

## **"CALCUTTA'S KALEIDOSCOPE OF CULTURES"**

Rabindranagar is a bustee or slum in Calcutta, unloved and unrecognised, home to six hundred men, women and children.

Rabindranagar consists of eighty one room thatched huts, squeezed between a stagnant pond and the main road that leads from the downtown heart of Calcutta past Salt Lake, a suburb of grey apartment blocks built just thirty years ago, but prematurely aged and yellowing, victims of the constant humidity.

It's dusk, a soft smoky haze punctuated by the wan smiles of underpowered street lamps. In Rabindranagar itself there is just one light bulb, jury-rigged illegally from the nearest telegraph pole.

My colleague Raja Chatterjee and I hold torches while ten year-old Samra Bhaja accompanies herself on the harmonium, sitting cross-legged on a rug thrown hastily over the bare earth.

Samra has never been to school. She probably never will. Most days she helps her mother roll 'bidis', cheap Indian tobacco rolled in leaves and held together with string.

Samra's voice is pure, untrained, with perfect pitch, full of pale melancholy as she unfolds her song:

"This necklace bruises me; it strangles me when I try to take it off. It chokes my singing. Take it from me! I'm ashamed to wear it. Give me a simple garland in its place."

"Who wrote this song?" I begin to ask. Samra's too shy to answer. Raja's astonished at my ignorance:

"Tagore! Rabindranath Tagore! Surely you've heard of him?"

Well, I hadn't then! But over the past few years, Raja has almost single-handedly set out to educate me not only about Tagore but about all Calcutta's myriad cultures.

Now I often wonder with the amazement of the newly converted how anyone could want to pass up the chance to live in Calcutta and wake to the golden tenor of Hemanta Mukherjee singing 'Rabindrasangeet' the art songs written by Tagore that rival those of Franz Schubert or Hugo Wolf in their lyricism and fecundity?

"How come you know these songs, Samra?" I had started to ask. But, almost immediately I realized the stupidity of the question. For Tagore's art has never known the boundaries of caste or class, education or illiteracy.

For if there is any one things that binds Brahmin and Untouchable, Babu and rickshaw wallah, bustee (slum) dweller and rich socialite, it is a passion for culture in all its forms. Indeed, Calcutta as a city proudly defines itself through this cultural vitality.

At the height of its glory in the nineteenth century, Calcutta was called the Second City of the Empire.

It rivaled London in its culture and sophistication. In Asia Calcutta was regarded as the centre of culture and education for everyone from Peshawar to Rangoon.

In its own mind it undoubtedly still is. Bob Wright, Secretary of the Tollygunge Club, says this sense of cultural superiority is deeply ingrained: "The Bengali has always set himself up to think that God put him on this earth to be a poet or a writer, and other races to do the dirty work."

It's commonly claimed (although I don't know how these things can be measured) that Calcutta has more poets than Paris and Rome combined, more literary magazines than either New York or London; more theatre companies and more art galleries than anywhere else in Asia; undoubtedly more publishers. It's the only city in India where cinemas have "House Full" signs outside their doors from lunchtime onwards.

In how many other cities in the world can twenty authors live entirely off the earnings from their writings? Manishankar Mukherjee, known by his pen-name Shankar, sold over 200,000 copies of his novel "Jana Aranya", a considerable feat in any country.

The film director Satyajit Ray, who made a film of Mukherjee's novel, claims to earn far more from his children's books, selling on average 20,000 copies of each title, than from his films. Painters such as MF Husain or Ganesh Pyne are able to fetch thousands of dollars for their work. Even young unknowns can fetch \$500 for a painting.

Poetry readings have been known to draw more than a thousand people. Poet Nabaneetha Deb Sen thinks many of the audience are just there to be seen. Satyajit Ray, who admits he can't really explain why so many Calcuttans pack theatres, cinemas or concert halls, suggests tongue-in-cheek (but who knows?) a more mundane reason:

"It's very difficult in Calcutta to find places where you can mix, where you can be alone, where a girl and boy can be alone. And I think one of the reasons why these cultural events are so well-attended is that the boys and girls have a chance to be alone together for some time, maybe holding hands while the lights are down."

