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**CALCUTTA:**  
**TRAVELLING THROUGH ITS TEXTS AND TIME**

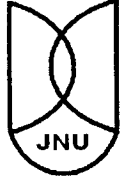
Dissertation Submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the award of degree of

**Master of Philosophy**

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*And indeed there will be time  
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,  
Rubbing its back upon the window panes;  
There will be time, there will be time  
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet  
There will be time to murder and create,  
And time for all the works and days of hands  
That lift and drop a question on your plate;  
Time for you and time for me,  
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
And for a hundred visions and revisions,  
Before the taking of a toast and tea.*

T.S. Eliot

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## CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE:</b>	
<b>A Colonial Broth: City, Self and Literature</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>CHAPTER TWO:</b>	
<b>Calcutta as Sung by the Subaltern</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>CHAPTER THREE:</b>	
<b>Multiplexed Calcutta and Critical Nostalgia</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>105</b>

## Introduction

*Cities, unlike villages and small towns are plastic by nature. We should mould them in our images: they, in their own turn, shape us by the resistance they offer when we try and enforce a personal force on them... the city as we might imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate in maps, statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demographics and architecture.*

-Jonathan Raban

Calcutta has been the subject of many an academic work and numerous coffee-table books. The hypothesis of 'a' city has been long discarded and substituted with the notion of polycentric western cities and incalculably and inherently fractured postcolonial cities. Still, to begin with markers, one can see how for Michael Keith, the 'city form' may be understood "both as represented and a crucible of representations." If production of the city *space* involves material, psychological, political, economic and sensory processes, then the city will necessarily elude a totalizing *cityscape*. In other words, the flood of images and sensations of the city require simplifying devices which range from the literary space of locution to the actual physical artifacts that are spaces of inhabitation and production. The city is however not merely a sum of its representations, it is also a space where individuals and groups challenge, appropriate, adapt and stray from the rhetorical, material and ideational level.

Calcutta, the celebrated colonial port and, recently, much critiqued by the city's intellectuals for its 'deteriorating intellectual and cultural clime,' has proved to be a historian's delight with its rich archives of colonial settlements and influences, the birth of the indigenous 'modern' man, and post-independence radical political movements and mayhem. Urban sociology is centripetally drawn to its darker side – unemployment, industrial debacle of the last four decades, slums, *adda*-s, immigration/population, and housing – which has engendered many an article and book, although this may not have been the only object for sociological studies. Calcutta, in the West, has also been at various points cited as the case of the incomplete transition to modernity; a failure of the empire's project, a more dreadful microcosmic version of India's modernity.

Precariously positioned on this picture of doom is a new Calcutta, one of the seven cities that are slated to get a facelift as part of the Mega-cities plan, a city which seeks to boost its service sector and find its correlation in packaged habitat in the form of extended

satellite towns, condominiums and sprawling malls. The glare and rush of this frenzied consumerism is hard to miss. The urban topography is changing, and the elephantine city's slow metamorphosis into a busy network of highways and enclaves checkered by malls and *bustees*, is yielding new ways of experiencing the city.

In the light of the hyperreal glow signs of global capitalism, my objective here is to compare and study different narrative modes and investigate various technologies of representation that have been deployed to simplify as well as meditate upon the complexities of this city as an evocative and expressive artifact. I would like to meditate upon how narrative modes – song (performative/visual/written), *naksha-s* (textual) and blogs (hypertextual) – access in their individual capacities the overwhelming images and emotions of the city.

Among the many attempts at capturing the city through aural, visual, and performative technologies, the word-city or the city as text, has representationally and symbolically emerged as a more accessible construct. How is a city sensed? - 'The eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things: pincers point out the tooth-drawers house, a tankard, the tavern; halberds, the barracks; scales, the grocer's... Other signs warn what is forbidden in a given place...and what is allowed.'<sup>1</sup> Speaking of the 'soft' city of Raban, writing perhaps retains the maximum plasticity of all representational modes with literature being the fecund site where multiple signs interact and intersect. Literature is a *de rigueur* intervention to rein in the recalcitrant city. It has provided a space to imagine the city creatively, to adapt to the city's changes imaginatively and ideationally. In writing, the city is eulogized, reworked, tweaked here and there, critiqued, and more often than not, it is created – a Phoenix in words or an obdurate Huehuecoyotl. This dissertation, however, moves from the amorphous terrain of literature of the nineteenth century and the songs of the Bauls through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the 'blog' diaries and chat excerpts of the new form of cyber-sociability.

According to Joachim Von Der Thusen, this heterogeneous image-making project follows linguistic processes such as metaphoric, metonymic and symbolic operations. On a metonymic level, a structural icon comes to stand in for the historical past or some prominent aspect of the city. Joachim's example is that of The Big Ben which stands in for the temporal rhythm of London and its history. In the case of Calcutta, one can think of Sumit Sarkar's note on Victoria Memorial and its significance for Lord Curzon, its

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<sup>1</sup> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, London: Vintage, 1997. p.13



benefactor. The Victoria Memorial was imagined not only as a cosmetic structure but also as a mnemonic contrivance testifying “to the history of India itself in the past two centuries.”<sup>2</sup> Today it is reminiscent of Calcutta’s colonial history, although ironically, the Victoria Memorial also connotes Curzon’s unfinished project of investing the ‘remote and largely unhistorical past’ of India with ‘a still more visionary future,’<sup>3</sup> a purpose the grand marble structure was to itself embody but for the end of empire.

Writers have availed the flexibility of literature to adopt different metonymic devices or invest the central metonym with different sets of meaning. Metaphoric representations of the city are a search for a single expression or word which will encapsulate the protean city. ‘City metaphors have a holistic tendency. Speakers who use them search for the one encompassing image that will contain the unstructured and will give meaning to the incomprehensible energies which threaten the onlooker.’ ‘Often, the city has been described as a ‘jungle,’ ‘river’ or ‘bazaar.’ In *Kalikata Kamalalay*, Calcutta is ‘a river thickened with sharks and crocodiles’, and *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* evokes the image of a crowded marketplace or carnivalesque. Such expressions use concrete constructs to grasp the ideological quality of the city. In literature, often, a single metaphor is refuted by the use of a spate of countervailing metaphors. And on the symbolic level, the image constructed is of an ideal greater than the city itself, an example of which is Jerusalem perceived as an interface between heaven and earth.

The relation between structures of literature and cities has been consistently reciprocal. In literary representations, the ethnically, racially or economic polysyllabic urban landscape is negotiated; an engagement with the ‘other’ expresses itself in the tensions between the generated poles of hinterland and metropolis, city and frontier, alienation and self-aggrandizement, nature and artifice. The forms of articulating the experience of the city, is conjoined with the growth of the city. As Richard Lehan summarizes, ‘Comic and romantic realism give us insights into the commercial city; naturalism and modernism into the industrial city; and postmodernism into the postindustrial city. The city and the literary text have had inseparable histories.’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hiren Chakraborty, ‘The Victorial Memorial,’ quoted by Sumit Sarkar in *Writing Social History*. p. 163.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Joachim Von Der Thusen, ‘The City as Metaphor, Metonym and Symbol,’ in Valleria Tinkler-Villani (ed.) *Babylon or New Jerusalem: Perceptions of the City in Literature*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Lehan. *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. p. 289.

The notion of an originary city has long been debunked in favour of protean cities birthed by different historical conditions and contexts. In the colonial context, third world cities, which had foregone an industrial phase, have been subjected to an understanding that claims they have inherited a city-type out of the imperial encounter. This is true only to the extent that there was, on the part of the colonist, a definite attempt to reproduce the mother-city in the colony as in Ebenezer Howard's drive to plant garden cities throughout the empire in the early twentieth century. In the case of Calcutta, the project of constructing a familiar space, the white town created out of necessity and then nurtured irregularly, escaped the imperial control and gave birth to a hybrid construct where the city space was considered profane and liberating, on both sides of the colonial divide. Indeed, Calcutta did not grow out of any clear intention and was more a result of bureaucratic and administrative necessity than formal city planning. The prolonged colonial contact and the experience of early capitalist development manifested themselves in the archetypal image of chaos, disorder and irreverence. In Simmelian terms, the metropolitan space creates the techno-rational man out of the unholy alliance of money economy and intellect where the individual's rationality stands in contrast to the emotional irrational rural inhabitant. The city here stands in for a schizoid, hyper-rational and calculating modernity where money becomes the common denominator of all values and also by extension a way the controlling center of economic, political and cultural life. Nineteenth century Bengali literature grapples with this overwhelming experience of the urban in all its colonial specificities and, especially literature by rural authors seem to be grasping the novelty of city life where a synesthetic and cinematic presentation of the city includes both city-as-a-stage and city-in-opposition-to nature tropes. If the dynamic city is seen as generative of a certain kind of literature, then literature too affects the way the city is received and its space performed. This 'shared textuality,' to borrow a term from Richard Lehan is the concern of 'A Colonial Broth: City, Self and Literature,' and 'Calcutta as Sung by the Subaltern.' To this, in 'Multiplexed Calcutta and Critical Nostalgia,' I also add the newer forms of interactive media – cyber 'blogs' – which include a reflective journal entry (and I stretch the inclusiveness of 'literature' by incorporating it), a poem and a chat conversation. The last is not 'literary' but it is dialogic and it is through this dialogue that some of the principal concerns of the chapter are delineated and deliberated over.

The cultural and eco-political formations of the city cannot be easily divorced from the formation of personal identities, subjectivities and in a modernist strain, the impact of 'grand structures' of colonial, capitalism, caste, market, globalization. Thus the dissertation intends not only to re-present Calcutta but also to investigate the underlying power structures that manipulate and facilitate such representations. And such an investigation is necessarily a multifaceted and polyglot exercise which involves contextualizing and historicizing the subject, here referring to both 'city' and 'locutive subject.' The chapters explore the mode, content and context of these representations of the city. As deductive equipments for making intelligible the 'profuse profanity' of the city, these modes of textuality reflect and evince multiple intersections of identity, culture, locality, resistance and accommodation. The chapters progress on an interlocked thoroughfare of time and space, of privileged and marginal identities, territorial and de-territorialized anxieties, modern and postmodern conditions, historical and nostalgic exercises.

'A Colonial Broth: City, Self and Literature' studies *naksha*-s of the nineteenth century to delineate the various intersecting developments and processes of modernity facilitated by the advent of printing and the role of literary irony in the construction of a Bengali collectivity. The *naksha*, discussed in detail in the chapter, was essentially an urban literary innovation contingent upon the historical exigency of colonial Calcutta. *Kalikata Kamalalaya* (1823), *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* (1871), and *Kalikatar Nookochuri* (1869) are rich in their specificities; each has as their central focus a different aspect of Calcutta charting not a straightforward linearity but a temporal alignment emerging through the trope of '*kaliyuga*' which is calibrated by spatial aspirations within a dystopic/utopic paradigm. If an overarching framework is to be desired, then the negotiation of the Bengal upper/intermediate caste male with early and colonial modernity through the reflective space of literature and irony. I argue the scope and potential of the literary humor and irony of these *nakshas* vis-à-vis the criteria and possibilities of such irony in defining the Bengali self as against a white supremacist 'other' as posited by Sudipta Kaviraj in 'Laughter and Subjectivity: The Self-Ironical Tradition in Bengali Literature' (2000). Literary irony acted as a methodology to read the imperfections of a present self and in imagining a *desired* self that would equal the white colonialist. Central to this project remains the cityspace and the imperfections and disruptive tendencies of colonial Calcutta operate simultaneously to denote the fragmented and difficult modernization of the city as well as the modernity of the

Bengali self. *Naksha*-s have been mostly neglected as 'light' or 'dispensable' prose compositions – negligible in literary value and unserious in intention. Only recently in the last century did *naksha*-s come to be actively collected, annotated and read (though by only a few eager readers) as either material artifacts of the nineteenth century, or as resources of academic research – a postscriptal canonization. However, as is evidenced by Kaviraj's bias for canonized authors such as Bankim Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore and Sukumar Ray, the *naksha*-s continue to live an adumbrated existence due to such popular appellatives as '*bangyo*' or '*bidrup*.' The chapter, therefore, intends to study the semantic possibilities of the texts: *naksha* as a discourse on the city and the inseparable processes of self-construction and limitations and potential of the genre.

The following chapter, 'Calcutta as Sung by the Subaltern,' attempts to capture a perspectival shift from middle-class representations of Calcutta to the subaltern imagination of the city. Bauls and other subproletariat religious groups such as the Kartabhajas have had a conflict-ridden relationship with the city of Calcutta. The Bauls by their presence were thought to profane the cityspace because of their controversial sexual and occult practices and anti-establishment politics. Both educated Hindu and Muslim middle-class perceived them to be as threats to the construction and presentation of a Bengali identity that conformed to a Victorian notion of morality, a Hindu concept of pollution, and a Muslim aversion to religious assimilation. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even into the 20<sup>th</sup> century these groups, from Young Bengal/Derozians to *Tariqa-i-Muhammadiya* and *Faraizi* condemned and persecuted Bauls on the basis of their anthropophagic, sexual, and occult rituals. However, the Bauls' rehabilitation into the cityspace and urban imagination was equally politically impelled because of a certain concatenation of historical exigencies. Rabindranath Tagore, the most celebrated Baul exponent, established the Baul as the rural romanticized other of the urban modern Bengali and founded them as one of the loci of nationalist discourse of peasant simplicity and unsophisticated spirituality. For this, the Baul underwent a discursive sterilization where the problematic aspects of the religion were expunged.

The emplacement of baul songs in the chapter bears in mind this complicated relationship with the city. Baul philosophy and politics has very definite rural roots. Its non-conformism was a reaction to the oppressive, caste-ridden, exploitative social order. The radical politics of Bauls' thus was quick to respond to the exploitative regime of colonialism, the latter's processes manifested most acutely in the imperial epicenter of Calcutta. However,

over the last fifteen years, the Baul has yet again been reinvented by the city. The chapter intends to delineate the complexity of this reinvention which draws both upon the historical construction of the Baul image, as the modern Bengali's 'simple other,' as well as the present reign of commodity capitalism. Interestingly, the present context allows for a more visible agentive role to the Baul. The commodification of Baul music, its circulation as 'world music' in the global market, and the lifestyle changes of the baul that directly contradicts the renunciatory philosophy, indeed hints at bleak prospects. Nevertheless, based on the polygonal impacts of technologization of music and mass media one is yet to see if Baul music launches a disruptive, interruptive and interventionist strategy of critique or perpetuates its existence as 'packaged rebellion.'

The city's active courting of forces of resistance to its urbanity and its ability to flatten history draws our attention to the specific city-form of present day Calcutta. As has been mentioned above, Calcutta's landscape is now sliced by chic skyscrapers, glassy malls, air-conditioned departmental stores, and 'safe' niches of walled condominiums. 'Multiplexed Calcutta and Critical Nostalgia,' is a query into this rapid and ongoing transformation. A study of the South City Project, a sprawling condominium with an attached mall, serves in many ways to explicate the spatio-economical changes besetting the city. However, like Walter Benjamin's angel of history, Calcutta tears *ahead* with its face turned backwards to a past that is being either (e)razed or commodified as 'heritage.' This chapter posits the interventionist power of nostalgia to question notions of 'progress' and 'development' against the global construction of spectral realities, productions of pseudo experiences of nature, consumption of commodified leisure and a reordering of spatial configurations. The global condition of transnational production, dispersion of labour, dissolution of territorial boundaries or rather the disposal of territorial boundaries, rapid and renewed intensity of mass migration has given rise plurality, difference and specificity. Much has been said on the decentered subject, fragmentation of identities and polarization of marginalities and marginal spaces as a consequence of dissolution of territories by this present 'world order.' But rise of the revolutionary de-territorialized space of the Internet has emerged as the new mode of sociability and political mobilization. In this dissertation, I look at the 'blog' and its multifarious use by a technophilic polity as sites of reflection, discourse and political strategizing with relation to the specific case of Calcutta's prostheticization into a global city. Through these nostalgic exercises an oppositional politics against the teleology of progress is forwarded and the potential of the Internet of this process is explored.

However, I am aware of the specificity of the instance itself. The Internet obviously is not, in the third world context of Calcutta, a tool of the proletariat – although it shows protracted signs of popularization among the masses with the vernacularization of cyber-scripts. On the contrary, it is a fast growing necessity for the middle class. Thus when one speaks of nostalgia, she refers to such expressions and practices of a middle class partaking of the grand-narrative of the history of Calcutta which also has access to the means of such enunciations.

Importantly, the nuances of the very experience of and nostalgia for Calcutta are sieved through the filters of Calcutta colonial history.

### The Growth of Calcutta

*I could tell you how many steps make up the streets rising like stairways, and the degree of the arcades' curves, and what kind of zinc scales cover the roofs; but I know this would be the same as telling you nothing. The city does not consist of this, but of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past.*

-Italo Calvino

Calcutta has been variously called the 'City of Palaces,' 'City of the Poorest of the Poor,' 'City of Joy,' 'City of processions,' and now perhaps it is settling down somewhere between 'city of ruins' and 'city of mall' in local parley. But to rehearse yet again the birthing of the structures and signs that make up Calcutta or Kolkata.

It is not to be assumed that Calcutta or Kolkata (Bengalis seem to have laid an exclusive claim to it) has been a relatively self-oblivious city and has only started to scramble for a definition and a past. The city's awareness of itself has been almost coeval with its transition from one of many trading cities of the east to the epicenter of colonial trade due to its excellent navigability. Rangalal Bandyopadhyay in *Kalikata Kalpalata*, a historical account written approximately between 1850-1860, moves beyond what he finds an inconsequential debate over the meaning of 'kalikata' to assert the existence and importance of Calcutta before the British 'created' it. "To this end, he cites ancient literary texts to place the city's antiquity. Bandhyopadhyay quotes the *ancient* poet Mukundaram Chakraborty, the author of *Chandikabya* of the 15<sup>th</sup> –16<sup>th</sup> century, who narrates the journey of Srimanta Sadhu to Sri Lanka while marking all the cities on the way, one of which is Kalikata.

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<sup>6</sup> Rangalal Bandyopadhyay, 'Kalikata Kalpalata', in *Dushpratyyo Shabitya Shangraha*, ed. Kanchan Basu. Calcutta: Reflect Publication, 1992.

Bandhopadhyay gives a fairly consistent account of Calcutta's emergence after Saptagram suffers a setback because of the parching of the River Saraswati. The three villages dihi-Kalikata, Sutanuti and Gobindapur came into prominence after the merchant class especially the weaver castes of Seths and Baishakhs shifted to Kalikata to ply their trade once Saptagram started to lose thoroughfare due to its drying waterway. It should be recalled here that Calcutta did not magically grow out of a colonial wand fulfilling its master's wish. Calcutta was made possible because both indigenous and colonial joined forces. Rangalal preconcerts Farhat Hussain's anxieties on the eclipsed history of Calcutta's own dynamism that propelled its growth, its advantageous location and the city's readiness to accommodate foreign trade. He cites three reasons for the East India Company's final gamble with Sutanuti, Kalikata and Gobindapur: the depth of the river Bhagirathi (Hooghly) on the west bank, the entreaties of the Seths and Basaks inhabiting the eastern coast, and the hope that the location would keep the Marathas at bay. In reference to the last point, Farhat Hussain makes a case for this merchant class's contribution to 'the morphological development of the city.'

In 1708, when the Company were planning to dig a ditch around Calcutta, they found that 'the Merchants and Inhabitants are so sensible of the security and benefit of such a ditch that they would be at half the charge of it and offered it to him [Jonathan Winder, a Company's official in Bengal] before he came away.' This ditch- completed in 1742 and described in the English sources as the Maratha ditch- was, in fact, constructed at the insistence of, and was largely financed by, the merchants of Calcutta. For we are told by Orme that in 1742 'Indian inhabitants of the colony requested and obtained permission to dig at their own expense round the Company's bounds from the Northern part of Sootanutty to the southern part of Govindpoore.' The Company apparently advanced a loan of Rs. 25000 to Vishnudas Seth, Ramkirihnsa Seth, Ravishiri Seth and Amichand for the same purpose. <sup>7</sup>

Not only had the Seths and Basaks migrated to Sutanuti and its adjoining areas (Pradeep Sinha identifies their occupation as being restricted to 'a ribbon of high class settlement, stretched in a thin line along the old course of the river for four to five miles to the south of the core of the British settlement' <sup>8</sup>) but they had also brought along the essentials of a 'bhadra' society – the Brahmins, the Baidyas, and the Kayasthas. Evidently, functionality of a society depended on the presence of all important caste groups. <sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> As quoted by and in Farhat Hassan, *Indigenous Cooperation and the Birth of a Colony: Calcutta, c. 1698-1750*. *Modern Asian Studies*, vol 26, no.1.(feb.,1992).pp.65-82

<sup>8</sup> Pradipt Sinha, 'Calcutta in Urban History. Calcutta: Firma KLM Pvt Ltd., 1978. p. 2

<sup>9</sup> Rangalal Bandyopadhyay, *op cit.*

So little is known of Calcutta's precolonial life that it is tempting to forfeit its lineage in favor of the adjectival *tabula rasa* whereupon not only did the British inscribe the colonial city's physical space but also gave it a calendar. But what we do know, or can know, is in the buzz of the great bazaars of Calcutta, the Turks, Jews, Armenians, Portuguese (the Portuguese slave trade that plied in Calcutta, there were markets for the buying and selling of slaves) merchants from different provinces of India, and the locals, interacted and transacted. If we read Bandyopadhyay and Rev. James Long together we might get a peep into these obscurities of place and people. To work backward with a quote from Rev. James Long in 1872:

The position of your Society in Burra Bazar has often reminded me, in threading into its labyrinth, of the adage: 'One half of the world does not know how the other lives.' The Burra Bazar and the Mughal part of Calcutta are quite a terra incognita to the other part, and I hope your society will pursue its inquiries into the curious social life of the Marwaris, the Jews and Mughals that inhabit the far-famed Burra Bazar.<sup>10</sup>

Here, Mughals may include Muslims of Iranian and Turkish descent as were known to have been resident in the region. Sinha reminds us that historically the bazaars gained popular form and frequency with the coming of the Arabs and later the Mughals. The synchronicity of the indigenous *banyas* and various Central Asian groups ethnic groups lent a complexity to the bazaar economy. This sophisticated and peculiar bazaar phenomenon along with its temporary and sometimes permanent structures and attendant ethno-business communities, continued parallel to British settlement and expansion. As Sinha notes, "The colonial setting created... a new firm-oriented economic organization which retained economic initiative in the port cities, leaving the traditional bazaar a large degree of autonomy."<sup>11</sup> In fact, in *Kalikata Kalpalata* we find a list of the bazaars in Calcutta that were brought under the East India Company's rule and which paid taxes to the company. These were Mandi Bazaar, Burra Bazaar, Bag Bazar, Hat Sataluti, Shovabazaar, Dihi Kolikatar Bazaar, Shyambazaar and a few others. Out of these Burra Bazaar remains the "oldest 'Oriental' urban market," to borrow a phrase from Sumit Sarkar. It continued to be the traditional cosmopolitan hub of trade and commerce as it was with the mix of ethnicities which caught the attention of Rev. J Long. These bazaars themselves could have been archives of the lives and times of what we now call Calcutta.

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<sup>10</sup> N.N. Laha, *Subarnabanik Katha o Kirti*(Bengali), vol.3, 1942; excerpts from the fifteenth Anniversary Proceedings of the Family Literary Club, pp.27, 20. as quoted in Pradip Sinha.

<sup>11</sup> Sinha, *op cit.* XVIII



On 29<sup>th</sup> August, 1690, Charnock landed in Kalikata and within few years the East India Company not only bought Sutanuti, Gobindopur and Kalikata which formed this golden strip but also laid claim on the surrounding areas of swamps and jungles. It is the manipulation of this relatively 'empty' strip that often gets pre-eminence in discourse over the inhabited and busy coastlines. To give an idea of the structural density of the land bought by the British:

The earliest documentary evidence for a reasonably comprehensive physical picture of the territory destined to grow as the city of Calcutta is the account of a survey conducted by the Company in 1707. The great Bazar about half a mile to the north of the old fort was already the most populous built-up area, having 400 bighas built over out of its entire area of 488 bighas. Houses with grounds account for 248 bighas out of 1717 in Town Calcutta and 134 bighas out of 1692 in Sutanuti and 51 out of 1178 in Gobindapur. The extent of jungle was 263 bighas in Town Calcutta, 487 in Sutanuti and 510 bighas in Gobindapur.<sup>12</sup>

The British did inherit the great salt lake swamps and the jungles but so had the Seths and Basaks, the migrants from Saptagram who fortuitously had made ready the then extant jungle tracks for the colonizers. In fact, the locals, in recounting this act of theirs, referred to the two communities as '*jangal kata basinda*,' or the 'jungle clearing settlers,' informs Sinha. Here is a reproduction of C.R. Wilson's quote from the 'Consultations, Fort Williams, September 11, 1707':

In consideration that Jonnundan Seth ... will keep in repair the highway between the Fort's landmark to the northward on the back side of the town, we have thought fit to abate them in a bigha of their garden tent which is about Rs. 55... and they being possessed of this ground which they made into gardens before we had the possession of the towns and being the company's merchants and inhabitants of the place.<sup>13</sup>

This was also the year when arbitrary constructions of houses and ponds without permission were prohibited by the British.

By the time Rangalal wrote his *Kalikata Kalpalata* in mid-nineteenth century the face of Calcutta had changed. In fact, his opening lines claimed that the façade of Chowringhee itself was reassuring of the city's progress. The white settlement began around the Laldighi and Fort William. Chowringhee was born much later at the turn of the century south of Park Street with 20 garden houses with colonial effort. The scene after a hundred years, writes Rangalal, is different:

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<sup>12</sup> Sinha, op cit, pg 6.

<sup>13</sup> C.R. Wilson, *Early Annals of the English in Bengal*, Vol. 1, p.289 as quoted by Pradip Sinha, op cit. 62.

*Eikhone kalikata nogore emon dui charjon lok paao jai janhara amrabati tulyo chowringhee ke baghranibash jangal o goder matthe holprobaho drishti koriyachen, shei shomoye doshyubhoye shahebdeeger bhritiyagon shubrabbanta parityag koriya moleen beshe ai math diya gamanagaman karito ebong ratrijoge shahebra pranbhore mahumurku bonduk dboni karten...ekshoto botshor hoilo –kalikata nogori bhayaboho byaghro nokradir shojol jongolmoi boshostholi chilo kintu ekhone shei kalikatai niyoto 5/6 lakhya lok bash kariteche.<sup>14</sup>*

The exact processes of British and native collaboration, trade and ascendance to prosperity have been researched and written about at length and continues to be so. Those are not the foci of this work, although parts of it will feature in discussions of the literary imagination of the Bengali. But there is something to be said about the socio-cultural osmosis that came about in the native society on the heels of colonial extravagance.

I tend to agree with P.J. Marshall that Calcutta's wayward babu class absorbed western culture and lifestyle more from the spectacle of what can be called the 'whites' tropical carnival' that set in from the early days of Company settlement, than from institutionalized capillaries of knowledge.<sup>15</sup> The colonial population only exceeded 1000 late into the eighteenth century and the census of 1866 shows it having reached 11224. As soldiers constituted the greater part of the population, it was only the elect few 'civilians' who labored to recreate England in Calcutta, or more importantly to create what they *imagined* high society in the mother country to be and did their best to emulate a notion of grandeur which by the end took on an exorbitant standard of opulence unthinkable by the metropole itself.<sup>16</sup>

Within the first thirty years of the colonial city's life, the Company officials had earned enough wealth in their limited capacity of independent trade to attract considerable attention. Directors of the Company back home was not happy with the 'expensive and extravagant way of life, particularly in equipage and show' or in the fact that the Governor had 'a sett of musick at his table and a coach and six with guards and running footmen.'<sup>17</sup> Once Calcutta became the capital of British India in 1772, immense wealth was acquired through trade and also the high officials received lavish remunerations. It led to intense competition in England for positions in the company and more so for a position in the Civil

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<sup>14</sup> Rangalal Bandyopadhyay, op cit. pg1

<sup>15</sup> P. J. Marshall. 'The White Town of Calcutta under the Rule of the East India Company.' *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2. (May, 2000), pp. 307-331.

<sup>16</sup> The soldiers and sailors were considered to be of low 'caste,' a sort of replication of the Indian caste system and kept out of bounds by the British high officials and society, the elite few of colonial Calcutta.

<sup>17</sup> OIOC, Letters of 25<sup>th</sup> January 1730, 3 December 1731, E/3/104, p.674, E/3 as quoted in Marshall, 7.

Services which promised almost instant prosperity. These young men who vied for a piece of the empire's fortune came from landed and politically influential families. This, Marshall notes, produced an elite segment that prided itself on its gentility. This intensified and further developed the culture of excess and exclusivity.

Centres of leisure were apace with those in England. By the 1770s subscription assemblies were booming in the white town as they were in British towns. The Harmonic Tavern mainly hosted parties and assemblies, which included a 'concert, ball and supper'<sup>18</sup>. Public entertainments were held in the Old Court House and later the new Town Hall with which matters got even more elaborate. And the founding of Bengal Club in 1927 and United Services Club in 1845 enabled even more exclusive social events. Music took center stage from quite an early age of the white town – professional music performances in private homes, a rage for Hindustani music, music lessons, orchestras were standard in the eighteenth century, and operas including one by 'the French Company,' performed in 1837, were introduced in the nineteenth century. Theatre was not to be left out either – the theatres of the eighteenth century and the playhouse of Chowringhee, which burnt down in 1830s, regularly staged the staple Shakespeare and contemporary comedies performed by amateur European locals and continued to thrive when professional actors began to appear. Painting was patronized, and rivaled any collections in Britain. Marshall names Johan Zoffany, Arthur William Devis, Tilly Kettle, William Hodges, Thomas and William Daniell (who documented the street scenes of Calcutta in their paintings), Ozias Humphrey and George Chinnery visited the city and made fortunes. The social scene of the white town was dominated by men; the women kept to (quote). The most wives of officials engaged in were charities like the Ladies Society for Native Female Education or the European Female Orphan Society and similar missionary organizations when the latter made a foray into Calcutta in the second half of the century.

