

NOSTALGIA

Claire, British Airways, London- Calcutta flight, October 1975

Will Calcutta¹ be the same for me without Firpo's²? I was hugely disappointed to learn that Firpo's had closed when I updated my Calcutta information before booking the trip. I was so looking forward to it. Finally, I consoled myself by reserving a stay at the Grand Hotel.³

Several of my dear friends had told me that our once vibrant community, called Anglo-Indians⁴, had been progressively getting smaller and smaller, with most people leaving Calcutta for other cities in India or migrating to Australia or the UK. Things change, and life evolves. I now live in the UK, though leaving my comfort zone in Tundla in north India was challenging with all the uncertainties that a new environment may offer.

Throughout the flight, I kept getting lost in memory. Though the primary purpose was to attend the wedding, I realized this would also become a trip down memory lane.

I decided to embrace the old memories of India instead of suppressing them. That thought raised another question: Should I add Mussoorie⁵, the hill station where our family spent summers and of which I have fond memories, to my travel schedule? Will it mean I have to delay my departure back to England? I wanted to go to Tundla, but that plan also depended on final discussions with Olivia and Isabella per our exchanged letters. Olivia now lives in Bombay and plans to stay with me in Calcutta.

In my dreams, when I see myself, it is always in the house in Tundla⁶, where I lived with my parents and spent my childhood and teen years. I am yet to feel the same affinity with my home in Liverpool. Thinking of happy memories, my adult self returns to Firpo's, while childhood takes me to Tundla and Mussoorie.

I had taken a flight from Heathrow airport in London and was to land at Dum Dum airport in Calcutta. With incredible difficulty, I had persuaded Dorothy, the bride, to let me stay at the Grand Hotel. Another effort had been to convince her to avoid coming to the airport to pick me up as it was an early morning arrival. The topic of staying and picking up from the airport was covered in multiple letters exchanged with Dorothy's mother, my dear friend Edith. She had finally consented that I may not stay with them, and they would not pick me up from the airport over a telephone call that had taken 7 hours to mature. Still, the connection was barely audible, and we were yelling to make ourselves heard.

¹ Now called Kolkata, the former capital of British India.

² The Most famous Night Club Cum Restaurant, During 1920's onwards. It closed in the 1970s.

³ The topmost luxury hotel in Calcutta during World War two. Renovated and redone is still a byword for luxury.

⁴ Mixed Indian and British Parentage.

⁵ A hill station in the Himalayas is usually visited to avoid the heat in summer and see snowfall in winter.

⁶ A train junction in North India.

Calcutta, October 1975

I came out of the customs to find Dorothy and Edith in printed floral dresses looking bright and cherry. They had conveniently ignored the agreement not to pick me up at the airport. When we hugged, both me and Edith cried. Finally, after giving us a few minutes to regain our composure, Dorothy put my suitcase on a luggage trolley and brought it outside. Edith brought the car around, and we were on our way. I had carried just one suitcase and one handbag.

This was the first time I saw Dorothy as an adult. I might not have recognized her if the photos had not been exchanged. She was just a few months old when I saw her last when she and Edith had come to Tundla before I left India. Edith looked to have hardly aged.

There was a light breeze at the airport. The city smelled of diesel and petrol mixed with that of rotting garbage. The winter had not yet started, and it felt like summer to me now, as I am used to much colder weather than in Calcutta.

The 15-kilometer-long drive took about half an hour. Did Calcutta change? I saw many black and yellow taxis of Ambassador cars, which looked like Austin cars of the fifties. The city was filthy, and even the taxis had layers of dust on them. Garbage was piled up on both sides of the roads in many places. Was Calcutta ever so dusty and unclean?

I asked Edith, 'I do not remember so much grime and filth. Buildings also look without maintenance. What is the scene here?'

Instead of Edith, I got a reply from Dorothy: 'There is a high level of deterioration; the communist Government here in our state encourages protest culture, not work culture. Businesses have been exiting incredibly quickly for the last few years, so jobs are becoming scarce. Because the jobs are few and work output is low, the salaries are also low now, and though Mom has been holding me back, I think we also need to leave soon. I do not see much future here. We live in a cocoon, but sooner or later, we must come out of it. Everybody knows their civic rights here, but no one cares about their responsibilities. When compared with Delhi or Bombay, Calcutta looks like a century behind. With a lack of new development, the city is frozen in the past.'

Earlier, the capital of British India, Calcutta, was once the greatest city in the British Empire in Asia and called the 'Jewel of the East. 'But it now looked like a giant slum with shanties everywhere. The paint was chipping from formerly imposing old buildings, and visible rain damage existed. Among multiple other signs of deterioration and neglect, ugly, uncoordinated signages hung on the shops. Surprisingly, most individual houses also did not show any external maintenance, giving a feel that people living in them had become indifferent to the quality of life.

We reached Chowringhee, and I checked into the Grand Hotel against the vigorous protests of Edith and Dorothy. But I was able to have my way to stay at Grand instead of at Edith's house. I was handed over a thick & heavy key chain of wood with a metal knob, which would automatically

remind me to drop the key at reception while going out. The check-in was excellent, with much deference. A bell boy dressed in all white with a red turban and matching cummerbund took my suitcase and put it on the luggage trolley, and we followed him to the room. I had not changed money yet and tipped him with a pound note over protests of Edith, who wanted to pay on my behalf. The friendly banter and insistence on who should pay reminded me that I was back in India. It was an old Indian custom for the host to pay instead of guests.

Grand looked as if time had stood still. It had the same type of four-poster bed with provision for a mosquito net and those large bathrooms. However, it was squeaky clean, and it was clear that they had taken care of the minutest details. I love the crisp white linen that they use.

Suddenly feeling ravenous and over protests of Edith and Dorothy, I ordered breakfast from room service and went to take a bath. When I was back, three breakfast trays were neatly laid out with pots of ginger tea, orange marmalade, apple preserve, butter, well-done toast, and freshly made breakfast pastries. We all had a long and leisurely breakfast and then proceeded to Edith's house. Isabella, another dear friend of Edith, was to come in on a flight in the afternoon. When Edith and Dorothy went to pick her and Olivia up, I went back to the hotel to catch some sleep. Because of her sand blond hair, we all called Olivia 'Blondie.' She had studied in Bombay and continued living there after college.

By late evening, it was like old times when we got together.

Tundla 1944

World War Two was ongoing, and the Government and newspapers constantly told everyone to do their share of work to win. Two station masters managed the train station at Tundla Junction in shifts, and my father was one of them and frequently worked long hours. I loved carrying his tiffin⁷ to the station instead of one of the servants, enabling me to enjoy the railway station. The other station master was Olivia's father.

We had grown up with the noise of trains and coal-powered steam engines with the hustle and bustle that the arrival of a passenger train generates. A train coming to the station led hawkers to offer Samosas, Kachoris, or Pakoras⁸ and hot tea in Kulhad⁹ in winter and NimbuPani¹⁰ in summer. A. H. Wheeler and Co., in a large stall on Platform number One, sold newspapers, magazines, and books and had many vendors on carts who went near the windows of the train compartments and sold their products. Some hawkers who carried products on trays climbed into the train compartment to sell magazines or books and small convenience items like combs and batteries besides food. The usual stops at Tundla were long enough to enable them to do so.

⁷ Usually mid-day meal.

⁸ Samosas, Kachori and Pakora are savories in Indian food.

⁹ Earthen pot.

¹⁰ Lime water