

Mr. Parto's Kolkatan Smile

Mr. Parto (name changed) was “Special Officer” to the Development of Planning and Finance of the West Bengal Government, in Kolkata, the new name for Calcutta. When I was interviewing the “Special Secretary” of the Planning Department in the restaurant of the Sheraton ITC hotel, Mr. Parto kept nibbling at his food with a broad mysterious smile on his face. I took that as a sign that the answers the Special Secretary were giving were minimalist and not doing justice to my very oh-so-smart questions. Later on, however, when Mr. Parto took me around Kolkata on a beat up government Ambassador car, he never dropped that smile, the smile which often widened around broad white teeth on a sublime dark chocolate face. I came to realize Mr. Parto was just another good humored West Bengali man, nothing to do with my questions or my illusion of smartness. He was just a jolly man.

He took me to see wonders in Kolkata: The Victoria Memorial, the Court House, the Government House, all beautiful Gothic architecture pieces, straight out of any British town. He explained to me why the buses were painted yellow, blue, or red (according to whether they were municipal, private, transition public/private or special fuel, or categories I did not understand or hear the explanation among the cacophony induced by the “Honk Please” signs behind these lego buses). When the car was ambushed by hordes of begging children, Mr. Parto, a good representative of the Government Planning Division that he was, quizzed these tiny shoeless dirty bodies about whether they were going to school (to which they nodded coyly), and how many kilometers they had to walk to get to school (to which they laughed and took off running). He then took me underground to see one of the cleanest Metros constructed, complete with half a dozen large TV screens playing the quintessential MTV Bollywood Ichiquedana dance numbers. We rode a few stations among very orderly crowds, a world away from the chaos of the Mumbai suburban trains. As the Metro belonged to the National Government, and Mr. Parto was a representative of the State Government, and as the Federal System in India is to be reckoned with, Mr. Parto was unable to convince the policemen and their four supervisors to allow me to take a photo. He smiled and told me that he could not pull rank in this under-ground, over-state “national” territory. While he was talking to the authorities, however, I did what we tourists do: take a picture anyway and feign ignorance.

As the sun was setting, Mr. Parto took me to Old Calcutta, a maze of crowded bazaar with hundreds of peddlers, kiosks and shops in old glorious buildings now decrepit, the walls plastered with political posters with the hammer and sickle of the Communist Party (the ruling party in Kolkata for the past 26 years) or the Hand of the opposition Congress Party (of Sonia Gandhi fame). This is what Calcutta of my imagination was: a few kilometers from the architectural gem of the Hotel ITC Sheraton, perhaps one of the most beautiful hotels in the world, was a railway track around which hundreds if not thousands of people had built makeshift shelters out of tin aluminum roofs and bits of cloth. The railway line stretched next to the River Ganges, a supposedly sacred river but festered with tons of rubbish on its shores, themselves lined up with makeshift temples of gods of all colors and shapes. Thousands of people walking up and down in between cars and cows and bicycles and saints and thieves and IT specialists and runaway kids and hand holding couples. Meanwhile, a crematory by the river let out a grey smoke of a Hindu passing on from this colorful world to another one. While my senses went on overdrive at all these sights, and while we sat in impossible traffic of nauseating fumes out of old Calcutta/Kolkata and into the chic world of giant Billboards advertising fairness creams and mobile phones, Mr. Parto never lost his Cheshire smile.