The prodigality of the white town with its literary, cultural and architectural overabundance did not escape criticism from travelers and self-conscious inhabitants like Macaulay. The over-sufficiency in all aspects of life was termed as 'vile' by Thomas Babington Macaulay – 'Vile acting, and viler opera-singing and the conversation is the most deplorable twaddle that can be conceived.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Letters of Elizabeth Fay, ed. E.M. Forster, (London, 1925), p.192, quoted in Marshall, op cit. p.19.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Babington Macaulay, The Letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay, ed. T. Pinney, quoted by Marshall.

Insofar as the fascia of prosperity, profligacy and pleasure took a normative form, spillage of the same onto the native comprador class was the logical upshot. The comprador class took on many of the 'habits' of the colonial masters 'by a mechanism which remains unexplained.'

...architectural styles moved from the white town to the black town. Classical European elements were reproduced in the great houses of north Calcutta. Rich Indian customers evidently bought furnishings, especially glassware, at the European shops. There is little evidence of Indian interest until later in the century in European music or their visual arts, but European theatre was clearly of absorbing interest to some. A Hindu Theatre on European lines to put on plays in Bengali was established in 1831, characteristically of Calcutta, by a Committee. Selections from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar were among the first productions. As a knowledge of English spread, members of Calcutta intelligentsia showed themselves to be widely read in western literature.<sup>20</sup>

As we have come to discuss cultural transactions in Calcutta, it is in the nineteenth century that Calcutta resoundingly emerges as the stage which inaugurates the theatre of modernity. The foremost marker of nineteenth century Calcutta, the literary world of the Bengali in the 1800s (print and renaissances often forge intimate connections) was the body where the impact and debates fathered by the Renaissance thrashed themselves out. As a preliminary note on the turn Calcutta takes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the cultural spotlight that Calcutta seizes as well as submits to (and which would bring to it the appellation of 'the cultural capital of India' even to the present day), it should be recalled that the attendant effect of the Bengal renaissance was the development of a historical consciousness that demanded resurrections of a past that could compare with western civilization. The renaissance individual found himself assigned the task of 'combining purified indigenous tradition with the desirable elements of a foreign civilization.'<sup>21</sup> This struggle and its ramifications up to the present day colours all bourgeois representations of Calcutta.

The imagination of Calcutta in the twentieth century as the cultural capital of the country draws upon this idea of renaissance, appropriating it in a way which runs contrary to the self-image of the nineteenth century itself. Calcutta even today is claimed to be a city of and by Bengalis and the latter claims to have benevolently accommodated 'non-Bengalis' and 'marwaris.' Calcutta had always been a multicultural trading center; its marketplaces have always been multiethnic. The Bengali identity, is now well known, to have been forged in

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 24

<sup>21</sup> David Kopf, *Nineteenth Century Bengal and Fifteenth Century Europe*. Calcutta: Committee for Cultural Freedom, 1963.

contradistinction to other ethnic groups in Calcutta, articulating its modern identity in ways which have lent to the stereotyping of the other. However, the city's most thriving business community, the marwaris, are continually denied their right to the city where the very question of symbolic and cultural right has been arrogated by the middle class Bengali. Sumit Sarkar writes, 'That image (of Calcutta) in the twentieth century has been of a city predominantly Bengali (and implicitly, high-caste Hindu) in culture,' if not by way of statistics. 'The first decade of the twentieth century was crucial to the making of this imagined Calcutta, for in significant ways, at least as a positive stereotype, it had not existed earlier.'<sup>22</sup> The renaissance in Bengali was obviously an elite affair, as all retrospective renaissances are, but the collapsing of the renaissance with Calcutta, the colonial city, seems to be more attributable to the decline of the mofussil towns that were also centers of the *nabajaganan*. However, those who came to inhabit it in the 20<sup>th</sup> century precisely drew on these discourses and histories, to establish a new unapproachable identity for themselves.

In the twentieth century, the struggles for independence, Tagore's rise and enshrinement, the foray of Bengali culture by way of cinema into the international scene and the coming of the Left into power along with the radical movement of the 1960s have carved another and conveniently continuous history of cultural and political intellectualism. The celebration of the seventies and eighties has recently given way to nostalgic longing in the face of a transforming city, which seems to threaten this inheritance. The need to *be* appropriately Bengali, Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, has been a nineteenth century inheritance that has come under the axe of globalization. I extend this proposition to include that this crisis of identity – the specific need to *be* Calcuttan – the idea of the *who* is umbilically related to the *where* and that the latter is as much important to the existence and affects the praxis of the *who*. Dipesh Chakrabarty's 'Romantic Archives: Literature and the Politics of Identity in Bengal' is a valuable supplement to these questions. The mutually reinforcing character of the interactants, place, identity and literature, specifically in the context of Calcutta, is the motif of my dissertation. In this respect, the questions raised by Chakrabarty about the interfluent discourses of Bengali literature and identity contribute substantively to the discussion of Calcutta and its present cultural 'crisis.' Chakrabarty asks a direct question: 'Will the investment in Bengali literature that marked Bengal's colonial modernity survive the

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<sup>22</sup> Sumit Sarkar. *Writing Social History*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 167. .

impact of globalization?’<sup>23</sup> This may also be rephrased as ‘Will Calcutta marked by Bengali modernity survive the impact of globalization?’ By the end of the nineteenth century, Bengali anti-colonialism synchronically founded an aesthetically sensitive Bengali identity and this intimate connection between a praxis of aesthetics and identity, is now felt to be waning in traditional, and I will add, specifically urban Bengali middle class homes.

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<sup>23</sup> Dipesh Chakravorty ‘Romantic Archives: Literature and the Politics of Identity in Bengal,’ *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 30, No. 3, Spring 2004, p.1.

## Chapter One: A Colonial Broth – City, Self and Literature

*The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live everyday, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.*

– Italo Calvino

This chapter explores the signposts of the Bengali Renaissance man's consciousness and the structures and aspects of Calcutta that received preeminence in literary undertakings. The objective here is to underscore the continuum or overlaps in the responses of Bengali intellectual figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the city – an enquiry into the topical in their works. It must be clarified at the very outset that this chapter and the concomitant history of Bengal embedded within it refer to mainly upper-caste Hindu constructions of the city. I forward an apology for my engagement with only Bengali representations, and specifically that of the Hindu Bengali male, due to lack of time, space, and scope. In connection to this, I must also declare that at no point is the term Indian or indigenous deployed as a congealed unproblematic category but is an operative shorthand for my present purpose.

Much has been said about the relationship between the novel and city, but the texts read in this chapter are primarily *naksha*-s – *Kalikatar Nookochuri* by Tekchand Thakur Junior or Chunilal Mitra, *Sachitra Gulzarnagar* by Kedarnath Datta, and *Kalikata Kamalalay* by Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay. I will recapitulate the themes that are present in these selected texts and have incurred a large corpus of secondary literature over time. My aim is to synopsise *the city that has been written* through the literary form, *naksha*, and which the twentieth century has inherited as a metanarrative of Calcutta. In fact, by exploring the thematic relevance of the city in the nineteenth century, we'll find that the literary representations are in the vein of a conversation between an English-educated *bhadralok* intelligentsia and a readership which came mainly from the same socio-cultural order with either overlapping or counterweighing ideological commitments. Following S.N. Mukherjee,<sup>1</sup> one can say that internal conflicts within the *bhadralok* class play out also in these *nakshas*, which in turn, have been constitutive of the *idea* of Calcutta.

*Naksha* in Bengali means a sketch, or a pattern, as in embroidery. The closest literary translation of *naksha* would be social satire, although the dictionary specifies it to be 'a sort

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<sup>1</sup> S.N. Mukherjee, "Daladali in Calcutta in Nineteenth Century", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 9, I, pp 59-80.

of literary burlesque.’ However, although satire and laughter is more commonly associated with *naksha*-s as the latter’s primitive identification, it may not always be the case. Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay’s *Kalikata Kamalalay* is known as the first *naksha* in Bengali literature, but the satirical touch is evidently absent; neither does it evoke the comic. It is rather a portrait of contemporary Calcutta painted in words. The latter two *naksha*-s are more explicitly satirical, with the comic appearing in parts and episodes. Thus a safer and more inclusive treatment of the *naksha* form would be to consider it as a prose composition engaging with contemporary social life presented through a conventional narrative or/and vignettes which employ(s) irony, as we shall see, to fulfill certain social functions. *Naksha*-s, more importantly, were a singularity of the urban nineteenth century. A popular literary form, its appearance and utility in contemporary society were concurrent with the transitional phase of the Bengali cultural and political landscape referred to as the Bengal Renaissance. Gauging by the subject matter, function, and style of the genre, the *naksha* also signified an intermediate phase in Bengali urban prose. It drew its substance from the societal changes which beset Calcutta with the advent of print technology, the onset of a new eco-cultural dynamics, and the birth of a Bengali public space and sphere. Calcutta was being cultivated as the controlling centre of all political, cultural and literary activities and the satiric vein in literature seems to have been an ironic offshoot of the very project. On the birth of Bengali urban literature, Asitkumar Bandyopadhyay has remarked:

*Gramin bangla shahityo atherosho shotabdir sheshbhag hoite nagarik shahitye porinoto hoilo. Itipurbe gour arakan, murshidabad o krishnonogor shikkha o shongskritir kendre porinoto hoyachilo bote, kintu modhyojugio bangla shahityo konodin nagarik shahityo hoy nai ba bishesh kono kendro hoite procharito hoy nai – kebol brindabon-er shorgoswami probhura kichukal baishnobdhormo, shomaj, o shahityo-r kendrosthole biraj koriyachilen. Shomogro desh juriya ei shahitye-r bhumi prostut hoyachilo, kobi shahitye-geon gramanchol-e jonmogrohon koriyachilen, gram-i chilo prachin o modhyojugio shahityer procharikendro. Kintu unish shotabdi hoite adhunik bangla shahityer jonmo hoilo, kalikatay kendribhuto hoilo, gamin shahityo hoilo nagarik. Kohite gele gramjiboner shobit unish shotabdir bangla shahityer jogajog pray lop pailo. Adhunik bangla shahityo tai kalikata-r shahityo. Tabar shohit polli-praner shongjog nitantoi kheen.<sup>2</sup>*

Here, we may extend the theory of the interconnectedness between the novel and the city in the West to indigenous literary prose formations of Calcutta such as the *naksha*. The above quote explains the centrality of the imperial epicentre to the birth of a new kind of literature and the shift (and development) of the cultural centre from its rural moorings in Bengal to colonial Calcutta.

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<sup>2</sup> Asitkumar Bandyopadhyay, *Unobingsho Shatabdir Prathamardha O Bangla Sahitya*. Calcutta: Bookland Private Limited, 1959. p 27



The *naksha* was one such product. The art of the *naksha* was mourned to be in decline by the time *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* was published in 1871. *Naksha* in Bengali came to be developed into two kinds – one would be a compilation of sketches stringing various themes together, and the other kind usually had a plot of which *Kalikatar Nookochuri* and *Sachitra Gulzarnagar* are examples. The latter two texts invite readers to experience Calcutta through the incidents involving one or more central characters, whereas Bhabanicharan's *Kalikata Kamalaya* or, even for that matter, Kaliprasanna Sinha's *Hutum Pyanchar Naksha* directly stage snippets of city life under specific labels through a dialogue or a third person narrator. For its narrative techniques, the *naksha* could involve more than one mode in a single composition – third person commentary or first person narration, dramatic dialogue, interspersed with Bengali lyric verses, local proverbs and ancient quasi-religious epigrams (usually at the beginning of a new chapter or section). If satire, by definition, is bereft of sentimentality or emotions, then the same cannot be said about *naksha*. Both *Kalikatar Nookochuri* and *Gulzar Nagar* evince a nostalgia and longing for a humanity and 'tradition' under threat from the newer forces of a westernized modernity.<sup>3</sup> While they expose the moral fabric of Calcutta among various power-wielding groups and condemn exaggerated and unconventional reform movements, the texts in consideration retain a religious and emotional underpinning throughout the narration, perhaps as an antidote to the calculating rational coldness of city-life and partly as an ideological imperative.

Sumanta Banerjee posits the 'heterogenetic' character of Calcutta as the source of new modes of thought formed out of relationships that were based not on 'a traditional moral order but on a business or administrative convenience.' This convenience itself was necessitated by the onset of a capitalist economy within a colonial set-up. The new modes of thought arising out of this situation, Banerjee comments, produced literature and art which either contradicted or overhauled the older cultural terms.<sup>4</sup> The *naksha*, a product of this colonial modernity, evokes both the ethical and comic in man. The explicit aim in most is to 'hold up a mirror to the social being' encapsulated in the phrase 'apnar mookh apni dekhoon' made famous by the *naksha* of the same name by Bholanath Bandyopadhyay. Speaking of the comic mode in *naksha*-s, we may retract and expand Sudipta Kaviraj's exposition, in 'Laughter and Subjectivity: The Self-Ironical Tradition in Bengali Literature'

<sup>3</sup> Here I would like to state that I am not adopting modernity and tradition as two mutually exclusive binaries.

<sup>4</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta*. Calcutta: Seagull, 1989. pp. 2-3

(2000), of the nature of modernity and literary humour in Bengali (high) literature *beginning* with Bankim Chattopadhyay to the genre of *naksha*. If construction of the self and its formation through reflection is the seal of modernity, then the genre of *naksha* does certainly offer itself as a veritable and rigorous exercise in this project of modernity. The twin facets of modernity have been explained by Kaviraj as a) the discovery of the self that already is and investigation into the nature thereof, and b) idealization of the *desired* self. These are the predicatives of modernity acting themselves out variationally in different contexts.

The desire for an idealized self comes coupled with the sense of choice. Our desired self is necessarily a choice. We choose to be this or that; in retrospective historical analysis, Bengalis were the first to imagine the Indian self for obvious reasons of having had the most sustained colonial contact. This necessity to *become* the 'imagined' self 'through reflection'<sup>5</sup> manifested itself through literature in India: 'It was through literature that Bengalis came to form historical ideas about what had happened to them through colonial processes, and imagined their collective selves – through various suggestions by literary writers about what was central to their self.'<sup>6</sup> Literature was the field through which a collectivity could be imagined and vicariously experienced. Literary humour and irony were central to this enterprise: 'Literary humour in particular discussed how they could acquire what they lacked, and become more perfect than they were.'<sup>7</sup> It was the space which enabled 'reflections' on the imperfections and achievements the self to which the Bengali aspired to.

Here, something may be said about the kinds and origin of humor and self-irony in the Bengali literature of the period. Sudipta Kaviraj notes:

Literary humour came from several sources, classical, folk and the peculiarly derisive wit that the fragile prosperity of colonial Calcutta gave rise to: the humour of a people who were themselves somewhat bemused at their own historical good fortune, a subtle anxiety about the rapidity with which they were elevated, by their association with British rule, to positions of evidently undeserved eminence. This produced a genre of local town humour which consisted not only in lower classes satirizing the more fortunate, but also the babu bantering his own breed, a trend luxuriating in witty, often somewhat smutty songs. Colonial opportunity for self-advancement created inexplicable cases of rise to fortune which attracted acerbic comment.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, "Laughter and Subjectivity: The Self-Ironical Tradition in Bengali Literature", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2. (May, 2000), pp. 379-406. p 379

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p. 381.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p. 382

The humor of *naksha-s* can be said to belong to the category of ‘derisive wit.’ Bengali comic literature, in its modern avatar, had abandoned gods and legends in favour of describing types and characters. Art and literature, from the demoted stigmatized presses of Bat-tala, to Kalighat *pat-s* and *bhadralok* literature, seem to have been riveted to the *babu* phenomenon. In the shadow of the *babu* one might get glimpses of the marginalized, hovering on literature’s fringes. The *babu* was destined to continue his monopoly on literary imagination till the turn of the twentieth century – Amritalal Basu’s play, *The Babu* (1892) bears ample testimony to the character’s extant strength. The *babu* was a subset of the *bhadralok* class. The term *bhadralok* contains multiple indices of caste, business, profession, intellectual acumen, and cultural values. The *abhijato bhadralok* was a class that acquired privilege and property in the capacity of *dewans* (intermediators) and *banians* (agents) under colonial expansion in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The *maddhyabitta* or *gribastha bhadralok* – English-educated affluent salaried middle class – birthed the Renaissance actors who were conscious of their higher caste in spite of an iconoclastic politics. Mukherjee writes that this new class fashioned itself as a distinct entity, separate on the one hand from “the feudal aristocracy and peasants of the rural area, and on the other, the English administrators and urban poor of Calcutta.” It was so in spite of the fact that some had direct connections with the countryside in the capacity of rentiers under the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793. Bhabanicharan, in *Kalikata Kamalalaya*, recognizes another component of this class which was the *daridra bhadralok*: “*keho mubori keho meto keho bazarsarkar ityadi kormo koriya thaken. Bistor path haantte hoy. Pore pray pratidin ratre giya dewanjir nikat agye jeagye mahashay mahashay karite hoy. Na korileo noy. Poda udorer jala.*”<sup>9</sup> The *babu*, however, emerged from the *abhijato* class and, originally, the term was pejoratively used to connote the singular lack of immoderacy in his department and consumption. (Of course, by the third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ‘babu’ became an honorific title used by and for the professional *maddhyabitta bhadralok*.)

The spectacle of the *babu* was displayed in an urban environment, which was unmistakably familiar as well as intimidating. By the nineteenth century, Calcutta was more *sabeb* than ever before. Lines of racial difference were sharply redrawn and these were cultural as well as territorial. In the midst of strengthening colonial economy and administration, the indigenous community appropriated structures and discourses just as much as they hesitated and distanced themselves. I quote Sarkar again: “Nineteenth-century Calcutta had become a real metropolis

<sup>9</sup> Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay. *Kalikata Kamalalaya*, Calcutta: Nabapatra Prakashan. 1987. p. 7.

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for the bhadralok, providing education, opportunities for jobs, printed books, a taste for new cultural values. It was also, by and large, a city where the bhadralok did not feel at home, an experience embodied in the practice of the Bengali gentlemen, ~~off~~ well into the twentieth century, calling his city residence *basha*, reserving the more intimate term *bari*, for the ancestral village home."<sup>10</sup> The city came to the forefront of concerns fairly early in the history of Bengali modern literature. The novelty of urban experience, the hybrid cultural forms, the anxieties of a colonial modernity required an internalization that found method and direction in the fortuitous institution of printing that vernacularised literature and the press and promoted a sense of collective identity and inclusiveness. *Kalikata Kamalalay* (1823), one of the first literary undertakings in the vernacular, negotiate the corrugated and variegated city from an upper caste perspective; *Kalikata Nookochuri* (1869) written almost half a century later may be read as a kind of literary report on the progress of the mechanisms set off in the 1820s; and *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* (1871) presents a wider social canvas and a complex critique of the subaltern spaces of the city. An umbilical relationship between self and city is palpable in all these texts.

*Kalikata Kamalalay*, *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* and *Kalikatar Nookochuri* represent and participate in their own historical contexts. The Calcutta of *Kalikata Kamalalay* was alive with proliferating vernacular presses and periodicals began by Serampore Protestant Mission in 1800, and the impact of the introduction of English education with Hindu College (1817), Schoolbook Society (1818), Bishop's College (1820), and theological/cultural organizations like the Antiya Samaj (1815) and Gauriya Samaj (1823) in the previous decade. The 1820s was also a decade that was beginning to comprehend the implications of Rammohan Roy's reformist politics along with the entrance of Christian propaganda into the printed public realm. These historical developments are enunciated throughout the structure and content of the text. *Kalikata Kamalalay* stands at this crucial juncture of Bengali colonial history. In relation to *kabiwalas*, Sushilkumar De has succinctly synopsisized this socio-cultural condition of Bengal and specifically urban centers such as Chinsurah, Chandernagore and Calcutta:

The days of royal patronage ended with the older feudal system under the British around the last decades of the eighteenth century. A capricious section of landlords and speculators rose stepped into their place who lacked the same refinement and inherited the tradition as the ancient aristocracy of the land. The commercial banians, seths, and merchants, constituted themselves a class of patrons who demanded literary entertainment of a momentary nature. They could not spare the time or the willingness to study the arts.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Sumit Sarkar. *Writing Social History*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp 176-77.

<sup>11</sup> Sushilkumar De, *Bengali Literature in the Nineteenth Century, 1800-1825*. Calcutta: The University of Calcutta Press, 1919, p 308.

The fierce mercantilism, according to Bengali literary critics, left no space for the 'healthy' growth of culture and social intercourse. What has been mourned as 'the interminable literary slumber' of the first decades of the 1770s to 1800s, beginning after the death of Ramprasad and Bharat Chandra, was only occasionally given a jolt by professional versifiers (*kabimala-s*) in the city. This phase has been termed as 'the cultural interregnum' in Bengali literary history. With the advent of printing and specifically, initiatives of the Serampore Protestant Mission (1800), it is claimed that the Bengali was re-united with his literary past celebrated as the 'bangla nabajagan.' The mission not only printed and published travelogues and articles on world history, Indian geography, western politics in *Samachar Darpan* (weekly periodical begun in May, 1818), it also was the first to reprint ancient Bengali poetry and scriptural texts composed by Chandidas and company between 1300–1700 A.D.

The 1850-70s were also dynamic, marking some of the high points of indigenous and imperial undertakings. Normal Schools were established throughout the country by a directive issued by the Court of Directors in 1854 for the popularization of primary education, along with institutionalization of an Education Department within British administration. 1860 was a volatile year when the unchecked oppression of raiyats by British adventurers and speculators patronized by the East India Company found powerful expression in Dinobondhu Mitra's dramatic masterpiece *Nil Darpan* which weaved atrocities and injustice perpetrated in the indigo plantations into its arresting plot. The indigo movement was also a landmark in Bengali journalism. The acclaimed patriot and journalist, Harish Chandra Mukherjee, revitalized the Bengali political sphere and empowered the 'Native Press' by persisting in his criticism of colonial policies, first with an open criticism of Dalhousie's annexation of Oudh and Canning's policy during the Mutiny of 1857, and then championing the cause of the indigo raiyats in his formidable journal, *The Patriot* which eventually facilitated the 'Indigo Commission' and the institution of reforms. Furthermore, a sensationalistic train of events such as the widow remarriage agitation, the rise of the 'fountainhead of Bengali poetry,' Iswar Chandra Gupta, the rise of Madhusudhan Dutt, the emergence of Bengali theatre and drama, and Kesab Chandra Sen's joining of Brahma Samaj followed. The provocative adjustments made to the Brahma Samaj by Kesab Chandra Sen with relation to women's education, widow remarriage and religious views led to the bifurcation of the Brahma Samaj into the 'Adi Brahma Samaj' of Debendranath Tagore and 'Brahma Samaj of India' of Keshab Chandra Sen. Contemporary

Calcutta was also reeling under the effects of the famine of 1866-67 and cyclone of 1868. There are both overt and discrete references to the historical events and characters in the *naksha*-s, most of which however are lost now to the present reader.

### I. *Kalikata Kamalalay*

*Kalikata Kamalalay* is a complex triangulated mapping of the ways of this *babu* class, its reconfiguration of caste hierarchies, and its social programme which had so vibrantly animated the city of Calcutta. The meanings of this city may be traced and interpreted through the dialogue between the metropole (city intellectual) and periphery (*bideshi* interlocutor). I hope to show that the web of questions and answers centre around a caste-class-city lock which betrays the premonition of a possible onset of *kaliyuga* that was to capture the Bengali imagination in the latter half of the nineteenth century as explored by Sumit Sarkar in *Writing Social History*. *Kaliyuga* is the fourth, most degenerate, of the *yuga*-s or eras in Hindu cyclical time characterized by the destruction of social order, a symptom of which is the inversion of the gender and caste hierarchies. In his essay, 'Renaissance and Kaliyuga: Time, Myth and History in Colonial India,' Sarkar dwells on the predicament of the Brahman middle and lower middle classes who identified the nineteenth century as *kaliyuga* when, if we look closer into the social fabric, lines of discontent of the '*bhadralok-kevan*' class over the colonial order of things are prominent alongside the breakdown of traditional structures. *Kalikata Kamalalay* reads as a portentous precursor to this angst that was to grip the upper caste male of Calcutta a few years later. The dialogue in *Kalikata Kamalalay* is an excursion into the heart of the second decade of nineteenth century Calcutta while it bears out the time-honoured binary between nature/culture or city/country. The regionalism inherent in the structure of the text testifies to the nature of socially produced spaces that signifies production of loyalties and a sense of place. Thus it is an expression of social control and power relations prevalent in society. The discourse not only reveals the politics of power within the actual city but the dialogue brings to the surface the power relations between the two actors who represent the imagined polarities of village/city.

The point of departure in this text is the placement of peripheral and metropole in diametrical opposition: the latter is identical with guile, corruption, intrigue, and false values, and the former is its natural and positive other. The introduction lays out the instructional

aspect of Bhabanicharan's composition which is to help the foreigner to Calcutta navigate through the labyrinthine city: "*Palligram nibashi o onanyao nagarbashi lok shokol ei kalikatai ashiya ekbankar achar bichar byabohar reeti bakkousholadi obogoto boite asbu ashomortho hoyen.*"<sup>12</sup> The areas identified as problematic for the novice are material, ethical and intellectual. Here the foreigner is ostensibly from a rural background, intellectually and culturally lacking:

*...jokhon nogorbashi bahujan ekotro boiya kono prashnottor bhabe porashpor kothpokothon koren totkale polligram nibeshi byakti kono shaduttar korileo nogorastho mohashoyra taha grahon na koriya kohen tumi polligram nibashi orthat padagnaye manush otolpo dibosh kolikatai ashiyacho ekbankar reetigyo noho, ei kothai proyojon nanchi.*<sup>13</sup>

The text, the author believes, whether aurally received or read individually, will equip one with the survival mechanisms needed to beat the byzantine ways, laws, and speech of Calcutta. The author intends to impart this knowledge through the structure of a dialogue between the knowledgeable *nagarbashi* and eager *bideshi* (ostensibly from the rural backwoods of Bengal as expressed in the line: '*...amar agyata arthat pada-gneye kalanka bhonjon korile onyodbare mohashoyke shadhu shadhu dhonyobad korito*').<sup>14</sup>

The narrative opens on a religious register where the goddess Lakshmi, symbolising wealth and power, is invoked as the resident goddess of the city through a metaphoric play of wealth, religious symbols and geography. Calcutta is an ocean of wealth and power, growing in prosperity and flowing in riches. Its beauty and plenitude is celebrated throughout the country. Of late, however, populating the city are some 'slandrous sharks' and 'uneducated crooked crocodiles.'<sup>15</sup> Description of this conjugality of *dharma* and wealth in this 'kalikata kamalalay' is the task the author has set himself.

The tensions borne of the city are manifest in the questions and answers of two unnamed men. At the outset, the *nagarbashi* clarifies certain points about the general conduct of non-urbanites in Calcutta. In his opinion, a person arrives from the country and proceeds to board at a relation's house. He gets the opportunity to be introduced to prominent men, and begins to freely make social calls around the town. Under the able and generous guidance of a knowledgeable member in a group, many a novice has gained proficiency in English, Hindi and Persian, and has also distinguished himself in the learned circles of Calcutta in matters of intellect and bearing. Some have even made small monetary gains by

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<sup>12</sup> *Kalikata Kamalalay*, p 3

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p 5

<sup>15</sup> *ibid* p 4.

striking the right social networks. However, this has not prevented them to criticize and abase this city and its people. Moreover, removed from familiar surroundings, migrants from villages accept and indulge in dishonorable undertakings out of a sense of anonymity in the city. Thirdly, cheap labor from the country has had an adverse impact on the employment prospects of urbanites. Fourthly, some people have the good fortune of gaining employment as a *sarkar* or accountant in a prosperous household. By observing all commands and fulfilling all requests, both legitimate and illicit, they ingratiate themselves with family members, and secure their position therein. The consequence of such unholy alliances has almost always been the defrauding of the family. On the death of the employer, these men usually swindle the ignorant relations of their property. Fifthly, in spite of drawing his sustenance from this city and founding an establishment here, the country person prefers to conduct all religious and secular ceremonies in his native village or town. The argument for such partiality has been that such customs are a family tradition; the city has nothing to offer by way of authentic spirituality. The pujas that are held in the city, namely Durga puja, may be also called by various other more suitable names such as 'bai' utsav, 'kabi' utsav, 'bati' utsav, 'jhar' utsav, 'stri-r gahana' utsav, or even a generic 'bastra' utsav. Hence, in light of such vilification and inconsideration, our *nagarbashi* concludes that there lies no profit or virtue in such an unthankful exercise as assisting newcomers to the city.

The interlocutor complains that the account is biased against his people; city dwellers cannot be absolved of all blame. He argues that such accidents are attributable to the urbanite's neglect of traditional *shastra*-s which explains his injudiciousness. Social groups irrespective of place are characterized by the presence of persons of the three classical grades – superlative (*uttam*), mediocre (*madhyam*) and inferior (*adham*). In fact, the city offers a wider range of personality types than a village by dint of it being a multiethnic space wherein characters of all types are present in each community or group – pious, cheats, illiterates, intellectuals, intelligent, and more. One ought to exercise caution and discretion in their associations. Thus, homogenizing the country type (although the village, by the speaker's confession, has a smaller range and more defined social groups) and absolving the city from all negatives is a logically weak argument. This segment self-evidently problematizes the notion of a homochromatic city or countryside. The dialogue itself makes apparent the dialectical relationship between the metropole and the margin and reveals the disparities in a normative understanding of city life as either positive or negative.



