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The Indiscreet Charms of Spatial Ugliness: An Enquiry into a (Post)colonial City

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Introduction

The debate about urban space in the Global South has been dominated by a sense of ambivalence regarding metropolitan modernity and postcoloniality. When this disagreement is considered visually, there seems to be an unremitting foregrounding of the ugly as a prevalent motif in understanding the self-fashioning of the postcolonial city as a pestilential site of urban reconfiguration. Calcutta, once the seat of the British Empire's deepest engagement with colonial modernity in South Asia, is a great example of this scopic employment. Calcutta was the archetype of a colonial urban imaginary, where modernity was directly sired by aggressive colonialism. The early records of Calcutta's visual history show a determinable practice of viewing the city from carefully aesthetisized distances to establish an unmistakable visual authority. But we see a determinable shift in this regime as Calcutta hurtled towards a transformational tornado in the 1940s. This shift, as this chapter will claim, politicizes the anti-aesthetic of the post-colony as much as it reveals a wanton disengagement with postcolonial publics. Is there anything specific about the spatial ugliness of the postcolonial city? Or is the photographic aesthetic of the post-colony a result of factors beyond its immediate representation?

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To ask that one has to look at ugliness as a category of aesthetics and its relationship with urban photography. Ugliness is a powerfully and eloquently contested idea, which even before the emergence of modernism as a cultural practice has had often inexplicable hold on the artistic imagination. With the arrival of mass modernity, especially when visualized through the performative agency of the cameratic lens, there however seems to be a foregrounding of ugliness as a scopic regime that seems to be integral to the unfolding of the modern metropolis itself. Drawing upon the debates around ugliness in photographic image-making and the representational crisis it thrusts on the modern city, the first part of this chapter traces a predominant genre of urban photography across the West. This is followed by a brief history of the dominant practice of urban photography in India, specifically Calcutta. The final part probes how the complex interplay of photographic imagery problematizes the duality of modernity and coloniality to produce the archetype of the postcolonial city.

Spatial Ugliness and the Photographic Form

In her book *Plain Ugly*, Naomi Baker traces the etymology of ugliness to the Norse language. Baker writes:

> The term "ugly" originates from the Old Norse *ugglig*, meaning "to be feared or dreaded." Early modern English definitions of ugliness frequently focus on its power to disturb the viewer.[1]

Through the Renaissance, Mannerism, and the Baroque periods and well into the early eighteenth century, says Baker, ugly became a free-floating signifier in Western thought, a protean and portable term to refer to anything that did not fit within the moral architecture of the beautiful. Though instances in which the ugly was perceived as naturally native to its subject are not unknown, ugly was generally considered a freak or joke of nature rather than any reasonable continuation of it. Similarly, the grotesque and the monstrous function as *exceptions* in Western art, say in Hieronymus Bosch, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Michelangelo Caravaggio, Henry Fuseli, or Francisco Goya.[2] In a certain way, the systematic theorization of beauty by Kant was part of a prolonged process of naturization of beauty in the West rather than any significant break from it. Hence discussions on Kant's dissociative notion of ugliness as a category of experience in unlikely to reveal any conclusive answer, at least in terms of defining ugliness independently. It is rather in

Kant's follower Karl Rosenkranz's 1853 book *Aesthetik des Hdsslichen* (*The Aesthetics of the Ugly*), that one might find the seminal break with the Kantian tradition, for having considered ugliness as an a essential component of art. No wonder Theodore Adorno's further theorization of ugliness[3] within the scope of capitalist modernity can be traced to Rosenkranz and not Kant. As Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer mentions in her essay on ugliness:

> In the wake of Rosenkranz …, Theodor Adorno argued that, in the dialectics of the beautiful, ugliness was appropriated through negation, its sheer opposition to the urge toward beauty generating an inherent tension within the work of art that was an essential, if implicit, component in the production of its structural harmony: the ugly is that element that opposes the work's ruling law of form; it is integrated by that formal law and thereby confirms it.[4]

In other words, Adorno's critique considers ugly as an invisible fulcrum in classical aesthetics, the apparent pull of which provided the impetus to push towards the conformity of beauty as the prevalent drive of art. As per Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, Adorno spins an imaginary, creationist tale of ugliness, when he equates ugliness with the beginning—the chaos—and how beauty emerged later as a civilizational impulse to put an order to the disorderly world. As a Jewish intellectual hounded out of Nazi Europe, Adorno's empathy lies with ugliness, because the overemphasis on beauty carries within it the same historical protrusion of a repressive order that Fascism wanted to stamp its dominions with. To that end, says, Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, "In art as in life, Adorno endowed ugliness with moral beauty and a humanitarian mission: to foster sympathy for the degraded, to reverse social inequity."[5]

