

Chapter 1

The new millennium brought good tidings for India. Signs of hope filled the country as banks advertised for home loans, streets were illuminated by advertisement banners, shop windows displayed goods from overseas, prestige cars criss-crossed some old beaten tracks, McDonald's shops appeared in major street corners, shopping malls sprung up in all major cities, and flyovers relieved traffic bottlenecks. The demolition crews were busy in every city, town and suburb. The landscape changed. So did the people. Among the prosperous millions, some flaunted their newfound wealth in pubs and restaurants, some found jobs for the first time, and some even changed companies to better themselves. Then there were those adventurous souls who left for foreign shores to attempt new skills or to improve old ones. A ray of hope, optimism and renewal reflected from most of those one billion one hundred thousand human beings. India was shining.

Not the city of Calcutta. The Calcuttans waited to join the band wagon. Most knew why they lagged behind and what was missing to catch up with their countrymen. But it was the same story: each person waited for some heavenly inspiration to solve their problems. As the waiting game continued, cynicism became a popular sport among the populace. Without an immediate solution to their woes, or some creative means to vent their frustrations, their mental abilities froze – like the ancient mummies of Cairo. And that inactivity turned into self-doubt every time they heard Calcutta being called by a different name: The City of Palaces at first, then The City of Processions, and finally The City of Joy. Outsiders often wondered if these labels helped or hindered Calcutta's progress, for it turned out to be a land of the lotus-eaters where people ignored their environmental conditions. With Calcuttans, it was only the brave who believed that the city would be able to join the rich man's club by the year twenty thousand and twenty. To most the Hindu rate of growth was there to stay.

But self-doubt is such a powerful emotion that despite the prevailing cynicism, disbelief, denial and anger amid the general population, Potla Road residents decided to change their plight. And this is how they did it.

To an outsider Potla Road appeared to be like any other side street. But in reality no two streets in Calcutta looked alike. Every street, road, lane and expressway possessed its own character. For the Calcuttans it was not a difficult mental exercise to remember their streets. Most differentiated one from the other by the strong mental images it created. For instance the narrow, dirty and filthy lanes made them hop over garbage piles as if they walked on a mine field. Then there were those reputed ones made famous by its fried fish, or some special sweet dish, or an artisan's trade such as making earthen idols of gods and goddesses, or some ancient Victorian architecture that attracted people from far and near, or an open air, colourful bazaar that sold expensive saris, or a temple with reputation for miracles. To Calcuttans every detail mattered.

In length Potla Road measured about a kilometre as it meandered along the banks of the city's only canal, the Potlaghat Canal. Its northern end finished at the tram lines and the southern end bordered the Tulla slums. More importantly, Potla Road linked the south-western suburbs to the southern suburbs of Calcutta. The latter gained notoriety during the British Raj for perpetuating the lavish lifestyle of the colonials. Only five kilometres from the heart of the business district, this quarter of about ten square kilometres contained the golf club, the tennis club, the cricket club and the backyard swimming clubs. What it lacked was the cultural excellence of their northern brethren. After the fall of the Raj, the southerners therefore hurried to replicate the lives of their masters and build myths around their cultural activities. Hence it was not a wonder why to the residents of Potla Road, living close to the southerners was like a beggar's dream of living next to the king.

Looking at it in another way, Potla Road started where old Calcutta ended. The link between the old and the new was a two-hundred year old timber bridge across Potlaghat Canal. This bridge was a significant land mark to the district's elders for right across it, opposite to Potla Road, laid an old crematorium. Over two centuries the neighbourhood's aged citizens dreamed of being cremated

there. In their younger days, however, they worried about their children: As the funeral directors and the crematorium workers were untouchables who doubled as drug dealers and pimps at night, the parental concern was understandable. No wonder the Potla Road residents wanted change. Who wouldn't?

On the other hand Potla Road's ambition to become respectable like its neighbour, southern Calcutta was hindered by its physical limitations. The street failed to attract new residents – respectable or otherwise – in that kilometre long stretch. In fact there were two more limitations. The first was the Potlaghat Canal which started from the River Hooghly and ended abruptly at Tulla. During the British Raj, its designers possessed the good intention of creating an inland transportation system between the city centre and the southern suburbs. Like that found in Rotterdam or Amsterdam, tiny barges and house boats plied the waterway as feeders for ships moored at the Port of Calcutta. But after the Raj, as the port lost its national importance, the Potlaghat Canal served only one purpose – that of breeding mosquitoes.

The second limitation was the Potla Crematorium. What was then the city's limit gradually became engulfed within its boundaries. As the only place for cremation for both the famous and the not-so-famous southerners, this crematorium gradually found itself in the heart of a busy district like Potla.

