

## The Hotel Calcutta

This is a story I wrote for a book to benefit Unicef called *The Weekenders: Adventures in Calcutta* (Ebury Press). A group of writers, including Monica Ali and Irvine Welsh, travelled to India in 2003 to write personal stories inspired by a remarkable city. This piece is about a very expensive and ambitious hotel, and the people who work there.

### 1. I Was So Happy

My name is Sanjay, and I was born in Assam. I'm 23 now. I studied in school up to Class 8, but when I was 13 my father lost his job and I was forced to work to help the family. First I joined a plywood factory and then I worked in a garage changing tyres and mending punctures. In 1997 there was a call from Amatala, just outside Calcutta, to say there was a new plywood factory setting up, and I worked there. It was my job to carry chemicals to the machines and boilers. The chemicals were very strong and bad for your health.

My brother ran away from home in 1992, ran away to Delhi. He broke a container at home, and my father got angry and hit him, and the next morning he wasn't there. He was about eight. He was away for two years and my mother and father had lost hope that he was alive but he came back two years later and we were so delighted to see him. In 1997 my sister was born with a handicap. She had club feet.

When I first came to Future Hope [a charity providing shelter and education to underprivileged children in Calcutta] I was having eating difficulties because of the chemicals. It was very interesting seeing all the children playing, because I didn't do that much when I was a child. When I came here I felt like a child again. I've been here for four years, learning technical skills and going to school classes and working for an electrical company.

I heard about a job at the new hotel about six months ago. Everyone said it was going to be a special place, and everybody wanted to work there. I had two interviews at the hotel. First I went with my application, and they asked me where I had worked before. The job was to work in the kitchens, so I was asked why I wanted to work there, and if there were other departments I wanted to work in also. I said that I want to be a chef, a good chef, and I had to start at the bottom. There aren't many people who could say they are a qualified chef, and I think there will always be work for me if I do that. If I am just a waiter - anybody can be a waiter and as a waiter I might not be in so much demand.

When I heard I got the job I couldn't believe it. I was so happy. I heard a few months ago. They said they like me and want to take me in, but I have to pass my exams first. Computers, mathematics, science, English. They are in October, and

so I'm working hard. I will begin by peeling foods, the fruit and vegetables, and I will start in one restaurant and then move to another, and then slowly I will learn more skills. I don't know the salary at the moment but I think they will pay me well. My ambition is to be a chef in a most famous hotel, and I hope people will know of me.

## **2. We Like To Use The Phrase Restobiz**

My name is Ranvir Bhandari and I've been in the hotel business for 20 years. I was born in Calcutta in 1961 - all my formative years were here. The school offered a lot of extra curricular activities and I played a lot of cricket and squash, elocution and debate. The idea was to be someone not just good at books, but also have a more complete exposure. My parents ensured that we travelled a lot, and as I grew up I realized that I just enjoyed being around people, and I was very extroverted and gregarious. I realized I had to get into the people business, although that didn't happen for a while.

I studied to become a chartered accountant in Calcutta. Midway I had an interview for the Oberoi Centre for Learning and Development, and I was very attracted by the brochure and the things people told me. There were 12,000 of us being interviewed. There were five rounds, and the final one was with Mr Oberoi in Delhi, and they took 20 of us, and it made me feel like the Prince of Wales.

Now I know the business I realize they were looking for a great attitude, a great background, a good education, for someone who was good with people. So I joined the two-year post-graduation course on hotel management, and you do everything in that period - from being an innkeeper to being an entrepreneur. After the course I transferred to the Oberoi Grand in Calcutta for seven years, going from assistant manager to food and beverages manager, and I took a sabbatical and went to the Stamford in Singapore, at that time the tallest hotel in the world. They have 22 kitchens and 18 restaurants, so great learning for any food and beverage person.

