

THIRD EYE EDITION

Call of the city

I know, I know, the day of the year set aside as Women's Day got over last week and so I am not going to serve leftovers here. As it is, all of us wom-en love to go on and on about ourselves as the men lapse into stunned silence. But I stood up for my kind by catching the movie *Kahaani* at a theatre close by. The story of a feisty, heavily pregnant woman straddling continents on the trail of her missing husband sort of grabs you by the throat. And yet, instead of maudlin sentimentality, you have a taut, gripping thriller as full of twists and turns as the seedy back lanes of Dhakuria. Interestingly, the protagonist, the role essayed by Vidya Balan, is surrounded all through the film by men – men who are protective, condescending, hostile, amused, speculative, besotted. All these men, brought up in traditional Indian families, seem intrigued by this beautiful woman who hacks computers as casually as she knots her hair, whose quirky sense of humour shines through the darkest gloom. Now I am not going to let on if she got her man back, but only want to point out that there was another powerful character in the film, one that we should not miss. And that is the city of Kolkata – Kolkata in her many moods, – cheerful and bustling in the noon sunshine, brooding and melancholy as the last tram trundles by and the shutters are downed for the night. She is like an old hag in tatters as the camera moves along crumbling buildings with broken stairwells and mouldy walls. And yet, you cannot miss her voluptuous exuberance as Puja revellers dance frenetically on her streets. Like us women, she is restless, voluble, always vying for attention, a creature of impulse. Yet, under that cacophony is the deep silence of secrets buried in subterranean vaults. Nothing is as it seems, just like the portly, affable *bhadralok* insurance agent turned contract killer. Watching this film, I am reminded once again that every city is a living, breathing body. It is more than the sum of its parts – its streets and buildings and parks and slums. And like bodies, each one is unique, with its own fingerprints – and DNA that cannot be replicated.

It is a given that it is the poor who truly appreciate the value of money and it takes the hungry to savour a meal. If you have to come under the spell of a city, you have to be the outsider, to cautiously put out your toe into it, as it were, like a child on the beach venturing to the sea, and feel it come surging up your ankles. I was a small town girl and Shillong then was a place from which you could walk off to the countryside after an hour's brisk trot. So the vacation excursions to big, bad Guwahati made us children quite overwrought with excitement. Two storeyed buildings looked like towers, the rickshaws rattling past were rich with potential for dangerous, gravity-defying rides. When our car first got swallowed up by the din and chaos of Paltan Bazar, it seemed to me nobody had the faintest idea who was going where. And then, thanks to the creation of Meghalaya, this city became home. Guwahati, in those early years of painful adjustment, made me lose the sense of a small, close-knit community. Here were people from all over, subtly antagonistic, with the credo of 'to each for himself' ruling all lives. The capital city Dispur was then a dusty maze of makeshift looking concrete government quarters designed by somebody who was clueless about aesthetics in architecture. The profane cussing on the streets, the squirting of betel nut juice on walls, the huddled masses under bridges and the black tar melting on summer streets hardly did anything to endear me to the city. But something about the tranquil

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waters of the Dighalipukhuri fringed by old, dreaming trees, the stately bungalows by the river, with their gabled roofs and deep, shaded balconies, the view of the Brahmaputra glittering in sunshine, seen from the Ramshah Hills, the bookshops in Pan Bazar, the pealing bells of Nabagraha temple and the sea of humanity ceaselessly struggling to live – hoping, dreaming, weeping, laughing, with their childlike enthusiasm for malls and restaurants, their streetsmart ways, their one-upmanship – it all grew on me over the years and now I can't bear to live anywhere else. And so it is that every morning, as I ready myself to leave for office, I have one ear cocked for the breezy, light-hearted chatter of the RJ on FM Radio. When she talks about how RG Baruah Road is having a traffic jam and MRD Road is clearing up, I get caught up in the buzz of this awakening city as it rolls up its sleeves and plunges into the day. And on the way to work, as I wait at the rail gate for an inter-city express to pass, I see young men in ties jump off with laptop bags on their shoulders, as well as humble farmers tug burlap sacks of produce from their fields. It is these anonymous, resolute people who make up the flesh and bones of this city, far more than steel girders and concrete blocks ever can.

A favourite girlhood affectation was singing the famous Tony Bennett number *I left My Heart in San Francisco*. It expresses the sentiments of a jaded traveller who's been around and for whom the gaiety of Paris is tinged with sadness and the glory of Rome has long faded. He has been alone and forgotten in Manhattan. But San Francisco... ah, that is another story. The city by the bay calls out to him. He imagines the hill leading to it, the cable cars climbing halfway to the stars. And in that city by the blue and windy sea, his love waits for him.

To my eternal regret, my visit to three great European cities – London, Brussels and Berlin years later was spent in attending brainstorming seminars and educative (yawn) visits to newspapers and television stations. Hastily polishing off the iconic British dish of fish and chips at (of all places) a Turkish restaurant, we strolled along the streets of Covent Garden just as the weekend revellers were filling up the pubs and discotheques. There was little of the London I had read from Dickens to Kingley Amis, nor the horse carriage and gas lamp days of Jack the Ripper and Sherlock Holmes. I found the London Eye an eyesore, garish and pretentious and the Tube really scary with its screaming racist graffiti. In Berlin, from the glass dome of the Reichstag, the whole city spread out silently, squat, dark historical buildings flanked by futuristic steel and glass edifices, seen through a flurry of snowflakes, an enigma.

And then it struck me that the truly perceptive and intimate way of knowing a city is to visit it in books and films, to discover and explore it through the eyes of one who has got under the skin of a bewildering urban sprawl. James Joyce's Dublin feels more real, more compelling in his *Ulysses* than the Irish city never mentioned in our newspaper headlines. The New York of Jack Kerouac and Woody Allen is more vibrant than its neurotic, post Twin Towers avatar. Give me the Paris of Victor Hugo and Honore de Balzac, the St Petersburg of Pushkin. They speak of places that have something timeless about them, untouched by the rude urgency of the here and the now. All over the world, cities are beginning to resemble

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one another in architecture, amenities, public spaces. Soon it will be difficult to evoke them in the written word, for each will lose its unique character. But even so, I have serious unresolved issues with the term concrete jungle. Not only has it been done to death, but its predatory slant is unacceptable. Cities are more or less successful experiments of people striving to live together. Tempers are lost, nerves are frayed and somebody out there is always trying to pull a fast one on you. But there is also unexpected generosity and the kindness of strangers. And it is in cities that you are most aware of the restless human spirit – always on the move, questioning, searching, challenging the odds and gambling all. And like the humans whom it shelters, a city too is always transforming itself, moving with the times, rising above all that is old and decayed. And those who make it their home, can never quite move away to quiet, green obscurity; for unknown to them, the city has grown roots deep in their hearts.