Hereon, the text also reveals an interesting aspect of Bhabanicharan's project. *Kalikata Kamalalay* is not only "a manual of etiquette for country people" and "gives vivid glimpses into the city life of Calcutta"<sup>16</sup> but is also a recuperative effort by Bhabanicharan, a conservative, to salvage the image of Calcutta as a city afflicted by 'moral infection,'<sup>17</sup> indeed to 'conserve the city itself.'<sup>18</sup> The urban intellectual ventriloquially tries to reconcile the law abiding, *dharmic*, devout citizens with a runaway city, whose defects are articulated through the questions of the *bideshi*. The city, a socially and culturally conflicted space, must be made comestible through a cautious negotiation with its perversions. Bhabanicharan's *nabya-babus* with their *mosabeb*-s (claque) and *barangana* (pleasure women), are cleverly inserted through a naïve enquiry of the *bideshi*. The brusque response to his query relating to discourses on Vedas and shastras in these circles and exact orientation of the *mosabeb*-s to the *babu*-s, is '*gaan bajnashokol bujhi na kintu inhara ki prokar kaloyat hoyachen taba apon budhyanushare boli jemon kathaler amshotto ihay bibechna koriba.*'<sup>19</sup> *Mosabeb*-s are apologetically spoken of as a motley class of self-interested individuals including Brahmin pundits, *purobits*, semi-educated and semi-talented hard up hangers-on who specialize in running errands and appeasing the *babu* with contrived assurances and false compliments. These clagues were a peculiarity of the age. *Kalikata Kamalalay* explains that a *babu* would usually gather a group of obsequious supporters, each with a specific role to play in the overall objective to gratify. They are depicted as having possessed superficial knowledge in the arts and scriptures. However they could compensate the lack of perfection with the ability to immediately hold an unscripted and extemporized performance at the *babu*'s wish. Some sought employment or grants and some would shuffle from camp to camp bringing the *babu* his staple gossips. These *mosabeb*-s subsisted on merciful handouts of the *babu*, often unable to support other family members who have to fend for themselves. Those who could save shared the meager earnings with their family. Others lived a parasitic life in the *babu*'s company which explains the extraordinary hours invested in entertaining him. Even learned pundits would often join such clagues because of the failing economic condition in Bengal post 1757. After the transfer of power from the Nawab's court to East India Company, the contemporary

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<sup>16</sup> Sushil Kumar De, *Bengali Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, as quoted by Sanatkumar Datta in *Rachanasamagraba: Bhabanicharan Bandhyopadhyay (1787-1848)*. Calcutta: Nabapatra Prakashan, 1987. p 10.

<sup>17</sup> Roper, Lethbridge (ed), *Life and Times of Ramtanu Lahiri, Brahman and Reformer: A History of the Renaissance in Bengal*. Calcutta: S.K. Lahiri and Co., 1907, p 50

<sup>18</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*. New Delhi: Oxford, p.

<sup>19</sup> *Kalikata Kamalalay*. p 27

economic condition of Bengal deteriorated. Between 1765-1772, exorbitant taxes imposed by Mohammad Raza Khan and Sitas Rai along with the famine of 1770 and small pox drained the rural economy. This impoverished condition of the rural poor was clinched with the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 which demoted the erstwhile aristocrats to petit urban enterprisers and gave rise to the parvenu class of Calcutta. Migration to Calcutta was a desperate attempt by the onetime dominant class/caste to seek employment, symptomized by the functions of the learned pundits in the cityspace. To quote Bhabanicharan,

*...Brahman pandit-era onek srame bidya uparjan koriya poribarerdiger udor bhoron poshmarthe kinchit arthakankhi hoija kalikatay ashiyachen. Ananya byabshay kichui janen na kebol babuloker niktot niyoto jatayat koren. Dui bela giya ashirbad koriya thaken tahate kono babu kichui monojog hoi na tobe ki koriben bibechna koriya dekhilen je babu nitanto bigyabhimani otoeb ihake bigyo bolile odhik shontushito thaken. ci hetu keho keho choturata koriya dui jon-e oikyo hoija nyaydarshan probhriti shastrer koti koriya babuke modhyosto manen, keho smritishastrer kono bochner uor dosh diya todyottor nimitto babuke tabar tatparya jigyas koren. Shei babu tahardiger chaturata bibechna na koriya apon buddhinushare ekta kono katha kaben. Pundit mahashayra shey kathay tahake shadhubad karata prashangsha koren babuji tahatei tushito hoija kichu kichu den. Ihatey kaljapan karitechen otoeb tahardiger upor kono dosh hoite pare na.<sup>20</sup>*

Bhabanicharan's text is both an apology for absences and a directive to explore the full potential of the city. In fact, Dickens' 'sense of promise' in the city is both experienced and undercut in a way which represents the city in terms of a lack – the city spoken of, as it *should* be while attempting to re-present it as it is. Preston and Housley write, "The city has always been an important literary symbol and the ways in which a culture writes about its cities is one means by which we may understand its fears and aspirations."<sup>21</sup> The ideal and the present city of a culture may both be perceived through the word city. The imagination of a utopic urban space, and importance thereof, in *Kalikata Kamalalay* has been overlooked in literary and historiographic readings. If we are to accept the 'early modernity'<sup>22</sup> of the text, then it becomes a dense coagulation of contours and tensions that are incipient in the Bengali and which are gradually stoked by the dystopic experience of Calcutta. Calcutta then is not just a place but it is also praxis.

The first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century created a sense of both self-consciousness and crisis that was to launch many an identity-constructing project. In Bhabanicharan, one finds a desire to forge a continuity with the enlightened past of Bengalis that stands threatened by missionary and reformist politics. At the same time, visible is a desire to perfect a language

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p 29

<sup>21</sup> Peter Preston and Paul Simpson-Housley, *Writing the City: Eden, Babylon and the New Jerusalem*. Routledge: London, 1994. p

<sup>22</sup> Partha Chatterjee, p 1

stimulated by this awakening to a lost heritage for its potential to award equality with the colonizer. On the literary objectives of Bhabanicharan, Asitkumar Bandyopadhyay says:

*Tatkale kalikata jugoshonkot muhurte uponito hoivyachilo. Ekdike missionary name shonaton hindu dharmer ninda, ar ek dike rammohon ponthider shongshkarer name shonatan hindu dharmer mool-e gobbar khonon korar cheshta – ei dui aghat hoite hindu-r achar, bichar o shomaj jibon ke rokkeha koribar jonyo-i tini bidrupe shanito astra loiya shahityokhetre abirbhuto hon. Kintu ei akromon ingreji shikshito nobyo shomproday-er biruddhe udyoto hoi nai. Ihar porom bishmoiboho byapar ...tini ihate jaha diga-ke akromon koriyachilen, tabaru kehoi uchashikshito 'young bengal' ba atmiyo shobha ba brahmoshobhar shodoshyo nohe. Atherosho satabdir sheshardhe kolikatar je baishyadhormi byabschayi sreni o shongskritahin bhushomi shomproday godiya utbechilo tabader bipothgami shontander kadachari gronthagulir mool boktobya.*<sup>23</sup>

This was not in any way akin to nationalism as, in the context of Bhabanicharan, the colonized bhadralok was not in any sense anti-imperialist and was, more often than not, a beneficiary of colonial rule. The relationship of the colonized elite to the empire was performed in a complicit colonial economy which could allow, at the most, the imagination of a legitimate collectivity. It is well known now that legitimation of the 'indigenous' self required a sieving of the aspects of the past followed by sterilization and stabilization of that past. In Bengali this awakening led to sophisticating the literature and expunging the language of foreign elements which did not conform to a specific 'Hindu' lineage in order to bring it closer to the ideal paternity of Sanskrit.

Raja Rammohan Roy is generally considered the father of modern Bengali prose. "His acquaintance with Sanskrit contributed very much to polish his Bengali style. His writings, as well as those of his followers in the Brahma Sabha, have given a powerful impulse to the study of classical Bengali, and have imparted nerve and expressiveness to the study of classical Bengali, and have imparted nerve and expressiveness to the language."<sup>24</sup> But Rammohan's style was not literary. It was Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay who was the first prose litterateur. In fact, even though his works have only been recently re-discovered, Bandyopadhyay was the first to engage with the *babu* and *bibi* in brilliant satires such as *Nabababubilas* (1825), *Nababibibilas* (1831), celebrated as the prototypes of Pyarichand Mitra's *Alaler Ghare Dulal* and Kaliprasanna Sinha's *Hutum Pyanchar Naksha*. Arun Kumar Bandyopadhyay, in praise of the fluidity of Bhabanicharan's prose, writes, '*bhabanicharan bangla gadye kshiptota o sharashata anen.*'<sup>25</sup> Dinesh Chandra Sen has celebrated Bhabanicharan

<sup>23</sup> Asitkumar Bandyopadhyay, *Unobingsho Satabdir Prathamardha o Bangla Sahitya*. Calcutta: Bookland Private Limited, 1959. p 137

<sup>24</sup> 'Early Bengali Literature and Newspaper,' *Calcutta Review*, 1850

<sup>25</sup> Arun Kumar Bandyopadhyay, *Bangla Gadyer Itihas*. Calcutta: Classic Dress, 1949, p 321.

as “the fountainhead of Bengali colloquial style.”<sup>26</sup> Elements of modern Bengali prefigure in all his works and a vestigial vocabulary of a rapidly vanishing present glints between pages.

In fact, language itself is a central concern in *Kalikata Kamalalay* wherein the city is conceived as a corrosive space where language and tradition lose their chasteness to capitalism. One can see this clearly in the English version of a dialogue from the text:

Bideshi: This account of the dharmic disposition of its people complicates the question of why then Calcutta suffers such disrepute. It is believed that the Hindus of Calcutta have discarded the scriptures, read only in English and Persian, cannot speak or read their mother-tongue, Bengali, have no knowledge of literature in their mother language, and have even done away with most ancient laws relating to filial duties and traditional funeral rites. How is it that young men have come to believe that these ancient religious customs are merely superstitions and symptoms of regression when they drink brandy on the demise of parents and disrespect their parents by their minimal compliance with customs, shaving just the beard or head for the shradh? ...A new lexicon is being created in the city. These words do not form everyday speech, instead the attempt is to fashion a stylized literary language, sadhu basha, which borrows heavily from foreign tongues. The new constructions betray an ignorance of the great Sanskrit language and reveal an absence of any association with Sanskrit pandits and scholars. (Furnishes a list of borrowed vocabulary)

Nagarbashi: It is true that in the city the sadhu bhasa has gained much prevalence. However, there is something to be said about your proclaimed self-sufficiency of the Bengali or Sanskrit languages. The new formations are not used in religious practices. But they have made their way into every day interactions and transactions, in light-hearted conversations and playful literature. Moreover, no language is pure and it is a significant point to remember that at any given point of history, the language and speech of the ruler is bound to infiltrate and affect society. In this country, Persian and English are the current lingua franca and it is only natural that these would further hybridize the language. As for your ignorant question regarding association with scholars of Sanskrit, let me inform you that accomplished families in the city are known to patronize erudite pundits and have even established tols to facilitate the impartation of knowledge in the venerated Sanskrit language.<sup>27</sup>

Language is an anxiety-ridden field. The above quote illustrates, through the responses of the *nagarbashi*, a restructuring of language and vocabulary out of new encounters and practices that were peculiar to the present historical context. Language is used as an ideological vehicle through which a desired identity is to be constructed, and specifically the concern of the *bideshi* betrays an incipient project of shaping ‘Aryan’ indigenous roots of the Bengali which was to take a pan-Indian nationalistic turn by the end of the century. The formation, use, and idiosyncratic nature of urban language will dominate the concerns of the Bengali self throughout the other two texts read in this chapter. In *Kalikata Kamalalay* language ostensibly

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<sup>26</sup> Op cit, 20

<sup>27</sup> Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay. op cit, pp 9-15.

connotes upper caste Hindu apprehensions of purity and pollution where the trope of adulteration spills over to related concerns of a Hindu self decaying in a contaminated environment of multi-ethnic and inter-caste socio-economical intercourse. Here the insular and virginal non-urban is posed as the proto-habitat from where the movement into the porous city necessarily involves a loss of *dharmā* and *jati*. Though the *nagarbashi* defends the new formations as a logical and reasonable outcome of a polyphonic environment, his assurance is designed as a safety valve by emphasizing the distinction between the socio-economic and religious spheres.

The concerns over *dharmā* and *jati* remain the marrow of the text and are manifested again in the discourse on *dal*-s. *Dal*-s, as has been explored by S.N. Mukherjee and Partha Chatterjee, were a distinct form of urban sociability that grew out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century context of Calcutta. They acted as sockets for organizing and disciplining social practice and for mediating the new urban experience. *Dal* and *daladali* are interesting instances of the new modes of thought and action which were produced by the transformed economic relations in the city. It was more of a disciplinary body that marshalled the actions of members with regard to marriages, ceremonies, and caste injunctions. It also extended patronage to learned pundits and scholars from outside the city. The heterogenetic caste and constitution of *dal*-s and its plutocratic orientation of *dalpati*-s signified its specific historicity – the intermediate caste origin of Calcutta’s most empowered denizens. Tensions regarding maintenance of caste and religious purity are evident both at the *internal* textual level and the *external* socio-historical space represented in the text. The socio-political function of *dal*-s seems to clearly reflect an understanding of cityspace as essentially a heteromorphic and heterodoxic solvent space. Regulating and perpetuating customary Hindu practices is necessitated by the tendency of the city to diffuse the margins of ritual ‘pollution’ and ‘purity.’ On another level, the same anxiety over ritual purity is manifested in the interlocutor’s unease over a subordinate caste’s power, as *dalpati*, to arbitrate over Brahmins in *dals*. This profane inversion of caste injunctions couches an anxiety which was later to gain prominence and expression in the *kaliyuga* trope. Furthermore, the assurance that “no one confused the new secular order of social status with the traditionally prescribed ritual order of precedence that was still respected, but kept separate” is also indicative of the restorative element implicit in the text which was intended to make the city decipherable as well as palatable to the upper caste Hindu.

## II. *Kalikatar Nookochuri*

Acts of apparent subjectivity are really ones of deepest heteronomy. That is why colonial society is such an appropriate field for sarcastic demystification. Even seemingly highminded action must be probed by this sarcastic mistrust, until true motives are revealed. It is the unapparent, indistinct intention which can tell an act of kindness from one of imitative servility, verbal posing from genuine intellectual convictions.<sup>28</sup>

Written in 1869, *Kalikatar Nookochuri* is a relatively unknown *naksha* by Tekchand Thakur (Junior) or Chunilal Mitra. Out of the three *naksha*-s, *Nookochuri* is the most tonally overt and tongue-in-cheek. The spectacle of the *babu* is its object of study. As the central preoccupation of the text the *babu* appears in both his avatars – the prodigal son as well as the heretic English-educated. The main plot charts the spiritual journey of Pamorlal Babu, a member of the illustrious yet controversial Young Bengal, from his years of decadence steeped in women, alcohol and *mosaheb*-s, to a transformed pious Hindu husband. Godadhor Ghosh belongs to the other category of *nabya babu*-s, a term incidentally introduced by Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay. This was the wealthy comprador class marked by intermediate-caste origin and excessive parading of wealth. By the middle of the century, the massive fortunes made by some families through business with the East India Company as speculators, financiers, factors and entrepreneurs were withering away because of the unrestrained consumption of the later generation. Godadhor Ghosh is one such reckless inheritor of colonial prosperity. The practices and rituals of his type are later elaborated in one of the digressions, so characteristic of *naksha*-s.

As is the case with both *Kalikata Kamalalay* and *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar*, Chunilal Mitra begins *Kalikatar Nookochuri* with an introduction signed under the nom de plume of Tekchand Thakur (Junior).<sup>29</sup> At the outset, the author lays out the intended purpose of his *naksha* in stating:

...*lawarish kagoj niya khanik chele khela kore bodmayeshder akkel gudum koriya arshikhani (e bodo mojar jinish – ete apnar mukh apni dekha jai ar poder to kothai nei) apnader shamne dhorlem. Jodi iha dekhe amader shomajer upohar, o kuchoritro shongshodhon hoy, taha hoile srom shophol hoibe.*

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<sup>28</sup> Kabiraj, Op cit,

<sup>29</sup> Chunilal Mitra was the son of Pearychand Mitra who also wrote satirical *naksha*-s under the pseudonym Tekchand Thakur. There are similarities between the lineage drawn of Godadhor and the author himself. Though the autobiographical semblance seems to end with the colonial connection, the proximity to the society he describes comes across in its particulars and aliveness.

He clarifies that in the light of disingenuous literary satires by ‘hutum’ one must stay alert to literary duplicity.<sup>30</sup> The implicit claim is that only an honest self-reflective social critique can move the public to action. At this critical moment in Bengali history where education and progress had led to but exposure of the hollowness of its proponents, literary interventions that honestly mirror the erroneous course of action that Bengalis have adopted may help to rectify and salvage the situation.

*Desher onishto, mool shura tar  
Lokachare heyo nore, kore bhabichar  
Kushonge kumarge loke, nore dvesh kore  
Bibhupod aradhone, shob dosh hore.*<sup>31</sup>

The concern of *Kalikatar Nookochuri* is the failure of the privileged Bengali *bhadralok* in effecting real progress in society. Colonial transaction, intellectual and material, has left the city’s populace both intellectually and materially wanting. After brandishing the flag of progress and reformation, the economically empowered erudite class has betrayed the very ideals of their grandiose projects. Caught in between the grandiloquent pseudo-reformist *babu* and the debauched *abdare babu*, the city’s *madhyabitto* has been rendered mute and dependent on the whims and ways of the self-proclaimed moral and intellectual sentries of the community. Consequently, for diverse yet interconnected reasons Calcuttans, irrespective of caste or class, indulge in what the author calls ‘nookochuri’ or ‘hide-and-see.’ In other words, deceit and duplicity have infested all quarters of the city.

Mitra writes: “*idaning amadiger nobyo babura ingrejder nokol korite giya kebol tabader odbikangsho dosh prapto hoy, gun prai olpo lok paan.*” *Kalikatar Nookochuri* presents itself as a critique of this political and socially indifferent *babu* class. The author is biased towards the ‘madhyabitto’ – “*madhyabitto lokeder chelera onek bhalo, ebong tabader gun-o ache*”<sup>32</sup> – this group is yet uncorrupted by unproductive and misappropriated anglicization. Its subject instead is the politically incompetent ‘reformists’ of Calcutta, the politics of the privileged. The early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of reformist and radical indigenous movements in the form of the Brahma Samaj, the Derozians and the Young Bengal. There has been much debate on the purity of the political intention of these groups. Besides being perceived as culturally bankrupt and duplicitous in matters of religion, their political commitment was

<sup>30</sup> This is a direct reference to Kaliprasanna Sinha’s *Hutum Pyanchar Naksha* (1868)

<sup>31</sup> *Kalikatar Nookochuri*, p 238

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p 213

gravely mistrusted. Years of grandiloquence produced negligible change and led to political disillusionment of the middle-class with this otherwise articulate section of the indigenous intelligentsia. While Rammohan had not denied the economic benefits of the social change he advocated, the Young Bengal abandoned its anti-establishment views, joined hands with both the orthodox and Brahmos, and was eventually co-opted by the state. Insofar as civic and administrative matters were concerned, Calcutta in many ways was a no-man's land. While the failure of elite intra-politics in altering the condition of the city's poor, specifically the class of *garib bhadralok* (as categorized by Bhabanicharan), is the concern of *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar*, the very exposure of such elite politics is the kernel of *Kalikatar Nookochuri*.

Pamoral is a parodic representative of this particular type of political activist whose financial insulation permits him to dissipate his time and wealth on women, alcohol and *mosabehs*. His interest in politics is restricted to facile speeches at gatherings more correctly summoned for a round of drinking than out of any actual commitment to social issues like women's education or widow remarriage. This general absence of ethics and commitment in elite politics is further accentuated in the depiction of Benaras as the cultural satellite of Calcutta. In the character of Shoshinath we have yet another example of the English educated *nabya babu*. The severity of the situation is emphasized by the fact of Shoshinath being a native of Benaras and not Calcutta. Here Calcutta's infectious immoral environment is threatening to spread to other parts of the country through the vehicle of English education. Mitra invests a scathing portrayal of the vacuousness and futility of such education in Shoshinath's facile 'intellectualism' which is nothing more than a ploy to continue leading an extravagant and wasted lifestyle despite his diminishing resources.

The 1820s beheld the rise of progressive radicalism of Derozians/Young Bengal which for orthodox Hindus had detrimental effects on the youth of Calcutta, spawning 'degenerates' in the name of progress. It was claimed that exponents of the Renaissance, the Roys, Derozians, and Banerjees, were anglicized liberals whose cosmopolitanism was disconnected from the general 'Indian' community. Motivated by self-interest and bound within undemocratic cliques, they were considered to be non-representative of a pan-Indian politics. Their contradictory and schismatic identities of high modernism and high Brahmanism were accompanied by an epidemic of drinking. These charges continue well into the twentieth century. For instance, the critic Susovan Sarkar comments thus on the Bengal Renaissance:



The flutter caused in Bengal society by Derozians was, however, in the perspective of history something ephemeral and unsubstantial. They failed to develop any movement outside their own charmed circle and the circle itself could hardly keep significant form. Worldly occupations and private interests claimed the attention of the individual members of the group, the majority of whom came from middle class homes and had a living to earn ... Their only trait which was widely copied in contemporary society was the escape from social conventions, but mere evasion. This led to sad corruptions in which there was amongst the imitators no trace of the personal integrity and courage of real Derozians which have such a charm even today.<sup>33</sup>

In *Kalikatar Nookochuri*, however, Pamoral is financially secure, ostensibly belonging to the affluent high caste rent-receiving *bhadralok* class. A frustration with such abuse of position and privilege runs through the narrative. This point is amplified in an ironical comment of Ponchanon, a *mosabeb*: “*babu-r moto koto lok ache be ei shokol bishoi-e chorcha korbe? Dhon thakbe, othocho deshbachar shonshodhon mon hoybe, eha na hole ar to e bishoi-e shiddho hote parena? Ekhonkar prai odhikangsho lok-ei din aane din kbain ... cheler mon panch taka bhabbe ki politics niye matha bokabe?*” Here lies the root of the educated *madhyabitto* dilemma. The vanguardist politics of the Bengali elite remained embroiled in interpersonal conflicts and rivalry in their effort to gain colonial patronage and neglected its responsibility to lower middle-class and subaltern Calcutta.<sup>34</sup> Within the colonial economy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, communities, castes, classes and races, which formed ‘many Calcuttas’, reached an impasse in terms of incommunicability. The oppressed groups were not of concern to the self-indulgent indigenous intelligentsia.

Into the text, a narrative of serial disintegration of moral and economic health of the city is suggestively woven. What Shibnath Sastri had described as the quotidian undertakings of the *babu-s* of the early decades had only changed hands, so to speak, in Mitra’s time:

*Shobhabazar, Pathuriaghata, Jorasankoi, fujdari balakhanai, bagbajar-e, hogolkuriyai kabir dal kbulia, shanj bajaiya, gajon-e shong habir kariya, chowringhee anchaler chowringhee nather mandir-e puja diya, keboba shabarna chowdhury-der laldighisthita sherestai hishab nikash-er kaj kariya, ingrej reshomkuthir mutshuddigiri koriya, ghuri udaiya, bulbulir ladai dekhuya, setar esraj – bino bahaiya, kabi, hap ‘akhrui panchali’ suniya, ratre baranganadiger alaye gitbadya amod kariya atherosho satabdir sheshardho karilo.*<sup>35</sup>

Mitra describes the *babu* of 1869 as:

*Shohore kotok kotok nobyo babura half bhoot, kebol moja niye achen. Aaj kalighat, kal barackpur, tar por modhur shonibar. Robibarar bagan to achei, tahar kotha nai; badite byarami hog, kormo kaji thak, othoba aakash bhenge poduk, bagan jetey hobe. Bachader eto ata jodi lekhpodai hoto, ta hole amader desher mongol ar lekhhokdiger porisromer shomota hoto... aaj kal jemon beroari pujar kom podedeche, temni shoker jatra, concert, o theatre bedechhe.*<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Susovan Sarkar as quoted in Nandalal Bhattacharya, *Samayik Patrer Ittibritti*. Calcutta, pp 30-31.

<sup>34</sup> See Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* for an examination of middle class existence and *kerani* or clerkdom.

<sup>35</sup> Asitkumar Bandyopadhyay, p. 33

<sup>36</sup> *Kalikatar Nookochuri*, p 235.

The text is not a call to the indigenous to rise to the occasion of national emancipation neither is it a critique of the *ideals* of reformist politics. It remains strictly pro-colonial in its allegiance. The thrust of the text is not towards nationalism but it is an introspective exercise in disciplining a Bengali self into existence vis-à-vis the colonist. This introspection reveals a politics that cannot be straitjacketed. Here deployment of the trope of *kaliyuga* in the instance of the patriarchal project of rescuing the colonized female subject makes valuable revelation. Ostensibly, *Kalikatar Nookochuri* criticizes the self-advertising progressive men of the city for failing to introduce widow remarriage, female education and abolish child marriage. The Young Bengal proponent, Pamoral Babu, embodies the characteristic disdain towards Hindu conventions.<sup>37</sup> A profligate drinker and adulterer, his is a ritualistic interest in politics – the progressive movements of the day only receive glib lip service from the likes of Pamoral where any occasion is a ruse to drink. The affected concerns of the *babu* are a sincere concern for the author. In an unequivocal passage, Mitra posits the colonizer’s civilization as the yardstick for progress: “*Odyabodhi amader strishikha uttomroope hoy nay, balyobibaho nibaron hoy nai, bidhoba bibaho-o procholito hoy nai; tobe amra ki prokare ingrejder shohit tulona dibo? Ingrejra amader opekha onek gune sreshtho, kichu matro shondeho nai.*” However, in the depiction of Menoka, Pamoral’s wife, and their relationship, a Hindu revivalist tendency indirectly surfaces in juxtaposition to the above-stated liberal view. As if anticipating the imminent male nationalist-revivalist tradition, Mitra posits the woman of *bhadralok* society, in the person of Menoka, as a ‘locus of unconquered purity.’<sup>38</sup> Women, however, occupy in Mitra’s imagination, an interfacial space informed by liberal reformism, and a specific manifestation of *bhadralok* anxiety, the dystopia of *kaliyuga*. Women were perceived as the source of degeneration in *kaliyuga*. In late 19<sup>th</sup> century representations, the female destructive force was relocated from the realm of unbridled sexuality to that of conjugal dominance. The ‘modern’ wife, demanding and disrespectful, replaced the ‘whore’. However, a distinctive feature of the *kaliyuga* trope is that the subaltern occupies a position of privilege by performing its own subalternity. Thus in literary representations, the devout and devoted Hindu wife appeared in a curious agentive position – the mute wife became the antidote to

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<sup>37</sup> This was a time when all three primary socio-political organizations of Calcutta, the Brahmo Samaj, The Young Bengal and the Dharma Samaj, had occasioned considerable chagrin and derision for combined disintegration of their principles and ideologies. More often than not, they shared the same stage and joined hands in co-editing this or that magazine/periodical. For a more detailed examination see, Ashok Chatopadhyay, *Unish Shotoker Samajik Andolan o Kangal Harinath*.

<sup>38</sup> Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, p 143.

the chaos in the external realm of the *bhadralok*'s life. Extreme domesticity would be advanced as a specifically 'Hindu' remedy to the evils of the *kaliyuga*. Sarkar clarifies, "...the ideal woman's role goes beyond noble endurance of suffering to visualize the prospect of a change of heart brought about by such endurance and fortitude."<sup>39</sup> This is precisely Menoka's role in *Kalikatar Nookochuri*. In spite of Menoka's beauty, fidelity, and piety, Pamorlal resists an emotional and sexual relationship with her, rationing such interactions for his various extramarital alliances. She is as devout a Hindu as her husband is an atheist. However, conjugal duty for Pamorlal is limited to minimal and literal observance of the contract of marriage. This Mitra cites as being the general agreement of the *nabha babu*-s of Young Bengal.<sup>40</sup> Menoka, nevertheless, is the exemplary Hindu wife whose silent suffering and perseverance eventually reforms the debauched dissenting husband. While Menoka accepts her fate as 'karma,' ironically her suffering and agony become instrumental in Pamorlal's transformation. This positive agency is deployed to defend and re-establish "a structure within which they would once again be deferential, but to husbands and social superiors who have been reformed and purified by the efforts of subordinate groups."<sup>41</sup>

### III. Sachitra Gulzar Nagar

*Sachitra Gulzar Nagar*, written in 1871, by Kedarnath Datta under the nom de plume of *bhand*, may be read as an interesting supplement to *Kalikata Kamalalay* for its engagement with both the upper strata of metropolitan society and the eclipsed underbelly of 19<sup>th</sup> century Calcutta. However, the focus of the work is primarily on the latter rather than on *bhadralok* society. Kedarnath Datta opts to investigate the murkier realities of areas around Chitpur, Bagbazar, and Gobindopur which were neglected and repressed in the documentation by contemporary writers while the elite centres around Chowringhee or Town Hall which were the staple arena of both British and indigenous fiction, diaries, and journals. *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* engages with the marginalized spaces of the city – the underworld of thieves, cheats, *kartabhaja*-s, slum dwellers, prostitutes, and fraud. The first half of the text is a prolegomenon in the form of a first person commentary. It contextualizes the main narrative

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<sup>39</sup> Sumit Sarkar, Op cit. p 207.

<sup>40</sup> Datta, Op cit, p 212.

<sup>41</sup> Sarkar, Op cit.

through remarks on the middle class colonized social order. This cynical canvas of *bhadralok* culture functions as a rite of passage into the more complicated psychosocial world of the urban poor. The core plot is the experience and journey of an orphaned fifteen-year-old boy, Hemango Bashak. We are invited to travel into the dark recesses of Calcutta through the meanderings of Hemango. Hemango's destitution is complete by the sudden death of his father, an unsuccessful *dalal*. His pitiless lessor, Boknapiyari, a viraginous prostitute/landlord, drives him out of his only shelter. Hemango is finally inducted into Niradchandra's clique of *mosaheb*-s. Niradbabu, on the basis of Hemango's good looks and mellow disposition provides him with a home and trains him as a classical singer. However, due to the intense competition and the general poverty of *mosaheb*-s, Hemango's emergence as Niradbabu's favoured *mosaheb* gives rise to Achabua's jealousy and a conspiracy against Hemango. Finally Hemango is expelled from Nirad's establishment. At the end Achabua's machinations are discovered by Niradbabu and Hemango, and the two are reunited.

*Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* is an illustration of the myriad goings-on of the *gulzar nagar* that is Calcutta. The word *gulzar* literally means splendid, crowded, or noisy. However, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *gulzar* had come to possess a certain negative connotation and was used to describe Calcutta as a carnivalesque place, not only splendid in its show, but also dynosiac and cataclysmic in its impact. In this *naksha*, *gulzar* are the nights of Calcutta. The commentary on contemporary Calcutta in the opening section in *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* is critical of the lacunae in the general politics of modern Bengal. The city remains enslaved due to the self-seeking mercantilism and politics of the urban nouveau riche. In a scathing criticism of the destructive impact of colonial modernity the 'bhad' laments the fate of colonized Bengalis whose self-interestedness will perpetuate imperialistic rule. Emancipation in the truest sense is not complete till a community achieves economic self-sufficiency and its own cultural identity. In the most succinct demand for equal power in the text, the 'bhad' writes:

*Jotodin, tomra koljontro o banijyer nigud tottve onobhigyo thakbe, joto din utshabo shabosh o oikyotar fol shompurno bhog na korbe, joto din purush-porompurai niyom o samajik acharer dash thakbe, toto din kebol dashotvosrinkholbohon koro.*<sup>42</sup>

The values imported and adopted under colonial rule and education are critiqued as having remained unassimilated into the indigenous culture and thereby ideologically fracturing the indigenous psyche which has grown decadent, hypocritical and immoral. The incomplete

<sup>42</sup> Kedarnath Datta, 'Sachitra Gulzar Nagar,' in Kanchan Basu (ed.), *Dushprapyo Sahitya Sangraba*, Calcutta: Reflect Publication, 2002.

understanding and blind emulation of the colonizer's culture, discipline and morality is arguably the cause of anarchy in society. It is argued that the dialectics of the colonial encounter have deepened the lines between different socio-economic groups within indigenous society creating mutually quarantined worlds, which exist in ignorance of the other. Furthermore, this could be a reference to the world of '*chakeri*' or clerical jobs in which the *madhyabitto* found themselves enslaved.

The hybrid modernity of Bengalis is denoted as '*shong*' (a low-grade popular entertainment). The projects of the enlightened actors of the urban arena have spiralled into chaos and disorder. *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* mocks the institutionalized education borne of both the administrative and indigenous elite initiative in Bengal. On the one hand, it has spawned a class of self-interested, ill-informed, corrupt professionals and on the other, it has given birth to a generation of over-qualified, conceited, anglicized young men who have disengaged themselves from their culture and society. Sonarchand babu, the worthless lawyer of *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar*, is an example of the former while the second instance alludes to the Young Bengal. A spillage of the new contexts, the sudden spate of periodicals, journals, and newspapers have also died a quick death. The new schools and colleges have earned a name instead for their flagrant lack of discipline, morality and ethics. Reformers of the Brahma Samaj are portrayed as unethical and religious opportunists, conspicuous by their eclectic fashion, eager consumption of meat and alcohol (apparently a marker of 'progressiveness') and subservience to white overlords. As for the politics of the privileged, the reformist Samaj is derided for having carved out a niche for a socially incongruous agenda which evinces an utter disconnect between the elite and the general public. The state of the legal-police system illustrated in the descriptions of the spaces of police, jail and the courtroom submits a depressing culture of bribery, extortion, coercion and racism that was extant in the period. Municipal conditions of the Native Town in areas such as Chitpur Road, Pathuriaghata, and 'makhonwala' lane were infamous for the lack of functional drainage, sewerage and street lighting. They are described in the *naksha* as inhabitable and unsanitary. These subaltern spaces would predominantly accommodate the socially marginalized – slum dwellers, prostitutes, felons, petty criminals, pimps, homeless beggars and drunkards: "*Oi goli prokrito kuchonipara, tothai bodh hoi bhadraker boshoti nai, rajyer juachor, hoptokolume, khuntakhunre, jalkhote, borhole, adda gedechhe, hetornade chardike, gijgij kocce.*"<sup>43</sup> Detailed descriptions of Pathurighata and 'makhonwalar goli' stress the unsightly conditions of open drains, slums, absence of garbage

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p 438

disposal and the stench thereof; and the absence of proper street lighting have made these areas a haven for anti-social elements. In fact, the opening lines of the central narrative stages the activities of the 'disreputable' lower class society in the dimness of the streetlight.

Calcutta, especially the 'Native Town' or North Calcutta rapidly grew after the Battle of Plassey. Symptomatic of most unplanned urban expansion, the city witnessed a rise in the number of dispossessed, a catastrophic civic condition, a disruptive law and order situation, and a municipal breakdown. Since 1793, Justices of Peace were constituted as official authority for the municipal government of Calcutta. It remained in charge of the police force and scavenging department, responsibilities few thought they executed with efficiency.<sup>44</sup> The flooding of Chitpur, the filth of Pathuriaghata, the parallel irrational cosmos of criminality and unlawfulness of 'makhonwala goli' are testimonies to the myopic vision of *bhadralok* politics. According to Kedarnath Datta, the only positive outcome of the reformist drive in society was to popularize tap water in Calcutta – the only strength the metropolis could boast of vis-à-vis the surrounding suburbs.

The opulent world of the semi-educated nouveau riche *babu*-s had little concern for the disfunctionalities of the city or its malaise. In fact, the moral degeneracy and dissolution of the traditional joint family is attributable to the self-seeking class of *bhadralok kerani*-s who had made a moderate fortune in their capacity as 'article clerks' in various foreign agencies and the East India Company itself. Typical of these nouveau riche fops, young and old, was their immaculate sartorial rituals. Rotund in form, their hair neatly parted, dhoti clad with a rose or a walking stick in hand, they would frequent the streets, *majlis*, liquor shops and brothels. Sonarchand is one such *babu*, an article clerk, who is mobile between the upper rungs of the professional order as well as the 'disreputable' lot of 'Nishkalanka Kartabhajas.'

Our *babu*, Niradchandra, belongs to the earlier class of *abhijata babu*-s. By the 1870s the *babu* phenomenon was in decline, but Kedarnath retains the *babu* in the character of Niradchandra to enter this world of deceit, lies and thievery of the underdog, Anchabhua. Niradchandra, 25, has come into a vast inheritance and spends his days squandering his wealth on his clique and *mehfil*-s. Furthermore, this retention may be alternatively read as a confrontation between, what Partha Chatterjee has termed, 'early modernity', of which Niradchandra is a historical remnant, and the 'colonial modern.'

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<sup>44</sup> P.J Marshall, Op cit.

Niradchandra has minimal education and is not literate in English. He is not familiar with the language or institutions of colonial modernity. In the context of the newly enlightened class of anglicized rational Bengali men, namely the Young Bengal, Nirad represents the obverted group of moneyed yet uneducated youth continuing the tradition of a spectacularly decadent standard of living. Nirad's recruitment of Sonarchand, a semi-educated incompetent lawyer, testifies to his restricted understanding of the juridico-political system in spite of his formidable economic status in society. Moreover, on suspecting that Hemango may have been framed, Nirad does not summon the police again. Instead he takes recourse to the trusted Bengali operative, 'goenda,' or the private detective, and the dreaded Habsha Madhav, a racketeer and mercenary killer, to reach the bottom of the matter. In a two-pronged attack on the legal administration and the flawed modernity of colonial Calcutta, this extra-institutional team is able to unravel the mystery as well as expel the toxic 'other', Achabua, brother of Hemango, asserting, in a hegemonic Hindu idiom, the victory of good over evil.

Although *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* is not written in the hegemonic language of what would constitute contemporary politics, it would be an exaggeration to claim that the author was sympathetic to this neglected facet of Calcutta and its actors. Through the many tribulations and trials of Hemango, we are invited into the chaotic, unsavory, and spurned underside of Calcutta. Through the tortuous bylanes of Pathuriaghata, the reader accompanies Hemango Bashak to the latest 'dharma sabha' in town known as the '*nishkalanka kartabhaja*' (roughly translates into the 'immaculate kartabhaja-s') located in a begrimed derelict house. The *nishkalanka kartabhaja-s* are apparently an offshoot of the sect of Kartabhajas. It is a historically known fact which is also illustrated later in the text that the Kartabhaja, an otherwise socio-politically radical sect, had later reincorporated the sectarianism and Brahminical structures of caste. In the *naksha*, the sub-sect, '*nishkalanka kartabhaja*,' has been formed by Hutum Gonshai to form a more authentic 'congregational space'<sup>45</sup>, which dispenses with all caste and class hierarchies. In his sermon at the gathering, he declares that the Kartabhajas of the Ghoshpara<sup>46</sup> are a fraudulent and defeatist sect which has, in the absence of visionary leaders, emptied the religion of its higher ideals and dragged

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<sup>45</sup> A term made popular in the context by Partha Chatterjee in *Nation and Its Fragments*, 1993.

<sup>46</sup> Located a few miles outside Calcutta

the religion to the debauched depths of illicit sexual pleasures.<sup>47</sup> Hutum claims that the 'Nishkalanka Kartabhaja' opposes such sexist, casteist and religious discrimination and celebrates 'pure' love of God.

However, in *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar*, the politics of the '*nishkalanka kartabhaja*' is contested by a satirical and stereotypical portrayal of the new 'sabha' as yet another place of moral, social, and religious deviance. The spiritual authenticity of the sect and authority of its *karta*, its spiritual leader, is variously undermined. The *karta*, marked out as a charlatan, forges whimsical rules for the order and by way of supplying evidence of his spiritually elevated status indulges ever so often in acts of fitful swooning which manages to strengthen the faith and devotion of the numerous unsuspecting members. The *sabha* is depicted as an excuse for indulging in opium, hemp, and *ganja* (a doctrinal imperative), it is a paradise for thieves and pickpockets, and a convenient space for flouting sexual mores. Hutum Gonshai is assisted in his programme for expansion by a certain 'chotodidi' whose beauty is described not in unproblematically sexual terms. An excessively emotional and devoted Botuk Shai, a *kulin* Brahmin by birth, is another key figure in the sect whose primary job is to prepare the *kolke* for the *karta*. The proceeding of the *sabha* is described in lurid language as essentially being a revelry of the most insubstantial kind where cacophonous singing and dancing (a pretext for mutual fondling or even molesting unsuspecting women) followed by a community *bhog* and another round of *ganja* smoking. On special nights the scene at a Nishkalanka sabha is more chaotic:

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<sup>47</sup> Kartabhaja is an enigmatic, controversial and "deviant" sect which originated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with roots in Vaishnavism and Sufism. Awul Chand, a holy 'mad' man of obscure origins, founded the sect. Awul Chand called the Supreme, Karta. Hence the name kartabhaja or the follower of Karta. The sect has its roots in *sabhaja* and tantric philosophies of medieval Bengal and believes that the self is identical with the absolute reality, the pure, material, spontaneous, reality of *sabhaja*. The kartabhajas preach the equality of all men and women and recognize no distinctions of caste, religion, sex, or even good and evil. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the sect mostly attracted, in the rural areas, the indigent oppressed peasants of lower castes who were persecuted by rural indebtedness, famine and landlord oppression, and poor migrant laborers in Calcutta. The sect was at its prime in Calcutta in the 19<sup>th</sup> century outperforming the Sahajiyas and Bauls. Important to the temporal and geographical concern of this research, the kartabhajas emerged in and around the imperial city of Calcutta during the emerging stages of capitalism in the subcontinent. The change in land revenue policies in Bengal under the East India Company resulted in large scale migration of poor laborers to Calcutta who filled the slums of the Black Town. The kartabhajas mostly belonged to this group; the reason for this was cited in *Somprakash* (1864): 'This religion holds sway primarily among the lower classes. According to the Hindu scriptures ... they do not have any freedom ... but in the Kartabhaja sect they enjoy great freedom.' It proclaimed the centrality of the body as a microcosm of the universe because the Spirit resides within the human form and it was through the worship of the body by way of meditation, yoga, and arcane sexual practices that one could gain access to the Spirit. Thus, in the *bhadralok* society of Calcutta, the sect came to enjoy a discredited reputation.



*Jhanpkata, Ulkejpora, daimonkata, khandanaki, cherondanti, potachurni, penchamukhi, probhiti bhalomondo cheharar aaj-bibi nagad natiputir boyoshi ronginigon, ay thor-kamane, hadhabate, modaketho, gobogonesh, nobokartik, babrichulo, jhaogunfo, kachakhola molla, probhriti.jomat bendhe acbe...bedal, kukur, o kag...probesh koreche. Badite ek dushto gabhi acbe. Ekjon lok sthanobbabe tar kandhe chapbar upakrom korate she dodhi chinre chotke podate ke kar ghade pode, magguloto aluthaluhoye chitkar kolle, hulusthul pode gelo.*<sup>48</sup>

Finally, we come to the protagonist himself. The psychosomatic construction of an uncontaminated Hemango Bashak signifies an attempt at re-location of the *bhadralok* cultural identity in his person. The cultural superiority of Hemango, even though not a Brahmin, signifies a reconstruction of the ideal secular Bengali identity. Hemango is not wanton or immoderate. He is immaculate in his being. In the midst of the heady carnivalesque space of the *gulzar* city, the introverted Hemango is a spiritually self-contained island drifting in the nauseating surges of contemporary society. Moreover, legitimization of this imagined ideal is sought by counterpoising the aesthetically immaculate body of Hemango against the distorted bodies of the 'ignoble' characters in the text. The homoerotic description of Hemango's beauty is reproduced below:

*kehub gourango dudhe rong - ta te ektu alta amej ache ... hemangor kopalkhani dirgho o uchu, bhrujugal shoshir oshtokolar nai gol, ta shoman rupe krom-e krom-e emni shoru hoyeche bodh hoi tuli diye anka. Hemango-er chokhuduti besh tana ar bodo, thnot dukhani patla ar emni ranga jeno rakto foote berucche ... Bidhata, hemango-er onger shoshthob shadhone bistor jotno peye chilen*<sup>49</sup>

Against this we have the description of Boknapiyari, the prostitute/rentier and a kind of nineteenth century female thug of makhonwala goli, who bred violence and terror in the surrounding neighborhood:

*Bokna Piyari dirghe shochorachor strir moton kinchit khorbo, adelombai ekuni kali kore she tilbhandeshorer nyay mota, jara oi oishorjyo obotarar dorshon-shukhe bonchito tara piyarike ekta mangshopinder dhakai jala kolpona korun. Bokna Piyari Ghadegordane ek, tar ghade ek thaba mangsho knuchke shobha pachilo, mathar chul pray bhaluker lomer nyay mota o khoshkoshhe, kopal shendbon – bhru – chokh kuture, khnoda nak, abar shei naker niche besh ektu shuaguli knatar moton gnop, aar tar dadite ekti bhatar moto ab chilo. Tar dnat amader dnater dun, thnotjora aadh inchi puru, ...ar rong kuchkuche andhare.*<sup>50</sup>

The moral and emotional deficiencies of Bokna Piyari are exteriorized in her physical appearance. The dynamics of the discursive production of bodies are exemplified in this description. The de-sexualization and de-feminization of Bokna Piyari is designed to undercut her encroachment onto the essentially male domain of violence and criminality.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Kedarnath Datta, Op cit, p. 463.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid pg 433.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, pg 425

<sup>51</sup> She is eventually overpowered by a rival thug, Hapshi Madhai, a 'scrupulous' criminal, thus ending an epoch of this 'rapacious female tyranny'.

This collapsibility of moral certitude and aesthetics of the body has been consistently deployed as an ideological device in the text. The bestial imagery in the description of Hapsha Madhav, another infamous mercenary, is evidence to this claim:

*Tar chokduto joba fuler moton lal –' nakta ek thabai dhore na – gale chnapdari jbulche – hater guliguno daber moton bodo ar ta bhatar moton shokto – buker chati jeno dupashe dui pabad, tader majhe jeno ekta khal podeche, paduta bodh boi jeno ek baonye paowa jai na – hanter angulguno jeno ek ekta kola- shorir jeno bojrer moton nitutshokto...<sup>52</sup>*

Social acceptability therefore is inscribed into the body of the subject. Hemango's physical beauty denoting his cultural location is a ticket to the higher rungs of elite society. Nirad accepts Hemango purely on the grounds of the latter's attractive looks; and we also find Hemango frequenting the more sophisticated gatherings at Prasanna Kumar Tagore's garden houses. The physical degradation and ruination of his beauty is consistently emphasized while describing Hemango's tribulations in the jails and streets of Calcutta. Thus here we find a spatialization of cultural and aesthetical codes and vice versa. The demarcation between elite/popular or upper class/subaltern, finds expression in a cartology of aesthetics, as it were, where people's appearances act as referents of their socio-spatial location.

Although there is no conceptualization of an ideal Bengali womanhood, the representation of women in *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* may be broadly categorized into the progressive educated yet domesticated woman, and the illiterate promiscuous yet autonomous woman. Niradchandra's wife, Srimati Ujwalkamini Dashi, symbolizes the former who receives tuitions from an Englishwoman and operates within a restricted private space. Into the latter group falls prostitutes and women like Bokna Piyari and 'chotodidi.' These lower class women are depicted as loud, shrill, and the cause of frequent pandemonium. Interestingly, it is this class of women who are presented to be the most vocal and assertive of their rights and space. They own their space whether it be the street (Bokna Piyari) or the sabha (chotodidi). In contrast, the city street is depicted as unsafe for the wives of *bhadralok*-s. These violating streets of Calcutta are thus described, '*edesher lokera eto oshobhyo, tanra romonikuler morjyada eto tachbilyo koren je, America khonder indian-ra, africa-hotentot-era, ar bonyo santhal-ra tander opekha joshagoner maan rakhte janen.*'<sup>53</sup> In an interesting episode, a middle-class woman is harassed and molested in a bylane of Upper Circular Road. Hemango's intervention rescues her from further assault. Juxtaposed to this is the

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<sup>52</sup> Op cit. Pg 596.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid 860.

harassment of a working class woman where not only does the woman vociferously protest but she is also defended by other women. The subversive element implicit in the narrative undercuts the professed empowering and liberatory powers of liberal education for middle class society, and especially women.

Finally, to end where Kedarnath Datta begins his narrative, *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* reproduces the nature versus city binary in its hagiographic treatment of the Ganges. Through this binary, Calcutta is both mapped and constructed as an archetypal space of anxiety. Crowdedness, disorder, anonymity, corruption, guile are invested in the definition of the city where the citizen is forced to seek the comfort of nature embodied by the holy Ganges. The life-giving waters of the Ganges continually detoxify the city. It is also the obverse of modernity, and specifically colonial modernity, of which Calcutta is a product.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this chapter I have tried to demonstrate the intertwined nature of the cityspace, identity and writing. My attempt has not been to draw continuities among the three but to explore the shifting concerns with the city in an exercise of self-reflexivity. Among the three, Bandyopadhyay's *Kalikata Kamalalay* is very different from *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* and *Kalikatar Nookochuri* which conform to present day formulation of *naksha*-s. *Kamalalay* is devoid of irony. It is a directly mediatory text negotiating the 'early modern' cityspace with the 'traditional' mode of life. It is symptomatic of the overriding centrality of the city in reorganizing and restructuring the imagination and praxis of, as is ostensible in the text, the Hindu upper caste society. It is a representation of the tensions and aspirations of the dominant class. It is well known that the historical contingency of 19<sup>th</sup> century necessarily constituted the literary sphere as elite middle class space. But even though class pilots the project and production of the text, caste remains the cornerstone in this text. Furthermore, its explicit purpose to delineate the complexities of Calcutta is also a dialectical de-stabilizing of the neat categories of city and country. In literary representations since the nineteenth century, of both the imperial metropolis, London, and the colonial epicentre, Calcutta, an archetypal space of anxiety is mapped and constructed. This anxiety-ridden space compartmentalizes the country and the city. Crowdedness, disorder, anonymity, corruption, guile define the city where the countryside is its uncontaminated virgin other. This binary has

been reproduced in literature quite consistently. The homogenization of rural and urban identities and locations produces totalizing narratives of the interactions between the two. However, the text problematizes this very theoretical pronouncement on two levels. Through the dialogue between the nagarbashi and the bideshi, it deconstructs stereotypes of the city and country – a rather explicit project. On another level, *Kamalalay* brings out the specific modernity of Calcutta and the very local discomfort with the new city-form which cannot be easily slipped into an over-arching binary of city/country or simulation/nature without qualifications apropos a Hindu upper caste perspective. By vocalizing the tensions concerning ritual purity, the text reveals the contingent nature of the negotiation between country and city: the city is dystopic not out of a traditional western experience of anomie, but insofar as it is experienced as a place of loss, dissolution, and breakdown of all traditional structures, Calcutta is as much suspect as it is overwhelming.

Both in *Kalikatar Nookochuri* and *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* we find Calcutta represented as a prototypical transgressive place. Through the subaltern as well as bourgeois faces of the city, *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* constructs a Calcutta that is Dionysian in its revelry and pandemonic in its functionality. In both, Calcutta is the ‘other’ space which, in spite of the authors’ familiarity, is either threatening to reduce the known order of things to chaos or defying a desire for a new order altogether. Similarly, in *Kalikatar Nookochuri*, this is made still more pronounced by projecting Benaras, a historic site of Hindu pilgrimage, as the aspiring urban facsimile of a decadent Calcutta. The choice of Benaras is a potent device for the explication of Calcutta as a site of transgression, desecration and contamination. Most importantly, the sexual politics embedded within these texts vocalize the perception that the cityspace was rendered profane by ‘the presence of women in public.’ In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the accruing experience of the British male’s effete, effeminate, unsuccessful ‘other,’ the Bengali male identity came to be constructed around a compensatory morality and a reformist progressive politics which were significantly mobilized through literary narratives. What became central to this enterprise was the question of women in public.<sup>54</sup> Concomitant to this problem was the production of the city as public space which was accessible only to Bengali men because, incidental to the incipient forging of a collective self, women were to be constrained within the household as signifiers of the private sphere of domesticity,

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<sup>54</sup> Swati Chattopadhyay. *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism, and the Colonial Uncanny*, New York: Routledge, 2005.

morality and religion. The problematic of Calcutta as public space is most well captured by the city street. The spatial location of the women in both *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* and *Kalikatar Nookochuri* is revealing in this respect. The city street is a conflictual space. While both an indigent ‘*bhadralok-er stri*’ and a ‘*magi*’<sup>55</sup> are publicly molested on the streets of Calcutta, Bokna Piyari and Chotodidi – who explicitly fall under the prostitute/whore category – are shown to dominate the city streets and freely operate in public space. For encoded within the city’s irreverence was a liberating power which transformed the lives of women in traditional families; the city offered choices to the erstwhile subjugated and oppressed women. Prostitution, more often than not, was the only lucrative profession for these women. Sumanta Banerjee writes with respect to contemporary Calcutta: ‘The metropolis was developing into a flesh-pot attracting the nouveau riche as well as the rural poor.’<sup>56</sup> Banerjee continues that women from both distant parts of Bengal and Calcutta increasingly fled their oppressive homes to join the flesh-trade. These fears are echoed by Datta: ‘*keu shami-r durniti, loklojja o shongsharjontrona na shohjyo korte pere amtyohotya pap-e mogna hoye, keu ba dushchoritra hoye desher matha hent koren.*’<sup>57</sup> In contrast to these lower class/caste women, we have Ujjwalkamini and Menoka, wives of Niradchandra and Pamoralal respectively. They play out the gendered literary imagination of the authors as respectable wives who remain within the spatial frontiers of their house (*griha*) as heedful *grihalakshmi*-s.

This chapter has also been an exploration into the relevance of these *naksha*-s, especially of *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* and *Kalikatar Nookochuri*, and their irony to Sudipta Kaviraj’s study of laughter and subjectivity. I disagree with Kaviraj’s felicitation of Bankim Chattopadhyay as the ‘founder’ of a self-reflective form of irony that invested, for the first time, an objective into the humorous discourse. At a commonsensical level, this perhaps has to do with the politics of canonization. Kaviraj’s central thesis participates in the canonized ‘high’ literary reservoir of Bengal, and reinforces that canon with such declaratives. The text under analysis by Kaviraj is *Kamalakanta* by Bankim Chattopadhyay which is a collection of satirical essays. What I am trying to suggest here is that an assumption between ‘high’ and ‘mediocre’ literature is operative here out of a politics of canonization that not only distinguishes between what is ‘worth’ or ‘stable’ for analysis but also pins a certain cumulative point in literature of becoming modern, or

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<sup>55</sup> Term for a lower class woman.

<sup>56</sup> Sumanta Banerjee. *Dangerous Outcast: The Prostitute in the Nineteenth Century Bengal*, New Delhi: Seagull Books, 1998. P. 85

<sup>57</sup> Datta, Op cit. p 444

literature's engagement with modernity, which negates the synchronicity of such literary developments. The self-reflective turn in Bengali literature had dispersed moments of appearance in literature which, in fact, question the neat correlation between novel, the city, and modernity. The literary yardstick that congealed by the 20<sup>th</sup> century might eclipse the importance of these texts as they are subsumed under the rubric of 'light comic literature,' and especially in Bengali literary terms, under the labels of 'byango' and 'bidrip'.<sup>58</sup> Albeit these are the essentials in a *naksha* taking on a personal or more public target, but *nakshas* are not merely representations of the city as it was. The form of the essay were an immediate development which responded quickly to the reflective potential of prose which Kaviraj reflects to. And this potential even though thoroughly explored in these *nakshas* have been superceded by the over-arching description of 'byango' and 'bidrip.' Referring to Kaliprasanna Sinha's *Hutum Pyanchar Naksha* (1862), Kaviraj claims Sinha's *naksha* does not adequately problematize the self. To Kaviraj, the lack of seriousness in tone and texture of the laughter of *Hutum* is not sufficient for such an analysis. Thus, he proceeds to lay out the criteria of humor for deliberation on the Self. Literary humour, while speaking of the self as subject and part of a larger collectivity, must remain distinct from the object of description; identification with the object of laughter causes a negation of the philosophical possibilities of the effort. Secondly, the literature must evince an understanding of the public fate of the collective, 'a darkly ironic sense of history achieved through reflection upon the benefits and impositions of western modernity.' This is the source of self-irony for individuals who perceived the contradictoriness in the principles of a colonial modernity which taught autonomy, yet strove to subjugate. Here *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* and *Kalikatar Nookochuri* illustrate this bifurcated modern anguish.

*Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* expresses Kedarnath Datta's deep unease with cultural hegemony made even more dangerous by economic dependence. Through its critique of the beneficiaries of colonial rule it unveils the 'benefits' of and 'sacrifices' to modernity:

*pathokra ...apnara ki ghumochen? ...ek dondo cheye dekhun...amader pode pode jomjontrona...pathokere oneke free constitution – free press- poor commission – ragged school, probhritir biboron amar opekha bistarrupe shunechen, aar kebokeho she shomosto tothay protokhyno dekechen, e rajoty tar shakharajoty, tobe keno amra noroke dube achi? Bolte ki, je, moharani – je rajyomotrira, ekdol fenyander upodrobe bysto – jnara hingsrok, ki grihopalito poshu palone byatibysto – jnara ekta nuton chikitsshaloy-er tottvadharon-e shojotno...tnara urishyar mohamorke lokhynolokhyno prjar okalmrityur shune bharoter proti kotakhynopat koren nai! Hay! Shongkeramokrog-e polligram projashunyo bolo! Tar oshudh kothai?*<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Arun Nag (ed.), *Hutum Pyanchar Naksha*,

<sup>59</sup> Kedarnath Datta, Op Cit. 484.

This is the terrible dilemma of colonial modernity. While colonial institutions of law, medicine, municipality, and education are accepted, they are simultaneously rejected as insufficient or rather incomplete in the indigenous context. Moreover, colonial interpellation helps in imagining a collective national Self while depriving equal citizenship. The passage above reinforces the ‘tragic dichotomy’ of ‘autonomy without modernity or modernity with the acceptance of subjugation.’<sup>60</sup> In *Kalikatar Nookochuri* this dichotomy is suggested in the very acceptance of the superiority of the British and internalization of cultural inferiority: “*odyabodhi amader strishikhma uttomrup-e hoy nai; balyobibabo nibaron hoy nai, bodhoba bibabo procholito hoy nay; tobe amra ki prokare engrejder shobit tulona koribo. Ingrejra amader opekhma onek gun-e sreshtho, kichu matro shondebo nai*”<sup>61</sup>

The passage also takes us to the other area of concern – the social operativity of the *naksha*, its success and failure. Although these texts provide rich insights into the creative process of a Bengali male identity, their political significance or potential is undercut by the structural expectations of this popular genre. Both texts have an avowed social commitment to change or reflect the absences and lacks of the modern Bengali. However, both texts negate their own potential to mobilize the reading public towards the ‘internal ideology’ of the text because of the nature of readership ‘contract’ of these *naksha*-s which neutralizes its own potential at the moment of the text’s resolution. Christopher Pawling writes that genres ‘generate particular rules or norms of expectation which are crucial factors in the reader’s acceptance or rejection of the text.’<sup>62</sup> One of *Kalikatar Nookochuri*’s central concerns is the emancipation of women from subjugation and by extension the failure of Bengali bourgeois politics of ‘rescuing’ the woman from her state of oppression. As this above quote suggests, it even becomes a measure of progress vis-à-vis the colonizing ‘other.’ A look at the movement within the text confirms a double negation of the female subject through her literary representation. Menoka’s subalternity is made agentive by investing her suffering with the power to transform her husband into a law-abiding Hindu, i.e., from the path of *adharma* to *dharma*. The main narrative is Pamorlal’s literal and metaphysical spiritual journey. Within this scheme, Menoka leads a sexually and emotionally unfulfilling existence which is then given an agentive role as mentioned above. However, the agency is negated by perpetuating her sexually and emotionally denied existence. The short reconciliatory moment

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<sup>60</sup> Kaviraj, Op cit. p. 385

<sup>61</sup> Mitra, Op Cit. p. 213.