Although there have always been village settlements of fishermen, weavers and priests, Calcutta is a young city, just three hundred years old. But if it is a culture young in its forms it is old in its content, and that's probably why it retains its vitality.

The city is attached like a human ear to the banks of the Hooghly river. The inner ear is "White Calcutta", the European city of spacious homes and broad avenues, built around a vast green inner ear of field and wood - the Maidan - Calcutta's answer to Central Park.

Beyond that, clustered around the three fishing villages that predate the British settlement, lies the native or "Black City" of narrow lanes, innumerable bustees (or slums), jute mills, bazaars and 'manufactories' as they used to be called.

The oldest part of the city is the top of the ear: North Calcutta. This is where the Tagores lived. The

earlobe is Tollygunge, once an exclusive residential area; now a typically Indian juxtaposition of mildewed English country-house and bamboo and thatch slums.

Nobody really knows how many people live in Calcutta. The latest edition of the city handbook dates from 1975 and improbably suggests seven million. The more commonly accepted figure is anywhere between eleven to thirteen millions, of whom five million live in slums and a further quarter of a million on the streets.

The Municipal Handbook should be required reading for every visitor to the city. Its passion for by-laws, tables and quaint information mirrors that of the city's intellectuals, for whom the city's past is alive and well and part and parcel of today's Calcutta.

Thus we learn that the annual testing fee for the roadworthiness of private horse-drawn carriages is now 7 Rupees (50 cents); that the city boasts twelve theatres, eighty one cinemas and two amusement officers (job description not supplied).

RP Gupta, one of Calcutta's best-known historians, says that while Calcutta is European on the outside, it is wholly Bengali within. The British imported European art forms - theatre, cinema, the iambic pentameter, oil and water-color, the novel and the short story (along with cabaret and nightclubs).

Calcuttans took these alien cultural forms and ran with them. In so doing they reinvented and reinvigorated Sanskritic and Bengali folk culture. They de-colonized British culture and made it Bengali. One of the pioneers was the early nineteenth century social reformer Ram Mohan Roy, usually called the Father of the "Bengali Renaissance". Roy believed passionately that Bengal's future lay in producing a synthesis of the best of East and West.

The Tagore family were also in the vanguard of this movement. Tagore's brothers and sisters were all brilliant artists and writers, but their individual talents seemed to have been recombined within the person of Rabindranath. He was Shakespeare, Dante, Schubert rolled into one, in addition to being a world-class philosopher.

"Have you seen Rabindranath's paintings?" Raja asked me on one of my first forays into Calcutta culture. It had never occurred to me that Tagore was anything other than a writer.

When he was sixty seven, an age when creative forces are normally on the wane, Tagore suddenly took up a new career as an abstract painter. His paintings, full of anguish and melancholy, owe allegiance to no school. They are truly original, although critics have sometimes compared Tagore's paintings to those of Klee or Modigliani. The best ones are in Tagore's house in Santiniketan, two hours north of Calcutta by train.

Tagore became the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. The effect in Calcutta was electrifying. It confirmed Calcuttans in their self-appointed role as the intellectuals of India, an attitude and behavior that they have never questioned since.

It's hard to escape Tagore's influence in Calcutta, especially that of his songs:

"To Bengalis he is the songwriter. Songs are very important to human emotions..and Tagore is perhaps the greatest songwriter anywhere in the world." claims Uma das Gupta, who studied and taught at Tagore's world university established in the countryside a hundred miles north of Calcutta at Santiniketan.

Tagore wrote over two thousand songs, mostly in the minor key, miniature 'Ragas' in their formal structure. Most of these songs can be subdivided into songs about God, Nature or Love. You hear the soft melancholy of these songs known as 'Rabindrasangeet', on the radio, in private homes, in the train that takes you to and from Calcutta, in schools and in a slum like Rabindranagar. They know no boundaries of caste or class.

Every year, Calcuttans celebrate Tagore's birthday with a fifteen day festival of his music and dance dramas, classical musical plays that usually deal with Indian mythology. They'll also show some of the films made by Satyajit Ray of Tagore's short stories and novels.

