

A PILGRIMAGE TO KALIGHAT

March 1,
2005

By: Somnath Mukherji

Kolkata is where my roots are. Every year or two we would come back from northern or northeastern India, where my father would be posted for his service in the Border Roads, to be with my grandparents and a part of our big family who lived in Kolkata. In my 36 years of life never had I been to the famous temple of Kalighat where millions throng to seek the blessings of goddess Kali. March, 2005 was the first time I made my pilgrimage to Kalighat – not to the temple but to the slums where thousands live in tiny hovels under sub-human conditions. These gods and goddesses who live on the margins of the society were not happy. We had not tended to them; we had neglected and hurt them. We have seen their wrath expressed in the form of crime and violence and shuddered in disgust but never have we seen their tears which have run dry due to our indifference.

My actual pilgrimage started from a building in Hossenpur near Ruby Hospital which houses the administrative office, a half way home and an open school for Tomorrow's Foundation (TF) – an organization that started its activities in 1991 by providing non-formal education to the street children in the Kalighat area, on the terrace of Mother Teresa's "Nirmal Hriday". Today, TF supports the educational, vocational, health and psychological needs of 400 underprivileged children. The project director, Ashis-da took me to a class preparing for the Class X examination in the open school system. These children had dropped out of school at various points in their lives, primarily due to financial constraints and unstable family conditions. The teacher, Kasturi-di was sitting on the floor along with the students. There were some students who were coming back after a gap of 8 years while some after only a year. When I asked Kasturi-di how she was teaching the same thing to such a heterogeneous group, she said that it was necessary to pay subtle individual attention. Through certain feedback mechanisms, she had a measure of the varying level of assimilation among the students. Biki was a student in the class who stood out because of his confident yet friendly demeanor. After he had introduced himself, Ashis-da added that Biki had lived on the platforms of Sealdah railway station as a child. With TF's intervention, he was going to school and learning to drive a car and leading a relatively dignified life with his uncles. Equipped with a Class X certificate and a vocational skill, it was expected that the students could go out and make an honest living. Ashis-da stressed on the fact that the functioning of TF was very transparent – neither were the children kept in dark about their pasts nor were they unaware of how TF was being funded. Care was taken that they don't feel cut off from their roots. The children were taught to take ownership and pride in whatever they did. An extremely low self esteem is a usual problem with children who lead an uncared for deprived existence. Kasturi-di told me about one of the girls in the class who would not look into anyone's eyes.



TF's new building in
Hossenpur



Thirsty for knowledge - at the
municipal school in Kalighat.



Giving back - a teacher who
was once a TF student.

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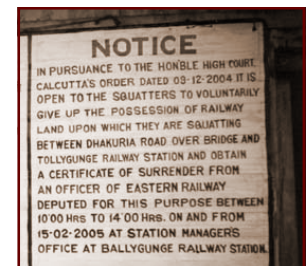
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A mother and son were waiting in the front porch with a suitcase and a bag. Their home was due to be demolished the next morning (March 2nd, 2005), in a planned eviction of 30,000 “squatters” near the Tollygunge railway station. TF had offered the bright teenager an accommodation for a year at their halfway home so that he could finish his higher secondary education with minimal distraction. Ashis-da showed him his dormitory and other facilities, none of which had locks anywhere and urged him to work hard and be an example for the younger children to follow. Cleanliness, ownership and good relations with others were some things that were strongly emphasized. The friendly yet firm message from Ashis-da was that TF would be there for all his needs within reason but a good result in the higher secondary examination was expected of him.



Tollygunge railway station - close to 30,000 people live along these tracks.

After a short visit to the ground floor where students were busy producing extraordinary handicrafts and greeting cards, I got into a car with the students from the open school and their teacher to go to Kalighat where TF holds evening classes for younger children in a school run by the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC). I had a very heart to heart conversation with the students in course of the journey. They opened up to me in an amazing way and asked me all sorts of questions regarding my life. They felt I was genuinely interested in their lives – a very big compliment indeed. I told them that when they grow up and become established in their lives they should not forget the underprivileged people of the country – something my teachers had told me as a student. To this, Biki replied in a determined voice that it was impossible for them to forget their own pasts and their roots. He said they would never throw away the part of their lives that had caused them so much pain and yet made them stronger. My eyes welled up and I silently bowed before him in reverence for looking reality in its face and having compassion amidst the struggle that is his daily life. There was a god sitting next to me and my pilgrimage had begun.



This notice was meant to be a precursor to the proposed eviction on March 2nd - the day when 80 students from these homes were to appear for Madhyamik (Class X) geography exam.

At TF's office in Kalighat, Arpan-da, one of the main coordinators explained me how the younger children are identified from the underprivileged communities of the six neighboring wards and assisted in their admissions to nearby formal schools. TF has a cell which visits the homes of absentee children regularly in an effort to remedy the problems being faced by them. This care is further supplemented by another cell which regularly visits the formal schools and get updates on the progress of the children. Besides these cells, there are trained teachers who coach the children in the evening and people who keep track of the children's health. They also had a computer training center at the office. I requested Arpan-da to take me around some of the communities from where the children are drawn. We arrived on the banks of the Tolly nullah – a 30 to 40 feet wide canal whose water is black from the refuse of the city and gives out a pungent



Students from TF's open school - a source of great inspiration.

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stench. Anything that does not find a place in Kolkata ends up either floating or sinking in the Tolly nullah. The thousands of people who had built up their shanties along this nullah were not much better off. This was where the seams of the city were bursting; this was the furthest these people could be pushed – physically and socially. The tiny dwellings, hastily built with tin, jute bags and plastic turn into ovens in the summer. The residents are rendered homeless on a regular basis during the monsoons when the acrid water, along with human and animal residue, rises to flood the places they call home. With all their belongings, the families end up on the streets patiently waiting for the water to recede. The walkway between two long row of houses was barely 3 ft wide. It was difficult to believe that people could live under these conditions year after year, but it was impossible to believe that the children from these families were going to school and appearing for Class X examination. Walking through the different bustees around the Keoratala crematorium, from where the unburnt human remains are cast into the nullah, made me understand the gravity of the work TF was doing. Arpan-da asked every student on how they fared on the Madhyamik (Class X board exams) history paper that day. Walking alongside a god made my pilgrimage all the more worthwhile.

That evening, the municipal corporation run school was abuzz with activities since a free health check up was going on. The three doctors that were examining the long stream of children, regularly volunteer their time and provide the basic vitamins that almost every child needs. A light tiffin is served to the children before they go to the classrooms to begin their lessons. Some of the teachers were graduates of TF who had chosen to come back and teach there. Leaders and role models were being created in the community – a lack of which cannot be denied in our society. Like it is said, when you find a job you really like, you will work for less money and when you find your ideal job you will work for free. Seeking the blessings of all the little gods and goddesses, I bid them adieu but the pilgrimage continues in my heart and mind to this day.



Tolly nullah bears testimony to the bursting seams of Kolkata.



Happy Streams of Children



Health check up for all students - healthy body, healthy mind.