<sup>62</sup> Christopher Pawling. *Popular Fiction and Social Change*. London: Macmillan, 1984. p 4.

is immediately followed by her husband's '*desb bhromon*' as '*prayashchitto*' and upon return it is suggested that Pamorlal meets his death. The last words of Pamorlal demonstrate his reconciliation and reunion with Hinduism accentuating the success of his transformation by invoking a Hindu structure of penitence-abstinence-salvation. This main narrative of Pamorlal thus perpetuates the state of denial of Menoka and hence reduces, what is supposed to be, a 'self-fulfilling' agency to pure instrumentality that does not function as a corrective to her situation. Similarly, the political movement against casteism in society of *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* meets a dead end when ultimately the protagonist, Hemango, marries a woman from the same caste and this receives a special mention in the text.

Here, one sees while the text 'organizes and interprets' experiences and thereby offers 'a particular way of thinking and feeling about one's relationship with oneself, to others, and to society as a whole,'<sup>63</sup> the politics of genre rounds of such intention into a neat denouement which performs the 'light' and the status quo-ist expectations of the readership. This is where I find that *naksha*-s perhaps fail to offer a 'fantasy' of an alternative Bengali self, in spite of succeeding as they do in vocalizing the angst of the modern Bengali male.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 6



## Chapter Two: Calcutta as Sung by the Subaltern

*It is true that the city is accompanied by two projections of itself, one celestial and one infernal; but the citizens are mistaken about their consistency. The inferno that broods in the deepest subsoil of Beersheba is a city designed by the most authoritative architects, built with the most expensive materials on the market, with every device and mechanism and gear system and functioning, decked with tassels and fringes and frills hanging from all the pipes and levers.*

*Intent on piling up its carats of perfection, Beersheba takes for virtue what is now a grim mania to fill the empty vessel itself; the city does not know its only moments of generous abandon are those when it comes detached from itself, when it lets go, expands. Still, at the zenith of Beersheba there gravitates a celestial body that shines with all the city's riches, enclosed in the treasury of cast-off things: a planet a-flutter with potato peels, broken umbrellas, old socks, candy wrappings, paved with tram tickets, fingernail cuttings and pared calluses, eggshells. This is the celestial city, and in its heavens long-tailed comets fly past, released to rotate in space from the only free and happy action of the citizens of Beersheba, a city which, only when it shits, is not miserly, calculating, greedy.*

- Italo Calvino

In this chapter, I intend to re-present the discourse on Bauls. The objective of the chapter is to locate the articulations of the Bauls with respect to the identity-conferring urbanity of Calcutta. In the third section of the chapter, I wish to present Calcutta in the subaltern imagination in the nineteenth and twentieth century. In clearer terms, a rehearsal of the fraught relationship between Bauls and the urban intelligentsia of Calcutta will help in understanding the locutionary position of the Bauls of today and their relationship with the present day metropolis. The trajectory of the chapter follows the 'Baul' through his initiation into *bhadralok* society, the latter's rejection of the 'rag-tag' 'perverted' minstrel, and his subsequent rehabilitation and mobilization in the age of globalization into even more receptive circles of middle-class youth and intellectuals. Rupture of the 'popular' by elite interventions lead us into the problematic and ambivalent relationship between the urban and rural, center and periphery, city intellectual and rustic simpleton<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, underlying the attempt is a problematization of the very category of Baul and its manifold appropriations across various registers down the ages for political, cultural and social ends.

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<sup>1</sup> Ramakanta Chakraborti designates, wrongly, the 'baults' as 'anti-intellectual.' See Jeanne Openshaw, 'The Web of Deceit: Challenges to Hindu and Muslim 'Orthodoxies' by 'Baults' of Bengal,' *Religion* (1997) 27, 297-309

Before I present the Baul-problematic, I wish to begin with the caveat of Jeanne Openshaw that the term 'baul' is highly unstable, even in the present context. Some who are recognized as Bauls prefer the term 'barttaman-panthi' or 'those who are self-dependent in their search and attainment of truth.' 'Barttaman' is opposed to the doctrine of 'anuman' which relies on received or scriptural knowledge to understand the 'truth'. The term 'baul' is coveted and rejected by different groups, depending on location and context. With reference to her ethnography between 1983-1990, Openshaw posits that there are two groups, one which refers to itself as Bauls, usually high profile singers and performers, or those who are lesser known but still dependent on patronage; and another who are recognized as 'Bauls' but who, usually remotely located, may hesitate to identify themselves as so because of the controversial and pejorative connotations in such areas. Moreover, the very 'sect' seems to have not existed before the 19<sup>th</sup> century as has been demonstrated by Hugh B. Urban. However, to proceed with the paper, we need to return to the nineteenth century to explore the very process of stabilization of the *figure* of the Baul. <sup>2</sup>

### **The Perspective on Baul**

The common understanding of Bauls is that they form an iconoclastic sect, detached from the material world; a 'folk' icon of Bengal pleasing for their 'charming poems set to irresistible tunes.' They are the 'wandering minstrels' of Bengal, roaming from place to place in flowing saffron robes, singing to the sound of the *ektara*. They live on the fringes of society, spending their days in contemplation of the Divine One. Their pioneer is Lalon Phakir and their most famous patron, Rabindranath Tagore. This would be the popular image of Bauls in most urban middle-class homes. The silence on the sect's 'problematic aspects' is telling of both the Baul appropriation and self-fashioned Bengali morality.

Academic discourse has variously engaged with this sect. I shall, for now, briefly, represent academic deliberations, both western and Bengali, on their origin, music, and their subcultural value. Atis Dasgupta in 'The Bauls and Their Heretic Tradition' explains the syncretic character of this mystic sect as standing in contradistinction to both Brahminical Hinduism and orthodox Islam. The Sahajiya school of philosophy to which they belong propagate a path of *ulta-sadban* or 'the reversed path' which believes in the natural piety of the soul and dispenses with ritualism and pedantry of organized religions.

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<sup>2</sup> With this clarification, I proceed to use the word without quotes.

It preaches the innateness of spiritualism: the Spirit is within the mortal body and communion with it may be realized through the body and not by any ritualized external object or performance. This philosophy is speculated to have originated from the *Vaishnava Sahajiyas* of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The *sahaja Vaishnavas* regarded the body to be the microcosm of the universe and thus the ultimate reality. Mankind, represented by Radha, unites with the male principle of the universe, Krishna. The consummation between the two joins Man with the Divine. This union in *deha-tattva* can be realized through the love between man and woman (*upaya* and *prajna*). Bauls also drew on Sufism to translate this love between dualities into the love for 'Maner Manush,' that is between the Divine Beloved and the human self. Sahaja as well as Sufism thus seem to be the foundational philosophies of Baul mysticism.

Baul and other syncretic sects have been traditionally seen as a religion of the lower class/caste of the city. These groups were a 'religious' intervention in the socio-political discourse of the urban colonial space of Calcutta. Sumanta Banerjee and Hugh B. Urban have discussed the ways in which the disconnect from rural moorings and within indigenous community between the elite and the working class had led the latter to embrace these syncretic dissident formations. In the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> and most of 19<sup>th</sup> century there continued a large influx of migrants from rural Bengal into the metropolis of Calcutta. Famine, Permanent Settlement, and the gradual destruction of the indigenous market led to impoverization of the erstwhile dominant religious and social groups as well as further immiserization of the lower orders. At first, migration to the city with the birth of the new parvenu class afforded caste-based occupations as carpenters, weavers, artisans, masons, blacksmiths, sweepers, and coolies. Petty jobs with the East India Company and indigenous agency houses were also available. The social activism of the *dal*-s, associations and *samaj*-s of Calcutta did not take an interest in the causes of the subaltern. The public sphere that was created remained constricted to the discussion and movements of middle and upper class contentions with the colonial administration. Social movements and discourses around widow remarriage, *kulin* polygamy or *sati*, which were exclusively upper caste practices, excluded the majority of the city's inhabitants – the indigent lower caste population of migrant labourers, artisans, construction workers, low-paid employees, domestic servants, coolies. The lower orders had therefore to construct their own social symbols and practices while appropriating some dominant modes of worship and socialization such as *sitala* puja

and *baba taraknath* and popular performing arts such as the *jatra*, *shong*, *kobi-gan*, or *kehenta*.<sup>3</sup> This disorganized working class of Calcutta in their search for a 'collective self-consciousness'<sup>4</sup> in an alienating metropolis gravitated towards the heterodox syncretic Baul, Sahabdhani and Kartabhaja denominations. The radicalizing potential of these popular 'religions' lies in their rejection and refutation of scriptural Vedic Hinduism and Islam. They challenged caste, gender and class hierarchies and dismantled sexual normatives of mainstream society. Furthermore, they offered a space for women in their organizations which were professedly on equal terms with the men. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the elasticity of moral and gender boundaries and the absence of ritualism and dogmatism, made these sects a parallel (perhaps more revolutionary) movement in their own right along with the reformist movement launched by bhadrakok society. Hugh B. Urban writes in reference to kartabhajas of 19<sup>th</sup> century Calcutta, 'Not only did they accept the men and women of all ages but they also transgressed boundaries of caste and social status inviting Brahmins to sit side by side with outcastes to share food with harlots and leather-workers. Within the restricted sphere of esoteric ritual and ecstatic gatherings at least, the Kartabhaja path opened an alternative social field; beyond the usual burdens of caste, labor, and trade.'<sup>5</sup> The millennium old sahaja tradition of heterodoxy and criticism informed the Baul philosophy with a nonconformist politics that situated them between a peripheralizing nationalistic middle class and an orientalizing Tagore. The sahaja compositions of Mayanamoti, Dohas and Charyapadas composed in Bengal in the 8<sup>th</sup> century under the Pala are expressions against the caste-ridden Brahminical orthodoxy of the time. The Senas attempted to suppress these dissenting voices but the sahaja tradition reasserted itself during the Mughal and Turk-Afghan rule and finally birthed the Baul tradition along with Sufism and sant philosophy which was flourishing in north India. The philosophy resurfaces in the formation of the Bauls and was introduced to the English-educated urban middle class under the patronage of Rabindranath Tagore and the pioneering scholarly efforts of Kshitimohon Sen and Mohammad Mansuruddin. Although the first known documentation is Nafar Chandra Datta's *Baul Sangit*, it was the

<sup>3</sup> *Kobigan* and *kehenta* were also the staple entertainment of the elite comprador culture who arose out of the Permanent Settlement till the first few decades of the nineteenth century. The 'nobo-jagron' or the Bengal Renaissance with the spread of English education engendered an anxiety to construct the pristine Bengali self which could not be associated with non-Sanskritic traditional art-forms. Thus, these practices were derided as vulgar and discouraged by the new bhadrakok class from the second quarter of nineteenth century.

<sup>4</sup> Sumanta. Banerjee. *The Parlour and the Streets*, Calcutta: Seagull, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Hugh B. Urban. 'Songs of Ecstasy: Mystics, Minstrels, and Merchants in Colonial Bengal,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 123, No. 3. (Jul. - Sep., 2003), p. 503.

compilations of Sen and Mansuruddin with introductions by Tagore himself that popularized the Bauls. Ever since the 1950s there has been burgeoning research on both Baul music and Baul philosophy. The Bauls have been variously represented in Bengali literature and is now ensconced comfortably in the Bengali self- imagination.

### The Problematic of Baul

Above is the popular reading of Bauls discursively sketched in academic and common exchanges. The tension between *bhadralok* and Baul is an exemplary illustration of identity politics, where the two have been dynamically morphed the other into existence. The Bauls occupy a liminal space vis-à-vis Bengali culture and identity. In Bengali nationalist discourse Bauls have been appropriated as representative of the peasant simplicity and earthy spirituality of Bengal, while paradoxically being excluded from the urban middle class culture as the profane 'other.' In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the urban Bengali *bhadralok* posited the bauls as the 'real' embodiment of an uncontaminated 'folk' spirit. By the latter half of the twentieth century, Bauls came to symbolize communal harmony in nationalist discourses, and cultural resistance by a globalized music and culture industry. They are now a symbol of *pukka*<sup>6</sup> ethnicity and their music a bearer of humanistic love. These various appropriations do not tell neat histories but are results of complex multilateral negotiations.<sup>7</sup>

Hugh B. Urban has argued that the category of Baul is a fairly recent construct. A genealogy of Bauls would begin coevally with the anxiety-ridden crafting of a Bengali *bhadralok* self in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In imagining a collective Bengali identity, the disruptive and incongruent 'others' within the imagined community required to be expelled. Later the demands of a national identity required the inclusion of these same 'others,' albeit through a process of de-sexualizing and infantilizing. In the case of Bauls this rehabilitation included investing them with a paternity and patronage which has gained authority more through repetition than accuracy, rehearsed over the last century across several registers of politics.

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<sup>6</sup> A term used by an Indo-American in a personal conversation.

<sup>7</sup> I should qualify the following presentation by emphasizing that shifts and drifts of such an identity construction are extremely complicated and any crystallized staging of linear periodic shifts in the image and identity of Bauls would be reckless. For instance, and by way of a prelude note, the claim that 'Bauls' as a denomination standardized over time in concomitance with historical necessities may seem to be contradicted by the unequivocal identification and persecution of them by Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I do not intend to imply a non-synchronic process. The principle of criticism requires a well-defined object, therefore when early activists rallied against these disruptive and threatening formations in society it was a cursory bracketing of dispersed elements under the rubric of 'Bauls.'

The Bauls have been assigned various lineages. Common understanding is that the Baul originated around the time of Caitanya, between 1625 and 1675. But contending narratives have located their origin to as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century. We find in the work of Jeanne Openshaw and Hugh Urban, a destabilization of the term 'Baul' or 'Baul tradition.' While Openshaw situates the problematic of the term in self-referentiality, Urban questions the very existence of such an organized denomination prior to nineteenth century. In fact, Urban has located the first mention of the term 'sect' with reference to Bauls in Akshaykumar Datta's *Bharatvarsiya Upasaka Sampradaya* (1780). And Baul 'songs' were recorded a decade or two later, the oldest and probably first compilation being that of Nafar Chandra Datta, *Baul Sangit* of 1881. Prior to the nineteenth century, there can be found only sporadic mention of the word Baul in medieval texts – *Sri Krsna Vijaya* by Maladhara Basu (14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century), *Caitanya Bhagavata* by Vrndavana Dasa, and *Caitanya Caritamrta* of Krsnadasa Kaviraj (1580-1). It is undeniable that mystic mendicants such as Fakirs, Kartabhajas and others have for centuries been known to exist and are still to be found in Bengal. The point is that there appears to have been no reckoning of a 'tradition' of Bauls to have existed till the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is being recently claimed that Lalan Fakir (1774-1890), the Baul icon, consciously distanced himself with Bauls. There is no mention of 'baul' in any of Lalan's compositions, neither is there any mention of Bauls in *Grambarita Prakasikar* (started in 1872).<sup>8</sup> The first to claim the 'Bauls' as a distinct sect was Duddu (1841-1911), Lalan's disciple. Interestingly, post Lalan and Duddu, Baul came to be a recognized sect with a formed body of compositions with many Bengali mystics identifying themselves as Bauls. In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of the Baul became relatively fixed both in scholarly and popular imagination. This politics of paternity is not merely restricted to dates which buttress the narrative of tradition but drastically re-appropriates the other into official culture. Ksitimohan Sen's *The Bauls of Bengal* (1954) intercalates Baul philosophy into the Vedic discourse, problematically claiming a common origin and underlying sameness of both. Accompanying this interpellative traditionalizing is an infantilization of the Baul image which, through the trope of 'pagol' (mad) or 'paglami' (madness) came to carry in the Bengali imagination heavy connotations of childlike behavior, seeks to undermine the sexual potency of the Baul.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Hugh B. Urban, 'The Politics of Madness: The Construction and Manipulation of the 'Baul' Image in Modern Bengal,' *South Asia*, Vol. XXII, No. 1 (1999), p. 25

<sup>9</sup> The relationship between childlike behavior and madness is derived from the tradition of Bhakti and its entrenchment in the Bengali imagination is attributable to the bhakti movement of Ramakrishna in the late nineteenth century.

While the mellifluous songs about the Divine Being (Maner Manush) is universally praised, the performative and problematic component of Bauls had exposed them to intense vilification and stigmatization since the nineteenth century. The sexual component which has roots in Sahaja Vaishnavism and Tantra has been studied in detail by Rahul Peter Das in 'Problematic Aspects of Sexual Rituals of the Bauls of Bengal' (1992) and Sashibhushan Dasgupta in *Obscure Religious Cults* (1969). The body being microcosmic is held to be the indubitable means to sublimation. Sexual performance here becomes a means to an end and not an end in itself. This 'secret' *sadbhava* includes the sexual act of coitus reservatus known as 'ulta, poth,' the 'ritual of the four moons' or the ingestion of semen, faeces, urine and menses, and also anthropophagy.<sup>10</sup> Such sexual and 'occult' practices of Bauls and other members of sahajiya cults reached a high point towards the end of the nineteenth century.

The Bauls appeared in Calcutta towards the beginning of the nineteenth century. Along with the Kartabhajas, Auls, and other syncretistic 'sects,' they gained immense popularity among the lower orders in the city. They were tolerated at first as existing on the margins of society and literally on the fringes of the city. However, with a growing presence, orthodox Hindus and Muslims soon started rallying against what they considered perverse and threatening to their moral and social order. The appearance of these sects offered an alternative liberatory space which rejected social, sexual, and gender normatives while it corresponded with the congealment of a capitalist economy within the British colony in the subcontinent in the nineteenth century. This subcultural realm of non-conformism collided with the self-purificatory praxis of elite movements such as the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj. I agree with Harjot Singh Oberoi, that such collisions were not simply a result of modernization but were informed with a Foucauldian 'mechanics of power' and 'the articulation of a hegemonic elite culture'<sup>11</sup> which sought to create a new cultural identity vis-à-vis the colonial state. This was most conspicuous a case at the time of 'Bengal Renaissance' when the Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, and the radical group of Young Bengal are said to have 'quickly singled out (the Bauls) as the most notorious and most dangerous of the various heterodox sects of Bengal, and thus as the one of the most major symptoms of the

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<sup>10</sup> Charles H. Capwell, 'The Esoteric Belief of the Bauls of Bengal,' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2. (Feb., 1974), pp. 255-264.

<sup>11</sup> Harjot Singh Oberoi, 'The Worship of Pir Sakhi Sarvar: Illness, Healing and Popular Culture in the Punjab' *Studies in History*; Vol 3; No 29, 1987, p. 31

corruption, licentiousness, polytheism, and immorality, that had infected and perverted the Hindu tradition in modern times.<sup>12</sup>

In the last three decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century, due to political changes under the British, the Muslims of East Bengal felt an increasing need to assert their autonomy and identity. A specifically Islamic identity required a regimentation of the self which included expulsion of all that was un-Islamic in the culture of Bengali Muslims. Under this project of radical reformism, all forms of syncretism that had sidled into the Islamic tradition or claimed Islamic roots were to be exterminated. Thus, fundamentalist groups such as the *Tariqa-i Muhammadiyah* and *Faraizi* resorted to rhetorical as well as physical assaults on such syncretistic communes and forbade the persistence of such tendencies within the Islamic tradition. Solidarity with the larger Islamic brotherhood or nationality required elimination of all that was local and contingent. The most militant of these campaigns was Maulana Reyajuddin Ahmad's *Baul Dhvanga Phatoya* or 'The Directive for Destruction of the Bauls.' The acerbic and incendiary *fatwa* enlisted the evils practiced by the followers of Lalan Fakir, accusing the fakir and his followers as worshippers of the vagina, of the human form, of anthropophagic and orgiastic conventions, and rituals of wife swapping. Other such publications such as Maulabi Phajul's *Baddha Phakir* (1915) and Maulabi Keramatullah's *Ucit Katha* (1927) were equally intolerant and incensed denunciations of the Bauls. The anti-Baul propaganda by both Muslim and Hindu orthodox and reformist streams stemmed from an anxiety which imagined 'the "Baul" ... to represent what is most wrong with Bengali society, during the colonial era, what must be purged from Bengali culture in order to achieve a pure and genuinely united social-religious community.'<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly, this overwhelming negative image of the Baul was to undergo a radical makeover in the first half of the twentieth century, muting the vituperative against him/her till present time. The greatest exponent of the Bauls, ironically, emerged from the most

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<sup>12</sup> Ironically, however, Abdul Rahman's violent condemnation of the Bauls and other such formations in *Ketab Nasihat al Azam* (1876), drew upon a specifically Hindu religious trope of the *kaliyuga*:

Let me describe some features of the Kali Age:  
The world became full of false fakirs  
Some smoke cannabis, some go around singing ...  
If you ever come across such a fakir, beat him  
With shoes and break his head!  
If anyone listens to the words of a fakir which  
Are not in accordance with the holy writ and  
Traditions, he should be given ten blows with a shoe

<sup>13</sup> Hugh B. Urban, p 31.



urban, influential, sophisticated and wealthy Tagore family. The political texture of Rabindranath's relationship with the Bauls has now come under a deconstructive scanner. The formation of a 'Baul' tradition owes much to Rabindranath's political vision of an uncontaminated 'Bangla' vis-à-vis a nationalistic politics and the colonial state. The popular image of Bauls has coagulated over time through discursive strategies of aestheticization both in art and in early Bengali academics. Urban has demonstrated that how after his disillusionment by 1907 with the National movement, Tagore's ideals underwent an implicit shift from the properly political into the spheres of spirituality and art. He had grown to believe in the Brahmoistic tenet of universal humanism and freedom which would liberate, especially the industrialized West, from the dehumanizing control of mechanization. As an antidote to what Urban terms the 'dehumanization of man,' Tagore looked to Bengal's peasantry for inspiration. The peasantry, symbolic of an uncontaminated humanism, would form an indispensable cog in his project of decolonization. Bauls, for Tagore, represented the essence of this idealized land and peasantry of Bengal. They were the true carriers of Brahmo ideals which had become mangled in the reactionary and quarreling factions within the Samaj. Tagore's fascination with Baul, whose philosophic and metaphoric elements are unmistakable in his poetry, surpassed its original intent and fixed the multivocality of Baul into something accessible and univocal. The articulation of this univocality of an elite agenda involved a sanitization of the Baul where the preeminence of the Body in Baul philosophy was silenced and excised before the accentuation on its emotive and spontaneous tenor. It is interesting to note that not only did Tagore bracket the entire belief system of Bauls as 'worthless'<sup>14</sup>, there is no mention by him of the contentious practices and fundamentals of Bauls. Sterilization of the Baul continues beyond Tagore in Bengali cultural and literary spheres through a collapsing of 'folk' and 'happy madness,' so that the indigenous could claim it as a private Bengali sphere of benevolent spirituality as opposed to a capitalistic, self-interested colonial grammar of politics.<sup>15</sup> Urban argues, 'Tagore's construction of the Baul image... was a part of this broader search for a new national identity among the bhadraloks of colonial Bengal.'<sup>16</sup> The urban temperament of this programme of indigenous politics in its praxis of essentializing of the peasantry and, by extension, the Baul is not to be overlooked.

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Capwell, op cit. Pg.30

<sup>15</sup> Partha Chatterjee. *The Nation and its Fragments: Studies in Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

<sup>16</sup> Urban, op cit. 39

A similar appropriation takes place among the Bengali Muslim intelligentsia after the formation of West and East Pakistan. In another configuration of Islamic identity, suddenly the local and pastoral were celebrated and advanced before a threat of cultural and linguistic homogenization. Salomon writes, 'In their search for an identity rooted in the soil of Bengal ... Muslim Bengalis exalted literary figures ... who expressed nonsectarian humanistic beliefs. Foremost among them were Tagore, Nazrul Islam and Lalan, who came to epitomize the Bauls, already symbols of Bengali folk culture.'<sup>17</sup> And lastly, both Hindu and Islamic nationalism claimed a specifically Hindu or Muslim identity of Lalan which led to his poetry being Islamized or Hinduized, and Lalan himself began to be hagiographically portrayed or enshrined. Suddenly, Bauls were brought into the fold of 'our people' as an adhesive to hold together fractured selves of the Bengali.

This anthro-geographic politics which imagined the Baul as an embodiment of the 'folk' spirituality in a nationalistic imagination rendered the multivocalities inherent in the baul philosophy and praxis 'univocal symbols of closed, ordered, unambiguous meanings.' The 'politics of discipline' which required a complete overhauling of the image of Baul through a systematic de-sexualization and anesthetization of the Baul 'usurped the ability of people to read their own meanings into the cosmos. Those who did not pay their homage to the new articles of faith enunciated through univocal symbols were considered as irrational, backward and deviant.'<sup>18</sup>

### **The Urban in Baul**

In a penetrative reading of subaltern spirituality and its relationship to the cityspace in the capitalist economy of colonial Bengal, Hugh B. Urban has demonstrated the 'unusual form of Bengali literature emerging at the heart of the colonial city of Calcutta.'<sup>19</sup> Within the increasing urban frontiers, where poverty misery and crime go hand in hand, Urban argues that the continued use of economic language and imagery in the songs of Bauls offer, if not a solution, vital spiritual succor to the subaltern poor. Music has been the chosen vehicle of practicing and popularizing the Baul philosophy that arose out of a particular social environment that was oppressive and insensitive. It is an interventionist and critical

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<sup>17</sup> As quoted in Urban, 41.

<sup>18</sup> Singh, op cit, pp.54-55.

<sup>19</sup> Hugh B. Urban. 'The Marketplace and the Temple: Economic Metaphors and Religious Meanings in the Folk Songs of Colonial Bengal,' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 60, No. 4. (Nov., 2001), p 1104.

implement designed to interrupt, challenge and subvert this social order. For instance, in colonial Bengal, Baul songs by participating in the official fiscal discourse of Calcutta, the economic and material epicenter of the empire, both invert and subvert the symbols of power to parody or critique official institutions and apparatuses.

The central metaphor of much of the literature around colonial Calcutta was the *bazaar* or marketplace. The *bazaar*, through the Mughal and colonial eras, synaptically linked the political, economic and religious spheres. The *hat/bazaar/ganj* was the central locus of socio-political intercourse. The image of the 'bazaar of the world' is predominant in songs of the *chandimangal*, the hymns of Ramprasad, and the sayings of Ramakrishna. Urban identifies this use of 'market' imagery with a non-violent form of resistance in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by subaltern groups as a device to appropriate and subvert the dominant articulation of power, and redeploying the language of the state in order to move towards a less exploitative, alternative society.

In precolonial and colonial Bengal, the network of metropolitan *bazaars* and other impermanent, more localized, markets such as the *ganj*, *hat*, and *mela* would be hierarchically structured and centrifugally spreading outwards from an urban center. Urban quotes Sudipta Sen: "*Bazaar, ganjs and hats ... had come to signify political authority and material clout in an unprecedented way ... The marketplace stood as a powerful metaphor of worldly authority for the ruling elite.*"<sup>20</sup> The market was not only the locus of eco-political power but was also the recipient of religious patronage. It had a direct symbiotic relationship with religious practices, rituals and commodities. Thus it emerged as a nodal point of political, economic and religious activities and became a contested area of control for the East India Company. On the other side, the market also occupied a disturbing 'extraterritoriality,' to borrow a term from Bakhtin, because of its secular and solvent tendencies to bring together people of all classes, religions and castes into a realm of 'freedom' and 'familiarity.' It was a place where the lower orders would assemble and critique the dominant class. It was therefore a subversive space associated with rumors and subversive discourse.

The *bazaar* also came to symbolize religious authority and power. In Vaishnavism, Chaitanya is represented as a "holy businessman" who has come to allot commodities of love and peace in the marketplace of spiritualism. Assisting Chaitanya in his enterprise, are his disciples who continue distributing the commodities through their 'merchandise' of

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p 1088

songs in their capacity as clerks, treasurers and scribes. On the other hand the spiritual denominations of Bauls and Kartabhajas, who transgressed caste, class and gender boundaries, could also invert the connotations of the market metaphor by associating the *bazaar* with illusion, greed, deception and suffering. Here the market embodies the illusion of material world. Thus it became a locus of 'diverse fields of power' where the official order and ideology would be intensely contested and asserted.<sup>21</sup>

The *bazaar* metaphor serves a twofold function in these Baul songs – they offer a critique of the socio-economic order of society as well as a discourse on the religious-spiritual level. Songs replete with images of buying and selling, trading, merchandise are employed in subverting official religious and social institutions.

When you deal in the market of the world,  
 You think you buy rubies, diamonds, pearls –  
 You really only buy brass beads, my friend.  
 ...  
 My house, "my goods" – like this our days go echoing by.  
 We eat the poison possessions, and when wealth is lost we weep.  
 What good will weeping do when lost, my brother?<sup>22</sup> (Lalan)

These songs simultaneously evoke the spiritual as well as the material loss of the urban. For instance,

*Shohore shohojon bombete*  
*Koriye pagol-para*  
*Nilo tara*  
*Shob loot-e*  
*Panchjon dhoni chilo,*  
*Tara shob fatur holo*  
*Karbare bhongo dilo,*  
*Kokhon jani jay uthe.*  
*Rajyeshbor raja jinni*  
*Chorerou shr shiromoni,*  
*Nalish koribo ami*  
*Kon khane kar nikote?*

<sup>21</sup> For a 'deviant' sect like the Kartabhajas, the marketplace would be more overtly negative and brutal. The common use of the phrase 'bhaber bazaar' or 'the bazaar of the world' through its eco-political invocation actually seeks to more directly describe the condition of the struggling working classes of colonial Calcutta who dwelled in slums and streets of the black town. To better illustrate the accuracy of the portrayals, I reproduce a quote in Urban's 'Songs of Ecstasy: Mystics, Minstrels, and Merchants in Colonial Bengal,'(508) from *Bhaber Gita*:

All the merchants engage in business in the Bazaar of this World.  
 Those who toil, in accordance with the law, don't have much wealth,  
 while those who engage in business, holding the surplus of trade,  
 happily take their profits and make some more purchases.  
 And when a break [in trade] occurs, they give the beggar a handful!

<sup>22</sup> op cit, 1093.

