

## **A Protean Gathering: The Sarai Independent Fellowship Book** *Debjani Sengupta*

When the offer came to me, to put together a book on the Sarai Independent Fellows, I was doubtful if I could do it. I had been a fellow and I thought I wouldn't have the detachment or the judgement to decide what to keep and what to discard. But then I changed my mind and the work began. But this is not the real beginning

My Sarai Independent Fellowship started in January 2006 and finished in August of the same year. That year was important to me in more ways than one. The fellowship happened when I was going through a crisis of sorts, and for some time I was troubled by angst-ridden questions about life. They were in part triggered by rapid changes that were taking place in my physical, psychological and academic lives, changes that I now know were necessary but nevertheless, at that point of time, neither anticipated nor desired. The previous year I had applied for the fellowship because I was pondering on the topic for some time and was thinking of a larger and more extended work that would eventually lead to a doctoral dissertation. Before that, I thought I needed to test myself. I was coming back to serious academic research after more than a decade. I was, to say the least, very unsure of myself. I wanted to do a small but intense study on a topic that interested me before I set out for the larger work. The Sarai Fellowship gave me an opportunity to do just that and more. This small introduction that I write will give some idea of how the fellowship created a space in my cluttered life where I could most truly be myself; a space that has now grown considerably bigger because the work I began with the fellowship has also grown in scope in its academic processes.

The Independent Fellowships began in 2001 and are given every year to scholars, media practitioners, activists, journalists, film-makers and any other interested person to work and research on the city. That being the operative criterion, everything else is more or less left to the fellow. There is complete freedom in the way the fellow wishes to carry on with the research process, the methodology, the depth to which the study is to go into, the material to be submitted to the archives etc. A time frame is set out, the fellowship runs for a cycle of six months, and the grant is very, very respectable. The only rule that was given to us was that each month of the fellowship cycle, we had to make postings in the Sarai reader list so that the work in progress can be assessed by others and critical comments posted as and when required. It was clear to me from the start that the freedom that comes with the fellowship was really very enabling but it came with a responsibility. The other fellows' postings kept me on my toes and often made me think of new directions that I could pursue. Often, the dialogues between two different works in progress brought out interesting analogies and differences, opening further new questions. Sometimes, a stranger wrote in, helping with additional material or applauding because I was on the right track. In six months this happened, if I remember cor-

rectly, three or four times with my project. Overall, there was an atmosphere of excitement; of doing new things and being encouraged to do exactly that.

My topic was a historical-literary one and needed certain archival work. It was based on Calcutta's history during the post Partition years and the influx of refugees in the city from East Bengal and the subsequent changes in the city's cultural and literary climates. For nearly two months, I lived in Calcutta, a city I love and I was grateful that my fellowship allowed me to do that, working and researching a city I felt close to. My fellowship also gave me a passport to meet interesting people working in the area; particularly Manas Ray and Shibaji Bandopadhyay of the Centre for Social Studies, and Sudeshna Bannerjee and Moinak Biswas of Jadavpur University. I also made other friends living in the erstwhile refugee colonies and who had seen the city transforming through the years. Anjan Chakrabarty, who has lived in Bijoygarh Colony all his life, took me around to meet friends and neighbours and told me the colony's history. I interviewed people, roamed the city streets and glimpsed a part of the Calcutta I was unfamiliar with but of which I was deeply aware. Moreover, the city was changing me. I had left it eighteen years ago. I realised its pull was still as strong as ever. The Sarai Fellowship brought me back the city I had longed to return to, but now never could belong to. My work was also defining me in a strange way. Researching the lives of refugees in the city I realised my own family's history of rootlessness and my work suddenly became intensely personal, firsthand, direct, moored in my own life. Everyday I realised that in the work I was doing, the personal had become interwoven with the social, the inner with the outer, and the fictional with the real. I became deeply aware of my roots, where I came from and where I was going. That is why I say the fellowship was much more than an opportunity to do a project. It helped me to find myself when I really needed to do that. It helped me find an obsession that I hope I will stay obsessed with.