In 2002 I jumped ship from the Oberoi group to ITC and came back to Calcutta. People often have a very negative perception of Calcutta as a place where nothing works. Many people who came here ten or twelve years ago never returned, and Calcutta was not really looked at as investor-friendly or a place to do good business. So Calcutta was not marketed well. Suddenly the new chief minister wanted to present a changing face of West Bengal, and he wanted a showcase. Calcutta has the largest intellectual prowess in the country, and there's no reason why it shouldn't rule the roost in the services sector and IT and retail. So I hope the Sonar Bangla will be at the centre of the Calcuttan Renaissance. Here is a hotel which is very modern, using cutting-edge technology, offering the world's best, yet seamlessly coexisting with the traditions of Bengal. It's a business resort. We like to use the phrase Restobiz.

Calcuttans are a very emotional people, the people here love water and many draw their livelihood from water. Fish is a major staple in the diet, they immerse their deities in water. When Kerry Hill, the architect and designer of this hotel, first came here he went around West Bengal for about six months and became inspired by water. And the old Calcuttan always enjoyed his country house,

known as the *bagaanbari*, which had a lake and a great sense of space around it, allowing the Calcuttan to sit and create and read or just reminisce. It was also very well equipped for both leisure and work. This hotel develops that old *bagaanbari* concept.

For a start it gives you a great sense of space. The concept is that there's a great hub of activity in one place - seven restaurants, 22,000 square feet of convention facilities, a pub, everything, but once you're through you go through these walkways into a very quiet and private space and nobody disturbs you. We also created this spa and this chip-and-put golf course and the jogging track and tennis courts and yoga and aromatherapy and many forms of massage. Previously people have said about Calcutta that things don't move, and even when they do they take a lifetime, so when this building went up in two years they didn't believe it. When we said that it would open on 31st December 2002 people said it can't be, but as it got closer people said 'Wow, maybe it can be'. And when we opened on time that was a big message. Locals have embraced it in hordes. Sonar Bangla means Golden Bengal.

The ITC, the Indian Tobacco Company, is headquartered in Calcutta. The company has diversified from tobacco into matches and timber and many leisure pursuits. Its plan was to make this a destination in itself. Most hotels are built on four or five acres and have rooms with 350 square feet. Ours is 16-and-a-half acres and our average room size is 400 square feet - so much more to offer. We have 240 rooms here, but that includes a CEO's wing, a vice-president's wing, and the executive wing, so you have a choice. If a company wants to bring in their top four layers they can separate them.

We're not fully on the market yet - it's a soft opening. We wanted to ensure that all three Ps - people, product and processes - were all in place before we start firing on all cylinders. I'm about to go to Bombay to market the hotel, to tell people that there will be no gap between promise and delivery. I'll be talking to heads of companies, the top professionals, big telecom people, the medical fraternity. I'm going to tell them to come to stay with me.

The advertising has just begun. This month [May 2003] there's the first national advertising in the newspapers. The photography of the hotel has just been taken, and the brochure is just being developed. We didn't want to photograph until the hotel was complete and the trees had grown a little bit. We had a launch party - the chairman of ITC had a party for the city at large, about 2,000 guests, and all the restaurants were open. Great publicity.

For any general manager to open his own hotel is a great opportunity and not everybody has it. Believe you me, it's wonderful to actually have your own toolkit when you open your hotel. It's like giving birth, and now I'm mothering the baby as I would wish to, teaching it the way I'd like it to walk. The team here have been recruited basically for attitude. They're all on a learning curve. We have very few levels in this hotel - only five levels from the lowest to the general manager, and we want to keep it tight because we want the reaction time to the guest to be very quick, we wanted decisions to be taken immediately. I just wanted graduates with great communication skills and a great willingness to serve. I selected them from all over India. I was with Oberoi for 18 years so a lot of them wanted to follow me,

but many have come from all over, and we have some with experience and some fresh ones. We were inundated.

### **3. After A While We Heard Rumours About This Place**

So I'm Chantelle Cropp. I'm from Sydney, schooled in the local public schools, grew up on the beach side. I was a dancer, and I danced for the Sydney Dance Company - classical ballet. But dancing doesn't really pay much money so it was time to look for a career and I became a certified practising accountant. But then I get married to a chef and move overseas. I was in my last year at school when I met Matthew.