It is in the light of Adorno's socialist critique of ugliness that one must turn towards photography and the modern city and the emergence of a new visuality produced by both, since the middle of the nineteenth century. The modern industrial city, with its mobilities, masses and its proactive temporalities, provided the Adornian challenge to the classical aesthetic model. And as its visual ally, so did photography, whose emergence was an urgent and instant subversion to the elitism of art and its esoteric, plutarchist consumptive patterns. This is further complicated by the fact that photography's indexical relationship to the object photographed is often in contradiction to the iconicity of art.[6] This means that photography's claim of representing *what is there* can be seen as a provocation to provide the aesthetics with a material, historically observable object rather than simply a language of representation; as in the case of art. To that end, a certain kind of image-practice can turn

complex cultural material into collective political aesthetics, something this chapter is interested to probe, especially in the context of the postcolonial city.

One of the earliest to equate photography with a kind of degenerate industrial life was in fact Victorian aesthete and thinker John Ruskin. Though initially enthusiastic about the new technology, he soon found photography merely a technological distraction and below the high ideals of the painterly ambition. In his fourth Oxford lecture on art, writes Michael Harvey, Ruskin complained that the whole system and hope of modern life "are founded on the notion that you may substitute mechanism for skill, photograph for picture, cast iron for sculpture."[7] Ruskin's observation is in keeping with a prominent discourse across the Atlantic between painting as art in comparison to photography, a discourse that had been in vogue since the 1840s, and had, among its early debaters, Edgar Allan Poe and his French translator Charles Baudelaire. Against Poe's fascination with the Daguerreotype,[8] Baudelaire, notwithstanding his otherwise ready embrace of modernity, found photography[9] a frivolous pursuit that at best could be a handmaiden to science and at worst, thanks to what Bazin later calls a "resemblance complex,"[10] would destroy the artistic capacity for imagination and mystification. Poe's and Baudelaire's positions reflect a series of discussions on this pressing matter that went way past their own lifetime and spilled noisily into the twentieth century, in spite of an increasingly complex jostle of ever-provocative artistic and literary movements problematizing the very idea of the *real* and the *representable*. In an article published in 1930, titled "Beauty in Ugliness," in the journal *Photo-Era*, Edward D. Wilson made an important, if not groundbreaking, observation. Stating that painting is a representative art form of the premodern, pastoral age and hence steeped in the natural beauty of the planet, Wilson writes:

> The very age, however, which created the roaring locomotive, the grimy smoke-stacks and the filthy waste-laden river has created a new form of art. This is photography. A photograph lacks color but easily rectifies this deficiency by the delicate tones which only [a] photograph can possess. Industry has little color, only gradation of tones. Photography, then, is excellently suited to reproducing its beauty.[11]

What is important is that Wilson, because he was also writing in an era by which photography had gone through multiple mutations in form and practice, points us to the aesthetic dimension in photography's urban-industrial genealogy. He concludes this essay by saying:

… [In] the city beauty must be discerned from the uninteresting, like diamonds are separated from clay … What constitutes its beauty? It is not its color that is early always a repulsive tint if it exists at all. It is its mechanical perfection, its supreme ugliness. So, beauty is accomplished at the two extremes—by complete lack of ugliness and the complete presence of it. That which reaches either extreme is a thing of beauty.[12]

Wilson considers photography as foregrounding a different idea of beauty not through existing notions of extracting what is appealing but by institutionalizing its exact opposite—the repulsive. Wilson's observations hold weight because firstly, he determines beauty and ugliness not as situated within a pyramidal aesthetic architecture of high and low but as equals in a spectrum with two extremes, both in their way reaching their sublimation in beauty, even if understood in opposite values. Wilson's argument rests on the following observation: that photography as a product of the industrial age is the most compelling apparatus to mirror its entrenched ugliness. This begs two queries: Is city/street/urban photography fundamentally beautiful in being ugly? Two, is this form of ugliness actually a photographic asset? To understand this further, one has to take note of the very complex relationship that photography developed with the modern city.