Satyajit Ray grew up in a Calcutta family close to the Tagores. As a student Ray was sent to study at Santiniketan and hated it:

"You could never really get very close to him because he was a very remote kind of a sort of figure. he was superhuman in that sense. His personality was like that." The young Ray felt intimidated: "His looks and everything, his beard and his enormous height, even his speech was very florid. He never used a wrong word. If you recorded his normal conversation it would sound like a prepared speech. Everything was so incredibly perfect. That's off-putting."

Ironically, Ray grew up to be as tall and imposing a figure as Tagore himself.

On the set at the ramshackle Tollygunge Studios in South Calcutta, every take is preceded by the stentorian imperative "Silence" boomed out by Ray himself. It's an order that few would dare contradict. Film hands stop playing cards in the gloom at the far end of the studio; fans are switched off as Ray's son takes the camera in close for a reaction shot of Saumitra Chatterjee, one of Ray's favorite actors, sitting in an armchair listening to one of Beethoven's Razumovsky String Quartets.

Calcutta is proud of Ray's fame in the West. But there have been many who resented his success or his refusal to espouse the fashionable Marxism of the city's intellectuals.

Ray's grandfather Upendrakishore started a children's magazine "Sandesh" to which his son Sukumar contributed wonderful nonsense verse before his early death. Satyajit Ray revived "Sandesh" and still contributes regularly stories, often based on a Bengali version of Sherlock Holmes called Feluda.

There are many who would claim that Ray is in fact the true successor to Tagore. Both are multi-talented: Ray not only directs films, he designs the costumes, the sets, writes the music, novels, verse and paints. Both also share the same humanism and deep sensibility to the dilemmas of ordinary men and women torn between the contradictory pressures of change and tradition. Both also use Western art forms as vehicles for essentially Bengali art.

Ray maintains cinema is a Western not an Eastern art form. Ray once told me that no one could

hope to make good films if he or she did not understand Western classical music because the whole rhythm and form of film is based on classical music structures.. Again, this desire to combine Western technique with Eastern content to produce a new and vital synthesis.

One Calcuttan writer, Nirad Chaudhuri, carried this precept to extremes. Now living in Oxford, but writing vigorously at the age of ninety three, Chaudhuri has been called "The Last True Englishman" because of his unshakeable passion for the English culture he and his generation grew up with in Calcutta in the first decades of this century.

Chaudhuri took this passion to considerable lengths. Chaudhuri's marriage in the early years of this century was arranged by his parents. The first time Nirad and his wife of now more than sixty years actually saw each other was on their wedding day.

"I was marrying a stranger whom I had not seen. I had to decide what I was ready to give up and what I was not ready to give up!" Chaudhuri had just discovered Western classical music through 78 RPM records.

"So, when I met my wife for the first time after the wedding I was extremely uneasy about that point; not so much about meeting a wholly strange girl as wife, as about that. So when we laid down on the bed side by side, first thing she did was to raise my hand and tell me: "You are very thin. I shall take good care of you." I did not feel even grateful. I did not thank her at all. That horrible question was making me uneasy."

So, very hesitatingly, I asked her: "Have you heard any European music?" She nodded and I felt a little encouraged. "Have you heard the name of a man called Beethoven?" She again nodded to say yes. Not quite satisfied with that I asked her: "Can you spell it?" And she spelt it absolutely correctly."

"I felt very reassured. Perhaps now I will be able to do something with her? And actually the miracle was that the first time she heard European music she liked it!"

Although many would reject the comparison, Chaudhuri's rage to live the life of the intellect seems to typify the city's determination to remain a great city in the forefront of world culture.

For this is above all a city of scribblers. It seems that every Calcuttan feels a right to see his opinions and prejudices in print.

Take my friend Raja Chatterjee. Raja never seems to have held a steady job. But he has a profession, being a Bengali intellectual. Raja looks the part, clad in white Kurta pyjama, a cloth shoulder bag jammed with books and notebooks and pencils.

Somehow he finds work, at the film studios, helping a friend mount an experimental translation of Anouilh or Brecht or Durrenmat at one of the city's innumerable small theatres.

