



Calcutta: Don't write its obituary, its pulse is still strong

Since the 1690's, Charnok's Calcutta has been confronted with many a criticism. Alexander Hamilton in the 18th Century termed Calcutta a 'Grave Yard'. Well it was not the ultimate of opinions; in this century too, Calcutta has been called a 'Dying City', arousing vehement protests still seen on those wide walls where graffiti artists have their say. Well, fuelling no controversy, my recent visit was a venture to sense the pulse of Calcutta.

Chaotic roads, filthy narrow lanes, garbage ornamented roadsides, dangerous pit-falls, vultures, and at night the mighty mosquitoes reign over the city, but the thriving life of Calcuttans recognises the sovereignty of these hazards. Since colonial days migrants flocked in, and the process is still continuing today with telling effect on municipalities and other law keeping bodies. People reel under deeprooted poverty and struggle for survival. There are numerous unknown saints who nurse Calcutta's struggling populace and show them how to survive life's miseries.

The density of Calcutta's 104 sq. kms., population is 31,700 habitants per sq. km., a ratio much higher than other metropolis of the world like Paris, which has around 25,000 people per sq. km.

Thirty per cent of the total populace reside in slums. These widespread slums (*bastis*) have sprung-up because of the Bangladesh refugees and migrants from neighbouring states who languish in dingy sheds waiting for slow death. To name some, Panchanan Tola, Gobar Danga, Gobindo Pur

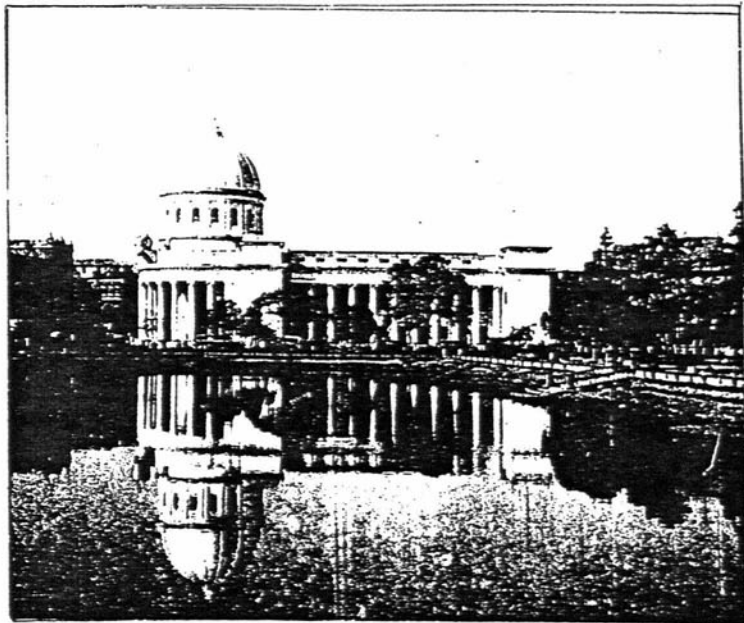
are some poverty-stricken places manned by Mastans with unwritten laws of vice rather than virtue. They are rag collectors, or active in many anti-social activities from black marketing to smuggling.

A YOUNG CITY

It is of factual interest that Calcutta's youth is 30% of its population, in the age group of

above Rs. 2000. 10 lakh people still reel under unemployment (as per data available)—a figure which cannot be ignored.

Sectorwise employment shows 54 per cent or 14 lakh people engaged in the Tertiary Sector i.e. small business, hawkers etc., 40 per cent in the Secondary Sector and the remaining six per cent are engaged in the Primary Sector.



15 to 30, having their say in the day-to-day life of Calcutta. Before knowing or measuring a city's pulse it is important to look at its income level. About 30% of the population's family income is a meagre 300 rupees per month. But 60 per cent of the population earn around Rs. 700/- per month. Only 3 per cent have monthly earnings

The ever-increasing population of Calcutta is becoming a grave threat to healthy life. As estimated, Greater Calcutta's population will reach One Crore Forty Seven Lakhs by the 21st century. The problem is already surfacing on the footpaths of Calcutta as roads become unruly and buses over crowded.