Photography and the City in the West

Reading Wilson alongside Adorno, (as well as Berger[13] and Sontag[14]) we can argue that photography, through its liberation of scopic space and the perpetuity of its reproducibility, provided the aesthetic insurgency that Adorno talks about. Photography could fundamentally and irrevocably challenge the hegemony of beauty, both as object and as value. And in the whole of photography, it is urban photography that could be considered autonomous and hence emancipatory. This is because the so-called triad of the modern metropolis—with boulevards, cafes and street life, the new architectures of modernity and photography—established a protean, vibrant relation with each other with constantly shifting registers and parameters of stillness, neutrality, exactitude and mobility. Given this protean, unpredictable relation between *iconicity* and *indexicality* in urban photography, its aesthetic is also, at the same time, political.

For example, photography's *stillness* was never considered a liability until a few decades later when photography gave birth to cinema. The contention of Benjamin[15] and Kracauer[16] that cinema came with an unprecedented advan-

tage of recoding time *within* the image, stealing from photography the element of real time, is well taken. But this also gave photography, as Barthes[17] and Burgin[18] claimed later, an access to the transcendental in the contingent. It is hence not a surprise that before cinema, photography's desire for invoking the temporal and the mobile in the modern city is indecisive. In fact a significant genre of early urban photography is *without* the hurly-burly of the modernist city, foregrounding instead the emptiness, the vacuity of the modern metropolis in an apparent subversion of photography as testimony to the obvious chaos of the modern city. The emptied city in photography is rather common across most cities in the West. Maria Antonella Pelizzari and Paolo Scrivano, for example, point at the Second Empire photography of Parisian Édouard Baldus. They write:

> Baldus's photographic "style" carved buildings from the urban context with the specific intent of interpreting Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann's (1809–1891) politics of *dégagement*, where monuments appeared as new beacons within open vistas. This attitude persisted for long, since early twentieth-century architectural historiography built its narratives on the identification between objects and their photographic representations.[19]

This attitude was not without its reasons. More recently, Steven Jacobs has historicized this spatial imperative of early city photography. He writes:

> The city was the perfect subject for early photography: the open air guaranteed sufficient light; the fixed, stable forms of urban space eminently suited to a medium still primitive and struggling with long exposure times. The tremendous activity of the boulevards, however, could not be captured. At a time when artists and writers were starting to define the modern metropolis as a place of hurried activity and fleeting impressions, photography reduced the same scene to a panorama of motionless, lifeless objects.[20]

The effectiveness of such praxis is found in Paris in the early photography of Charles Marville and the comparatively later street photography, of say, Eugene Atget or the Manhattan photographs of both Alfred Stieglitz and Paul Strand. Jacobs traces this artistic proclivity, unsurprisingly, to Charles Baudelaire's unveiling of the metropolis in his poetry as a locus of disorientating, if banal, modernity. He says:

> The modern metropolis, with its aleatoric diversity, is subject to the aesthetic gaze of the flaneur who is able to read the city's banality allegorically. Psychological isolation, an aspect of life in the modern city, is one of the poet's themes in *Ie*

Spleen de Paris (1864) … This predilection for places of emptiness and silence, however, cannot be reduced to a form of escapism. On the contrary, Baudelaire stresses the duality of the modern metropolis: it is precisely in its banality and ugliness that poetry may be found. By giving form to vacancy, the artist suggests the frantic tempo of the city.[21]

Ironically, it was in Baudelaire's foregrounding of ugliness that the modern city found its first literary articulation. And it was in trying to psychologize the same ugliness that modern photography inaugurates its ontological relationship with the metropolis. Photography in this case is more reflective than representative. Early city photography in the colonies is often cited as an exclusive and determinable aesthetic of projecting the imperial aura on an emergent metropolis. But clearly this was not something unique to either colonial photography or the colonial city.

It is not before the early twentieth century, when cinema became the recording machine par excellence, that photography reorganized the scope of its visual register to measure the taxonomy of the teeming city, with an unnerving sense of the *now* and *here*, enveloping the convergent crowd, the swelling streets and the overflowing cafes. If the emptiness of the city is a distinguished genre of early urban photography, the hurly-burly of the bustling city is the predominant theme of the later genre. Wonderful examples of the emergence of the alienated, lonely individual in crowded cities would be the candid photography of Henri Cartier-Bresson or the images used in Annie Haven Thwing's 1920 publication *Boston's Crooked and Narrow Streets*,[22] among many others. It is in this wide representational axis—from vacuity to crowd, from the immanent to the imminent—through which photography emerges into the Adornian rather than Ruskinian discourse. It established itself more adept at recoding the modern forms of urban ugliness than being keen to preserve an exclusive domain of aesthetic value.

