

Hijli Detention Camp

Sudipto Das

Ever since I came across this place called Hijli I used to always wonder about its history, especially how it might have got its name. I always get surprised at the ingenuity of people who give names of places. Across the country there are places whose names would evoke awe, bewilderment, astonishment, frustration and so many other mixed reactions. A name like “Dehri-on-Sone”, in Bihar, is a very amusing one. It declares the exact geographical location of the place. No doubt that the name has been given by the Britishers, who have named many places in England in the same manner. It’s like some South Indian and Marathi names where the home town is appended at the end of the name. Then there’s a place called Narayan-Pakuria-Murail, a station on the Howrah-Kharagpur South Eastern Railway line. The Indian Railways Authority had to somehow squeeze in the entire name in a single line. It’s an example of peaceful coexistence. Looks like the local politician had to please the residents of all the three villages, Narayan, Pakuria and Murail, when the name of the station was chosen. There are the Hallis, Palyas and Pets in Bangalore, Pallis, Paras, Pukurs and Talas in Calcutta, Vihars and Baghs in Delhi and so on. The bigger names in Bangalore have been abbreviated to give some relief to your tongue. Otherwise it would have been a real feat every time you say Bannerghata-Taverekere-Madiwala Layout in place of BTM Layout. People in rural Bengal aren’t that much speech efficient to call NPM instead of Narayan-Pakuia-Murail. Bombay has Bhandup, Borivili, Mulund, Ghatkoper and many other places each of which has been chosen with the choicest permutations of consonants that can make any newcomer stammer the first few times. The Britishers did understand the pains of pronouncing names like Udagramandalam or Thiruvananthapuram. But new-age Indians believe in no-pain-no-gain policy and hence prefer to take the pains for the sake of pride in having a real big name. This reminds me of Utpal Dutt who had fascination for mouthful names like Dhurandhar Bhatwadekar and Amrutangshu Shekhar Satyavaadi in a movie. He used to believe that the name is indicative of the personality of a person – bigger the name bigger is the personality. The name ‘Hijli’ is neither big, nor a tongue twister, nor has any complicated permutation of sounds. But still it remained in my mind for quite some time since I’d first heard of it. No doubt it was the first name of that sort which I’d heard till then. I heard the name for the first time during the counseling for admission in IIT. I’d come to Kharagpur along with my parents. After the formalities were over we’re taking a stroll around the IIT campus, when we came across the Hijli Detention Camp, the very site around which the first IIT was founded in May 1950. The administrative building of the Detention Camp has been converted into Nehru Museum of Science and Technology. I also learnt that there’s a railway station named Hijli adjoining the IIT campus. Something about the name ‘Hijli’ struck me. Little did I know that this very name would eventually become such an important thing in my life.

I’d opted for Kharagpur during counseling and finally managed to get the desired stream in the same place. My parents came with me to Kharagpur to help me settle down in my hostel. To my surprise I found the rooms in the hostel quite unimpressive. I’d a much better impression of the arrangements in IIT. Each room measures eight feet by ten feet, has an iron bed, iron table and iron chair and one wall mounted front-open cupboard

with an open loft. Though we all got used to this austerity but the first sight did depress me. My parents left me in the evening to stay with my father's friend, who was a professor in Mechanical Engineering department. I'd already stayed in hostel for seven years before joining IIT. So staying in hostel was nothing new to me. I found it very silly when I saw many of my friends quite morose after their parents had left them. It was quite amusing to see some of the parents giving last minute advises and tips on varied topics to their sons. I overheard one mother advising her son to change the bed sheet every three days and the bedcover every week, wash underwear everyday with surf and make sure that it's not mixed up with others', talk to the mess manager for fresh milk everyday in breakfast, always use immersion heater to heat up the water in a tub, which is kept under the bed behind the trunk, and then mix it with the right amount of cold water to attain a particular temperature, to which he is accustomed to take bath, and so on!! I was wondering how much pampered these guys might have been at home. Very fast I categorized most of the freshers into a few categories based on their first impression. That guy, whose mother I caught giving advises about washing underwear, fell into my first category called "Mom's *Pallu*", identifying them with overgrown kids, who still need to cross the roads holding their mothers' *pallu*. The second category was "Tear Jerks" for all those guys who had shed a few drops of tears when their parents' were leaving them. There were other categories like "Quakers" for too much talkative folks, "Paranoids" for all those who were always paranoid about everything starting from the cleanliness and hygiene in the mess to things getting stolen in the hostel because there were no lockers in the rooms, "Interrogative" for all those who had already asked zillions of questions to everyone passing by about anything and everything in the world ranging from the time of lunch and dinner to the chance of seeing a ghost in the remotest 'D' wing of the hostel which adjoins the boundary wall overlooking a big area covered by bamboo trees. Off course I and a lucky few others fell into the "Cool" category.

