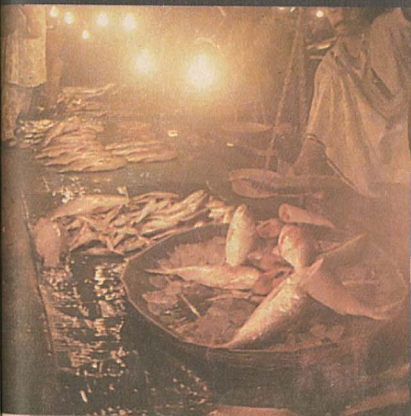


# Oh Calcutta!

It took just eight Indian wickets for a city to fall from grace. Calcutta, until now the city of joy for at least most sports-persons, had overnight earned itself a reputation for unsportsmanship that would perhaps never be erased. And all because a few bigots forgot that cricket was only a game.

But at the same time, one must guard against over-reaction. An entire city cannot and must not be judged and condemned for the insanity of a handful of fanatics. Calcutta has not lost any of its old world charm. It still is a city with a cultural heritage that should make us proud.

The following pages show Calcutta for what it truly is: The city of joyous despair.





# A BEAUTY RAVAGED

*Genesis, evolution and degradation of Calcutta*



**A**UGUST 24, 1690. THE BIRTH of a city. A city founded by chance. One which grew out of a man's whims, or historically speaking due to the need of finding an alternative business centre for the East India Company. But that sudden mid-day halt of Job Charnock, the ascribed founder of this much talked about metropolis, marked its beginning. The city has earned as many diverse sobriquets as possible: 'City of dreadful night' to Kipling and 'city of joy' to Lapierre; the 'dying city' to Rajiv Gandhi and 'city of palaces' to Robert Clive.

The contradiction of the city is very much a part of its history, its tradition. Before the death of Job Charnock, the British through a fortuitous combination of historical circumstances were able to buy the *zamindari* rights of the three villages of Sutanuti, Kalikata and Govindapur – the entire area of Calcutta – from the Sabarna Choudhuri family, the original owners. Thus the British solidified their hold and forcibly utilised the area as a commercial centre. Within less than a century of Charnock's epoch-making landing, the city had grown in beauty and importance. Travellers called Hasting's Calcutta a miniaturised tropical London. The

Frenchman Grandpre visiting the city in 1789, described Calcutta not only the handsomest town in Asia but one of the finest in the world. But the cause for such eloquence was because of the outward glitter. For while Calcutta, under the colonial pressure was swelling up the coffers of the company and revenue earnings of His Majesty's government, the city at the same time reeked in the destitute. In fact, the city from the very beginning was a stratified one. European Calcutta, throughout the 18th century was restricted to a space of a little over a square mile, with the fort at the Western end skirting the Hooghly and the well-known tank called *las-dighi*, the present BBD *Bagh*. The rest of the areas were swampy, dotted with jungles, where wild animals prowled. The European Calcutta began to expand southwards in the early 19th century, to what was until then the suburb of Chowringhee. Facing the *maidan*, Chowringhee road with its magnificent buildings including Governor General Wellesley's residence (now Raj Bhavan) to its northwest, became the most celebrated stories of treachery of holocaust – both natural and man-made, of the rise of Bengali *babus* and a shameful imitation of Western ethics and culture. While *nawabs* groaned in pleasure, malaria whipped out denizens at random. While the nouveau rich nations made a gaudy exhibition of money and the elite Bengali

ALL TEXT BY SHILADITYA SARKAR  
PHOTOGRAPHS: SUBHRASISH SINHA RAY

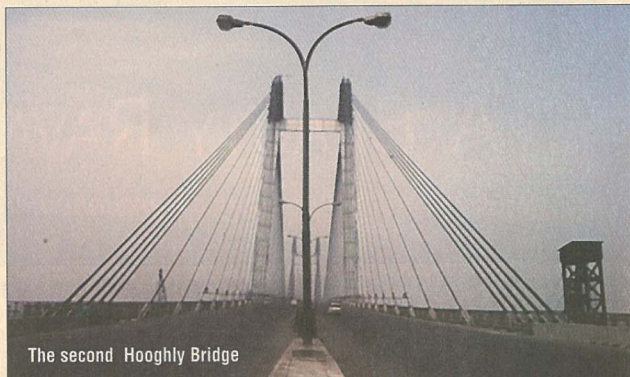


business class acted as agents for the Englishmen, the commoners remained steeped in parochial practices and struggled to eke out a living. It was not until the first partition of Bengal in 1905 – that infamous act of Curzon – that the Bengalis really geared up to take on its enemy.

