

**dispatch #2 from ralph
calcutta, december 27, 2005**

the first week in calcutta

DAY #4, The British Council, Saturday, December 17, 2005

Waking in Calcutta: let the din begin. About 4:30 am start the bugles, as if urging reluctant elephants into battle. Followed around 5 by the singing: about 100 people sing together, each his own song. At 5:30 or so come the air raid sirens, perhaps calling bus drivers to the early shift. Once I get the hang of it, clocks will be unnecessary.

This day, Calcutta #1, my top priority was to access my email and catchup the most urgent messages. Consulting my Lonely Planet (the world's leading guidebook to India, 1268 pages) I found the most attractive internet cafe to be the British Council Library, 5 Shakespeare Sarani, which also loans books. One fee covers its branches in Delhi and Bangalore also, which are on my itinerary. It opens at 10:30 am. So, off I go at 9:30 am on an experiment in navigating this mad city. Getting into a yellow classic cab outside RKM gate #5, I asked for the British Council. No response. Ditto for Shakespeare Sarani. (Later I learned that addresses have to be pronounced with a strong Bengali accent, something like Shokuspair Shuruni, and anyway, that street is really known as Theater Road.) Consulting my map, I tried out several nearby monuments, and was delighted to find one that worked, Maidan Metro. Shortly I was dumped near Maidan Metro for 60 rupees, about one dollar and a half.

Soon enough I learned the scale of the map the hard way, my destination was about a mile away, more considering the three wrong turnings I made. But by 10:30 I was in front of 5 Shakespeare Sarani, a bank. The armed guard told me the BC had moved a few years back, to 17 Loudan Street. Oh right, the Lonely Planet I have with me is the 1999 edition, an economy measure. Another 15 minutes walk brought me to the BC, where a gaggle of armed guards told me the opening time was 11 am. At the exact hour I passed through the metal detector, checked my shoulder bag, and queued for the membership desk. After filling out the forms, I was finally warned that the Library no longer allowed Internet access. I fled, and right outside the metal detector I came across my pal, Sisir Ray (pronounced she-she rah-ee) with whom I had a lunch date. This cloud had a silver lining, as Sisir took me to the Marco Polo nearby, surely one of the best Chinese restaurants I have come across, ever. And with Sisir I discover a plethora of common interests, from microphysics to cosmic consciousness. Email must wait another day.

DAY #5, The Calcutta Math Society, Sunday, December 18, 2005

My first professional appearance of this trip, the high point was (as usual) the taxi ride from Calcutta to its suburban sister city, Salt Lake. Just a few buildings six years ago, this new city now rivals Calcutta in size and culture. It has a certain charm: big lake with long thin fishing boat, fisherman standing on one leg in boat, flock of goats by the side of the highway, lots of canals, walking paths, open fields. Many buildings already seem old (how is that possible?), and that is certainly the case with the home of the venerable Calcutta Mathematical Society. Since I first heard of this organization I regarded it as the most esoteric club on the planet. Many famous mathematicians have visited here. And now, my turn. But the level of talks was middling, the topics ancient, and the turnout for this international meeting poor. My talk attracted about seven of the 30 or so participants.

DAY #6-10, WBUT, Monday to Friday, December 19-23, 2005

The West Bengal University of Technology (WBUT, pronounced wuh-beauty) is my official host for this Fulbright trip. The Fulbright Senior Specialist Program pays transportation and an honorarium, but each trip must begin with an invitation from an academic institution somewhere in the world. and that host organization must pay my room and board. It was WBUT that had ponied up for this trip, and I never knew why. Today i finally found out.

The first apparent reason was a workshop called the Winter School of Chaos, Nonlinear Dynamics, and Complexity. It met every day this week, and I was scheduled to speak every day in the first session. After another amusement-park taxi ride, this time with A. B. Roy (no relation to Sisir), I arrived at WBUT. It is a single building resembling the Calcutta Math Society, but on a larger scale, and has a group of guards at the entrance gate with antique rifles reminiscent of the civil war, surely they do not work?

We were ushered into the posh office of the vice chancellor (VC, he is the boss) by the chief guard, whose mustache says dont-mess-with-me. Apparently when the VC wants to see somebody, this enforcer is dispatched, and returns without fail, like Dog the Bounty Hunter, with the wanted man. More efficient than appointment books and all that. The VC, Ashoke Thakur (same name as Tagore) turned out to be very charming. The main speakers were seated in front of his desk, and we took tea together. Ashok Sengupta and A. B. Roy, the prime organizers of the workshop, Bikas Chakrabarty of Jadavpur University (JU, in Calcutta), and me.

And then, at last, we meet the workshop. Besides the speakers, there are not more than ten registered participants, all young faculty. After lunch break (tomato and cucumber sandwiches) and a few more demand meetings in front of the VC's desk, the real plot emerges: it is called the Institute for Research on Complexity (ICRC). This is the urgent brainchild of A. Sengupta and A. B. Roy (we must use initials, as in Bengal -- like China -- there are only a few last names). And the way to raise money and support for a new Institute is to hold a workshop or conference, and get some newspaper publicity, etc etc. It seems to me I have heard this song before, as my mom used to say. Anyway, I gave my five lectures, listened to a few of the other talks (the level was very high), caught up on jet lag, moved into my new office next to the VC's with internet (it works half the time) and giant air conditioner. So I am settled in for a month in Calcutta, all in the service of the ICRC.

Sidebar on WBUT

At the RK Mission where I stay, so many people ask me what I am doing here. I say I am on a Fulbright visiting the WBUT, which draws a blank. So here is the W-scuttle-BUT. Five years ago or so, as tech industries were on the rise in India, some entrepreneurs realized there was money to be made in tech edu-business. Shortly, there were 83 institutions serving 60,000 students of engineering in West Bengal alone, and junk degrees proliferated. The West Bengal State government decided to intervene, and three years ago, WBUT was formed as a standards and examination arm of the government. But they charged exam fees, of course, to cover expenses, and soon realized it was an oil well. As money gushed in, the VC of WBUT decided to begin offering graduate courses, and at present there are programs in BioTech, BioInformatics, Computer Science, and a few other fields. There is a faculty of 35 and student body of 350. Next: a department of Chaos, Nonlinear Dynamics, and Complexity, and then the ICRC, and that is where I fit in.

DAY #11, The Asiatic Society, Saturday, December 24, 2005

The agenda this day was to accompany Sisir Roy to an Einstein centennial conference at the Asiatic Society, where he is giving a talk on quantum mechanics and consciousness. He picks me up at the RKM for the inevitable bumper car tango, and we arrive at the venue, at the top of Park Street, a fancy shopping street downtown, not far from the Marco Polo. This crumbling building is a famous antique, recognizably Victorian within the typical state of Calcutta melt-down. We listen to several excellent pop talks on the big bang and the like, all strickly legit Western science. When Sisir got up to talk, his fancy PowerPoint connecting ancient Sanscrit philosophy and quantum mechanics was a knockout, and perfect for the Asiatic Society which aspires to such connections. At the end I was invited to join the panel for a final discussion, and I mentioned that mathematics had a fundamental role in Einstein's work. When we emerged it was dark, and Park Street on Christmas eve was a sight to behold, lights everywhere, the whole block appearing like a Christmas tree on steroids.

=====