

Journey of courage

"It's about my first homecoming," Gautam Lewis said, looking out the car window toward Cranfield University's far-away airfield, "and the Calcutta airport, the street, the heat and the dust."

**By Sarat Das And Parashmita Gogoi
Photographs By Sarat Das**

He was born into poverty in 1977 in Howrah, across the Hooghly from old Calcutta. When he was 18 months old he contracted polio and lost the use of his legs. At the time, 1 in 5 Indian children died from the virus, while those who survived faced lives as crippled, illiterate beggars.

When Gautam was 3, an old woman — an aunt, his grandmother, he doesn't know who — carried him across the bridge to Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity and left him in her care. But he was not destined to remain within the "grey walls" of Mother House forever. Two years later he met Patricia Lewis, a dual Irish-UK national who arranged for his rehabilitation and

gave him a new life. She adopted him at 7, taking him to New Zealand, a trip that began his love affair with flying.

Today, at 31, Gautam Lewis is a London-based pilot, entrepreneur and a goodwill ambassador for Rotary International's Global Polio Eradication Initiative. He runs "Freedom in the Air" (www.freedomintheair.org/), a flying school for people with polio and other disabilities. Last November he won the Asian International Who's Who Leadership in Charity Award for 2008.

Here he recounts his remarkable past and dedicates his future to the millions of people who are less fortunate, especially those with a disability.

The beginning

I was perhaps born as Gautam De in a Bengali family. The nuns at the Missionaries of Charity say that an elderly woman brought me to Mother

House. Possibly she was my aunt or probably





my grandmother, who really knows? She told the nuns that my name was Gautam De and that I was born in Howrah, living in 24 Parganas and subsequently disabled with polio when I was one-and-a-half years old. Perhaps I was born out of wedlock or maybe my biological parents were too poverty-stricken to afford me a living. There could be many assumptions. But I am glad that at least they didn't abandon me in the streets and instead brought me to Mother House. It must have taken a lot of courage and mental strain to do that for me.

When I was 5 years old I met my rescuer, Patricia Lewis, or as I knew her then, "Tricia-dee" – big sister Tricia. Ever since Patricia was 15 and had met a priest who used to travel to Calcutta, she had dreamt of going there. When she did, she says, it felt like going home. She can speak and write Bengali, which somehow eluded me, and like any other Bengali her favorite poet is Rabindranath Tagore.

Patricia had come to Calcutta after completing her university studies and was working at the Rehabilitation Centre for Children (RCFC) in Behala. She and other volunteers went around looking for children who needed treatment, and when she saw me in Mother House she immediately arranged for my transfer to the rehabilitation centre.

I underwent two years of operations at RCFC, and during this period Patricia and I developed a special bond. That bond was so strong that she decided to adopt me. I think the last thing she imagined she would be doing at the age of 27 was to adopt a 7 year old from Calcutta with polio. Where I left the ghost of my birth mother, a new mother was found and my life turned upside down from that point on.



Farewell to Calcutta

It was now the mid-eighties, a time when foreigners could not adopt Indians. Patricia had left India for New Zealand, where she was a resident scientist and lecturer at the University of Auckland. But she wouldn't give up on me. She hired an attorney, waded through a wagonload of legal papers and visited Calcutta umpteen times to take control of me as a guardian.

I never knew I was so much in love with Calcutta until Patricia was ushering me to the aircraft bound for New Zealand. I was screaming and grabbed anything I could lay my hands on. But as soon I was on board I stopped screaming, because the inside of the aircraft and the sound

of the jet engines fascinated me.

In January 1985, Calcutta was grey, dirty, polluted and noisy. By stark contrast, New Zealand was green, clean with a clear blue sky. It was like paradise. My mother had a house near a beach called Mission Bay. It was a complete contrast to the narrow and crowded lanes of Calcutta. I can never forget that day. It was a new beginning for me.

Strange, difficult world

To me there was no world outside Calcutta. But suddenly I was brought to a world which was strikingly different. Soon, however, the good feelings began dissipating when my schooling



The unknown 'England'

Two years later we were leaving for England. Patricia was 29, a nuclear physicist and a single mother. I was again nervous. Ironically, I was a little sad too, not withstanding the harrowing experience I had gone through in New Zealand, because I was perhaps leaving something I was comfortable with and anxious about this unknown "England". I was leaving behind my best friend, but I was looking forward to meeting my extended family.

I went from speaking Bengali to speaking English with a strong Kiwi accent. I was

determined to lose my Bengali in order to show people that I was a

pukka Kiwi Britisher. These are ways to survive in a new world.

At Gatwick, I instantly bonded with my grandmother like her lost grandchild. Surprisingly, she was not a stranger to me. In India, everything revolves around family. At Mother House, the nuns did not give the feeling of family but there was care, certainly.

Patricia was now working in the area of nuclear disarmament at the Verification Technology Information Centre in London, and the nature of her job required long hours away from home. Naturally I spent more time with my grandparents and became very close to them.

They offered to send me to the famous Hill House preparatory school in Knightsbridge, behind Harrods. This is the same school where Prince Charles and his brothers were educated. In Hill House I had children of celebrities and royalty as my classmates. I liked Hill House for its ethnic diversity, students with unfamiliar background and for not being bullied for my disability.

