

The Irrepressible City of Modernity

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Historiography of the modern city must be cognisant of the historical moment in which the metropolitan space made the first gains from modernity as a deterritorialised and yet organising principle of self-articulation. The modern city is the first global space in the modern period, a space beyond narrow nationality, compressed social hierarchy and older orthodoxy. Moreover, that historiography is to be, unsurprisingly, contestable, complicated as it gets by the multiplicity of articulation, the expanding geography of inclusivity, the multitudinal excesses of its spaces and the continuing possibilities of its reinvention. As much as the modern metropolis is a product of modernity's inexhaustible possibilities, there is always an excess, an overreach, which cannot be cognitively historicised or theorised within the existing framework of disciplinary mapping. The conditions that fuelled the modern city also produced its essential unknowability, more specifically the city's irreducibility to its constituent components. Calcutta, India's *urbana prima* through much of the 19th and early 20th centuries, is an archetype of the modern city and its uncontainability, both of them spilling over into discursively unmanageable domains. It is a city whose borders are more breached than honoured, its spaces more encountered than lived. Moreover, the 1940s were unlike any in the city's tercentennial-and-a-quarter history. Bombing and wartime exigencies, a debilitating famine, ruthless communal violence and a massive human movement during partition—all within a span of half a decade—undid

Calcutta: The Stormy Decades edited by Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2015; pp xii+474, price not mentioned.*

many of Calcutta's older recompenses, sometimes irreversibly; and many of its time-honoured charms, sometimes devastatingly. Historicising that decade is hence not just about re-reading the past but also meditating on the extent of the city's brutalisation.

The anthology under review takes this task seriously and manages to pull it off successfully. The collection is bookended by essays of the editors, both, in their own right, being two of the leading historians of our time. Among them and in between them one finds explained the intellectual architecture under which the essays are brought together. Cataloguing the long list of devastations that befell Calcutta in the 1940s and early 1950s, Bandyopadhyay writes in his introductory essay,

these were the best and the worst of time, occurring in crowded sequence, churning up catastrophe and exhilaration in equal measure and ruthlessly compressing vast, unprecedented, indeed, unimaginable changes in urban landscape and demography within a span of little more than ten years. The city that was forged in and by these years was a very different Calcutta... (the anthology) thus focuses on some elements of continuity but more on some cardinal changes that have not marked previous histories of Calcutta (p 4).

This is a fair claim since older histories of Calcutta, like most other established historical lineages, were founded on either broad urban history paradigms or that of nationalist narratives and resultantly less appreciative of either microhistories or devoutly suspicious of reading the

archives against the grain. Contemporary history is steadily and productively moving away from many of the older worries of historiographic orthodoxy. And it was critical for these newer forms of historiography to narrow down on a city like Calcutta, with its crowded annals as full of meaningful events as are its archives thick with unvoiced records. As Tanika Sarkar writes in her postscript:

The present collection brings to the fore a very different order of urban existence where time becomes a palpable and mighty force, beating against urban space and people, creating, destroying and remaking lives in bewilderingly quick ways. Several momentous histories got compressed into the two decades of the 1940s and 50s. Some of them were catastrophic, some were moments of rare ecstasy and promise. The promise and the limits were, moreover, intertwined intimately (pp 461–62).

The Imprint of Temporal

Both these observations clearly make room for understanding how the temporal impinges itself on the spatial and how history writing can marshal its customary and emergent resources to interrogate the same. The anthology brings together 18 essays which are divided into four sections: "Ordering the Urban Space," "War, Famine and Unrest," "Communal Relations: Solidarities and Violence," and "Postcolonial Transition." The essays together manage to consider a very wide spectrum of themes around the unifying space of Calcutta and within the temporal specificity of the 1940s/early 1950s. This is no mean feat because almost all contributors are young or at best mid-career researchers who have only recently formalised their academic enquiry as completed doctoral theses. Moreover, poets share space with historians in this anthology.

The literary pieces, *The Flute* and *I Had a Dream One Night* by Tagore and

On a Birthday by Samar Sen (two of which are translated by historian Sumit Sarkar), add to the charm of the collection. But it is not just in the literary pieces that the collection's nod to Calcutta's many selves is highlighted. Even in the core historical essays, there are substantive insinuations of literary genres, war rumours, alternative city-spaces, oral circulation of ideas and recalcitrant visualities of Calcutta, which make a kind of historiographical stoicism sit comfortably with interpretive humanities, without either complaining of each other's dissident proximity.

