



Swapan Chakravorty

Imminent ruin and desperate remedy: Calcutta and its fragments

Swapan Chakravorty provides an account of his native Calcutta in terms of its political failures past and present. He describes how the failures of the British colonisers to adequately make good on their promise to modernize the city meant that to justify its status, Calcutta (population 15 million) was forced to fall back on its cultural heritage. During the economic crises of the 1960s and 1970s, the Communist government rose to power through the support of the city's poor; today, still governing, it courts Western investors at the expense of those very same people. By sanitising public spaces, by evicting street vendors and stall holders, the government is threatening the city's cultural heritage and vital tradition of urban commons.

**DOCUMENTA
MAGAZINES**



Calcutta, by all accounts, is changing. The city now calls itself "Kolkata", reverting to the demotic variant of "Kalikata", the name of one of the three villages the Muslim Governor of Bengal sold to the East India Company in 1698. The new name has the sanction of the state, but it has to reckon with the stubborn habits of an amphibious culture. The University of Calcutta, set up in 1857, is in Bengali "Kalikata Visvavidyalay", and the authorities have failed to make room for the new official name in its formal title in both languages. Calcutta is not an ancient city, not at least by Indian standards, and yet one is none too sure of the etymology of its name. The devout like to believe that it derives from the goddess Kali. Pilgrims, they say, had always flocked to Kalighat, the famous temple on the bank of the old river that, after changing course, is now no wider than a moat. It is one of the fifty-two spots over which the body of Sati (a form of Shakti like Kali herself) was scattered, when Vishnu had to dismember the corpse to stop her enraged husband Siva from destroying the world. In some ways, Calcutta strikes outsiders as having been true to its myth of origin. It is in some ways like the orphaned fragment of a lost corpus, forever caught on the hop between imminent ruin and desperate remedy.

What exactly is it that is changing in the city? West Bengal, the oddly named state on the eastern fringe of the peninsula, was slow to make peace with the market-driven regime that has been steadily dismantling the command economy in India since at least 1989. But the markers of headier times are all in place now, at least in the capital city of the state ruled for close to three decades by a Communist-led coalition. New apartment blocks and flyovers tower over an improbable topography and shopping malls are a maze of high-street brands. The small parking lot at my university department, built for the few sad local cars owned mostly by women lecturers with rich husbands, is spilling over with gleaming Japanese, Korean, and American models; tabloid celebrities from across the nation drop in on speciality stores and multiplexes; fancy restaurants, lounge bars with ethnic themes, and coy night clubs sprout in breathtaking defiance of commercial wisdom; wines take up more shelf

space in liquor shops while Subway and Pizza Hut try their blandishments on kebab addicts; more children wear ties to school and more parents talk golf and country clubs; fewer upscale hotels offer discounts out of season; stodgy clerks and timid schoolmasters gamble in stocks and mutual funds; electronic betting, now legal, is the new opium of the working class, as are MTV and dating sites for the young; college celebrations routinely include the models' runway; software geeks and commodity traders work nights; European designers are sprucing up the old airport and the shabby waterfront; the media are noisier against urban eyesores and political strikes; the greenery and open spaces in the city find corporate keepers to scare away tramps and hookers. A slovenly government billboard outside the airport terminal welcomes guests to a "resurgent" West Bengal. Calcutta, it more than implies, is happening. The city is at last talking money, not talking back to it; and poverty, still too visible, has lost its power to disturb or distract.

