

Calcutta Notebook

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THE WINTER REFUSES TO recede and so does the upbeat mood of the city. The event of the year, the Kolkata Book Fair started on January 25 and ended per schedule on 5 February. In spite of inept organisation and in spite of claustrophobic stalls that could become tinderboxes at the flash of a match, that the fair has become the biggest draw for middle class Calcuttans is amply borne by the fact that footfalls on any given day exceeded a lac. The importance of the event is underscored by the fact that even the Kolkata Police, never conscious of their public image, wished to put their best foot forward. Glum faced constables in fresh uniforms were doling out poly sachets of drinking water. One wishes that the cops carried forward their newfound vision to the *thanas* that they staff and ensure that their colleagues as well as detainees have easy access to clean drinking water.

However, not all are happy, not the *bazaar press group* in the least. The *sarkari press*, never at ease with the *hoi polloi*, carried on with its biased despatches from the fair ground. The Bangla rag from the *bazaar* stable continuously reported that more people were eating *biryani* than buying books. The English supplement to the Bangla rag chose to ignore the fair and propped up a Kolkata Literary Meet. (26 to 31 January). The notoriety and glitterati, having had their fill at Jaipur did not take the trouble of coming to Kolkata. Some over the hump and the rest out of work, writers & hacks & academics (save Chetan Bhagat & Vinod Mehta) came and spoke to themselves, since there were no audience to address. The frustration was apparent when Arvind Krishna Malhotra said that 'I feel more awareness is required to make the Book Fair enthusiasts participate in the meet'. Unlike Jaipur, Kolkata has a huge and varied cultural hinterland. Even if one forgets Bengal for the time being, Kolkata remains the gateway to the culturally rich hinterland of the North East. The aesthetically challenged organisers of the Kolkata Literary meet were simply ignorant of this connection. The lit meet organisers had hitched on to the Book Fair bandwagon and were using the facilities at will but they had not bargained for the sliminess of one of the organisers. This organiser, he can be facially imagined to resemble a bespectacled Kolkata version of Charlie Chaplin's tramp, had the gall to switch the lights off in a packed auditorium during a discussion with Imran Khan. Surprisingly, Charlie instead of being quarantined got away with a sly apology.

Like the previous year, facilities on the fair ground were reasonably good especially if one takes into account that they withstood the thrust of large crowds. However, like the previous year there were a few unwanted agencies too. This pack has nothing to do with books but they join the crowd for an image makeover. One of these, perhaps the most wily and deceptive of the revenue departments, had a two-storied stall at a prime location. There were no books on display and a few hired hands moved around with a put on smile. That there is a nexus between this department and the organisers was given away by the fact that one of the organisers had set up shop in an adjacent stall. This mutual back scratching was at the cost of the little magazines enclosure. The most vibrant section of the fair was tucked away in a corner;

next to a boundary wall. Although the dust within the fair grounds was at a tolerable level, the approach to the fair was a picture of mismanagement. The pavements, although barricaded, were uneven and dusty and reaching the fair was an uncomfortable experience. The unevenness and dust were impediments enough to keep senior citizens and the differently able away from the fair.

The fair warmed up on 1 February. Part 7 of Taslima Nasrin's autobiography, *Nirbasan*, was scheduled for release on that day. The ban and burn books brigade, so active and so successful in Jaipur had clenched their threatening fist at the administration and at the organisers of the Kolkata Book Fair. It is a fact that this ban and burn brigade has a strong presence in the city and they have strong political linkages due to democratic India's genuflection to vote bank politics. The same brigade held the central part of the city to ransom on 21 November 2007 and armed forces were called to tackle the menace. The brigade withdrew their street forces only after being assured the departure of Taslima Nasrin from the city in which she had taken refuge. This time around, as could be expected, the administration did not stand up. The Guild that organises the fair wilted, as one would expect businesspersons to, and cancelled the launch of the book in the fair auditorium. Laudably, civil society and the publisher of the book stood their ground and chose to take the menace head on. The book release programme took place in front of the publisher's stall in the presence of Nabarun Bhattacharya, Dipankar Chakrabarti and Sujato Bhadra and many others.

Another event that created a ripple was the presence of Jan Myrdal at the fair grounds. *Red Star Over India*, his latest book was released at the book fair. Octogenarian Jan Myrdal who has lived at various times in Europe, the United States, Afghanistan, Iran and India was present at the publisher's stall at the fair till the end of January. He has written books on subjects as diverse as Meccano, wartime propaganda posters and French 18th century caricature art. His earlier book on India is titled *India Waits*. During January 2010, the author had travelled to the depths of Dandakaranya forest in Central India. One of the outcomes of this 16-day sojourn was an interview with the General Secretary of the Communist Party Of India (Maoist) which was published in January-February 2010 issue of *People's March*. The title of his latest offering is 'inspired by Edgar Snow and his *Red Star Over China*' and is a product of the same journey to the forests of Central India. He interacted freely with the visitors to the stall, gave them a patient hearing and autographed books. This weekly co-hosted (alongwith *Aneek, Nagarik Mancha, Anustup & Bartika*) an adda or tete-a-tete with Jan Myrdal at the press corner of the Kolkata Book Fair on the afternoon of 28 February (the links to the video recordings of the event on YouTube are available at <http://frontierweekly.com/>). The venue of the *adda* was chock a block with enthusiasts eager to get a look and interact with Jan Myrdal. However, it must be admitted without any riders that on a very slack estimate, the average age of the participants, was on the wrong side of fifty. Mahasveta Devi and Sumanta Banerjee shared the dais with Jan Myrdal. Although participation was enthusiastic, the long-winded questions lost their focus en route to the intended recipient. The audience completely ignored the rich and varied life of Jan Myrdal. Although Jan had earlier commented, that he had no crystal ball to gaze at and that

nothing was written up there on the sky, most questions were centred on the course that Indian revolution should take. Jan's sagacious advice was that every movement has to find its own path through praxis. He was enthused by the loose structure of the 'Occupy' movement since he felt that the structure enabled spontaneity and this was the strength of the movement. At the same time, he felt that due to the absence of a 'party', a concerted thrust towards the next stage of the movement was hampered.

Like all good things, the 36th Kolkata Book Fair ended. Thankfully, the fair is yet to become a playground of the rich and the famous although the media houses (print and visual) and the organisers are working overtime towards this end. Not surprisingly, it is the overwhelming participation of middle class Calcuttans of a particular language group that has ensured the success of the fair since its inception. Surprisingly, over the past 36 years education (and presumably reading as a habit) has penetrated deep through social and income layers and yet the crowd profile at the fair has remained largely unchanged.

How did the fair end? Well the same Charlie, who had in an earlier incident switched off Imran Khan's lights, rang the closing gong on the evening of 5 February. □□□