

THE PARADISE TRAIL

1. Can you tell us a bit about the basic plot of the book please?

It is set in 1971 in Calcutta, in a hippie hotel, called the Lux, on the eve of the war between India and Pakistan that led to the existence of Bangladesh. The main characters are: Anand, the young hotelier who has found himself reluctantly running this fleapit; Gordon, one of his guests, who has dropped out of his job as an advertising copywriter in London in the hope that he will find some kind of enlightenment in India; Hugh, a philandering journalist who has been despatched from London to cover the war; Britt, an American agency photographer; and Freddie, another Lux resident, who appears to live in a fog of unreality. There are also a couple of lost Australians, a pair of middle-class Calcutta lefties and an American who was skipping the Vietnam war which is also in full flow at that time. Two sudden deaths....But it takes another thirty years to find out what really happened.

2. The period the book is set in was one of great change. Do you think that these characters could have existed in a similar period or were the actions and reactions of these characters specific to Calcutta in 1971.

The time was very specific. It was the end of the sixties and there was still great optimism around. Bangladesh was part of that optimism in that East Pakistan was seeking its independence so that it could escape from what was a very oppressive Pakistani regime that had carried out atrocities on an appalling scale. Also, travellers heading east still had some sort of idea - naively, no doubt, in many cases - that they would learn something from the experience. And travelling then - before the internet, before mobile phones, before Rough Guides and Lonely Planet guides, before cheap flights and when the Magic Bus and hitching were still favoured as methods of transport - was a less predictable experience. I was recently back in Goa and it was unrecognisable from 1971 when I was first there and there were perhaps only about a couple of hundred hippies around. Now there are literally tens of thousand of tourists on what used to be deserted beaches.

3. The book is full of some very colourful characters. Are they lifted from your life experiences wholesale or are they composites?

Quite a few are lifted and some are composites. I do remember people who had burned their passports and were wandering around talking mystical gibberish and thinking that they had become transparent. And there was also a hippie who was stuck at the border between Nepal and India having been expelled from Nepal; India wouldn't let him in and Nepal wouldn't let him back so he was left in No-man's-land. Maybe he's still there.

Someone I met in a hippie hotel in Delhi - David Jenkins, also a journalist now - became a lifelong friend and we wrote a rock opera called Hepatitis! together which was published in an underground

magazine called IT in 1975 or thereabouts. It's never been performed on stage for very good reasons. So I have certainly used that in the book, two people knocking out these lyrics together which might not seem quite so hysterical in the cold light of day.

The incident in which a war photographer takes pictures of someone being killed in Bangladesh is also very much based on real life. I got accredited as a correspondent for another tiny publication, called Ink, and went into Bangladesh with the Indian army. It was an extraordinary experience - the Indian tanks were garlanded with flowers and the freedom fighters, the Mukti Bahini, were these young heroic figures, like the Sandinistas in Nicaragua ten years later. The atmosphere was electric. Informers were dealt with very brutally and I was taken to see one man whom they claimed was an informer being killed with paving stones; he was lying dying in a ditch. A photographer friend, Penny Tweedie, who was covering the war for the Sunday Times, was elsewhere in Bangladesh and she was also taken to see people being killed - she refused to take pictures of it out of principle but the people who did take the pictures and they are famously haunting images - won international awards for them.

3. The idea of a creeping death in a serial killer and the conflict between India and Pakistan is very interesting. Did the serial killer represent something more than just a maniac?

There was a real serial killer in India not long after this period. He took advantage of the fact that people were very trusting and that a person could go missing without anyone knowing. Nowadays, it is harder to bump foreigners off because there are more computer checks on who's flown where and who's had a visa issued when. And yes, there was an attempt to contrast the thousands of deaths that were passing unremarked in Bangladesh and the notion of murder of an individual and how much easier it is for people to identify with that.

