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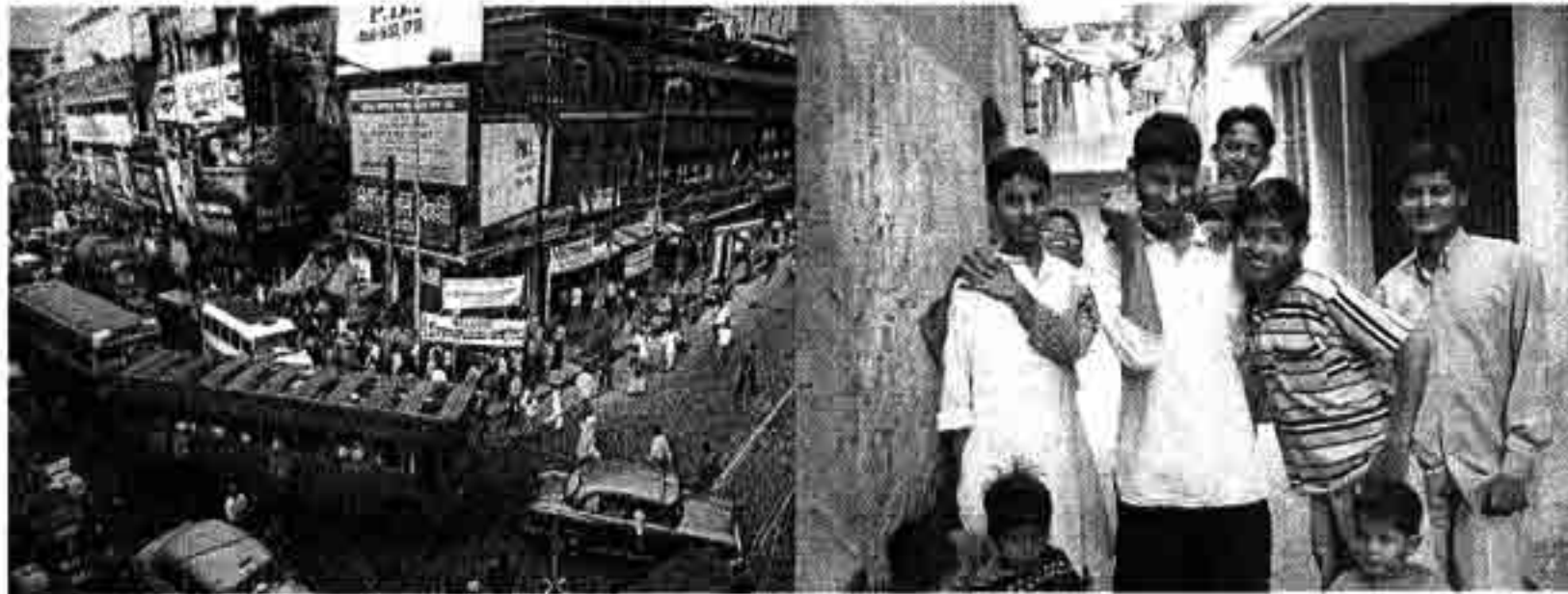
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FROM ONE CITY TO ANOTHER
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CITY PHOTOS BY ROBERTO SANZ/CONCRETE PLANET IMAGES; BRIDGE PHOTO BY ROBERTO SANZ/CONCRETE PLANET IMAGES; VISITORS BY JOHN AUCHARD

26 Days in Calcutta

Clockwise from top left, scenes of Calcutta: A view of the Indian city's congested streets; Mehtu, holding toothbrush and surrounded by friends, in one of the busters, or slum; the gardens at the Fairlawn Hotel, a favorite resting spot for many of the city's regular visitors; and men bathing in the Hooghly River, beneath the Howrah Bridge.

Empower the Children



Mission: EMPOWER THE CHILDREN is a non-profit foundation which serves children in need, enriching them physically, intellectually and spiritually, and helping them fulfill their life's potential.

