

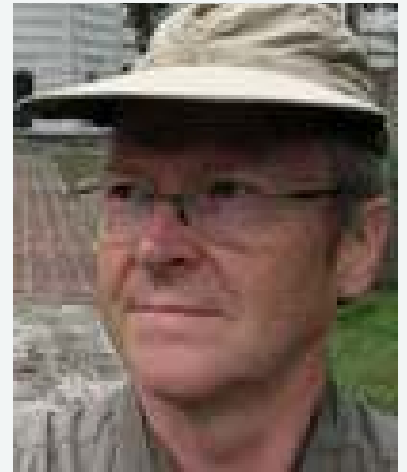


Many foreigners have visited Calcutta (now Kolkata) over the centuries. Mostly merchants and Company servants initially, they were soon followed by administrators, travellers, artists, chroniclers and others. Only a few among them ventured beyond the White Town in which the Europeans had settled.

Brian Paul Bach, writer, artist, film maker and traveller, who visited Calcutta, which he refers to as the 'Star of the East', on numerous occasions since the early 1980s, on the contrary, explored the entire city and its suburbs: its avenues, streets and lanes visiting and revisiting familiar sites to examine them in greater detail than perhaps ever before.

His untiring efforts led to the magnum opus *Calcutta's Edifice: The Buildings of a Great City* (Rupa, New Delhi, 2006) allowing, in the words of Brian, these buildings 'to speak for themselves'. He also has several other books to his credit.

We are happy to reproduce an article by Brian on the city, which he found to be 'a cohesive unit with a style all its own and a soul intact'. We also carry a tribute from Brian to Professor Nisith Ranjan Ray, founder of our Society, in the columns of *Kolkata On Wheels* (March 2021) of which he is a regular contributor on various aspects of the city's heritage.



An Essay for the Calcutta Preservation Society

Calcutta : A Collective Creation

BRIAN PAUL BACH



This past summer, 1992, I had the pleasure of spending more than a month in Calcutta. It was my fourth visit in ten years, and in all ways, the best to date. This time, I had a sustained period in which to concentrate on Calcutta and only Calcutta-as a collective entity. With no portfolio but my own, I have approached Calcutta directly from America on three of these visits, with only the environment of international airlines to provide any cultural continuity. However, the first time I visited Calcutta was after extensive travels elsewhere in the Subcontinent. I think I felt more so-called 'culture shock' then- visiting Calcutta after the rest of India - than arriving cold from the West. There is India and there is Calcutta.

My intention has never been to put the great Bengali metropolis under a microscope, as a representative laboratory of so-called 'Third World' extremes.¹ I have never wished to extract its tinctures for academic distillation, to be consumed as an esoteric liqueur amongst ivory tower pedagogues. Rather, it is to witness the reality of Calcutta, to partake in its *darshan* and to absorb its erratically publicised characteristics, as



they *are*, and as a whole. I can't get around the fact-nor do I want to- that absorption of the city *as it is* - is the overarching incentive in my Calcuttan attraction. I stress the term 'as it is' because Calcutta, more than any other place in the Subcontinent, is usually interpreted and publicized *as it isn't*.

'Calcuttafication' is a term I coined in order to concisely-and it is hoped, not cryptically-describe the unique process of a locality 'becoming Calcuttan', as it were. The process by which all the ingredients, influences, and minds come together and form a particular but collective creation, whether by chance or by design. Perhaps it is a term which can only be applied to Calcutta itself, as nowhere else can it be compared to Calcutta in a holistic sense.

The prime catalyst in Calcuttafication is the populace itself, for they are the mind and hands which have made the city what it is. Their creation-the physical city-is the evident fabric of their presence. The whole is set in a location where the primal effects of geography and climate naturally dictate the city's basic characteristics. Human vision, human creation, and natural environment : such is the elemental breakdown of any community in the world. Of these three elements, human vision always produces, as its chief manifestation, architecture. Despite its ability to impress upon the mind, the urban environment of buildings and streets is usually the first part of our physicality which we are likely to take for granted. Calcutta's physicality, due to its peculiar participatory demands, is perhaps less likely to go unnoticed than other places in the world, but for various reasons, such as crowding, traffic, and countless other distractions, general perception of the city's architecture tends to be filed in regions which are not foremost in the average mind.