I also thought that the war then had parallels to today in that the Indian army intervened on humanitarian grounds. India at the time had the backing of the old Soviet Union so the United States backed Pakistan. It was a weird time. You had to make it clear in Calcutta that you were not American. I watched a bunch of people set fire to the Pan-Am buildings because the US consulate was sandbagged and too difficult to reach. It was an early example of how superpowers backed different horses and how that led to the way those superpowers were perceived internationally.

4. The Character Hugh Dunn seems terribly English awkwardness. As a Scotsman yourself, has that kind of Englishness gone forever or are there still small outposts of men like Hugh.

Certainly Hugh is still quite typical. I know people who behave like that to this day although they are a dying breed. The male journalist in the seventies - and it was a very macho profession - was a very different beast: drinking was much more accepted, people would often have four pints at lunch and drink through the evening. It would be a rare journalist that would get away with that today; you would probably be sacked or sent to

a rehab place. Feminism was only just starting to make itself felt. I remember reading *The Female Eunuch* around that time and it was a revelation. Some men felt very threatened and reacted accordingly. Characters like Hugh Dunn were common although I think often people behaved like that because they thought that was what expected of them. They didn't realise how unappealing that made them.

5. Calcutta in the 70s is very vividly brought to life in the book. Have you visited it since then to witness the changes that have taken place?

I went back to the same hippie hotel last year. It was fascinating. The owner of the hotel showed me where I would have stayed. It was a very strange dreamlike feeling, like walking back in time. The guests were much more together than we were: they all had bottles of water and copies of the *Lonely Planet*. There were no French junkies trying to nick your wallet or groaning casualties complaining that someone had stolen their Janis Joplin tape.

Calcutta itself was just as exciting and vital as I remembered it. I think it's a great city, not least because people are so ready to engage with strangers in conversation and politics is still very much a part of daily life, which is much rarer in the west. There was more cricket than I remember and I was even offered a game which I had to reluctantly turn down.

6. The music of the time is very much to the fore of the book with many references and actual lyrics quoted. Can you tell us a little about some of those bands, specifically Scotland's *The Incredible String Band*?

The *Incredibles*, as they used to be called, very much epitomised that era.

I remember seeing them play in London and having to sit on the floor and getting terrible cramp which was not conducive to enjoying them but it was still great. They are still going, I am glad to say. They had a fantastic inventive innocence about them and although they were often mocked for some of their songs, they still have a loyal following. They were great musicians, too.

What I remember at the time was the contrast between the very dark lyrics of bands like the *Velvet Underground* who were singing about heroin and prostitution the *ISB* who were telling us that "all creatures are/brighter than the brightest star." And John Lennon had just recorded *Imagine*.

People used to sit on the beach in Goa at night with guitars and play both kinds of stuff under the skies; perhaps they still do although not on the same beaches because you wouldn't hear it above the sound of football games on satellite TV. There were some dreadful musicians on the road - awful harmonica versions of *Blowin' In the Wind* - but a few terrific ones. Music was very much a key part of life not least because Ravi Shankar had introduced people to Asian music through George Harrison so you hunted out Indian musicians if you were in a city. Dylan was God, though. Still is, really, isn't he?

7. The Concerts for Bangladesh in New York was a huge event when it happened and I hear that you attended one of the benefit concerts. Can you tell us a little of what you saw there?

I wasn't at the big concert in Madison Square Gardens although I've met a lot of people who claimed they were so perhaps I will one day, too! That concert is seen now very much as a forerunner of those big benefits - Live Aid and so on. That year, 1971, was also the first year of Glastonbury so it was very much part of the growth of open air concerts attended by tens of thousands of people.

My main musical memory of that time was in Nepal when there was a talent contest in Kathmandu one weekend for Nepalese musicians. I remember one of the bands was called the Mandu-Kats. Whatever happened to them? A bunch of us went along to watch and, when we left the concert at the end to go back to our hotels, all the long-haired westerners were arrested by the police and taken to Kathmandu central jail because they thought we didn't have visas. So much for the healing powers of music! We were all eventually released when they opened the visa office on the Monday morning - but who knows, maybe there are some people still there.

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