

From the Land of Jaganath to the “City of Joy”



The Bustle of China Bazar

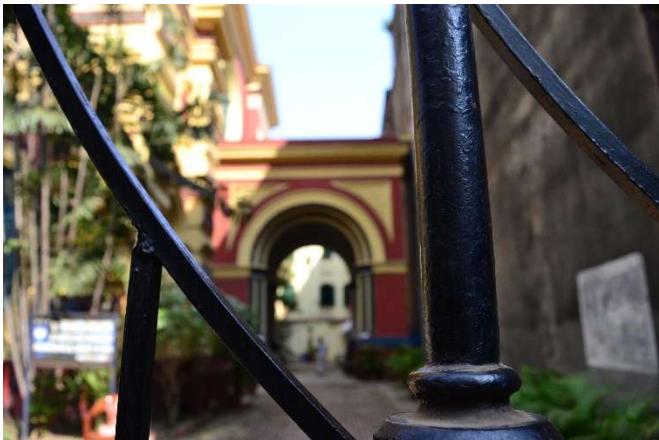
The breakfast of Wantons, meatballs and clear soup at Tiretta Bazaar was sumptuous. A drip of chutney slid down my Red t-shirt. Oh well, it was a game of camouflage here as the stain slyly hid under the shade of Red revealing just a little mark on the t-shirt. As I opened Google maps, adjusting the shoulder strap of my new DLSR. It was time for me to slip into the crowd and let its momentum carry me in the direction of my latest source of interest. The hustle of China Bazar introduced me to the chaotic side of the “City of Joy”. Off Canning Street to the left on the Synagogue street was my destination, the Maghen David Synagogue, distinctly characterized by its clock tower, which towers over the busy Ezra street.



The Clock Tower

A well-built Security guard comes up to me and enquires, “Why are you here? Any specific work to be done?”

I had been denied entry last Sunday since it is the only day of the week when the last remaining Jews of Kolkata assemble in the Prayer hall to recite the Amidah (silent prayer) under an American Rabbi, but I was hoping I would have better luck this time.



Guarding the Synagogue

The Security guard was impressed by my persistence, I suppose, as he let me in through the Black arched gates, and there I was, inside the premises of the Maghen David Synagogue, the largest Synagogue of Asia. I signed the register, put down my Aadhar card number and declared my Camera belongings. That's when I met Anwar Bhai. Well, this time, your assumption is correct-he is indeed a Muslim who looks after the Synagogue and does a splendid job at it.

The brick-red and lemon yellow coloured exteriors coupled with its gorgeous interiors tell us a story about why it is known as the “largest and most splendid in the Orient”.



David Ezra (in picture) built the Synagogue in 1884

While the Israel- Palestine Conflict has taken over a thousand lives and the death toll might still be on the rise as I write this feature, Anwar Bhai's selfless devotion to his job as the caretaker of

the Synagogue is one to be lauded. Sounds contradictory right, but well stories like this still exist in this increasingly polarizing world.



Anwar Bhai

Jews of Kolkata...

Judaism can be argued to be the first foreign religion to arrive on the shores of India, they came as traders from Baghdad and are popularly known as the “Baghdadi Jews”. The Jews were more like wanderers. The Jews have a saying for it; “We go anywhere for trade”. The first Jew to settle in Calcutta, in 1798, was Shalom Obadiah Cohen, and not long after, more Jews started to arrive in Kolkata.



Interiors of the Synagogue

While the city of Calcutta burned during the Great Calcutta Killings in 1946, the Jews were left untouched. There were more than 6,000 Jews in the city at its peak. What followed was the Indian Independence in 1947 and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Many good to-do Jewish Businessmen left to go and settle in the “Promise Land” over fears of their businesses being nationalized.



Blurry lights

Meeting Anwar Bhai...

Anwar Bhai is one of the caretakers of the Synagogue and has been looking after the establishment for over twenty-two years. He greeted me with a smile on the gate and led me through the Synagogue introducing me to various aspects of the Synagogue. What I was most impressed by was the stained Belgian glass which projected a splash of colours on the white pillars of the humongous prayer hall. He gave me a Kippah (Skull cap) to wear and like an intrigued child I decided to take a selfie and post it on my Instagram story.



A splash of colours

“Sir, could you just pose for me. Well, I click good pictures and I promise to send it to you on WhatsApp.”

Convincing him to click a picture was another task for me as he would blatantly refuse. Finally, after having a long conversation and explaining to him that I live quite far away and it would be a privilege on my part to bring his story to life, he agreed. Well, I must say Anwar Bhai even though he is 45 years old is still quite a poser.



Anwar & Rabbul Bhai

“Did you ever put into perspective the thought of converting to Judaism?”

“I will never convert sir, well I count the blessings of Allah each time I have a good day at work here.”



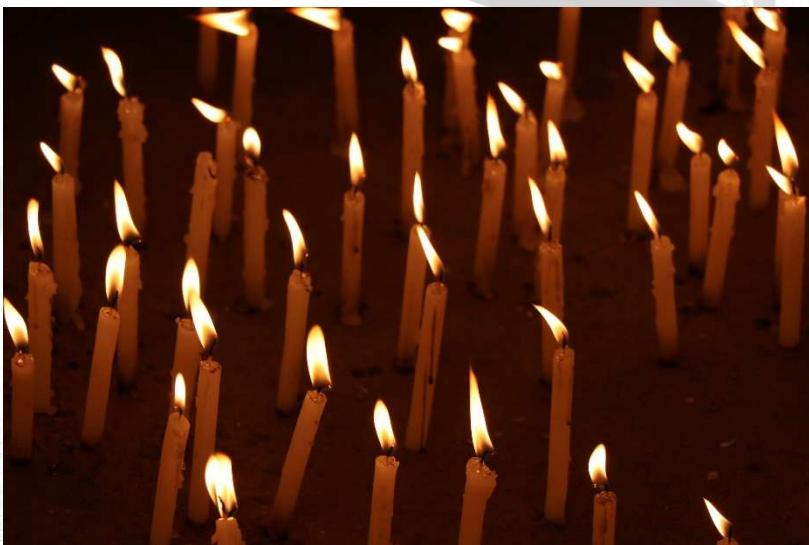
A visitor giving her feedback

He is as Muslim as one can be, reading the Namaz five times a day and taking a holiday during ‘Eid’ to go to his home town of Puri, the land of Jagannath in Orissa. Coming from a centre of pilgrimage for Hindus to now taking care of the Synagogue- well, religion can indeed be a unifying thread too.



One of the many chandeliers in the prayer hall

Anwar Bhai was quite the comedian too, and would never fail to make me laugh with his witty remarks. It was a privilege for me to know Anwar Bhai, but it is saddening to know about the number of Jews decreasing each year. Well, the “City of Joy” will soon lose out on the cosmopolitan edge it has been so proud of and what would soon remain is just traces of a community.



The last flicker of the “Jews of Kolkata”

The Synagogue still stands tall and tells a story about the heritage of the city. But it tells just a potent one about peaceful coexistence and humanity. With people like Anwar Bhai in the picture, one can only hope that hatred doesn’t rise above humanity. As Tyrion Lannister says in Game of Thrones, “What unites people? Armies? Gold? Flags? Stories. There’s nothing more powerful than a good story.”