

## Letter #1 - Hong Kong

*Ni hao* from Hong Kong, setting for the big climax of my next book, *Into the Fire*. Our first morning, a rainy Sunday, the location scout begins with a Star Ferry ride from Kowloon to Hong Kong island. We take the Peak Tram up to Victoria Peak, which often offers a spectacular harbor view. Today however the vista is mist-shrouded and mysterious—perfect for a flee-the-bad

guys scene. Later we scout the Mandarin and Peninsula Hotels, old-time elegance where someone must die.

The next day we visit the Kowloon docks, a gritty sprawl of ships, containers, cranes and trucks: China's own 24/7 delivery system.

Hong Kong, a British colony until the 1997 handover to China (which has never forgiven or forgotten the opium trade), remains an international city, proudly Chinese yet fiercely independent. It is a wonderful, busy, vibrating place.



*Temple Interior*



*The Star Ferry in Hong Kong Harbor*

## Letter #2 - Kolkata, India (formerly Calcutta)

We arrive in a land of hand-written ledgers and carbon paper, wifi and every-kid-a-coder. The streets assault and bombard us with light and color, sound and images. A breathless and breathtaking landscape of the senses, demanding and immersive. I am here for background research on my 1947 novel *The Star of India*, based on the life of Nancy Valentine, a young actress whose dreams of India led her into the arms of the dashing Cambridge-educated Maharaja of Cooch Behar--Bhaiya.

The Cooch Behar family had roots in Calcutta, and Bhaiya took Nancy to their estate, Woodlands, upon their arrival here. It is also our first stop and we visit Woodlands, donated as a hospital in WW2. We see the Maidan, the great stretch of greenery where young Bhaiya and his siblings would go for early morning rides. There would be cricket matches, horse races and great parties organized by his widowed mother, the beautiful and powerful Maharani of Cooch Behar, Indira, who would later become Nancy's sworn enemy.

We will now move on to the former princely state of Cooch Behar, set in the jungles of India's remote northeast along the Burma border. Here Nancy – a poor girl from St. Albans, New York – was thrust into a world of wealth and treasure, but also ancient curses and danger.

## Letter #3 - Sleepless before Sealdah

or By Train through Bengal

There will be no sleep the night before our 06:30 departure from Sealdah, a crowded, sprawling old railway station whose unfamiliar ways I fear having to navigate alone. My forebodings are realized when our car is trapped in a bottleneck and we must flee on foot amid masses of people. There are many trains, going to all of India, a swirl of confusion. Panic. We find a porter who helps us race through the station. Finally we find The List that assigns us to our berth.

We board and gradually sink into our journey... 16 hours of eating, sleeping, reading and swapping stories with our new Indian Air Force friend Mohandi, a man of grace, generosity and wit who

sees it as his duty to shepherd us throughout the trip until we finally exit onto the Cooch Behar platform at 21:40 that night. He will continue onto his base outside Guwahati, Assam, a restive border region of tribal separatists and Marxists near China—"a developing nation like us. Our real enemy," he confides, "is Pakistan."

We are met by Manoj and driven through the darkened town to the Royal Palace Hotel, where lights pop on for our arrival. The next morning it is off to the grand domed palace of the Maharaja of Cooch Behar—Bhaiya—lover then husband of my novel's "Star," Hollywood actress Nancy Valentine. Despite a brief visit 15 years ago, I have been feeling a need to walk the scenes of my imagination and give them a more grounded reality. Since the end of the Raj these old palaces have become national monuments and I enjoy seeing the descendants of former royal subjects stroll and picnic in the spreading gardens. In a far corner I discover a fabulous Shiva temple carved out of an ancient banyan tree, a far more colorful setting for an already-written scene that I will now revise.

After scouting the river area for other scenes, I meet Manoj who drives me to the maharaja's air field, during WW2 the Allied Forces' base for operations in Burma and China, known by US troops as Shangri-la. Enamored of jazz and Hollywood, Bhaiya fell hard for Nancy. But a year later the end of the British Raj meant the end of royal privileges and Nancy will fall into a snake pit of intrigue and enmity.

Late that afternoon I wander the the bazaar to find a secret meeting place for Nancy and her CIA liaison, for she is only released from her contract by promising producer Howard Hughes to "keep her ears and eyes open." A small but frontline border state, Cooch Behar is ripe for a communist takeover following Independence. Nancy will find herself enmeshed in conspiracy and danger as Bhaiya fights for survival and a symbolic royal jewel goes missing.



*Top: View from the Train.*

*Bottom: Interior of the train.*



*Cooch Behar Palace*