City of Dreadful Night: Death, Gold and Calcutta in the European Consciousness

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Abstract

When Kipling called Calcutta a death bringing, pestilential city, he was drawing upon rhetoric that had gained currency among the British inhabitants of Calcutta from its inception in 1699.Nor was the reputation undeserved. Obituary notices, epitaphs and grave inscriptions preserve ample evidence of the extraordinarily high rates of mortality among British arrivals to Calcutta. It was however also in this period, that the city was gaining its reputation as the most important commercial base in the East Indies for the British East India Company, and was becoming the preferred destination for impecunious Englishmen and women in search of fortune. The most important causes of death within the city and in its environs may be construed to have been caused by lack of immunity or tolerance of heat, humidity, accumulating garbage, lack of sanitation and combinations thereof. However, a parallel study into the behavioural patterns of British settlers within this time frame (1790-1820; the period of civic and demographic growth of 'white' Calcutta) reveal that the causes leading to death of British men and women can be directly related to denial rather than ignorance or inability to adapt to modes of conduct and consumption better suited to survival in a subtropical, low-lying, marshy and humid environment. This paper attempts to study the relationship between political and cultural anxiety within the British establishment, the constant rhetorical balancing act attempted in the European consciousness with Calcutta as the trope; between death and gold and how the infamous 'mythoid' surrounding the 'Black Hole' coalesced into a composite image, one which is also reflected in the British literature produced in this period and how this may indirectly have encouraged Calcutta, that most British among East India Company's territorial possessions to have earned the unenviable but deserved sobriquet of the city upon which 'death looked down'.

The city of Calcutta developed geographically, historically and culturally on tangential trajectories. To explain this somewhat puzzling statement, it is necessary to engage in a comparative discussion of the growth and development of three Indian cities: Calcutta, Bombay and Madras which owe their birth solely to the commercial and military exigencies of the British East India Company. That this institution, through a string of incidents in the eighteenth century almost singlehandedly changed the political landscape of what came later to be called the Indian nation and that the nascence of the aforementioned urban spaces contributed to the rapid rise of influence of the Company is too well documented to admit of doubt. However, the rhetoric and reasons advanced by the EIC for acquiring land and constructing fortification and for encouraging the growth of British and native urban settlements around them, in spite of rising British influence at the waning subsidiary Mughal courts of Delhi, Lucknow, Hyderabad and Murshidabad need to be explored. Such an investigation reveals anxieties about enculturation which served the EIC and the British Parliament as the basis for British racial imperial strategies in the subcontinent later on, in the nineteenth century.

Discussions about British urban establishment in the Indian subcontinent, must necessarily exclude the earliest trading station, namely the factory in Surat since this city already was an established commercial post under the Mughal administration in the seventeenth century whose port the English were permitted to trade from, by permission of the emperor Aurangzeb. It must be emphasized that English factors needed to be extremely circumspect while trading there because their actions were constantly monitored by Aurangzeb's agent at Surat and by powerful Portuguese merchants from Goa. Also, since the English EIC neither had sanction (as Portuguese traders did, from rulers at Lisbon) from the British Parliament nor the support of Company Directors in England in shopping for 'souls and spices' at this juncture, early English protestant settlers were not actuated by religious zeal to seek interference with local customs and governance (Roderigues). In short, English writ either judicial or cultural never ran in Surat. It was otherwise however with Madras, Bombay and Calcutta.

Madras is chronologically the earliest British fortified town. Francis Day, an EIC man negotiated the grant of a parcel of land in the village of Madraspatnam from the local ruler in 1639.Geographically it was a bizarre choice for a maritime trading company: there was no harbor and no shelter for anchored ships near the fort. It was apparently, according to a contemporary visitor 'the most incommodious place' he ever saw. (Alexander Hamilton 1: 364). Even in terms of urban settlement there were almost no facilities; no readily available potable water and very importantly, little harbor security which the English company desperately needed, as they were constantly harried by stronger counterparts in the spice trade of the Indian Ocean: the Dutch on the Coromandel and the Portuguese on the Malabar coasts. Indeed, the powerful Portuguese port of St Thome was only a few miles away. But in spite of the insalubrious conditions and vulnerable position, the fort St George (built at the cost of 3000 pounds) was a sound business investment and the city of Madras soon flourished and attracted as one historian puts it, 'all the paraphernalia of a settled and growing trade' (Kaey 194). Though it was not, like Calcutta, technically British territory, as the company was only a leaseholder of the land on which the fort stood, the lease agreement and subsequent negotiations for land

transactions are legally straightforward documents and the expansion in the case of Madras is for historians of urban development like Marshall, a better example than Bombay and Calcutta of 'expansion' as exemplified by commerce, migration and diffusion of English culture as opposed to 'imperial rule'.

