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In the City the Body Rests

Debashis Sinha

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In the City the Body Rests

Debashis Sinha

Abstract

The stories we carry are grown from rich and multimodal experiences, the stories we make grown likewise. Sounds that lie at the edges of the spoken story carry a parallel power to the words inside them, and fuel Sinha's research-creation sonic arts practice. Through examining the edges of the story, new sound relationships are uncovered and manifested through the use of digital sound tools. In *The City The Body Rests*, investigated here, is one such manifestation that considers the city of Kolkata and the possible story of a sentient urban space.

"To wrest listening away from its standard conception as a largely human- and animal-centred activity allows us to understand listening as an ecology where we are not only listening but listened to"

Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, p 98

Every story is grown.

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It comes from a complicated coming together of branches, experiences, connections—human-, earth- and sky-bound. Every story is a container of richness, a carpet that can be pulled apart and each thread marvelled at, equal in beauty and complexity to the whole. The weave can be re-woven into new pieces, new combinations of colour and line.

The stories my grandmothers told me as a boy are complicated sensory experiences (the smell of their saris, the hum of the ceiling fan, the traffic (or lack of it) out the window, how they patted my head, the rhythm of it, the rain). And then the stories themselves, tangled intertwining of mythology, family anecdotes, gossip that I could hardly follow with my basic Bengali skills. Meaning, language, pattern, sound.

My creative (ethnographic) practice has always been about seeking the sounds outside my hearing, those that weren't coming out of radio speakers or on the suburban streets and playgrounds. The sounds of Hindustani classical music were as precious and as fierce to me as the 2-Tone music of England in the mid-80s—they both were from a world that I didn't see but represented a powerful experience and worldview that hummed at the edges of my consciousness. I knew that these sounds made up, or were part of, a picture of the breadth of what I wanted my life to be (and others' as well).

Every story is grown.

Please see HTML version for accompanying audio content

My story was more than the colour of my skin, or my Canadian accent, or my hard-won burgeoning Bengali abilities. My story was all of those things coexisting with a million other descriptions. As I came to understand this and (slowly, tentatively) celebrate it, I realized (am still realizing) that this was true of stories in general, for all of us. And that if true, then the stories that we hold are as interwoven with the sensorium as anyone's, each one a weave of place, language, senses, experience (and a weave is a map, with many routes in and through).

Sound is, for me, the route to discovering the rich confluence of ideas and sense-experience held in the story, and in the moment of the telling of it. The quiet, singsong tones of a half-understood language in the afternoon heat is a repository of meaning in itself, as well as a vector of information. The pauses in the telling of the myth to call out instructions to the cook holds a part of the image, is a path.

When I seek to uncover the story of a place or time or moment, I understand that this uncovering is connected to the land, the air, the sounds and smells and time that passed there, the people who told stories standing exactly at that place before the moment I stood on that spot, and after—where you are now, right now, exactly there: someone told a story to their child, their people, their lover, the stars.

Every story is grown.

In the city the body rests is the second in a series of radiophonic works that look at known phenomena and attempt to deconstruct and re-imagine them. The first in this series, *The Light*, was broadcast on Deutschlandradio Kultur in 2012. Most of the text for *In the city...* was written on a trip to Kolkata, India during the 2015 Christmas season. *Dhakuria Bridge* is a work that I generated using machine learning tools and neural networks trained on field recordings I've collected over many trips there.

Kolkata plays a large part in my audio work—it is the anchor of many sound compositions, installations, videos and performance works I have devised over the years, and my experience of being south Asian in Canada has been largely informed by my relationship to this city and my familial, cultural and spiritual connection to it.

Writing the text for *In the city...* (the first work of the two) started out as a project to crystallize many of my thoughts about Kolkata, but, as I wrote, I realized that my thoughts on the city—coloured and romanticized as I made them—were actually a direct expression (or perhaps were the foundation for) how I think about urban spaces, and the roles they play in human culture and larger arcs of pre- and post-human time.

Looking deeper, these two works are an expression of the multimodal experience of the space of the city and the story we could construct from it. I'm drawn to the concept of multimodality—it implies an acceptance of the totality of the place/moment, building a space and time for an ecology wherein we are listening *and listened to*, as Robinson puts it above.

