

Calcutta hits traveller hard and doesn't let up

This summer, Maria Wawer, a student at UNB, went on a World University Service of Canada seminar to India. The following is the third part of her travel story.

By MARIA WAWER

Finally, Calcutta. This is not going to be an easy story to do. It is very hard, or even impossible, to be at all objective about this city. Calcutta hits one strongly and never relents. When one first arrives, from the semi-modernity and sterility of New Delhi, Calcutta is an oppressive city, although very exciting.

Sights, sounds, smells assail one constantly. The streets are very crowded, very noisy. One elbows one's way through the narrow passageway between the shops and the street vendors, between men dressed in white and women in bright sarees — (women who I found to have much more beautiful facial features than those in the western part of India). The heat is incredible. Everywhere big, skinny white cows and bullocks mingle with the crowds. One often sees a cow sitting placidly in the middle of a busy intersection. In Canada, it would be cow soup in five minutes flat. Little kids run up and start to beg. Traffic is chaotic. There are few traffic lights, and anyway, most of them seem to be ignored. Calcutta is the only of the Indian cities I visited which still has rickshaws pulled by men on foot (in most other places, there is a bicycle attachment). They often miss being run over by a few inches.

As one moves down a street, one is also hit by the smells: some most pleasant — incense and jasmine, fresh fruit; some very disagreeable, from the animals, also from the human excrement. (How can this be avoided in a city such as this, where an estimated quarter to half a million people live in the street?) Calcutta and the street dwellers seem to cope with each very well.

There are public pumps on almost every block to provide drinking and washing water. Also, especially in the older downtown area, most of the buildings have wide colonnades or verandas in front of them, allowing these people to escape from monsoon rains. It is estimated that half of the street population is made up of people from the country who come to the city just for a short time, to make a bit more money. As they prefer to save every rupee, they do not search out accommodations.

It is not possible to classify the architecture of the place. Most of the buildings date back to colonial days, especially in the central part of the city. They seem to be made up of a lattice work of crumbling balconies and gabled windows, verandas and rusty grillwork.

When we first arrived, we stayed at the Great Eastern Hotel, one of the last remaining vestiges of imperialistic colonialism, (or colonialistic imperialism, if you prefer). This impression is given not so much by any in-depth study on my part of how the place is run. Rather it is the product of my superficial observation of the

architecture and watered down version of the local conception of how a "veedy, veddy fine British hotel" is supposed to function.

The place was huge, with a wide central courtyard. Most of the rooms had their own attached sitting room. There is a dining hall with orchestra. (All this for about six dollars a day, mind you.) However, there were cockroaches an inch long everywhere — it's not too bad hard to understand that it would be very difficult to keep a large place like this hotel completely bug free in the damp weather. None of the plumbing worked consistently — sporadic functioning was a cause for rejoicing. I think I ate in the dining hall twice. Both times, I was the only one there, except for one or two others from the group. At least five waiters hovered over us each time. It was impossible to move a fork without one or the other swooping in to rearrange it. Once the power went out, and we could only feel their presence, like so many dark vultures, behind out backs. To their own minds, of course, they were out to serve us to the best of their ability. It was the same attitude one often found in shops or the market place. One would be browsing along quietly when the shopkeeper would appear and insist on serving one, taking out all his wares, and generally, (to one brought up in "serve yourself" department stores!), being a nuisance. No matter how one pleaded to be left to look around quietly, the stock answer would be: "But, Madame, it is my duty to serve you." This may have some aspect of "Skin the tourist while you can" in it, but I think it went much deeper than that. These people, be they shopkeepers or waiters, fruit vendors or doormen, have a strong sense of their duty and station in life. No one is going to stop them from fulfilling this task, no matter how humble it might be.

At the same time, mild cases of cheating the tourists were common, and often done with a certain good humour. I remember one Calcutta taxi cab driver. His meter clearly read one rupee. He insisted on two, basing himself on the new rates which had just been approved a few weeks ago. For some reason, I was in no mood to be taken in that way.

"No, way, man! The new fare is the old fare, plus 20 percent. That's

one rupee, 20. No more."

He gave me a big appreciative grin of surprise and said, "Oh, you know!" The matter was closed.

Calcutta, especially at the beginning, was a challenge. I do not think it will ever be a place to which your average overprotected Canadian student will sink in with no effort at all. However, it is also India's most active city culturally. The best concerts, theatre, art is to be found there. Many of India's most politically aware members of the intelligensia are found here, which also adds to the excitement of the city, if one is fortunate enough to meet these people.

