



## A BIRD IN THE CITY OF BUTCHERS

Wednesday, January 4, 2017 – Bhopal (India) Ginnori Road

23.254700,77.409238

The elderly gent with the long beard and the big nose has no desire to be photographed. He laughs shyly, shakes his head, wags his forefinger, tucks his chin into his collar, and bends his head: «No, no, no.» Okay, I get it, I pack the camera away. Thing is, why not? Given that everyone else around here is really keen to have me take their portrait?

The city of Bhopal has a heart of meat. Its darkest chamber is the fish market, housed in a long cellar. Anyone who gets in here becomes a blood-cell that has to be forcibly squeezed through the arteries of the noisy, haggling, laughing, begging, cursing organ. Past the bodies of giant carp that lie on the floor trembling in the throes of death. Over mounds of little silver-and-blood red shiny river fish being shovelled into sacks. Twenty kilos of hil-

sa for 800 rupees. Who will offer a better price? Grab the chance!

The room is not even three metres high, the stalls are just holes in the wall, with the action taking place only in the aisle. On the ground is a swamp of water, blood and fluids which is inexorably seeping into my sneakers and socks. It's as if the place is beginning to digest me. A light bulb flickers and goes out, there is complete darkness in a whole section of the market. A scream, and salty droplets hit my face: a fat eel comes flying out of the darkness, whizzes past me and bounces into the arms of a fat salesman, who drops his scales in fright. The whole heart-chamber guffaws. An old woman takes me by the hand and pulls me to a stall where a man is sitting solemn and quiet on a plastic chair. She tells me to take a picture of him and pinches him hard in the







cheek. «Your son?» I ask, holding the camera with the result in front of her face.

A stab in the left shoulder, I lose my balance, stagger, my backpack hits the wall, and something runs wet over my calves. Two young men have crashed into the cellar from the entrance ramp, carrying a styrofoam box between their thin bodies which is so powerful and heavy that they cannot manage it. Three steps later the box slips from their hands, strikes the ground, crashes, and an avalanche of fish and ice tumbles over their feet, sweeping away a pyramid of carp-heads that a young man with a curly-twirly beard and a turban has painstakingly piled up.

Outside, the sunlight blinds me. Milky brilliance breaks through the street mist. The outer chamber of the Heart of Bhopal is the poultry market, which nestles kidney-shaped against the low-slung building containing the fish cellar. The stalls are located on the fish market street, but the vendors here sell chickens mostly, and some ducks and roosters. At a few spots in-between you can see a goat tied up, wrapped in cloth because the weather is cool. The white-feathered hens are locked in small wire crates in which they can barely stand. Most birds sit quietly, only one chicken crawls about in panic, some others lose a few feathers as they scramble atop the crate. Only the roosters strut about pro-



udly, at eye-level with the customers: they stick out their chests, crow, and generally act as if they have a future.

Even my Big Beard has to sell a chicken – though only one. And that was two hours ago, when I'd first walked the street. He sits crouching and holding the animal with a string, one end of which he has wrapped around the claws of the animal, while the other end hangs on his big toe. The chicken does not seem to have any intention of leaving the dust, though. The man has also tied a bright orange bow around the bird's neck – an accessory that gives it a coquettish appearance. I give the man a bag with a few slices of a small cake I had bought in a nearby bakery. He explains something to me, caresses his chicken, then folds his hands, tilts his head to one side, looks imploringly at the sky, and points tentatively with his right hand. I do not understand him. Does he think that I will buy his chicken from him? For a moment I reflect on the possibility of proceeding on my journey with a chicken by my side. The idea is not unappealing, although I have no idea about how to deal with these creatures.

Now, there's a little boy tugging at my sleeve, asking me to take pictures of his big brother who is

posing proudly on top of a tower of chicken cages – in the coolest of poses, mobile phone glued to his ear, quite like a businessman would: the ultimate Chicken Don.

Is that the reason that Big Beard does not wish to be photographed? Because he has only one chicken to sell? Implausible. He has probably been sitting there for five hours or so, trapped between two stalls, invisible to most who are on a shopping spree on their motorcycles.

The third chamber of the meaty heart of Bhopal is the mutton and beef market. As 40 per cent of the city's population is Muslim, beef consumption is popular here. Even the famous Paya soup I ate the previous day had tasted more like beef than mutton. It's hard to believe that so much gelatine can be drawn out of a goat's hoof; the soup had stood almost upright on the spoon. The beef butchers have their stalls on the bend of the road behind the Sultania hospital, which is not far from the largest Hindu temple in the city. Dark red-and-cream chunks of meat dangle on hooks in the shopfronts, where one showcases one's produce. Behind them the butchers crouch in the dark, cutting the meat on low platforms, removing the fat from the kidneys, burning the hair from the cattle



hooves. They also like to be photographed, posing proudly, with a butcher's knife in their hands.

Suddenly, on the fringe of the intersection with Sultania Road, I see a chicken that is making its way, unnoticed by all, between parked motorcycles. It has a bright orange bow on the neck. This can only be Big Beard's chicken. Only, what had happened? Has it run away from him? Hard to believe. Had he released it? But why would he have done that? Because he could not sell it? I follow the animal, not knowing quite why. The creature leads me over two junctions to the bank of the lower lake, then crawls under a fence, and leaves me standing in a state of suspense.

I hear a call from behind me. I turn around. I'm standing on a four-lane motorway-like, fast-traffic road, the median strip of which is unpaved. The austere shrubs there stand at a distance of perhaps three metres and are protected by a metal fence on both sides. There is a Big Beard standing between two of these little trees and he beckons me. I hesitate only because the street is a veritable death-strip. But then I steel my heart

and skip, like a frightened torero, between the cars and motorcycles over to the median strip. The old man evidently has his dwelling here. He has dug a hole in the ground, set up a fire pit and is frying a flat-bread in an earthen pot. In the bushes behind him, his seven things are hanging in plastic bags. He also has a dog with him that shows me his healthy teeth. The gent invites me to climb over the fence, points to his bread, and cuts it symbolically in the air. I decline with thanks. What about the chicken, I want to know, signalling to him with my arms about the manner in which the bird flaps. He looks at me in puzzlement for a moment, then laughs mischievously, explains something to me, points to his pants, and then to the sky. Again he invites me to a piece of roti, flatbread. I ask if I can take a picture of him. Now, he has no objection to it. I give him a few more rupees and feel the strange need to touch him. In a gesture of farewell, I run my hand over his shoulder and back. It feels dry and warm.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram..