

## **The long journey north and Calcutta (4/11/2008-4/14/2008)**

When I left Hampi around two in the afternoon I was not looking forward to the journey ahead of me. I usually try to avoid long hauls preferring instead to make my way slowly in a particular direction stopping to see places along the way. However, I had spent longer in the south than I anticipated and the weather pressures of the oncoming monsoon along with the ever rising temperatures on the plains dictated that if I wanted to get some trekking in before the rains hit I had to go north as fast as possible. I first had to head to Guntakal Junction on the main rail line and catch a night train to Hyderabad, where I had an eight hour layover before hopping on a 26 hour train to Calcutta. Two days in Calcutta then it was another night train up to the northeast transportation hub of Siliguri for onward transport to Sikkim. But before all that, I had to make it to Guntakal for my 10:15 pm train. I had decided to take the bus from Hospet to Guntakal, a decision I would soon be regretting, retracing a rather unpleasant experience I had had on the same route out of Hampi 14 years ago. I figured things had to be better now, surely the journey couldn't be worse, and maybe I was just young and not as road hardened as I am now and thus it really wasn't as bad as I remember it. I left a little after 3:00 pm from Hospet allowing me what I thought would be plenty of time to cover the roughly 130 km (~80 miles) and catch my train at 10:15 pm. On Indian buses I generally figure on around 30 km/hr for bad roads 40 km/hr for good ones. Worst case I would have thought about 5 hours to cover the distance between Hospet and Guntakal. I had taken the back middle seat for the legroom sacrificing my bottom to stretch my legs, a tradeoff I'm often prepared to make. Just outside of Hospet, as we reached the main road to Bellary, the town where I would have to change buses, the road disintegrated into a series of pot holes. The complete lack of suspension and my placement in the rear of the bus meant I was going airborne every 20-30 seconds. As if the road wasn't bad enough on its own it was packed with convoys of trucks kicking up dust and slowing our progress. Apparently there are a number of steel plants along the road and the heavily laden trucks reduce the road to rubble. The rough road was apparently not only taking a toll on my posterior but also on the bus. It soon became evident something was amiss. We had slowed to a pace where entire families clinging to a 100 cc scooter were passing us. I stared at my watch pondering the nightmare ahead should I miss my train and am forced to make the 9 hour journey to Hyderabad in the cattle class free-for-all of unreserved second class. It had been 3 hours and although Bellary was finally visible on the horizon we were going at a pace at which like a mirage in the desert made the city seem unattainable. Finally another bus approached from the rear and my fellow passengers and I piled out and filled the aisle of that bus. It wasn't comfortable but at least it was moving, for the time being. I could only laugh to keep from crying when after a stop the driver turned the ignition to the sound of only a click. After 10 minutes of attempting to push start the bus the engine finely turned over and I actually made it to Bellary. Now my worry was how long I would have to wait here to find a bus. If the second half of the journey took as long as the first I would certainly miss my train. In the one stroke of luck on this ill-fated journey a bus was leaving for Gunikal just as I arrived. While the road was nearly as bad, at least this bus held up to the jolts and my only problem was having sit in the "box-out" position half of the trip while trying to fend off the two grown Indian men who were trying to share the seat next to me. I eventually made it to the station about 30 minutes prior to my train's departure which miraculously enough was actually on time. After the hell on four wheels, the days on the trains were a breeze up to Calcutta.

This was my first time in Calcutta, now actually Kolkata, but that just doesn't have the same sense of history that Calcutta has. It wasn't the ideal time to visit the city. On the verge of summer, temperatures were pushing 40 °C, well over 100 °F. Nevertheless, I still managed to walk the city (though sweating profusely) and found it to have a very vibrant street life, full of vendors of types and trades as well as excellent street side dining. It's the type of city I like, where there always seems to be something going on, great for walking and snapping the occasional photo. Down near the most revered Kali temple in the city, I ran across some sort of Hindu street procession. I wasn't able to determine the purpose but I

enjoyed wondering along with the crowd for a while. There isn't a whole lot to "do" in the city and I didn't get around to actually going inside either of the major "tourist attractions" the Victoria Memorial, and the Indian museum. I did enjoy the city and probably will spend some more time there when I'm back in the area, hopefully during a cooler season.



**Flower market, Calcutta.**



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**The truly devout bathing beneath the Howrah Bridge in the less than pristine yet holy waters of the Hooghly River, Calcutta.**



**Man brushes his teeth by the Hooghly River, Calcutta.**



**Flower market, Calcutta.**



**Flower market, Calcutta.**



**Flower market, Calcutta.**



**Calcutta.**



**Colonial architecture,  
Calcutta.**



**Calcutta.**



**Colonial architecture, Calcutta.**



**Rickshaw pullers waiting for work outside of New Market, Calcutta.**



**Colonial façade of the main post office, Calcutta.**



**Colonial era high court building, Calcutta.**



**Band members prepare for a procession, Kailghat, Calcutta.**



**Band member prepares for a procession, Kailghat, Calcutta.**



**Girl made up for a procession, Kailghat, Calcutta.**



**Procession, Kailghat, Calcutta.**



**Bare-chested kid does his best Tarzan impersonation while sitting on a fence, Kailghat, Calcutta.**



**Boy dressed up for a procession, Kailghat, Calcutta.**



**Watching the procession from a rickshaw, Kailghat, Calcutta.**



**Child watching the procession from a rickshaw, Kailghat, Calcutta.**



**Amused bystander watching the procession, Kailghat, Calcutta.**



**Man peers out of his window to watch the passing procession, Kailghat, Calcutta.**



**Playing cricket on the Maidan in front of the Victoria Memorial, Calcutta.**



**Goats grazing on the Maidan in front of the Victoria Memorial, Calcutta.**



**Henna artist on the streets of Calcutta.**



**Boy drinking tea on the street,  
Calcutta.**