It is undeniable to me that a place simultaneously encodes and expresses the sum total of its time—both the long thread of history of the land, witnessed by human and non-human beings, and the endless pointillistic moment of observation, the sounds, smells, heat, dirt, wind and sun. The story of the thread and the moment coexist and complicate/support the observation, and the observer. It is impossible to break out the moment into *only* one mode of apprehension.

And so an entangled, multimodal ethnography: a system of observing and recording that takes all of it in, in all its confusing complexity, and allows it all to be present in the story we tell.

References

Robinson, D. (2020). *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*. Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press.

In the city the body rests - Libretto

Debashis Sinha, 2016/2020

Take as a conceit a city as being capable of apprehending its own existence, as a being that understands time, place, perspective; as something that seeks to understand itself. What follows? Planning, reaction, assessment – a series of complicated and subtle gestures, intricate and varied. Abstractions, difficulties overcome, new paths created and uncovered. Events both coordinated and occurring through happenstance, integrated into a whole that constantly shifts and changes moment to moment in observable and also unseen ways.

A web of intent, conclusions shifting.

Consider sound as the element that gives a city its entity-ness.

The physical limits of the ear, and the areas of the nervous system assigned to it, dictate what can be actually heard. What is remarkable about these systems is not what they can do, but what they cannot – that despite its limitations we ourselves can still produce sound that is undetectable without technological assistance. How is it possible that we can produce something that we cannot sense? Or is this only an accident, a corollary product of other explorations?

One need not look further for proof that the city exists apart from us than to realize that the vast majority of its life is undetected and undetectable by our senses. Infra- and ultra-phenomena abound and permeate the cells of the conglomerate, offsetting them but unknown to the higher levels of consciousness of its inhabitants. Only a narrow band of sound and light are sensed, considered, understood and forgotten. The majority of the life of the city exists outside of this band, hidden from the higher senses.

Those that inhabit the city, then, can be pictured as suspended in a medium they cannot sense or interact with – floating in a miasma of dimly perceived information. Blind, deaf, helpless to counteract the subtle effects of radio waves, of electric fields and particulates, the city's beings are jostled and fight against currents they cannot sense.

Every city builds itself out of a discrete set of mores and codes. Those cities with the most presence and import are those whose codes are most densely executed, mysterious, or impenetrable. History, or rather the passage of time, plays a part in the setting of these codes, as does of course geography, language, human presence, physics, and the unseen movement of atoms.

There is a certain flutter, an energy that makes itself felt in those cities whose code runs deep and subtle. This happens (or is most obvious) in large part at night, when visibility is low and the visible world is murky and muted. The surface and puzzle of the city is altered – whether perceptually or actually remains up for debate – and the codes by which it functions is at its most confusing and rich.

Time of day, colour of skin, class, weather, neighbourhood – these and other aspects of the moment interact with the various codes of the city to yield results so complex and evanescent that one might almost classify or understand them as quantum in nature. The city transmits these codes in subtle ways to the populace, from the smallest insect to the most sentient being. And further, it transmits only those aspects of the code appropriate to the locale or function of the receiver. Those entering into a code-specific area that have been inculcated with a different code must quickly find intersections and commonalities, and stay within those bounds. The city yields its codes only to those who demonstrate a commitment, a loyalty to it. It created this incentive relationship on purpose, to further cement its presence on those within its bounds, and to infect other cities and thereby establish itself beyond its own confines.

Decoding the city necessarily involves a partnership with it, a compact wherein we agree to expose our own desires and ambitions in return for access. Permission granted, we colonize the space but in colonizing we delude ourselves that our gaze is what defines. This is a common failure of the colonizer. We lose the vulnerability that first defined our relationship with the city, and in this loss is also the loss of our ability to decode the city's inner life.

It is clear when a being is in a city against the city's will. There is a quality of movement and gaze that is clearly manifest, an uncertainty or apology at the foundation of every gesture and action. This obeisance to the city is demanded, understood to be part and parcel of the social construct between city and stranger-inhabitant. In the animal world, the consequences of this relationship are abundantly clear. In higher order beings, the costs are less apparent, visible post-mortem perhaps, or through serious health or mental breakdown.

