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## What better place to live!

*RAINBOW REVELRY: Night-riders chill at Calcutta hotspot. Picture by Rashbehari Das*

8-11 minutes



Now is the wrong time to be praising Kolkata. Thuggery has followed a tragic death. Park Street has come to rhyme better with rape than with Flurys. The new airport emits deja vu of the old, and editors have had to work overtime to calm nerves with celebrity supplements.

Yet, times were never ideal for Kolkata. For as long as I can remember, people here have recited Neruda's "Come and see the blood in the streets" and brought out marches the morning after. Outrage has been Kolkata's middle name from the days of the Black Hole. From a dead vice-chancellor in Jadavpur to a defiant one in Presidency, it has been a consistent performance of a two-

act play — promises made and promises broken.

Yet for the 14 million who live here — some by force, some by choice and a handful because they aren't able to make up their minds — nothing rankles more than running Kolkata down. The irony is obvious: it doesn't take much to turn a Kolkatan into a vitriolic critic of anything under the sun, lesser still to turn her into a protective tigress when it comes to Kolkata.

Strangely enough, the city still manages to bring out the tigress in me — a PRK or Part Resident Kolkatan. House-hunting like the condemned Prometheus, researching the unspeakable for a novel and spending quality time with friends-turned-enemies and enemies-turned-friends, the last five months have brought home five good reasons to “hold” my Kolkata stocks while others might be tempted to sell before it is time.

## THE SOUND OF SILENCE

Sooner or later, the eruption in Bangla cinema was bound to produce something that transcended itself. It was time to cast aside all that was shop worn, all that was painstakingly copied from old masters and chart a flight path that took crew and passengers by surprise. That surprise is Kaushik Ganguly's *Shobdo*. Not only has it taken the wind out of hype that lately marks launches of all things big and small, it has done so with a heart-wrenching silence.



*Shobdo is provocation par excellence, a biography of obsession, a requiem for the emptiness within and without*

To begin with, the premise of a Foley sound artist falling out of step with his world is worthy of praise for a kind of universalism that rarely invades the Bangla screen. On surface it is the clash of three titans: sound, noise and silence, but a simple incision reveals it to be much, much more. A painter sees nothing but colour, a sound artist hears nothing but sound — a mad man is mad only to others but perfectly sane to himself.

*Shobdo* is provocation par excellence, a biography of obsession, a requiem for the emptiness within and without. Utterly lacking in sentimentality, it is as Un-Bangali as it gets, just as it is deeply and dazzlingly metaphorical. And it marks the arrival of a towering acting talent — Ritwick Chakraborty — after decades of waiting.

*Shobdo* is almost more than cinema, inspirational to all those boxed in and bursting inside. If Kaushik Ganguly has done it, perhaps there's hope still for some of us. Leaving the theatre on a sultry evening I heard a whisper inside.... don't give up, don't give up just yet despite all that's happened and is bound to happen again.

## ‘EVENTFUL’ CITY

If Bombay is Maximum City, Kolkata, most certainly, is Maximally Eventful. And the best of the events are free. If hanging out in a ragged field smelling of weed-smoke and urine on a cold January night is your kind of treat, you’d do well to visit the annual Baul Fakir Utsav in Shaktigarh. The music on offer isn’t the kind of baul *gaan* you’re likely to hear in birthday parties these days, but the real deal from Bangladesh, Bengal and from far and wide. Add to that Sufi Sutra, Dover Lane Music Conference, Kolkata Book Fair and Literary Meet, not to mention readings, readings and more readings, and you’ve got an utterly unmoveable feast. There are detractors, mind you, to each of the above, for reasons both good and bad. Just as critics don’t make good creation, they too at best deserve credit for scripting the footnotes.

A caustic cousin had laughed off Kolkata’s eventfulness as “*hujoo*g”, citing the phenomenal queue up at the Rodin show in Birla Academy in 1983. Let alone the fact that such frenzy for cold stones would’ve warmed the bones of Francois-Auguste in his grave in Ile-de-France, hysteria beats indifference hands down when it comes to life and living. And that goes for the IPL as well — over the top and rising — for all that’s wildly demonstrative and irrationally lustful, for offering a reason to celebrate in the absence of personal triumph.

