but the kind of bizarre that can only be considered endearing and loveable.

Burrowing deeper into the heart of *Boi Para*, we encountered shops upon shops of old books, each with their own individual character. Novels and books of poetry, mathematical theory and old editions of *Reader's Digest* – these shops boasted of carrying nearly anything and everything. The shopkeepers beckoned us at every turn, enticing us with the low prices and attractive collections. My uncle and I are individuals of weak resolve, and it was only after burning a heavy hole into our wallets that we decided to seek out a taxi for a ride back after the sun had long set.

The Bangali nature in us prompted us to complain and our sweat drenched state was our chief concern. However, our complaints of the extreme heat were answered by the taxi driver with, "Now is the time for *pujo*. Rain is waiting just around the corner."

Perhaps invited by his words, the sky seemed to break apart into pieces and send down its answer to the mockery of the earth's heat in the form of torrential rain.

Surrounded by the familiar smell of more old books than either of us needed to buy, the tang of petrichor and the comfort of knowing that an Eden such as College Street exists, we made our way across the City of Joy in a 50 year-old yellow taxi that will likely last 50 years more.

Zaima is a fake poet. Send her your sympathies at zaima2004adrta@gmail.com



PHOTO: TAMREEN EMDAD KAMAL



PHOTO: TAMREEN EMDAD KAMAL