As in any metropolis, the



theory of labour migrants to the urban zone is also true of Calcutta and around 66,000 pavement dwellers whose roof is the sky have come to stay in Calcutta for mainly socio-economic reasons. These shelterless people are an unorganised work-force engaged in labour jobs, rickshaw pulling etc. Out of the total pavement dwellers, 20,000 are from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Down the lane interviews with some cart pullers reveal that they who toil the whole day for survival, live in an obsolete room taken on rent in one 19th century dilapidated building. This is their kitchen, their beds nothing but their carts parked on pavements. But in the rainy season all these cart pullers flock to their room and sit and sing *Ram Dhun* the whole night. Traditional Dholak and chorus make these nights lively and they pump-up their cultural mood amidst natural odds.

PAPER SUGGESTIONS

To uproot these pavement dwellers is of primary concern to the Calcutta Corporation. To clear the pavements and eject the dwellers are regular happenings. The stay on evictions granted by the Supreme Court a few months ago came to an end after October 31, 1985, strengthening the hands of the law as they can now be inhumanly picked up like their bundles of baggage and thrown out of the city. Is it logic that towns lead villages, often voiced in the October Revolution in 1917? Police authorities who exercise the power opined it was not a new happening. Well, benevolent voices are heard and paper suggestions for night shelters do figure; it is to be seen who is to be ultimately housed in the proposed night-shelters and how.

Much is talked about the

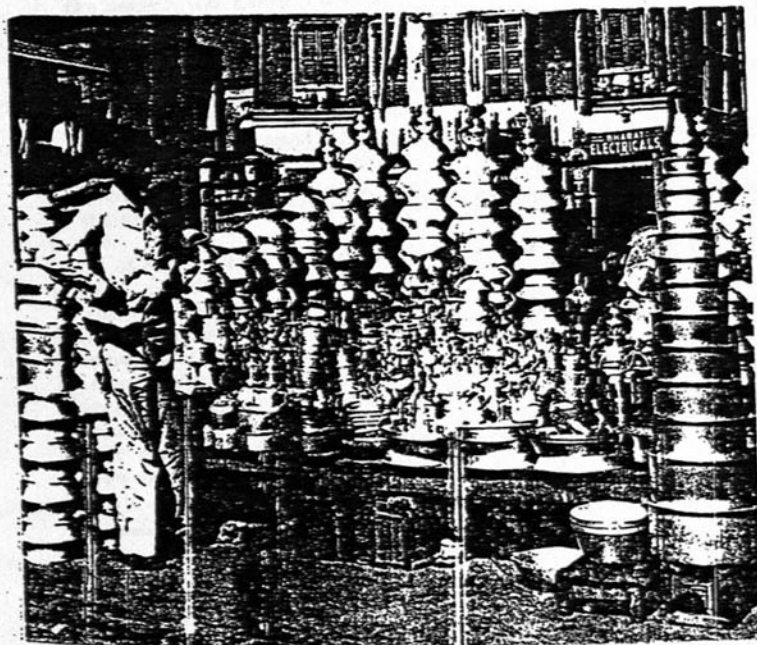
poverty of slum-dwellers but there is a tendency to over-look the finer angles of their life which peep out of those dirty rags and torn beds—a cultural outlet, a source of entertainment in the lives of these have-nots. Amazing scenes at the dawn of every dusk—the melody of drums just opposite Tata Centre with the womenfolk's rhythmic stepping and tinkling, giving a fresh infusion of life. In the Maidan, folk songs are heard where reminiscence keeps its date with the present, where Rajput glory is sung more spiritedly than in its native soil, with ardent listeners hovering around. Where else can one find such national integration?