During the dinner I bumped into a few of my old friends from my school days. I'd been out of touch with some of them. I felt a relief after seeing them because otherwise it was not quite an easy task to start conversation with someone totally new. Gradually more and more people started joining us at the table and we all got introduced to each other only to that extent which allows carrying on useless conversations. After the dinner the President of the Hall, called 'Hall P', called all the freshers to assemble in the common room. Needless to say, everyone knew that was the summon for the first session of ragging. Like everyone else I'd also heard a lot about the ragging in engineering colleges. There was indeed some apprehension about it. With so many formalities to complete the day passed so fast that I never got a chance to think about ragging. When all the freshers were called after the dinner my heart kept pounding. The Hall P was a very unimpressive short and lean guy with a baby face, which we couldn't figure out if it was clean shaven or totally devoid of any hair for ever. He was wearing a pair of very untidy crumbled shorts, a type which even the rag pickers on the road would detest to wear. He was accompanied by a group of people, some of whom resembled bouncers at strip joints and some other looked like WWF wrestlers. None of the seniors looked like students. I seriously started to have confusion whether they really were students or just some wagon breakers from the nearby railway yards. Anyway, I don't think I'd any option than to accept them as our seniors, on whose whims lay our fate for the next one month. The Hall P started his speech with the choicest of Hindi abuses, some of which I can never utter in

my life. That was the first time I came to know that mothers and sisters are so much integral parts of abuses. The summary of the speech was that for the next few weeks we should abide by each and everything that our respected seniors would ask us to do. At the end of the speech we're asked to take an oath, raising our hands in the "Hail Hitler" pose. There's no doubt that the oath had all the ingredients of erotic Sanskrit literature sans the gracious part. I hadn't heard anything more gross and vulgar till then. At the end of the oath we're reminded of the basic doctrines to be followed during the entire ragging, or orientation period like wearing full sleeve shirts tucked formally into pants, no jeans and sneakers and *chappals*, addressing all seniors as 'Sir' and many other. Being the first day we're allowed to disperse early at around one in the morning. Inside my room I kept on thinking whether I took so much pain to clear the IIT entrance just for this - the orientation.

The next day was a Sunday. The seniors had the entire day at their disposal to manifest all their frustrations and ingenuities on us. I never had any idea that people could be so vicious and sadistic. The worst experience was to just sit in front of one of the final year students in his room and do nothing while he continued to do all his normal work without even considering the existence of some alien people in his room. I never knew that keeping quiet could be so tiring. I was totally drained by lunch time. After a fast meal I took my cycle, called bike, and started riding aimlessly on the roads of IIT amidst the scorching heat of July. After sometime I reached the Hijli Detention Camp and spent enough time strolling in front of the closed Nehru Museum. Never ever in my life did I find the outside of a museum so interesting!! I investigated every nook and corner of the Detention Camp, the gallows, the cells, the administrative office etc. I read the history of the Detention Camp engraved on a wall. I learnt that Hijli Detention Camp was significant in the struggle against the British Raj in the early 20th century. The large number of those who participated in the armed struggle or the non-cooperation movement could not be accommodated in ordinary jails. The British Government decided to establish a few detention camps; the first one was located in Buxar Fort followed by the Hijli Detention Camp, opened in 1930. A significant moment in the struggle against British rule occurred at The Hijli Detention Camp on Sept. 16, 1931 when two unarmed detainees, Santosh Kumar Mitra and Tarakeswar Sengupta, were shot dead by the British Police and Subhas Chandra Bose came to Hijli to collect their bodies. National leaders, including *Gurudev* Rabindranath Tagore, voiced strong protests against the British Raj over this incident. The Hijli Detention Camp was closed in 1937 and was reopened in 1940. In 1942 the camp was again closed and the detainees were transferred elsewhere. In May 1950, the first Indian Institute of Technology was established here. When there was almost nothing remaining for further exploration I took my bike and reached the Hijli railway station.

