



The city we call home

After years of being on the wrong side of history, Calcutta must take advantage of the fact that similar political factions now govern the city, state and the centre, and press for a genuine makeover, writes Sayandeb Chowdhury

"Hüzün does not just paralyse the inhabitants of Istanbul, it also gives them poetic license to be paralysed."
— Orhan Pamuk (*Istanbul: Memories and the City*)

Through the churning of work, the tumult of conflicts, the intensity of dream, keeping me awake with the rolling of your blood's ocean, setting me on fire, you have given meaning to my existence — my Ujjaini, my America — Calcutta

Buddhadeb Bose, *Calcutta* (trans. Ketaki Kushari Dyson)

That Calcutta is a city in decay is within the knowledge of all its stakeholders. On a bad day it would represent Hell. But only represent, perhaps not be. Hell is fulsome in its pain, truthful in its denial of happiness, is perhaps richly built architecture of melancholy. Calcutta is none of the above. It's instead a garish, despondent film set erected cheaply in a hurry. Because even in its attempt at realising Hell as closely as possible, Calcutta has been denied the basic artistry of a

dignified imitation. It's a hack painter's rush job, a scratchy poem written on the back of a forgotten notebook, a musical note that the cacophonist wrote under delirium. A little description from Gunter Grass's *Show Your Tongue* allows no scope to escape the drudgery: "Weight loss, followed by atrophy of muscles. After three months, Calcutta begins to gnaw. Yet the sketching and recording do not abate, even when eyes have grown tired and dry from all the openly spread-out misery."

Thanks to decades of bad press and Mother Teresa, Calcutta has earned a name that could have suited the disposition of fifty other cities. But Calcutta has to bear the cross of being haggled by history and left to rot by the side.

Also, for too long has this city been governed by a loathsome lot of lumpens and leaders of their ilk who have used the city as a giant petri-dish to release their particularly repellent variety of political excreta. For too long have we let visitors wipe their brows and wash their hands in dismay, unable to fathom where the sea of people have given way to the dusty sky! For too long have we let roving cameras and encumbered pens lick the city's wounds

for attainment of greatness. For too long have we been just let glory pass by, even those held out, unflatteringly, from itinerant handcartists! That is perhaps what Pamuk in context of Istanbul calls Hüzün, a melancholia so intense and overbearing that it almost become a state of existence and even an alibi for paralysis.

Does this happen to all great cities? Do they, in trying to live up to it, sink into perpetual decline?

But Calcutta is more than the assorted nuisance of the governing logic of its ruling factions. Its charm is so legendary that it is almost impossible not to be seduced by it! It wears melancholia lightly if openly, laughs with unsparring wantonness, loves and cares equally.

And the people! From the shopkeeper who engaged Michael Madhusudan Dutta in a discussion of free verse, the bus driver of a double decker who took Shakti Chattopadhyaya home in his bus, the police officer who accosted Louis Malle on a day of protest to talk about French cinema, there are reels and reels of examples about how the city can skip a beat or two over a great book or moving image, how it can crowd Rodin's sculptures, mob Pele or throng

outside the auditorium for a song or two from Pete Seeger.

But all said and done, Calcutta needs a makeover. Decay does not come with a date of manufacture so its difficult to note which was the day when the city was pushed down the gorge.

Was it in the '60s and '70s, the days when capital was demonised and a streetcar named strike fetishised? Or should it be the coming of the Left and their bucolic indifference to the city's prospects? Or should we go back to the forties, when millions of refugees washed up at its shores with nothing but a past they were running away from? May be we should go even further to the December of 1911, when the British decided to shift the capital to Delhi.

That was the beginning of the end. The British shifted the capital out the city they has built with lot of precision and care. They wanted to weaken Bengal politically and Delhi gave them strategic advantage over foes, as they learnt in 1857. They almost left Calcutta to fend for itself leaving the once great cosmopolis, the biggest centre of commerce and culture and entertainment east of London in tatters. And since 1911, its been a

slow but steady history of ignominy.

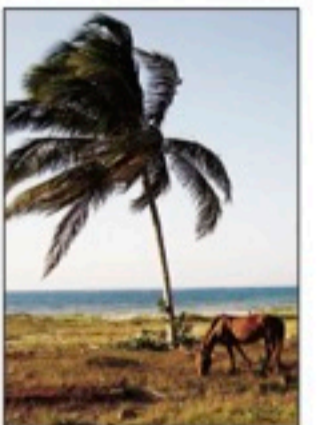
Now, hundred years since then the cycle seems to be complete and the time is ripe for a leap. Also, after decades of abject mis-governance, Calcutta has the same governing coalitions in the city, at the state and at the centre. Since 1969, when Calcutta had the first Left mayor, the governing coalitions at the city, state and the centre of the Left and their bucolic indifference to the city's prospects? Or should we go back to the forties, when millions of refugees washed up at its shores with nothing but a past they were running away from? May be we should go even further to the December of 1911, when the British decided to shift the capital to Delhi.