Gelo gelo dhon, mal-ou namay,  
 Khali ghor dekebi jomay  
 Lalan koy,  
 Khajnar day  
 Tao kobe jay laat-e.<sup>23</sup>

The Bauls often use the image of the poor merchant in colonial Calcutta. The wealthy moneylenders are the 'bombete'-s, a term for dacoits and the colonizer is the 'raja'. The colonial state along with unscrupulous moneylenders is the cause of the merchant's demise. The metaphor stemmed from the capitalist market which was monopolized by the East India Company who forced indigenous small merchants to take loans. These merchants suffered further immiseration because of the high interest rates on loan which rendered them bankrupt. As per the duality in meaning inherent in Baul songs, the metaphor also stands for the soul which wanders through spiritual poverty and debt in the material realm.

The key to my own home  
 Is in alien hands.  
 How can I unlock  
 To gaze at the riches  
 I have?  
 My home is loaded with gold  
 But ran by a stranger  
 I am blind  
 From birth.  
 He would let me in  
 Only if I pay  
 My door-keeping fees....<sup>24</sup> (Lalan)

Here we seem to have a direct critique of colonialism. Not only is it a sharp analysis of the economic exploitation and impoverization under the British but is also a comment on the intellectual incapacitation of the indigenous. 'Alien' cultural apparatuses have 'blinded' the indigenous so that now he cannot see the 'gold' in his own cultural resources. The songs explicitly critiqued even the *nabya* babus who built fortunes under colonial patronage.

Fashionable Mr. Rai  
 Wears a watch on the wrist, his hair finely combed,  
 But only three paise jingle in his pocket!  
 Though his stomach is in agony from hunger,  
 He has a cigarette in his mouth.  
 Working in an office for only 120 rupees a month  
 He cannot support his nine daughters and three sons. <sup>25</sup> (Anon)

<sup>23</sup> Upendranath Bhattacharya. *Banglar Baul o Baul Gaan*. Kolkata: Orient Book Publishers, (1962), 2002. Pg. 583

<sup>24</sup> Deben Bhattacharya, *Songs of the Bards of Bengal*, New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1969. Pg. 90,

<sup>25</sup> Compilation of Bhaskar Bhattacharya, op cit. p 1094.

These lines attack not only the self-seeking indigenous upper class whose obsequiousness to the East India Company earned them wealth, but also a middle-class culture thereby formed which demanded a conspicuously lavish lifestyle even when the financial condition of individuals did not permit such extravagance. Furthermore, the song interestingly narrows its focus on the ‘forgotten world of the unsuccessful *bhadralok*.’<sup>26</sup> We can speculatively situate the song in the 1860s-70s by dint of the allusion to office work. The under-represented world of office-life or *chakri* in Calcutta around this time was characterized by a racially discriminatory workspace and disciplining clock time which became oppressive for a generally high-caste yet *daridra* or poor *bhadralok*. This depressed class, strove to maintain its *bhadralok*-ness culturally from the *itor* class or menial subordinate classes through a consumption pattern that has been alluded above which further amplified the angst of middle-class males. The impersonal capitalistic nature of *chakri* along with disciplinary time and salary differentials particularly dehumanized the work culture of Bengali men who had to suffer everyday violence of the workplace silently and servilely. The humiliation was greater as they were fatalities of, to borrow Pierre Bourdieu’s definitions, a ‘dispositional habitus’ deprived of the ‘cultural nobility’ which, excluded them from the discourses of the sophisticated *madhyabitto bhadralok* class. Thus, simple tautness of these songs brings to the forefront the fissures within the *bhadralok* identity and problematizes any monophonic representation of a middle class uniformly shaped out of colonial contact.

Not always are the songs cynical. The following is a compassionate portrayal of the self-aggrandizing, yet oblivious, comprador bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century by Lalan.

My heart,  
 You are in a muddle,  
 As the days go,  
 Your inherited riches,  
 Plundered, fly.  
 You only doze  
 Around the clock  
 Drinking dreams  
 And living in five homes  
 With no control  
 The robber rests with you,  
 My heart,  
 In your own room  
 But how can you know?  
 Your eyes are shut  
 In sleep...<sup>27</sup> (Lalan)

<sup>26</sup> Sumit Sarkar. *Writing Social History*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press. p 285.

<sup>27</sup> Bhattacharya, op cit, p. 85.

These compositions are never without double innuendos of religious invocations and social critique. The following is a composition by Sridam, which was collected by one of the authoritative figures in Baul studies in Bengal, Upendranath Bhattacharya from the district of Bardhaman at a Baul congregation:

*Modna-chor dhukche shohore*  
*Khepa mon re.*  
*Jodi palbi proja, hoye raja*  
*Chabi de re mal-ghore.*

*Shei anondo bajar*  
*Jabi mon amar,*  
*Gurudotto oastro dhore chol, mon amar;*  
*Shethai prolobhon rup andhokare*  
*Gaaner prodip nao kore.*

*Shei bajar khub khasha,*  
*Ajob tamasha*  
*Shei bajar-e roshik-jonar*

*Shorbodai basha;*  
*Nai kamona, onyo asha,*  
*Roy shoda amr dhore.*

*Gele shbo- shukher bajar*  
*Hobe shob ajar,*  
*O tumi Ondhokare morbe ghure',*  
*Pran jabe tomar;*  
*Shethau dushtoloker mishto bole,*  
*Pran harabi ondhokare.*

*Gele moho-bajare,*  
*She chor shorbodai fere,*  
*Pele pare charbe na bhai,*  
*Debe saaf okere;*  
*Shethay shabdane shocheton hoye,*  
*Par hobi bhoktir jore.*

*Shei kritanjolipur,*  
*Oti shumodhur,*  
*She shandhane jene jete pare,*  
*She hodo chotur;*  
*Shetay nei ko shonka,*  
*Prem-er donka*  
*Shune kornokuhure.*

*Ore pagol mon,*  
*Amar katha shon,*  
*Goshai hori-r bakyo dhore*

*Kor dekhni gomon;  
Tor milbe roton,  
Sridam re, tor milbe roton,  
Ekbar dekh re joton kore.<sup>28</sup>*

The imagery of Baul music as a norm is drawn from everyday life and it is through the simplicity of this imagery that philosophical, social, and religious implications are drawn. The bazaar, metonymic for the city, is an orgiastic locus of seduction, deception and defraudation, represented adjectivally with the words 'anondo,' 'mobo,' and 'andhokar.' The market thus stands not only as a site of transaction but also as the underside of human nature and ephemeral forces of terrestrial temptations.

In this bazaar, music and 'gurudotto' are the only succor. Music, as has been mentioned earlier is indispensable to the being and praxis of Baul. Bikas Chakraborty writes: '*baul pothe thakar jonyoigan baul-er jibon-e oporiharjo karon gaan-ei shadhona-r tottbo o tottbanushilon, ja shadhona-r hab-ke nityo jagroto rakhte shabajyo kore.*'<sup>29</sup> Thus the song itself asserts the power of music to resist the coercive bazaar of material life.

Again, the metaphor of 'chor' or thief plays on the double connotations of both swindler and 'maner manush' (Divine One). The salvific world of 'kritanjali' awaits one who can transcend the market of the material world. It promises a utopia of love and ecstasy where one need not fear the unknown or dread the persistent return of thieves who leave one destitute. The underlayer of this philosophy rests on the synonymization of the city which epitomizes all that is transient, corrupting, and negating.

The appropriation by Bauls of the symbols of the dominant order evidences praxis and proposal of a survival mechanism in the colonial marketplace. Urban argues that it is an instance of radical non-violent resistance of subordinate groups against the powers that be at a critical historical and geographical moment in Bengal. What these songs offer is an alternative community of universal humanity attainable outside the capitalist caste-based sectarian economy through faith in the inherent divinity of Man. This alternative social vision, which proposes a non-hierarchized, egalitarian, non-materialist fraternity, will be based on love and equality. However, simplistic flattening of subalternity as chaste and immaculate should be avoided as these groups too are riven by internal tensions and contradictions, are caught between contending interests and operations of power.

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<sup>28</sup> op cit. pp. 951-952.

<sup>29</sup> Bikas Chakraborty. *Baul Jiboner Samajtattva*, Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2003. p. 132.



Nevertheless, the Bauls offer their philosophy as spiritual anchor in a materialist society in spite of internal corruption and external attack. They offer a rich example of manipulation and resignification of commodities in terms of the subordinated culture into subcultural signs of resistance against a super-imposed Protestant capitalist colonial ethic dominated by linear time and alienation.

### **The Urbanization of Baul**

Kolkata has re-emerged in the Baul imagination but the reconfiguration therein demands critical engagement. Such an undertaking takes into consideration the dialectical relationship between the local and the global and between music and listening to explain the co-mutation of the city and the subaltern.

In a recent work on the Bauls by Aditya Mukhopadhyay, the re-incarnation of the former has been bemoaned as the dilution of both Baul philosophy and music. The discourse of authenticity aside, what one is witnessing are the very transformations in the engagement with these problematic sects which cannot but be ontologically based on concrete shifts in the nature and presentation of Baul music and lifestyle. Thus, whereas the bourgeois intellectual accepts, proclaims, and partakes in a discursive graph of apotheosization and subsequent dilution, the cooption and participation of Bauls – their agency in the consumption and reification, say for instance, as ‘world music’ – supplies enough grist for the former’s mill.

*Banglar Baul* describes, albeit polemically, the make over in lifestyle, attitude and intention of contemporary, often famed, Bauls in a situation where the *image* is sacrosanct, paid due homage to, despite a paradoxical decline in adherence to the material and metaphysical precepts of the religion. Thus, increasingly Bauls are adopting markers of an urban worldview, where jeans have replaced the *gedua* robe, Maruti cars are sought after, and global destinations (preferably Europe or Japan) are ideal locations for performance. The *image* still lingers around – to be literally donned before one goes up on the stage. Mukhopadhyay observes that popular artists such as Paban Das casts his jeans off and dons the traditional garment only for performance. This act reduces the politics of the garment itself to a mere tokenism, a tipping of the hat to history. Media attention and (foreign) publicity has become a strong incentive for remodelling and restyling music and identity. The desire for fame and complementarities sometimes necessitates a self-exoticization where

dollars dictate intentions. Most Baul singers enjoy a secondary occupation and Baul-ism becomes an alternative lifestyle. The past returns to haunt the Baul in an altered form. The initial marginalization and persecution of these sects was rooted in their esoteric sexual practice and the past century witnessed a silent acceptance of the sect coopted in nationalistic discourse. However, the standardization of patterns such as the imperativeness of foreign trips, acquisition of property, companionship of foreign/white women, and casual sexual encounters in distant lands re-animates certain long-standing stigmas.

This certainly contests the founding principles of Bauls. The geo-political roots of the sect established the Bauls in a particularly anti-establishment, pro-peasant cast. The power of such a counter-culture lies in political praxis in everyday life where each article of clothing, accessory and even musical arrangement indicts normatives. The robe with a tear denotes the Baul's renunciatory worldview and has deep historical connotations of faith. The 'ektara,' a one-stringed instrument is a traditional musical accompaniment of the Bauls. It is carved out of gourd, bamboo and other easily available organic resources. The cords even recently were crafted out of animal intestines. They have now been replaced more or less by metal or nylon strings. The ektara itself is therefore invested with a history of rural poverty and a sustained intimacy with nature. Similarly the percussion instrument, 'dugi,' is also made of baked pot and leather which are easily available from the surrounding environment. Therefore, the polysemous socio-ecological roots of sartorial and quotidian performativity face extinction when the fundamentals are altered or replaced.

*Dugi ektara-r moto je badyojantro-ke praachin baul shadhok-gayokera grohon korechilen, tar jonyo shamajik paripoarshikota o tnader byaktigoto jibonchorja-r shamogrikota ekta shodorthok bhumika chilo. Emonki dotaru o khomok ja porobortikale grihito hoyeche, tao lokbadyo hishee sbbikrita. Gaan-er shathe baul-er je ekatmota, ta protiniyoti jibonchorja-r shathe tnar shomporkoke drido theke dridotor kore. Ekhetre tnar jibon theke bicchinno kono upayke obolombon korle ta jibonchorjar shamogrikota theke tnake bicchinno korbe...tai kono baul.jodi juger shathe tal miliye cholar kotha bolen prokitopoke tokhon tini nijer jibonchorjar poriborton-er proti-i ingeet korchen.<sup>30</sup>*

Ektara and Baul have grown synonymic. 'Ektarar ortho baul-er uposthiti, ar baul bolte kane kane ektara-r shur, ja udash kore tole bhāber manushke,' writes Chakraborty. The technologization of Baul music therefore alters the very experience of it, and if both music and musical arrangement are methodological apparatus of the faith then such innovations as the synthesizer perhaps encode deeper meanings. The synthesizer is now rather popular among bauls and it is now played by Bauls at 'melas' and gatherings in place of the 'ektara.'

<sup>30</sup> Bikash Chakraborty. *Baul Jiboner Samajattwa*, Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2003. p. 146.

Calcutta enters our discussion here in the present context of cities where cities have become, in an intensified way, the controlling centre of cultural, social and political life. The adoption of the synthesizer, the *packaging* of Baul music as mass culture or ‘world music,’ the acquisitive propensity of the performers, the bifurcation into ‘baul singers’ and ‘baul members’ are all directly or indirectly dictated by urban forces. On the use of synthesizers, Chakraborty says, ‘*Kolkatabashi ebong shomoyer poriborton-er shathe tal miliye cholen emon ekjon baul bondhur jbnok royechhe synthesizer-er proti ebong tini ta byabohar koren.*’<sup>31</sup> Debdas Baul, a famed practitioner and singer of the faith, welcomes this change. He remarks: ‘This is the kaliyug, many kinds of things, cultures, groups, music are there at hand and all of these streams join together to create something beautiful. Purity cannot be maintained. I welcome this so long something beautiful is created. Moreover, baul is a hospitable and accommodating sect and it is easy to maneuver the music as well.’<sup>32</sup> Moreover, over the last few decades Calcutta has come to play the neighborly ‘land of opportunities’:

*Prochar-er kajer othoba bajarer prochar-er srote ga bhasa-te baul-er kache kolkata holo bondor shohor. Shongskeriti-r shilpo jogot-e jnara niyontrok-er bhumikay, tnader boshobash o kormokshetro ei shohor-ei. Grambanglay lakeeti-r bajaar-e jinni oprotidbondbi hoye uthechilen, shohortolir train-e-bus-e prayshoi gayoke-r konthe jar gaan metho shur-er amej srishiti kore, sbei goshtio gopal das-er ekadhik gaan-er rochoyita chilen kolkata bashi. Jibon jibekar shondhane. Jibon jibika-r shondhan-e je ashonkho manush ei shohor-e ashen, temni shohor-o akorsbon kore ei shomosto manushke. Eei chobitai holo ‘push of the village and push of the city’ totther astob protiphalon. Shohor kolkata-y baul-er jonye royechhe betab- doorodorshon-er ahoban, onuragi-shudhijoner badi-te ghoroya onushthan o tader shuparish koroyari onushthaner borat. Er shubadei durga pujo theke dipaboli porjonto brihotkor kolkata-r nana prante bauljogot-er onek porichito mukher bhir jome...shongrihito tothyanchari 58 jon kolkatay kono na kono shomoy onushthan-e onghogrobhon korechen jodio baki 42 jon-er shei shujog hoini.*<sup>33</sup>

As tangible expressions and nodes of spatialized finance capital; the city’s power to dictate and seduce is evidenced in the above quote. It is the very logic of the spectacle that seeks to re-package dissenting voices into corporeal proofs of its supremacy in the form of cassettes, cds and video-recordings – unashamedly displayed in stores for anesthetized consumers.

Bikas Chakraborty posits that the cultural landscape of music in Calcutta experienced a revolution with Kabir Suman’s arrival. Suman’s music not only surged in popularity within a very short span of time but it also launched the songster as an icon in Bengali culture. What ensued was a ‘genrification’ that was nothing more than a codification of a successful style as a means for ‘easy’ victories for newer artists in Calcutta. Thus the city’s receptivity

<sup>31</sup> Ibid p. 145.

<sup>32</sup> Personal conversation on 6<sup>th</sup> April, 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Bikash Chakraborty. *Baul Jiboner Samajattva*, Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2003. p. 149.

expanded the field for iconization of artists and the standardization of music. Technologization of music ushered in re-generative possibilities and engendered challenges to originality, turning 'the copy' not objectionable but desirable. Debdas Baul reminisces that unlike the bygone days when *informed* listeners desired songs of import and listened with patience, city audiences now prefer shorter songs which have already been popularized by the mass media. Urban audiences have ceased to encourage newer or unfamiliar numbers. In fact, this logic of repetition and standardization in production identically operates in the latter's obverse, i.e. consumption practices. The culture industry grooms the consumer to procure a *type*, liquidating all other alternatives. Adorno writes, 'The listener is converted along the line of little resistance into an acquiescent purchaser.'<sup>34</sup>

The essence of Baul music is therefore perceived to be in decline before the institutionalization of music and spiritual-somatic tenets of a commodity economy. The state is not absolvable in the cooption of Bauls – official patronage of folk and Baul music has impacted the content as well as the character of the music. The state actively exploits Baul music for its various public welfare programmes. State sponsored festivals and fairs are attractive venues for publicity. Thus, at fairs such as the *poushmela* the Literacy Committee of Birbhum District stages Baul performances. Debdas Baul himself composed a song for the bicentenary of the French Revolution which was celebrated in West Bengal. While customary *mela*-s have become a field for multipartite extravaganza – indigenous fairs, unchecked alcohol consumption and *ganja* smoking, academic fieldwork, tourist-voyeurism – drawing in an increasingly extra-territorial audience, and the *akbra*-s have grown less and less hospitable, the performance at these *mela*-s has correspondingly become ritualized. Alongside the facts that songs have been reduced from a length of two hours to tally with the clipped versions of studio recordings of 5 to 10 minutes and 'baul-singers' hail from professorial/administrative posts,<sup>35</sup> the performances get routinely televised. These programmed performances target a select audience selling a brand named 'baul.' The radicality of Baul music and the sect at large thus stands open to question. Its inherent radical politics is now fragmented, simplified and popularized as 'packaged rebellion' (Duncombe).

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<sup>34</sup> Theodor, Adorno. 'On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening,' in Stephen Duncombe (ed.) *The Cultural Resistance Reader*. London and New York: Verso, 2002. p. 279.

<sup>35</sup> Currently a distinction has developed between Bauls and baul singers, better explained by the terms of 'baul-shadhok' and 'baul-gayok.' The latter are individuals who have a distinct social identity but who sing the music of the bauls out of an affective association.

In a profit-motivated market where the commodity is most sacred, the commercialization of tradition and culture has been the subject of inconsolable angst for both the general populace as well as academicians. Theodor Adorno's strident warning of the seductive power of the culture industry: '... what are emancipated from formal law are no longer the productive impulses which rebelled against conventions. Impulse, subjectivity and profanation, the old adversaries of materialistic alienation, now succumb to it.'<sup>36</sup> Thus the aspiration for 'a better life' overrides any space and possibility for critical intervention.

Increasingly music seems to be subsuming the space of *sadhana* or devotional practice. Aditya Mukhopadhyay has explained the phenomenon as being a consequence of the dominating logic of the market. Prospects of self-aggrandizement loom seductively over the horizon for the indigent. Music offers itself as a vital strategy for survival as it yields greater dividends. Here the power of mass media is instrumental in congealing such desires. Advertising has also become a part and parcel of propagation of upcoming events and performances. Most performances are now notified on billboards and in newspapers. Frequently these come with the curricula vitae of the performances, in terms of their world tours and media appearances.

In my reading of the present situation in this section, one may notice the use of the term 'Bauls' as an inclusive, generic term for all members of this sect. But the caveat at the beginning of the chapter should clarify that a) the term is forthrightly used to designate those who present themselves as Bauls. Furthermore, an investigation of this nature, connected directly to questions of agency and appropriation, necessarily focus on a subject who is both agentive and active, i.e., who engages with dominant codes and thereby affects changes within the group as well the perception of the group. In clearer terms, the Baul's 'discovery' and popularization by the nineteenth bourgeois intellectual and celebration by the nationalist class of the twentieth century understandably created a space for those who, for whatever persuasion, seek to pursue that nomenclature. In the process, they fashion a concurrent and superimposing space of power which enables a situation where perceived changes, shifts and transformations within the denomination are arbitrated on the movements of these self-denotative members.

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<sup>36</sup> op cit. p. 277.

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## দেবদাস বাউল

বেতার শিল্পী

প্যারিস, ইণ্ডিয়া, সুইজারল্যান্ড, জার্মানী ও লণ্ডন প্রভৃতিতে।

ভূড়িগাড়া, পোঃ বোলপুর (শান্তিনিকেতন)

জেলা বীরভূম, পিন-৭৩১২০৪

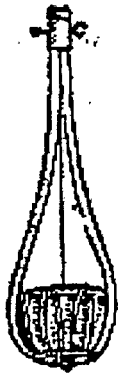
## BAUL OF BENGAL

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## বাউল-রাজা হরেকৃষ্ণ দাস

[ আমেরিকা ও জাপান প্রভৃতিতে। বেতার, ধ্বনি-চলচ্চিত্র ও মঞ্চ এবং রেকর্ড (দেশে ও বিদেশে) শিল্পী। অধ্যক্ষ, ছয়সফার লোকসঙ্গীত বিহারতন, কলিকাতা ]

বনহগদী গভর্নমেন্ট কোয়ার্টার্স,

১০৪, বি. টি. রোড,

কলিকাতা-৭০০০৩৪

আত্মপরিচয়ে বাউল

Nonetheless, the intractable question remains: Has the elegy been sung to soon? As argued in the debates around subalternity: if material conditions heightened and embodied in consumerism is the primal factor of conditioning culture, and if there is difference and potential in the way subaltern groups' *mode of acquisition*, i.e., in their use of the dominant culture's symbol (consumerist goods and products) then where may we look for the signs of such subversion in the present context of Bauls? What is now the telos, tendency and direction of Baul music - their principle vehicle of dissemination - when their name and music is employed and appropriated by all organs of normative society and culture, from state banks to Bangla rock bands?

The variations from and appropriations of the dominant will reveal the possibility of resuscitation in a context wherein cultural purity is increasingly becoming a problematic demand. Such binaries of purity and pollution are not merely restricted within academic exercises and are independently and organically seem to be concerns of the subaltern self. One indignant baul protests: '*apnara baul-der tene rakhte chan. Baul gaan-ke ek jaygay theke thakle hobe na, onyo gaan-er theke pichiye porche.*'<sup>37</sup> This compels us to reflect on our own non-academic and academic intentions and expectations. Pessimism à la Adorno runs the danger of 'freezing the exotic.' A discourse undesirable, the need to congeal identities and modes of being reflect a counter-desire of musuemifying the 'otherness' of the other. It is as much a reflection on the self as it is on the other. In the context of Bauls, such an expectation again replays the desire of bourgeois city intellectuals/youth/devotees to seek refuge in the calmative presence of the static 'other' - one who has renounced the phantasmagoria of the city. Furthermore, a negative representation in writing excludes the subaltern from a dialogue that directly concerns him/her. Thus perhaps throughout the text of this chapter, an undertow of the politics of the 'subaltern written' cannot be easily sluiced out of the more explicit concerns.

This chapter obviously excepts the important 'aspect' of gender. While I do not believe in treating gender as a separate appendage in academic exercises, the parallel and connected dimension of female Baul singers/members had to be foregone not on the grounds of dispensability but on those of complexity. A work on gender relations within the sect and the understanding/self-perception of female Bauls would warrant a separate chapter which due to the lack of sources, time, and scope of this work has not been possible. Gender

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<sup>37</sup> Bikas Chakraborty. op cit. p 145.

complexities operating within such denominations have not been studied on a significant depth or scale. Thus it leaves open the possibility of a future subject of research. Nevertheless, my failure to reckon with this most critical component as a woman researcher can only beg clemency.



### Chapter Three: Multiplexed Calcutta and Critical Nostalgia

*The metropolitan has the added attraction that, through what it has become, one can look back with nostalgia at what it was.*

*Beware of saying to them that sometimes different cities follow one another on the same site and under the same name, born and dying without knowing one another, without communication among themselves. At times even the names of the inhabitants remain the same, and their voices' accent, and also the features of the faces; but the gods who live beneath names and above places have gone off without a word and outsiders have settled in their place.<sup>1</sup>*

- Italo Calvino

*Kolkata mumursho, na mrito? Jodi mrito tar mrityu shabbabik mrityu na hotya? Jodi hotya hoi, tahole ke ba kara tar ghatok? Jekhane bishyer shomastro oiyijboshali shohor adhunik bigyan-er chnoyai kothao 'udyan nogori' kothao apon shousthob-e apnaate apni bikoshito. Shekhane kolkata-r ei okal mrityu keno? Othoba mrityur opekhai tar ei ontoronjoli jatra-r duhshobo muburter oboshan ghotbe keno?*

Poriborton, 1985

The 1980s were politically and economically depressed years for Calcutta. An article named 'Mumursho Kolkata Bnachte Chay' in an ironically named magazine, *Poriborton* (1985), laments the state of the city in the above quoted words. In the nineties Calcutta's urban narrative of disaster was to take a spin towards the glossy signboards of hyperreality. The Marxist Government of West Bengal by the mid-nineties decided to recuperate the city's image. The making of 'Kolkata' thus took a literal skyward direction with the proliferation of skyscraper-condominiums and multistoreyed-multiplexes. The city was however rendered not unrecognizable. Poverty, irregularity, and the many faces of disorder in the city continue to the present. But the gods of Calvino are being replaced, yet again.

A once dying Calcutta is being rescued from the ashes of its colonial modernity by a hyper-modernity that has injected a tempo and speed in everyday life which causes 'anguish to the man of archaic mould, and this is the measure of the imbalance between his pulse-beats and the pulse beats of time.'<sup>2</sup> This chapter attempts to chart the renovation of Calcutta into a global city catering to and cultivating an upwardly mobile middle class and an NRI catchment of investors. It looks closely at the explosion of consumerism in the city manifested in the myriad new urban spaces, the production of consumption, and its material

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<sup>1</sup> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* pp 30-31.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Singer. 'Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism,' in Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, eds. *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1995, p. 94

signposts in the form of cafes, shopping complexes, condominiums, luxury malls, stylized parks and gardens while specifically focusing on the latest construction of South City, a one of a kind housing and shopping complex in Calcutta. From these re-territorialized spaces of the city the chapter moves to the de-territorialized space of cyberworld where I try to explore the nostalgia of a technophilic polity and therein present the very forensics of nostalgia – its politics and uses, its ambivalence and problematic. It is the intention of this chapter to question the very teleological notion of progress through the debates around nostalgia as a *mode* of relating to the past when it has been discredited as a kind of cognitive aberration since the critical philosophy of Kant. Concomitant to this objective is an aim to assess the growing space and potential of the Internet as a corollary social mode of existence within the flow of commodities, communication, energy and resources. Synoptically then, I look to argue the power of critical nostalgia in hoping and imagining a utopia borne of a spectacular, hyperstimulating and dystopic urban order; to render evident the possibility of an alternative to the presently disfigured dissimulating ‘carpet of Eudoxia’<sup>3</sup>

### A Stylized Sub-City

Twenty-three years since the publication of *Pariborton*, Calcutta has decided to cause a stir with the most astonishing undertaking of the global-city making endeavour – the South City project. ‘South City: Live the Way the World Does’ is the tagline of a project that claims to be the most glaring step forward towards Calcutta’s transformation into a global city ‘with expatriates returning to invest in malls and restaurants, in the process enforcing the standards of service they learned in the West.’<sup>4</sup>

South City sprawls over 31.14 acres of land in south Calcutta. The condo-complex consists of four of the tallest residential towers in Calcutta housing 1600 flats, a school, multiple clubs and swimming pools, spas, sports complexes, auditoriums and a gigantic shopping complex that is posed to be the biggest retail zone in eastern India. With 1,50,000 sq. ft on each floor, it will have more space than any other mall in Kolkata. Continuous corridors, free of dead-ends, make sure there are no sudden halts for shoppers. The mall houses numerous upmarket consumer brands such as Guess, Gucci, Wills, Marks and

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<sup>3</sup> Calvino, Op cit. pp 96-7

<sup>4</sup> Robert D. Kaplan. ‘Oh! Kolkata!’ *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 301, Iss 3, April 2008, p.5

Spencer, Christian Dior, Adidas, Reebok and other international and domestic designer stores which were either scattered around the city earlier or altogether absent. South City's stupendous size and ambition has also set off talks for a connecting flyover with Dhakuria. 'The self-contained South City provides a unique option of living inside, as it were, a mall. It is a mall-city within a megacity. Its aim to 'revolutionize lifestyle' is openly declared in the project to provide housing and shopping experience for those who are 'upwardly mobile, who want to make a lifestyle statement.'<sup>5</sup> This experience is pitched to be complete by the other up-scale residential skyscrapers that flank both sides of Prince Anwar Shah Road.

Urban lifestyles such as being cultivated in cities at the present moment, Zukin asserts, are defined by an 'aggressive pursuit of cultural capital.'<sup>6</sup> The city in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been transmuted from being a site of production to that of consumption. Driven by excessive focus on lifestyle, it has engendered visible consumption spaces in the form of restaurants, boutiques, art galleries and coffee bars accompanied by intricate retail strategies that combine advertising, sales, real estate development and entertainment. South City as well as other shopping arcades offer entertainment, food and shopping along with strategically positioned benches and stairs to reproduce the street or park experience. In fact, the project reconstructs the conventional geographically disparate spaces of leisure, education and living into an easy extension of each other within a single bounded territory.