We moved to the Middle East in 1993 when I was 21 - Muscat in Oman, an Intercontinental Hotel. I was really just there as a spouse. Then another posting came up in Shanghai, and within a few weeks I had landed a job with the Australian trade commission doing finance and admin. Then it was Bangkok and I became fluent in Mandarin, and I was working as the executive director of the Australian-Thai Chamber of Commerce. Then we moved to Bombay with ITC. We were there for two years, I did the spousing, I did a correspondence course, I did yoga and met up with the ladies group. It's Matthew's career I'm following, basically.

It can be very difficult, because you lose your identity and independence. But there's a goal of where we want to be financially. I think when we moved to Bombay we found 13 other Australians. Here there are two - Matthew and myself. But we're working towards our goal and we love to discover new cultures and really get ingrained. When I moved to Calcutta I asked if there was an opportunity for me at the hotel and they said 'Sure'. Otherwise Calcutta is such a small city and there's not so much to do and the other option was to go back to Australia alone. We would do that six week thing - every six weeks one of us would travel to the other place. It's about 13-14 hours with a couple of stops on the way.

My uncle married an Indian lady, so I learnt a little bit in my teens about Indian culture. But I never thought I'd move to Calcutta. This movie with Patrick Swayze that was made at the Fairlawn Hotel - that was my vision of Calcutta. City of Something. Of Joy. Not exactly the most luxurious city on earth - I didn't want to go there, the poverty, the sickness, the dirt.

We were in Bombay at the Grand Maratha for two years. After a while we heard rumours about this place. 'Sonar Bangla is coming up, maybe Chef Cropp should go.' I was in Australia at the time, and he told me he was about to go into a meeting. Then he called back and said, 'It's Calcutta' and I thought 'Oh God, I don't know about that for me at all.' But then again it's going somewhere different. We got here in August 2002, four months before it opened.

I hate to say it, but I really just asked for the job I have. With my background I wanted something that was quite high-profile. I didn't want to be reporting to junior managers and things like that. But it wasn't going to be easy. When I came here I didn't know the names of the important families, but the advantage is that I'm this Australian who is Ranvir Bhandari's secretary and the whole city knows about it and it brings in business in its own way.

I had to learn that Calcutta was a relationship-building city. It's all about old money and old families - a bit like Melbourne really - old groups that have been going for hundreds of years, company relationships and business partnerships. Learning that was a battle. You can't just walk in and say 'Hi, I'm Chantelle, how's it going?' It takes time. But I'd say that a lot of the families know who I am now. It's more than just a secretary. It goes from basic work like filing and telephone calls to complete management of heads of department, following up on what they're supposed to be doing, a lot of PR, a lot of guest relations involved, keeping guests happy and seeing that if there are any complaints that they're looked into and dealt with straight away. All the big families call me up for all their restaurant reservations, so I'm a table booker too. Hotels are all about PR really.

When we came here there was lots of rubble, and we couldn't live as we do now. You had to walk over cement and dirt. I started work in November and there was no air-conditioning and lots of grime.

But now we have the unique spa and I love the West View restaurant. It's really quite classy. I love going out and looking at the water lilies. The management want this to be a seven-star deluxe hotel, an ambition in itself. This hotel wants to be the Rolls Royce, not the Ambassador you see on every street. It's all about how you feel when you walk around, a learned thing, something that must be groomed and developed. I would say that this hotel is definitely on its way. And that's really sad for us, because we always leave just as it gets really good.

#### **4. I Never Used To Go Beyond Park Circus**

My name is Ravi Krishnan and I was born in Calcutta way back in 1964. My father was working here as a chartered accountant. The school I went to - St Xavier's - is even today considered to be one of the finest institutions, and growing up here was great fun for me. The quality of academia I always thought was considerably higher than many of the other cities. Calcutta has always had a tremendous sporting heritage - football, hockey, cricket - and I was staying in the south of Calcutta next to the lakes where rowing was big and I used to be a member of the rowing club.

