

**dispatch #1 from ralph
calcutta, december 25, 2005**

the journey from santa cruz to calcutta

DAY #1, Day of Departure, Wednesday December 14, 2005

All packed, up early, planning to leave about 10 am for San Jose airport. This would be a new route, just begun by American Airlines: San Jose to Delhi with only one brief stop in Chicago. At 6 am the phone rang. American Airlines said my flight is canceled due to ice in Chicago. I recalled the recent accident in which a Southwest plane overshot the runway and ended up on the highway. They say we must leave at once to catch an earlier flight from San Jose to Chicago. We did, Ray driving and Shea in the back seat. From then on all went smoothly until Chicago.

After a long wait in Chicago, I got on the plane for Delhi. At end of the runway, there was another long wait for deicing. We had a party on board for over an hour. The plane was full of Indians going back for Xmas. Most seemed to have a PhD in engineering or economics. Among others I met Dusty, an engineer from Calcutta, now living in Milwaukee. After the pleasantries we got down to "what do you do", I make agent based models for financial markets, he uses agent based models for marketing. Go figure. We will get together in Calcutta after Xmas. At last we were off.

DAY #2, Delhi Stopover, Thursday, December 15, 2005

The flight was essentially a night flight, over Iceland, Latvia, Iran, etc, landing in Delhi in the morning, Chicago time. But of course, that is dinner time in Delhi. I must say, this was the easiest trip to India ever. Exiting customs with my two rolling bags, I was met by Ananda, my driver from the Yatri House, a little bed and breakfast I discovered in the Lonely Planet Guide. At last I am in India. In the nearly six years since my last visit, not so much seems different. On the drive into New Delhi, it seems that maybe there is less smog. Ananda explains that five years ago there was a government mandate to switch vehicles from gas to CNG, even three-wheelers. We arrive at Yatri House, very comfortable, clean, and quiet. I plug in my laptop to charge, and collapse into bed around midnight.

DAY #3, Arrival Calcutta, Friday, December 16, 2005

I awake in Delhi after a good sleep, have breakfast on the porch looking at gigantic crows on a high-rise across the road, do a little work on Hypatia, my trusty 12 inch Powerbook, had a light lunch, then off again with Ananda for the airport and my flight to Calcutta, with a stop at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU, pronounced jayne-you) in South Delhi to meet Prof Ram Ramaswamy who will be my host in week number five.

Good thing I had Ananda with me, as even with his help, it took more than an hour to find Ram. I walked around several departments of JNU, nobody had ever heard of the School of Physical Sciences. Finally I called Ram for instructions on someone's mobile, then we drove to the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) campus next door. The JNU/IIT campus is an isolated field with factory style buildings. I spotted a movie theater and a juice bar. When I told Ananda that I would be staying here in the guest house for a week, and it seemed nice, he just rolled his eyes. Finally I found Ram. He recalled our last meetings in Princeton, 1966, and Les Houches, 1981, and then we made plans for my series of four lectures in mid January. At last I left for the airport, and the flight to Calcutta.

Into Delhi domestic terminal, xray the bags to be checked, and onto the plane... no problem. After a two hour flight, we land at Calcutta Dum Dum (where they made the bullets) Airport. I get the bags, go out the door, and there was my driver waiting ... VIP service throughout. By now it was dark, and the drive from the airport was hair-raising. The road is an endless bumper car rink: buses like worn out tin cans with people hanging from holes in the sides, trucks of every description, yellow "Classic Ambassador" taxis, modern cars, foot and bicycle rickshaws, three-wheelers with lawn mower engines, bicycles, tricycles, foot traffic of humans, dogs, bullocks, cows, and goats, mostly without lights or reflectors ... all trying to squeeze ahead in heavy smog. There are a lot of panic stops, and one must hold tight to the seat. No safety belts, but no matter, we hardly topped 15 miles per hour all the way to Calcutta.

Around eight pm, the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture (RKM/IC) hove into sight. It is a giant floodlit white fort filling an entire city block, with uniformed armed guards at every gate. This will be my home for a month. I was taken through gate #5 to the Guest House, and soon was alone in my room A18 with bags and self intact. The view from the balcony was of a garden surrounded by high rise (five stories with crenelated roof) cliff houses occupied by orange robed monks ... sort of like the Potiala Palace in Lhasa. After 48 hours of easy travel, I went to sleep dreaming of my own Lost Horizon. In the morning, I will have a look at Calcutta, and estimate the magnitude of the challenge ahead.

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