A casual visitor, or one returning to the city after several years, will not fail to notice that the city's skyline is changing. As children, we would go up to the terrace of our old three-storied block of flats on August afternoons to watch the kites fly. Kite flying was big in Calcutta at the end of the monsoons, when the skies were clear and the evenings not as short and depressing as they would soon be from late October. After the vacation for Durga Puja and Diwali, one would switch to cricket and swot for the end-of-the-year tests. But the brief spell from August to October would belong to the knights of swooping tetrahedron and to their aerial tournaments in which glistening strings, coated with powdered glass, would graze and tangle. We would wait for the victory chorus to power through the evening air, and then run to grab the felled kite floating gently down, like a leaf in autumn, before it lodged itself on the wireless antennae rearing up from a neighbouring roof. The diamond-shaped specks would loom high above the trees in the east, beyond the Campbell Hospital grounds, reaching as far as the big railway station in Sealdah. If the wind set in from the east, the flimsy sheets of coloured paper spread on a frame of two intersecting sticks, one straight and the other bent like a bow, would lurch towards the west, and we could spot them against the distant bridge joining the city to the bigger railway terminal across the river in Howrah. The trees are all but gone, and the giant bridge is hidden from view by the concrete mess stretching from one end of Dharmatala Street to the other, right up to the old city centre in Chowringhee.

Some like to call the old city centre Dharmatala. Others call it Esplanade, although the maidan, the stretch of green that let the British guns at the riverside garrison of Fort William have clear lines of fire, has steadily shrunk, and the civil administration and the army, with corporate help, seem keen to fence off what is left of it. Campbell Hospital is now named after a famous Bengali doctor, and Dharmatala Street is Lenin Sarani. Like the city itself, nearly all its streets and neighbourhoods have more than one name. Unlike the ideologues who pull down statues and rename streets, Calcutta makes little fuss about living simultaneously with its disparate histories.

It is not just the old city centre that is changing. Sturdy and functional office blocks on and around Chowringhee Road (or Jawaharlal Nehru Road), built in the sixties and seventies of the last century, now look like poor shades of a disowned past. The brash condominiums, malls, and commercial structures coming up in the southern and eastern fringes of the city have decisively altered the architectural profile, the industrial map, and demographic spread. Calcutta grew along the eastern bank of the river the British called the Hooghly. Spreading several miles westward from the old Fort and ringed by

moats and ditches, this was the central business district, with government houses, the legislature, the secretariat, the Town Hall, the law courts, and the stock exchange along Esplanade and around the tank in Dalhousie Square. It formed the nucleus of White Town — its elegant clubs, churches, racecourse, shops, bars, and cemeteries built to cocoon Europeans inside a tenuous shell of familiarity. Further south were the docks in Khidirpur. The port was once cosmopolitan and chaotic, shading off into the Muslim districts where the Nawab of Awadh had taken refuge after being driven away from Lucknow in the middle of the nineteenth century. He brought to the upstart city the grace of a lost world — courtly manners, the elegance of Urdu poetry and song, a lordly cuisine. The descendants of Tipu Sultan, who died fighting the English in 1800, had also fled to the city from southern India. The metropolitan culture of Calcutta has always been, in a genuine sense, the culture of the displaced.

Away from the river in the south was the wilderness, which provided abundant game, including tigers. Warren Hastings, the Governor General in the eighteenth century whom Edmund Burke famously impeached, had set up his country residence in the area. Close to the gardens of what is now National Library and the Horticultural Society, he had fought a duel with Philip Francis. The wilderness and the tigers are gone, but the area housed the fringe population of the city until a few years back. One of the two large prisons in the vicinity is now the south campus of Calcutta University. Across from the Library and the University is the zoo, built on the sprawling estate of a former maharaja. As children we went there every winter to gaze at the migratory birds from Siberia. Fewer birds take the flight these days: they have not taken kindly to the plush hotel that has come up a few yards away. The neighbourhood now teems with malls, restaurants, speciality hospitals, and the high-walled homes of tycoons, military top brass, and civil servants. The zoo, we are told, would soon be shifted: a tiger had killed a drunken man who had entered the enclosure with a garland for the animal just a few years back.

