

Journey to India

Chapter 7: CALCUTTA

Rex Maurice Oppenheimer

Full of adrenaline after the miraculous recovery of all my money, visas and passport, which had been stolen a couple of hours before I had gotten on the train in Bombay, I was settling in for the two day train ride to Calcutta.

I was as usual in second-class sleeper, smoking hash mixed with tobacco, as India flashed past my window. The myriad manners, castes and faces of my fellow travelers provided a mix of language, dress and countenance that calmed the rolling carriage as it rocked along like India's beating heart.

Excited to be on the move again, heading toward the legendary city of Calcutta, I was also a bit sad knowing that my visa would soon be expiring and I'd have to leave India for six months before I could reenter.

With all its difficulties, dirt and squalor, India had been a salve for my soul. There were times on these dusty roads, or cramped in the back of some public transport, or strolling through the vibrant streets, that I felt as though I was living a dream.

Life as a traveler suited me. I was independent enough that I could enjoy traveling alone, yet personable enough that I had no problem meeting and forming relationships with people I met, and chameleon enough to survive among both bankers and bank robbers with equal aplomb.

I wasn't alone. There were many others like me. The hippie trail across Asia was full of vagabonds held captive by the same illusions. There were also plenty of characters with illustrious pasts gone dim, or shady pasts well concealed. From smugglers to terrorists, mercenaries to embezzlers, drug dealers to disgraced diplomats, the Asian backstreets offered a route of escape, and it offered me the perfect blend of fantasy and reality.

I was a child of the Sixties imbued with a reckless pursuit of freedom and pleasure, yet crippled by the delusion of escaping the very real demands of history, human nature and discipline. Among the dusty roads and primitive structures, the third-world economy and exotic, gypsy-like ways of dressing, I felt free. Dancing a hedonistic waltz along the razor's edge of pleasure and pain.

Calcutta was for me a turning point: I had to leave India, and I got married for the first time.

A beautiful Indian woman I'd met on the train from Bombay had recommended a hotel in Calcutta called The Modern Lodge, and that's where I headed. The streets had gotten narrow, full of people dressed in lungis and dhotis, a rickshaw or two passing by, boys selling the leaf-wrapped mixture of betel nut and spices, called pan, from improvised roadside stalls, as I turned the corner and approached the Modern Lodge. There was a woman, a Westerner, with very light skin and long, dark hair, just coming out.

The touts outside had said that the Modern Lodge was full, but they always said stuff like that so they could lead you to where they could get a commission. But the man in the hotel responded to my inquiry with that Indian sideways head nod, "no rooms," he said.

As I exited the hotel I saw the woman talking to the touts in an Indian language I didn't understand.

"What language are you speaking?" I asked her.

"Bengali," she said, adding, "They say there are rooms at the Evergreen, but they're 60 rupees."



“That’s a lot,” I said. I was used to paying less than 10 rupees a night. Then I said, “We could share it.”

“Well, I don’t know. What do you think...we could, I guess.” She thought out loud.

“Why don’t we go and look at it,” I said. “We could take it for the night and then look for something cheaper.”

“Okay,” she replied, “but you have to promise not to molest me.”

“I’ll promise not to molest you,” I smiled, “but you don’t have to promise not to molest me.”

Her name was Penelope, and she was Australian. She had been living in Calcutta for some time. An archeologist, originally on her way to Afghanistan, she had been side tracked by the Russian invasion of that country, and had settled in Calcutta, studying Hindustani classical singing, with the august guru Bimmel Da. She was sharing an apartment in Calcutta with Jon, another Australian, who had been living in India for about 10 years.

Jon was a musician and some other Australian musician friends, a couple with a child, had been in India giving concerts. They were booked to fly to Bangkok in about a week, on the same flight I was leaving on.

Since they had a child, Penelope had offered to give up her room in the apartment and get a hotel room. That’s how she happened to be at the Modern Lodge.

We were together for those seven days and fell in love. As I mentioned before, my six-month visa was expiring, and I had to leave for six months before I could get another visa to return. We made vague plans for her to come over to Thailand and meet me, but she was rather anchored in Calcutta and we had no real plan. There was a total eclipse of the sun on the day I left for Thailand, which the Indians considered very auspicious.

I arrived in Bangkok with no visa and a tola, 10 grams, of hash shoved down my pants. I hadn’t known I needed a visa, and the customs men took me into a small room where they interviewed me. I was given a short, about three-week, temporary visa. At least they let me in the country. Now my plan was to head down to Malaysia where I could get a new visa for reentry into Thailand.