In those days people mostly spoke of Calcutta being hugely congested, with all this poverty, and we had a huge power problem. There were hours and hours of load shedding, and we were the butt of ridicule throughout the country. In a day of 24 hours we would only get power for 12 hours. The infrastructure was mismanaged. In the early 1980s I was aware that the other cities were progressing fast, and Calcutta was really lagging behind. Not much happening in the city, and the youth started getting into lots of activities that were not beneficial, and very politicised.

I began as a management trainee and I've spent most of my hotel career in food and beverage all over India. I went to Cornell University in the US for six weeks on the general manager's programme. That was wonderful - you got to meet up with your counterparts from all over the world, and it was great exchanging notes, very enlightening. Then I stayed in London for three or four days and got to see the Savoy - the Grill Room and the rest. I was always a big PG Wodehouse fan. I saw the Dorchester and then the Waldorf Astoria in New York.

The moment I came back from Cornell I was moved back to Calcutta as the resident manager to set up this hotel in September 2002, when the hotel was still a project site. The teething problems here... many unknown problems. How does one handle the water and horticulture, and getting used to the layout is very different. The architecture is not very functional - there are challenges to cleaning all this glass, a problem we're still grappling with. This hotel is in an area which used to have a lot of leather tanneries, so there used to be a smell permeating into the open areas, and a fair amount of work has been done to clean that up. Then we had to do the first time-and-motion studies for room service: we had to find how long it would take from the kitchen to all the rooms, through all the narrow corridors below the hotel. One day we had a huge thunderstorm measuring about 120 kilometres per hour, and that made us realize how open the hotel was - all this water inside. A guest got stranded between his room and the central walkways which were unnavigable. So we had to call back the architect to say we needed one area totally reinforced so the guests could get to the restaurants. But the kind of affection that the opening of this hotel has created in Calcutta has far outdone all these small niggling things. The whole city has been talking about it and has taken to it. Four months on it's become a destination.

When I was growing up I hardly knew of this area. I just knew there was something called the Bypass. We used to live and party and dance - everything on the other side of town. I never used to go beyond Park Circus. I just couldn't picture anything lovely in this part of the city because this is where the garbage dumps are. Or were. The underbelly of Calcutta. But this is now the new face of our city - its hasn't transformed itself from an ugly duckling to a swan quite yet, but the progression is happening. And people have come to realize that actually this hotel is not very far away, just six kilometres from the middle of town. The new generation in Calcutta is changing too - they are now in tandem with what's going on with the rest of the country, no longer a decade behind.

As far as food and beverage is concerned, 90 per cent is local Calcuttans, and 10 per cent is people who stay in the rooms. I think it will take at least a year for the hotel to establish itself completely and for the whole country to be talking about us. Now all the rooms are open for sale, and there's only one restaurant we're waiting for, the Pan-Asian, and then we'll only have the chip-and-putt golf to come. The landscaping is done, and now we're waiting for it all to mature. I'd like to think that during the season we'll be as busy as we'd like to be. The season here begins in October until February, after the rains are done, and I would imagine we will be very busy then. We're pretty gung-ho about everything we've done so far, pretty gung-ho.

## **5. Hazelnuts On The 24th Shelf**

I grew up wanting to be a pilot. Then I enjoyed learning to cook with my grandmother. Then I had the opportunity to go into a hotel so I tried it, I enjoyed it, I excelled, and I aspired to being an executive chef. I gave myself a goal of 35 which I achieved at 27.

The nomadic life has its ups and downs. You can't compare living in India with living in Sydney, but that's the challenge. Working in Australia should be an eight

or ten hour a day job. Here it's sixteen, eighteen or twenty if required. We went abroad because we saw doors opening, and we took opportunities that we wouldn't have got until years later if we had stayed in Australia. I've done two openings now. Then I'll be looking for a corporate position somewhere. Chantelle and I developed our business minds at an early age, and we'll continue to travel until we have children and go home. We want to put our children through Australian schools.

The image I had of India was the Taj Mahal. Around The World in 80 Days. Mother Theresa. That's about it. I could have just stayed in Bombay, because there's another hotel opening up there soon. But I was called into a meeting, and the vice president said he was going to ask me a question and I said 'Yes'. And he said, 'Well Chef Cropp, I haven't asked you yet,' , but I said 'Yes. You want me to go to Calcutta.' After all, this is the flagship for the hotel group.