The Bengali Renaissance, no matter how restricted in influence, was nothing short of a whirlwind, uprooting many traditional ethos and values. Calcutta was the nerve centre of this resurrection

process. In the social sphere Ram Mohan Roy and Vidyasagar brought havoc by banning ritualistic religion and preventing evil practices like *sati* and child marriage. Hindu College, founded in 1817, became the cradle of Western education. Being Westernised was equivalent to being enlightened. The bright students of the college, under the inspiring teacher, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio became the proverbial bull in the tradition-encompassed Bengali mind. The city responded often arbitrarily, sometimes reluctantly too, to this spate of liberalism. But Calcutta remained the first breeding ground of modern Western outlook, an ideal which the rest of the country picked up later. It was also the city of the first Indian University, the first medical college of the natives, the first Indian Nobel Laureate. Discovery of medicines for malaria, and Captain Bertie Clay's invention of DumDum Bullet are part of this city. It was also the first city to witness fully the brutal consequences of underground terrorist acts and the massive upsurge of political consciousness. It is a unique city of migrants and

refugees. The city's exceptional traits of compassion and its ability of absorption made it the home of migrant labourers. Calcutta had the dubious distinction of being the only economic drawing-point of three utterly improvised zones: Bihar, Orissa and eastern UP. The thrust on development of infrastructure experienced an imbalance, altering the shift of the capital to Delhi in 1911. This act according to a British commentator was an 'administrative earthquake'. The motive was to make Calcutta suf-



The second Hooghly Bridge



Calcutta's Metro:  
A symbol of pride

**Calcutta remained the first breeding ground of modern Western outlook, an ideal which the rest of the country picked up later.**

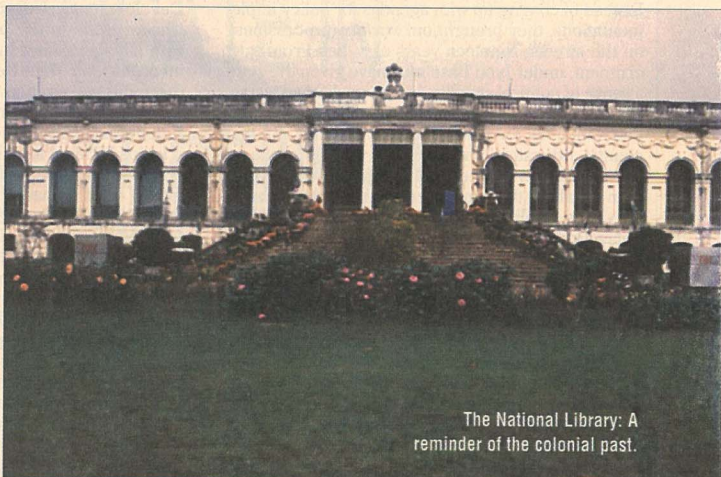




fer financially and commercially. Many deplored the thoughtless infliction of loss on a progressive community. The plight of Calcutta, however, normally goes unheeded. So, quite naturally, the city experienced another reshuffle in its demographic and territorial space in the wake of partition of the province into East Pakistan and West Bengal. Endless exodus of refugees, settled down in and around the city's suburbs – "an urban sprawl that became integrally linked to the core of the city".

The strains of such rapid historical flux have left sore spots on the city's face. But Calcutta never got unnerved. The city, it seems, was conditioned beforehand to observe and endure all the ills of an urban complex, indifferently. If at all it created a fuss about anything, it was about issues which had little bearing on the present, or gave in easily to passions. This explains the city's preoccupation with things cultural even at the height of the freedom struggle, or the city's responsiveness to political outbursts. The fact that the province, in the quagmire of political game planning became a pawn and was humiliated by slicing it twice, was borne with relative calm.

In the process however the city's past glory got washed away. The post Independence period, till date, is testimony of the gradual erosion of the city's infrastructural base. Apart from the early inspiring leadership under BC Roy, Bengal in the decades following freedom was a showcase of industrial decay. Once a throbbing commercial centre, Calcutta's lack of industrial base compounded its urban problems. Space was always a problem in the city. Influx of citizens from neighbouring areas crammed the city's shrinking space. Its transport system is a nightmare. Drainage and sewage system, dismal. Academic eminence got blurred. Quality of political leadership became doubtful. Angry wrath against this decay was most violently expressed during the



The National Library: A reminder of the colonial past.