In terms of absolute control, Bombay the last of the three major centers of British trade to come into being was the most secure. The English monarch Charles II received it as a part of the marriage settlement of his new queen the Portuguese princess Catherine of Braganza. Incidentally this was the first piece of freehold land that the British crown or company, acquired on the Indian subcontinent. The total area amounted to about twenty square miles of swampy, marshy land and tidal waterways. The climate was as difficult as at Madras but it was British land at last and there was a good, sheltered harbour (the existing Portuguese settlement was called 'Bom Bahia' or beautiful bay, later Anglicized to Bombay). The land was conditionally granted to the British so as to use it to for military defense against Maratha free traders and the VOC (Dutch East India Company) and as allies to the Portuguese on the Malabar Coast. The wily and poor English king was relieved to offload this burden onto the EIC on perpetual lease (of 10 pounds payable in gold per annum) and the English EIC was happy to own land on the west coast, the better to insulate trade activities from depredations of local enemies such as Mughal officials from Delhi, Gujarati merchants in Surat, Maratha free traders on sea and the mighty Portuguese maritime cartels at Goa. Despite appalling climate and high mortality, (the 'two monsoon' thumb-rule of English residence in Bombay was that any settler who survived a couple of monsoons in the city would not die of the climate thenceforth) the settlement flourished almost from the beginning and Bombay continued to attract settlers both European and Indian or of mixed origin through the nineteenth century.

Since the origins of fortification and urban development in Madras and Bombay are well recorded it is evident that as business or legal transactions these were relatively clean deals but the early documents for land lease for Calcutta are a different proposition. Nothing about the origin of Calcutta is free from controversy, indeed very few of the numerous leases and agreements over the land acquired for the construction of the fort were above question. One historian calls the birth of Calcutta in the eighteenth century 'a grubby business' and further, that of all the stories involving the development of Calcutta and the city's purported founder the Company employee Job Charnock, 'there are few that involve selflessness, heroism or even much decency' (Dalley 62). Considering topographic and climactic conditions the site was probably worse suited to the establishment of a European settlement than either Madras or Bombay. Rhoads Murphey, the geographer, while quoting Kipling on the establishment of the city, noted that his poetry was factually accurate:

> "Me the sea-captain loved, the river built,
> Wealth sought and kings adventured life to hold.
> Hail England! I am Asia, power on silt,
> Death in my hands, but gold!"

Founded in 1690 on a small natural levee thrown up by the Hooghly River, and set precariously on the edge of a deltaic swamp in a climate devastating to Europeans,

Calcutta brought gold and death to many as the first city established in Asia on the modern Western commercial/urban model (Murphey 241).

The comment contained in the last line of the quoted poem juxtaposes two concerns of early British settlers with regard to Calcutta. Though suitable as a position for the establishment of a river port and attendant fortress, the city was an insalubrious place for residence. Even before Murphey and other geographers in the twentieth century, the historians of the nineteenth never stopped commenting on the death bringing capacity of the city. Calcutta seemed to have induced in most commentators a horrified fascination as a place which from its inception through rise and prosperity became synonymous with pestilence, disease, filth, misery and early death. Busteed, a celebrated biographer of eighteenth century Calcutta emphasized the fact that to its early British residents, sojourn in this growing eastern city, was always tinged with uncertainty because death hovered close. The greatest cause for self-congratulation that any young employee of the Company could aspire to was that: "…with good management I am a match for the climate". This comment made by Phillip Francis one of the most colourful early English residents of the city to his friends in Calcutta finds an echo in letter after letter written to the editor and in editorial articles in Hickey's *Bengal Gazette, Calcutta Gazette and Calcutta Chronicle* some of the earliest periodicals to have been published in India. Calcutta was a means to a future, even perhaps one that was prosperous beyond expectation but the fortune had to be earned at a price. The prize was lucrative enough: in the words of a jubilant young man on life after retirement from the EIC, sentiments echoed by others in his position, "we shall still be young, my friend, with the means and powers of enjoyment" (Busteed 238). It is to be noted however that the well understood formula was that while the means were to be earned in Calcutta, the enjoyment was reserved for life back in England. As Victor Jaquemont an early French traveller and diarist remarked, Calcutta may have served as a beacon to the fortune hunting impecunious British hordes who descended on it, knowing well that the city was no better than an "undrained swamp, in the immediate vicinity of a malarious jungle, that the ditch surrounding it was, as it had been for nearly forty years previously, an open cloaca, and that the river banks were strewn with the dead bodies of men and animals" but they were also certain that fortune here could be speedily earned (Busteed 239). It was a calculated risk that many young Englishmen were willing to take in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

Kipling, nearly a hundred years after the city was born; in this indictment reinforces the horror inducing potential of Calcutta. The city in his imagination proliferates nightmarish horrors; a place where,

> 'the cholera, the cyclone and the crow
>
> come and go'

and adds that this circumstance can be attributed to ill planned urban expansion.