To find the soul of the teeming metropolis, he went right to its people.

By JOHN AUCHARD
Special to The Washington Post

That's the end." The third-oldest daughter in a family of seven children had just finished a 25-minute summary of Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice." She had done so in her home in the "busters"—the dense Calcutta slums—while Rosalie Giffoniello and I sat on two plastic chairs, the only chairs in the room. The room was no more than eight feet wide and no more than 13 feet long. It was the entire home of a Muslim family of 10. The family all sleep together on the plywood platform that takes up the far end of the room. But now the children are big, and the platform is no longer big enough, and so the older boys sleep sitting up, with their backs to the wall. When the season changes to summer and real heat comes, the temperature in the house climbs to 120 degrees. Then the boys sleep out on the streets, but the girls stay inside, where they

say the nights are terrible. During the day they all care for an eighth child, the month-old son of the married, working, oldest daughter. The baby, Fardeen, care nothing for Jane Austen as he sat quietly and grasped the neck of a little chicken the family hoped would turn out to be a hen. I asked if he ever tried to strangle the bird. The oldest son, Mehtu, laughed and said it did not happen that often. A few days before, I had introduced myself to Rosalie Giffoniello after her health Brooklyn accent surprised me at Raj's cyber cafe on Sodder Street. One night five years back, after a divorce had left her lying on her sofa with her hand plastered to her forehead, Rosalie acted on an impulse. She picked up the phone and bought ticket to Calcutta. Now 55, she has been here since then, and she loves the place. When Rosalie asked Ruma to tell me what she was reading in school, I expected to hear what kids say, that "Pride and Prejudice" is a story about some sisters who f

See CALCUTTA, P7, Col. 1

One on One With Calcutta

CALCUTTA, From P1

nally get married to their boyfriends in, uh, England. But with a keen talent for gossip, Ramah took delight in relating every inch of the novel. If there was any deviation from the measured expression of Miss Austen, it came when Ramah called the two silly youngest Bennet sisters "wicked, wicked girls!" Her own older sister, Subah, laughed when Ramah described Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and I asked her if Ramah had made a mistake. "No," said Subah as she came to terms with her critical judgment. "She's right, but sometimes her expression is funny." Ramah started school late in life, and so, at around 17 and in seventh grade, she is being taught by nuns in one of the city's Loreto schools. Four of the children have been able to find support for their education—three of them girls. Two of Subah's brothers have never attended school and do not know how to read.

For my visit, the family had prepared a lunch, and for dessert, Subah had made some sweets that were topped with a dark, suspicious bean. "What's that?" I asked. "It's a kind of cherry," she said, "for garnish." It later occurred to me that she had served those small honeyed sweets—which we ate off paper plates set on the bed,

for they have no table—in small white pleated paper cups that, in the United States, are used to serve petits fours.

When I asked Subah how old she was, she didn't know. "We know our birthdays," she said, "but my mother is not an educated woman, and she doesn't know in what year any of us were born." As Mehtu held his mother's arm and translated into Bengali, the mother smiled, then actually laughed. Genuinely warm and, despite what anyone will insist, by all signs happy, this cloistered Muslim woman lives in a world that rarely extends beyond her front door. That may be why she has little concern for numbers, for even the shopping is done by her sons and her husband.

But Subah has ambitions. When she was about 14, her father arranged a marriage, but she protested and he didn't force her. Now somewhere around 20, she will soon finish high school, and if she can find a sponsor for the \$300 she needs to join the 300,000 students at Calcutta University, she hopes to study law.

When Mehtu led me out of the buses to Free School Street, he told me to write. I had my doubts about a postal address for such a place, and so I asked if a letter had a better chance of getting there if it went to him or to his

parents. "Send it to Subah," he said. "Why Subah?" I asked. "Because she is famous." When I asked why she was famous, he said it was because she was such a clever girl.