The station appeared to have come out directly from the sets of a Sherlock Holmes movie. Time seemed to have ceased to move forward. The old faded bricks and tiles of the lone platform, the high ceilings mounted on rusted iron frames, the broken glass lamp shades, the few iron benches scattered across the platform, the few broken wagons of goods train shunted little away from the station, the hand operated signal at the end of the platform, station master sitting idle in his office and the loneliness of the surroundings had created a perfect ambience of a place lost in time. It was such a refreshing atmosphere for me after the half day long orientation. I sat on one of the iron

benches which was not that much unstable. I stretched my head backwards and leaned against the back rest of the bench. I was gazing at the slate colored late afternoon sky hanging over me. Not a single cloud, neither a bird. The sky looked so dull and calm and lifeless. I couldn't make out if everyday the sky looked the same at that point of the day or it was something special for that day. I'd never gazed at sky in Calcutta at around half past four. In a short while I got bored of sky gazing. I sat upright on the bench and looked around the platform. To my surprise, or rather shock, I found the bench next to me occupied. I couldn't recall if the bench had been already occupied even before I came, perhaps not. But then when did she come? If she had come by the main entrance of the station then she should have crossed me. But I didn't see anyone passing by me, even if I was gazing at the sky above. Did she come from the other side, through the village crossing the railway lines? She didn't look like a typical village girl. She was leaned against the back rest of the bench, her crossed legs stretched a little towards the front and her joined hands resting on her legs. Her eyes seemed to be focused on nothing. Her stare was aimless. I could only see her side profile from where I was sitting. She was wearing a black *salwar kameez*, her head covered with black *duputta*. She was wearing round black specks, a very small ear ring, and a wrist watch with a thin band. She had a fair complexion, which made the black dress much more prominent on her body. She was scratching the nails of one hand with the fingers of the other. She seemed to be sitting very leisurely. I couldn't see her face properly. But her sharp nose was quite dominant. "Is she also a fresher like me?", I thought. It's not that I noticed each and every girl around me so closely. But as there was no one else noticeable I did pay a lot of attention to her. In fact I started feeling an urge to go and start a conversation with her. I never had any inhibition towards girls. I never treated girls in any special way. I used to be always equally frank and candid with girls as I used to be with boys. The girls used to always complain about my foul language. Most of them had to remind me of their presence around me and ask me to be a bit more dignified in my language. So getting up and starting a conversation with the girl over there was not a big deal for me. I rose from the bench, proceeded towards the bench she was seated and asked directly in Bengali, "Are you also from IIT"? I was behind the bench, holding the top of the back rest of the bench. Without any motion anywhere in her entire body she replied very coldly, "No". I waited for a few more moments expecting something more. But when she didn't utter any other word, nor did she turn to see me, I started feeling really very awkward. I didn't know what to do next. She was no doubt like none of the girls I'd seen till then. I gathered some more courage and continued, "Oh, I thought you're also from IIT and sitting here to escape your seniors"!! I smiled a bit in an attempt to make the atmosphere lighter. Now she turned sideward and raised her face to look at me from an angle, her both eye brows raised in suspicion and surprise. She replied in Hindi in very soft and soothing but firm voice, "What do you want"? Well, that was indeed a very valid question and I didn't have any precise answer for that. I resorted to my well tested tactic which I'd used a number of times in history papers whenever I didn't know the correct answer for any particular question – fill up the page with some totally irrelevant things hoping the examiner might not read the content but just give some consolation marks seeing the confidence with which I'd dodged. "Nothing", I said, waited for a few moments and continued, "I'm just curious seeing a girl like you sitting alone here". Turning her face away from me and resuming her aimless gaze forward she retorted, "You're also alone sitting here. Did I get

curious? And what do you mean by girl like me”? No girl had talked to me so rudely ever in my life. I lost my temper but still spoke very calmly, “Sorry, please carry on with whatever you’re doing or not doing”, turned back and started returning to my cycle parked in front of the ticketing counter. I started pulling the bike towards the narrow road that lead to IIT. Exactly when I was going to start riding I saw Ms. Rude Talks in front of me. I was wondering is she was following me ever since I’d turned back. She looked so calm so poised; gone was that stern face. She spoke very softly, “Rather I should be sorry. I come her everyday and don’t like anyone to intrude into my world”, turned back and started walking towards the platform. I waited till she disappeared through the main entrance gate of the station but she never turned back. I was really confused. Started riding back to our hostel thinking of which category I’d put this girl in.