Moreover, heightened importance of lifestyles has led city governments to develop strategies to 'aestheticize' (Zukin) or emphasize the visual consumption of public space. Financial channels, information and 'culture' (art, food, fashion and tourism) encompass the symbolic economy of the city which is based on an 'interdependent production of such cultural symbols as these and the spaces in which they are created and consumed – including offices, housing, restaurants, museums and even the streets. Thus urban lifestyles are not only the result but also the raw materials, of the symbolic economy's growth.'<sup>7</sup>

Urban spaces founded around malls, arcades, simulated parks and gardens have accidentally or intentionally democratized desire. The modern urban forms, asserts Zukin in relation to advanced industrialized states, 'embodied innovations in the mass production of

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<sup>5</sup> <[http://www.southcityprojects.com/sc\\_mall.htm](http://www.southcityprojects.com/sc_mall.htm)>

<sup>6</sup> Sharon Zukin. 'Urban Lifestyles: Diversity and Standardization in Spaces of Consumption,' *Urban Studies*, Vol. 35, Nos 5-6, 1998, Pg 825.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Pg 828

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, Pg. 826

consumer goods, in technologies of building and display and in strategies of creating and selling “dreams.” Similarly, department stores placed before the public, in a great big ‘bazaar,’ goods that previously had been confined to small, specialized, elegant boutiques for a custom and luxury trade. The new availability of consumer goods to customers’ sight, touch and smell democratized desire and made the exotic familiar.<sup>8</sup> One can say the same about a third world metropolis like Calcutta that the lure of swanky architecturally eye-catching departmental stores, entertainment niches, and shopping arcades – with their plate glass, shiny exteriors and coloured neon light boards and hoardings – is based on this fantasy-selling strategy. However, the boom of departmental stores such as Spencer’s and Big Bazaar is also to be approached as an instrument for making the banal ‘fantastic,’ in the sense that far from familiarizing the exotic, in the third world context of Calcutta these new urban experiences – embodied in sterilized scented air-conditioned spaces – exoticize the mundane, the familiar. For instance the recent protest meet called by the Hawkers’ Union of Gariahat at the inauguration of the departmental store, Spencer’s, agitated precisely against these aestheticized conditions of something as ‘familiar’ as grocery shopping which the union is afraid will subsume its traditional market.

Also peculiar to the project of South City is the reconfiguration of the concept and criteria of suburban experience. South City located in the heart of Calcutta is an attempt to replicate the western suburb. With its private-agency surveillance, and neatly designed spas, gardens, parks, clubs, school, apartments and stadia, South City caters to the media-informed lifestyle as well as the traditional suburban demands of hygiene, security, open spaces and healthy living. The project’s webpage celebrates the stylization of its unused space thus:

At South City, after planning the four towers, the enormous shopping mall, the sprawling club and the school with its own football field, we were still left with 80% of open space. In fact, the central green is bigger than Eden Gardens! The landscaping includes beautiful water bodies, a cascading waterfall and even a hillock. In this age of decreasing greenery, South City is just perfect for children to rediscover the wonders of nature.

This is nature simulacralized in the human factory. Its artificiality is advertised. Located and surrounded by an overcrowded neighbourhood and traffic route on all sides, the City promises a withdrawal into its walled secured boundaries. Suburb, a phenomenon that has its roots in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, by definition is a retreat but a retreat that is essentially geographically distanced from the city. It arose in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a class-oriented

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 827

phenomenon where the aristocratic desire to flee the dirt, grime, diseases and poverty of the city led to the construction of a simulated idyllic township that promised leisure, liberty and quiet. In the absence of such large intractable uninhabited open spaces due to the presence of overpopulated historic *mofussils* around Calcutta, South City is the next best offer to a public that imagines a western suburban experience. In relation to the American experience post 1945, Zukin writes: ‘the dense, morally ambiguous and socially heterogeneous consumption spaces of cities were replaced by the suburbs’ clean, sprawling, socially and visually homogeneous shopping centers.’<sup>9</sup> But the centrally situated South City cannot escape the multiform non-segregated environment of the city, and yet it promises a visual and experiential treat in its proud skyscrapers, artificialized nature, extensive layout with park benches on each floor, escalators, and food joints – the now regularized features of an A-grade mall. The South City furnishes a human fantasia which seeks to create an alternae reality. The retreat it offers testifies Rem Koolhaas’ statement:

The true ambition of the metropolis is to create a world totally fabricated by man, i.e., to live *inside* a fantasy. The responsibility of a specifically metropolitan architecture have increased correspondingly to design those hermetic enclaves – bloated private realms – that comprise the Metropolis. ... such hermetic self contained enclaves offer emotional shelter to the disinherited Metropolitan masses, ideal worlds removed in time and space, protected against the corrosion of everyday reality in their interior locations. These sub-Utopian fragments are all the more convincing for having no territorial ambitions beyond occupying their interior allotments through a private hyperdensity of symbolism and localized paroxysms of the particular.<sup>10</sup>

### The Production of the Consumer

The millennial moment of Capital is defined by the adoption of neoliberalism by economies and the promise of deliverance of marginalized spaces and identities while at the same time it seems to enact and eclipse the a) role of consumption in shaping identities, selfhood, society and epistemic reality, b) configuration of social class, and c) crises of community and reproduction, youth and community. The era of millennial capitalism is “the conjuncture of the strange and the familiar, of stasis and metamorphosis, (it) plays tricks on our perceptions, our positions, our praxis.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Pg 829.

<sup>10</sup> Koolhaas, Rem. ‘Life in the Metropolis or the Culture of Congestion,’ *Architectural Design*, Vol. 47, No. 5, 1977.

<sup>11</sup> Comaroff Jean, and John Comaroff. ‘Millennial Capitalism: Thoughts on a Second Coming,’ in *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. p. 3

In 'First Thoughts on a Second Coming' Jean and John L. Comaroff explore the relevance of social class in the present political and economic conditions where increasingly gender, race, and generation are being emphasized as terrains of identity, affect and political action. Consumerism has transformed from being the 'disease' of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries into 'the hallmark of modernity' in the twenty first century. In this Second Coming of Capitalism, 'the postmodern person is the subject made with objects.'<sup>12</sup> It is *the* determining principle of identities. The Comaroffs term it as the 'Gucci-gloved fist' that controls and shapes political, material and social thought and praxis.

Concomitant to this development has been the obfuscation of production. The traditional sites of production, the factory and the shop, have been erased or eclipsed by their translocation to cheaper, less State-protected locales with an increasingly feminized workforce and also by the increasing dependence on non-human technologized systems of manufacture. Thus the production side of things has come to be dominated by a form of finance capital that abandons historically established mechanisms of social, economic, and political control by transforming the space of places into a *space of flows*.<sup>13</sup>

This space of flows, these 'secretive' spaces of production facilitated by a network of information flows and knowledge, could not escape the notice of people all over the world, especially those who live in 'places where there have been sudden infusions of commodities, of new forms of wealth ... Many have given quick voice, albeit in different registers, to their perplexity at the enigma of this wealth: of its sources and the capriciousness of its distribution, of the mysterious forms it takes, of its slipperiness, of the opaque relations between means and ends embodied in it.'<sup>14</sup> Many members of the same middle class in Calcutta are wondering at the consumptive capacity of the new society while surveying with wonder the proliferating new urban spaces for spending in the city. Nostalgia, may be argued, is one of the modes of enquiry, given its reflective capacity on the cost of this present state of comfort and wealth, into this 'shifting conditions of material existence.' The *production of the consumer* emerges precisely from this 'production as a secretive space of flows,' as it were, where production now takes place in the backyard of former industrialized countries, in the global service sector, in a feminized workforce.

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid* p. 4

<sup>13</sup> Manuel Castells. 'The Reconstruction of Social Meaning in the Space of Flows,' in *The Informational City*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

<sup>14</sup> *Op cit.* p. 7

This dispersal of the production process ironically seeks not to liberate labour but to immobilize it, as nation-states get even more stringent over movement of workers. The growth of global markets thus simultaneously compartmentalizes and frees labour. Integral as this feature of capitalism may be, the present situation warrants attention due to the invisibility of 'nomadic, deterritorialized investors' (Comaroffs) who operate across the globe without being answerable to any democratic society or government. Thus in this historic effort of capital to free itself from the bindings of particularity and specificity, and thereby from labour, space and time, what is the relevance and face of class in this new political economy? Comaroff and Comaroff put the question thus:

Our task is to examine how consciousness, sentiment, and attachment are constituted under prevailing conditions; why class has become a less plausible basis for self-recognition and action when growing disparities of wealth would point to the inverse ... why gender, race, ethnicity, and generation have become such compelling idioms of identification.<sup>15</sup>

The role of the nation-state stands undermined and under-deployed in this global dispersal of manufacture. By transferring firms, plants and industries to distant geographies and thereby rendering obsolete the traditional equations of negotiation between labour and capital within a cognitive territory; by cutting labour costs through outsourcing, hiring cheap labour, and casualization, forcing blue-collar employees into unemployment or perpetuating their positions at the lower end of the service sector; by constituting a working class out of the poor in this schema through sweatshops, labour export, and maquiladoras; and by reducing proletarians into their lowest common denominator, this mode of manufacture forces the working class to participate and compete in this exploitative framework. Therefore, the erstwhile topography of the nation-state as the field of class-conflicts gives way in this diffusive flow to a condition which fragments class consciousness, alliance and antinomies, and a rootlessness that denies proletarian culture a formative anchor.

What emerges clearly against this confusion, erasure and obfuscation of the concreteness of the working class is the transnational capitalist class. The delineation of this class is clear in two respects: its interests in a global scale of capital investment and its constant attempts to distantiate itself from labour demands, taxation, legal and environmental constraints. The underlying venture is to polarize capital and its workforce. And in this global marketplace persons are re-deployed not as producers or workers but as consumers. It is the Consumer that is enthroned by messianic capitalism.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 11

Even in the face of resistance and contestations of the metanarrative of consumerism, the narrative of laissez-faire proves to be a strong counter-current. Through various technologies of seduction penetrating everyday life through global communicative media it weaves a magical tale of a global (consumerist) identity which overpowers local place-based nationalist identities. The nation-state is bemoaned as having lost its power to control the movement of both labour and capital and that its role has come down to supplying infrastructures and public goods at the lowest cost. The national economy now stands posed to lose out to the global economy where centralized governmental apparatuses now must cater to the demands of a global corporate class. Moreover, over the last decade or so, one has noticed the birth of an 'electronic commons' wherein

virtual money and commodities may be exchanged instantly via unregulated world network of computers has shattered the integrity of sovereign polities. It has eroded their monopolistic control over the money supply, their capacity to contain wealth within borders, and even their ability to tax citizens or corporations...many states are finding it impossible to meet the material demands placed upon them by their citizenry or to carry out effective economic policies...<sup>16</sup>

The replacement of local and national legal and extra-legal apparatuses, social movements and identities by de-territorialized global equivalents, whereby even violence is commodified through the accessibility provided by the Internet for hiring and organizing soldiers and armies, renders the sovereignty of the nation-state open to dispute. In such a situation identity and issue based politics takes precedence over class struggles which Jameson argues is little more than self-fulfilling acts in the absence of a coherent terrain wherein the class struggle can act itself out.

The perception of and the discourse on (mostly academic) the 'reality' and character of Nation and State are both undergoing changes at this millennial turn. The state has been regarded as an imagined, ideological, illusive construct – a structure of domination designed as a legitimizing tool for the ruling elite. Benedict Anderson, in his *Imagined Communities* (1983), declared that the nation is an imaginary which is essentially marked by its incompleteness and heterogeneity. The articulation of the state to the nation encounters similar ambiguity and deficiency across the global in greater or less degree depending upon individual polities. But even those who continue to believe in the importance of the nation-state acquiesce the fact that the nation-state is transforming from a 'citizen-state' to a

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid p 29



'consumer-state' where concerns over and privileges to consumers acquire preeminence over the security of workers: Rousseau's 'contract' is now between the government and market where fiscal and legislative relaxations are provided to encourage transnational investments, India's Special Economic Zones are a case in point and erstwhile national obligations such as healthcare, education, care, industrial growth have been forced to take a backseat. However, the naivety of this analysis would lie in the simplistic graphing of the nation-state as enacting a retreat in the face of an omnipotent market capitalism. The pointers direct elsewhere. In spite of the virtuality of market transactions and capital flows, national territories remain the locus for the materialization of global forces and processes. The importance of the place-basedness of capitalism cannot be denied or ignored in the discourse of its spatial dynamics. To follow Lefebvre and Merrifield, the diffusive processuality of capital must necessarily take place somewhere and in a specific/contextual form.<sup>17</sup> In our context, the nation-state still remains a very proactive locus of the playing out of global capitalist trends and operations. And in this enterprise, the nation-state and government are not passive receptors but rather the active solicitors of transnational corporate investments. The interdependence of the two is located in the very existence of national territory as well as the generation of national wealth. Nation-states' complicity and conservatism make their involvement complicated as they sometimes seek to control over the terms of the market as well as woo business and protect customer. Thus the Comaroffs write: 'Its impact is much more complicated, more polyphonous and dispersed, and most immediately felt in the everyday contexts of work and labour and media-gazing.'<sup>18</sup>

In the context of Calcutta, the communist government's accommodation of multinational and corporate investments has led to a legitimation crisis. In spite of that, the city is being rebuilt to provide adequate infrastructure and undergoing a spectral makeover to make it viable for such clients. This infrastructural stability is being sought to make *place* for this new moment of capital as part of the larger reworking of the nation-state as not a community of horizontal fraternity (which it never was) but a heterogeneous identity based polity where class is obfuscated by the universal brotherhood of consumers.

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<sup>17</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991; and Andrew Merrifield, 'Space and Place: A Lefebvrian Reconciliation,' *Transactions of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol.18, No. 4, 1993, pp. 516-531.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid p 34

## Blogging the Nostalgia for Place

Growing up in Calcutta, one of the primary loci of my life was the neighbourhood sweet shop, Mahaprabhu Mistanna Bhandar (Mahaprabhu's Cornucopia of Sweets). Lunch or dinner was always terminated by one of its products and whenever a guest came, that was the place I had to go to buy the *chomchom* and the *chanar jilipi*. My favourite Mahaprabhu sweet used to be the extremely saccharine *gujya* (25 paise a piece) from which I graduated to what I called Mahaprabhu's *Ek takar mishti* (the one rupee sweet), the jewel in their crown whose quality was distinguished by virtue of it being priced at Re 1 whereas everything else was 50 paise or below.

As time went by, the prices went up, the size of the sweets went down and the people at the front counter became less generous in giving out extra rubber bands. But virtually everything else stayed the same: the peeling plaster on the walls, the slightly broken statue of Laxmi and Ganesh, the rickety sink on which was perched a plastic jug that contained potable water, the huge vats of *rosogolla* and *pantooya* floating about in a sea of syrup, the flies buzzing about, the bare-torsoed/baniyaned assistants with their exposed pot bellies and abundant nostril-and-cochlear hair taking your order, handing out change and packing the sweets.

Till now.

In a city that I struggle to recognize each time I come back, I find that one of the last bastions of timelessness, Mahaprabhu Mistanna Bhandar has fallen to the winds of India shining. The complex of run-down one storey buildings, of which Mahaprabhu was one, had been torn down and replaced by a spanking new multi-storied commercial complex: the first floor of which is dominated by Mahaprabhu Mistanna Bhandar.

But this is that old store in name only.

With shining glass panels as walls, marbelled roof and full climate control, it is barely recognizable not only in terms of its looks but also with respect to the sweets it sells and their pricing. Gone are the traditional Bangali delicacies, gone are the middle-class affordable prices. Gone are the tubs of lard that manned the gates of sweet heaven in their various stages of undress. And the flaking paint and the cracked water jug.

Instead there are North Indian sweets (as distinguished from Bangali ones) with a wild assortment of food colors, which I was told is "all natural" each one costing a small fortune. Smart uniforms are the norm, the people handling sweets could well have been call center employees with none of their physiques showing any trace of extensive sampling of merchandise. The flies are gone, a huge statue of Krishna Lalla dominates the store and the old proprietor, who was once "one with the people" sits in a quasi-cubicle, CEO-like. The old Mahaprabhu used to open its shutters at the crack of dawn and sell *jilipi-singara* (Bengali jalebis and samosas) but evidently that is too downmarket for them now because of which Mahaprabhu opens not earlier than 8.

Remarkably impressed by the new-look Calcutta, of which the new incarnation of Mahaprabhu is but a manifestation, I could not however help but feel more than a bit of nostalgia-driven sadness. And something more.

A sense of disassociation. The feeling of having become a stranger in my own *para*. (locality). I do not recognize faces on the street anymore. Where girls in shapeless salwar kameezes walked to Bhartanatyam/painting school now stride shapely ladies in red skirts and black stockings as they make their way into the airhostess training institute next to Mahaprabhu. Where was once parked venerable mini-tanks otherwise known as Ambassadors and mobile rust-buckets otherwise known as the Premier Padmini now stand a Honda City or an Accent. The cobbler who repaired the straps of hawai chappals for a few rupees is gone. So too is the weighing machine in front of Mahaprabhu with the blue/red lights that spat out, with equal randomness, your weight and your fortune.

Yes, Calcutta has changed.

And it has changed, without me in it.

- *Mahaprabhu Mistanna Bhandar* at <http://greatbong.net/2007/06/16/mahaprabhu-mistanna-bhandar/>

This is nostalgia borne of a city going 'global,' of an 'India shining.' Time, appearance, behaviour, praxis all reconditioned to the imperatives of a millennial capitalist market. The feeling of loss, change, and passive reception underlies all such expressions of nostalgia. The above blog deftly touches upon the 'new.' At first, one may be inclined to 'pick up' a strain of longing for a status quo-ist stagnancy but on close reading of the description of the 'new' and the 'now' what emerges is not so much an ideal imagined past but a comparative reading of what has been lost for present gain.

The symbols of a 'real' metropolis of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the city is now marked by the presence of international automobile models such as the Honda City and air-hostess training institutes, the latter doubly signifying the active presence of goal-oriented 'westernized' women in public space (in contrast to the relatively docile engagement with the performing arts, Bharatnatyam, or painting and their associated connotations of eastern culture and domesticity) in a globally connected India. The blog, furthermore, presents a micro picture with the Mahaprabhu Mistanno Bhandar as the focal point of its author. Contiguous to the sweet shop the changes that have been effected are reflective of the infrastructural investment of a commodity economy that seeks to increasingly control and direct consumption and class conflict. The spatial reproduction of its ideology is the corresponding ordering of the street in deference to the 'spanking new' complex and the internal rearrangement of staff, ambience, lights, paint and plaster. The inscription of hierarchies on space is clearly visible in the description of the locality. The cobbler and the garish weighing machine are gone. As symbols of a disorganized unattractive past and for the creation of rationally organized and socio-economically homogeneous enclosures, their regulation and probable relocation is integral to the politics of conceived space emergent within a discourse of power and difference. Especially in reference to the presence and now absence of the cobbler, the discourse on the production of bodies through spatial discrimination comes to the fore. The cobbler's absence speaks to the notion of certain bodies as 'dirty' or 'discordant,' invasive to the neatening project of urban re-planning. This absence then is reflective of the further otherization of subordinate classes and groups within the 21<sup>st</sup> century metropolis planning where production and consumption of space necessarily requires and manages to effect niches of socio-economic homogeneity within a larger heterogeneous Janus-faced urbanity.

In the midst of disinfected environs, the newly uniformed staff and the old shop owner evidence a depersonalization that occurs out of automatization, sophistication and cosmopolitanism. These markers of professional networking and segmentalized interactions, representing the intensified specialization of the workforce within the capitalist machinery, further attack the integrability of society generating anomie and alienation. Synchronically, time along with the spatial organizing principle forms the other grid into which praxis is effected. The drawing of the shutters at 8 a.m. sharp complies with the capitalist idea of a rigid framework of work and leisure. The informality and familiarity of a fairly flexible timetable needs be replaced by a professionalism that is easily identifiable with a modern notion of time and productivity. While reading the blog, one is reminded of Simmel:

Punctuality, calculability and exactness, which are required by the complications and extensiveness of metropolitan life, are not only most intimately connected with its capitalistic and intellectualistic character but also the colour the content of life and are conducive to the exclusion of those irrational, instinctive, sovereign human traits and impulses which originally seek to determine the form of life from within instead of receiving it from the outside in a general, schematically precise form.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, in exchange of the swanky, efficient, grand store what one experiences is a sense of dis-location: the feeling of being tided along the fluxing global capital of the Second Coming and its associated sense of rootlessness.

The blog is a reference to the material changes over time. Nostalgia here is not just a simple longing for home but also expresses a longing for 'a way of being.' It evokes a Simmelian discourse on the alienating environment of sanitized and commercialized neon-lighted glass-bound postmodern life. It is a statement on a technologized existence in which anomie is the cost paid for development. Furthermore, unlike Ray Cashman's older generation who live to preserve or rather live by preserving the traces of a past era in 'Critical Nostalgia and the Material Culture of Northern Ireland,' these are reflections of a younger generation who use the cyberspace as a terrain of social interaction and action, reflection and communication. It is as if the psychological alienation from one's own locality has also subsumed the space of face-to-face social intercourse, occasioning the need to take recourse to the perpetually fluxing placeless-ness of the Internet. Technological advancement explains the decline in face to face sociability and increased alienation but the Internet as a mass medium opens up a space for a different mode of deterritorialized sociability.

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<sup>19</sup> George Simmel, 'Metropolis and Mental Life,' in *The Sociology of George Simmel*, London: Glencoe Collier Macmillan, 1950, Pg. 13.

However, it will not be enough to reduce the text of the blog to a simple rejection or dejection over replacement of a mode of being, a cultural practice and lifestyle, with that dictated by the spectacle of late-capitalism. In fact, location emerges to be a key entry point in the entire discourse of 'loss.' The erosion of the easy identifiability of one's own *para* or locality of identification, as will be seen in the following citations, is central to our understanding of one of the problematic aspects of the interconnectedness between the production of place, culture and identity. Gupta and Ferguson write: '... rapidly expanding mobility of people combines with the refusal of cultural products to "stay put" to give a profound sense of loss of territorial roots, of an erosion of the cultural distinctiveness of places.'<sup>20</sup> Place and nostalgia thereof are resultants of a historical co-mapping of culture and place where the two are rendered co-terminus through abstract cartographic isometrics. In other words, what emerges from the blogs quoted from in this chapter is a desire to fix a *desired* culture within a *remembered* geographical boundary. This collapsing of society, culture and place is not a given but the result of an active politicization of space where '... space itself becomes a kind of neutral grid on which cultural difference, historical memory and societal organization are inscribed.'<sup>21</sup>

Gupta and Ferguson suggest that the process by which space realizes a distinctive identity as place is manifested in the spatial distribution of hierarchical power relations. The following discussion closely toes this caveat. The piece that follows is part of a chat forum discussion on a site named <www.CalcuttaGlobalChat.net>, advertising itself as 'the largest online Bengali community' where most of the participants are non-resident Bengalis. The anxieties revolve around language, material restructuring, demographic changes, and a rather ambiguous notion of '*nijeder* identity.' Insofar as a place is being claimed as a shared space of community consciousness, belonging, and praxis and a critique of the brisk changes that is rendering this familiar place palimpsestic, the fragment offers a rich site for theorizing the role of nostalgia, the meaning of place/home, and the internet as mediator. Much of what is said in the quote that follows is applicable to the preceding quote too.

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<sup>20</sup> Gupta, Akhil and James Ferguson. 'Beyond "Culture": Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,' *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference, February 1992, p 9

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

## ***HARIYE JACCHE KOLKATA!***

**Post # 1 Dec. 29, 2006, 2.54a.m.**

**Panther Panchali (Bombay):** Amra jara kolkata-r bairay thaki, tader jonyo ekhanay chhuti katatey asha besh ayk nostalgic byapar..

kintu eshey dyakha j shaub kichhu astay astay bodlay jachchhey...bhishon kaushtokore at times.. notun flury's dekhey shotti khoob kharap lagay...shei flury's jekhanay boshay ghaunta-r paur ghaunta adda mara jeto...shei furniture,shaub kichhu i kemon hariye gelo... pink apron paura meyera... ingreji baula waiter... kyamone aykta onyo raukome hoye gelo Flury's...

kaal ratay dekhlam, avishkar bolay dokan, which use to keep amazing arty stuff in Park Street, baundho hoye okhanay KFC khulechhey...its depressing...

rasta ghatar naam toh paltiyee gechhey e..

Tram aar hath rickshaw o aunek taratari Indian museum-er part hoye jabay...

Ami manchhi, change is important...growth is necessary...kintu nijer identity hariye??? Shauhore tar character e hariye jachchhey astay astay...tai na?

Tomader ki monay hauey?

probashi ra aar Calcutta bashi ra... baulo, tomra ki feel kauro?

**Post # 6 Dec. 29, 2006, 2.54 a.m.**

**Anamika Recharge (USA):** Kolkata is changing and I love it. Bangalider khali nostalgic feelings, changes er bhoy ei bhabe kono kichur unnoti hoyena. May be Flurys changed, may be parar dokan tatey alur choper bodoley fried chicken bikri hocchey, so what? Think about the growth the city is going through. Just amar 2 bochor por Kolkataye giye ager sob kichu jemon chilo temon dekhe bhalo lagbe bole to r ekta sahorer unnoti bondho kora jayena.Purono k dhorey bosey thaka jayena. We have to move on. All of these are signs of investment of companies in Kolkata. Bairey theke meyder skimpy out fits dekhe oblyosto amra, so why not our Calcutta Girl's too. Amra ki chai Kolkatar sobai pichiye thakbe when the rest of the big cities are moving forward in every aspect? Ami 17 yrs Indiar bairey. Every time I go I see new things and I just love the way Kolkata is progressing.

**Post # 3 Dec. 29, 2006, 3.26 a.m.**

**Strides\_of\_Sun (Kolkata):**PP di, Kolkata visoni druto bodle jachhe.tumi thik i bolechho. Ami kolkatar chele noi, baire theke porte esechilam, tarpor chakri sutre ekane roye gechhi. pray 7 bocchor hoye gelo. Ekhon ar gariahater crossing e giye ager sei jom jomat feelings ta hoi na. Tobe Kolkatar misc Geographic changes er thekeo amake onno ekta jinis byatha dei. Seta holo kolkatar demography ekdom changed hoye gecche recently koyek bochore. Recent kicchu surveys bolchhe je Kolkatay ekhon bangalir percentage 38 %. Bangalira ekhane minority hoye gecche. Shudhu tai noi, by financial standards, Bangalira kolkatar sobtheke pichiye pora race. Jekono chhutir dine kono park/theatre/shopping Mall e gelci dekhi non-bengalis (mostly stinking rich & uncultured) ra vir kore achhe. Vison kharap lage. Kolkatateo jodi bangalira civabe sesh hoye jay, tahole amader next generation perhaps sei asol Kolkata (& its spirits) ke khuje pabe na.

Alongside the resident Kolkatan, striking is the desire for constancy or advancement of dispersed peoples. Neither desire is unproblematic, innocent. Post#1 expresses a naïve affective association with middle-class consumption patterns as it mourns the closing down of a shop selling 'arty stuff.' In fact, the choice of Flury's as a case in point reveals the exclusiveness embedded within the discourse. Haunting an up-street joint such as Flury's partakes of a cultural code, in terms of generation, gender and class, which is not available to

a large section of middle class Kolkatans. Nevertheless, the city's character and authenticity is measured in terms of its non-technologized humanness and quirky personalistic remnants such as the tram and rickshaw which are endangered leftovers of a colonial past. Space and representations of space have never been innocuous and what seems to be a blind endorsement of an awkward post-independence inheritance is part of this politics.

Cities have never been homogeneous. But an increasing emphasis on demographic changes in Calcutta, inspired by arbitrary figures of news magazines, have come to dominate any discussion, formal or informal, on the city. Recall that 'Mahaprabhu Mistanna Bhandar' lets out a note of melancholic regret over the predominance of North Indian delights which testifies to the phenomenon of heightened urban multiculturalism in the post-industrial diasporic context. Articulated in these cases is a conflation of imagined territories with imagined communities. The right to the city for the Bengali is a right to a communistically defined space. To quote Gupta and Ferguson again: 'Notions of locality or community refer both to a demarcated physical space and to clusters of interaction, we can see that the identity of a place emerges by the intersection of its specific involvement in a system of hierarchically organized spaces with its cultural construction as a community or locality.'<sup>22</sup>

However, nostalgia is never unifocal. Ingrained in the same problematic nostalgia is a political stance against the second wave of modernity sweeping Calcutta in its multinational avatar and corporatization. The hyper-rationality that it often comes up against is encapsulated in the espousal of an investment driven globalization. Post#6 is an unambiguous endorsement of an establishmentarian development policy where a top down enforcement of superstructural changes invades everyday life and yet maintains unaccountability to popular critique. As one of the reincarnations of capitalism, finance capital in conjunction with the state has become the apparatus through which the city is restructured as a 'consumption machine' (Soja) – transforming luxury into needs, facilitating suburbanization and its associated consumption and working towards the segregation/territorial fragmentation of the working class.

Modernity as telos functioning as a psycho-political generality is immanent within such an espousal of development and progress. However, the strain of criticality must not be missed in nostalgia. The logic of development is countered by a repudiative warning of the dispossessing aspect of the integer and its subsequent cooption of such material spares into a

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p 8

'heritage industry' that necessarily veils the processes and casualties of development. Thus as Boym puts it nostalgia need not be only retrospective but also prospective through its criticality. Within the enterprise of nostalgia, therefore, is entrenched a simultaneity in (re)thinking both past and future.