As will be clear in the course of the chapter, a similar scopic regime—from the empty to the heaving, teeming city—distinguishes colonial urban photography too. But there the consequences—especially in terms of the value one is likely to put on the political representation of ugliness—were very different.

Photography and a Colonial City

Like most modern democracies, photographic visuality has mirrored India's arrival into modernity. But compared to the scope of its participation in the nation's life, scholarly investment in Indian photographic history is scarce.

The existing scholarship foregrounds two broad observations on Indian photographic history: First, that photography in India was tied to the global circuit of technology and the wonder of photography in the mid-nineteenth century; and second, that the invention of photography sits comfortably and contemporaneously with other techniques of colonial governance and surveillance. Concurrently, scholarship of this history has been mostly anthropological in nature, and to that end has offered an excellent critical historiography of photography that is largely dominated by deeply problematic portrait and ethnographic samples.[23]

However, more recent scholarly work on colonial photography undermines the second claim above: the claim of an overarching colonial gaze in early imperial photography. For example, Sophie Gordon's contention is that early scholarship of this genre pays enough attention to the images *themselves*, which reveal no such overarching imperative. Citing further work by historian Narayani Gupta, Gordon writes:

> There is an underlying assumption throughout that all the photographs are consequences of an unwavering colonial gaze. There is, however, scant discussion of the visual aspect of the photographs and it is the context and association of the images that is presented for analysis. The conclusion that one must reach, extending Gupta's argument, is that the colonial gaze does not, in fact, exist.[24]

Even if we can refute this complete negation of the colonial gaze and agree that the colonial eye in fact surveys if not controls the photographic set-pieces of native portrait as well as royal *carte-de-visite*, there is still considerable absence from this critical discourse of the large body of work that exists outside the genres of portrait and travel, specifically, the city photography of colonial centres. In addition to the indeterminacy of detecting an overarching imperial gaze, the colonial city neutralizes any simple notion of a gaze itself. City photography does not lend itself to the assortment of colonial apparatuses; neither does it betray any simplistic orientalist enterprise. Metropolitan colonial photography is consciously a mapping of a certain modernity and urbanism which is in contradistinction to the visual regimes employed in portrait photographs. Moreover, a city like Calcutta (with its unique position in South Asia as a spectacular re-imagination of European cityscapes) needs an ontological understanding of modernity as prefiguring its desirability as a visual/scopic object.[25] The panoramic colonial city with deliberate minimization of its publics, as has been said before, is in no evident way different from the emptied cities photographed in the West. At the same time, it can never be safely claimed that representations of the city were *entirely* outside the manoeuvers of a scopic, visual authority.

Like most instruments that announced the arrival of modernity in colonial South Asia, photography too first arrived in Calcutta, within a year of the announcement of the Daguerreotype in Paris in 1839. It is no wonder that a veritable and continuous photographic roster has since distinguished Calcutta's urban aesthetics. The exact date of arrival of photography in India is shrouded in comparative secrecy but it is clear that photographic activity in the subcontinent can be traced at least to 1840, a year after the public pronouncement of the Daguerreotype. Calcutta's legendary stationer Thacker, Spink and Co., writes Siddhartha Ghosh, was advertising the magical invention called the camera in that very year.[26] Soon, sporadic but increasing mentions of Daguerreotype and soon Talbot-invented Calotype are found in the colonial centres of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. In a decade or so a number of commercial establishments had set up shop in the colonial urban centres, and studios and *carte-de-visite* photography was already a rage. The interesting early scholarly work that exists about this time in the subcontinent—that of Ray Desmond,[27] Judith Mara Gutman[28] and John Falconer[29]—never fail to hint at the extent of popularity that photography amassed in the colonial cities in the subcontinent in the very first decade of its arrival. It is not surprising that by the time Samuel Bourne, the most notable of India's early photographers arrived in Calcutta in 1863, he was surprised by the enthusiasm around and popularity of photography.

There is hardly any scope here to go further into the fascinating history of this pioneering moment in the subcontinent's visual historiography but suffice to note that the cities' (especially Calcutta's) topography emerged as a primary object of photographic intent. Starting with Federick Feibig, we find that a number of photographers were taking note of the city's coming into modernity, in the beginning through the panorama form and then through extensive wide-angle photography.

