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my calcutta

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The silence of statues

The arrival of the Messiah in my life

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lost kolkata



It was 17th July 1965, when I attended a roof-top dinner party in Joya Roy's large and spacious house. There was a gathering of men and women who knew each other and an animated conversation was in progress. I spotted a pretty, young, well-dressed girl sitting quietly by herself, unmoved by a cacophony, a hint of self-sufficiency. I asked the hostess to bring this girl over to me. That was my introduction to Anita Roy, on her twenty first birthday. I admired her well kept hands, her reserve and ability to hold herself together. In fact, I was quite intrigued. We spoke and our journey began which would finally end in our marriage in 1968. We promised to meet from time to time. Anita came to have tea with me every week and mother was only too anxious to provide Flury's specialities. After months of our getting to know one another, the question of marriage cropped up in our minds but mother put

her foot down and strongly opposed it. After three years of hide-and-seek, meeting her clandestinely at restaurants with the help of friends, we decided to sign on the dotted line on 20th February 1968. A friend's drawing room. Ustad Bismillah Khan on the cassette. A cheerful registrar to conduct the proceedings. We became a married couple without any fuss with love as the great propeller. After the news was received mother asked me to leave the house. This is when a charming little bungalow in Tivoli Park became our refuge and love-nest. Anita had decorated the cottage with great élan, breathing new life into a building which had never seen so much care bestowed on it. Those were heavenly days with the taste of freedom on our lips. We flourished in this novel ambience after having left a cloistered world where stagnation was slowly setting in. I felt adrift and listless before I met her. Anita and I savouring a sense of inde-

pendence and determined to be masters of ourselves were drawn towards Bengali plays staged at the Academy of Fine Arts. The Naxalite movement was spreading across the state and the plays we saw exploded with anger at the callousness and indifference of the government. This gave us an opportunity to meet and exchange intimate conversations with thespians like Sreela Majumdar, Bimal Banerjee, Tapas Sen (light), Manoj Mitra, Dwijen Bandopadhyay, Asit Bose, Bhikhas Chakravarty and Bidyut Nag to name just a few. It was such a delight to enter this world where one saw creative energy and strong social commitment. Our constricted life-style shored up by conventional props lost its relevance in this heated atmosphere of response and resistance. Anita and I saw the powerful film director, Mrinal Sen's angry films like *Interview*, *Calcutta '71* and *Padatik* where an oppressive social order was dusted and aired, revealing hideous moles and

warts. It was the time to shed our torpor. We were learning all the time. After the film shows, Mrinal Sen was found mingling with the audience in the foyer and keen to hear their reactions. That's how we got to know this extraordinary individual. Our relationship burgeoned from that time and we have never quite lost touch with each other. His films had a seminal influence on us and helped us to face harsh realities. In 1978 we left Tivoli Park to stay with mother in her newly built house. That's where Anita blossomed into an innovative cook with a flair for picking up new recipes. Even now she is in an experimental mood and comes up with novelities we have not tasted before. For twelve years in succession she drove me to my office, Martin Burn Ltd. Come hell or high water. The business area was invariably crowded but she never lost her patience. In her spare time she knitted cardigans not just for us but for friends like Jyoti Basu, Mrinal Sen and

Prasanta Sur whose simplicity was rather endearing. Embroidery was another of her hobbies and she made the most exquisite table linen and bed linen and children's clothes for her nieces and nephews which outsiders looked at with covetous eyes. When the time comes for summing up I can't help stating emphatically that I've never been so well looked after and protected from marauders. Her unfailing affection and solicitude for my physical welfare, her practical common sense and ability to deal with intractable day to day problems, cover her with distinction. This opinion has been voiced by all my friends and even the clerks in our office. Whether it's the Windamere Hotel in Darjeeling or the South Eastern Railway Hotel in Ranchi or the Calcutta Club she has always received special attention from the staff. In her case there will always be some final innocence exempt from dust. — The writer is a raconteur and connoisseur of old Calcutta

How the fire killed the Fair and the foul

Much more than books were at stake when Calcutta Book Fair was ravaged by fire more than a decade ago, writes Sayandeb Chowdhury

When the Book Fair burnt in January, 1997, it did not smell of authentic Bengali cuisine. Or of any of the many subliminal 'snake foods' (purportedly snacks) that were being cooked inside the fair ground, one of whose stalls had apparently been that very Prometheus who handed over fire to an undiscerning congregation of millions. Inside a stall, around 5 in the evening, I was browsing through a book on the city. Yes, a collection of photographs on Calcutta by Tapan Mitra. *The Calcutta Persona*, with text by Partha Basu. I distinctly remember being tucked somewhere along the alabaster balustrade of one of Chitpur's grand old palaces, when I heard 'fire fire'! I turned around. And in a distance there was a giant mouth of a fireball, like an open gape of a fire-

spouting dragon, eating into a large stall at a distance, aided happily by the late winter breeze. This was the very breeze which on other, recent days, soothed hapless fathers who had just given into buying the tenth encyclopedia Britannica or the eleventh Tintin to his demanding kid. That breeze was now backslapping the marauding fire vehemently, to eat up everything that came on its way, as if the fire was on a race to dive straight into the river that was in usual saunter less than a mile away. It was inferno. And the inferno was at that moment eating ravenously into the bulky volumes of Standard Literature. I had never seen fire this up, close and personal and for moments I could not move. The fire's appetite seemed unending and slowly it ate into Oxford University Press, Tata Mc Graw Hill, sundry local publishers, may be Dey's