Still, for many years people living in that district never complained. It was not their way of respecting the dead. On the contrary if Calcuttans did anything well it was to complain. They stood out in this activity: complaining either about the high unemployment rate, or the poor public services, or the impotent state government. Generally people often complained about complaints, particularly about the Calcutta Municipality Corporation's activities. But the crematorium remained in service all the same.

Such closeness to death, in fact, was of value to the living; it was convenient to get rid of the dead. As the prevailing custom dictated that the dead be carried on a cot from their residence to a crematorium, the shorter the distance the easier it was for the cot carriers. Again, like anywhere else, when it came to the dead matters were never quite that simple. In the crematorium there were two options: an open air cremation and an enclosed electric oven.

Since a dead man can't bite, the open air pyre was almost always busier than the electric one. The only activity that was common to both was the dumping of the ashes in the canal. After this activity, the post-cremation ritual entailed a quick dip in the same waters. In brief, convenience saved the Potla Crematorium.

The remaining human activities were harmonious with the environment. For instance although twenty meters wide, with footpath on either side, the road catered for all modes of travel. The three-wheeled scooter rickshaws, known as three-wheelers, with seating for two under the rear canopy were most popular. These vehicles maximised commuter convenience in direct proportion to the smoke, noise and traffic jams it created. With great care and accuracy, the enthusiastic three-wheeler drivers navigated past the street dogs, street markets, street children, street cows, other vehicles, handcarts, wonderers, beggars and roadside barbers to reach their destination on time and on budget. More often than not, it was the women who haggled about fares and yet overloaded the two-seater with their children, or with shopping items of odd shapes and sizes. On their part the three-wheeler drivers carried out their task cheerfully, though the ten or twenty rupees they received barely compensated for the time, fuel and energy they spent over their middle-class patrons. Only the government planners differed in opinion: they had the gullible believe that they helped the human condition by replacing hand-pulled rickshaws of the past with motorised ones.

The footpaths, however, evoked a different emotion. Wet from water overflowing from buckets carried by the slum dwellers, slippery from motor oil spilled by the roadside mechanic and the continual spitting by shopkeepers and jaywalkers, these dusty footpaths were a crucible of human interaction by day – and a bed for the homeless and the street dogs by night. This is one area about which the citizens never complained. For example, it was uncommon for the street tap users to curse the municipality about low water pressure, or for the footpath vendors for the lack of footpath space, or for the mothers cooking for their children to blame their husbands for their plight, or for the roadside Romeos to blame the public for staring at them.

From another perspective footpaths provided a great service to the community, since it doubled as a street market for the residents'

convenience. This temporary market sold interesting articles from six to nine every morning: noisy chicken in cages, fresh fish ready to be cut and cleaned, fruit and vegetables on banana leaves to attract discerning shoppers, and molasses, sweets and chutney displayed in full view of the locals. Neither the summer's heat nor the monsoon rain, or the winter's chill, succeeded in stopping them.

Most important of all were the houses along Potla Road. These were an odd mixture of single storied brick structures with an open front veranda, a two-storey brick and mortar building of the Victorian era, singled-roomed mud brick houses with a corrugated tin roof and without amenities, and dingy shop fronts created out of timber boards and canvas tops. To a passer-by the two-storied Victorian building stood out from the rest. Situated on the bank of the canal, exactly opposite to the crematorium, it almost occupied as much land as the old land mark. Made of bricks and mortar, it was not hard for an onlooker to visualise that once upon a time the structure was white. In the new millennium it looked like this: black and white patches on the exterior walls, a grey veranda, gabled timber windows, a double-door frontage, and a flat terrace surrounded by a brick balustrade. The gentle arch above the terrace had the numbers 1803 inscribed on it. That was its birthday.

How the building was designed internally was anyone's guess. Some claimed that there were ten rooms; others swore that it contained a collection of two-roomed flats. Only a handful of senior citizens claimed that they have actually seen the property – when the ground floor was opened to a once-a-year event – the Durga Puja, the worship of the goddess Durga. Since the building was not displayed publicly for the past thirty years, these claims remained unverified. No one possessed the secret.

The secretive affair during the past fifty years or so was simply because its occupants disliked publicity. The neighbours observed, and some even spoke, about a man in his early fifties who occupied the residence. To most this man never displayed the vanity common among occupiers of large Victorian houses, nor promoted the pretty structure for admiration of the passers-by. It was only during the last five years people observed some change: the dignified resident embraced his community by talking, listening and helping his neighbours. As the public saw more and more of this once recluse

character, they secretly admired him. With time the residents started calling him Prince. And since no one questioned it, the name got stuck.

