

# Calcutta's universities are politically involved

By MARIA WAWER

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

Calcutta does most things in a big way. The University of Calcutta has a quarter of a million students, scattered in about 100 different colleges. Students from the University have, more than once, been strongly involved in striving for many political and social changes in India.

Administering such a monolith cannot be an easy task. Due partly to the rambling nature of the structure, with its scattered component institutions, there is as yet no student representation or any of the governing bodies of the university. The student union, which tends to be much more politically orientated than student councils in North America (giving, perhaps, its students a much less narrow view of the problems in society than do many of our ivory towered institutions) seems to be in a more inward looking mood lately. It is trying to achieve more student say on matters affecting them at the university.

Also, I met quite a few students, especially in the natural sciences fields, who are afraid their curriculum is not modern and rigorous enough to put them on a par with universities in other countries. According to several students, the math curriculum at one of the colleges, has not been revised for 26 years.

Tension between the students and the administration, when it does appear, tends to be rather more acute in its manifestations. Armed guards from the army can be seen here and there on some of the more volatile campuses.

Whatever the inward problems of the university, however, it is certain many of its members will be on the forefront of many far reaching demands for political or social change in the country something in the spirit (if not the essence) of the great wave of political awareness that swept

North American campuses in the late 1960's - but without losing steam.

Calcutta, in the central part of the city, is a very modern, bustling city. Park Street, one of the main office areas also has lovely (and expensive!) shops, restaurants and so on.

Just a few blocks away is the New Market a labyrinth of shops selling all from intricate silver filigree and fine leatherworks to fruit and vegetables in its inner recesses. This market, although not ancient by any means has preserved the old tradition of being under a series of big stone roofs. One can browse in comfort under the relative coolness of the mall.

One couldn't give a traveller's overview of India without at least mentioning the bureaucracy one runs into everywhere. There are some astoundingly efficient people in many offices - who often turn out to be astoundingly overworked as the work is piled on them more and more. There are various little rituals every tourist must perform. For example, it is not allowed for foreigners to travel to areas of India bordering the little series of countries that separate India from China (Nepal, Bhutan, Sibilim) or to Assam, without special visas. As these papers are passed from one government official to another for signing and stamping and counter-signing this can take time!

I ran into the utter epitomy of the perfect bureaucrat while arranging student discounts for the one airplane trip our group of ten took (Students, if they have a valid I.D., get reductions of 50 percent on all domestic flights, 25 percent on international ones. Unlike in Canada, a student with such a ticket need not fly standby) I came briskly into the official's office, arranged the ten passports, ten visas, ten student cards and ten appeals for discount on his desk for him, explained quickly what we wanted and why, who we were, etc...etc...etc.... He then looked up with an expression of extreme hurt dignity.

"And now, madame, will you please sit down, and I will do this slowly!" And he did...slowly. In

general, the government service has swollen to much above its most efficient size. It is easy to see how this would happen, especially in the cities. The government is one of the few large employers of the steadily growing educated class. Although one understands how this came about, it is perhaps unfortunate that so many do become civil servants in a country where more productive work is needed - organizing rural groups, etc...

Back to Calcutta...there is no way for me to give some type of nice, general, overview of what the city is. I will have to stick to one or two other disparate impressions or observations. Why is it that such things so often sound much worse than they really are once one is at all used to them?

Some parts of Calcutta have little or nothing in the way of an organized garbage disposal system. Thus in many parts of town one sees the phenomenon of some part of a street being designated a temporary dump. Here, all day long, the people throw their refuse, which is the burned at night. The pile can become quite big during the day. Cows munch at the vegetable matter all day, and in the evening, some of the street dwellers come to see if there is anything they can salvage.

One of these depots was surprisingly almost in front of a large central post office near Lenin Saranii Street. The dump itself did not surprise me as much as the attitudes manifested by some of the people walking past. The poorer ones ignored it. The two other North-Americans I was with more or less ignored it (in 100 degree heat, it was not exactly like roses.)

Many of the middle class looking people did not ignore it. They'd run past. They would hold handkerchiefs to their nose. They looked highly annoyed. To me this seemed like an exaggerated reaction. Either one accepts the dump is there, or else perhaps, tries to have it removed? But why get into an apparent panic, on each trip to the post office!

Calcutta, and indeed, all of Bengal has often been on the forefront of various Indian political movements. There is often a certain current of activism in the city. Demonstrations (of the

peaceful, march on parliament variety) are common occurrences. While living on Dharamtala Street, a few blocks from the Raj Bavan (the Government place) I witnessed at least one or two groups of such demonstrators every evening - long files of women, both rich and poor, some carrying babies, protesting the rise in food prices; other groups decrying grain shortages, or this or the other political injustice.

Power failures, some due to actual shortages and inadequacies of the electrical system, others due to strikes, were also common.

There are problems, big problems in this rambling, in some ways disorganized metropolis. It is

easy to understand how many developed - the jute industry, on which Calcutta was founded, collapsed after the partition of India and Pakistan (the growth area for hemp was separated from Calcutta, the production centre) and synthetics took over from natural jute. An industrial city suddenly found its economic base withdrawn. During the war preceding the formation of Bangladesh, hundreds of thousands of refugees camped on the cities doorsteps, further draining its resources.

To solve the problems of housing, unemployment, sanitation, cannot be an easy task. The potential is there. In many ways it already is one of the great cities of the world.

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### Crossroads will give presentation

Two returned participants of the 1973 Canadian Crossroads International summer program in Africa will offer a slide presentation on Tuesday, November 6 in Room 26 of the SUB at 7 p.m. This event is open to staff and faculty of UNB and STU as well as any other interested persons.

Maria Wawer, who went on a similar seminar to India, organized by the World University Service of Canada, will also be on hand to show her movies of that country. Rather than actually working in India, Maria did a research project on medical facilities. She also travelled throughout various regions, reaching Assam (between Bangla Desh and Burma) and went to Nepal. She also had the opportunity to live with nationals of India, both in cities and in village situations.

Pat Flanagan spent three months in Ethiopia working in conjunction with the YMCA helping with recreation programs in Addis Ababa and teaching swimming at a youth camp, as well as taking part in a four day hike of

approximately 80 kilometers through mountainous rain forest.

Bob Elliot was placed on a construction project in Nigeria, working with the host nationals to build a hospital. The way of life in the two Countries forced the two participants into some interesting adaptations. These projects served the function of providing contacts for the two Crossroaders in order for them to better acquire an understanding of the culture and customs of the peoples of the host countries.

A great deal of interest has been expressed by quite a number of students with regards to the 1974 Crossroads program. Applications close on November 15 and forms may be obtained from Pat Flanagan at the UNB-SRC business office, Rm. 126 in the SUB or at this event.

This presentation promises to be beneficial to those attending as the participants' impressions of the host countries will no doubt be somewhat more along the lines of gut reactions and on a much "earthier" level than traditional presentations. Y'all come!



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