and Thema, may be the Montmartre — the little magazine territory. Was it just a coincidence that only days before I had read the Maria Upton poem: *Fire is the roar/The hum, the sting of Wind/Fire is the pepper pulsing/from the flower/ Fire is the frenzied volcano dancing/It is the lightning's blitz, the drumming, the singing/The beat of tribes, telling their story all night/Piercing the bottom of dark, birthing the light.* Was it a bonfire of vanities in a city that was increasingly losing its hallowed claims to public culture? Was it a bonfire of sanctities, when the late nineties' fin-de siècle doom loomed large? Or may be it was a bonfire of profundities; of losing to the pillaging fire-breathing monster the last of the city's famed pretences to greatness — its million-thronging, free-spirited, green-chomping, buccaneering, swashbuckling Book Fair! Along with other assorted isms in its showcase. I did not know. And I could not see what it meant because the horizons, as far as I and the thousands stranded with me could look, it was dark smoke. Up in smoke was Umberto Eco, up in smoke was Frantz Fanon, up in smoke was Jorge Luis BorgesBorges. Was there ever a more elaborate burning of books in history since the fire at Alexandria. Was there ever a more poignant collective sigh since Rome burnt? In annals of the city, destruction of the good as against the bad and the ugly has been a recurrent motif, like a bad character from a forgettable film. So I was not surprised. Just plain dazed, looking into the haze of black fire, and then pale and vague into the sky. I could not make out if it was the twilight or the black smoke which caused that terrible darkness up there. But by now I was only too conscious to be a witness to one of the city's high points of contact with itself that was now slowly engulfed by the wrath of its past and present sinners! The Book Fair was good as over. Half of it lay burnt and razed in front of us. Howling cries made the air heavy. Must be small publishers who had stacked everything. Or may be it was the ghost

of the reading public, who had waited a full year only to have his yearning dashed to the ground. I went back the day after. A giant dark patch marked Maidan. The smell of charcoal filled the air. There was no one on that quiet afternoon. There was no picketing, no fencing. No sign of vigilance. That morning newspapers barked over each other's voice to mourn the accident. Some blamed the penchant for food over reading of the philistines who thronged the fair in hordes. The CM in waiting and the cultureminister Comrade Buddhadeb had thumped his chest and vowed to come back with a new Fair within a few days. Standing in front of the expansive, burnt heath, amidst the flutter of burst papers and charcoaled books, somehow I felt that the days of the Fair in the heart of the city was indeed numbered. The madness of the downtown fair, the proclivity of its endless, eager visitors, the chirpiness of the children, the smell of grass with a new book in tow, the foolhardiness of chasing a beauty in the crowd, the cheesiness of peeping clumsily into the book of nudes and the sheer freewill of walking back home with hundred others, all with at least one packet of books held close to their chest on happy January evenings, was going to end soon. And it did. Since it burnt, Book Fair never found a steady ground in Maidan. It slipped and fell on its cloistered feet for some years till it was relocated to its current premises, one sixth of its original size, one-millionth of its original charm. But burning is not just the only memory one has of the fair. In fact Book Fair is perhaps the only event in the city, apart from the Pujas, which manages to connect, as we will see, to very different demographics. In younger days, young boys from suburban areas would show keen interest in the fair. They had not read a single book in their life and would never do. But come every Fair, they would religiously head for the Maidan in groups. Their intention? To gather together inside a stall, create some disorder and then, taking advantage of the attention lapse of vigilantes, steal books away which they sold in the market to make some quick pocket money. 'Cultured' boys and girls went with their

parents and browsed dutifully at Enid Blytons. 'Uncultured' boys stole books. On anything. Yoga. Moonraking. Kayaking. Gardening. And if they were caught? No they were not in for any corporal punishment. Instead they were made to sit down and write essays on why they should not steal books. Being from *kaaltured family*, I was aghast at this practice of stealing till much later I heard, in JNU, a famous and irreverent professor advocating stealing of books from the library. 'That way, some of it will be read', he said. Donno why, and without referencing to those who I knew stole books in my past, I believed in him. Book Fair was also the time when one KC Paul, Counter-Copernicus of the Nether World, would appear from nowhere and espouse his famous theory of the Sun going around earth once every year (and not what we, the fools know) complete with mathematical sums, diagrams et al. He occupied his place religiously outside Gate One of the Fair for years, undaunted by and unmindful of the ludicrity of his enterprise. It is in Book Fair again that I heard, live, one Jacques Derrida, the philosopher and proponent of the theory of Deconstruction when he came for the annual lecture sometime at the end nineties. He had famously said that the Book, chased by the assorted ills of modernity from the world at large, had finally found a resting place in Calcutta. Deconstructed, this means that Calcutta was outside the world. Perhaps, till very late into its modernity, with its legendary nature of playing truant with time, Calcutta was outside the world. This was all before the fire burst in, as if sent from the outer globe, to put a leash around Calcutta — oblivious and drunken in a world of books — back to the fold of order, the order of un-books that Derrida had derided. The fire was a burning reminder that Calcutta's famed romance with books could not have gone forever. It had to finally succumb to the ways of the world. Now, the Fair is still there, propah like a trade fair, cemented like an industrial exhibition, clustered like corporate jamborees. But the Book, chased and troubled by fire and forgetfulness, perhaps isn't.