Prince was a tall, skinny and brown complexioned man with a grave exterior – and a slow, jerky gait. His dark hair with patches of white at the edges was almost at the end of its life cycle, for on a sunny day that bald patch reflected light like the mirrors of the Hubble’s telescope. Apart from that imperfection, Prince was always well-shaven, which enhanced the natural expression portrayed by a sharp aquiline nose, broad thin lips, a narrow chin and sunken cheeks. Whenever he smiled, those lips nearly touched his large ears, a feature everyone noticed but refrained from any remark for fear of being unkind.

Until recently, the silent observers of Potla Road whispered among themselves to conjecture about Prince’s occupation whenever they met at the street market. The careful and sensitive people were of the opinion that Prince was a banker. But those who enjoyed talking about others to deflect attention away from them thought otherwise. They swore that the quiet man was a politician. The remaining neighbours inferred that Prince was a government clerk from his well starched trousers, white shirt, gold watch, gold necklace and a pair of black shoes which he adorned in public. Like with most conjectures, for many years no one had the opportunity or the desire to learn the truth. At times, due to some odd reason, people love to guess rather than face the truth of certainty.

Prince got up at seven that morning and stood on the veranda upstairs, leaning on the brick walled balustrade. It being January the sky appeared like a painter’s palette, scattered with red, blue, purple, pink and white colours. Afar, the light haze over the old single storey buildings made them almost invisible. The bald, ugly, empty terraces of multi-storeyed apartment buildings penetrated the smog at times only to be lost under the weak morning sun. Despite such poor visibility, the television antennas continued to raise its ugly hands to show progress. In some house tops, the huge water storage tanks reminded one and all of their dependence on Mother Nature. And those ugly strings criss-crossing the verandas to carry the day’s washing succeeded to mar the glorious morning.

Below him, on Potla Road, old men adorned berets and multi-coloured jerseys for their morning walk; young husbands rushed to the street bazaar holding tiny bags made of jute to buy fish and vegetables; and slum children yawned, wishing they were still in bed. Behind him lay ten empty rooms upstairs and a large hall downstairs. At the entrance a steel security door separated the residence from the family's temple. Lord Shiva, symbolised by a large, erect phallus of pure marble, resided in it. The temple's ambience reminded the worshippers at every moment that Lord Shiva is the sole owner of the universe. It also evoked a fear that some day we may lose the things we call our own.

Apart from that eerie feeling of uncertainty, there was nothing extraordinary about the house. What appeared strange that in spite of numerous doors and windows, the only connection it had with the outside world was a teak double-door. And every time someone stepped out of the house, a pile of garbage at the doorstep reminded one of the squalor outside. It was impossible to escape.

During the past five years Prince sent applications to the Calcutta Municipality Corporation to complain about the public squalor, particularly about the inadequacy of the street's garbage collection. Unfortunately all such requests fell in deaf ears. To start with there was complete silence, then a brief response from the authorities stating that the matter was being looked at, and finally silence again. This game of hide and seek continued. But as the local government elections were due in two years, the environmental degradation made Prince reflect over the matter seriously. They've called me for a meeting again, he reflected. What will they tell me this time I wonder? I've tried everything from pleading to threatening, but it is the same old excuse: we need to make the most of our limited resources. But as laws were meant to be broken, Prince dreamed of his next move to achieve his goal. This thought worried the middle-aged resident during that cold January morning.

If rates strike doesn't work, I need to think about another way, he tried to imagine of an alternative in his mind. Well, I can always reach out to the residents here and make them see the need for change. I feel we've been complacent about the environment for too long. The human condition is absurd in Potla Road.

The large living room where Prince stood was sparsely decorated. Apart from a square table, which doubled as a coffee table and a study, a lounge suite and six folding chairs, the space appeared as if the family just moved in. Matching that emptiness were the green-black walls of damp and worn mortar adorned by a solitary framed photo of Mount Everest. As it happened, Prince's favourite holiday spot was Darjeeling, at the foothills of the Himalayan ranges, two hundred and fifty kilometres north of Calcutta. More recently he added Kathmandu in his wish list, hoping to get a better view of Mount Everest and Kanchanchangha. To him, for the past ten years, the call of the mountains was irresistible. When will I be able to make it, he complained at times.

Right at that moment a gentle knock accompanied by a slapping noise of rubber slippers distracted Prince. He looked right to find Rena, his daughter, at the door. "What's up, Rena? Can't sleep?" he asked gently.

"Morning, Papa," the little girl whispered. She was five and still in her night dress.

Like most five-year olds Rena had short, thick and dark hair tied behind into a pony tail. In addition, she had a brown skin like her Father, a sharp nose and large eyes like her Mother and a set of even and sparkling teeth from her grandmother. Rena, due to some reason, appeared older than her age. She was also tall like her father, skinny and energetic. Whenever Rena spoke the words were so well articulated, the pauses were so well timed, and the diction was so well matched to the tone of her voice, that most people found it enjoyable to talk with her. To this end, despite her age, listening to Rena was like listening to the evening's news from a competent newsreader. Could this be another nature's wonder?