The Black Town was in the north. Bengali landowners, made rich by the East India Company's revenue settlement at the end of the eighteenth century, and an assortment of merchants, agents, and clerks from all over the country had built their mansions there in the hybrid architectural idiom of the native arriviste. The old Black Town, stretching to the cremation ground near Baghbazar, has weathered the changes with forlorn sturdiness. The place is still a maze of chaotic bazaars, run-down theatres with mismatched domes, unappetizing brothels, job printers working on treadle machines, night markets selling used clothes, dreary offices of *jatra* troupes who make old music and melodrama out of new themes (including Bush and Saddam) on makeshift stages, marching bands on hire that mix fake bassoons with authentic bagpipes, shops for musical instruments such as the *sehnai* and the *sarangi* that no one wants to buy, quaint houses of worship built by nineteenth-century religious benefactors and radicals, the earliest academic institutions and libraries, ruined houses with the crest of Queen Victoria moulded on wooden doors, the decayed pretence of chipped stained glass or a forsaken fountain featuring Neptune and his seahorses, eating houses that live more on memory than custom. Forgotten forms of life cling to north Calcutta with the tenacity of the city's banyan trees, which strike root in concrete pavement, rusted water pipes, and crumbling parapets.

Bengalis made money under the British, but lost it to more seasoned business communities of Indians after independence in 1947. The *zamindars*, or landlords, who collected revenue on behalf of the government were slow to adapt to changing times, and the financial reins of the city have passed to the

Marwaris, the Gujaratis, and the Punjabis. The better-off among Bengali professionals began to shift base to the south of the city a couple of decades before independence. The culture of owned apartment housing caught on with salaried Bengalis from the 1960s. Around the same time, the new generation of up-country businessmen started branching off from their ancestral homes in Barabazar and Chitpur in the north. The upscale southern neighbourhoods were the ones least resistant to recent changes, partly because transfer of property was easier here, with legacies, tenancies, and entailments being less complicated than in the old family estates of the north. Executives entitled to paid accommodation advertise for flats in the south, since this is where the improvement in urban infrastructure is most visible.

Yet, even after the recent IT boom, the south is not half as cosmopolitan as the north once was. The cultural heterogeneity of the Raj years is still evident in the architectural chaos that is north Calcutta. The official buildings in White Town were mostly neo-Palladian, with a few exceptions, such as the High Court, built on the Gothic plan of the town hall in Ypres. The Government House, now the residence of the Governor, was modelled after Kedleston Hall, the Derbyshire seat of the Curzons. The churches mostly followed Gibbs's neo-classical style in such exemplars as St Martin's-in-the-Fields in London. This was European Calcutta, the city from which the British governed India from 1774 until the capital was shifted to Delhi in 1912. It was the second city of the empire that ran the affairs of places as far off as Rangoon and Melacca. Eighteenth-century paintings of European Calcutta by Thomas Daniell and engravings by William Wood depict spacious buildings with rambling gardens. But as one heads toward the north from Dalhousie Square, one wades into a less tranquil cityscape — a noisy, hybrid, crowded architecture that recalls the heady mix of races and idioms typical of an eighteenth-century port city. The south, despite its modernist boast, has no Portuguese church. There is no synagogue, and there is no Jain temple built in the style of a Burmese pagoda. Armenian realtors did not invest much in the south, although in 1780 they built a Greek church with Doric columns there. The old mansions of Black Town speak of the contradictions of a modernity under colonial rule — a courtyard facing the open porch raised on antique columns for *pujas* and other ceremonies, the front quarters flaunting European-style parlours and billiard rooms, the more traditional quarters at the back housing the women, who could watch a ceremony or a theatrical performance from behind bamboo slats on the first-floor galleries. Then there are the *haveli*-style houses of rich Muslims with Persian tracery; there were the ornate latticework and embossed windows in the Rajasthani houses built by Marwaris. The promise of modernity in the north, though compromised by the colonial presence, was promiscuous and inclusive; it is ironic that "postmodernity" in the south should threaten homogeneity and exclusion.

Black Town was slow to urbanize. In the middle of the eighteenth century, it was still a confusion of hovels, alleyways, and gutters. After more than 250 years, hand-pulled rickshaws and carts are more abundant in the north. That, however, did not impair its ethnic variety. Even crime was multinational. On 29 January 1795, a band of 200 robbers attacked the house of a rich Bengali, Chaitanya Seal. The house was in the north, in Kasipur (Cossipore). The gang included Italians, Portuguese, Frenchmen, Germans, and Bengalis. Portuguese bandits joined Bengalis in storming the house of Chaitanya Datta in Colootolla on 21 October 1789.