He's just finished helping his friend Malay produce a series of half hour Bengali short stories for television. Malay and his wife live south of Tollygunge in a duplex apartment. Malay shows me a couple of episodes on his VCR. Each episode cost \$3,000 to make, ridiculously cheap, impossibly cheap for any

Western television producer, but a fortune for the Malays, who've put all their savings into the series. Neither appears to have any regrets or second thoughts. In Calcutta this is normal and honorable behavior.

Raja also lives in South Calcutta, but near the famous Kalighat temple, with his wife Runu and daughter Sonali and Runu's widowed mother, who spent several years in the Soviet Union as an interpreter. She speaks and reads Russian, Bengali, Hindi and English.

The house is full of books - Tagore of course, Maxim Gorky, Byron and Shelley, lots of Shakespeare - and an upright piano. Runu has been going blind for several years now, but still teaches piano at a private school.

"Come round to dinner tonight. We will prepare a special Bengali fish curry for you. My daughter also wants you to hear her play the piano."

Twelve year-old Sonali plays short pieces of Mozart and Grieg. Then Runu plays the first movement of Beethoven's "Moonlight" sonata and a Strauss waltz. Runu apologizes profusely for the sound of the piano:

"It must be tuned. But when is the tuner coming?" Raja promises to get the tuner tomorrow. But I doubt he can make much of a difference now. The constant humidity has badly altered the very sound of the piano. Imagine Beethoven played on a bar-room piano in the Wild West. The effect is surrealistic and very Calcutta. But this must be the only place in all of India where it seems natural both to play and listen to Beethoven and Mozart.

After supper, Raja wants me to meet his friends Dakoo and Kumar at the Writers' Coffee House in College Street, a half mile of bookshops and bookstalls spilling over onto the pavement, carrying first editions, pamphlets, paperbacks in every Indian language, with more than a fair smattering of books in and out of print from France, Germany, Russia and England.

Dakoo is a cartoonist. He's drawn a small book of cartoons on Calcutta's three hundredth birthday for me. Sometimes, one of the daily papers publishes Dakoo's work. The rest of the time he just draws and waits.

Kumar works in one of the city's luxury hotels, in charge of room service. But every morning he writes a poem. Kumar and Raja both write naturally in English. English is as much a language of Calcutta as Bengali. Kumar has never sought a publisher. He wants to know my reactions to his poems. Raja also writes poetry and has had no problem finding someone to publish these sixty-odd pages in hardback and five hundred copies.

It's perhaps the tension between decay, death and the struggle to survive in Calcutta that gives so many of these artists and writers their subject matter.

Satyajit Ray says: "With problems you have food for creation. You have your material. If you're living in Stockholm all you can do is make films like Bergman does, about human beings and all the psychological this and that. Whereas in Calcutta you have a whole lot of other things that you can deal with, which is

unfortunate. Perhaps one would prefer Calcutta to be more like Stockholm. But the fact remains that for creative people Calcutta has things to offer which most other cities in the world do not have."

Raja and Dakoo agree. Their work is obsessed by their love-hate relationship to the city and its problems. Another well-known film-maker Aparna Sen, who also edits Calcutta's leading feminist magazine, freely admits she hates the city:

"But I know what it looks like in the morning, in the evening. I know what the streets are like and how the shadows fall..even though I hate it I can't think of working anywhere else!"

If Calcuttans such as Raja Chatterjee have a tremendous thirst to see their thoughts in print, there exists a public equally avid to snap them up. Publishers can make a good living from such modest books of no more than sixty pages, with footnotes and bound in leather.

Raja, Kumar and Dakoo may never be famous or very talented. That's not the point. They are pursuing the right of every Calcuttan and every Bengali to be an intellectual and an artist. No one snickers.

Raja Chatterjee and his friends will quote as freely from Rammohan Roy or Tagore as they will from Wordsworth, Browning, Baudelaire, George Orwell, Lenin or Kurt Vonnegut.

Driving through Calcutta one day, Raja suddenly blurts out: "Chief! What about this Jack Kerouac? You know him? I am very much liking this man." Raja has read Kerouac in Bengali. Romantic images of a footloose Kerouac obviously appeal to the Bengali psyche. For like so many Calcuttans Raja regards culture as his birthright and the world of ideas his personal and private oyster, to be savored at his leisure.

At times this seems so self-conscious that one wonders if the obsession with culture isn't really motivated by something else: a fear that Bengali culture will be diluted by the presence of so many non-Bengalis in Calcutta. And also by a need to reassure themselves that Calcutta still counts on the world cultural stage, when so many in the West and India have written the city off, consigned it to a provincial backwater and worse?

Perhaps, in the final analysis it is the vitality of ordinary everyday culture that is most impressive about Calcutta. Without this broad foundation Calcutta would indeed become a city of intellectuals.

"Much of what the West calls folk culture is dead art, kept alive on life support systems from the West. It has no social function anymore so it's dead." says Radha Prasad Gupta, a retired steel executive and now one of the city's unofficial historians.

No visitor interested in Calcutta ever fails to visit RP Gupta. I first got to know him because he had written a small volume called "The Sounds of Calcutta". Naturally intrigued as a radio producer I went along hoping to find an archive of tape recordings. No such luck. RP Gupta's catalogue of extinct sounds existed only on paper. But RP offered me the services of his young assistant - Raja Chatterjee.

So now, on every visit to the city, Raja and I make the pilgrimage to RP's flat full of old prints of the

city in its glory days.

Gupta argues that much of Calcutta's working class culture is alive and well precisely because it's utilitarian in nature. "The film director Jean Renoir took back several huge clay storage pots to Hollywood after he had finished filming 'The River' here." RP explains.

"He was fascinated by their sensuality, their curves, the belly where the grain is stored. But they are beautiful precisely because they're household objects. Even the poorest hut in a slum has rice and grain storage jars. If we start using plastic storage containers those pots will become 'art' and cease to have beauty. They're beautiful only because they are practical."

By that token, two of Calcutta's most famous indigenous cultural forms - Baul singers and Khalighat paintings - must be considered on the endangered species list.

Baul singers used to be mendicants wearing harlequin suits made of patches of cast-off clothing, touring villages and cities singing about God. There are Baul singers today in Calcutta, but they perform only on stage and for big money. RP Gupta once told me that I would find authentic Baul singers in the first trams as they left their depots at 4:30 in the morning. I rode those trams in the dampness before dawn but never saw a Baul singer. Maybe it was too early for them?

Kalighat or 'bazaar' paintings are usually water-colors, free form, often satirical, bawdy, and colorful. They were sold as cheap souvenirs to the pilgrims who came to the Kali temple in South Calcutta. The postcard and mass reproduction spelled their demise.

"You want to see Khalighat paintings? No problem! There are some very good Khalighat paintings in the Metro.

"Let's go Chief!" And Raja whisks me out the door and down the stairs that lead to his apartment.

But Raja lives on a street that every downpour transforms into a Venetian lagoon. The only way to reach or leave his house in this situation is by rickshaw. Directly across the street is a rickshaw stand. Raja thunders some command in Bengali and two rickshaw wallahs pick up their rickshaws and paddle through two feet of brown flood to the doorstep.

I had never been in a rickshaw. But I know that many Indians and most Westerners find the very idea of one man carrying another degrading and inhuman. When I ask my rickshaw wallah Santalal, a small wiry man in his forties from the neighboring state of Bihar, he simply doesn't understand my reservations. For him, one man carrying another is a natural state of affairs.

Santalal came to Calcutta fifteen years ago. Like most immigrants to the city, his wife and family remain back in his native village. He makes quite good money by Indian standards - fifty Rupees a day on average. He sends his family money every month and spends one month a year back home.

Santalal clears away some basic misconceptions about life as a rickshaw puller. His beat is roughly

one square mile, to Khalighat and back. The average journey maybe a quarter of a mile. Santalal's day usually begins around eight in the morning, ferrying parties of school girls from home to school and then back again in the afternoon. It's presumably safer than riding a bus.

He makes really good money when it rains and the streets become virtually impassable. The rickshaw is then the surest way from A to B and Santalal isn't too keen to pass up work by talking to me.

We cross Chowringhee to what looks like a small ventilation shaft where Santalal sets us down. Raja leads on down some steps and into the world of the Calcutta Subway known as Metro. Metro is Calcutta's pride and joy even though there's only one line and it's only a third complete.