Cultural and social changes reorganize the perception and performance of space. And in the present context the changes seem even more disorienting in a diasporic world of transnational flows and mass migrations. Confronted with unprecedented and accelerated changes within a very short span of time, nostalgia is an immediate response as well as a sieving mechanism of those both 'rooted' in a place as well as those who have been rendered 'homeless.' Paratactically arises the concern with place of people at and from a distance. This feeling of 'homelessness' and 'rootlessness' has assumed a general non-specific character. In this general postmodern condition how and why does one then continue to collapse cultural identity with a specific place? Again to quote Ferguson and Gupta:

The irony of these times however, is that as actual places and locations become even more blurred and indeterminate ideas culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps become perhaps even more salient. It is here that it becomes most visible how imagined communities come to be attached to imagined places, as displaced peoples cluster around remembered or imagined homelands, places, or communities in a world that seems increasingly to deny such firm territorialized anchors in their actuality.<sup>23</sup>

Thus Calcutta continues to figure and be desired either as a home which one once knew or as a place of origin that must necessarily compete with and correspond to capitalist and global specifications of lifestyle and market-economy. People have always been mobile and places and spaces have always been in flux but the increased velocity of changes wrought in a short time confounds localized spatial meanings. This holds true for those who remain rooted in their familiar and ancestral places who 'find the nature of their relation to place ineluctably changed, and the illusion of a natural and essential connection between the place and the culture broken.'<sup>24</sup>

This 'new spectral reality' is performed at a swiftness that is too fast for the subject of modernity to keep apace. The present offers very little sense of control. The pace does not offer opportunity to make informed judgments about which changes are compatible and which are not. Herein the domain of nostalgia offers an opening through which one can approximate agency in a condition that reduces the subject to a passive spectator. It unlocks

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 10.



a conceptual space wherein one can evaluate the cost and worth of certain changes without falling into an indigenist desire to exorcise the specter of the modern teleology of progress and development while functioning as a 'critical equipment' to deal with change, loss and anomic. To quote Cashman:

Unable to slow the pace of change but unwilling to passively float with the tides of change, people nonetheless claim their right to at least evaluate change in retrospect, to discern true loss (such as a decline in neighborly cooperation) from at least provisional improvements (such as modern conveniences of transportation and communication). Nostalgia practices ... can be seen, then, as reclamation of individual agency. Nostalgia practices do not offer people the power to literally arrest change, but they do offer them the temporal perspective necessary to become critics of change, more or less willing participants.<sup>25</sup>

Winter morning  
chat lazily across the table,  
tired thoughts  
turns to be plaster on the wall,  
or sleeps idle  
in the beneath of air;  
an old hope  
lying dead on ashtray.  
Folklore sitting here all  
in a winter morning...  
looking for sunshine...  
sipping their cup of coffee...  
telling stories of  
golden old days...  
Sunshine-  
lost between clouds  
peeps out sudden,  
and lost again,  
plays the age-old game.  
Folklore sitting here all,  
they portray sunshine...  
breathing storm over a cup of coffee.  
Another day is lost  
as a tiny black spot  
on the plaster of the wall...

*-Gautam Hasra - <http://goutam-hasra.sulekha.com/blog/post/2004/11/calcutta-coffee-house.htm>*

Time is the protagonist of this blog-poem. An 'older time' passes too leisurely against a fading past that is denied a conclusive farewell. Literally outside the scabby walls of the Coffee House is a time-space of the present which rises to conspicuousness by its very absence in the poem. The interpolative use of imageries of nature in the description of the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p 146.

Coffee House and the practices contained therein runs a counter-narrative against the original elimination and the subsequent simulated production of nature in the city outside. Against the background of peeling plasters – signifiers of an unremitting temporal linearity – ‘ashes’ of present miscarriages lie in restorative juxtaposition to the ‘golden days’ of yore. Nostalgia here is not only a vacuous indulgence on part of the nostalgic but a device for coping with current frustrations and disappointments. The locus of this exercise is equally important as the import of it. The Coffee House, a material insignia of the nineteenth century site and mode of social intercourse, is integral to the project of present denizens ‘to prove that the present need not be as it is.’ Cashman argues, ‘the past is inscribed in material traces across the landscape, and by highlighting certain sites and certain objects, timely messages of immediate relevance are communicated.’<sup>26</sup> The message embedded in the patronal attachment to the Coffee House communicates a desire for meaning in human existence and intimacy in a non-surveillant environment in contrast to the upmarket regulated alcoves of a Barista or a Café Coffee Day.

The very *habit*, and in this case a conscious ritualistic *practice* of frequenting the richly symbolic Coffee House of Calcutta implies a refusal to accept the present values of an ‘India shining.’ Both Sumit Sarkar and Louis Wirth speak of clock time as the hallmark of ‘body-cycles harnessed to time-discipline’<sup>27</sup> in modernity. Svetlana Boym writes, ‘nostalgia is a rebel against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress,’ and the nostalgic is one who refuses ‘to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.’<sup>28</sup>

These nuances of nostalgia, often swept under the regression carpet, need to be probed and examined if an alternative urban existence or city is to be imagined. To be sure, nostalgia cannot be ignored as mere sentimentality or an insensitive escape into the past. History, in the postcolonial world, must be rescued from the erasing sweep of the second coming of capital if we are to imagine a less exploitative and more inhabitable future. And for this the discourse of nostalgia in academics and in everyday life with a variegated course of over three hundred years seems to furnish us with a veritable entry point.

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<sup>26</sup> Ray Cashman. ‘Critical Nostalgia and Material Culture in Northern Ireland,’ *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol.119, No. 472, Spring 2006, p. 152.

<sup>27</sup> Middleton, Richard. ‘Politics of Repetition: Over and Over’, in, *Beilrag Zur Konferenz Grounding Music*, Mai, 1996.

<sup>28</sup> As quoted in Ray Cashman. ‘Critical Nostalgia and the Material Culture of Northern Ireland,’ *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 119, No. 472, Spring 2006, p 147

## Nostalgia, Technopolitics, and the Global City

### I

Nostalgia, a 'structure of feeling' ...invokes a positively evaluated past world in response to a deficient present world. The nostalgic subject returns to the past to find/construct sources of identity, agency, or community that are felt to be lacking, blocking, subverted, or threatened in the present. The 'positively evaluated' past is approached as a source for something now perceived to be missing; but it need not be thought of as a time of general happiness, peacefulness, stability, or freedom.<sup>29</sup>

Nostalgia, as a word, appeared in distinct relationship to modernity in the medical and psychological discourse from the seventeenth and through the twentieth century. In 1688 Johannes Hofer coined the term 'nostalgia' from the Greek 'nostos' (to return home) and 'algos' (pain) to describe the pain resulting from an intense longing for home. The need to coin a new word to describe a condition is itself indicative of the socio-historical context's novelty. By the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the word came to acquire political valence.

In Marxist understanding, through the philosophy of Kant and Hegel, nostalgia has been posed as one of the 'others' of History – something that is essentially anti-empiricist and irrational. It is 'politically reprehensible' as it harkens back to a past that was unjust and therefore endorses the injustices of regressive social orders, and it is 'empirically untenable' as the object of nostalgia is too 'fuzzy,' i.e. it lacks historical accuracy and detail. History and Nostalgia thus came to signify the binaries of rationality/irrationality and empiricism/ affectivity. Western philosophy beginning from Kant and Hegel had already split past and future and collapsed them with categories of retrogression and progress. In Kant, the movement from passive acceptance to critical reason signified a breaking away from an older oppressive social order towards universal freedom. This break understandably engendered tensions and anxieties for a simpler familiar time which Kant branded as an 'empty yearning' that would disappear with the fruits of reason. To this Hegel's 'impulse to perfectibility' reinforced the faith in the human being's capability for perfection and the invariability of progress. By the time Marx formulated his thesis on capital, nostalgia as a mode of relating to the past was considered as disruptive to history's progressive movement to a socially equitable and less exploitative mode of production. Attachment to the past was problematic as it signified nostalgia for the loss of privileged status of an empire or class. In Marxist thought capitalism's triumph will lead to its own undoing ushering forth a

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<sup>29</sup> Stuart Tannock as quoted in Ray Cashman, 'Critical Nostalgia and the Material Culture of Northern Ireland,' *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol.119, No. 472, Spring 2006, Pg. 13

communist era. Herein, a nostalgic fixation on the past is an impediment to capital's advancement. In fact, also embedded within 19<sup>th</sup> century medical discourse was the de-stabilizing potential of nostalgia of the capitalist machinery. Nostalgia, as a disease, came to be understood as a 'debilitating disorder, not only for the sailors, but also for immigrant laborers, factory workers and the former rural dwellers, experiencing the dislocations caused by industrialization and modernization.'<sup>30</sup> Thus, it came to be even more reprehensible as it was considered to be disruptive to the production of bodies – so vital to the machinery of capitalism. Thus, the ideology of progress and freedom is deeply woven into the narrative of capitalism. The past was treated as regressive and 'barbaric' and all its remnants in the modern present would have to be exorcised. 'Within bourgeois society itself, these elements from earlier social formations will be found. Although in "stunted" or "travestied" form, as "unconquered remnants" of the past.'<sup>31</sup> In summary, for Kant, Hegel, Marx and even later Marxist critics and historians such as E.J. Hobsbawm, the 'movement ahead' of history and progress is projected as inevitable, crucial and *desirable*. Both capitalists and anti-capitalists adopted this interpretation of future-oriented notion of state and historical development.

Concomitantly, History came to be the dominant critical apparatus for relating to the past where the movement from an earlier time to the present was necessarily narrated as a movement from barbarism to a superior present. Nostalgia as an alternative mode of relating is deprecated as an impotent and misleading apparatus as the past is devoid of political potency. That the past cannot be repeated is demonstrated for Marx by the failure of the Revolutions of 1848 which for him was a travesty of the Revolution of 1789. The impossibility of repetition of the past, except by way of a farce or travesty, leads Marx to espouse a total break from it. Thus History and Nostalgia here are split between freedom/servitude and conservatism/progressiveness.

The Freudian school of psychoanalysis at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century further reinforces this negative critique of nostalgia as an abnormality. Freud makes a distinction between mourning and melancholia/nostalgia in his text "Mourning and Melancholia" (1964) in which mourning is determined as a healing, healthy movement forward out of the present calamity whereas melancholia is a retracting impulse and a pathological denial of

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<sup>30</sup> Ray Cashman. 'Critical Nostalgia and the Material Culture of Northern Ireland,' *Journal of American Folklore*, Spring 2006; 119, 472; p 139.

<sup>31</sup> Marcos Piason Natali, 'History and the Politics of Nostalgia,' in <<http://www.uiowa.edu/~ijcs/nostalgia/nostfe1.htm>> accessed on 10.5.08

progress. Psychoanalysis strives to convince the melancholic subject of the object's irrecoverableness, thereby also advocating the impossibility of a return to the past. This is the fundamental proposition of both Marx and Freud. This finality of death is both constitutive of the desire for the dead as well as the justification for the abandonment of the dead. 'Attachment to the past becomes a hindrance precisely because of the belief that the past is irreparably lost, making nostalgia a desire with the possibility of fulfillment,' explains Marcos Piason Natali.<sup>32</sup> Nostalgia therefore is predicated on the belief that the person or thing is irrecoverably lost. Natali states that this form of affective relationship or attachment to the past is therefore posed as a question of empiricism. The discourse on nostalgia thus pitches the debate on the dichotomies of fiction/fact and rationality/irrationality. What then happened in the trajectory of nostalgia is that it was transformed from

a disease of memory ... into a problem of the imperfect assimilation of the categories and practices of history, that is, the condition of those who did not have what in modernity gradually became the dominant relationship to the past. Nostalgia thus became a label to define those who fell outside of the modern framework.<sup>33</sup>

Nostalgia's ineffectuality as history proper has also been argued by Linda Hutcheon who describes it as a form of romantic attachment to the past that contrives to represent it as a neatened utopia removed from its socio-historical moorings. Thus nostalgia begins to signify the 'non-modern' or the 'incomplete modern' and even its presence in modernity tends to transmute those moments into the 'un-modern.' Romantic longing makes the past aseptic by aestheticizing and hyper-stylizing it. This has led to fierce critiques of the 'mystifying intentions' of postmodern nostalgia with Fredric Jameson lamenting the production of dubious objects of representation that lack historical competency. Through this critique of nostalgia emerges a privileging of history as a legitimate method of narrativizing the past that subsumes all other modes of interpreting and organizing past experiences.

Capitalism offers itself as the only alternative to 'death' and thereby compels societies to adopt the bourgeois mode of production and reproduce themselves in the image of the bourgeoisie. Here the metaphor of 'death' is a double-edged knife. Seeking the eventuality of a communist state aseptically justifies capitalism's subsumption of societies which prevents their 'death,' but the simultaneous flattening and standardizing of identities and societies by capitalism also perpetrates another kind of death.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

Thus the important question, which both David Harvey and Raymond Williams pose, is the survival and preservation of social and political identities and practices under the sweeping homogenization of capital. This is an important cue in the present context of the simulacralizing urbanity of Calcutta or any other place. It is a question much begged of left academics. Natali configures the problematic with reference to Raymond Williams' *Country and the City* thus: '...in his theoretical work it becomes the tension between a "militant particularism" devoted to the preservation of local identities and a social "universalism" that has no place for the concern with historical and social singularity.'<sup>34</sup> Her close reading of Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* poses some interesting questions on the nature of homogenizing capitalism and the critical possibilities of nostalgia. The intractability of the situation insofar as academics and political activism are concerned, and as anxiously engaged by the Comaroffs, lies in the micro struggles of identity vis-à-vis the metanarrative of capitalism. The Left is suffering a strategic crisis in the face of an explosion of identity politics where as has been explained above class seems to have been relegated to the political backseat while struggles and movements revolve around gender, sex, race, social, culture and identity. Deconstructionist theory has led to the destabilizing of what were formerly perceived as unitary identities and postmodern theories à la Foucault have diffused power which tends to negate the option of waging war against any concrete enemy. This makes any political action against oppression in any form a thorny problem. After all an 'I' or 'we' is needed to fight an 'it' as provisional as these identities may seem. Left politics finds the struggle against capitalism eclipsed in the simultaneous proliferation, fragmentation, and destabilization of identities. Sharon Zukin, Fredric Jameson and David Harvey hold that urban culture and identity are direct offshoots of post-fordist/late capitalist economies and their socio-spatial impact on the material form and structure of cities. The position of the left is encapsulated in these words used in another context: 'When our common enemies are so powerful, however, it seems counterproductive to engage in a politics that emphasizes the national and social identities of distinct groups, which too often attack one another rather than allying to seek redress for grievances of common concern.'<sup>35</sup> Although I tend to agree with the view, the gradual obscuration of class poses a serious problem at the moment.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Ackelsberg, Martha A. 'Identity Politics, Political Identities: Thoughts toward a Multicultural Politics,' *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 16, No.1, 1996, p. 89.

## II

The Internet has come to be a fecund site of polyphonic politics. The space it provides is used for both mainstream as well as alternative, hybrid and complex, articulations. It lends itself to both reactionary and progressive politics and thus has become a multivocal, multifaceted, created and creative complex, dissolving in the process 'classical cultural and political boundaries.' Since the launch of the World Wide Web and its other rivals, corporate and non-corporate alike, the Internet performs as a veritable space of debate, opinion-posting, chat-rooms, email discussions and so on. It became rapidly popular in its appeal and carnivalesque in its contours, accommodating both cultural and subcultural voices.

This multivocal fluency of the Internet and its appropriation to various political and social ends by a range of groups across the world has also brought it under the scanner of 'Bushnomics' that has spiralled into both online and offline debates on user privacy and state security policies. However, the politicization of the Internet continues to intensify, no less because of the growing user awareness of the nexus between corporates and governments and their umbilical relationship to globalization. The globalization discourse now tends to argue for alternatives to corporate globalization, its macro and totalizing dimensions, by focusing on the proliferation of difference and the shift to more local discourses and practices. The local, the specific, the particular and micro everyday experiences take preeminence in this view which is also espoused by poststructuralist, postmodernist, feminist studies. Internet subcultures' 'maturing political awareness' here can and does make valuable contribution to the local level by organizing struggles around a number of identity issues. Instead of focusing on simplistic dichotomies posited by globalists and localists, attention may be drawn on the negotiations and interactions between the forces of the local and the global which have become crucial to any critical understanding of and radical politics that intend to resist corporate globalization. Kahn and Kellner write:

...it is the mix that matters, and whether global or local solutions are most fitting depends on the conditions in the distinctive context that one is addressing and the particular solutions and policies being proposed. Specific locations and practices of a plurality of post-subcultures constitute perhaps what is most interesting now about oppositional subcultural activities at work within the Internet. ... Internet subcultures have taken up the questions of local and global politics and are attempting to construct answers both locally and globally as a response. Importantly, this can be done due to the very nature of the medium in which they exist. Therefore, while the Internet can and has been used to promote capitalist globalization, the current configuration of on-line subcultures are interested in the number of ways in which the global network can be diverted and used in the struggle against it.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Kahn, Richard and Douglas Kellner. 'Internet Subcultures and Oppositional Politics,' at <<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/internetsubculturesoppositionalpolitics.pdf>>

Technopolitics is now a non-violent space for mobilizing people against the excesses of corporate globalization captured best in the movement against the World Trade Organization. The Internet is used for circulating crucial material, news, footages, and views that are normally edited out of mainstream media.

A revolution in Internet communication over the last 3-4 years and which has burgeoned in the last one year in India has been “blogging.” Tech slang for “web log”, the blog, is an extension of the World Wide Web of hypertext pages. Post 9/11 the popular diary format has dominated blog styles. Blogs’ popularity lies in their easy to use automated software, both paid and anti-capitalist free tech interfaces. The option to personalize one’s blog page thereby investing the mode with a subjective and intimate touch resembling traditional personal journal-keeping is a world wide rage. Most of all, blogging has integrative and intercommunicative features where bloggers can not only post their respective thoughts and messages but also are open to postings by readers’ reviews and responses. The inter-dialogic feature of the blog through a common messageboard encourage discussions, debates and interaction. Blogs also allow subscription whereby readers are notified of new postings through email. Blog pages also include hyperlinks which link webpages together. Community building has been integral to the phenomenon and practice of blogging. In the blog world, readers and writers alike like to keep track of the developments – new arrivals, talented writers, each others’ progress and regularity – and also provide lists of links to the blog cartels that identify the ‘who’s who’ in blog world. This has led to the proliferation of sites such as Blogdex, Day Pop, and Technorati which provide a network of links featuring the most popular blogs and news stories that are under discussion.<sup>37</sup>

### III

The problems and questions evoked in this chapter may be enumerated thus: What would be the appropriate mechanism against the logic of the spectacle enacted against the global geography of capitalism? How can such a politics negotiate with an emergent tribalization of identities? And what is the potential of the hyperspaces of a growing cyberculture in subverting, what Andrew Ross terms, ‘the technologies of social control’ and the realm of images? These questions posed in the context of Calcutta, an instance of the “moment” of

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid*



apparent fixity of capital in place.’<sup>38</sup> However, I do not claim to have all the answers to the questions raised. The chapter is an attempt to capture the anxieties borne of the current millennial moment of capitalism. In the writing of it, a straightforward account of the relationship of nostalgia to a changing city stumbled over theoretical snags and contradictory articulations which could not be ironed out in favor of a solutioning conclusion. The modest attempt has been to forward nostalgia as a critical tool that opens up a space for politics against this logic of the spectacle as sustained within is a strategical recourse to *choice*. In a general ambience of cynicism, I am optimistic of the evolution of the space provided by the Internet as a veritable site of politicization and articulation of that politics. Here Cashman’s reminder that nostalgia is not content, but a practice holds in good stead for any critical engagement with the concept and its potency.

Nostalgia, Cashman states, is more than a structure of feeling, i.e., it goes beyond imagination to the realm of practice and offers a veritable critique of modernity. Nostalgia is deeply connected to tradition, identity, authenticity, and heritage. But nostalgia’s negative critique as ‘bad history’ has prevented the positive potential of it to question, resist and challenge modernity and its teleological apotheosis: ‘In condemning nostalgia as romantic yearning for a harmonious, integrated past that never existed, Berman and others implicitly endorse modernity as a project of positive progress.’ Positive evaluations of nostalgia have been forthcoming in recent scholarship as it now seems to be emerging as a coping mechanism for loss, anomie and change as well as an instrument for forging new identities in a context of rapid political, economic and socio-cultural transition. It is a universal cultural practice which demonstrates exceptional pliability. Its very pliancy exposes it to hostility as nostalgia ‘can be made to “happen” by (and to) any one of any political persuasion.’<sup>39</sup> To follow the vein of the Situationists, nostalgia leaves itself open to commodification whereby the market neutralizes any potency it may have. But nostalgia’s productive and prospective power to guide practices and choices as evidenced by certain persistence of ‘habits’ in everyday life such as preferring the Coffee House or a less fabulous Flury’s to KFC, to meditate upon changing power relations inflicted and morphed in space and on bodies, to forge new social identities, offer an ideological stance against the teleology of progress and

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<sup>38</sup> Andrew Merrifield, ‘Place and Space: A Lefebvrian Reconciliation,’ *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol. 18, No. 4., 1993, pg. 521.

<sup>39</sup> As quoted in Sanclan, Sean. ‘Introduction: Nostalgia,’ in <<http://www.uiowa.edu/~ijcs/nostalgia/sanclan.htm>>

the latter's blind acceptance. Nostalgia in all the blogs cited in this chapter leads one to question the underlying consequences of market capitalism. And herein the role of cyberspace as an instrument for reacting, responding, and communicating our sense of the present reality becomes important in its obdurate undeniability.

Cyber-culture is the disembodied posthumanist manifestation of a salvific millennial post-industrialism. As the latter's corollary, it has been decried as the most treacherous mode of socio-political control in an era of 'informational capitalism.' However, the room for subversion even within cyberspace cannot be overlooked. On a more optimistic note, technoculture proffers 'a space for reconfiguring politics, a refocusing of politics on everyday life, and the use of the tools and techniques of emergent computer and communication technologies to expand the field of politics and culture.'<sup>40</sup>

Technology in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ushered in a revolution in everyday life. However, the relationship between the mechanic and the organic forged by the new information and communication technology is reconfigured in a meaning-generative way through the democratic space of the Internet. Like nostalgia, the Internet is also a contested and pliable space in the service of many gods. It cannot be denied that it acts as an ideological vehicle of a capitalist consumer society, propagating new modes of fetishism, enslavement and domination. However the moment to reckon is the future of webcasting. I agree with Kellner and Kahn that: 'The political battles of the future may well be fought in the streets, factories, parliaments, and other sites of past struggle, but politics is already mediated by broadcast, computer, and information technologies and will increasingly be so in the future.'<sup>41</sup>

The Internet as the medium of communication of these nostalgic exercises engages alternative voices, resident in geographically and economically disparate zones, in forming yet another imaginary community which seeks to collectively cope with change. Politicization over this space is extensive in its a-territorial reach while it illustrates the possibility of a politics of prospective, future-oriented nostalgia.

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner. 'Internet Subcultures and Oppositional Politics,' at  
<<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/internetsubculturesoppositionalpolitics.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

*According to the materialist conception of history, the determining element in history is the production and reproduction in real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. If therefore somebody twists this into the statement that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms it into a meaningless, abstract and an absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis, the various elements of the superstructure – political forms of class struggles and their consequences, constitutions established by the victorious classes after a successful battle, etc. – forms of law – and then even the reflexes of all these struggles in the brains of those combatants: political, legal, and philosophical theories, religious ideas and their further development into systems of dogma – also exercise their influence on the course of historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form.*

- Engels in a letter to Joseph Bloch, 1890.

The intention of this dissertation has not been to extract a uniaxial connection between chapters. Tenuous by no means, elements informing these connections are like the waiting squares of Rubik's cube – displaying multifactorial possibilities.

On the level of academic imperatives, the representational devices – *naksha*-s, songs and blogs – enunciate multiple points of intersection of time and space as well as perform within manifold terrains of identity, gender, locality and class. These should then function as the overarching grid within which the specific chapters operate.

For Sartre, literature as an agent of change was indispensable. And since literature 'best manifests the subjectivity of the person when it translates most deeply collective needs,' the *naksha*'s contribution through its reflective competence to the construction of the Hindu upper caste male self is reflective of the political orientation of the authors themselves. In colonial Calcutta, as elsewhere, the comprador class (by no means homogeneous) could not escape a problematic relationship with its colonial masters. Colonial modernity enforced a project of imagining a collectivity primarily through printing and literature. As an urban narrative genre, the *naksha*'s historical competency directly inscribes itself on the very territoriality of Calcutta. In the urban discourse on self of both progressive and conservative Hindu males, the city came to occupy an uncanny locum for this desired oppositional self. Furthermore, the self and the city were emplaced in a desired commensurability which remained partial and unfulfilling. *Kalikata Kamalalay, Sachitra Gulzar*

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, London and New York: Routledge, (1948), 2002.

*Nagar* and *Kalikatar Nookochuri* are literary negotiations between this self and the city. While *Kalikata Kamalalay*, by way of its originary status, only begins to hint at the assimilating and disruptive tendencies of the new urban centre of Calcutta, *Kalikatar Nookochuri* explicates the very iconic status of Calcutta in popular imagination. These anxieties pronounced through the recurring trope of *kaliyuga* connotes the representation as well as *construction* of Calcutta as a dynosiac space of inversion and profanation which *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar* both partakes in as well as seeks to redress. *Sachitra Gulzar Nagar*, perhaps most explicitly, speaks of Calcutta as a failed project of modernity when the very political frontrunners exposed themselves as self-seeking exploiters of the Bengal economy. The politics of the genre of *naksha* remains inextricable from these exercises of reflections on the self and an imagination of a Bengali collectivity. I argue that the expectations from a genre, in this case the *naksha*, established in ways by the genre itself proved to be detrimental to the *naksha*'s potential for rupturing contemporary socio-cultural barricades and its acceptance as serious material for retrospective analysis.

*Kaliyuga* proves to be a telling trope for the mounting sense of cultural dispossession as well as the resultant severity of caste and class purity. The anomaly inherent in this is revealed by the contradictory practice of 'goshthapati-s' who arranged ascendance to higher caste rungs among the powerful members of parvenu class. However, middle-class male Calcuttans perceived themselves to be embattled by the 'polluting' presence of subcaste religious denominations such as Bauls, Kartabhajas and Sahebdhanis. These marginal groups detained the attention of both political and cultural activists of the time. According to Veena Das, 'it is the nature of the conflict within which a caste or tribe is locked which may provide the characteristics of the historical moment.'<sup>2</sup> The fraught relationship that the Baul denomination encountered with the colonial and nationalist urbanity of Calcutta is telling of these very processes of historical negotiations that were necessary between the Bengali urban intellectual and the rural contaminating 'other.' And in this Calcutta at the level of both praxis and ideation emerged as the place and space which rejected, appropriated and rehabilitated the subaltern in dominant imagination and discourse. Calcutta continues to engage the Bauls into the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. However, Calcutta refigures from a colonial economy to a commodity economy which seeks to actively seduce and co-opt resistant

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<sup>2</sup> Veena Das, 'Subaltern as Perspective,' in Ranajit Guha (ed.) *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1989.

modes thereby reducing the antagonistic radicality of the Baul to mere spectacle. Nevertheless, the discourse of agency punctuates and interrupts any neat denouement of narratives. Therefore, I leave the agentic participation of Baul singers and practitioners open to the possibility of subversive interpretation and redeployment of dominant symbols and goods. As an aside, it needs to be remarked that the *place* named Kolkata has ceased to figure or be hospitable to everyday performances of the Bauls. Baul performances are now staged and recorded at exclusive Baul fests and cultural occasions such as the Durga puja or state-sponsored cultural meets. The erstwhile lanes and bylanes which had been Baul haunts since the nineteenth century seem to have given way to the amorphous space of local trains. Trains to Bolpur, Naihati, Bardhaman, among many others are now the chosen space of performances by impoverished Bauls for meager contributions or even those who are waiting to be discovered by local and city producers. The space of the train has indeed become a privileged site of performance by both Baul and pop bands from and around Calcutta. This awaits serious scholarly attention.

Calcutta's arrival on the transnational global circuit has sent jolts throughout a city known for its somnambulist bearing. As the second communist state in India, its remarkable transformation questions both the competency of left politics as well as the latter's future scope. Amid these swift changes, Calcutta also comes across as overcast with nostalgia. Nostalgia's critical potential stands adumbrated by history's imperialism. Nostalgia has proven to be a critical equipment for dealing with unsettling changes. In the context of Calcutta, I have used blogs to investigate the drifts and competency of nostalgia to counter the overwhelming logic and acceptance of a historical notion of 'progress' and a capitalist form of 'development.' At a time when subjectivities are decentered by the condition of postmodernity, my earlier reference to the middle-class discourse of nostalgia in the third chapter can only be partially accepted. Class in the millennial moment of global capitalism can only contingently inform any identity which subsequently always remains partial against the more stable referent of 'consumer.' Nostalgia, it is argued in this dissertation, can prove to be an effective practice to question and challenge the hyperreality of Calcutta and inform an everyday counter-politics.

This dissertation was also partially conceptualized out of my personal experience of Calcutta. In spite of not being attached as most Calcuttans are to the city, I find my bearings are disturbed every time I go back to the city. Having been brought up in a relatively

insulated environment, as I progressed through college and university, I was constantly reminded of the importance of names of this street and that, this college or that, interspersed with remarks on my own deficient knowledge of the city. But various points of departures in the three chapters are not arbitrary or simple afterthoughts of my adult life on a city when distance has expedited meditation. They are closely related to different moments of life. Even though I grew up, naive as I was in regard to the city's 'glorious lineage,' I was not unaware of the shifts in the cityspace. By the time I was fifteen or sixteen, the music of the snake charmers, the shrill call of the quilt and carpet beaters, the singing Bauls had all but disappeared from south Calcutta's residential and central areas. The erratic and sudden appearances of these songsters in their colourful robes gave off an aura of mystery which as a child both intimidated and attracted me. Their equally sudden and permanent disappearance from the lanes of Lake Gardens persisted in memory: The figure of the Baul would haunt for many years the image of the desolate street outside on hot afternoons which I learnt to spend before the television. As Calcuttans became more and more 'developed,' ingresses of these marginal figures into the cityspace grew unwelcome. Perhaps now they can only be found in the nucleated lanes and crannies of North Calcutta and this too might soon cease to be the case. The second chapter is clearly an outcome of this protracted relationship with a memory. The re-ordering of the spatial performativity has undergone even more stringent measures as I've tried to illustrate in the third chapter, 'Multiplexed Calcutta and Critical Nostalgia.'

This dissertation on Calcutta therefore, has been as much of a learning experience as it has been a site for critical thinking. Hence even though social research is bound by an oath of objectivity, my subjective experience of Calcutta underscores the intent, purpose and questions raised in this dissertation.

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