

KOLKATA IN LOCKDOWN – MARCH 2020

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Kolkata in Lockdown is as we have never seen it.

The skies are the bluest blue in over seventy years, the world silent except for the rustling of leaves in the Mango trees, the cawing of the ubiquitous crows and occasional barking of stray dogs in empty streets normally bustling with people. No cries of street hawkers, no bells of the rickshaw wallahs, no cars hooting, no yellow taxis, motor bikes or bicycles squeezing down impossibly narrow alleys, no planes flying overhead. Horses are cantering down Park Street deserted by their owners fled to the villages, foraging amongst the garbage, together with crows and hundreds of starving dogs as suddenly there is no rubbish for them to pick over. My friend Chiru sends me a photo of a monkey on the roof of his house near Park Circus, Hanuman personified! He has never seen one there before.

The air is getting cleaner by the minute and I marvel that it only takes four or five days to achieve this, in one of the dirtiest most polluted cities in the world. Delhi is normally beyond hazardous level, and I am told it is the same there – brilliant blue skies! All over India. All over the world.

It has been a most extraordinary year. People have been locked down in all corners of the earth, wherever they happened to be, or simply locked up in their own homes for indefinite periods. There have always been minor epidemics since the last major global Pandemic of

1918, the Spanish Flu, over a hundred years ago, when a third of the world population at the time contracted it and it claimed 50 million lives, more than the whole of the Great War. Now we have a similar one visited upon us.

For us here it started with a Janata Curfew – that is, a People's Voluntary curfew declared by Mr Modi from 6am to 9pm on Sunday 22nd March. We pretty much all obeyed it – not knowing this was to be but a sample test for more to come. I had planned to move from my apartment on Theatre Road during the week to the Elgin Fairlawn Hotel but when I tell my landlord on Monday he says: "Antonia, if you don't go before 5 pm today you will not be allowed to leave!"

Shops and stores are closing all around me including my favourite supermarket at the Saturday Club over the road and I know I have to get out. Apparently, the night before, Narendra Modi had appeared again on television saying the Lockdown was officially prolonged from 5 pm on Monday until midnight on the 27th March – next Friday. Everybody went mad buying up what supplies they could before the deadline.

I pack in a whizz, my big silver trunk full of the personal things I keep at the apartment – bed linen, towels, saucepans, china, glasses, cutlery, cushion covers etc – and my clothes into their suitcases and then try to find transport. Impossible! There are no taxis, no Ubers and I am stuck. I call the owners of the Elgin Fairlawn who have become good friends, and they are so kind, they say no problem! They will send one of their cars for me, the drivers know where I live having dropped me off many times before.

I am ready by midday and at one o'clock the car arrives. At the Fairlawn I am greeted by Goutam, the charming young Acting Manager, and the rest of the staff who know me well. First in order to check in I have to have a medical check certified by a doctor, so Goutam

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The Elgin Fairlawn Hotel, Calcutta

rings for one. Amazingly it turns out to be my old friend Dr Gautam Ghosh – a lovely man, and very esteemed doctor here in Calcutta. Apart from his normal duties mostly at the Woodlands Hospital (one of the best in Calcutta) he is the doctor in charge of the Racing and the Cricket – that is, he treats any accident or incidents relating to the Cricket teams at the Eden Gardens, and the Jockeys and even horses at the Racecourse and I have known him for twenty years. He is most surprised to see me walking down the stairs!

We chat and he does all the usual tests, although not the actual Covid-19 – that is given only if someone has symptoms and I have none. He writes out the Certificate and gives me a copy, keeps one and gives the Hotel one. All before 4pm. And total Lockdown.

Nimmi and Diamond Oberoi come for the last time that night, as after that even they cannot come over from Park Street. The next evening, Tuesday 24th March, Modi once more appears on television saying the Lockdown is now extended to 21 days – until 14th April. I am so happy to have made it to the Fairlawn by the skin of my teeth.

And there I stay for the next five weeks, locked up, or down, in the Elgin Fairlawn. It could be worse! I love this place and now have the run of it, there is only one other guest who chooses to ignore me in the most part which suits me fine. I am quite happy alone with the charming staff of seven, Gautam the Manager, who takes everything very seriously, quite rightly, handsome Hassan the Shopper, Mohan the wonderful Chef from the south of India, Hafta the charming Chowkidar, Rahul the smiling

ubiquitous waiter who does everything, from serving the food to chasing cockroaches at 2am, Amut the sweeper and another lad doing cleaning and odd jobs. They all look after me wonderfully and I feel very lucky. I try to be as accommodating as possible to them all and cheery – we have to keep in good spirits, this is hard on them too.

A pattern begins to emerge in our daily lives – greet the staff with a smile, chat to Goutam then have breakfast in the garden. The sun pours down. It is not too hot yet but will be 38C before midday. A pot of steaming coffee and a plate of fruit, usually melon, papaya, apple, watermelon, pineapple – whatever Hassan can find in the Market – is followed by two fried eggs with chicken sausage, hash browns, tomatoes and mushrooms. It does not much vary. They would make me anything I ask for but I am happy with this routine. At first there is toast but soon it is impossible to find bread. I lazily read the Daily Telegraph on my iPad, and the Times of India and the Indian version of the Telegraph as I eat.