The trains are fast and frequent but Metro is not cheap for the average Calcuttan. Nonetheless, Metro has become a cultural attraction. Santalal says he's bought tickets twice to travel up and down the entire length just for the fun of it.

Each station is decorated with paintings and sculpture. When we reach the Khalighat station sure enough there are Khalighat paintings along the walls. Other stations have reproductions of Tagore's paintings or early scenes of European Calcutta. Raja says many Calcuttans like Santalal ride Metro just to admire the artwork. But there's also another attraction: each station is hung with several color television sets showing popular films or cricket matches. For most Calcuttans, who cannot afford a television set, the Metro is really a series of movie theatres connected by rail.

Although Khalighat paintings may now mostly be found in the Metro, it's premature to conclude therefore that popular culture is losing its creativity or its audience. The easiest way to judge the continued vitality of ordinary Calcuttan's culture is to spend a couple of hours on a Sunday afternoon on the Maidan, Calcutta's version of Central Park.

Santalal's idea of a Sunday off is to cook a good meal, rest and then spend the afternoon on the Maidan. Under the shadow of an extraordinary tower built in memory of Sir David Ochterlony, an eccentric member of the East India Company who liked to parade his fourteen Indian mistresses each one mounted on an elephant, dozens of street performers perform for the working men and women of Calcutta.

Quack doctors draw eager crowds: "Miracle medicine to cure stomach pains and improve sexual energies!" claims seventy-year-old Mohammad Abdullah. The medicine on closer inspection turns out to be a cross between black liquorice and tar. Muhammad Abdullah dismisses my scepticism: "Look at me! I am seventy. I have three daughters, three wives and eighteen sons!" Raja is keen for me to buy some lumps for him.

Ramni Pandit tells fortunes with the aid of a parrot who steps out of a tiny cage and selects an envelope at random. Inside the envelope the card insists that there are good days ahead, but warns me to placate the planet Saturn with a small offering of food to 'the black dog'. QUIT I mentally make a note to feed my black poodles as soon as I return home.

Another crowd has gathered round a family of acrobats. Two members keep up an insistent

drumming while three small children contort themselves through a tiny metal hoop, then take a bow on a high wire six feet above the grass.

It may not be High Art but only a monsoon downpour will keep thousands of working men and women from the fun of Sunday on the Maidan.

On Monday morning the Maidan is deserted again. Raja and I decide to go back into North Calcutta, to Kumartuli, a former red light district but also home to the image makers of Calcutta.

The easiest way to get there is by taxi. Throughout all the years I've been coming to Calcutta I've been driven by Tivari, a Brahmin from Uttar Pradesh, who lives here with his father and brother.

I think my Western habits must have shocked Tivari when I first met him. Highly literate and a devoted follower of Ram, the legendary God-King of Ayodhya and hero of the Epic "Ramayana", Tivari determined to educate me. On my second visit he had acquired a cassette deck in his taxi. He would endlessly play 'bhajans', popular devotional hymns to the greater glory of Ram and Krishna sung by Anup Jalota, a popular playback singer.

In the end Tivari won. I needed a tape of Bhajans for a radio program. Tivari promptly obliged. In return he asked for cassettes of my programs. Now his customers have a choice: Anup Jalota or National Public Radio, although the speed is seriously off on his machine and I can scarcely recognize my own voice through the loudspeakers.

Kumartuli is a rabbit warren of sheds, workshops and alleys where more than three thousand 'kumars' or potters work year-round shaping bamboo, straw and clay into life-size reproductions of gods and goddesses. For six of those months they'll vie with each other to produce the most sumptuous and original models of Goddess Durga, the Destroyer of Demons, and unofficial patroness of the city.

Durga Chenal Pal is already hard at work, smoothing grey clay onto a large straw and bamboo frame of the goddess Durga. Chenan Pal learnt how to make images from his father. And for most of the potters of Kumartuli image-making is a caste profession going back several generations.

Others, such as Alope Sen, a former art student, use images as tools of social criticism. His Saraswati (Goddess of Learning) images depict the Goddess in chains. "I want to show the slavery of today's education where children are just stuffed with facts," says the soft-spoken Sen.