A song I’d written that was the title cut on Juice Newton’s first album for Capitol Records, been accruing some royalties, and I’d asked my mother to send them to me. I had to go to the American Embassy to collect the funds and while there the consul I spoke with filled me with horror stories about Muslim separatists, who hijacked the busses from Bangkok, stole everything and often killed many if not all of the passengers.

I took that bus ride several times over ensuing months and years and never had a problem, but I didn’t know that then, and considering the official source I took the warning fairly seriously. I also wanted to get back to India, which I missed, and the woman I thought I had fallen in love with.

I was staying at the Atlanta Hotel in Bangkok, where I met its owner and founder Dr. Max Henn. Dr. Henn was an amazing man. He had been in the Luftwaffe in the 1930s when Hermann Goring had told him that since he was Jewish he better get out of Germany.

Thus began a trek that included helping the Maharaja of Bikaner establish an air force, sojourns in Tibet, and finally coming to Bangkok in the 1940s, where he eventually built the Atlanta Hotel. Quite a prize when first opened, its later incarnations included being an R & R haunt for American GIs during the Vietnam War, and then, by the time I got there, a hippie/traveler hotel, with rooms for a few dollars a night.

Dr. Henn also ran the Western Union Travel Bureau out of the hotel, and over the coming years I was able to get some fantastic tickets through him. Twice I bought tickets for a few hundred dollars that went from Singapore to Jakarta, Indonesia to Noumea, New Caledonia, to Sydney, Australia, to Papeete, Tahiti to Los Angeles. The ticket was good for a year, I could stay as long as I wanted at any of the destinations along the way, and it was on UTA, which was then the Pacific wing of Air France.

I didn’t get involved in the Bangkok life very much on this trip. But I did spend one night at the infamous Grace Hotel, which was full of Westerners and Thai whores. I wasn’t looking for a prostitute, but it was there I met Supraanee. Although a prostitute, she never charged me, but rather would come to my room, often bringing some fruit and flowers, and always wonderfully powerful Thai sticks.

Supraanee and I mostly communicated through sign language, since a dealer had cut out her tongue, and she couldn't speak. We had a sweet, fleeting relationship.

I had become so used to the pace and peacefulness of life in India, that Bangkok seemed far too fast and modern. Besides, I wanted to get back to Penelope and see what that life had in store for me.

It may seem crazy, but since bribery was so common in India, and I had paid off those cops on the train in Allahabad, I thought I'd go to the Embassy and try to bribe the Ambassador. So I got on a bus and headed for the Indian Embassy.

I wasn't able to see the Ambassador, but I did have an interview with the First Consul. I remember sitting in front of his big desk and telling him my story, and a story it was. I said I was a student studying Indian culture, and that I was so disappointed to have my exploration and discoveries interrupted. But more than that, I poured my heart out to him, saying that I was engaged to be married to a woman I'd met in Calcutta, and now this bureaucratic red tape was forcing me to leave my love behind.

Indians are romantics, and as amazing as it may seem the Consul looked at me and said, in his clipped Indian English, "Let me see your passport." As he thumbed through it he called out loudly, saying something in Hindi. Then fixing me in an officious look, he said, "I will give you visa." With that, he wrote in my passport as a man brought him a stamp and inkpad, which he pressed into the pages before handing it back to me with a smile.

I arrived at the Calcutta airport on February 29th. Penelope had said to come to Bondel Road, Ballygunge Phari, that was all I had in the way of an address. I had been to the apartment, but had no memory of where it was or how to get there.

After retrieving my Tibetan backpack and shooing away all the would-be porters, I went to bargain for a taxi. I felt much better haggling for a set price, rather than being taken god knows where for god knows how long through the streets of Calcutta.

I shared the cab with another passenger, an Indian gentleman, and after dropping him off we finally arrived at my destination. It was just a rather large square, or plaza, surrounded by several stores, restaurants and other buildings and with various roadways emanating outwards.

Looking out of the taxi window I was lost, and I had my doubts as to whether the driver had brought me to Ballygunge Phari or was just dropping me off somewhere in the middle of Calcutta. Just then the brown, smiling face of a teenage Indian boy appeared at the window. "Are you looking for Penelope?" he asked.

"Yes," I smiled back, thankful for what seemed another small Indian miracle. In a country of nearly a billion people, I had had encounters that were hard to explain, such as when I met Peter in Dharamsala, which I described in Chapter 2. I had met him by chance when he was sitting in a restaurant in McLeod Ganj at the same table as a few Italian and French hippies, whom I'd joined to smoke hash and drink tea. He and I had left to go drink Chhaang, a thick, bitter and potent Tibetan rice beer. We were just two guys that had just met in India; we didn't know each other, except for the bit of information we'd shared while drinking. He was English, but was born in India. Well educated; he had taught in the university, and he had known and traveled with Ram Das, during the latter's first sojourn of discovery in India. I told him I wrote poetry. Later, when we were walking through the narrow streets, he asked to hear some of my poetry. As I was reciting some from memory, he turned to me and asked, "are you Greg's friend?" It was Greg's letter I'd received back in Phoenix a year ago that that had started my mysterious journey to India.

