
Kolkata, Spring 2008

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Dispatch #1 of 2 from Kolkata



My room at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata

Foreground: laundry on the line. Above the bed: mosquito net.

In the back: New MacBook Pro computing patterns.

Holi Moli

This is my sixth visit to India since 1972, and the third to Kolkata. Two years ago I went to India on a six-week Fulbright and spent a month in Kolkata. The dispatches and photos are posted on-line at:

<http://www.ralph-abraham.org/new/fulspec/india.2006/>

This time I used frequent flyer miles to go to Kolkata to attend Complex Systems 2008, a workshop organized by the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) and the West Bengal University of Technology (WBUT). My mission throughout has been to support the emergence of a center of chaos theory and complexity in India.

The voyage to India

Aside from taking 38 hours door-to-door the ride on Singapore Airlines was not half bad. Airport lounges in Hong Kong and Singapore saved me. I kept up with email and managed to finish *Shalimar the Clown* by Salman Rushdie. Which reminded me that I cannot actually write at all. Despite which, I must set this story down.

I have been telling everybody how much I love Kolkata and have been looking forward to this trip. Although I hate to leave home these days. Too nice, our little family. But the entry from Dum Dum airport into Kolkata was not without blemish. I greatly appreciate the luxury of a "limo" meeting me at the airport after a longish trip, and the host institutions here – ISI and WBUT – had provided one as usual. But exiting the customs area into the dark hot smog at 11 pm I could not find a person holding a sign with my name. So I used my rusty Treo to call my WBUT host, Khamales, and shortly a young street urchin (it seems) approached me and said my name. He led me towards the "limo" at high speed, which I could not match dragging my three pieces of luggage. He did not help with the luggage, nor in fending off the numerous pariahs who were trying to grab my bags and hoist them for me in hopes of a fat tip. My commands to bug off in Hindi helped not, as they seemed to speak only Bengali. Anyway thanks to a full moon rising through the orange smog I spotted my driver lounging in front of a Maruti minivan (Japanese

sized jeep thing) and he opened the boot so I could lever my big bag in. OK, the first blem was his attitude, all the rest as expected. After entering the fray -- not too frightening at midnight -- I made out from his mumble and growl that he had no idea where he was to take me. Another call to Khamales provided the address but apparently not enough direction, as Blem-boy stopped repeatedly either to piss, buy bidis, or ask directions from beached taxi drivers. All went well -- overlooking a certain paranoia on my part -- and we arrived at my favorite lodging in Kolkata, the Guest House of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture (RMIC). This is a gigantic white fortress in the midst of chaos, filling an entire city block, somewhat reminiscent of the Potala Palace in Lhasa. Once inside the small gate and past the armed guards, I could relax.

After a brief and fitful rest despite taking a handful of homeopathic Calms it was time for breakfast, and then the 90 minute bumper car madness from RMIC to ISI (takes only 30 minutes in the middle of the night) and I arrived at the workshop, had lunch, and gave my first tutorial talk on "morphogenetic fields". All okay so far, ignoring the crushing fatigue and jet lag. I was told that the very next day, my Day #2, was a major national holiday called Holi, and ISI had organized a jeep ride to Santaniketan -- pronounced Shantiniketan in Bengali, meaning House of Peace -- where the best Holi celebration in all India would be happening on the campus of the Visva Bharati (VB) -- meaning Unity University. There was a seat for me if I wanted to go, I could be picked up at 4:30 am next morning. Hmmm.

Now I was exhausted, and I hate festivals and crowds and so on. So a day of rest at the RMIC seemed the more rational plan. However, eight years ago Ray and I had visited the VB and really liked it. Founded by Rabindranath Thakur (called Tagore outside Bengal) to epitomize a new principle of education, it seemed to be the UC Santa Cruz of India. Classes outdoors emphasizing the integrity of nature, visiting students from all over the world, classes in Russian and Japanese, much time devoted to the arts, etc etc etc. So I Just Said Yes to the trip to Holi in Santiniketan.