The panoramic images of Josiah Rowe, Oscar Malitte and Samuel Bourne, from the heights of the 1828-built Ochterlony Monument, help reproduce the central districts of Calcutta, as it was laid around a critical open space— the Esplanade—around Fort William. The expansive greenery of that open space (or Maidan) is seen surrounded by the entire colonial paraphernalia— government and military offices, judicial and legal buildings, departmental and supply stores, institutions, organizations, hotels and gourmands. These images are representative of a recurrent motif of using the Ochterlony as a vantage point to view the growing modern city from the summit of built space. The Ochterlony, which stood at 165 feet, could provide the right kind of height to take panoramas of the city's horizontality while also giving a sensation of lording over it. A concomitant, sub-genre of the panorama form is

also quite commonly seen, using as a vantage the heights of newly built commercial and luxury properties along the Esplanade East, the Old Court House Street, the Strand Road and the then Supreme Court Building. Images often testify to Calcutta's "exceedingly Westernized" imperial quarters though in the same breath it warns that those who are too impressed by these mighty monuments might be sufficiently "compensated" when they enter the "native districts." Later, as the worldwide influence of Underwood & Underwood spread, their stereoscopic images are seen celebrating the "clean and airy" Chowringhee—the foundational space of the city's cosmopolitan, convivial downtown.

Unfortunately, not many early photographers ever entered the native districts and hence there is a limited parallel visual record of the so-called native quarters of the city that had concentrically spread around the colonially supervised "white" town. The limited visual evidence of non-white districts hinders any imagination of the city's gradual evolution as a whole. But the so called white parts of the city stand routinely exposed to cameras, calling for consideration of the certain pattern of producing imagery that became iconic for a time, perpetuating the format. This practice continued well into the twentieth century. James Ryan, among the early scholars of colonial photography,[30] mentions the role of the Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee or COVIC. Based on plans prepared by Oxford Historian Halford Mackinder, in 1907 the COVIC selected Hugh Fisher as the photographer-artist to travel around and record the empire, India being the first location. Ryan writes that "Photographs of imperial cities and their architectural achievements were common in published surveys and celebration of the Empire. Images of monuments and memorials built under British authority in India were particularly prolific."[31] In Calcutta, writes Ryan,

> (Fisher) discovered that by obtaining a high vantage point he had a particularly efficient way of encapsulating these public sings. From the top of the Ochterlony Monument, for example, like other British photographers before him, he surveyed with his camera Calcutta's monuments to Empire, from Government House to the distant spire of the English cathedral. In his lectures Mackinder explicitly contrasted these lofty views with an image of Calcutta's Tiretta Bazaar Street, epitomizing for him the "Native City with its narrow ways and crowded life."[32]

Exceptions aside, the city (or its central districts) that is foregrounded in and through these images is embedded in a European—indeed *Haussmanian*— idea of the nineteenth-century metropolis with clearly defined and regimented

spaces, an austere sense of order and a sensible civil apparatus that imagines and maintains the space as such. These images are often telling in the way downtown Chowringhee would be virtually emptied of people and most forms of mobilities, rendering the buildings distant, protrusive and larger than life. A wonderful specimen of this orientation is an image of the Old Court House Street looking south into the Esplanade, taken by A. De Hone in the late 1870s (Fig. 9.1). As late as 1932, a telling picture shows an incredible aerial view of Calcutta as a robust, highly Westernized, geometrically ordered, unmistakably white and composite city in full view. The images are deliberately unpeopled, panoramic and attuned to a specific architectural distinction that helps recast a distant Eastern colonial town in familiarly metropolitan means for the principally European viewers of these photographs. This, as is clear, was surely not the entire story of Calcutta, whose native quarters (at least since the mid-nineteenth century) and its mushrooming working-class slums were repeatedly mentioned in official documents and municipal records for their noticeable disorder. However, it is the story of Calcutta that travelled mainly within photographic circles, the global colonial establishments and the travelling circuits.

Fig. 9.1 An empty Old Court House Street looking south into Esplanade, the street having emptied itself on the Maidan with the Ochterlony Monument on the far left. Photo by A. De Hone (1870s)

What we in fact have as a historical record of Calcutta (or other colonial cities) is not very different from early city photography in the West—Calcutta is similarly as emptied and as distant to the human eye. In fact it would be more gainful to examine urban colonial photography as displaying the same currents as in the West, that is, over the course of about half a century or more a transition from a predominantly vacuous city to a predominantly brimming one. To understand the notion of scopic and spatial ugliness, therefore, the relevant question is not whether colonial photography was "colonial" enough, but what cultural and scopic legacy photography left for the transformed post-colony. To understand this one has to look closely at the very moment of Calcutta's transformation from the second city of the British Empire to just another post-colony.

