



Namaskar - Welcome to West Bengal

I landed at Kolkata's DumDum airport at 7:40 a.m. on Wednesday, November 6th, as planned. After clearing immigration and collecting my bag, I met the orphanage driver outside, just before 9 a.m. My ride from the airport to the orphanage was circuitous—we had to get diesel for the car—and absolutely fascinating. It exceeded anything I expected, though it was also those things—humid, dense with people and cars, colorful. I rode in the front with the driver. First, they drive on the left side of the road. I enjoyed seeing all of the people in their morning routine—walking alongside the road, hailing buses and taxis, driving or bicycling, crossing confidently through lurching cars. In such a large modern city I was surprised to find the women mostly wearing the traditional clothing—brightly colored saris and salwar kamises. The heavy, moist air felt good after the dry plane. The driver, Daniel Makal, pointed out a series of tall concrete supports being erected—they are building an elevated metro from the existing line to the airport. The signs posted read, "Men Working on Metro Construction, Sorry for the Inconvenience." One road sign instructed drivers not to talk on their mobiles while driving and another reinforced the message with, "Alert Today, Alive Tomorrow." We took a detour labeled "Please take the diversion."

I saw many trucks and cars with colorful public service announcements painted on their tailgates: "Obey Traffic Rules." The movie stars on the billboards were familiar to me thanks to the hours of research I put in watching Bollywood movies—Kareena Kapoor, Amir Khan, and Sharukh Khan. Another woman's face appeared many times—the driver explained that she is the Chief Minister of the state of West Bengal, Mamata Banajee. The driver helped me practice some basic Bengali phrases, pointed out Nicco Park amusement park, the gardens of Science City, the Sisters of Charity buildings where Mother Theresa worked, the tram, the entrance to the underground metro and other interesting sites as we passed. I asked him how long he has

worked at the orphanage. "Since the beginning," he said with pride; he is in his fourteenth year working there. He explained the different cars they drive to get all of the children to school. You can tell he loves his work. "Sister is very good," he told me.

When I arrived at the orphanage, Sister Nektaria greeted me and showed me my room and then the washing machine, kitchen, dining room, etc. in our building. I only met one of the girls so far and then I was encouraged to rest. This was a very good idea since I wasn't able to fall asleep on either of my flights. I was going on 40+ hrs no sleep from the time I woke up on Monday morning in Portland. As I climbed under the clean white sheets of my new bed, I heard children chattering noisily from the open windows of the school building across the courtyard. When I woke up 5 hours later, it was dark and I heard Indian music playing outside and fireworks going off. I asked about this and was told that is the end of Kali Puja—a festival in honor of Kali, a goddess especially revered in West Bengal. Apparently there is a Hindu temple nearby and the music was amplified from there. It was certainly a festive way to be

welcomed to the village my first night. I went upstairs to the small kitchen where they

had put out some food for me—rice, curry, dhal, a Greek salad and fruit.

Then I sat with Sr. Nektaria when she came to eat. She let me borrow the Internet stick (an USB Internet drive) and after overcoming some hurdles regarding first, electricity and then bugs, I was finally able to e-mail home and let them know I had safely arrived.

Visit India
Through Film - To explore the varied impressions a foreigner might have, watch *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2012). If you don't mind subtitles, I also recommend *Swades*, depicting an Indian emigrant's visit home.

My home for the next three months is the Theotokos Girls' Orphanage in Village Bakeswar, just south of Kolkata. A fence encloses the campus; there is an arched gate at the entrance—big doors that swing open for cars and smaller doors at the side for entry on foot. There is a guard that stays posted at the gatehouse building where the drivers, landscape workers and others keep their cars and supplies. The driveway runs through

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the middle of the campus leading straight to the beautiful Byzantine style church, named in honor of the Virgin Mary, specifically the feast of the Presentation of the Theotokos to the Temple. The guest house/administrative building is on one side of the church. The girls' hostel, or orphanage, is the largest building – it is on the opposite side of the church. Between that building and the gate is the school building, which is three storeys tall, accommodating 350 children, pre-K through 6th grade.

In the guesthouse, there are offices and a medical dispensary (currently closed) on the ground floor, guest rooms on the first floor and a small chapel, kitchen and formal parlor/dining room on the second floor. Each room has a balcony and on the side of the building where my room is there is a beautiful green swampy field with a series of small lakes nearby and many trees and especially palm trees in the distance.

The boys' orphanage is only about 500m away on another road. There are about 60 boys there and 100 girls here. The primary school children from both orphanages go to school here on campus, the middle grades go to a Catholic school that is about 2-3 miles away and some go to yet another school in Kolkata. There are also girls studying in college and some working on their Masters degrees. India follows the British system of education – more on that later.

July through October is the rainy season and this year it was unusually wet. In fact, the entire orphanage was flooded and with the water came both fish and snakes. When I arrived, Sr. Nektaria told me that the water had receded only four days previously. Thankfully, this means no more cobras are lurking around! I'm glad my room is not on the ground floor nonetheless.

My impressions of India so far are best described by the sounds. In the morning, India sounds like birds, birds, everywhere birds, talking and chirping and getting ready for the day. It sounds like a fish jumping in the swamp/lake/field outside my balcony and a village fisherman guiding his boat slowly through the reeds to catch his meal. It sounds like my small lizard friend talking to me to let me know that I am not alone in my room. India sounds like horns honking and bicycle bells ringing in a conversation that communicates enough to keep everyone from colliding. It sounds like a motorbike rumbling down the road. India sounds like the diesel engine of the big blue school bus arriving at 7:15 a.m. to bring children

and teachers to school. It is the laughter of the little ones as the driver helps them off the bus and stops here to pinch a boy's cheeks or there to swing a girl down to her feet. It sounds like morning prayers said



Early morning views from my two windows. Above: Facing north you can see the school building on the left, the main entry and the gatehouse. The small, open huts in the foreground provide shade for visiting or having tea. Below: The east window offers a serene morning scene at sunrise.



all together by the children in the assembly room. It is the chattering of children heard from the open windows of all the classrooms at once. When the bell rings for break time or the end of school, India is the sound of children whooping enthusiastically. It sounds like temple music wafting gently from somewhere across the fields in the morning breeze. It sounds like sporadic blasts of fireworks throughout the day for Kali Puja. It sounds like the sweet chorus of smiling children eager to meet the new foreigner and perhaps briefly touch her light skin, "Good morning, Sister. How are you, Sister?"