A Somewhat English Oasis

The showpiece of the British Raj until its fortunes began to change after the capital was moved to New Delhi in 1912, Calcutta still shows many signs of a long English past—and the Fairlawn Hotel is one of the best of them, and one of the best places to stay in India. The 218-year-old hotel—its 18 humble rooms creak around a garden where people sip tea and talk, and then, these days, drink beer and talk—in owned and run by Violet Smith. She began working there in 1936, and it was in the hotel that she married an English major in 1944. Until Tod Smith's death in 2002, they ran the place together—he with precision, she with an exoticism evidenced by a genius for colored lights. Yes, the rooms are humble, and the lights, which are fluorescent, often blink, but under the warm lamps of the cluttered public rooms, where Mrs. Smith has heaped a lifetime of splendid mementos to the ceilings, people gather to talk late into the night.

Mrs. Smith looks and sounds like



A vendor sells vegetables in the streets of Calcutta, where the author visited a local family.

the proper English lady she is. But then again, she isn't. Born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, of Armenian refugee parents, she was educated at English schools both there and in Esfahan, Persia (as she calls it). And as I headed out on New Year's Eve, I heard country-western music coming from her veranda. I asked her if she was a fan of the Nashville sound. "Yes, John," she replied, "especially Jim Reeves."

Mrs. Smith runs the Fairlawn with the firmness necessary in a place where the monsoon and the fabulous heat turn everything to rot if you blink your eyes. An Anglo-Indian guest remarked that if I understood Bengali and knew what she said to her staff when she was angry, my blood would turn to ice. Despite her imperious bearing, she cares deeply for her staff, and they understand her ways and care for her. When Norman and Gloria Hutchinson arrived for their annual stay, Mrs. Smith, who loves them, was almost overcome with emotion. Then she stopped herself and did what she does each year when they return for their annual visit. She reached up and slapped Norman on the face.

The Hutchinsons are charming. And they are rich. For 30 years they had a chateau in the South of France, where they drove a Rolls-Royce, and

for years they maintained a second home in Highgate in London, where they drove a Bentley. Now living near Bordeaux, they have a mansion with a torture room. When I asked Gloria what Norman meant by that, she said it is the larger of their two drawing rooms, so big that Norman says it is torture for their friends.

The illegitimate son of a Scottish father and a half-Indian mother, Norman Douglas Hutchinson was born in Calcutta in 1932. He grew up in an orphanage in Kalimpong, where one of the school's patrons, Lady Mountbatten, encouraged the astonishing artistic talent of this yet untrained boy. Norman kept studying art, made it through school and, in 1959, made it to London. There he and his wife started a design business and made a fortune, and he built a distinguished career as a painter who would gain celebrity for his inspired portraits of Queen Elizabeth II, Prince Philip and the Queen Mother.

Even though the Hutchinsons might stay anywhere in Calcutta, they remain loyal to the Fairlawn, where the plumbing groans. Since in Paris their hotel is the Crillon, you would expect to find them at the five-star Oberoi Grand, but in Calcutta that is not what they want, for the Fairlawn is home. One night, though, when they invited me for dinner at the Oberoi, we started with a bottle of Dom Perignon that cost more than what I would eventually spend for my entire 26-day stay at the Fairlawn.

In Calcutta the Hutchinsons go around, explore the city and observe people. Norman buys Gloria jewels, and I begin to understand that that is not the same thing as buying her jewelry. Then they come back to the hotel garden, tell stories, meet with the directors of agencies they support, visit old friends and make new ones—as has been my good fortune.

During my first trip to India in 1996, a Gurkha general invited me to a polo match in New Delhi, and when it was over, he asked me to stay for tea. When I told my host that I wanted to visit Calcutta, he scoffed, but not because he was repelled by a vision of poverty. "Ah, the Bengalis," he said as he discouraged me, "they don't like to work. They like to chat."

It is certainly true that they like to talk. When, at the cavernous Indian



Coffee House near College Street, extremely self-confident young intellectuals ("You realize, of course, that most people in this room know more about the United States than do most Americans") would invite me to join them, if would strike me that these people could talk the hind legs off a donkey. They are proud of the fact. They should be.