Towards a *De*-aesthetics of Space in the Post-colony

This transition concerns the origin of the postcolonial city, if not of the entire postcolonial experience, whose birth, in the case of Calcutta, was attested by an astonishing conflation and compression of time and space, leading from a violent freedom movement to war, then famine, communal conflagration, brutal Partition and visceral violence, permanently marking a postcolonial city's coming into being with excruciating memories. Like most of the other structures of representation, the moment of the city's crisis also proved to be the moment of formidable reproducibility of that space.

Calcutta was not unused to scenes of public gathering and mass protests, at least since the early years of the twentieth century. Large parts of the city's population had been influenced by the rhetoric and emotion of nationalism from the first decade of the twentieth century. One obvious consequence of this was that the vanguard Indian intelligentsia, fed on the writings of Western enlightenment and European models of resistance, called for public violations of colonially administered city space. This was seen as a symbolic but no less triumphant subversion of the colonial body politic itself.

The unnerving disquiet of the 1940s intensified all forms of resistance. The intensifying discontent of the colony was best expressed in its most eloquent and universal voice. Only a few months before his death, in May 1941, Rabindranath Tagore, only too aware of his failing health and inevitable end, had given a seminal lecture at Santiniketan, the university town he had founded and nurtured about 200 kilometres from Calcutta. Now known as

the *Crisis of Civilization*, the essay shows Tagore's deep, almost prophetic awareness about how the long arm of the British Empire was feeding on its own tendons. At the time, Europe, in the grip of Fascist insanity, was bent on destroying the heroic achievements of enlightenment. Tagore, an inveterate internationalist, mourned the death of that Europe:

> In the meanwhile the demon of barbarity has given up all pretence and has emerged with unconcealed fangs, ready to tear up humanity in an orgy of devastation. From one end of the world to the other the poisonous fumes of hatred darken the atmosphere.[33]

Europe's possible demise forced Tagore to ponder the fate of independent India, leading to what is in fact one of the first major intellectual polemics on the emergent idea of the post-colony:

> The spirit of violence which perhaps lay dormant in the psychology of the West, has at last roused itself and desecrates the spirit of Man. The wheels of Fate will someday compel the English to give up their Indian empire. But what kind of India will they leave behind, what stark misery? When the stream of their centuries' administration runs dry at last, what a waste of mud and filth they will leave behind them! I had at one time believed that the springs of civilization would issue out of the heart of Europe. But today when I am about to quit the world that faith has gone bankrupt altogether.[34]

Historically, the colonial state, under crisis during the Second World War, was intent on strengthening its exploitative grip on the colony, even if it was for one last time—on the one hand it was fighting a war, but on the other it responded to burgeoning nationalism across the subcontinent, expressed through the violent non-Gandhian modes of resistance that the 1942 Quit India movement exhibited. Calcutta's ties to the colonial circuits of the empire were so undeniably potent that it faced the maximum brunt of its eventual and brutal demise in 1947 and continued to quiver till well into the middle of the next decade.

The Bengal Famine of 1943, which killed up to three million people by conservative estimates,[35] was just one colossal incident in a line of tragedies that struck the city in the 1940s. Before the violent, visceral impact of the famine could fade, the once scarred city (bombed in 1942) feared more Japanese bombings and experienced a fleeting moment of disaster again in 1943. Communal violence on a scale previously unseen and unheard of in the city struck Calcutta in 1946—the Great Calcutta Killings. Before the scars of

the conflagration could be mitigated, news of Partition spread and a deluge of refugees arrived in the city from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), the scale of which was, again, extraordinarily daunting. Nothing had prepared the new Indian civic bodies for this massive offensive on the city's limited resources and infrastructure. The fact that planning was minimal, execution dismal and corruption ubiquitous made any hope of purposeful rehabilitation a matter of indefinite prospect. Thus, Calcutta's emergence into a post-colony on the other end of the transformational tornado of the 1940s came at a cost that was severely disproportionate to any coherent prospect that the post-colony had nurtured for itself. A visibly receding British Empire seemed to be unveiling the deformed, unsightly city that was laying itself bare as a distasteful, festering, abject object—a constantly re-occupiable, embattled, violated urban space in which each of its many disenfranchised people were ordained to carry out their labored embodiments of filth and grime.