Then I go up to the Veranda – Violet’s Veranda! – for the morning to organize correspondence on the computer then write until mid-afternoon. An hour maybe on my bed in the hottest part of the afternoon then I abandon all devices, iPad, laptop, two phones one Indian one French, and take a cup of tea out to the Veranda again and read into the evening light. Thank goodness I had espied the last of Hilary Mantel’s wonderful Tudor trilogy “The Mirror and the Light” and bought it the week before – so good to immerse oneself in that world, and although it may be a bit wordy and long, I love it, and do not want it to end.

The garden is filled morning and evening with birdsong, and I begin to notice so many different species, I wish I knew all their names. Usually it is the Crows that dominate the Mango trees with their loud raucous cackle, but now emerge all manner of others, from tiny sparrows to pigeons and the famous Calcutta Kites and Buzzards wheeling high above, and many other rarer ones, like Barbets, Pipits and Shrikes.

Below the boys are playing cricket in the yard, their gentle whoops and cries rising up to me on the evening air. The muezzin intones regularly from his minaret, calling the faithful to prayer and whereas normally I find this just

adds annoyingly to the general melee of noise, the honking of car horns, the roar of traffic, the cries of chai-wallahs and beggars – now I find it beautiful, soothing, as the haunting melodies soar out with poignant melancholy over the rooftops. The sunsets are spectacular, a deep crimson red spreading over the whole sky as I watch lying on the sofa.

Back in my room, I have a delicious bath – a high point of the day – then down to order dinner. Sometimes Diamond sweetly arranges for me to have a glass of whisky out of his personal store which is so kind and really makes a difference. There is no alcohol in all Calcutta right now and none served at the hotel. I do not need alcohol but every now and then it is so good – a lifting of the spirits even if you never knew they were down – I sometimes hanker after the unopened bottle of Vodka in my silver trunk with nostalgic longing.

I discuss with Mohan the Chef what there is for dinner that night. Mostly it is chicken, with rice or chow mein, or curry – or salad, vegetables, whatever I feel like. One night there are prawns! I realize how hard these are to find and jump to have them, cooked with ginger simply delicious. Sometimes he makes tasty pasta dishes or mouth-watering Chicken Stroganoff. Sometimes just plain dahl with naan bread or chapattis is all I need.

My Irish friend TP comes over sometimes. He lives out the winter on the rooftop of the Modern Lodge, or as it has now been hilariously re-named “*La Loge Moderne*” – there has not been anything modern about it for a hundred years. Once or twice he makes it inside the portals of the Fairlawn for a cup of coffee although Goutam wants to keep everyone out as much as possible and I do understand. Other friends come, once Anirudh, once Kahn, sometimes a German called Ralf but it is true that this lockdown will only work if everyone adheres to it. What a situation! And how lucky am I to be here – I cannot get over it.

Many of my friends and family are worried and just want me to come home. My brother is furious I am still here, having offered to buy me a first class ticket to get out several weeks ago but I resisted, I am not sure why. I feel so completely at ease in this country, in this city, I am not worried. The figures coming out for Bengal are minimal compared to – well almost anywhere. The headline for West Bengal on Wednesday 1st April – not an April Fool’s joke! – reads:

“Worst Day So Far – 3 More Deaths Total 5 – Cases Jump from 15 to 27” hardly comparable to any European country or fatalities for many other diseases. Here if one

has money and food and shelter, for the moment it is a good place to be. England and France seem to be living a chaotic nightmare.

But I know it is all going to get a lot worse ...

The stories of the migrant workers, the “daily earners” are horrific, so many tales of misery and hardship and the Government seems oblivious. My favourite taxi driver, Pappu, who I have known on Sudder Street for more than 15 years, rings me up crying. He had reached his home which was not so far away (some of them are walking nearly 2,000 kilometres to get home) but after five days he has no money and no food, his family is starving. I manage to pass him some money via a friend through the bars of the Gate.

As my computer keeps reminding me, I should be boarding the plane in Delhi for Paris any day now but Air India has cancelled all commercial flights until 30th April. Nick Low, the wonderful Deputy British High Commissioner in Kolkata calls to tell me I am not forgotten and although impossible to get on the flights for London from Delhi going back next week, (we can no way get to Delhi) he and his team are “*digging their own tunnel*” to get people like me home. So nothing to do but sit tight and wait it out.

On Sunday 5th April half way through the Lockdown, Modi asks for all the lights to be switched off at 9pm and everyone to bring candles to their windows and balconies in a show of solidarity and support for each other. The boys bring me candles on the balcony. I think here in Calcutta the Lockdown has generally been well observed so far but in other parts of the country not so much – Bombay and Delhi have seen scenes of unrest.

Then one day at the end of April Nick, the Deputy Commissioner, calls and puts me on standby – there is to be a British Government repatriation flight direct from Calcutta to London. It will be the last one until commercial flights re-open, and no-one has any idea how long that might be. I realize it is now time to go, and I book myself on it. I wish it were possible to recreate the best parts of Lockdown in the future, although I know it has been incredibly hard for so many.

For me it has been something of an idyll, a beautiful moment of pure reflection and near solitude, complete happiness, writing and reading, alone with my thoughts. A time that will probably never come again. The mangoes are ripening on the trees and I have never been in India for Mango season. Tempting though it is to stay, I know it is now time to go home ... □