The Hutchinsons' talk is brilliant, and Norman's charm is promiscuous. There he is on the street chatting with newspaper sellers, with orange sellers, and newspaper wallahs, with the toothless rickshaw driver who remembers him from last year. That night he and Gloria dine with the Maharani of Jaipur. I do not mean that metaphorically.

Gloria Mudaliar Hutchinson is the daughter of an Indian circus owner and a lovely Russian circus performer. Each day she goes out alone into the streets and markets, and into the whirlwind of Calcutta, dressed as if for Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré. Under her arm she carries Rosie, a Yorkshire terrier with four strands of pearls wrapped around its neck. Sometimes children come up

People of Calcutta

CALCUTTA, From P7

and kiss the dog on the mouth. One day two young men couldn't stop staring at Gloria. Then one of them pointed at Rosie and finally exploded, "What is that? What is THAT? Is that a handbag?" "Oh noooooo!" the other one cried. "It is noooooo-thing!"

Although the Hutchinsons provide care for the poor and disadvantaged of the city—and their own granddaughter, Indu Hope, is a Down syndrome child—they do not go to Calcutta each year for purification by fire. One of Norman's recent paintings of his wife shows an elegant, smiling 60-year-old woman opening her robe to reveal a still beautiful body. They live in the spirit, but they love the world, and in Calcutta too they look for it and find it, and even there they remain more alive to beauty and sexuality than anyone I know. They say that frequent contact with the great city makes their good lives better, and I believe them. Until 1985, for almost 27 years they had not returned, and then they decided to give it a try. They found something. Every winter since then, they have left their fine home in France to spend two months in a small hotel on what seems to be a crumbling and desperate street.

Mother Rosalie

Although Rosalie Giffoniello has kept her ex-husband's last name, she is Jewish. After four years in a hotel, she recently took a small flat in a Muslim neighborhood. There, when she passes young and old men on the street playing Carom Board—a cross between billiards, marbles and air hockey—she is greeted as a celebrity. A few months back she met one of Sabah's younger brothers outside her building, and soon after, she met the whole family.

Rosalie spends most of her slim early-retirement income on the Empower the Children programs she started up. She began teaching in pavement schools that she set up on the street. Then she found space on a roof—a rooftop school—and recently she arranged for a room where girls from the bustees can come to study. When she invited me to an orphanage where she runs a program for mentally disabled children, I was unsure how I would re-



Norman Douglas Hutchinson and his wife, Gloria (with their daughters in 1990), visit Calcutta annually, making the Fairlawn Hotel a temporary home.

act, for everyone in my world is almost perfect. When we got out of the cab, 20 screaming kids tackled us, for they are that excited by Rosalie's visits. One boy kept stalling my hand and pouring his heart out in stammering Bengali, and I didn't know what to say until my mouth opened and words came out—"Well you know. That's quite an interesting point of view. I have never before thought of it from that angle. . . . I agree with you completely and I promise to give your observation further thought—once, of course, I return stateside!" The boy understood nothing I said but was deliciously pleased. For the rest of the afternoon, as I helped out with sensational handicrafts, that was my modus operandi. The kids seemed happy with it, as was I.

In her flat, Rosalie has 14 metal trunks filled with Kermit the Frog masks, paintbrushes, hand puppets, a huge wooden xylophone from Africa, marionettes, storybooks, picture books and lots of costumes—including a cow costume with a blow-up rubber glove so each child can milk the cow. Although she has a genius for creativity, she remains practical and pragmatic. When I asked what was the best thing she had done in her almost five years in Calcutta, she looked up at the bright colors of the orphanage walls. "I painted this place." Although she knows she can rarely bring the children happiness, she has discovered that she can sometimes bring them joy.

