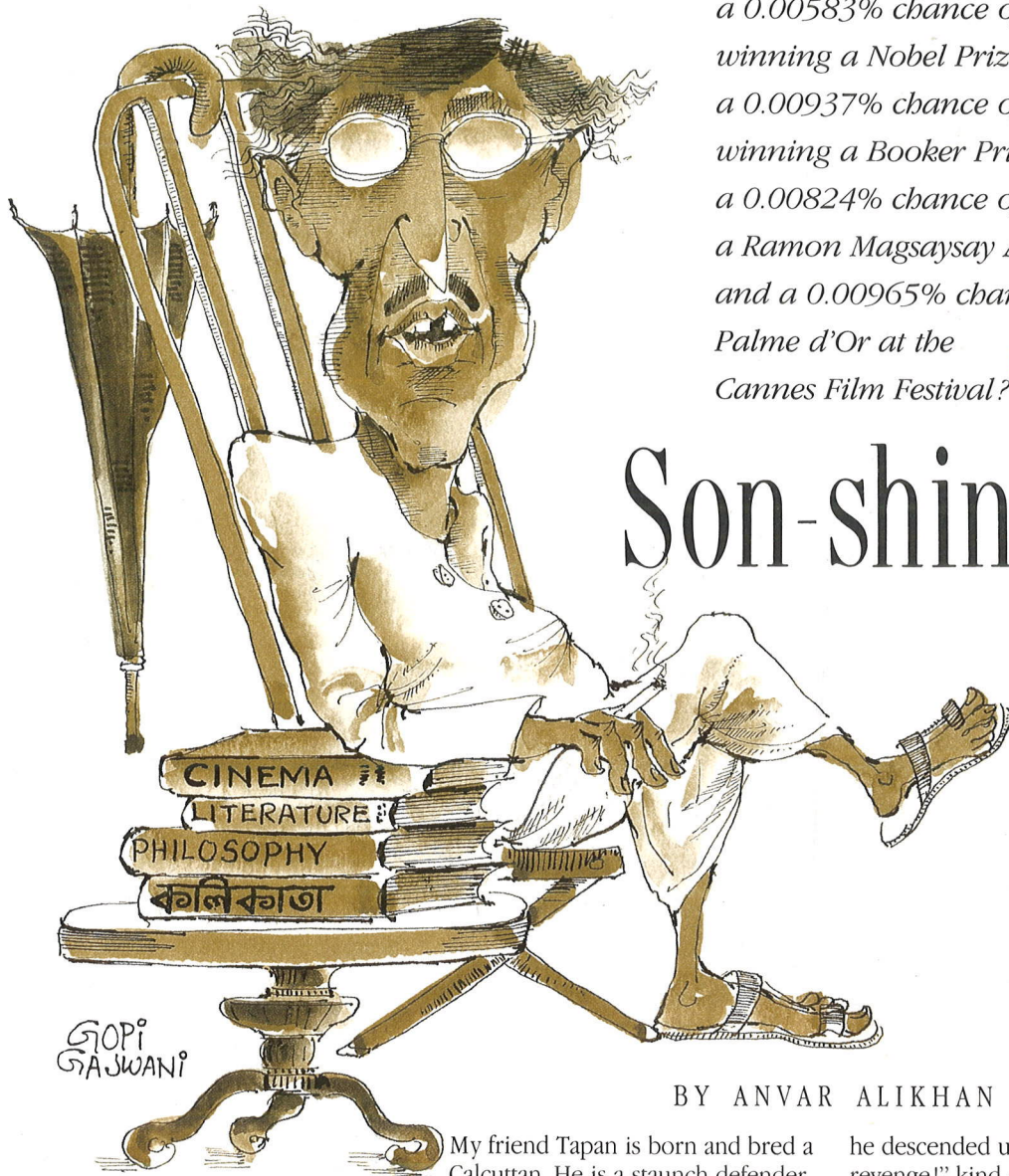


“Did you know that by being born a Calcuttan, you automatically have a 0.00583% chance of winning a Nobel Prize, a 0.00937% chance of winning a Booker Prize, a 0.00824% chance of a Ramon Magsaysay Award, and a 0.00965% chance of a Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival?”



Son-shine City

BY ANVAR ALIKHAN

My friend Tapan is born and bred a Calcuttan. He is a staunch defender of the city — and a fountainhead of trivial information. It can be a lethal combination — as I discovered for myself when I passed a less-than-reverential comment on his birthplace recently.

“It’s probably symbolic,” I was telling someone, “That Calcutta’s one-time chief town-planner has now given up everything and taken to writing Brechtian drama, instead.”

Tapan, alas, was within earshot:

he descended upon me with a “Hamlet, revenge!” kind of look in his eye.

“Yes,” he said acidly, “But maybe it’s equally symbolic that this one city has had a monopoly on all the Nobel Prizes ever won in India; that all the four winners from India have got their Nobel Prizes on the strength of work done in Calcutta.”

I must have looked tentative, for he lunged at me with his facts.

“Sir Ronald Ross,” he said, enumerating menacingly on his

fingertips, "Nobel Prize for Medicine, 1902. (Yes, he discovered the cause of malaria here at the School of Tropical Medicine.) Rabindranath Tagore — Nobel Prize for Literature, 1913. Sir C.V. Raman — Nobel Prize for Physics, 1930. (He did all his research on the diffusion of light at Calcutta University.) And, of course, Mother Teresa — Nobel Peace Prize, 1979." Tapan wagged an agitated finger in my face, "*That's* Calcutta for you," he said.