The city inhabits itself. It doesn't allow the pretence of control or the idea that the lives of its inhabitants somehow deserve more room than it does. It asserts itself, exposing the many meridians of energy that pulse and flow in order for it to remain in balance. (The larger the system the more complicated the relationships that sustain it). The city is no exception.

There is a constant push and pull between the cells here that we don't always see or are not aware of. There are no clean streets; politeness is measured in a different way or unnecessary. We build our cities and maintain them to hide what is necessary to keep them operational. No such artifice here, not possible, all exposed and tolerated, accepted.

Observing something changes the observer and the observed.

The processing and storing of the information in the brain is irreversible – it remains encoded in the physical structure, and traffic is rerouted in relation to it. We are forever changed and affected, moment by moment, by simply being alive. To be conscious is to be a vessel of change in the world. To remove oneself from this process is not possible. Even the effort to withdraw from this feedback network results in the very thing one wishes to cease. We are absolutely, inextricably, inescapably intertwined.

At every corner and crossroad is the evidence of all the layers at play in the moment. A palimpsest of gestures made by conscious actors and reflexive or self-generating systems. There is a placement of structures that run deep, subterranean, chthonic, able to be read by the initiate.

Dust: another vector of information we ignore. Smog: another. Litter. Waste of all kinds: heat, cold. Oil. Vomit. Exhaust. Screeching brakes. Horns. Jetsam: buoys, plastic shoes, tin cans, string, glass, bones. Syringes. crack vials, condoms, broken glass. These are delicate, secret messages the city sends us about our footprint upon it. When we stumble upon these in the street, we choose to ignore what they are telling us: that there are cracks in the social contract we have with the city, and that matter and people are falling through these cracks. That, left untended, we ignore these compromises in the structure at our peril. They are harbingers of a collapse in the relationships that keep us in equilibrium, and in equilibrium with the city.

All around us the parasympathetic reflex of the city circulates information through its systems. Analog and digital information is exchanged, reverses flow, takes on and is subsumed by new code

that travels onward. The wheezes, hums and drones that signify these systems at street level are merely the unneeded bits of information exhausted by these systems, and we miss them because they are drowned out by traffic noise anyway.

There are human custodians of this information, observers of how the city shares information with itself. If one parses how these observers are regarded by the rest of us, one sees how they occupy the periphery of the populace: garbage collectors, janitors, cleaning staff, building engineers and ventilation maintenance personnel. Working at night, in the secret places of the city. The homeless and the marginalized, and the people who work with them are part of this subset. All of them have insight into the unseen flow of information energy that continually flows. They respect it, and have learned how to sidestep it or be carried by it to safe places: a warm subway grate; cheap coffee; shortcuts, which restaurant is wasteful and which circumspect in bagging its garbage.

We don't see these people, forget they exist, but it is they who forge and maintain the fragile peace between the city and ourselves.

Any straight line here is a miracle, even more so when it functions well. Every edge is rounded, smoothed, worn down by time. There is a blurriness to geometry no matter where one looks, as though the world around is made of damp sugar or ghee.

The city chooses to bear the traces of its citizenry. Somehow these traces – smooth and shiny and rounded – lend the city a legitimacy and presence in the world. Maybe the city takes on these traces in an effort to gain a foothold on the earth, that without them it remains only an idea.

The city finds its way into its inhabitants in more ways than one. It forces itself not only into the neural pathways of its citizens but also into their physical systems. The city forces its way into the lungs, ears, eyes, thereby encompassing absolutely every single atom within it – it inhabits the totality of the space around it.

It deposits traces on every surface, inside and out, in an effort to be carried beyond its own boundaries. It doesn't offer any choice but this – to enter a city is to acquiesce to this arrangement.

In the body, the city rests. It settles, is carried, permeates. It asserts itself throughout its own parts, expressing a character and identity readily parsed no matter who observes. Within the confines of

itself, it is omniscient, knowing and updating itself to remain à temps and evolving in light of developments.

Mote by mote the city expands its footprint farther and farther, trailing on shoes, in lungs and throats, embedded into the synapses of travellers – spreading like a living organism through myriad vectors across the surface of the planet and in the inner hearts of the people who pass through. In this way the city courts immortality yet again.