I met many young volunteers for the Missionaries of Charity, the Catholic religious order Mother Teresa founded in Calcutta in 1950 when she took three destitute people off the street and gave them shelter. Now with more than 600 communities in more than 130 countries, the Missionaries of Charity attracts volunteers from all over the world. Among them I met de-

vout Catholics and Protestants, and even a young Mennonite. When I asked Rosalie if she still was an observant Jew, she said in passing that she was Buddhist. Many of the volunteers who stay on for years—and who have fine times together at good little restaurants—are frankly secular.

Over dinner, Anita—blond, blue-eyed and Norwegian—told how when she began volunteering in a village outside Calcutta, the villagers welcomed her with ropes of flowers. They led her to a makeshift platform, where they asked her to say a prayer in her native language. Uh-oh, thought Anita. She stood before them and nothing came into her head while the villagers waited and while she panicked. Finally her mouth opened and she heard long forgotten words come out of a far-off past. Anita heard herself slowly reciting, in Norwegian, the Twelve Rules of Safe Hiding: "Be sure," she began saying to the Hindus standing before her beneath the pitiless sun, "to buy thick gloves." Everyone stared at the wisdom woman. She looked around, nodded and soberly went on. "Never be afraid to admit when you are very tired." Oh my God, she thought, what am I doing? "Always," she intoned as children stared up at her, "carry a shovel."

No Words

One night, as I turned into an alley, I saw a still-young woman raising herself from the ground as she lifted up some baffling mess. What she had in her arms was nothing but garbage, nothing but rotting vegetables and things beyond rot, and shreds of cloth, crushed formless things, and pieces of nothing. As she moved to stand, rotting pieces and wet black things showered to the

See CALCUTTA, P9, Col. 1



"The Two Friends," Norman Douglas Hutchinson's painting of the Fairlawn's owner and her maid Mary.

CALCUTTA, From P8

ground. Then I saw that this shapeless heap in her arms was something that spread out horizontally and in layers, and I understood that what she was lifting was a pile of cardboard and stray parts of boxes. As she slowly twisted her body back and forth, the rotting bits of food dropped from the boxes and fell to the ground, and that is what she wanted. I think that she was collecting this pile of cardboard, to sell, somehow, if something that desperate could even be possible. She turned a vacant look on me, and I saw an exhausted, filthy face, but still brilliant white teeth, and on the top of her head a filthy transparent plastic bag that was slipping down over one eye. I handed her a hundred rupees, just over \$2 but a great deal for her. She looked at me and didn't take it, and then she took it, turned away and went back to her absolute isolation from any living thing. I am happy she didn't thank me. I am sick of being thanked.

A Tennis Star and a Missionary

Through the Hutchinsons, I was invited to dinner at the home of Naresh and Sumita Kumar. In their foyer is a photograph of Naresh as a dashing young man accepting the award as Indian Athlete of the Year. Back in 1955, as a spectacular tennis player and the Davis Cup captain, he led the Indian doubles team into the quarter finals at Wimbledon. When the French team lost to the Indians, they wept. Then they pulled themselves together, and in a handsome gesture they came over and presented Naresh and his team with a bottle of champagne.

His wife began working with Mother Teresa in 1967. The two women became close friends who often talked on the phone before they retired for the night. Sumita in her lovely honor, Mother Teresa in her small room above the kitchen in the hottest part of the Mother House. Eventually Sumita, who had designed saris for Hermes and who, like her husband, is Hindu, became the official spokeswoman for the Missionaries of Charity. In 1997 it was Sumita who announced to the world that Mother Teresa had died.

Some Calcuttians told me they resented the fact that Mother Teresa has made the world think their vibrant, vital and often happy city means nothing but suffering. Others asserted that although she was internationally known, very few of Calcutta's poor could have any idea who Mother Teresa really was. But Naresh relates something that happened when she was dying. A young man named Hank had flown in from San Diego to help with her final

From Calcutta's Soul

Near the end of Giuseppe Di Lampedusa's "The Leopard," the Prince of Salinas explains to a visitor from Turin why Sicily will never become one with the new Italian nation. He tells the Chesney di Montezucio that people may soon come to "teach us good manners, but they won't succeed." They won't succeed, he tells his guest, because in Sicily we believe that "we are gods"—"perché noi siamo dei." He suggests that the vanity of the Sicilians is stronger than their misery, and that Sicily does not wish to change. Its people do not really wish it, for the reason that, even amid the phantasmagoria of their crumbling towns, they consider themselves perfect.