## LIFE STARTS AT 80

Last week I visited Sukumari Bhattacharya in her home in Naktala. Horizontal with four life-threatening conditions, it’s obvious why frailty doesn’t suitably describe someone who’d radicalised the way we see our past. Writing in Bangla and English for the academy as

well as commoners, demystifying Vedic womanhood singlehandedly, her eyes won't let her get beyond newspaper headlines now. But they sparkle as she mentions her new book to be published soon by Cambridge University Press. "Tell me the full story of your latest novel as I won't be able to read it" — she makes me nervous like a poor storyteller appearing before a wise queen.

And then yet another visit to Ashok Mitra — economist, ex-minister, author, and lately editor of a new magazine. "Frankly speaking, I might leave any minute now given my condition," he says, and leaves me wondering about his destination. From soliciting manuscripts to visiting the printer, he has taken full charge, worrying over details of the start-up, keen to establish an island of disagreements in our ocean of complicity.

In Nemaï Ghosh too, I sense a similar instinct to make every moment count, keen to go beyond Ray with his other photographs — numbering 4 lakh — via books and exhibitions. Mention any subject, and he has shot it, even the reclusive Michelangelo Antonioni — not behind a camera, but behind his easel.

What's cooking with these frisky octogenarians, I've asked myself and others. More than loudmouthed politicians who've grabbed headlines ever since I landed in old Dum Dum, like *Shobdo's* Foley man they've reminded me at each encounter to discern sound from noise.

## STRANGE IN THE FAMILIAR

O Lord if thou had created Calcutta what was the point in creating hell! — reads a colonial epitaph in Kolkata. What was unfamiliar to sahibs is our home turf, as familiar as a racecourse is to a thoroughbred. And yet, most genteel middle-class Bangalis have

had few reasons in their lifetimes to venture into the periphery that lies at the city's core. No reason to stroll down Kidderpore, except to visit Fancy Market. No reason to peep into Burrabazar alleys, or go Friday namaz-watching on Zakaria Street. No reason at all to sneak into Eliot Road's Galib Bar, or to spend a casual evening at any of the slums where a third of the city's population lives. The familiar is full of strangeness, worthy of discovery if one is inclined to capture Kolkata by one's pen.

It is here that I've met my first passport forger, shared greetings with a man with a family business of running schools for pickpockets, rubbed shoulders with *satta* gambling pencilwallas, received a sermon on developmental economics from a baul, fought with the police and gone scot-free, interviewed gigolos, done what I'd never do in my wildest dreams.

And yet, Kolkata lies unexplored — the city with the richest turmoil in the world.

## ALICE DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANY MORE

Ask a Kolkatan to describe his city and he'll tell you about his *para*. There was a time when I'd boast that I knew every house on both sides of Rashbehari Avenue from Gariahat to Lake Market. Born in north Kolkata and reared in the south, I've moved further south and to a height from where the city lies at one's feet like a regal tapestry. Aurora Borealis fills nights. Days bring out kites, flying dangerously close to my window for food. I've lost my *para*, but gained a city. Snapped immediate ties to taste a new intimacy.

Like a "twice shy" investor, I've learnt to avoid the top three scams that do their rounds in Kolkata: First, nostalgia — never to ask where all the flowers have gone but to search for them wherever

they might be. Second, to avoid purists of all kinds who specialise in pitting perfection as the enemy of the good. And finally, to make a U-turn away from the battleground between God and Satan (read CPM and TMC in whichever order you prefer), and head straight for your favourite adda.

That's the motto of a Kolkatawalla. After all, this is where I have my best friends and worst enemies. What better place to live!

*Do you live in Calcutta by force, by choice or because you can't make up your mind? Tell [ttmetro@abpmail.com](mailto:ttmetro@abpmail.com)*