The smiling boy turned out to be Balaji, who worked as a part-time cook for Jon and Penelope.

It was good to be back in India, and living there, in an apartment, was a new and different experience than staying in hotels. So was living with Penelope and no longer being on my own. We had talked about marrying our lives together that first week we'd spent together, and now decided to actually get married. We applied for a marriage license, which meant visiting the Indian authorities, which told us we had to post banns of marriage. Posting banns is a rather ancient procedure, in which you post the intention of the two people to get married so that anyone who has a reason to stop the marriage can come forward. We were actually supposed to post signs in Calcutta and Delhi, and we were required to do it for 90 days, before the license would become valid. We also visited the American and Australian consulates as well.

My feelings about getting married wavered over the next few months, during which we took trips to Shantiniketan and Manali. Jon and Penelope shared a rented house in Shantiniketan, which is Tagore's hometown. Pen and I went there to get away from Calcutta for

awhile. The setting is indeed like a Tagore poem, with flowers, paddies, red earth, green trees, bright stars. It was a primitive and peaceful interlude.

Pre-monsoon Calcutta was becoming very hot and humid. Mark Twain once said about Calcutta that the weather can make a brass doorknob feel mushy, and that didn't seem like an exaggeration. We decided to go to Manali in the Himalayas.

We took a train to Jalunder in the Punjab, and from there got a bus to Ropar. The bus broke down, and we all had to wait several hours for another bus to come along. When it did arrive there was no room inside, and we all had to sit on top of the bus for the rest of the trip into Ropar. There we waited for five hours for our bus to Manali. Finally, after a rocking, rolling, muscle-tearing, bone-breaking ride all night long, we reached Manali early in the morning, and it felt like the most beautiful place on earth.

A gorgeous green valley surrounded by snow-capped Himalayan peaks, it is filled with enchanted forests, full of burbling brooks and glades, rivers and waterfalls, a zillion kinds of trees, from pine and spruce to cherry and apple. The forest often felt like a spacious cathedral of peace and beauty. There were small paddies of wheat, eagles, crows and cuckoos, and hillsides graced by stone villages and temples. All this and the best charras in India is grown and rubbed in Manali.

Despite my vacillating feelings, we did get married, and it happened, as so many things did in my life, impulsively. We were back in Calcutta, and Penelope had gone around the corner to the doi (Yogurt) shop to buy some doi. They also made and sold a sweet that I liked called limbu sondesh. While she was gone I said to myself, "If she gets some sondesh, we'll get married."

She came back with yogurt and sondesh, and the next day we went to see the marriage registrar, Sri A.K. Bose and make arrangements. The wedding took place a few days later on the fifth of June. We had three witnesses, a Sikh, a Jain and a Tantric Swami, all friends of ours. It was Thursday, a dry day in Calcutta, which meant no alcohol, so we celebrated by going to Flurry's for tea and almond rings.

The weather in Calcutta had improved by the time we returned. The city, famous for so many reasons, was an unforgettable experience. I lived there for somewhere between seven months and a year, and I'll always cherish the privilege of having experienced this amazing city.

Just wandering the streets I could see women patting dung into patties and sticking them to walls and trees to dry. Later they will use them as fuel for their cooking fires. People taking baths in puddles and at broken water mains. Bejeweled ladies in fine silk saris strolling behind wealthy, well-dressed gentlemen with elegant mustaches. Bearers pulling overloaded carts, and women balancing huge pots, trays, urns on their heads as they weave between cars, busses, taxis, rickshaws, bicycles, buffalo, holy cows and holy men.

Calcutta both bombards and bathes me with consciousness-expanding images and experiences. The city inspired the Nobel Prize-winning poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, the starkly beautiful films of Satyajit Ray and the spiritual music of Ravi Shankar, yet for millions of people around the world it conjures up nothing but images of the black hole, poverty, deformity and death.

For more than three centuries, everyone from rajahs to refugees has continued to pour into the paradoxical city. Calcutta is turbulent and tranquil, a spiritual haven to many, a den of iniquity to others. Many cherish it as a center of intellectual and artistic thought and expression, while for the endless stream of impoverished job seekers that flood into Calcutta from nearby states and countries, including Bihar, Assam, Nepal and Bhutan, it is a sea of hope.