The six months passed rather quickly. The work that we had been doing was to be presented over a period of three days to a large audience and the thought was initially frightening. After my presentation was over, I realised what a good exercise that was. The large and mixed audience came up with questions that made one think, and the poise and clarity one needed to convince them of the merit of one's work was hard earned and therefore greatly valued. As fellows, we listened to each other, argued with each other, ate and drank with each other. We also came to respect each other's work. Most importantly, the creative juices flowed strongly in an atmosphere of camaraderie and friendliness. Those three days were also a lesson in sagacity, in learning to cope with different kind of people, respecting the potential of others, seeing differences and coming to accept one's own shortcomings. The team at Sarai was ever-patient, sitting through the sessions, taking turns to comment on our work and pull us up when we fell short of intellectual expectations. I learnt something

very valuable in those three days. Intellectual life is marked by curiosity and an ever-ready alertness to savour what is on offer. It is a readiness to see new things without letting go of rigour and integrity. It is to be interested in everything human and above all to be modest.

The Sarai Fellowships in the last seven years have managed to gather in its archives an impressive array of material on the urban quotidian experience seen from various perspectives. This volume showcases some of the best work that has come out in these years, with brief introductions to the fellows themselves and what they had set out to do. Visual and audio components of many of these projects are strong and situate the city in interesting and new ways. Many of the projects have rich archival possibilities that emerge as they are worked out. Most of the projects are about research that is both accessible and rich in form and content. Sometimes in a project, the distinction between research and activism has become blurred, or the end product has deviated in significant ways from the paradigms set out in the proposal. These are minor problems. In most cases, the research contributes in significant ways to the growing body of knowledge on the city that Sarai wants to build on.

Editing this volume has been altogether a marvellous experience. This is the first time I am associated with the making of a book from its concept to the actual design and printing and it has been a valuable exercise. It is also a treat to research so many people working on so many different aspects of the city - ethnographic, narrative, visual and the auditory. Not only the big metros but also the smaller cities feature prominently in the fellows works: Jalandhar, Jharia, Asansol, Shillong, Imphal, Thiruvananthapuram, Bhopal, Ahmedabad, Srinagar and many more. Signages, cinema halls, apartment blocks, sewage systems, suburban trains, queer people negotiating the metropolis, urban generic fiction like crime thrillers, schools, historical transformations, urban sports, labour rooms, restaurants, madrasas, railway stations and its children, magazines, heritage ponds and corridors the list encompasses many different kinds of life experiences and the many ways a city can be looked at. At first, it was difficult to select the best from so much good material but a few criteria had to be followed. A particular emphasis in the study, a quirkiness of tone or attitude, a certain eccentricity in material selection meant some studies got more prominence than others and made their ways into the final list. It is also true that the questions about the city that are raised in the projects are not all answered. The important thing is they are raised in the spirit of enquiry and courage. Just one example will suffice. Syed Bismillah Geelani's project on the syndrome of fear among the Kashmiri immigrants of Delhi was written immediately after the release of his brother from prison where he was on the death row. Every word of that study is charged with emotion and a hopeless fear that really affected me when I read through it. This is an instance when the impact of the Independent fellowship can be seen in its entirety. It is just not a means to an end. It makes a real difference in the lives of real people.

This book would not have been possible without the constant presence and help of certain people. I am grateful to Shuddhabrata Sengupta whose trust in my abilities sometimes far surpassed reality. Vivek Narayanan shared many of my anxieties and came up with solutions to insurmountable dead ends. It was wonderful to work closely with them in a spirit of friendship and happy humour. Moslem Quraishy, the archivist at Sarai, was an enormous help. Without his patience and cooperation I would have failed all deadlines. Ashish Mahajan suffered my tantrums and calmed me down with tea. So did Ravikant. Thanks to Iram and Amitabh, the braveheart, for their timely interventions. Thanks also to Vikas and Jatin who looked after us at odd hours. A very special thanks to Ritwik Saha who lived for many months with the making of this book.

Last but certainly not the least, thank you Sarai, for teaching me new things, once again