I had been in the city about a week, before I realized that I was no longer afraid of it. It was a certain euphoric feeling to realize that one was beginning to feel at home in Calcutta. The crowds no longer bothered me. I had learned how to handle the market boys, with their baskets, forever offering to carry one's stuff, who did not allow one to shop in peace. Somehow, one just learns to accept all of the varied aspects of the city with some equanimity. One begins to flow along with all the things one originally found irritating. Why bother getting upset? Also, I began to realize that the average city back home looks pretty dull in comparison.

This slow acceptance of what one sees had its disquieting aspects however. It is surprising how soon one gets used to stepping around bodies in the street, or even worse, how one stops noticing the sick and the crippled beggars. Does everyone become blasé so quickly? One certainly is not going to go around wringing his hands at every "sad" thing he sees, especially since half of these things are only unfounded value judgements anyway. However, how cold can one become before one loses all sensitivity, becomes just another great supporter of the "unfortunates of the world" by making a five dollar donation to charity every year? There are many aspects of people's welfare that could use some improvement, not only here in India, but all over the world. I wonder how long it would be, if ever I were to go back to a place like India (probably as a doctor which is my present plan) before I became just another bureaucrat, incapable of reacting. To what point should adapting be taken?

I made many friends in Calcutta. For a while I lived at a hostel for young Indian career women and students on Dharamtala Street. It was most interesting to find out the aspirations and problems of this group of society. For many of them, this period is a difficult one. They suddenly find themselves caught between the mores of half a millennium. They can no longer accept all of the old traditional ways, with arranged marriages and life totally within the family. Yet, in many ways, they find the new lifestyles rather vulgar and unsettling. One of them asked me, "If a guy asks me for a date, how do I know he wants to marry me?" Good grief! Of course, she knew dates were for the purpose of getting to know the other better, yet she could still not totally reject the idea that being out with a guy was somehow lacking in honor. One must not over-generalize, of course. Many Indian women are very liberated, while many, especially in the villages, are completely comfortable in the ancient ways. Yet, the girls I met here form a fairly large group.

NEXT WEEK: Finish Calcutta, on to Orissa.

Jones Locker to levy cover charge

Robert Leeman and the management of Davy Jones Locker have requested that the following message be relayed to their customers.

Due to liquor license regulations, the management of DJL has been forced to lower the cost of drinks from \$0.60 to \$0.45 for liquor and from \$0.40 to \$0.35 for beer. This will represent a loss of approximately \$100.00 in revenue to the operation which is at present running on a break-even basis. Needless to say, this will cause the locker to go in the red and we will be forced to close down. For this reason, in order to remain operating, we must levy a cover charge of \$1.00 on our customers. This is not to our liking, but, let me stress that we will only remain a break-even operation and it should cost you, the customer, about the same as in the past because, for the average patron, the lower cost of drinks should defray the cost of the cover charge.

McGill workers win wage demands

MONTREAL (CUPI) — The strong solidarity among faculty, students and workers at McGill university has resulted in a victory for the striking maintenance workers here. An almost deserted campus forced the university administration to capitulate to the workers' demands October 18, the fourth day of the strike.

The maintenance workers, affiliated with the Quebec Federation of Labour, walked off their jobs October 15 to back demands for parity in wages and vacation

benefits with workers at the Montreal French language universities, as well as for guarantees of job security and the immediate refund of 140,000 dollars they paid into a now-obsolete sick-leave plan.

The strike, the first in McGill's history, had been marked by a geometric increase of support from students, faculty and non-academic staff at McGill.

A small but well-organized group of student and faculty supporters, with advance knowledge of the strike, played a major part in organizing the campus support for the strikers. Such was the preparation that, by the first day of the strike, a rally attended by more than 1000 people was held and classes had already begun to be cancelled. At the end of that day, almost everyone was aware of the issue.

Anti-sab squads were successful in preventing scab labour from working when some students began to clear up rising garbage heaps.

By the fourth day of the strike, over half of the classes had been cancelled. The library services were shut down because the non-unionized library workers risked their jobs and walked off in sympathy. In addition, the plumbers, electricians, computer workers and printers had walked off, supporting their fellow workers.

The threat of a complete shutdown was painfully obvious to the administration. The union negotiators were called on the telephone and the strike was settled, on the phone, within an hour.

The workers received a few cents raise in wages that their counterparts at other Montreal campuses had received, and also what they wanted in vacation benefits. The university agreed to return 100,000 dollars of their sick-leave owing them. And, the union was assured of job security: the administration guaranteed non-union guards would not be performing union jobs.

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