The architecture of Calcutta has certainly been taken for granted. It is not so much apathy as it is people's collective preoccupation with their own individual affairs. People rarely have the time or inclination to foster a heightened awareness about their environment if that environment is meeting their basic needs. Like the planet on which we live, we have forgotten the importance of our stewardship over our physical environment, both natural and man-made. This has led to misuse of resources and negligence of quality physicalities. Included in this category are architectural heritages. This attitude, usually a negative influence, has been in many instances a disguised blessing. In this way, a sort of passive preservation has occurred in the form of benign neglect. Such is the case, at least in part, of Calcutta.

Every time I approach Calcutta from either the West or from elsewhere in India, there is no doubt that once the border of the Calcutta Improvement Trust has been crossed, a different sort of environment will be surrounding me for the length of my stay. Different, despite its kinship to other Subcontinental locales; despite its possession of characteristics found in other cities in the world. Different because this is the city from whence Calcuttafication springs. Within these greater boundaries, one has the right to say, "That building is Calcuttafied"; "This person is Calcuttafied"; "The river is Calcuttafied", and so on.

Like London, Calcutta is a city where it is extremely satisfying to simply wander about and let oneself be completely absorbed with the offerings encountered. Unlike London though, Calcutta (for the most part) is not so ancient. But, it is very much more intact. Granted, many changes have been effected in Calcutta. Modernization schemes, buildings razed or ruined by alteration, decay and neglect. But Calcutta on the whole is still a cohesive unit, with a style all its own, and a soul still intact. These are all reasons for my attraction to this great city.

With this in mind, I embarked on a project to document many of Calcutta's buildings - not in a definitive way-but through a common visitor's discovery of an underpublicized world of much splendour and fascination. Samaren Roy, P. T. Nair, Jogindar Singh, and many other dedicatees to this city, in many walks of life, showed me 'their' Calcuttas. The Society for Preservation, Calcutta also invited me to join them in an impromptu meeting, and I was certainly honoured to meet Prof. Nisith Ranjan Ray for a chat in his office.

'Do you wish to know the face of Calcutta, or the mind of Calcutta?' Prof. Ray asked me penetratingly. He seemed a bit let down when I indicated the former, but at that early stage I did not consider myself capable or worthy to tackle such an ambitious and intriguing goal. While I still feel this to be true, I think that knowing the face a little more has elucidated some of the mind. Confident of its own capabilities-and certainly proud - Calcutta is nonetheless a trifle chary in revealing its inner nature. Life experience, though, has taught me to expect that the longer the period of introduction to a given

(1)The mandate of 'world' rankings in a numerical sense increasingly strikes me, as the 1990s progress, as nonsense. The blurring of international power politics has caused such a shift so that the resulting effects have yet to find a proper identity.



personality, the deeper the friendship will be. Deep is the face and mind of Calcutta. At times it seemed to me that he who uttered such a challenge, Prof. Ray himself, might represent both the face and the mind of Calcutta. Elderly yet vigorous, unpretentious yet intellectual, somewhat reserved yet deeply caring....

One of my most enjoyable evenings was in the welcoming company of a few of the Preservation Society's members. We gathered in the courtyard of the great Law mansion, with Miss Law herself graciously hosting our meeting. Twilight fell, lamps were lighted. The few topics we were able to touch upon that night excited me, and impressed me with the fact that one could easily make a career out of the study of Calcutta's preservation. The Society's interest and efforts in this diverse subject struck me as laudable. My own input to the Society was of course minimal, but I considered myself a student rather than a contributor, and I was able to learn much.

