

## THE CITY OF CONTINUOUS CONTRASTS

Calcutta plays muse to Rathin Mitra and Clyde Waddell in complex ways, notes Sayandeep Chowdhury.



Not so long ago, towards the twilight of its halcyon days, an iconic advertisement in *The Statesman* had described Calcutta as "much loved, much hated but never ignored". *The Statesman* was not wrong, having defined, in succinct phrasing, a whole cultural history of this sad, mad and charming city of teeming millions. Nowhere is this consciousness of the city, worthy of utmost attention if not inconsolable love, more visible than in the way it has been imaged over the last one and a half centuries.

Photography in India, in keeping with almost every other signifier of modernity under colonialism, arrived in Calcutta as early as 1840. Cultural anthropologist Christopher Pinney and others have found records of Calcutta's cityscape being imaged since then, almost at the same time when European capitals of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century were in a feverish race to photograph their own emergence into modernity. Calcutta has captivated the lenses of Malvern, Rowse, Bourne, Deen Dayal, Hoffmann and Johnston as well as many letter-day photographers of considerable repute. Calcutta's endless reproducibility has led to a wide spectrum of results that vary not just in the aesthetics and the politics of images but also their material

Rathin Mitra, *Chowringhee [At the time of constructing the Metro]*. Pen and ink drawing on paper 22" x 140". 1984. Image courtesy the artist.

and moral conditions. The 'photo-machine' as a tool of power and posturing has been employed in a host of disparate ways. Two recent exhibitions in Calcutta explore these areas with enthusiasm and provocation.

Rathin Mitra was 23 in 1949 when he joined the iconic Calcutta Group. After being away for a considerable period, it was only in the 1980s that he 'came back' to the city. His exhibition from November 22<sup>nd</sup> to December 6<sup>th</sup>, at Galerie 88, *Calcutta, The City I Love*, was a kind of a retrospective of his best works on the city. Most of them have been seen and have also been collected in a slim volume called *Calcutta: Then and Now* (1991). But that takes away nothing from seeing the work anew. In fact, one can still marvel at the meticulous documentation that he had done between the late 1970s and the early '90s. Later, he had moved on to similar projects but his drawings on Calcutta remain his *Madeleine*.

Mitra's drawings in pen and ink start by trying to capture

the strange rhythm and humdrum restlessness that defines a city like Calcutta. His best work ends up being a thorough deliberation on the city's co-habited and conflicted spaces. They are as close and as telling of their insistent tensions as one can get without actually photographing them. This is because Mitra is close to being unerring in his detailing – tenaciously observant, vigorous and fussy in getting the mood and posture of the buildings right up to their last shadow. Mitra is not just interested in drawing Calcutta as he 'sees' it. He is keen to make his drawings part of Calcutta's eminent visuality – lithographs, aquatints, watercolours – a history dotted with works by D'Oyly, Fraser, Solvyns, Loth and the Daniells. So each of his own drawings is juxtaposed against an older painting/image from either one of these artists or photographers.

Taking the vantage point of an earlier image, Mitra revisits the sites and limns the environs again, not only portraying the contemporary avatar but also presenting a comparative version of the city's multiple sites as they have evolved over the last century or so. To this end, each of Mitra's frames becomes a study of the sociology of spaces that re-affirm the city's endless

remaking of itself over the years. Calcutta is an architectural delight and Mitra's keen eye captures the magnificent spiralled churches, Corinthian columned colleges, Indo-Saracenic monuments, Neo-Gothic courthouses, Art Deco theatres, aqueducts, cantilever bridges, hanging balustrades and all the riches that the colonial capital possesses. The best of the series however is his panorama of Chowringhee during the excavation of the underground metro. This is a drawing without an 'original' because here he captures the enormous blunderbuss that the modern city is, in one frame, an imaging that no photo-lens can ever hope to encapsulate.

A few metres away from Mitra's show, Aakriti Art Gallery unveiled Clyde Waddell's *A Yank's Memories of Calcutta* from the 8<sup>th</sup> of December to the 24<sup>th</sup> of January. Unplanned though these shows were, they were not unconnected. Waddell was a professional American photographer, who on joining military service, found himself in the India-Burma war theatre in 1943, attached to Vice Admiral Louis Mountbatten, the chief of combined operations against Hitler and his allies in our part of the world. Sparingly during the War and generously after, he photographed Calcutta, mostly on assignment from





magazines in the US.

Waddell seems to roam the streets of Calcutta with mocking relish. His GI's gaze never fails to close in on morbid oriental kitsch (snake charmers, beggars, animals, dying men). But if we only locate in the photographs a 'yank's' unsavoury chronicling of a posting he would consider punishment, we are likely to miss the point. Waddell does not seem swayed by any particular vantage of looking at what the catalogue (by Charles Preston, a colleague) describes as the "greatest city of Romantic India". Waddell seems unhassled by the weight of his subject – Calcutta around the mid-1940s – a decade whose disquiet meets few parallels in the city's chequered annals. He climbs atop the newly built Howrah Bridge (opened in 1943) and shoots from the east bank to the north; he gallivants up and down Chowringhee and Dalhousie with their enormous buildings; he busies himself with hackneys, cabbies, carts, trucks and buses; railways stations and river ghats crisscross in his images. He is also an observer of GI behavior in souvenir shops, flea markets and seedy magazine stalls; and of locals in stock markets, restaurants, platforms,

Clyde Waddell. *Street scene with shoeshine boys outside the New American Kitchen, Calcutta*. Gelatin silver print. 8" x 10". 1946.  
Image courtesy Aakriti Art Gallery.

prostitution quarters and roadside places. Waddell is a consummate photographer, notwithstanding the fact that he is unsympathetic to most things he shoots, as evident in both the images and the captions.

Political correctness was not an artistic pre-requisite then. Neither should it be. Waddell's work is of great significance to visual historians. But it should be seen for the frankness of the camera's gaze that captures both the posturing as well as the penchant to record days and nights of a city that was unlike any. One photograph bears witness to Calcutta's complex character. It shows a soldier considering polishing his boots outside what is called the New American Kitchen. There is a snake charmer striding away in the foreground. As per the caption, this 'kitchen' was a popular Chinese joint, owned by a Portuguese person, served steak and was frequented mostly by soldiers who had briefly made the city home. Can it get more cosmopolitan than that?