
Kolkata, Spring 2008

Complex Systems 2008, March 17 - April 05

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Dispatch #2 of 2 from Kolkata



At dinner, home of Prodyot Roy

Foreground: a banana flower, outer petal folded back to reveal stamens, cooked versions of which I am preparing to eat.

Dispatch #1 related Days #1 and #2 in Kolkata. Suddenly it is Day #16, my last day, and I am packed and ready to go to the airport after dinner, for the 40 hour tunnel home. Where did all the time go? It seems that many days were alike, and time slipped by unnoticed. Trying in retrospect to remember anything for the record, I am coming up with only one special day, Day #13. While the whole experience has been highly interesting and valuable, #13 is the day that really seemed fun. The fun actually began in the evening of Day #11.

Professor Prodyot Roy and his wife had taken pity on me, alone and trapped in the RMIC fortress on a Sunday afternoon, and invited me home on dinner. This was within walking distance, and while dining on banana flowers and drumsticks (tasting like asparagus but actually inedible) we laughed and laughed. Prodyot is the chair of the physics department at Presidency College (sort of the Harvard of India) and I had been invited to speak there on agent-based modeling on Day #13, two days hence. So we made a plan to meet for lunch on the day of the talk, then go exploring the neighborhood of Presidency College, which resides on College Street, an intellectual hangout and location of a zillion small book stalls. They picked me up and hailed a taxi, an ancient yellow Ambassador that looked and sounded like a hornet. This hornet had a mind of its own, and despite yelling fiercely in Bengali, Prodyot had a challenge in directing it to our destination, a pleasant restaurant of the Raj era. Once again I resolved never to enter a taxi on my own. But we managed, and lunch was fine. I was able to recognize banana flowers and drumsticks all on my own. Then another taxi trauma and my talk. I think I persuaded some of the audience to try agent-based modeling on their own. And then, to the street!

We found ourselves a party of five, having gathered up Saugata, a young physics professor, and his wife, who teaches philosophy at a nearby college on College Street. My idea of celebrating the moment was to have a cup of tea. Seems like a modest ambition for tea-time in Kolkata. We went to several cafe's but none of them served any tea at all. It seems that coffee is the in drink these days. We hiked. We took the tram. We had yet another taxi nightmare. We took the subway. We hiked some more. My brand new Apple MacBook Pro laptop was getting heavier and heavier. We explored several "hubs" -- mall-park complexes which have become popular hangouts. Nowhere could we find a cup of teas. Finally we took one last taxi gamble, back to the RMIC fortress, hoping for a cup of tea in my neighborhood. Backs to the wall, we entered a coffee house for a last stand. Looked like a Disney version of postmodern Kolkata. And lo, they had two kinds of tea on

the menu. We ordered Darjeeling, but that was out of stock. We settled for Assam. For three hours we had laughed our way all over town, and finally found a cup of tea next door to my home. Could not have been better even if planned.