There is an aura that the city casts, that we feel in our bodies. A kind of tension that acts on our being, noticed only in its absence. The effect of this aura diminishes, the further we are from the city's outer limits, but then, with time, the tension returns the further away we remain. It is akin to some kind of survival the city implants in us, that we cannot survive away for long.

Our co-dependence is expressed in our bodies as this tension that manifests on our leaving the city limits, and in the city is expressed through system stress (example) or, in worst cases, catastrophic infrastructure failure.

A suggested perspective of the body:

- a porous field of energy, constantly replenished and diminished by the fields of energy encompassing it

- a finite and definite boundary

- multiple systems of information transfer, housed within a structure of questionable durability

- the repository of its own history, a library of experience that is built on every moment and then carried further; a fossil records its movement through space and time

- an intricately designed and efficient infrastructure, the sole purpose of which is to protect, support, and enable a thinking and feeling apparatus, the brain

- a sparse grouping of probability waves, slightly denser than the waves surrounding it

- a study in causality and the inexorable unfolding of the laws of the universe
- a random event triggered by cosmic rays
- a complex structure for manipulating physical matter through space
- a collection of periodic and aperiodic cycles, the collective execution of which mark the rate of decay of the system
- a gathering of innumerable binary forms – physical switches that, in aggregate, complete behaviours thought to be intricate and multiplex
- an engine that drives and is in symbiosis with articulations of ideas, many of which are not able to be expressed with verbal language
- the rude form that belies the various and delicate sensations within it
- constant and regular pulses of various intensities
- secretions of molecules in multiple states, either for purposes of maintenance of stasis or dissemination of information
- sensors designed to interact and relay information to a central processing instrument, even when dormant or in stillness
- a continuing, non-stop scan of data that is constantly updated and acted upon in the short and long term
- the first step in a complicated process of parsing the world and extrapolating increasingly abstract and finer ideas about the laws governing space time and how the universe functions, ideas that become more and more difficult to express using conventional communication systems and rules that were developed to describe observed phenomena or behaviour

A city is enveloped in haze – magnetic and electrical fields; pollution; particulates; light; sound; smell; language; transportation; water vapour; incense; the smoke from cooking fires; information; cabling; subsonic tremors; ambition; desire.

This haze is arranged in layers. Aeronautical regions and flight paths – 1 layer. Cell phone towers and signal repeaters – another. Power lines, roads, sewers, subways and those grids buried deeper. History. These make up only a vanishingly tiny few of those layers that surround and support the being of the city. They rattle and jolt the populace and affect them in countless other ways. The city actualizes itself.

The systems designed to make sense of the city by its inhabitants are, in effect, created by the city itself. It requires these infrastructures to strengthen its impact on the earth, its own selfhood. In that regard those that build to make sense of the city are, in fact, merely executing its will rather than their own. Our building of the city, our struggles to come to grips with it and its function – we become cells in a body, DNA executing programmed codes to strengthen the host and keep it alive, healthy and growing. It is not its inhabitants that use these systems; it is the city itself, sending us on a million small errands to keep itself vibrant and alive.

There are new options available to the city as new developments in technology, architecture, construction and engineering arise. Precision growth in three dimensions is more possible and issues surrounding high level dwellings are being addressed in general discourse, which serves to give the city more of a place on the earth, to allow it to concentrate its resources and offset the energy drain of self-maintenance.

For make no mistake, fatigue is a real possibility. The Arab Spring, the Gezi Park protests, the January 6th insurrection at the White House – the fatigue of the city plays a part in these events, and has indeed always had a hand in the events that stand out in human history. Urban planning, urban health and social justice, politics, science, engineering, immigration, food safety, sustainability and green energy, economics – the city's involvement in the arc of new thinking and developments in these fields is clear.

The choreography of urban space runs under every mundane aspect of the city. Every day an influx, an outflow, a cyclical tide of people and energy. These tides leave behind residue, some of it perceivable, some of it not. There is litter, smog, noise. But more importantly there are dreams and

moments that cling to the architecture, define the cityscape on some unconscious level, hum just outside the range of our hearing and sight. This is the detritus of the movement of people through the space of the city.