Back home, I was treated with special vengeance because of my absence for the greater part of the day. I was asked to do all sort of things in different states of undress which finally culminated into “*chaddi* football”, which is surely the most lethal game after bull fighting. All freshers, numbering fifty, wearing just the underpants, were assembled in the field between the ‘B’ and ‘C’ wings of the hostel. Divided into two teams the game involved scoring a point each time anyone pulled down the underwear of someone from the opponent team. At the end of the game the field was filled with just torn underwear. Class commenced from the next day. Most part of the day passed in registration, allotment of sections and lots of running around in between. At around four in the evening suddenly someone spoke into my years, “I come here everyday”. I lied to my newly acquainted friends about feeling sleepy and started riding towards Hijli station. To my surprise I didn’t find her. I thought I might have been late. Due to some totally unexplained reason I felt sad. Instead of returning to hostel I went to the Hijli Detention Camp and sat on the stairs. Few moments had passed. I was thinking why exactly I came here. Suddenly I saw a cycle coming towards me. When it came quite close I almost missed a heart beat. She parked her bike, walked silently towards me and sat on another stair, little away from me, her eyes lowered. She was wearing a very similar dark colored dress. A few eerie moments had passed before she spoke, “Why did you come here again”? I replied, “How did you know I’m here”?

- I just followed you.
- Were you there in the station when I went there just now?
- Yes.
- But I didn’t see you.
- Why did you just see the same bench? There are other benches also in the platform, isn’t it?
- What’s your name?
- Why do you want to know?
- JLT. I mean Just Like That!! I can’t talk to someone without knowing how to address.
- Why do you have to talk to me?
- Why did you follow me?

There was a silence for some time, after which she just rose, walked towards her bike and just before getting on the bike she spoke very mysteriously, “Why did you come again?” and left the place.

Few months had passed by. The orientation period was over and the last day of it saw the juniors giving CG, changing the Center of Gravity of the room by totally disorienting each and every thing in the room, to almost all the seniors. There was a fresher's nite, where some of the freshers were made to dress like girls. By virtue of already knowing most of the girls in my batch I got the task of procuring the girls' dresses. The more unlucky ones were given the job of buying the stuff which had to be inflated and used to create the vital statistics of a female body on a man's figure. The Hall P turned out to be really very decent guy, very much in contrast to the first appearance. The classes had started in full swing. Even the mid-sem, short for mid-term semester exams, was over. I'd already made plenty of new friends. I'd started enjoying the IIT life. Every thing seemed to be so nice - the hectic classes starting from eight in the morning; the rigorous labs, where we're made to work like people in jail convicted with rigorous imprisonment; the regular assignments, most of which demanded night-outs; the bland food in the mess; the inter hostel sports and cultural events; riding ten kilometers on bike on undulating terrains to go for movies in the night shows; the NCC classes, where we're made to run in the hot afternoon Sun; the Friday movie shows at the Netaji Auditorium, where a non-existent 'Tarapada' was always asked to repeat sensuous scenes of movies and mysteriously the person operating the projector, though having some other name than Tarapada, would always oblige; the occasional going to Calcutta to meet my parents and facing the grilling sessions of my sister about each and every details of any interaction with girls; and each and every other nondescript insignificant event. And the thing I enjoyed the most was off course going to the Hijli Detention Camp almost everyday and spending an hour or so with her. Even after three months I didn't know her name. Neither did she ask for mine. It had become a daily routine for me to ignore everything else and come to meet her. We used to sit on the stairs, loiter aimlessly around each and every structure, walk along the railway lines, enter inside the shunted wagons and explore the abandoned buildings. I used to share almost each and every details of the day with her. She already knew my family and even my sister's eleventh boyfriend's ex-girlfriend's recent fight with some guy who in turn had a crush on my sister. She used to always speak less. She never told me anything about her family. She used to often speak about unknown histories. I knew from her that the Hijli Kingdom existed between 1687 and 1886. Initially Hijli was a small island village on the banks of Rasulpur River. It developed into a Port town in 1687. Slowly, it converted into a Province or Kingdom covering parts of Bengal and Orissa. Captain Nicolson was the first British to invade Hijli. But he could not do much. Afterwards, in 1687, Job Charnock with his 400 soldiers captured Hijli defeating Hindu & Mughal Emperors but had to retreat to present Calcutta later. Towards the second half of the 18th century, another Port town Khejuri came into existence, primarily for carrying out trade with European countries. Khejuri was also an island set up on the banks of River Koukhali. Development of this region because of Khejuri and Hijli Port can be gauged by the fact that the first Indian Telegraph Office was established in 1852, connecting Khejuri Calcutta. In the devastating cyclone of 1864, both the ports were destroyed. The islands merged with main land. Hijli as we know today is only a very small part of erstwhile Hijli Province.