Strangely, in this part of the world nature never decreed a one-child policy. Yet during this period of history one-child families were common in Calcutta. Either by luck, or by design, or by circumstances, people began to put all their eggs in one basket. As most families huddled together in tiny accommodation, with little or no private space, this self-control possessed some merit. On the down side some of these children from the single child homes turned out to be attention seekers; some grew obese long before they crossed their teens. In Calcutta it seemed autocratic birth control policies, tried

some thirty years ago, were unnecessary. Mother Nature disliked such authoritarianism.

Looking at his daughter's face, Prince at once understood that Rena wanted something but never quite knew how to ask for it. "What's up?" he asked again.

"Nothing," the little girl replied softly and moved closer to her Father.

Prince switched on the lights as the morning sun was yet to invade the lounge. "Well, tell me what you want?" he tried to persuade Rena.

"I don't want anything." Rena was stubborn. She sat beside him and looked out through the open door.

"Is Mum up?" Prince changed the subject, hoping that it would work.

"Yes," declared Rena.

Prince smiled to make her comfortable saying, "You got up early this morning."

"The dogs," she said briefly, "were making a noise near my window."

"Don't worry about those street dogs, Rena. I'll do something about that soon," he assured.

Right at that moment all the street dogs began to howl simultaneously. That was not unusual, particularly when they competed for food with the children from Tulla slums. But this commotion was a bit different. It was not dogs versus humans but dogs versus dogs.

Resident pariahs were a common sight in every Calcutta neighbourhood. No one noticed them because no one fed them. As long as Calcuttans practised dumping garbage on the streets, no dog ever starved. They feasted on the leftovers as much as the street children did; the competition was healthy. On some rare occasions the competition turned nasty owing to poor human judgement; some kind housewife gave the leftovers to the street children instead of the street dogs. Consequently when Prince heard the dogs bark, he wondered about its true cause.

This was not all. Dogs in Potla Road were divided into two teams. One group consisted of five pariahs that usually hung out at the tramline end, and the other team consisted of four mongrels that

dominated the Tulla end. As it turned out Prince's residence stood somewhere in the middle of all this. So it was not unusual for him to find all nine whining curs congregating at his front door – whether that were to make love, or to look for a suitable match, or simply to search for leftovers in the street garbage.

In addition Potla Road's cricketers - mainly from the Tulla slums – detested dog invasion on their pitch. More often than not, dogs chased their cricket ball and barked at them right at the time the game turned serious, with bats of timber stolen from the crematorium and stumps of bricks stolen from someone's backyard. These children, who usually worked at the neighbourhood shops or ran errands for the retired, were not completely devoid of a sense of humour. Their passion for the game prompted them to name these dogs after their cricketing heroes. For example the five at the tramline end were named after the Australian cricketers – Don, Matt, Steve, Ian and Ritchie. It was Ritchie who led the northern-end dogs – an old bitch with dangling teats, open sores, bitten ears and a slight limp. Given her age, it was not surprising that Ritchie spent most of her time sleeping on the tailor's veranda, simultaneously enjoying the sun and hoping that some kind widow would throw a morsel of bread or a bowl of rice at her.

Their opponent, the Indian team, operated from the Tulla-end. These pariahs were named after the Indian demi-gods such as Sachin, Kapil, Sourav and Laxman. Kapil had the honour of captaining this Indian side. He was a snarling male – ever ready to attack the opposition females, or to defend the pups on its side. Not prone to luxuriating in the sun like his Australian counterpart, Kapil remained alert for protecting his side of the turf along Potla Road. Needless to add that during a dog fight, the children almost always barracked for the Indian side; and just like their test heroes, they always dreamed of defeating Australia.

Strangely enough, whether Australians or Indians, these dogs appeared to be well fed either from the three piles of garbage dumped along Potla Road, or from the impulsive generosity of some shopkeepers, housewives and carefree children. Even Prince, in spite of abhorring their wild behaviour and awesome barks, at times threw a biscuit or two at them. Those were the mornings when he opened the front door to yell at the barber to call him to his house

for a shave. The half a dozen or so street children, on the other hand, were not so lucky. They either waited for their parents to return home after a round of begging, or helped themselves at the leftovers disposed off in the garbage pile.

To Prince's dismay and Rena's delight, some unwanted additions were discovered in the dog family: two black pups. Naturally, these strangers attracted the wrath of long-term residents of the Australian and the Indian teams. This was the reason why they barked at the strangers continually that morning.

Almost impulsively Prince stared at the two black pups for a moment then left the veranda with Rena. As he slammed the door behind him, he muttered, "The sight of black dogs first thing in the morning is a bad omen, they say."

Rena, not sure about what changed her Dad's mood, stood still for a while then murmured, "I wish I had a pup to play with."