This dreamscape is the result of fragments, of leftover and faded thoughts and ideas, burrs of emotion that stick to our clothes, unnoticed. They gather in the features of the architecture or are caught under the dumpsters behind the entertainment district. These fragments contain a history of the city, histories that have been affected and determined by their interactions with other, older histories and colonizations throughout human time. Remnants of slave songs, of fighting and returning from wars, live alongside the ache of a lover's heart, suffocated by the heartache of consumption and quest for material things, suffocated by alienation through pinpoint focus on the internet and smartphone.

The city is complicit in our movements through it. Complicit in that it decides, permits. It participates in the construction of its structure, constructs the partnership we have with its growth.

The dynamic created by the tension between the concrete city and the insubstantial dreams of it and its citizens defines our urban space. We participate in these boundaries, form them and are formed by them. It is part of the pact we have with the city, how we can coexist without becoming consumed. It is how we make community with the structure we call the city.

It might be more accurate to consider the city as an entity that suffers its citizens, certainly when it lies beyond a particular population density. When one experiences a city of this magnitude, the strain on its systems and organizational structures is abundantly clear. In the same way as a human being needs time and space to parse a severe influx of information (a walk down the street in central Lagos is infinitely more exhausting than one in a rural English village), a city must consider population density as a kind of pollution or infestation, and then suffer (and perhaps act) accordingly. The picture of suffering is clear to anyone in a city of this magnitude, be they citizen or visitor. The sheer volume of noise – aural, visual, mental, spiritual – makes it impossible to ignore or filter, no matter what the baseline.

"Act accordingly" is less clear. In many ways the city chooses vectors of influence that are more oblique (for whatever reason) to deal with the suffering overcrowding inflicts upon it: a lack of personal space, a disregard for the bodies and experiences of others, a kind of heightened stimulus/response reflex that demands vigilance and impatience.

It is tempting to focus on these more changed and draining urban behavioural strategies, but it is also undeniable that this is not the whole picture. In the midst of the stress of functioning in an overpopulated urban space, there are also clearly myriad manifestations of a gentle and communal mindset in day to day living. These are not always readily apparent to the casual observer, but closer inspection yields a complex and entangled web of positive relationships, whether expressed or not. Every action is noticed and attended to by the community, and times of trouble are almost always met with a show of solidarity and support. Confusion or other difficulties, questions for directions or other issues are invariably met with kindness beyond what is called for. Friendly faces abound, and the citizens enjoy these small respites with gusto and joy.

To cope with themselves in the city, humans call on these skills, but, in reality, the city is drawing these strategies from its inhabitants – perhaps as a punishment for disregarding its optimal state and size, perhaps as some kind of long game to restore balance and harmony between the many communities and systems that compose the whole.

The city can afford to play this game. It is important to remember that the modern city and its capabilities and potential is only about a century old (with the exception perhaps of the ancient Japanese city of Edo). A city has a planning horizon well beyond the reach of any human being, once established. This is true regardless of how old the city under discussion might be. Barring natural disasters or catastrophic political action, an established settlement will unfailingly expand and grow in complexity.

The certainty of existence will, of course, influence the choices and actions of an entity. It is inevitable – the presupposition of immortality must have an effect on the consciousness of a city. It is difficult to know what that means when speaking of something so complex and intertwined, but perhaps it is not possible to articulate clearly in the end. It may be a kind of foundational encoding, present at a cellular level in all systems, or a more general unspoken and unconscious set of rules governing behaviour and expansion. In any case, it is important to remember that a city, once it has come into being, will not easily relinquish its position, whether or not it must. There are innumerable and deeply established assets that must be dismantled and abandoned, not to mention the physical objects embedded in and on the surface of the city's skin.

It may be that the technology (and perhaps in these days, the will) to erase the traces of such a complicated and intertwined collective circumstance do exist, but it is difficult to think of a scenario in which every last trace of a city could be eradicated. This is only speaking, of course, of the physical – there is also the infinite number of cellular traces carried by the beings (sentient or not) that knew of or experienced its existence. No, it is safe to say that a city is immortal.

We have established that the various citizens, systems, structures, and processes of the city have come into being in order to support and expand it. There is no doubt that the city uses its power towards furthering its own agenda. But the reality is that the incidental consequences of the so many complex systems running simultaneously are nigh impossible to predict, much less resolve. These incidentals coalesce into the complex event phenomena we term “Dreams”.