> Chance- directed, chance –erected, laid and built
>
> on the silt-
>
> Palace, byre, hovel-poverty and pride
>
> Side by side;
>
> and, above the packed and pestilential town,

Death looked down (Tale of Two Cities).

Writing in self-righteous glory of imperial high noon in the early twentieth century, the poet was referring to the tropes that had already made Calcutta, then the second city of the empire a byword in the western hemisphere. The anxiety condensed in these lines and had been held as true from the city's inception by British diaspora. Ironically, the wealth (and death) bringing alluvial silt and the tidal waterway up the Hooghly were reasons why, in spite both of high death rates enmity of the rulers both of Murshidabad and Dacca, the two most powerful Mughal subsidiaries of Bengal, the EIC encouraged it's servants to muddle their way to the disorganized erection of huddles of settlements and take up residence in it.

Calcutta was ill planned. 'Everyone built stragglingly where and how they pleased' a contemporary of Charnock reported of the early urban development of Calcutta (Kaey 166). P.J. Marshall compared early eighteenth century Calcutta to the towns that sprang up in the American Midwest at the height of the gold rush. But by the middle of the eighteenth century, the jerry built 'tents, huts and boats' at Charnock's site at the time of his death had transformed and the city reinvented itself on the same exaggerated lines that early reaction to this city always invoked. In the words of a newly recruited official,

> "It is a truth that from the western extremity of California to the eastern coast of Japan, there is not a spot where judgement, taste, decency and convenience are so grossly insulted in that scattered and confused chaos of houses, huts, sheds, streets, lanes, alleys, windings, gullies, sinks and tanks which jumbled into an undistinguished mass of filth and corruption, equally offensive to human sense and health, compose the Capital of the English Company's Government in India." (Mackintosh 265)

On the other hand, there is a contemporary counter narrative,

> "Approaching Calcutta, many gardens, newly laid out by the English, make their appearance, which have handsome dwelling houses, with an agreeable prospect towards the river. Calcutta, which is built on the left side on going down, about three quarters of an hour's walk along the banks of the river, make likewise a very pleasing appearance. Before it the ships lie at anchor, just as before Chandernagor, in great numbers. There is almost every day vessels which go to, and come from, every port of India, in motion here; which greatly enlivens the scene." (Stavorinus 1: 122-123)

The quotations above, which make contradictory claims, are both from respected independent sources. Yet they are almost contemporaneous and refer to the same few miles of urban sprawl. Also, in spite of an often persistent illusion, historians, architects and town planners have proved beyond doubt that white and native Calcutta in the early decades of the nineteenth century were not so uncompromisingly separated either demographically, judicially or structurally as is the popular assumption. This, if true might serve as an explanation for the contrasting perspectives. The city, in such a case must in its entirety have appeared as a paradox as polarized as the extremes of human condition that its name invoked in eighteenth and nineteenth century England. The conditions which framed British response to Calcutta from an early date are: fear of early death and ambition to earn a quick fortune; a place in short, either in a corner of the

English graveyard (later named South Park Street Cemetery) in Calcutta or feted a few years later as a newly returned *nabob* or *nabobina* in the drawing rooms of London. In between the two, life for Europeans especially the British in Calcutta was lived at a frenetic, extravagant pace. The cost of living in British Calcutta in the eighteenth century was high, higher in fact at contemporary rate of exchange than London. There seemed to have been an addiction for profligacy both in terms of money and consumption. The amount and kind of food and beverage consumed at every meal, the number of entertainments given every day all year, the size of dwelling and style of establishment that seemed to have been expected even of middle ranked Company servants testify to a lifestyle almost self destructively ruinous, summed by a historian as 'this curious hot-house of over-excited trading and underachieved personal lives' (Dalley 63). There also seemed to have been a policy on the part of the EIC from late in the eighteenth century onwards, of actively opposing any attempt at what writers like William Dalrymple have called transculturation or Indianisation of British settlers, usually male through interracial marriages to prevent 'miscegenation' (birth of mixed race individuals) but this is a later tendency, as it came into force in the nineteenth century under imperial administrators and was not seriously pursued as Company policy early on. The impulse to create a cultural space, however, as British as possible, importing the preoccupations of a country left behind lay behind the active pursuance of lifestyle that seemed calculated to decrease and pauperize northern constitutions and pockets already weakened by the climate and lifestyle in the Eastern capital of the burgeoning empire. Calcutta and its white population appears in retrospect to be active participants in the perpetuation of the myth that became the cultural leitmotif of the city in the celebration of which they confirm the place and the narrative of their own sojourn in it.

