

My first family trip to India was when I was forty. We arrived at midday and descended into a blistering heat shimmering across the airport. We were met by eager porters who grabbed our luggage and ran off to their cabs with me in hot pursuit, much to the amusement of my family.



Within minutes we were all stuffed into two dilapidated yellow and brown taxis and sped off along the motorway to the renown Fairlawn's Hotel in central Calcutta.

Tuk tuks, cars, buses, lorries hooted and jostled to overtake or undertake. Women sat sideways on motorbikes clinging to their husbands with one hand and clutching babies with the other. Buildings were draped with brightly coloured washing. Crowded workers crouched on the two foot wide central reservations, breaking up rocks while their small children played alongside in the dirt, dust and traffic fumes.

After a hair raising ride we arrived at the Fairlawn's Hotel. There were no lawns. The shabby hotel's decor remained unchanged since the early 1900s. Original and dusky paintings of Calcutta and countless old sepia photographs adorned the walls. Carpets were threadbare, ornaments chipped, statues cracked. The lobby was open to the driveway with pots of

green ferns, green chairs, green walls creating an exotic oasis against the street packed with cars and people sleeping and coughing with TB on the pavement at night.



The next day we woke to bird calls vibrating into a high pitched shimmer of sound as they greeted the dawn. The heat was already so intense my clothes were stuck to my skin.

‘Come’ my mother-in-law urged, ‘Lets go to the bazaar and buy something more suitable for you to wear while you are here.’

So we called a taxi to the Chowrangee Bazaar. As we entered we had to adjust to the darkness and cooler atmosphere, but I soon realised we were attracting a crowd of stall holders, all men calling out

‘Come and see my shop’

‘You want to buy something’

‘Buy this real genuine fake’.

Surrounded by an ever increasing crowd we all squeezed towards a tailors stall. From floor to ceiling the tiny shop was packed with bales of brilliantly

coloured fabric, silks, brocades, cottons and ornate and vibrant saris. We squashed into the shop. The tailor and shop assistant were eager to help



'Please come, please come'

'I would like an outfit made, something cool'

I caught sight of a long Indian dress with baggy trousers to match.

'Something like that, in cotton'

'Very good madam. A salwar kameez. Most excellent choice.'

The tailor advanced towards me with tape measure in hand.

Suddenly I realised my measurements are now of interest to the crowd silently watching the whole scene.

'Can you make it really loose?'

'Certainly madam'

Carefully and without touching me the tailor measured loosely around my bust, waist and hips and turned to his assistant to write everything down.

'Fifty, fifty fifty' he announced proudly.