When we came here in August the kitchen had been designed but there were a lot of small changes to make in terms of floor plans. There were all the pots and pans and utensils to get, some local, some imported, and we had to sort out all the procedures and policies, and the staff recruitment was a lengthy process. I'm in charge of all the restaurants, even the Indian ones.

Most of my staff speak English, some better English than us Australians. They're a very educated people. But opening a hotel is a very stressful business, and it is hard implementing things sometimes. People are overloaded with work. It's tomorrowland. It's hard to complete jobs and put things to one side - always focussing on fifty things. If I don't order butter for the storeroom it just won't be ordered. Things are slowly getting in line, but it can still be frustrating - getting people who haven't had international experience to see what I want to achieve.

The menus were also very challenging, in terms of imported ingredients versus local ingredients. If the locals can produce goods as well as imported ones then I have no problem. But if they can't, and we're marketing ourselves as a seven-star deluxe hotel, then you need to buy these things. Yes they're costly, but we reflect that in the selling price. And you have a financial controller who has no clue but is very willing and open to learn - that's just the way the guy is. He wants to know what Dijon mustard is, and why we need to buy so much of it. Why we need so many imported black and green olives.

A small issue the other day with Human Resources. Most of my managers are coming from other ITC properties and I want to know how many pending days leave they have. I got caught with this in Bangkok where I had 156 chefs and they were owed something like 3000 days in annual leave. 'Oh we don't give that information.' Why not? 'It's confidential.' So I had to approach it in a different way and go higher up.

I have 110 chefs under me at present and about 150 people in all, and there will be 186 if I'm lucky, for the seven restaurants plus bars and lounges. We haven't really promoted the F&B yet - which is a good idea. Let's get everything in place first and then boast about it. It will take a good 12 months, and if other hotels are judging us before then it's very unprofessional.

I've just finished sorting out the deli shop. The variety we're offering, the pricing structure, getting the pastry chef, training the staff. My work's pretty much done - I'm just waiting for the refrigerators to arrive. I'm now focussing on

banqueting. We have a portfolio of 200 menus. I'm working out a selling matrix - I'd like to sell at this price, but I can go down to this price if need be. Then there's Pan-Asian restaurant to open, then I get a holiday, then I'll come back and open up the Spa restaurant. A lot of starches, pulses, low-fat and low-sodium items. But the work is never done. We're not in the cooking business, we're in the teaching business. We have to teach and educate the guests as to what we want them to eat, about ingredients they may not be accustomed to, which they may or may not like. It's about how you sell it to them.

Also, it's all about staff motivation. We've developed this two-year programme which this young man you mentioned will go through, a complete theoretical and practical course with mid-term and annual exams. There will be outside trips to the vegetable, fruit fish and meat markets. It's a case of organisation - having all the nuts in one place, the rice and pulses all together in the storeroom. That was a good 24-hour job. There were hazelnuts on the 1st shelf and hazelnuts on the 24th shelf, so that obviously needed sorting.

The local staff who work under me - the younger ones look at it as a fantastic opportunity. The older ones look at it as a threat. I've got one guy with me here now who was chef at a 40-room property. We have conflicts, but pretty much I have to tell him who he is and who I am and put him in his place. After that there have been no issues. You have the old world and the new world, and you can't change the old world. The new guys are very good. They're very anxious, they're very ambitious, they know knowledge is money and power - very switched on.

We seem to be getting quite a good crowd from outside. But you don't have that many tourists here as you do in Mumbai or Delhi. Hotels in India are expensive versus the salary cost. In Bangkok you can get a five star hotel for \$75 a night, but here in India the minimum is about \$150. That's just how it is. It's a huge investment - for this property you're looking at \$40 million. I said I want a beautiful pastry trolley, I want a beautiful flambé trolley - they're \$5,000 each. I want beautiful outdoor barbecues imported - no problem. I think after Bombay they have the confidence to say, 'Let's give him what he wants.'