There were, it is true, Portuguese, Dutch, French, and Danish settlements within a few miles of the city. However, discrete histories of urbanization are

known to breed their own kinds of ethnic mix. The Chinese arrived in Calcutta around 1780. They made sugar out of the cane they grew: the Bengali word for sugar is *chini*. Although many were forced to leave the country following the Sino–Indian war in 1962, the Chinese population in the city exceeded 20 000 around 1980. Most of the settlers worked in the leather factories in the eastern fringe, where they built a walled neighbourhood named Tangra. The leather workshops have been shifted out of town, but the Chinese restaurants in Tangra are doing well. Iranian dissidents smuggled seditious tracts out of Calcutta, a distinguished centre of Persian printing in the nineteenth century. The Baghdadi Jews and Armenians were still around when I went to school. It was a Methodist institution, where several Jewish teachers and students sang in the school choir. They had names like David and Isaac, and we used to confuse them with the Anglo–Indians. In any case, there was no difference in their enthusiasm for Cliff Richard numbers, which, for some reason still dark to me, followed the hymns at "chapel" hour. The Armenians played rugby in the local league. We would feel bullied by the Armenian school teams in hockey and football: they were big boys who believed every sport in the world was rugby. I had no idea that the novelist Thackeray had lived in the house that was then the Armenian school. We were also scared of the turbaned Afghans, in loose shirts that reached down to their knees and baggy pleated salwars. They would prowl outside factory gates on payday, and we heard chilling rumours of how these loan sharks — Kabuliwallahs, we called them — forced defaulters to part with their month's wages. Did they have families here? Not visible ones. *Kabuliwallahar bou* (Kabuliwallah's wife) is Bengali for something one knows is there but never gets to see. Nepalis took up domestic jobs and Bhutanese women set up roadside stalls to sell cheap woollens.

Indians came all over. Every winter Kashmiri men came in droves to sell shawls. Gujaratis and Sindhis owned commercial establishments. The Sikhs from Punjab drove and repaired commercial vehicles, sold automobile parts, managed roadside eateries known as *dhabas*, and were the best carpenters. Marathis and Tamils, employed in banks, mercantile houses, and schools, formed strong cultural organizations. The poor from the neighbouring states of Bihar, Assam, and Orissa filled the big demand for industrial labour and the bigger one for unskilled manual work. I never got to learn about the ethnic mosaic in the sex trade.

The cultural mix began to change in the 1960s. The border war in 1962 drove out many Chinese families; the easing of immigration laws encouraged Anglo–Indian families to leave for Australia or Canada and Jewish families for Israel; government banks and welfare schemes checked the Afghan moneylenders; Belgian Jesuits were slowly replaced by the Indians they had trained in their seminaries; the British who had stayed back found it hard to socialize with the new crowd at the clubs. There were more people on the streets: the railway platforms were spilling over with refugees from East Pakistan and migrant labourers from the neighbouring states. By 1974, the population had swollen to 3.3 million (the official count is now close to 11.5 million). But there were fewer Eurasian chefs and crooners in the restaurants on Park Street; fewer jockeys on the racecourse spoke the Anglo–Indian idiom that had so amused Naipaul; rugby was an orphaned sport. Ungainly Landmasters and Ambassadors, the passenger cars manufactured by Hindustan Motors, had taken over the roads from the stately Austins, Wolseleys, and Plymouths. The statues of British governors and soldiers were stowed away, and street names were changed. Foreign looks and accents, like foreign cars, were fast becoming a curiosity. Calcutta was no longer the first–born city of colonial India; White Town wore a derelict look.