Something told me he was only just getting warmed up.

I was right.

"Let us turn to the world of Cinema:" he continued, "To India's great contribution to Hollywood — Estelle O'Brien Merle Thompson. Known to the world as 'Merle Oberon'. Yes, *the* Merle Oberon. You remember her, don't you, in *Wuthering Heights*, opposite Sir Lawrence Olivier? In *Scarlet Pimpernel*, with Leslie Howard? In *Desiree*, with Marlon Brando? One of Hollywood's biggest stars of the '30s and '40s, she was." His voice mixed equal parts of anger and pride of ownership. "Well, *that's* Calcutta for you."

"And, speaking of Cinema, I take it you're familiar with the name Satyajit Ray? It rings a bell? Good. Then I needn't list out all his films and awards and achievements. But I'd like to just remind you that his *Apu Trilogy* is ranked among the 'Ten Greatest Films of all Time'. Of *all time*, mind you. Along with *Citizen Kane* and *Bicycle Thieves* and the rest. So *that's* Calcutta for you."

I considered calling a truce, but clearly Tapan was beyond forgiveness by now. I would just have to take my lumps as they came.

"OK, forget Cinema," he went on, "Let us take something completely different. How about Sport, for instance? Who is India's greatest athlete ever? Ha! I bet you haven't even heard his name. A chap called Norman Pritchard. From Calcutta, of course. Took part in the Paris Olympics, 1900. Won two silver medals. For the 200 metres dash and the 200 metres hurdles. They're the only two medals India has ever won in Olympic athletics. The only two. Ever. (Milkha Singh? No chance. He didn't even win a bronze that time in Rome.) And, by the way, don't forget that Pritchard was competing against Alvin Kraenzlein of

*Calcutta seems to have
a unique knack of producing
remarkable personalities —
geniuses in every field
from literature to philosophy,
science to cinema...*

USA, who was the 'Carl Lewis' of his time. Well, *that* again is Calcutta for you."

(I must warn you: never ever play Trivial Pursuit with Tapan.)

"Now let us talk about Science and Technology," he snarled, "Who was the man who invented the wireless, for instance? Marconi? Ha, forget it! I'm talking about the man who did it a year *before* Marconi. Sir Jagdish Chandra Bose. Yes, it's a documented fact. He demonstrated the world's first use of wireless to a large public gathering — presided over by the Lt. Governor of Bengal, Sir Alexander McKenzie, no less — in 1895. A year *before* Marconi, like I said. It's just that Bose didn't bother to patent the damn thing.

"He was perhaps one of the world's greatest physicists of the early 20th century. But the incredible thing is that he became *even* more famous in a completely different field — plant physiology. (Yes, he's the man who proved that plants have feelings and that they 'scream' when plucked.) Actually, he should have probably won the Nobel Prize for the parallels he established between plant and animal tissue — but let's not get into that..."

"And then, of course, there's the *other* Bose from Calcutta — Dr. Satyen Bose. He and Albert Einstein together opened up a field that is today called 'Bose-Einstein statistics'. (Incidentally, please note the order of precedence of the two names). It's an esoteric branch of statistical mechanics. All about particles and the wave function etc. — you wouldn't understand. Anyway, they've even named a certain kind of particle after him: it's called a 'boson' — like a 'photon' or a 'meson', you know. So *that's* Calcutta for you."

Men may come and may go, but Tapan goes on forever.

"What shall we take up next?" he continued biting, "Literature,

perhaps? Is that OK with you? Fine. We've already talked about Tagore. Now let's talk about the two men who are arguably the finest living author and the finest living playwright in the English language, respectively. I'm referring, of course, to Lawrence Durrell and Tom Stoppard. (Remember the *Alexandria Quartet*? Remember *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*? Good.) Well, where were both these gentlemen *educated* in the first place?"

"Here, in Calcutta?" I ventured timidly.

"Well, in Darjeeling, actually — but at that time it was almost like a suburb of Calcutta. So, ha, think of our contribution to English literature! (By the way, Durrell is yet another of those people who, inexplicably, have not been awarded a Nobel Prize yet — he's only been nominated, so far.)"

Tapan proceeded to make a minor detour, invoking names like Gunter Grass, Paul Samuelson, JBS Haldane, Dominique Lapierre, Jean Renoir — "honorary sons of Calcutta", as he called them — who had, at some point of their careers, chosen to live and work in this city. "*That* should tell you something about Calcutta," he said, "I mean, can you imagine men like that actually choosing to live in Bombay? Or, for that matter..." (he sniggered indelicately here), "... in Delhi?"

I looked at my watch. It was near midnight. And by now Tapan was on to Calcutta's contributions to music: Ravi Shankar, Cliff Richard, Subir Pramanik ("the man who revolutionised audio technology by inventing the tangential tone arm and went on to become head of R & D at Bang & Olufsen").

This was now getting too much. "Hey, hold on," I said. "I don't think that's fair. OK, those last three people you mentioned may have lived in Calcutta for a bit in their young days — but that hardly gives you the right to actually claim credit for them."

He stared at me for a long, cold, scornful moment. "There's something you obviously don't understand," he said, "*You can take a man out of Calcutta, but you can never take Calcutta out of the man.*"

Anvar Alikhan is an adman and weekend writer whose articles have been published in India, Hong Kong and Singapore.