## **6. The Rest Of The Roads Are All Oh My God**

They put me in one of their executive suites - ground floor by the pool and spa, an ultra-tasteful brown and beige spread, with dark woods and furniture covered in silks and a huge sunken television. There was marble and a bar area and a walk-in shower that looked onto a leafy courtyard, and lying on the bed surveying the scene was like being wrapped up in *The World of Interiors* magazine. A big slab of chilled chocolate on a table was inscribed 'Welcome, Mr Garfield!' and next to it were publications featuring the Bollywood goddess Aishwarya Rai and news of the Calcuttan renaissance, not least the forthcoming shopping centre with the latest hi-tech stuff from Japan. But it was clear that the new Calcutta was already here in this hotel; everything was serene and odourless, and there was broadband too. The only anomaly was by the window, a terrifying black massage chair from America that shook you up like Buzz Aldrin on re-entry. They treated me well, sometimes overwhelmingly well. It was impossible to sit down in one of the lobbies without little cakes appearing on expensive trolleys



from all angles. The staff hovered around the waterfalls and bamboo groves and canopied walkways, eager to impress that they weren't going to stop at seven stars if eight stars were attainable by legal means. Whatever their post, they were certain they had landed the best job in town.

I was informed that the kitchen consultant was from Germany and the disco designer was from Ireland. I was handed many details about the Dum Pukht restaurant, a majestic place with an entire wall made from Onyx and a floor flown in from Italy. The menu had four culinary styles, including one favoured by the Jolly Nabobs of the East India Company. Each style had its own chef, and the hotel marketing department believed that some of their creations 'may well go down in history'. If not, the menu might: if you go to the Dum Pukht, for the love of God make sure you get an early reservation. There are more than 50 dishes with very long explanations, and your waiter will have historical footnotes to most of them. A kebab is not a kebab, not when it comes with pomegranate sauce and a swirl of coriander cream sprinkled with mace on mudkipuffed rice. Not when you're eating something frequently enjoyed by the enduring symbol of the English-educated professional middle-class urbane intellectual Calcuttan known as the Bhadrakok. I ate a delicious meal there one evening (small pieces of lamb marinated with green papaya and spices, served with luchi; paneer cubes sautéed and then cooked in a silky puree of tomatoes and fenugreek, with a touch of cream; a baked pudding of khoya mixed with ground almonds and saffron, strewn with raisins and nuts and served with a delicate brandy sauce) and my dry cleaner has since examined the shirt I was wearing and says there are no chemicals on earth that are ready for it.

On my third day I was handed papers about the ITC group. The company had been in the hotels business for almost 30 years, often in partnership with the Sheraton group. It now has 46 properties, but none of them are quite like the Sonar Bangla. None of them, for example, has an area called Dublin, which the casual visitor might casually refer to as an Irish theme pub, a description which would annoy its creators very much. According to one hotel 'communiqué', the area is based on the 'Third Place' principle hotly favoured by sociologists and readers of Wallpaper magazine, the notion of a hangout that is neither home nor work, but one where like-minded individuals may gather in a non-threatening environment. The pub was split into several sections. There was Point Dublin, described as 'the reception of revelry'. There was Dubliner's lounge, 'a pilgrimage of privacy'. The Diplomatic Enclave was the 'seat of the stately', while the Alumni Square is where 'the old school ties tie up...seeped in nostalgia...memories on the rocks.' Finally there was Ladies Only, 'an enclosure where claws can be sharpened and people can be bitched out over some bourbon.' One evening I came away from Dublin to the strains of a live local string quartet playing The Theme from Love Story and My Favourite Things, and passed a sign announcing a special feast for the Ambassador of Bulgaria.

Not everyone in town loved ITC and its opulent creations the way its employees seemed to. Some charities still see the company principally as a cancer empire. You mention the company's record of investing in technology for less privileged children, of giving something back to its city, and it's dismissed as window dressing, public relations.