In the midst of grand old buildings such as the Gothic-style Calcutta High Court built in 1872, the Indian Museum established in 1878, and the marble memorial to Queen Victoria for which George V laid the foundation in 1906, a row of women and children crouch on the ground like baboons searching each other's hair for insects. A barefoot man trots down the street pulling healthy, well-dressed children, with deep, kohl-darkened eyes, in a hand-pulled rickshaw. Harijan children, naked, or dressed in threadbare cotton, are running, playing, begging, as men in dhotis sit on the sidewalk and get a shave from the loin-clothed barber squatting before them.

Individuals are roaming, watching, constantly picking up bits of discarded food, or whatever can be salvaged, sold, or made into something. Women squat on the ground and cut scavenged, shriveled vegetables on old, rusty blades. Then cook over burning dung patties, coarse shawls pulled around their faces to shield them from the smoke, as they stir their family's meager meal.

The images, both beautiful and grotesque, dance before the eyes, tug at the heart and wrench at the gut. An intensity of motion and color, dreamlike, yet stark in its reality, is the city's constant song.

It's like traveling back in time, to when people first congregated in cities. They had tools but not machines. I go to get a key cut and a man files it by hand. Using only his eye to measure, he squints and holds up the original key for comparison. Of course India has machines. India has computers and atomic power. But in Calcutta the modern is so diluted by the ancient, and the familiar by the strange, it can feel like another planet.

Indians and Westerners tend to regard things differently. I remember riding on a bus between Varanasi and Patna, and we ran out of gas. Pulling to the side of the road, the driver asked us all to disembark and wait for another bus. A passenger from New York, the only other foreigner onboard, asked what the problem was. The driver simply said, "Petrol finished, Baba."

The New Yorker was incredulous, "You mean we're out of gas?" The driver again wagged his head and simply said, "Petrol finished."

The American just couldn't understand. "How long have you had this job?" he demanded. "I have driven the Varanasi - Patna route for fifteen years," the driver smiled proudly. "And how often do you do it?" queried the Yank. "Two times every week," responded the driver, his white teeth gleaming in his nut-brown face.

"What?" Screamed the highly agitated passenger. "You drive this twice a week for fifteen years and you don't know how much gas you need?" Now the Indian didn't understand. He stood among the passengers in their saris, dhotis and lungis. Some with hands, feet or faces painted in henna, sandalwood or khol. He then looked at the American tourist, who seemed to him to have just descended from another world. With pitiful compassion and bemused incomprehension, the driver raised his upturned palms, "It is only time," he said.

Although India has been independent for a long time, British influence is apparent in a variety of ways. English dishes, including baked beans on toast, are menu staples at teashops, such as Flurry's in Calcutta. At Christmastime, Kathleen's Bakery turns out some of the best mincemeat pies the British Empire has ever known.

Scores of imposing buildings and homes add to both the nobility and peculiarity of Calcutta's atmosphere. Many create a sort of Mad Max environment of a devastated but once grand civilization inhabited now by modern primitives. The grass and plants are reclaiming walkways and verandahs, and the untouchables and street people, squatting in the corners, under the trees, beside the stoop, now seem rooted in these estates.

This strange ambiance permeates life in Calcutta. I recall when the son of a Maharaja and his wife, a well-known novelist, who has had titles on the New York Times Best seller lists, invited Penelope and I out to the Bengal Club, a remnant of the Raj. The table was laid out with fine china, crystal and silver, yet my ex-wife noticed what she thought might be a rat scurrying about in the corner. She informed the novelist, who maintained her dignity as she called, "Bearer!" After the white-jacketed waiter left, three barefoot young men wearing lungis came out of the kitchen and busily shooed the creature from the room. The novelist turned to us and smiled calmly, "I believe it was a muskrat," she said.

While Calcutta is a city of gargantuan proportions it remains at heart a village. I remember once when my ex-wife and I had returned to Calcutta after an absence of nearly five years. Our first night back we went to dinner at a restaurant we used to frequent around the corner on Gariahat Road. A waiter smiled at us and addressed Penelope, "Oh, you have been out of station long time, memsahib," he said.

While many may find Calcutta a cauldron of corruption, Mother Teresa, an Albanian Catholic in a Hindu land, said it was where she found God. It is a city that, like other large metropolises, can be bizarre and beautiful, frightening and friendly, majestic and modest, yet in its entirety and at its core, Calcutta is unique. There is no other place on earth like it. Not just in comparison to its imposing physicality and its multitudes, but in its bloodline, whose evolutionary path is woven from all aspects of the human heart into holy cloth.