Lazy journalists and peddlers of literary nostalgia routinely blame Communists and their militant trade unions for the flight of capital from Bengal since the 1960s. The Communists now in power seem to have bought this line. They regret "past mistakes", and seize every imaginary occasion to assure investors that they have changed their spots. Life would have been simpler had they been such overpowering agents of history. Calcutta started slipping well before the Communists tasted power. The Second World War put a halt to the influx of capital goods, the Japanese bombed Calcutta, famine killed more than four million in Bengal in 1943–44, the stock markets crashed in the wake of the sectarian riots in 1946. Sectarian violence in the 1940s started the pattern of displacements that assumed disastrous proportions when Bengal was partitioned in 1947. More than six million refugees from East Pakistan migrated to Calcutta and the adjoining districts in the next two decades. As late as in 1969, 1.3 million refugees were officially awaiting rehabilitation in the state. Not all of them waited that long. Refugees forcibly took hold of land in and around Calcutta, sometimes fighting pitched battle with landowners for months. Pressure on land meant a lateral spread of shops and slums, with drastic change in the demographic layout. Shantytowns now housed former middle-class householders and farmers; the civic administration and amenities were on the verge of collapse.

The war with Pakistan in 1965 resulted in a suspension of the Five-Year Plan, with consequent drying up of funds from the federal government. Ancillary industries dependent on orders from government departments such as the railways, started laying off workers. Jute, ceramics, chemicals, textile, and engineering industries in the state were already facing the effects of obsolescence: the depreciated units were passing into the hands of asset strippers. Food was scarce all over India in the late 1960s. The government in West Bengal imposed sale restrictions on farmers to ensure supplies in ration shops, and cordoned off villages to check the smuggling of grains into the black market in Calcutta. Social arrangements in the villages were soon unsettled. Thousands of women, who had never been out working, swarmed into the smuggling trade, boarding commuter trains with pitiful bundles of rice hidden in the folds of their saris. Shantytowns sprang up along the smugglers' route, flanking railway tracks and canals, and the jobless and the homeless squatted on the city's pavements.

The elections in 1967 brought Communists to power as partners in an unsteady coalition. The state-sponsored unrest in agriculture and industry that followed was bound to prove ineffectual. Food prices rose, factories closed down, corporate houses moved their head offices to other metros. Disaffected revolutionaries left the mother party to join the Maoist movement that began with the peasant uprising in Naxalbari, a hitherto obscure village in the north of the state. 1968 was a heady year not just for Europe. The Maoists in Bengal launched a guerrilla movement, and otherwise qualmish young men killed policemen and died on the streets of Calcutta. State reprisal turned more brutal with the return of the Congress party to power in 1972. The surrender of the Pakistani army and the birth of Bangladesh in 1971 had turned Indira Gandhi into a popular icon. Nevertheless, the party chose to rig the elections, and the hoods they commissioned joined crime and politics in a lasting bond. When Mrs Gandhi declared emergency in 1975 and suspended fundamental rights, the protests in Calcutta were strangely muted. Counterculture seemed to have learnt its lessons. Mrs Gandhi called elections to Parliament in 1977, and the constitutional Marxists joined forces in West Bengal with rightwing parties. Secure in its mastery of the sly art of electioneering, the left won the Bengal elections on their own soon after. They have never lost an election in Bengal

since.

The instability and police terror in the decade following 1967 had crippling consequences for trade and the service sector. Shops and restaurants were deserted in the evenings; offices of international airlines closed down; hotels looked like bleak retreats for the moneyed fugitive. In the early seventies, when I was at the university, examinations were never held on time. There was this co-curricular innovation that newspapers termed "mass copying", and no one bothered to employ a graduate from Calcutta. No one bothered to invest in the city's infrastructure. The port was left to die a natural death, roads were a nightmare, sewers were choked, phones seldom worked, hospitals and factories had no electricity for hours.

