

## An oasis of peace

MUFFLING up the entire clamour and cacophony that gets under your skin peering all your senses, the intersection of Canning Street and Brabourne Road stands like the 'Jerusalem of Kolkata' ~ with a Mosque, a Cathedral and two Synagogues, co-existing peacefully in the same place. And amidst the vendors shouting their wares, pedestrians walking briskly and tiny stalls teeming with goods, reigns the Magen David Synagogue quietly, tucked away in the midst of all the hustle, forming an oasis of peace and tranquillity. One can easily miss it completely due to the congested area all around.

Once a home to the thriving Jewish community, this synagogue recently scored a footfall. Fascinated by the magnificence and grandeur, we entered the main hall. It resembled a church and we were taken aback to find Muslim men offering us, the boys in the group, yarmulkes (skull caps) to cover our heads as a mark of respect for the Jewish tradition. And despite the recent spurts of intolerance that is ripping the country apart, Kolkata still stands out as a melting pot of all cultures and communities. We found Islamic-Jewish co-existence in peace and harmony right here.

The outer structure was furnished with a brick-red look. Elias Joseph Ezra, a renowned real estate of those times, had built this synagogue in the loving memory of his father, David Joseph Ezra. Entering through an arched door containing the hexagonal Star of David and Hebrew inscriptions, we were astonished by the grand interior.

The chequered marble floors, gleaming chandeliers, stained glass windows and ornate floral pillars shipped from Paris, enhanced the ornate appearance. And the ceiling fans with strange looking curved blades, (still operating in D.C current) added to the shining splendour.

A raised podium in marble



Caretaker Masood Bhai



Framed portrait of Elias Joseph Ezra

**In this era of intolerance and communal discord, the students of the Statesman Print Journalism School discover incredible harmony inside the Magen David Synagogue**

stood in the middle of the hall for the Rabbi to preach. Two sets of stairs from either side of the hall took one to the balcony or gallery, usually reserved for women. We were wonderstruck by the beauty of it all.

However, Gufran Sheikh, a Muslim caretaker, sadly said, "Foreigner log aate hain har hafte

do char, lekin apna log nahi aata." As strong as 6,000 at one point, the Jewish population has now dwindled to about 30 in Kolkata. "Ten male members are required for a service," lamented Gufran, "failing which, a Sabbath cannot be held".

Working for three generations, Gufran's father Nasir Sheikh, had landed the job about 56 years ago, and is still working. Nasir collects the rent from all nearby shops surrounding the area, as the property belongs to the Jewish community.

Staying in the quarters provided in the synagogue area, they do not have any illusions of themselves other than being employees of the Jewish community. They feel that the reverence between them and the Jewish community is mutual. And this Muslim-Jew combination occurred when no Hindu was ready to cook beef, which is a part of the Jewish diet.

Next, we ventured to the Naveh

Shalome Synagogue situated right beside this one and were welcomed by Mahmood Bhai, a man in his early forties who regaled us with intricate details of this heritage place of worship.

It has not even been a year since he's started working here, yet is full of knowledge and vivid details. "I love to read about Jewish culture in my leisure and that's how I came to know about their by-gone culture", says Mahmood, one of the guardians of the Jewish legacy in Kolkata. The last wedding that had been held over here in the *Hoop* (an elevated altar) was in the year 1982.

The synagogues have been properly maintained by the Jewish community and from other funds provided by the Israeli embassy. The Torah or Jewish religious books have all been sent back to Israel.

Social and political changes post

Independence, forced many of these Baghdadi Jews with no other option than to depart for their homeland, leaving their long-lost culture to echo in parts of India.

Restored and maintained by the Archaeological Society of India (ASI), this place is open to all. Although they do not hold functions regularly, yet holiday services are held when a resident Jew from the community lights a candle on Friday evenings. Apart from the synagogues, the Jewish Girls School is another contribution by the community. The aura and ambience of the synagogues are sure to astound you.

shreyosi chakraborty, shraman banerjee, barnali mitra, samali mukherjee, shuvam choudhuri, sounita sarma choudhury, neelabh raj, krishnasish dasgupta, trisha bhattacharya and sabyasachi sen gupta



## Read a Book

BOOKWORM'S CORNER

### The Girl on The Train: Paula Hawkins

#### Forces you to ponder

PAULA Hawkins, a journalist by professions, presents a very intriguing thriller as her very first novel *The girl on the train* which has soon climbed the charts to become an international bestseller.

It is the story of a girl who goes to London on a commuter train daily and returns by the same every evening. She is Rachel, a divorced, depressed woman. When the train stops at a particular signalled, she sees a happily married couple (whom she names Jess and Jason) in a house hundred metres away.

One morning she sees Jess in her garden, intimate with another woman and soon finds herself involved in the lives of Jess and Jason. The story is written



from the view point of Rachel; Anna, Rachel's ex husband's wife and Megan Hipwell, Rachel's imaginary Jess. The story is full of little surprises and the characters are so full of life that you are not ready for the startling revelation that you arrive at.

The plot is very simple but the involvement of five protagonists make it mind boggling, interesting. The writer uses very simple and vivid imagery that helps the reader to picture the scenes very clearly and stands out because it clearly gives different personalities to each of the protagonists. The main plot could have been more fascinating but this book forces you to read and think simultaneously. It is a good read for those seeking for refuge in suspense, adventure and thrills.

ahendrija goswami, Class XII Coordinator, Bishop Morrow School, Krishnagar

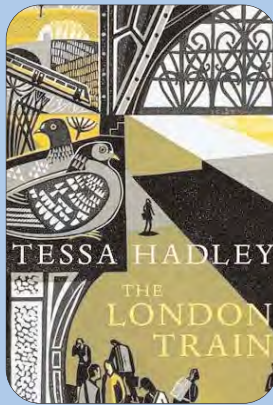
### The London Train: Tessa Hadley A good read

FAMILY relationships are sublime, notwithstanding the constant instability. The dire sense of responsibility and commitment towards one another comes to play and grows naturally.

*The London Train* by Tessa Hadley is one such family saga that depicts the temperamental minds of two people, the protagonists who are always in motion, planning to break out from their respective obscure shells of family responsibilities when they perceive something common and heart-rending on their way to Cardiff.

In the first part of this gripping novel, Paul, a father of three and a writer from Wales is comfortably pleased with his second marriage, however still picks up pieces from his first. In the next part, we follow Cora, wife of a civil servant and an English Teacher crestfallen with her marriage and readily escape to Cardiff, her hometown.

This creates the apt situation where the two protagonists meet and eventually, a link is established between them. Clueless, grief-stricken Cora, on the run from everything and yet at moments sharply, excruciatingly in



touch with herself, resembles one of Rachel Cusk's characters - intelligent and lost.

There are other echoes and correspondences between the stories - ex-partners, children, loved ones going missing but the overall effect is spread out mainly because the affair itself is left to Cora's only in the half of the

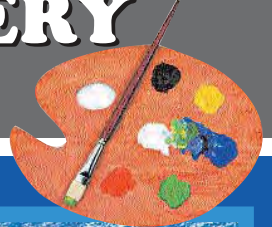
book. *The London Train* is a novel of convalescence where both Cora and Paul recover from their parent's death and try to re-establish their faith in things they believe can change myriad of things. As a matter of fact, this wonderful grasping novel steals the attention of many who accept the inevitability of unexpected things in lives. The story concludes with a twist where Hadley has crafted real excitement so that the story ends in a flurry of curiosity.

hrishita chatterjee, Coordinator, Class XI, St Teresa's Secondary School, Khidderpore

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