The skyscrapers and buildings of a city are trusses on which to hang the dreams of its inhabitants. These unfurl and fly in the wind and release their content across the sky. Empty, the hanging shells of these dreams remain, coating the upper reaches of structures with gossamer strands, offsetting the awesome and heavy footprint of the conglomerate of the city on the ground.

Above wafts a cloud of murmurs that rain down an unheard music, blanketing the corners and gutters of the city structure. Arpeggiated memories of dreams mingle and rearrange themselves as they fall – in sequence, in retrograde, in 12 tone rows. Those walking along the city’s pathways sometimes feel them as they land. These dream fragments soften the fearsome impulses of expansion and rootedness to which the city-conglomerate is in thrall.

The traces of shared dream fragments have agency, engaging with each other, floating to new locations and vessels, reconstituting into new patterns with new meaning. They attach themselves to different facets of the city structure and wait for the passersby they sense can help them fulfill the intent implied by their collective.

The agency demonstrated by this community resides in sharp contrast to the various other associations that make up the actors of the city. While independent action is a necessary feature of the makeup of the city’s systems, these dream fragments operate in a different way. One could posit that their ability to act independently in this manner is a harbinger of a new possibility in the various actions that are present in the city’s life. However, this independence is more than likely an anomaly in the complex equation that governs the city’s expansion and development. These invisible dream notes have somehow slipped through the cracks present in all mathematical equations, and exist in fragile balance with the larger calculus that defines the structures around them.

One is tempted to think of the city as heavy and weighted on the ground.

This is true, but not the whole picture.

The energy of motion is an integral part of the city, and indeed can be said to be the aspect that most accurately defines it.

The many imperatives that the city executes – expansion, establishment, control – can only be undertaken through movement. The transfer of information, inhabitants, attributes, and resources are all necessary processes that must occur for the city to maintain and expand itself. To illustrate: many of the assets of the city are, in fact, devoted to the free movement of things, and problems in any of these assets have ramifications that ripple out at alarming speed to other seemingly unrelated flows. The city must plan and reply to its systems and fail-safes bearing in mind the maxim “not if, but when.”

Part of this deployment resides in the ability of its component parts to independently react and solve the difficulties posed by any failure in signal flow. This ability to adjust without central directive is seen in countless lifeforms, from single-celled organisms to the higher sentient beings, and has been noted in inanimate systems as well. It can be then surmised to be part of the lower level encoding necessary to the larger evolutionary goals of the city-conglomerate. In any case, this adjustment behaviour is constantly being expressed, and what is expressed becomes, over time, refined.

At ground level this refinement is near impossible to perceive. Larger analysis of movement patterns yields an incredibly sophisticated and complex picture with great depth and countless layers - simple rules yielding complex results. The ingenuity with which traffic flow and signal problems are solved demonstrate the importance of the solutions devised. Impediment to movement cannot be tolerated, and exposes the fluid face of the heavy forms on the ground. The facades of buildings grow transparent, become a shell encasing transmissions of matter and energy, pulsing and glowing with light and heat. The glow grows and shines into the atmosphere, unseen like starlight in daytime, ever present, bathing passersby in an invisible luminescence.

There is no city, no being or structure at the centre of all this. It is a conglomerate, a collective experience of all that are the logical conclusions of its idea. Unwrap it - go through the maze of electricity, noise, peoples, transportation and infrastructure and come to the origin. You will find only an idea. No heart, no heat, no stone. Only a void of our own making.

- ds, 2016/2020

Debashis Sinha - Driven by a deep commitment to the primacy of sound in creative expression, Debashis Sinha has created numerous audio-centred solo and collaborative projects across Canada and internationally. Sound design and composition credits include works for digital media and theatrical productions with many of Canada's premiere theatre companies. His speculative mythology-driven sound practice has led to live appearances on stages from Japan to the mountains of Alberta. Currently, Sinha has been researching sound production using machine learning and AI with an ear to uncovering new modes and methods of story creation, releasing recordings on Berlin's Establishment Records imprint, Gusstaff and elsewhere. He is an assistant professor in The Creative School at X (Ryerson) University in Toronto, Canada. Web: <https://debsinha.com> Twitter: @sinhadeb Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/sinhadeb>