Even then, Calcutta never meant trouble and Mother Teresa, at least not for us. There was more passion in the air than blood in the streets. The rhetoric of austerity, the tetchy intolerance of trivia, the moralist suspicion of money, and the cultural snobbery with which one associates the Calcutta psyche now look like hypocritical alibis for economic failure. But that failure taught Calcutta to make bricks without straw. Universities bred world-class scholars in dingy labs and unlit libraries. Literature was desperately bold in a city without professional authors. Amateur theatre groups produced the finest classics of Indian theatre in mouldering playhouses and the studios in Tollygunge shot amazing films on rationed raw stock with the shoddiest of equipment. My father used to camp through the night outside packed marquees to catch strains of the classical concerts inside. I have seen demure women in saris climb trees to steal a glimpse of the open-air stage on the birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore. In a sense, this was predictable. The flawed promise of colonial modernity had schooled Calcutta into configuring a nation its people were denied: the city had then learned to invent nation as cultural idea. When Calcutta lost its grip on the levers of the national economy, it fell back on this legacy of material self-denial and cultural creativity. Political action and cultural vanguardism in the 1960s and 1970s were the perverse response of the city robbed of economic agency. The Communists — not the Maoist fringe but those into Parliamentary politics — consolidated that process into political dividends; they cannot be said to have created it.

The peculiar conditions of urban growth in Calcutta, as also the paucity of civic infrastructure, gave a festive openness to the city's culture and politics. Life, disease, and death have always been more visible in Calcutta than in any other city of comparable size and importance. Western visitors often fail to make sense of this visibility, attributing it to poverty and homelessness. People who live on pavements are not the only ones who live out their private lives in the open, nor are they necessarily homeless or jobless. Those with jobs and homes may be sleeping rough, washing themselves or their clothes at the roadside waterspouts. Vendors of street food cook and clean on the streets. Drivers and rickshaw pullers spend nights on vehicles parked on the road, and perfectly respectable men think nothing of relieving themselves behind idle lorries. Children play cricket on the road; shirtless elders chat sitting on the front deck of their houses. Death is a visible event. Even a few years back, most corpses of Hindus were carried on the shoulders of men who chanted God's name in chorus like jubilant cheerleaders, and cremation workers celebrated death in the family by taking the hearse out in a procession led by happy drummers. Wedding processions can be boisterous, with drums and crackers shaking up the neighbourhood. In old-fashioned Punjabi and Bihari weddings, bystanders gather to catch a glimpse of the turbaned groom before the bride has set eyes on him.

White Town and its privileged enclaves were built on the principle of exclusion: exclusion of the troublesome native, of the chaos, noise, and filth that marked the life of the imperfectly urbanized workforce. Black Town treated urban space as an inclusive arena, a space that merged the civic with the intimate. The resultant attitude to public space has spread to more genteel sections of civil society in many Indian cities. In Calcutta, the moral regimen of the family blended seamlessly into community surveillance. The elders of the neighbourhood would come down heavily on a young man trying out a cigarette or chatting up a girl, and more often than not his parents would approve. The delinquent could count on the same officious guardians to help out with the catering at his wedding, to arrange for an ambulance when his parents were ill, or carry them on their shoulders when they were dead.

Calcutta's cultural life will appear puzzling unless one understands this rare phenomenon of the urban commons. Hawkers occupy the pavements; cots for the dead are sold outside hospital gates, and bookstalls block one's view of the university campus on College Street; migrant workers reproduce villages in miniature under flyovers; mud huts are built with the earth shovelled up from construction sites. The city is a daze of incredible structures during festivals — usually made of plywood and bamboo and cloth — that simulate old palaces and temples or even the Eiffel Tower and the Library of Congress. On certain days, such as Holi and Muharram, traffic is suspended and the roads are taken over by ceremonial processions. Every occasion spawns a fair. The book fair draws about 800 000 people, and it was amusing to hear a clueless Jacques Derrida lament the demise of the book while inaugurating it a few years back. In the winter months, there are literary fairs, art fairs, music fairs, culture fairs, food fairs, trade fairs, garment fairs, leather fairs, tourism fairs, technology fairs. There is no permanent fairground, the sprawling maidan being the usual location for these carnivals. Every inch of civic space — roads, parks, gardens — is makeshift space, just as every inch of private space is communal space. The block of flats where I live is lit up during Durga Puja by people I vaguely know. The entrance to the house on these days is crowded with late-night revellers, hawkers, and beggars; the drummers sleep on the stairs before being asked.