Such a claim for Calcutta is absurd. I do not quite make it. And certainly it is not manners that Calcutta would learn from Bangalore, Mumbai or from the world. They would teach something else and Calcutta is learning it. You realize it when the gay at the Barista coffee bar on Park Street asks if you want an espresso macchiato. You see it at Planet M when CD-wearing kids strap on headsets and—

care, and just after he arrived at Sealdah train station, his wallet was stolen. When Naresh learned what had happened, he instructed some of his employees to visit the local tea shops and spread word that the man who had been robbed had come to cure for Mother Teresa. This, in a city of 13 million by night and 20 million by day—when 7 million people stream through the train stations and by way of the great Howrah Bridge over Hooghly River.

The next morning Naresh received a call from someone who had found Hank's wallet. That evening when the man appeared, in a tie and freshly laundered shirt, the money was missing but the documents and credit cards were all there. Hank was overjoyed and amazed, and he remarked that Naresh

Kumar seemed to be some kind of Calcuttan "capo di tutti capi." Then the man in the freshly laundered shirt asked for something in return. Despite the fact that he was visiting the home of the wealthy Indian who back in 1955 had made the French weep, he requested that his picture be taken not with the famed Davis Cup captain but with the unknown American who had come for Mother Teresa.

care sets—slooch down to look cool. You feel it on a Saturday night at the Forum shopping mall where couples on dates tell you their favorite actors are Jim Carrey and Arnold Schwarzenegger, and while you are trying to think of something polite to say, their cell phones ring and they ignore you anyway. But then over dinner a young media executive goes on about Rabindranath Tagore and says that no other city has a poet as its undisputed hero. And everyone tells you that India's new obsession with commerce, technology and money can never really touch the soul of Calcutta. It is as if there is something slightly perfect in that soul that they are afraid to tamper with. Everyone struggles to explain it to you.

On the first leg of my flight back to Washington, I sat beside a special projects manager for Bata India Ltd., the huge shoe company. Twice a month, Hemant Venugali travels from his home in Mumbai to Calcutta, and he loves the city. He does not love Mumbai, which is booming and such a happening place.

As Hemant tried to explain Calcutta's soul, he told me about the woman who sells him idlis—a small fermented rice-bread that in Kewpie's restaurant I mistook for French meringue. Ten years ago, after the death of her son, the woman remained in her house and tried to think herself out of grief. When she came out of her house, she began selling idlis for one rupee each. A poor woman, she worked alone, put her heart into her work, and she had success. Her small company now produces 10,000 idlis each day, but she continues to charge only one rupee, scarcely two American cents, and today, even in India, that is next to nothing.

One day Hemant recommended diversification. He explained how much better she would do if she also sold other breads. When she said no to that, he suggested she sell *ambars* or *naams* or coconut chutney or at very least dal—what people eat with idlis. She said no. At least, cried Hemant, you must change more for your idlis. The other idli makers are selling them for four and even five rupees. You must, he wailed, raise your price!

Again she said no. She did not want to charge more than one rupee for an idli. She wanted to keep doing what she had begun 10 years before. Hemant describes a simple woman who is not much of a talker, but she explained. "My boy," she told the Bata special products manager, "loved idlis."

For practical information about Calcutta, including details on airfare, hotels and more, see the online version of this story at www.washingtonpost.com/travel.

John Auchard last wrote for Travel about Bolivia. This winter, he published a new edition of Penguin's "The Portable Henry James," as well as "Four Trials," by Sen. John Edwards with John