This city is home to a crore people, to astonishing talent, high aspirations, amazing specimens of the homo sapiens and above all, the will to live. If for nothing else, let that will find itself mirrored in the city that they work in, feed in, sleep in and turn to when abandoned by their dreams.

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Calcutta needs to look after itself in every category but do well to start with the basics



Governance

CPIM had converted the Writers' into the extended domain of Alimuddin Street thereby proscribing the governing machinery with cadres, babus, union beneficiaries and other sympathizers, who had completely encumbered the administrative headquarters. What the new CM is doing by endorsing service with a smile or checking attendance reports is a good start. She is not the one to put Party above governance and she means well, but if she wants a quick response, effective administration, eventually she has to turn Writers' into a corporate office with management graduates, CEOs and IIM pass outs taking charge of the departments. This means that the only way to keep babus in check is to destroy them altogether. That way rooms in Writer's would gather no moss and work will be done. She must map out a delivery model based on corporate ethics with may be just a winking eye on populism. Also, the new CM should do well to decentralise the administrative architecture, involve more stakeholders and create a working and delivery environment with heavy stress on technology that can keep the building perpetually outside pests, red or otherwise. What she also ought to do is to create a nodal agency that can act as bridge between the city and the state, the KMC and the government as well as between the governments at the state and the centre. That way Calcutta can come under the direct gaze of the Indian government and that can only do the city a world of good.

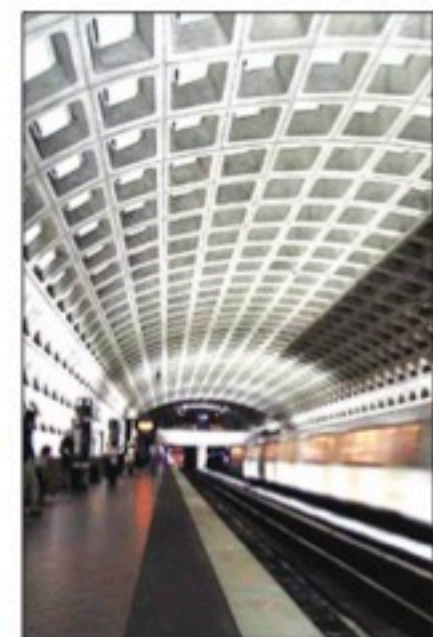
The past

Calcutta's past has been consistently written about and anthologised. While no city can rest on the past laurels to forge a future, the city can start learning how to capitalise, literally, on the glorious heritage architecture and it being the seat of the Renaissance. The heritage must be reused profitably like older cities of Europe. We will want to see boutiques, café's, bookshops, small theatres, restaurants, galleries and souvenir stores come up in the heritage quarters. Same goes for the riverfront which can be utilised for mixed use and tourism.



Future

The future must be driven not by people or party but by policy. Calcutta is a city-state and it should be driven not by a machine but a vision. Let that vision include bidding for the Olympics in twenty years' time. Let that vision include becoming the cosmopolis that it once was. Let that vision include becoming one of the world's great cities. Less than fifty years ago, Lee Kuan Yew, the founder of modern Singapore is said to have remarked, on asking which city is his model, he said Calcutta! Calcutta has a soul, lot of options for food, music, art, theatre and cinema; a history of inventions and institutional excellence, lot of potential as a centre for commerce. Decline is not endemic to it alone. But let it bounce back with such vehemence that when we talk of phoenix, the phoenix replies that it came back to being like Calcutta did. And that day we rejoice!



Present

Projects worth a few thousand crores are underway in Calcutta. From the East-West Metro to the new Joka-BBD Bag line, from flyovers across the length and breadth to new AC buses and converting the EM Bypass into a world class BRT are some of the projects on hand. While the overarching philosophy is to decongest, what can be another point of departure is to aestheticise? Can't a city also look clean and beautiful and not just homely and hospitable? Can't be have tree-lined avenues, wider footpaths, a grand central plaza, spectacular displays of public art, playful but street-smart graffiti from young painters, small corners for musicians and booksellers, colourful carts selling wares and kiosks for hawkers? What about introducing some commonalities? Like similar neons and danglers as per areas, same coloured houses? Let's take down the giant billboards and create small advert kiosks instead. Let's also pull down the walls and boundaries from large public buildings. Make the city visible, let the great mansions be seen.