



FROM A DISTANT WORLD

Saturday, January 14, 2017 – Calicut (India) harbour

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It takes a while for the men to notice me. I sit in the shadows cast by the tall towers of colourful plastic boxes and watch them sorting shrimp on the beach – under the keen gaze of white herons stalking about on the boxes. The men have pulled their wooden barge into the sands: the stern faces the beach while the bow bobs gently back and forth in the surf. There is no pier in the port of Calicut (Kozhikode), no bridge where fishermen can deposit their catch. The harbour is basically a strip of beach flanked by a sip of sea protected by two sweeping ramparts of boulders, over which the waves of the Arabian Sea race in and break.

The larger boats are moored to buoys in the water, the smaller ones are lying on the land. The men hoist the dripping boxes onto their heads and

carry them to a shabby little hall where the shrimp are sorted before being sold to middlemen. The bearers don blue headscarves and brownish-gray hats to protect their skin and hair from abrasion. They also wear T-shirts with numbers on them, like a uniform, the various shades of indigo of which remind me of the blue wagons of the Indian Railway. The fishermen, on the other hand, wear shirts in all sorts of colours and have a bright cloth wrapped around their foreheads. This lends them a vague explorer-type appearance – as a child, in my fantasies, I had clothed Sindbad the Sailor in just this fashion.

I knew of course that I would find no traces of the region's great history in the port of Calicut – but I had come here, so it simply had to



be. This was the romantic homeland of the spices that medieval Europe had lusted after. This was the land where pepper grew, the famed Malabar Coast – with Calicut, located not far away from the legendary port of Muziris that disappeared under the sea in 1341, being the main centre of trade. For centuries, Arabian sailors had sailed here from the Persian Gulf to take spices back on their dhows. In Alexandria, they had sold them to the Venetians, who had dominated the Mediterranean since the 9th century. Starting out in Venice, merchants from Augsburg or Nuremberg would take their spices on the backs of their mules across the Alps – and on reaching their des-

tinuation they would pepper up the price of «Pfeffer» and other wondrous spices with a surcharge of up to 600 per cent; a price their spice-hungry clientele forked out without protest, evidently. So, when a peppercorn got on board a ship here in Calicut, it was embarking on a long voyage that would see it facing many tough realities before it ended up in a roast pork on the table of a German aristocrat.

The «pepper sacks», as the merchants north of the Alps were nicknamed by buyers with a combination of disgust and admiration, would probably have had little idea about exactly where the spices came from. And the doughty Arabs, who allowed themselves to be comfortably blown about the world by the monsoon winds, protected their extremely profitable business by inventing wild legends about the birthplace of their goods. They would, for example, tell their naive buyers that the pepper plantations back in the east were guarded by snakes, which people needed to kill with fire. However, most of these Arab spice sellers most likely knew only half the story about their produce. Although pepper, ginger, turmeric and cardamom grew in the hinterland of the Malabar Coast, nutmeg, cloves and cinnamon came





(partly along the land route) from Sri Lanka, even southeast Asia, to Kerala.

Traders from so many cultures met in Calicut that hardly two spoke the same language. The city, therefore, developed its own fingermarking system, which allowed traders from different parts of the world to do business with each other. The system evidently worked well for many hundreds of years; no wonder that the Portuguese were not welcome when they wanted to take over the business here after Vasco da Gama's landing in 1498.

Prior to its destruction by the irate invading Europeans, the Calicut area must have looked just like it does today. A lot of business must have been conducted directly across the rail of the ships, with the feet in the sands or in the shallow waters. There must have also been vendors back then, too, selling fresh vegetables, sweet fruit, stuffed shells, fried bananas and all kinds of colourful drinks. And countless dogs must surely have romped around here among the humans in the hope that something might fall to their lot here or there. The kites, gulls, herons and crows, which circle around the fishermen today, must have definitely dominated the space above the heads of the sailors at that time

as well. Only today, nobody deals with spices and gold, Chinese lacquerware, ceramics and teak on the beach of Calicut. The place is largely deserted. If anything is sent from here to the Arab world nowadays, it is the contract workers, who go on to toil in the hotels of Dubai or push wheelchairs across Sharjah's bazaars or fry in the sun on Qatar's construction sites.

The men have now noticed me and are waving to me, gesturing animatedly that I should go over. They want to be photographed, and are ready to strike laughing poses. Three of the porters surround me and start grabbing my backpack with unabashed curiosity, even putting on my sunglasses and my hat, and peering into my notebook. Everything about me seems to fascinate them, and suddenly I feel like an exotic beachcomber who has just been washed up at their feet by the Arabian Sea. And, to a certain extent, that's what I am – because there is no such thing as a tourist, really, in current-day Calicut.

One of the men speaks English and introduces himself to me as Amin. He has a friendly manner and appears smart, so I am happy to interact with him. I ask him about their shrimp business. He tells me about their shrimp; that they catch it near





the coast in shallow waters with the help of nets that are dragged over the seabed.

Why had I come to the harbour, he eventually asks me. I reply a bit awkwardly that their coloured plastic boxes had lured me to the place. Amin rolls his eyes. Ah yes, the boxes, he says. A few years ago, a friend of his had constructed a raft out of such boxes and sailed north on it. The summer winds had driven him to Oman, where he had married the daughter of a sheikh. Since then, he had been swimming in money and regularly sending his mother expensive clothes, his brothers dishwashers and his sisters precious jewellery.

I am prepared to accept the dishwasher story, but I cannot believe the story about the raft of boxes – because the boxes are full of holes. How could anyone have built a sturdy floating object, such as a raft, out of them? But Amin insists it is possible; he steps back and moves both his hands in a quarter-circle from the hips upwards in a powerful gesture that clearly suggests a big boost. To prove to me that it is indeed possible, he picks up a piece of the broken plastic cover of a cutter from the ground and draws a raft with a sail on the sand. That's exactly what the ship looked like, the man obviously assumes.

I still have my doubts. As I am mulling things over, there is a noisy crackle from the large loudspeakers installed on the beach, south of the port. I had walked past them an hour earlier and wondered about the tedium and effort of preparing for the Jammāt-e-Islami District Conference (announced on big banners). There is even a newly installed system of water-pipes and basins on the beach so that the faithful can have their ablutions before the evening prayers. A voice wafts over the sands to greet the first guests in the name of Allah. It does not sound like the voice of a religious leader or a theologian, but more like that of a salesman who wants to attract customers. And suddenly the realisation drops like scales of dandruff from my eyes: These are not the descendants of the Mughals who ruled over large parts of India from the 16th to the 19th century! These are the great-grandchildren of Arab merchants who were active here for centuries before the Romans and also after the fall of the empire: Jews, Christians, and increasingly from the 7th century onwards, the followers of Islam.

If I had thus far failed to detect any traces of the great merchants' city of yesteryear, I was now seeing them everywhere – even in the faces of the porters and fishermen. The most diverse influences



were now tumbling over one another before my eyes. And, among their ranks is definitely a Sindbad – that mystical sailor who set out fearlessly for a new world, seeking to fulfil his dreams.

And perhaps that's the reason that I have travelled all the way here: For the sake of my dreams. For, though I now deal with the most exotic spices on an almost daily basis, for me cardamom and turmeric, ginger and pepper remain what they were to

my ancestors a thousand years ago: a miracle from a strange and distant world. Being able to procure these spices easily today – that, too, at a highly affordable price – is not a matter of complacency for me. They are a magic taste from a place on this planet that, however often I may travel through it and however many of its idiosyncracies I may deal with, will forever remain a faraway world.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.