After the 1940s, a new image regime emerged in keeping with increasingly besieged spaces around Calcutta's central districts. This regime could be broadly said to be seeing Calcutta from up-close—disempowered and de-aestheticized. This shifting image regime unmistakably came into force as a condition of the cultural reimagination of the postcolonial city. Any interrogation of Calcutta's emergence into postcolonial metropolitanism through this difficult period must take note of how photographic practices during these two decades constructed an identifiable image regime of the city. What we find is an increasingly unflattering regime: unflattering, because the city's civic architecture was now strained to its utmost limits; unflattering because the city was increasingly rendered ungainly by the sight of hapless people—bombed, displaced, famished, violated; unflattering because the city's deformed nether regions were now an exhibit of its wholesome failure to emerge into postcolonial readiness. Hence the politics of disfigurement of Calcutta as a visually compelling motif in photography is not in spite of the historical sweep but precisely because of it.

One telling image from that period, for example, is by Cecil Beaton, ace British photographer, who was dispatched to India to cover the Second World War. Beaton wrote a corresponding diary[36] of his travels and he was clearly outraged and intrigued by Calcutta, a city which he thought had plowed the depths of depravity as much as it was gilded in gold. To that end, his images capture the extremes that Beaton wrote about. A very similar photograph by Glenn Hensley (Fig. 9.2) reinforces the camera's record of an agonizing state of affairs of a city in dire need of civic and social aid. The photograph attests to civic incapacity, the "filthing" of public space, especially boulevards, and the mobility of animals in and across the same space inhabited by the poor. The

Fig. 9.2 A glimpse of Old Court House Street. Photo by Glen Hensley (1940s)

revelation of abject hunger, across species, in open public spaces to which no one pays any significant attention had in later years become a recurrent theme in postcolonial urban iconography and images such as these have contributed heavily towards that recurrence. The set of pictures of Calcutta's quotidian life, by GI's stationed in Calcutta, like Hensley and Clyde Weddell, should be read as outside any designation of event but as traces of the changing perceptions of daily life in the postcolonial city in the midst of an epistemic change. None of these images record the sequence of disasters that were inflicted on Calcutta during this period. By sidestepping the events, the images end up perpetuating the ugly, embattled space as natural and native to a city that is emerging from ordered coloniality to postcolonial unruliness, where the ordered colonial city is increasingly being substituted by a grim, wanton misrecognition of spatial value and hierarchy. These images foreground the logic of seeing modernity as an uncomfortable co-habitant of emergent postcoloniality, each cancelling the other's claim of a definite hermeneutic of city space. Visually, therefore, there seems to be an unapologetic foregrounding of the ugly as the central motif in understanding the self-fashioning of the postcolonial city as a site of diffident urban reconfiguration.

Another set of photographs carry the overwhelming sense of a city having been pulverized by history, by events. Here one must count the photographs by Sunil Janah who recorded the street violence in the precocious months of 1942, when Gandhi, India's supreme political leader, had declared a Quit India movement against the British, taking advantage of the English involvement in the war. Then, there are rare pictures of Nonapukur tram depot in Calcutta following Japanese bombing in the fading months of 1943. The threat of Japanese bombing on Calcutta after the fall of Singapore and Rangoon had enormous psychological impact on citizens while simultaneously producing the usual wartime mischief about black markets, overpricing, provocative rumours, food shortages and civic myopia. Another group of images portray death and destitution during the Bengal Famine of 1943. Later pictures record the communal violence, Fig. 9.3 being one of the most pointedly dated of the images here. It was taken on 28 August 1946, two days after Direct Action Day, that produced communal violence on a scale unmatched before or after in the city. The photograph carries a description: "Havoc at a road junction in North Calcutta where much of the city's wealth lies. British troops had to carry out what was described as an "extensive military operation" to quieten this area. British Army vehicles can be seen in the

Fig. 9.3 Havoc at a road junction in central Calcutta after communal riots. British troops had to carry out what was described as an "extensive military operation" to quieten this area. British Army vehicles can be seen in the background (1946)

background." The image carries additional text revealing the extent of the violence. It says: "It is possible that more riots will break out in the Indian trouble centre of Calcutta, Bombay etc., at the start of the Moslem festival of Id-ul-Fitr, which starts on Thursday. All the available troops and Police have been mobilised in these centres. It is estimated that approx. 3,000 were killed in the recent four day Hindu-Moslem riots which took place in Calcutta." A final set of images refer to India's Partition—the biggest one-time enforced migration of people in human history. One cannot even grasp, from the distance of history and unfamiliarity, the enormity of Partition, which seems to have had a far more lasting influence on defining the nation and its nature than most would have thought to be the case.