She used to always leave before it became dark. We never asked each other before parting if we'd again come the next day. But both of us knew that we'd be again meeting the next day at the same place – The Hijli Detention Camp. My curiosity about her kept on increasing day by day. By that time I'd already known that she would never utter any word about her family. I never followed her or tried to find out where she went. Her husky but soft voice always reverberated in my ears. Meeting her became an addiction to me. The two days, I spent in Calcutta from time to time, seemed years to me. In one such trip my sister extricated the secret from me. From her huge repository of love knowledge that she had gathered in course of her twelve affairs in the past three years since she had started going to college, she gave me some tips about what girls like how I should behave with them. She warned me not to use my characteristic foul language in front of her. She also enquired how far we'd proceeded. She asked very frankly if we had started holding hands or kissing each other. She told me that the most romantic thing is to kiss a girl on her eyes. I just lied to her about holding hands and kissing. I even told her a name. I couldn't admit that even after seeing a girl almost everyday for the past three months I still didn't know her name.

The day before the end-sem, the final semester exams, I was strolling with her along the railway line. She was cat walking on one of the lines, when suddenly she held my hands and pulled me to stop. I was a bit surprised. She pulled me close to her, put her hands behind my head, and asked me to close my eyes. She kissed me on my eyes. I held her tight with my hands. We heard the whistle of a train. In a whisker she released herself from me, told me, "I love you, I'll never forget you", and started running towards her bike. I stayed back, mesmerized, stunned, astonished. As the train passed by, through the wheels, I could see her riding away and by the time the train had left she was not seen.

And she was never seen again.

3

Years passed. My days in IIT came to an end. I got a schol, scholarship, from University of California, Berkeley. The day before I was leaving Kharagpur I went to Hijli Detention Camp for the last time. I sat on the stairs, spent some time at the site of the gallows, walked along the railway lines, sat on the bench on the platform, lying on the grass adjoining the station I gazed at the inverted sky. I did everything that I'd done so many times for the past three and a half years. Though she never returned after that day, I never forgot to visit the place from time to time. Initially I used to go almost every day without fail hoping to spot her. I even took the courage to proceed towards the direction in which she used to vanish every day. Strangely I landed at a dead end from where starts a jungle of bamboo trees. I understood she used to intentionally go in that direction to keep me in darkness. I asked about her to the lineman, who had observed us a number of times. Even he didn't know any whereabouts of her. Over the past three and a half years I developed a sort of rapport with him. He was the only witness of our association, of the times we spent together, of our separation and my desperation. He was an old person, never married, staying alone in his quarters adjoining the railway station and working as a lineman since his drunk father, also a lineman, had been run over by a train. He was only fifteen then. I used to pay him little amounts from time to time. That day, before leaving IIT I spent some good amount of time with him, drank tea together, and told him about my future plans. He cried for me. I never cried.