With the aid of the many who helped me, a few good maps, and a bit of knowledge from books, I moved about and around the city for exactly a month. I revisited familiar sites, and was able to explore them in more detail. The majority of discoveries though, were all new to me. I was also able to sense the energy in the city and estimate a few thought patterns, a few trends. It seems to me that even though many problems in the city are increasing, from my viewpoint as an occasional visitor, there is a new vitality in the city. Perhaps it was the shot in the arm given by the Tercentenary. Perhaps the city is reinventing itself. Perhaps I am perceiving what has always been the case here : a vast, stimulating (and stimulated) community, in which the diversity of the mind and the full spectrum of the human experience enjoin and react, mix and act, all simultaneously. In short, now more than ever is Calcutta a great city: because it thinks and it acts. Whatever it might be, this new vitality only emboldens my feelings about Calcuttification and what a unique world is the city's populace, culture and physical environment. Calcuttification has allowed for a heterogeneous group of people to join with the Bengalis and form a melting pot almost as diverse as New York's. In its creation, the architectural fabric became just as variegated. The British designed many key points of interest in the city, but Calcuttians did the actual building, and in the process of their technique and the additive ascendancy of years and weather, all Calcutta's buildings communicate not so much colonialism as Calcuttification. Calcutta has always been an



Prof. Ray and Ms. Lakshmi Law at her residence.

International city² as far as its conception and contributors are concerned, but *as it is*, it is wholly Calcuttan.

Calcuttification in climatic sense can be seen in other cities in the region. Both Rangoon and Bangkok experience very similar weather patterns, and the effects they have on buildings, as Calcutta. Rangoon is a newer version of Calcutta : a colonial port city of great importance sprung from an ancient religious centre. Yet, Rangoon is now so run down that soon it will be but a picturesque ruin. Many fine buildings are probably in structural danger. Bad government and apathy have conspired to ruin a fine city. Bangkok, for all its prosperity, has gone towards the other extreme. Overdevelopment on a sterile scale, too much growth too fast, too much traffic, and pollution of all kinds, have conspired to ruin a great city. Regarding the status of its architectural heritage, Calcutta lies squarely in between. Some erosion exists, as does some development, but in these two realms, nothing so extreme. Calcutta, then, is poised to be reborn-as itself. Rejuvenation could happen without the horrible expense and error of mass redevelopment. Preservation is possible without a damaging sacrifice to modernization. Among big, big cities with big, big problems, Calcutta just might be in one of the fundamentally least-volatile positions.

(2) Contributions to American cities are often international in their origins; e.g., many of New York's bridges, as well as the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco were designed by Swiss engineers. The World Trade Center in Manhattan had a Japanese architect. The highrise principles employed in the world's tallest building in Chicago came from the mind of an Indian engineer. The master plan of Washington DC was laid out by a Frenchman.



Private firms have been encouraged to restore Calcutta, if not in toto, then at least in bits and pieces. If the public sector lacks the means, the will and/or the ability to take initiative in improving the architectural heritage, then expectations must shift to the private sector. Tax incentives should be made a wholesale policy for restoration of worthy sites. The incentive also lies in prestige, for non-Calcuttan enterprises would be much more apt to invest in Calcutta if they knew that Calcutta cared more about its heritage. In America, Chicago enjoys great prestige as a business city because it fosters not only progressive architecture, but it is very proud of its architectural heritage, even if it extends only about a hundred years back. And, it is to be remembered most, every big American city has any number of problems of a monumental nature. The 'Adopt A-Tomb' scheme in Calcutta's Park Street Cemetery has been a great success so far, a small but significant step in the right direction. A larger example was Britannia's 'adoption' of the Ochterlony Monument/Shahed Minar. From all over the Maidan people see that restoration job. It accounts for something.