When I was 13, my grandparents offered to send me Bedales, a private boarding school. It was a stark contrast for the boy who had once boarded with, and was one of, India's poorest children. Bedales brought out the artist in me. It is a very liberal school where they teach and instill self-discipline.

It was not until I was 17 or 18 years old that I began to reconnect with my past, maybe because I felt now that I understood the importance of self-identity. My self-esteem was strong enough, so I decided to take a gap year after finishing my A levels and traveled back to Calcutta with my mother and my friends. India sounded like a cool place to them, and I somehow pitch forked into this journey without understanding what unpleasant things lay ahead for me.

Homecoming

It was early September 1995. After almost a decade I was en route to Calcutta, with my friends. As we lined up on the final approach to Calcutta airport, the reality of what was happening dawned on me. I was not too sure if I was doing the right thing by bringing my friends along.

At 7 AM, we touched down. Once the doors had

started. This was the first time that I had a sense of belonging. I was given a passport and a birth certificate (in that order), I started to learn about families, how to live in a family, how make new friends from completely different backgrounds.

My basic education began at home, but my mother then sent me to a day school. Suddenly I was exposed to a world not in my mother's control — a world populated with strict teachers and children who would bully. They would jeer at me because of my disability, for speaking broken Kiwi English and for looking so different from them. I was Indian and the only one in the playground with crutches.

Agonized, I blamed my mother for everything, for she had torn me away from Calcutta. In time I settled down. I became interested in horse riding, water polo and swimming. At home, too, I was at peace with myself, and I began to bond with my mother over home-cooked meals.

One day I stopped speaking or thinking like a Bengali forever, because I wanted to be the same as my schoolmates. Many years later, however, I feel the language is still alive inside me. Your mother tongue is perhaps always a part of your genetic makeup.

opened on the tarmac, the first thing that hit me was the heat and the smell. It turned off everybody. As we drove, we found the city was noisy and the lanes were narrow. It was a typical morning in India; people, stray animals and smoke-belching vehicles populated the streets.

I felt that I did the wrong thing by bringing my friends, who would now know of my past, which was full of poverty and helpless bereavement. They had come from a picture-perfect world and I was finding it difficult to reconcile my past. My case looked more miserable when we visited the rehabilitation centre where I was treated.

I felt uncomfortable and shocked to see the dark and dingy centre. Apart from the heat and dust, what I didn't like about Calcutta was people staring at me. I was with an English woman (my mother) and my 3-year-old sister (Patricia's biological daughter). Calcutta was repugnantly repulsive.

After a day or so my friends decided to take the train to Darjeeling to get away from the madness of Calcutta. My mother and I went to visit Mother Teresa, though I didn't want to meet her with my mother. I did not know why. It was a very special meeting and she spent a long time with us, taking us around the church and blessing us. She said a special Mass for us. From this my mother could guess my difficulty in coming to terms with my past.

Strangely enough, when I came back from India my relationship with my mother went disastrously wrong. I moved out of her home and started living on my own. I was angry at my past and perhaps trying to find somebody to vent this anger on. My mother perhaps was the soft target.

Music, flying and polio

I began studying business at the Southampton Institute, then opened a nightclub called Level One. This would heavily influence my subsequent work in the music industry upon returning to London when I was 21 — first as a club DJ, then as a manager for The Libertines, The Kills and other bands, and later as label manager for Poptones Records. Those years saw me with a record in one hand and a camera in the other, as I pursued my twin loves — music and photography — while experiencing the rock-and-roll lifestyle.

Growing out of the music industry I realised how chance is such a strange thing in life. I began to wonder what sort of life or person I would have become if I had not met Patricia. I felt compelled to use my talent and education to help others less fortunate.

I decided I wanted to learn to fly. With financial help from my mother and grandparents, I spent the next nine months training to be a pilot.

During my training I felt alive and felt a sense of freedom, of being liberated. I started to have new dreams and visualise my future where I wanted to help change peoples lives, if not try to change the world.

I knew very little about polio. I had overcome it and worked very hard to be fit, active and, above all, independent. But we all need help from those around us. I started to find out more about Mother Teresa and looked at ways in which I could help charities and good causes.

That's when I learned about Rotary International, the non-profit service organization that has made polio eradication its top priority. Inspired, I hoped to marry my skills with my philanthropic interest to help Rotary's campaign to eliminate polio in India. Still dependent on crutches from my own battle with polio, I believe I am in a strong position to empathize and fight the disease with other sufferers.

A mile-high role model

As I grew older and wiser, I began to realize what an amazing person my mother is and what a life she has given me. Today Patricia lives in California with my sister, Lindi, and is deputy director and scientist-in-residence at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute of International Studies.

Someone recently asked me "where is my happy place"? I replied, "5000 feet above the earth in an aeroplane cockpit flying!" Flying makes you feel alive and gives you a sense of freedom, of being liberated with nothing to hold you back. Freedom in the Air is all about what aviation can do to expand the horizons of people with disabilities and help them realise their talents and dreams through pilot training.

In India there are probably very few role models for people with disabilities. I want to share my life experiences with them and get the message across that anything is possible. My next goal is to become a flight instructor and one day fly solo around the world, stopping off, of course, in Calcutta and taking street children and people with disabilities flying. ■



I didn't want Mother Teresa to meet my mother, though I don't know why.