Now I am a veteran of scores of car trips through downtown Kolkata. I do not raise a hair at the habits of professional local drivers. Trimming the toenails of pedestrians, up the down staircase, reversing in the middle of the street in front of oncoming busses and lorries amid smog too thick to see through, riding the rails of oncoming trams, climbing the sidewalk, speeding through stoplights -- you name it, I am kool. For one thing, all this mayhem occurs at walking speeds, and actual crashes are rare in my experience (despite reading of thousands of pedestrian deaths per



U-turn in front of oncoming traffic

year in India). So the trip to Santiniketan began with a familiar level of risk. However, an hour of this familiar peril brought us to "the highway". Yes, there is a new one around here. And suddenly risk elevated, as highway speeds seemed to average 60 or 65 miles per hour. Still the lanes were dotted with sleeping dogs, goats, and cattle. Lorries still parked in the middle of the road for the driver to pee on the verge. But now the frequency of certain death boggled the mind. Roadkill everywhere being cleaned by flocks of crows.

Our driver had no nerves, obviously. One of his favorite tricks to circumvent temporary road blocks was to leap the divider into the oncoming traffic. Apparently the reflexes of sardines -- who perform a maneuver called the fountain to outwit an oncoming baleen whale -- had been inherited by these oncoming drivers. Another favorite trick saved us needless time at toll booths, where he would climb onto the grassy bank to go around the toll gate at top speed, careening on two wheels past dropping jaws. As terrifying as this was in the daytime, it was rather more so in the night, for they do not waste resources on needless running lights.

Well all right, not to worry. We arrived with dry pants at the VB by ten in the morning. Six whiteys with an equal number of keepers and a local guide, Sandip. We found the main ceremony just ended, and some three or four thousand students and an equal number of tourists from Kol-

kata rampaging through the campus like the bulls of Pamplona. Each had several large baggies of Holi Dust: pigments of fluorescent orange, magenta, red, blue, green, lime, etc – carefully compounded to stick to your hair, face, and clothing like duct tape. All were Jackson Pollack masterpieces on the fly. As the six of us were clearly underprivileged dust-wise, we became highly attractive targets. My white hair and beard were especially pitied, and Holi Dusting proceeded by the cupfuls – poured, rubbed, and polished off with a beautiful smile and the greeting: Happy Holi !!! We had already learned that the Holi in Santiniketan was the best in India because of the influence of Tagore, who taught a new meaning of the traditional holiday: Holi Dust signified World Peace and Universal Love. So we bore the kilos of dust with dignity for about an hour. We were dusted by professors, students, truck drivers, and small children. We posed for photos with hundreds of thrilled and giggling little ones, all repeating, Happy Holi. Finally the tipping point reached, we begged for escape.

Sandip had predicted all this, apparently, and arranged with his thesis advisor, Professor M. M. Panja of the VB, to open his on-campus home to us as a safe house. Vera (a systems scientist from the European Community) and I followed Sandip along narrow footpaths and byways to the Ponjo home, and there a whole new chapter began. This must have been the holi plan for the day, as there unfolded an awesome pageant of things Tagore. The little children of the house sang a number of Tagore songs, long poems set to melody by Tagore himself. Everyone in the house seemed to know these by heart, as all Bengalis learn them in school. The children go to school within the VB, which provides schooling from Pre-K to Post PhD. All in the family had spectacular drawings and paintings to show us. The talent and graciousness of all in the family amazed us. And an entire physics class from the VB arrived at the house with bags of Dust, but were so considerate as to apply it only to our stocking feet. The resulting mess of the whole house concerned nobody at all. Truly a Happy Holi.

We survived the trip home, the daytime horror tape replayed in the moonlight, and I had time for a triple shower which toned down my colors a bit before dinner at the RMIC and early to bed, still fighting jet lag at the end of Day #2.