On the human level, Calcutta gets a lot of criticism for the living conditions of its lower classes. It seems to me, as I have already said, that with persistent restoration of physical Calcutta, so will the living conditions of the people be restored to a more liveable level. Of course, this is not something that merely 'happens' with preservation of important historical sites. It is where the politics of a large number of people living in close proximity with each other becomes extremely complex, challenging and even threatening. But again, it seems as if Calcutta is ahead in this respect. The generally tolerant nature of Calcutta's people puts them in better standing to work together towards goals than in many other Indian cities (the mysteries of Calcuttification in play again?), and if their intelligence can be tapped, and a greater level of citizen involvement in operation of the city can be attained, then it would seem that Calcutta could think and act as a unit instead of as factions. Calcuttans love their city, and I do not think they want to see it ruined.

Platitudinous as it sounds, if the city wants to remain a viable entity in future, its growth will have to level off, if only to save the infrastructure from being so overtaxed as to cause its breakdown. At that point, restoration /preservation becomes meaningless— an expendable luxury as the pressures of sheer survival take the fore. If conditions in Calcutta's greater hinterland are made so that the incentive will be for the inhabitants to remain in the country, the improvement of Calcutta's physicality will be entirely possible. Such improvement will enhance the city's chances at quick rejuvenation.

I cannot help but be excited by the possibilities in restoring Calcutta, but I do not have the temerity of proposing a scheme here. Nor can I recite all of the city's problems and prognosticate over solutions. I do not dwell in an idealistic mist when it comes to Calcutta. I realize the scope of the city's challenges, yet I try to concentrate on its assets. Perhaps that is why I am at peace in accepting the city *as it is*—a concept I do not mind mentioning again.

I explored most quarters of the town, from Dakshineswar to Garden Reach, and from Sibpur to Dhapa, and not only was I impressed at the architectural findings, both well-known and obscure, but I was regularly impressed and pleased at the reception the inhabitants gave me. Everywhere I went in the city, the story was the same: I was welcomed. From the village-like attitudes of attracting attention in the bylanes of Kumartuli or Shyambazar, to the more focussed attentions of those who operate the Nimtola Burning Ghat (who welcomed me with open arms, and with a far more refreshing attitude than their associates at the Burning Ghat in Varanasi), I was regarded not with suspicion but with acceptance. The same could be applied to any other part of town. Sometimes I was regarded, sometimes I was ignored.

There were of course significant points to criticise, though. The absurd ban on photography on Howrah Bridge was a big disappointment; the 'plainclothes' watchdog types who drifted about and growled, smacked of mock spy scenarios. Indeed, the ban on photography in various places seemed the legacy of a more paranoid era, outdated now, as any 'spy' could surely get all the information they needed in much more subtle ways than aiming a camera in broad daylight!

Further down Strand Road, I was happily enveloped in the workaday world of the ghat and the godown, with a thousand head-loaded porters manually



unloading barges and loading lorries; where the bona fide bustle of a great port was seen in full spate, and I could wander as an urchin — in total anonymity.

For it is what I call the 'Amitabh Syndrome' — that condition in which one is regarded in a crowd as something special, and one attracts all the attention of a movie star, whether one is in the mood for it or not — that tended to be endowed upon me in many Calcutta locales. But it was usually delivered with a street-smartness, which very much differed from that offered up in, say, a small town in Uttar Pradesh. Calcuttification in play again—or at least big city sophistication.

Only once, at the little-visited Raja Bhukailash Garh temple-cum-mansion complex near Kidderpore, did I feel that the great zeal of the sizeable crowd that pressed in round me had the potential of a *gherao* rather than the mass *adda* I had come to expect from friendly Calcuttan neighbourhoods. If I wasn't exactly in the mood to encounter such an active crowd, I soon realized that their animation and enthusiasm had all the power and creativity of an accomplished troupe of street theatre performers. As a past film director, playwright and sometime actor myself, I found it easy to tap into their energy. Soon we were all making competitive faces at each other, to see how funny our distorted masks could get, uttering nonsense lines from absurdist plays, and generally clowning around. The magnificent buildings, temples, kiosks and tank of the Raja Bhukailash Garh seemed a splendid stage set augmented by the distant campanile-like stacks of the Kidderpore chimneys, and the lowering clouds of a pre-monsoon sky. Then, as I found to be the case with most groups who pressed the Amitabh role upon me, after the novelty of my presence had been established, the kids quickly returned to their previous activities. My experiences with the Amitabh Syndrome have not been fuellings for my ego so much as they have stoked the warmth I find in my heart. Westerners would be shocked to hear that there is so much consistent merriment in most parts of Calcutta, and that the children and young people, as well as the everyday people who mingle with them, have such a fine treasury of humour and goodwill from which to draw upon.