Given that they had completed their monographs, Datta's and Mukherjee's essays on planning in the city and Japan's bombing of Calcutta respectively show robust historical work behind the conclusions they have reached within their fold of enquiry. Datta's essay, culled from his book¹, with newer additions, traces the establishment and goals of the Kolkata Improvement Trust (KIT), the first major institutional planning apparatus in the city, which was set up in 1911. In many ways, KIT's role in Calcutta's Haussmanisation is undeniable and in the first

few decades, the CRT drew considerable acclaim for converting a "pre-industrial" metropolis into a planned urban configuration. This planning played a part in spatialising of visceral violence during the gruesome years as well as creating possibilities of resistance to it. Mukherjee's essay, a reprint of Chapter 5 of his book,² sees the bombing of Calcutta by the Japanese army as part of their aggressive strategy and the Great Famine as interconnected calamities thrust on an unsuspecting citizenry who were already struggling to meet wartime emergencies. While it is no new fact that the war helped the British hoard foodgrains in secrecy, leaving the provinces of Bengal starving, Mukherjee's essay powerfully draws the link between the actual bombings (twice, in 1942 and then again in 1943) and circuits of food supply, condition of labourers, military skulduggery and politics of anonymous bodies left to rot in the open. This essay connects meaningfully with Ishan Mukherjee's fine essay on "war rumour" and how it shaped public and administrative discourse in the early 1940s. This essay reads the archives interestingly and traces, in a

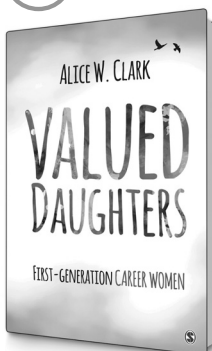
deconstructive way, the historical importance of rumour in a city under siege. Along with them one must read Nakiaki Nakazat's essay on "riot systems" during the dark days in August of the Great Calcutta Killings to be able to relive, with substantive empathy, the terrible days that befell the city.

The Disenfranchised

Another set of essays outline the various mobilisations among the disenfranchised—jute workers, tramwaymen and middle-class women—that took shape during those years leading to seminal transformations in social and political collectivisation. Anna Sailer's detailed essay on the role of Indian Jute Mills' Association during the war years and how it marshalled the control of almost every aspect of the industry using the social life and body of the worker is illuminating. One gets a clear sense of how war economy operates and how emergency reproduces the managerial state in what is but a facilitating organ in a bellwether industry. If Sailer's essay looks closely at workers in the industrial belt, Siddhartha Guha Roy's essay is

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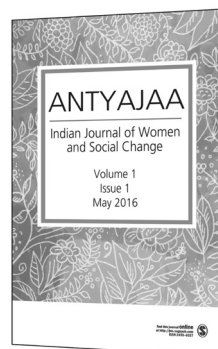
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about the militancy of the tram workers' union during the war years. Roy focuses on the role of left-wing leadership in mobilising the tram workers into a formidable workforce to challenge the tramway management, a process that later paid rich dividends to the organised left movement in Bengal. Between these two essays one cannot help but notice how the impoverished Hindi-speaking jute workers in Howrah were left to their own ill-luck while across the river, in the city, the middle-class Bengali tram workers enjoyed the privilege of being led by the cultured leadership of the left. The Bengali women were similarly buttressed by strong leftist support. Gargi Chakraborty's essay highlights how the war, the famine and later the refugee crisis offered historic opportunity for women to become part of public life. Emboldened by the heroic resistance offered by Soviet women to Fascism and under the vanguard leadership of Manikuntala Sen, Latika Sen, Kanak Dasgupta among others, the communists managed to provide considerable moral and material support to disenfranchised demographics in the city. Women as exemplar

of a singular resistant ethic and the huge political struggle to establish the refugee colonies, often with women at the helm, might be lost to a future generation but the imprint of those days, either in familial memories or in seminal works of cinema and performance (not to talk of fiction and poetry) remains unmistakable and undeniable.