The left could in the past mobilize the displaced — refugees, squatters, illegal tenants, hawkers, the homeless — with spectacular success partly because of this attitude to public space. Infringement of civic laws bred an incongruous claim to legitimacy. Forcible occupation of private property or public roads and illegal electrical connections were ways in which the more recent variants of Black Town would resist exclusion. The undivided Communist Party had used the conditions without much fuss. They would sell books by Lenin and Che Guevara at a discount outside the venues of religious festivals. They also used to organize a cultural festival in the cricket stadium at the Eden Gardens. At one such event, I had my first experience of a film by Satyajit Ray. I was eight years old. Bored by the literary seminars and the highbrow plays elsewhere in the stadium, I sat on the grass scorched by the spikes of dreaded fast bowlers, while *Aparajito (The Unvanquished)*, the sublime chronicle of our modernist moment, unfolded on a crumpled screen raised on bamboo stilts. The show was free, but such pleasures came at a price. Processions and meetings still paralyze life on weekdays. Election campaigns are like violent festivals, and no one asks your permission before painting slogans on your walls. If you are marked out by fate for such things, you might just lose your garage to the election agents.

The underground railway in the 1980s and satellite television in the 1990s were early signals of the recent changes. The metro joined the north of the city to the south in what was more than a symbolic link. Outsiders wonder why the same citizens, who do not worry too much about garbage and traffic rules, change their habits when they climb down to the metro stations. Confronted with a space outside social locations, a city without skies, they behave like docile tourists, queuing up behind the barriers and anxiously searching for litter bins. Supermarkets today cause a similar disorientation. Gone are the familiar demarcations — Hindu butchers selling goat meat in sections where beef stalls had no entry; Muslims taking up stalls of dry fruits, vermicelli, and eggs at a distance; the Chinese selling pork and bacon from allotted sheds beyond the market precincts. The divisions are now subtler, invisible, driven by hardnosed commercial sense. Satellite television had a different kind of levelling effect. Bengalis now watch pretty much the same programmes that Biharis and Punjabis do. Earnest housewives watch American soaps, and no one climbs trees to watch a Tagore opera.

Now that the city has to adjust to the global market, the Communists find themselves saddled with the ironic task of imposing the orderly claims of civil society against the carnival of the fringe. The old industrial map has changed with the dismantling of the protectionist economy. The premises of defunct factories are being handed over to developers who build condominiums, malls, and multiplexes. The patriarchal communitarianism of the neighbourhood has no place in these new enclaves. The fishermen in the eastern suburbs have moved out, with developers buying up every available piece of land flanking the Eastern Bypass. Derelict warehouses along the river may be soon converted into Singapore-style restaurants. The High Court has banned political processions and meetings on weekdays; crackers and microphones are illegal; the Election Commission has outlawed political graffiti. Communists now plead with their own trade unions to ignore the workforce in information technology so that American clients are not upset. The government has tried, with fitful success, to evict squatters and hawkers. The court and the army have ordered that messy fairs be moved out of the maidan. The primary task of the civic authorities now seems to be restricting access to public space and carefully licensing its use. The maidan itself is being fenced off, and one has to pay a fee to walk in the gardens of the Victoria Memorial.

The culture of new Calcutta is struggling to find alternative room for the carnival and the forum. If it fails — and all signs say it will — the city will be the last to capitulate to the "liberal" logic underlying the empire. It was the same empire that had given birth to Calcutta, and to the cosmopolitan promise it was powerless to keep.

Published 2007-05-25
Original in English
Contribution by Edinburgh Review
First published in *Edinburgh Review* 119 (2007)
© Swapan Chakraborty/Edinburgh Review
© Eurozine