I recently saw the film *City of Joy* on video. There are surely two schools of thought on this film and its book : those who like them and those who do not. I have to find myself somewhere in between, though. While it was a focussed and sincere attempt to portray energetic compassion and challenging accomplishments in a particular slum, Calcutta as an entity seemed irrelevant.

To the viewer, the cliché of Calcutta being one huge slum was certainly reinforced. So was the cliché of a Westerner 'saving the day,' as it were. Howrah Bridge was the only real Calcuttan image to be displayed. It is fitting that the dispossessed of Calcutta should have a time in the limelight, but verily, *City of Joy* is nowhere near being *the* film on Calcutta. By the same token, how could New York or Paris be summed up by just one film each? Westerners, even with the best of intentions, often strive to make consummate statements about terrain they discover, even if that terrain has been a thinking entity for centuries. Please understand that we Westerners can be as children escaped from a nursery when undiscovered country envelopes us. This mindset usually results in a mixture of thoughts and reactions. Just like the *City of Joy* film. No real extremes, just a multifaceted mixture of sensations and ideas, some correct, some incorrect — like life itself.



In the Calcuttan scheme of things, Mr Lapierre's book and film have affected me not a bit. He makes a profound humanist statement of compassion, but the setting just happens to be Calcutta. To me, he is not saying much about Calcutta as a city. As much as I love Tagore or Satyajit Ray, I cannot say that they have influenced my thoughts about Calcutta, either. For my own part, I cannot aspire to any influential status of any degree of maturity when it comes to Calcutta. This, despite the fact that I am often pressured by the Amitabh Syndrome. Rather, as, I said above, I choose to absorb Calcutta. When I am there, I am a vessel to be filled, and the city never lets me down in entering my very being and providing a neverending stream of stimuli, images and memories. That is my imperative : to absorb Calcutta *as it is*. I join those who maintain that the Calcuttan reality warts and all, forms one of the most amazing and life-



filled environments in the world, and the process, of Calcuttification makes it all possible.

I can honestly say, if a Calcuttan were to come to my home town, and if it was known that he was studying the town as it was, with no portfolio and with no special affectation, then he would be made just as welcome as I have felt myself made here in Calcutta. Small towns in America have a much stronger sense of community than do American cities. However, in Calcutta, the small town attitude flourishes, so that India's largest city still maintains the charm and values of a community many times smaller. If there is a plea that I would make to Calcutta, it is : hold on to this sane set of values! Do not let the so-called developers change Calcutta in the name of

'improvement.' They will sacrifice the city's true needs in the name of their own advancement. Do not replace your valuable architectural heritage. Instead, revitalize it. If this is done, Calcutta will still have a soul to identify with, and not an anonymous husk in which to live out its days. With revitalization naturally comes an improvement in living standards for the people, which is what improvement should be all about. The best-preserved cities in the world are the most confident, the most imaginative, the most capable of improving themselves with their own ideas, in their own ways. Knowing Calcutta as I do, I should think it is primed to enact this role of confidence, after so many years as a euphemism for error.