After staying at the Sonar Bangla for a few days I wanted to experience how it used to be for the tourist before ITC cleaned up the tannery stench, and how it still is for many. So I checked into the Fairlawn Hotel on Sudder Street, slap in the middle of all the usual Calcuttan madness - all the limbless dogs and general putrid nakedness. I told Ravi Krishnan of my intentions and his tone implied I may be making a tactical error. 'It's a backpackers' hotel,' he said. 'Very traditional'. My room had a signed picture of Felicity Kendal in it. The building was built in 1783, and it seemed to be on the verge of collapsing beneath the weight of its faded glory. Every inch of external wall was covered in greenery, and every inch of hallway by a painting or photograph of old Calcutta and old-style Calcuttans whooping it up with gin. The furniture was old, and not always in a charming way. I promised the soused owner that I wouldn't say anything bad about the place, but all promises were broken when a giant rat crawled up the air-conditioning cable in my room at three in the morning.

There were no such incidents at the Sonar Bangla, but it was early days. The place lacked only one thing apart from rats and its chip-and-put golf: a history. It was so far apart from what Calcutta was used to, and from what visitors expected, that it was yet to develop the character that comes only from mass habitation, from people leaving their imprints on the sofas. When that time comes (and it may be happening by the time you're reading this), then all the talk of elegance and waterlilies will come not from the staff but from paying customers, and the hotel will probably do more than any other single building to wrest the image of the city from the clutches of Mother Theresa. It is pure new Kolkata.

On my first night I met a girl called Debolina who made me feel like James Bond. She worked as a customer relations expert in one of the restaurants, and at the end of my meal she made a crepe suzette with two types of sugar and a running commentary. The next day she took me to her house in another new part of Calcutta. She said of course I must see the Victoria Memorial and the Writers' Building and the Howrah Bridge and all the other great old and famous things in the city, but we were now off to Salt Lake, a township that's come up nicely in two decades, where she and her family have built their own modern home. 'It's called Salt Lake because previously there were fish ponds all around,' she said. 'A lot of sand was put in, and it was levelled. Now we have all the cabbages and all the fresh vegetables growing here.' We travelled along the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass, a link road between the airport and edge of town that carried a billboard advertisement for a mobile phone company every fifty yards. The amazing thing was, westerners could actually imagine driving along this road, something it was impossible to do anywhere else in the city. As Debolina had it, 'this road is actually very nice, very smooth, but the rest of the roads are all Oh My God.'

We passed engineering and management colleges, and the office of the Geological Survey of India, and then Nicco Park and Aquatica, the theme parks where Debolina's younger brother begged to go every day of the holidays. 'This is now the area where all the business and residential buildings are coming up,' she said as we entered a leafy area that benefited greatly from central planning. Everything was in an ordered place like a town plan in a children's book - the

hospital, the school, the shops, the recreational area; again, not like the Calcutta in our heads.

Debolina gave me a tour of her fine house, with wood from Assam and lilac walls and the goddess of learning, Sariswati, in one of the bedrooms. Then we had some delicate food her mother had prepared, and on the way back to the hotel she pointed with pride to several gleaming buildings with familiar brandings high up on their glass: Siemens, Infiniti, Philips, Price Waterhouse Coopers. Three years ago this place had absolutely nothing, Debolina said. It was like jungle.

## **7. Oversatisfied**

My name is Debolina Mukherjee, and I was born here in Calcutta. I'm Bengali. I'm from a middle-class family. My dad worked as an engineer and my mum is a senior accountant, both on the railways. After I was born my father was transferred to Assam, so we all went there when I was one. I was in the Holy Child School, a beautiful missionary school at the top of a hill. My mum is still working, but my dad has been travelling too much so he has taken voluntary retirement. He's at home starting his own business. My brother Ankur is in Calcutta Boys School. He's 11 and his ambition is to go to England to play county cricket. When he gets home we start fighting and my mum is fed up with it.