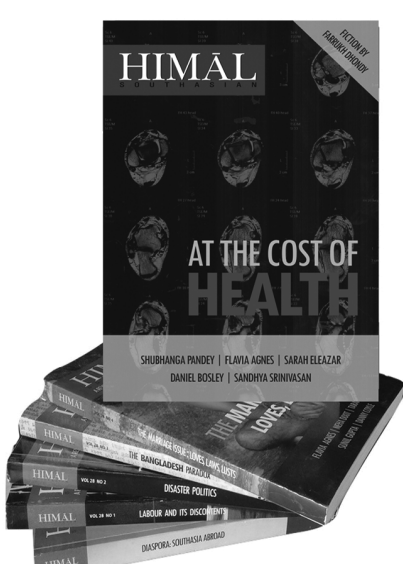
Rajarshi Chunder's inquisitive take on a city in mourning on the day of Tagore's death, which, somewhat symbolically, unbolted a decade of utmost hardship for Calcutta, is telling. While trying to historicise the events of 7 August 1941 Chunder hints at Tagore's diffident relationship to Calcutta as a kind of uber-history for that day, when private mourning for a devout humanist was subverted into a public spectacle for a "national" poet. Debjani Sengupta in her essay³ explores "public violence through fictional private lives," highlighting another role of culture in besieged times. She reads Ashapura Devi's *Mittibari* and Manik Bandopadhyay's *Swadhinotar Swad* as fictions deeply embedded within their time. The lens of fiction on historical contingency, even if not immune to

allegorisation of facts, remains one way of entering the past and to that end, Sengupta manages to trace, with impact, two very different authors—a Marxist and a closet feminist—and their reimagination of the worst of times. Her essay is further proof that extraordinary histories often produce extraordinary art.

Anwasha Sengupta's essay restores back to public memory the disturbing process of how Bengali middle-class gradually came to dominate the city after the partition, slowly but surely marginalising the city's substantial Muslim population. The roots of this majoritarianism lies in the days leading to the riots in 1946 and after but was concretised after partition, in spite of the communists trying their best to prevent blatant segregation of city's contested spaces. The role of the resistant leftists is highlighted in Anwasha Roy's essay on anti-communal resistance while Sohini Majumdar writes about the temporary relief from communalised sentiments that were culled during the Indian National Army trials. Another major structural feature of the post-colony, the refugee colony is discussed in threadbare detail in Uditi Sen's detailed microhistory



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of Bijoygarh. She manages to debunk much of the urban mythologies connected with coming into being of the colonies. The vanguardism of the well-connected middle-class leadership, across party lines, is revealed meaningfully, peeling away the usual heroics that have clouded righteous narratives of the newly-displaced class of Bengalis from what was then East Pakistan. Comparatively weak is Sukanya Mitra's essay on the Bengali melodrama *Shurjotoron*, an unrecognised retelling of Ayn Rand's *Fountainhead*. The essay tries to place housing crisis and slum redevelopment as integral to the nation-building temper of the early 1950s but falls somewhat short of being able to put the film and its concerns into a realisable historical framework. The introductory essay apart, Bandopadhyay writes an eloquent essay on what has been his area of research for a long time—the anxieties of freedom, the street-level exuberance of its actualisation, the emergent role of mass movements and the founding of a new poetics and politics of displacement and resettlement.

This is a handsome collection with a handful of discontents. First, the essays, at least those of the younger scholars read very similar. This cannot be the

work of the editorial hand but perhaps can be attributed to their having undergone the same or similar training as historians. A collection so rich in content would have done little better had the prose varied. Second, I missed mention of the Indian Progressive Writers' Association/Indian People's Theatre Association that played a stellar role in the cultural front and could sustain a number of worthy debates about the role of culture in politically and socially debilitating times. This collection, which foregrounds the importance of culture in shaping history, should have had at least one essay that takes into account new, critical scholarship that has come into being on the progressives—their art, music, theatre and cinema. To that end, one misses any mention of photography too, which played a significant role in documenting the visceral excesses that this book mentions again and again. There are a number of photographs inserted as illustrations of historical facts but none that historicise photography itself, or for that matter cinema. Finally, Calcutta's historiography would do better to include more than just Bengali historians. The history of the Chinese people, of the small but influential Baghdadi Jews, the

recalcitrant Punjabis, wealthy Parsees and especially Marwaris, who also went through great changes in their settlement or immigration pattern during those years, need to be told, specially from historians from within their cultural milieu. These are not protestations, but perhaps suggestions that could feed the intentions of a follow-up volume of essays which this reviewer is sure that the editors would consider sooner than later.

None of the above complaints should take anything away from this wonderful collection, which in fact should be widely read, discussed and taught and should become an integral part of any bibliographic collection on this much-loved, much-maligned, irrepressible city of modernity.

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NOTES

- 1 Partho Dutta, *Planning the City: Urbanization and Reform in Calcutta, c1800 to C 1940*, Tulika Books, Delhi, 2012.
- 2 Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine, Riots and the End of Empire*, HarperCollins Publishers India, Delhi, 2015.
- 3 Which is now part of her book, *The Partition of Bengal: Fragile Borders and New Identities*, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

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