His Durga images have become famous because of their ambiguity. Alope Sen refuses the crude depiction of demons as the epitome of evil. He sculpts them with the faces of ordinary men and women. "They represent the evils in the hearts of every man - lust, anger, vanity, infatuation, jealousy and greed." he asserts.

Sen's tableaux will fetch him at least \$20,000. They will grace four of the largest neighborhood 'pandals' (covered stages set up by street committees). For four days and nights people will flock to see these works of art. On the fourth night, each neighborhood will take down its Durga image, place it on a bamboo

stretcher and take it to the banks of the Hooghly, a branch of the Ganges.

For my first Durga Puja, Raja decided I must see and record from the vantage point of the ordinary Calcuttan. He had Tivari drop us off en route to the immersion ghats right in the middle of several hundred Bengali musicians. Together we marched through the night to the tune of something I still believe was meant to be "Scotland the Brave" played by Bengali bagpipers clad only in dhotis or loin clothes.

Once at the water's edge all hell breaks loose. Each street maneuvers down the muddy embankment and then heaves the Goddess into the water, where it will dissolve back into clay, straw and bamboo on its way to the Bay of Bengal.

Durga Puja is Alope Sen's personal vindication as an artist. It's also his nightmare:

"These images are my creation. They are like my sons and daughters. Now the studio is full. But soon it will be empty. Four nights of suffering will begin. It is unbearable for me to watch them putting my images, my children into the Ganga!"

For Bharan Das, festivals are also a major source of income. Bharan Das plays the Bangla Dhole or Bengali drum. It's so large that he has to carry it round his neck while he dances through the streets beating an insistent and unending rhythm.

No Calcutta festival would be complete without the rhythmical menace of the Dhole.

Bharan Das is an Untouchable. He lives in a slum in what used to be a notorious red-light district. But Bharan Das also has twenty students and appears regularly in films and on All-India Radio. For Bharan Das is a member of a most unusual community that could probably only exist in Calcutta.

Ram Bhagan is a small slum off one of the city's main streets. Getting there can take the patience of Job. Underneath Central Avenue will run the extension of the Metro. For as long as I can remember there's been a gaping hole right down the middle of the avenue. Ram Bhagan's just off this permanent building site and is home to four hundred families, who claim to have lived there since before the founding of Calcutta by Job Charnok in 1690.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Ram Bhagan (Bhagan means garden) was notorious for parties where rich Bengalis would bring Europeans from 'White' Calcutta to be entertained by 'nautch' or dancing girls. By Independence in 1947, Ram Bhagan had become so crime-infested that the police were forced to keep a permanent picket inside the slum.

In 1952, in desperation, a group of elders from Ram Bhagan went to the Ram Krishna Mission in South Calcutta to ask Swami Lokeswaranda to help them. Swami Lokeswaranda, now in his eighties, remembers his first visit: "It was impossible to walk through the place. The lanes were full of human excrement and mud. Most of the people lived by picking pockets. It was the den of vices."

Nevertheless, Swami Lokeswarananda agreed to send monks to Ram Bhagan to teach adult literacy.

Their efforts spread to the children, who were sent to High School and then on to university. Today, almost all the two thousand five hundred residents of the slum are literate. There are two schools and the slum dwellers are gradually being rehoused in two bedroom apartments they have helped design and finance. The police have long since been withdrawn and anyone can walk the alleyways of Ram Bhagan in complete security.

The police told Swami Lokeswarananda: "You have performed a miracle.' But the soft-spoken priest lays the credit elsewhere: "If we have achieved some success it is largely because of the people themselves. They are a gifted people but they were neglected."

For the residents of Ram Bhagan are a slum of artists, weavers and musicians, the like of which exists nowhere else in Calcutta, maybe in India. Most Calcuttans don't know it exists. Raja is visibly excited at discovering Ram Bhagan.

For more than three hundred years this Untouchable community has existed in the same patch of land, once mango grove, then village, now city, all the time exercising the old traditional crafts of musician, bamboo and cane worker, or painter. And it thanks to these skills that they have been able to emerge from misery.

Ram Bhagan is now famous for its bamboo and cane weaving. Not just household objects, like trays, but chairs, sofas and even whole buildings. For the Festival of India in Moscow in 1988 they built replicas of the giant Gates of Kiev. For the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953 they were commissioned to execute bamboo thrones. Now they're finishing a forty feet high temple for a festival in New Jersey, made entirely out of bamboo and papier mache.