### The city experienced another reshuffle in the wake of partition of the province into East Pakistan and West Bengal.

late '60s in the form of the Naxalite movement. No other city in India, and very few in the world have experienced the consequences of the outbursts of politically motivated youth. The city literally fished under the onslaught. Too many bright students willingly sacrificed themselves in that pyre. And they successfully rung the deathknell of the bourgeoisie. But in retrospect, it achieved nothing. The movement was inspired with a great cause no doubt, but the unmindful means employed to implement it was enough to rob the city of many of its vitalities. First, the student community itself became a depoliticised lot, the vivid memory of 'naxalbari' and the repressive state machinery employed to curb it, in the end was able to instil in the psyche, a sense of fear; secondly, the once monolithic naxalite group, broken into many splinter groups, further aggravated a sense of apathy towards the earlier cause and ideal. Politics no doubt remained, and is almost synonymous with Calcutta, but what changed colour was the standard of political discourse and political ethics. While students restricted themselves to college unions, acting and reacting in a haphazard way, the leader's only political socialising was restricted to *maidans*.





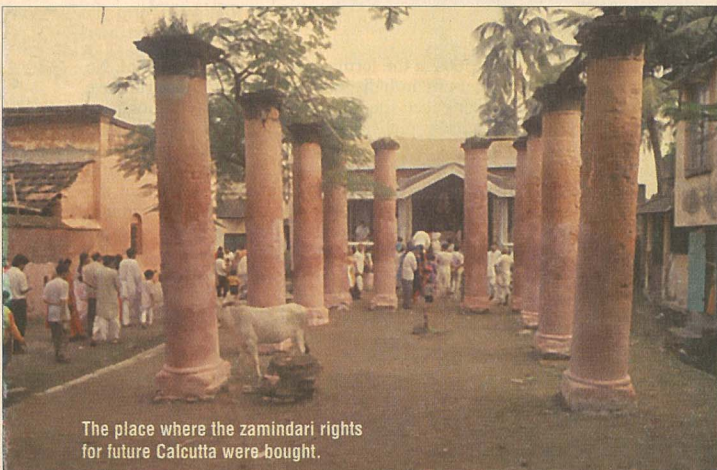
Instead of coming up with agendas for policy implementations, they brought out *michils* (processions) on the streets. Nineteen years of a Left-Front government, under Jyoti Basu may have given the state a sense of political stability, but on qualitative terms, the track record is not impressive. The party is targeted mainly for pulling down Calcutta on two counts: Education and Industry. CPI(M) style of politics, however, seems destined to last longer than usual, for the simple reason that Calcutta lacks a viable political alternative. It offers an unfavourable climate for any fundamentalist forces to strike deep roots. Even Amra Bangali – a party floated to gear-up sentimental passions about Bengal – did not get a launching pad. A xenophobic attitude is alien to Bengal. And if any apathy is expressed towards any community, it is the Marwaris. There exists an uncritical consensus that they have alone pocketed all the wealth of the city. But if one goes by the Bengalis' own track record, it becomes clear that erosion of industrial units from their own hands is because of their lack of enterprise in business. Of late, however, even political leaders have expressed grave concern on the city's lack of industrial units. West Bengal Industrial

Development Corporation, under Somanta Chatterjee, is in the process of brisk negotiations with NRIs and other Indian businessmen for investment plans in West Bengal. The city is now under this industrial euphoria.

Calcutta is in the midst of such utopian groans. Eulogy and eylesy on the city are forever written. But it keeps kicking, kindling hopes of a second regeneration. Both futuristic activism and a pining nostalgia go hand in hand in the city. The city remains hanging within the legacy of the Raj and the ideals for the future. Given the contradiction of the city it doesn't look out of place. Colonial clubs, with their European facade still persist. The British obsession with horses is still carried out sprawling race-courses. In the 200-year-old Tollygunge Club, golf is played with zest. People in the city still play that most British of games: bowls. Victoria Memorial – that architectural climax of the British Raj – has remained the awe-inspiring symbol of British splendour. The grand National Library reminds the city of its colonial past. In the midst of archaic and grand colonial architecture, sleek, modern buildings look a bit out of place.

Though Calcuttans are still commuting in trams

which are more of a nuisance than a utility, the city also possesses an impeccably maintained Metro. Metro rail is the result of patience of its inhabitants who made it a symbol of pride. So is the second Hooghly bridge. Roads with potholes, with terrible traffic rules, are overlooked in the ecstasy of having the first hanging bridge in India. In the night, under the neo-lights, when the whole bridge is bedecked in lights, it assumes a sentimental reference point to Calcuttans. For its people love in being distinctive. If the city lacks in anything it is civic sense. But then isn't Calcutta the ultimate city which also has the ability to nurture culture within a mesh of civic chaos? ■



The place where the zamindari rights for future Calcutta were bought.

ASHOK SEN

**Nineteen years of a Left-Front government, under Jyoti Basu may have given the state a sense of political stability, but the track record is not impressive.**