In Calcutta I completed my schooling, and when I was in class 11 my brother was born. My dad was posted to France, and at that time we faced some difficulties because my mum found it hard to balance professional and home life. The Bengali culture is full of traditions and fastings, so there were all these things to uphold, but she managed it well. My mum is also a classical singer, and she wanted me to learn Rabindra Sangeet, the Bengali songs, the songs of Rabindranath Tagore. But I was more inclined towards dance, and I was good at it, and if ever there was a function I would always be called. I was really good at all the academic subjects apart from maths. I was more into biology and chemistry and history. My parents wanted me to take the sciences further when I got older, but I needed better maths. So I shifted to commerce. I was pretty good at sports also - I was the badminton champion for three years. I'm 22 now. This is the second hotel I've worked in. In fact, it's my second job. I did my graduation in English honours, and I was also doing a PR correspondence course with Delhi University. They told me there was a vacancy at the Oberoi Grand in Calcutta. I really never thought of working in hotels but I thought I'd give it a try - it was my first interview ever. I passed the first round and the second interview was with Mr Ranvir Bhandari. I got through that as well, but I still had my final year of graduation, a morning course. He asked me whether I would be interested to work there if something could be worked out. My experience with hotels up until then was going to them with my parents and just eating there. I said 'Yes, sir, I would like to work here'. So he shifted me to a department which opened in the evening - an F&B outlet that just opened for dinner. It was authentic north Indian cuisine. Kebabs and tandoori food. I was a little scared at first, but because it was Indian I didn't face much of a difficulty. I'd say 60 per cent would be local clientele, and 40 per cent would tourists and business travellers from

across the globe. One guest was from London, and there are a lot of Indian restaurants over there. But he said he wanted to try the difference between English Indian and Indian Indian, so I suggested the kind of food he might like, and he liked it very much. After six months he came back with a group of friends. So I started working there and quite liked it - everyday talking to new people about their lives. I was interested to learn how did first-time visitors like Calcutta. I liked trying to solve a guest's problems, and then seeing them afterwards and they're happy.

This was in 2000. I was there until I came here. I completed my graduation. I was there for almost two years, and then Mr Bhandari shifted to the Sonar Bangla. I was very scared when I first met him, but he made me feel so relaxed, and I came to rely on him and I still listen to his advice. When I heard he was leaving I approached him and said, 'Sir I am very depressed.' He said, 'This is how the professional life goes.'

I said, 'Sir, can I also move with you and join the new hotel?'

He said, 'Yes, why not?'

So I applied and came over. I was interviewed by the assistant F&B manager. Right now he's looking after the banquets. Then I had another interview in front of a panel, with people from head office. I got through and originally wanted to be in some public relations post, but Mr Bhandari told me that because I knew the Calcuttan clientele well by their names and faces I should go to a F&B outlet, and then when people come and recognise me they will feel good about it. He said that after that I can move on to wherever I would like. So I am a guest service co-ordinator, a GSC now. My outlet is mostly for dinner. I start my work from three in the afternoon and end at about 12.30am. At the beginning it was very tiring being on the feet all the time, but now we are used to it. Then I use the car facility of the hotel to come home - the security here is very good. My job is to ensure that the whole operation goes smoothly for the guest and my subordinates as well. When the guests come here they should have a great time and when they go out the door they should be oversatisfied.

My parents have not eaten at the hotel yet. We employees are not supposed to have family in, and my mum is very touchy about it. But I have just spoken about this with my boss and he says it shouldn't be a problem: I just have to take a small permission from Mr Bhandari. In fact I told my mum and she was quite happy. She said, 'Let's plan out, and we'll definitely be there one day.' My mum is a travel freak and loves to visit places, but we always go together if we can, and she doesn't want to eat at the hotel with me working there. She wants to go altogether.

I must honestly say that this hotel is completely different from the rest. Whenever I enter I always feel there is a sea beach close by. People like to feel a hotel is like the perfect home - relaxing, beautiful, warm. Our interior designer is from Singapore. Even the water lilies are imported from Thailand. In the other hotels you know you are in Calcutta, but here I quite forget where I am.

Before people come here they say, 'Calcutta doesn't have anything, I don't want to go there.' But when they see the place the city grows on you. My friends who have left to go to Mumbai or Delhi they all say, 'Why don't you leave to join us,' but I always tell them 'No, I'm very happy being here, I just love this place.'

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