On a summer's afternoon, the narrow lanes of the slum are full of cane workers, children laughing and geese running freely. From a three story brick building in the centre of these lanes come the sounds of the shehnai, the Indian oboe.

This is the music school. Daswathi Ghorai, the shehnai player, is practicing with Profulla Hazra and Mohit Mukherjee, on tabla and harmonium respectively. As long as there have been Ghorais in Ram Bhagan, Daswathi claims, they have played the shehnai at weddings in Calcutta. "I still make most of my money that way." he adds.

Four out of every five residents of Ram Bhagan are either musicians or weavers. Players like Prafulla Hazra frequently perform on All India Radio and at concerts throughout India. They have national awards to testify to their skills. And although they have had to adapt to the taste for lighter film music, there are over five hundred students from the 'bustee' learning Northern classical music on the sitar, table, shehnai with Hazra, Ghorai and the other master musicians.

Nripendranath Ghorai, a small wiry man in his sixties, is less sanguine about the future of his craft. Nripendranath is a traditional rod puppeteer. With a team of eight puppeteers and ten musicians he's been performing puppet shows of the great Indian epics "The Ramayana" and "The Mahabharata" for forty years.

These giant puppets used to be statues that decorated religious chariots at festivals. Somebody, Nripendranath says, had the idea of taking them down and using them on stage. The puppets are still made of wood, the hair of jute, every limb articulated right down to the eyelashes.

Nripendranath doesn't just manipulate his puppets. he sings and dances with them held above his head. As each puppet weighs forty to sixty pounds fully clothed, it's not surprising that Nipendranath, despite his sixty seven years, is extremely fit. Nripendranath single-handedly introduced spoken dialogue, acting and dancing into this old craft.

Although he's famous throughout Calcutta and has toured the Soviet Union and France, Ghorai says that demand for his type of traditional puppet dramas is declining:

"People now have electronic puppets. And they prefer a cartoon show on the television. My son isn't interested, even though I have three pupils who will carry on this profession. Besides, a crew of eighteen costs so much nowadays."

Nripendranath is also frustrated by the conservatism of his audiences.

"They always want the same old things: tales from Ramayana and Mahabharat. I tried writing more contemporary plays. But they don't want to be reminded of their problems when they come out for a puppet show. They want entertainment and spectacle so they can forget their daily lives. So I've given up trying to write new plays on social themes. It's sad. But what can you do?"

There are now over five hundred youngsters enrolled in the music school, most from within the slum itself, learning every classical instrument from sitar to Bangla Dhole.

As I leave the music school to return to South Calcutta I take a peek into another room.

It's late afternoon - 'gauduli' or cow dust time: the air is thick with a smoky bluish haze from cooking fires; the smell of burning cow dung hits the back of one's throat. The ritual in Ram Bhagan is punctuated by furious honking from the inevitable traffic jam on Central Avenue.

Manti Manik is teaching classical dance to her daughter Sukappa in a second-floor room. She raps out the rhythms and then slows. While the late afternoon light fades across the rooftops of the new Ram Bhagan, Sukappa stops her practice. Profulla Hazra folds his hands over the tabla. Outside, the voices of children off from school, a man beating clothes on a stone in the alleyway.

Manti smiles, then begins to sing: "Please allow me to touch your feet, dear God. Don't leave me alone."

The room, all of Ram Bhagan seem suddenly still, as the golden melodies of Tagore's song flow out through the alleyways, a perfect ending to Calcutta's day.

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Julian Crandall Hollick was the Regular India Correspondent for National Public Radio (1988-1992). He now divides his time between India and the United States as writer and broadcaster. For National Public he has produced many features and documentary series about India, including the award-winning "Letters from Jitvapur" and "Passages to India". His new series **Apna Street** about pavement dwellers and street kids in Bombay's Byculla District will be broadcast simultaneously by NPR and Radio MIDDAY in Bombay. He is a columnist for **The Sunday Times of India** and is preparing his first book **Diary of a Radiowallah** with the cartoonist Mario de Miranda.

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