Even the bleakest of Tagore's prognoses about the post-colony that would be born out of Europe's self-annihilation, could not have gauged the wanton scale of arson, bloodshed, famine and mass migration that it would entail. Little could Tagore guess that the British Empire, at its final demise, would leave behind a state deeply mired in self-loathing, a nation truncated, a people devoured and a city virtually destroyed; and all of this, within less than a decade following his death.

Conclusion

A closer inspection of the images, of which only a minimum could be furnished as illustrations for this chapter, show a clear predilection for focusing on the ungainly body of the native Indian—loitering, rummaging, occupying, disemboweling on the streets of Calcutta. High colonial photography minimized or completely obliterates the human figure in favor of the appreciable built space, but in the photography of the 1940s, the native body comes to become the portent carrier of the new state—the postcolonial state. Events provide the necessary impetus to foreground the native body as intrinsic to the change of perception of space—from segregation in earlier photography to collision. Time, in that sense, not only unravels through space but through the body politic of the city's nether aspects, embodied in the mauled or mutilated native. Together the images point to an actual breakdown of civic architecture pointing towards a potential uncontainability of the space as it is being reorganized around the audacious desires of the postcolonial mass caught in the whirlwind of change. The obvious sovereignty of the British Empire, so palpable in earlier images, was now in decisive retreat, having uncovered the city's festering disorder that seems to feed into a determinable, programmatic propulsion of ugliness as the dominant motif of urban photography of that period.

What is usually absent from the postcolonial narrative is that the conditions that blighted Calcutta in those decades cannot be explained in terms of its own, provincial doing. Calcutta had been on the global map of the colonial circuits of mobility, technology, power, policy and capital. Throughout its history, Calcutta had been a steady receptor of the Empire's boom and it was only recently before the Second World War that planning in Calcutta, something to the extent of a derivative Haussmannization, was in spectacular operation.[37] Though partially disenfranchised by the loss of its status as the capital of colonial India after 1911, Calcutta nevertheless remained the apex city of colonial ministration as much as it was the epicentre of the expanding geography of discontent against the British Empire across South Asia. Hence with the advent of the 1940s, Calcutta was to become the first inevitable and irrevocable catastrophe of the Empire's doom, a doom Tagore had predicted without imagining its decisive, divisive and devastating impact.

The camera, once the chief importer to the West of Calcutta's audacious modernity, also became the prime modality of its abject ugliness. One can read the images as individual testimonies from various practitioners of photography in the last years of the colonial period. However, one is likely to be better rewarded if the images are read as a process of complicating the archive, something that Sumathi Ramaswamy argues for in a recent anthology.[38]

To that end, one can hope to trace five broad motifs that could be said to be emerging out of what Barthes would call the "community of images" that record the restive period. They can be broadly categorized as: the appearance of native body, the exigency of event, the etiology of civic uncontainability, the effacement of sovereignty and the seduction of anti-aesthetic. Even if a delectable coloniality is not visible in early photography of the city, in late photography, the camera, increasingly focusing on the native body as a site of contestation, anthropologises the gaze, rendering what is historically conditioned by necessity and events as normative to the native and integral to its culture. To that end, photography of Calcutta, as in the West, moves from the heights and distances of framing the city in an empty imperium to increasingly seeing it uncovered in its unguarded, unchecked, suffering moments, in its extraordinary incapacity to resist disenfranchisement. But unlike Western modernity, the city becomes the native body and continues to remain so. As India, microcosomed through Calcutta, poked the sealed book of hermetic construction of a postcolonial subjectivity in the years leading to the postcolonial moment, it had to also pay the price of that desire. Postcolonial India, and definitely Calcutta, therefore had to suffer the purging of its privation through the abject ugliness of its beleaguered publics.

Notes

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22. Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of the Town of Boston, 1630–1822* (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1920).
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25. Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism and the Colonial Uncanny* (London: Routledge, 2006). Also see Tristam Hunt, *Ten Cities that Made an Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2014).
26. Sidhartha Ghosh, "Early Photography in Calcutta," in *Changing Visions, Lasting Images: Calcutta through 300 Years*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1990).
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