Ever since she had vanished into oblivion I was never the same self. My sister found out very soon that her '*boudi*', sister-in-law, the name by which she had already started calling her, had left for ever. I had to lie to her that she was already three years older than me and that she was married forcibly against her will. I knew that my sister knew that I was lying. But she never asked me again about her. I never knew that my little sister also had a matured self, which hitherto she had never exposed to me. She hugged me and cried for so long. She stuck to her twelfth boyfriend and by the time I was leaving for US she had already expressed her wish to marry him. My parents decided to marry her as soon as she completed her graduation. The day before I had my flight to US she hugged me and again cried for so long. She asked, "*Dada*, you haven't yet forgotten her, right"? I didn't say anything. She understood everything and kept on crying.

Days in Berkeley were really hectic. But the only respite was the vastness and loneliness of the lesser known gorges and canyons and lakes and hills of the East Bay, where I used to get lost whenever I had some free time. I took to hiking and biking. I explored California in a way very few people might have done. My favorites were the hills to the north of Milpitas and Fremont, the gorge between Fremont and the San Francisco Bay on the way to Dumbarton Bridge and the endless undulating green fields along the Interstate 680. I got involved with Durga Puja celebrations in the East Bay. Time whizzed past. But I never forgot her. I used to always wonder who she was, and where did she vanish. I didn't even know her name.

One day, on my way back to Berkeley from Fremont on a BART train I was sitting by the window. The lady sitting beside me got down at Lake Merritt. She had forgotten the magazine she was reading in train. It was still some time before I would reach Berkeley. I picked up the magazine published by ISNA, Intersex Society of North America. I was wondering what all societies USA might be having. It used to amuse me in the beginning to find how much money and time is spent in USA for so many things that won't be considered worth even a single pie in India. I thought this ISNA would be also one such luxury that's affordable only in USA. I was browsing through the different articles when one written by Ritu Sharma attracted my attention. That was perhaps the only Indian or '*desi*' name in the entire magazine. I started reading the article. At the beginning of the article the writer explained "intersex", which I learnt is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. Though people speak of intersex as an inborn condition, intersex anatomy doesn't always show up at birth. Sometimes a person isn't found to have intersex anatomy until she or he reaches the age of adolescence, or dies of old age and is autopsied. Some people live and die with intersex anatomy without anyone (including themselves) ever knowing. The topic was so weird that it attracted me. I took the magazine with me and in the night I started reading the remaining part of the article. The article was about the journey of an intersex female, her psychological trauma and her struggle to overcome the stigma associated with it, ever since she had come to know about her uniqueness when she was just eighteen.

More I read more an eerie feeling engulfed me. The portion that followed was more astounding. Ritu had a very normal childhood. Her father was a rich business man somewhere in Eastern India. She had one elder brother. She was a very soft spoken, decent and loving girl. Since her childhood she used to always dream about a prince who would suddenly come in front of her in a chariot, take her in his arms and vanish in the

clouds. She dreamt of days when she and her prince would just walk around listlessly and aimlessly alongside lakes, pluck flowers from trees, lie down on grasses and gaze the sky above, run on rail-lines ahead of the slow moving wildly whistling steam engine chasing them, disappear into jungles, sit idly on the stair cases of a thousand year old church..... But then one fine day when she was eighteen she found that she was not a normal girl, that she was an intersex. All her dreams got shattered. Her mother started misbehaving with her. She was not allowed to come in front of her relatives. She was deported to a village where her dad had a mansion. She had to stay alone in the huge mansion. Occasionally her brother used to visit her and she used to cry for the whole day. She used to sit alone in a nearby railway station when one day she met a boy who resembled the prince of her dream.....

I didn't read the remaining part where she had mentioned how with her brother's help she got in touch with ISNA and finally came to USA.

I took the contact number provided in the magazine and called her immediately. But strangely I didn't feel any excitement in me. I'd always wondered over the past many years how I would react if she again came in front of me. And now I was just a call away from her. But I was so normal. As if, it was always expected. The phone was ringing. My hand, with which I held the phone, started to shiver a bit. Suddenly I felt nervous. I frantically searched for words I would say when some one picked up the phone at the other side. And someone really did pick up the phone.

- Ritu Here
- You told that you'd never forget me, right? Can't you recognize me?
- Sorry, who are you?
- Calling from Hijli Detention Camp. I've been detained here for so long.....Come on, please relieve me of my detention

I just spoke those simple words and then there were oceans of words flowing across, so naturally.....