Calcutta—a city of rallies, protests and boycotts is still today a memory of British days. The mode and activity, whether in protest against injustice or against torture or for the wage hike, is still a prevailing practice. Because Calcuttans know the spirit of voicing injustices and have the guts to speak out. They know how to resist but their actions are not negative. Well, they hold rallies to ask people to donate blood or clean the city, but those rallies do not limit themselves to vocal action; they actually donate blood. They remove obscene posters from walls, but paint them, not black but with artistic talent show their expertise and those walls become talent-on-show. Where else are rallies held to undo a wrong and induce people to come forward and donate blood?

VOX POPULI IS VOCAL

Much above the ethnic life and culture a network of associations from social to political bindings rule the city of Calcutta. Whether it is the University Coffee shop or 'thecks' in small tea shops, everybody exercises his or her freedom of speech and

I am Lord of all, I survey





voices a wide range of opinions from local to international problems. Everyone wants a better tomorrow, but misses no opportunity to commemorate the past or enjoy football matches. It is said to be in their blood, and nothing thrills them more than a football match!

Poetry in this century is facing a grave threat of extinction, but not in Calcutta. Thousands of Recitation Associations thrive. Almost every locality has reciters, coached by veterans, and ardent students follow this with perseverance. Many competitions are held with a superb clash of spirit and culture. Above all there is an Academy of Recitation headed by the famous Niladrishkar Bosu. This eight year old Forum is a fitting tribute to the movement of Recitation—a forum for discussions too. In a discourse one participant once asked the veteran poet Nirendra Nath Chakraborty whether the soul of the Poet and Poetry is the same? The answer, 'it should be! If it does not it should not be written.' Recitation, the courier of the Poet's feelings which goes without dramatising it and transmits it, as it is to the masses, is not a recitation worth the name. To name a few reciters one can recall Tagore, Sudhindra Nath Datta, Vishnu Dey or Jeevananda Das etc. When these reciters had had their say one could not conclude whether it was bad or good, one liked it just as it was. Today there is abundant talent yet to come into the limelight.

A rag collector collects charcoal to express himself on the roads. Uneven roads with falls and humps in Calcutta do not distract anyone but when a young boy draws a mythological figure—then only people stumble at these road canvases. And their silent look at the artist has deeprooted depression within, going back to their



Chaos amidst splendour

destination with heavy hearts perhaps as they cannot do anything for the betterment of these roadside artists!

Another place I stumbled on was the Indian Museum. A mammoth building accommodating statues of human beings of all shapes and sizes in comfortable proximity with prehistoric mammals. These silent statues are still a source of inspiration for today's artists—here is the place where art bridges history and finds its relevancy.

KUMHARS OF KUMARTULI

The ultimate in art is the work of the Kumhars of Kumartuli who are settled since the eighteenth century in the historic Sutanuti village of north Calcutta. An art which evolved from traditional rural trends soon found favour with the urban milieu. These Kumhars are not just the ordinary lot of Potters who shape out earthen objects from wheels, but model images with perfection, fulfilling the urban need and keeping pace with commercial trends. In the eighteenth century they were first employed by Raja Nabakrishna to model

an image of Goddess Durga. Their background gives us reason to believe that they are originally from Krishna Nagar, the renowned centre of dolls and images. Their iconographical canon is nothing but the hereditary teaching process which has come down from the family, which they modify and update according to the customer's demand.

Above all, the human crowds of Calcutta are humane. In time of need one is never alone amongst unknown faces. When a woman gets down from a crowded mini-bus, the conductor will tinkle the bell twice so the driver can know and take utmost care to control the bus. When I was rushing for a train at Sealdah Station—my purse slipped out of my pocket but I had not noticed it. After a few steps, a man tapped my shoulder to hand over my lost purse. I then realized there is still 'life' in this 'dying city'! A teenaged boy was selling guavas near the Secretariat. His slogan was 'Payara niye jann shostaye, aj pulish ghush khaiyae nee' (Take guavas cheap today, police have not taken bribe).

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