NISITH RANJAN RAY

Professor of History, Champion of Heritage

Brian Paul Bach



Commemorative plaque at Bishop's College

In this, the second of my tributes to my three gurus in the realm of Calcutta Studies, I consider Professor Nisith Ranjan Ray, preeminent historian, educator, author, and trailblazer in recognising Calcutta's cultural and built heritage. After a stellar career teaching history in Academia and ten productive years as Curator of the Victoria Memorial Hall, Prof. Ray became head of the Institute of Historical Studies. Only later did I discover his distinguished resume. Curating the VM - what an awesomely heady notion to even contemplate! Learning of my pursuits in Calcuttan

matters, a friend's advice was clear: 'You must confer with Professor N.R. Ray!' The Institute Prof. Ray directed was down Shakespeare Sarani a ways (near Loudon St.). The May day of 1992 was very hot, but in my perambulations, its intensity always seemed to somehow heighten the significance of everything in the city. His desk was in the thick of things rather than sequestered, and piled with various works in progress. I certainly didn't want to take much of his time, but his cordiality was gentle and entirely without pretension. Still, at first look, anyone would know he was eminent in some way.

He started our session with a profound question. 'Do you wish to examine the face of Calcutta, or the mind of Calcutta?' His was a gravitas that carried with it a hearty and sincere hint that exceptional historical items of significance and intrigue awaited, though best approached with steady deliberation and factual clarity. The question he posed was unexpected, yet so stimulating, it caused me to answer with a concept I'd never thought of till now 'Maybe, by examining the face, I



The Town Hall – upper landing before restoration



The Town Hall – upper landing after restoration

can learn a little of the soul: He was here to help and suggest, not to critique, so he proceeded with a digest of insights and facts he thought I should know. His rundown of important sites, their condition, usage and prospects was pretty thorough, and like a student absorbing high-quality information from a learned Prof, I was madly taking notes. Tea had been served some minutes before, and Prof. Ray halted his word-flow, then gestured to the teacup. 'Take a sip!' This was certainly an endearing courtesy, and I relaxed completely. As we proceeded, our exchanges were less in the teacher/student mode and more towards Q&A, followed by thoughts and opinions. Two associates came over and joined in. When introducing me, Prof. Ray quipped, 'We are hitting it off: Great stuff indeed! In this spirit, all my subsequent researches had a buoyancy to them. After all, Prof. Ray's entire tone was invitational, welcoming, non-judgmental. `Anything you need, give me a jingle: As I left with grateful thanks, I noticed that his associates had been waiting politely to confer with him on the business at hand. I think it was work concerning the huge `Dictionary of National Biography' project, which he was editing.

We conferred several more times, the last being on a pleasant evening in the great thakur dalan courtyard of Ms. Lakshmi Law's fine heritage house, along with several other persons of note. As founder of the Society for Preservation, Calcutta, Prof. Ray was

keen on any input regarding awareness, protection, and preserving the city's magnificent but under-known and increasingly vulnerable heritage. He had lent his name to delivering the Town Hall from impending demolition. This was only one of his heroic efforts, and he would have been deeply gratified by its eventual success. He suggested I draw up some ideas for turning the Town Hall into a Museum. I did just that, and later integrated them into my 'Calcutta's Edifice' book, with Prof. Ray as one of the dedicatees. As the meeting broke up, Prof. Ray reached out to shake my hand. It was one of the lengthiest but most heartfelt handshakes I've ever experienced. I was quite moved. To this day, I'm sorry that I let go first, and for what reason? But you know, I got the feeling that he might've thought, 'This fellow's got a lot to do. But come to think of it, so do I: The great concept of Calcutta, both its face and its soul, encompasses, unites, and stimulates like nowhere else. We had bonded accordingly. While we are so often distracted by sensationalism today, there yet remain, reliably abiding, and more essential than ever, those of greatness who, through personal contact and documentation merit high praise for their achievements and their character. They continue to teach — and inspire. Professor Nisith Ranjan Ray is one such. A chela thus salutes his guru, with humble thanks. [Additional material concerning Prof. Ray (1910-94) graciously provided by his son, my friend Abhik Ray.] Stay curious, have fun, and be sure to come when Calcutta calls!