This argument finds confirmation in the references to Calcutta in English literary texts of the nineteenth century. It is necessary to separate the references by returned travellers and those conjured by writers to whom India was known second hand. Similarly, descriptions of India the country and of Calcutta, its British centre are marked by very different rhetorical registers. While cultural discourse on India induced a sensory overload in the west, the latter, more familiar territory invoked almost universal opprobrium. The Calcutta of British residence and the 'city of dreadful night' represented in British memory (even tinged with nostalgia) is untouched by that imaginative excess compositely understood as the exotic romance of the east, an image of India that the self-styled, multi-cultural Western hemisphere routinely and to this day conjures on multiple responsive fronts .

Perhaps, the most persistent historical metaphor which has attached itself to colonial Calcutta relates to the incident of 1756 known as the 'black hole tragedy'. This paper does not intend to comment either on the historical authenticity or controversies surrounding Holwell's account of the imprisonment and subsequent suffering and death of English men and women after the fall of The Company's garrison to Siraj-ud Dawla's army except to note its unusually strong capacity as embedded 'mythoid'. Again, like Charnock's involvement in establishing Calcutta it is a story in which almost every aspect is open to question and every character involved morally suspect. It is an unedifying and illogical narrative as a modern historian has deconstructed it, to the extent that there is no

longer a possibility of stating with any certainty whether there was in fact such a 'hole' or even whether there ever existed any marked degree of blackness about it (Zoli). The rhetoric generated in the aftermath served specific administrative purpose as the confusion within the garrison after the routing of the English forces precluded any official authentication of the number of prisoners, condition of incineration and the nature of casualties. Holwell's account sent to the Directors in London which reads like a document written to extenuate himself for obvious inefficiency, is nevertheless a remarkable piece of prose in that it manages to utilize and condense in this one event all the anxieties underlying European perception of the murderous conditions of life Calcutta: heat, humidity, suffocation, absence of potable water, insanitary, malodorous premises, lack of common decency in natives; to fabricate a Jeremiad of such melodramatic potential that the Directors had little choice but to sanction immediate military action.

Of the heat in Calcutta, which by the nineteenth century had already become a byword, Mark Twain invented or repeated snide anecdotes connecting the heat and the 'Black Hole ' on his visit in 1840 to Calcutta, and over the years the incident and the city of its occurrence merged into a whole. It is a remarkable and tenuous synecdochic perception. Recent scholars have traced this conflation in the frequent mentions to the black hole in English literature of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century as in Francis Burney's Evelina (1782) and H. Rider Haggard's King Solomon's Mines (1886). Thackeray's references to the Black Hole of Calcutta in Vanity Fair (1847-48) are characteristically off-hand. At the novel's commencement, Rebecca Sharp upon leaving Miss Pinkerton's academy famously tosses her gift of "Dr. Johnson's Dixonary" from Amelia Sedley's carriage. When Amelia expostulates with her, a laughing Becky replies: "Why, do you think Miss Pinkerton will come out and order me back to the black-hole?" (1:14). Second and more importantly, toward the end of the novel when Amelia's brother Joseph Sedley, the notorious nabob, returns home to England from Bengal, he chooses to live in an Anglo-Indian neighbourhood full of retired colonial administrators' residences in London. The narrator writes of this place, feigning that his facts come from upper-class gossip, "Who does not know these respectable abodes of the retired Indian aristocracy, and the quarter which Mr. Wentham calls the Black Hole, in a word?" (2:761).It may be noted that the explanatory tag 'of Calcutta' while referring to the 'Black Hole' in both these and most subsequent references is conspicuous by absence. Calcutta, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century was the begetter of fortunes or livelihoods for a multitude of European men and women (the latter came into its port in search of husbands and generally found them quickly as the gender balance was skewed among British populace in India) where lives of luxurious splendour was lived in a frenzy of conspicuous consumption. But as a commonplace cultural trope referred to in newssheets, journals, periodicals, travelogues, novels and poems it had unequivocally established itself as an urban representation of heat, squalor and death- the city *became* the black hole in popular British and European imagination. The cemeteries (especially South Park Street cemetery) of Calcutta offer evidence to the nature of this perception from a different angle. The extraordinary and elaborate memorials (some erected for very young children) testifies not only to the short life expectancy of settlers; sixty five was considered to be miraculously advanced age, the eulogies and memorials written for

people too newly arrived or too young to merit them and the constant harping on the minutiae of English background details regarding origin (name of parish, village, county meticulously recorded) are touching evidences that the British diaspora yearned to retain or recall some confirmation of a stable identifier in the grim lives they were forced to live 'in this inclement clime' as the tombstone of Rose Alymer, friend of Walter Savage Landor, proclaims.

'White' Calcutta under the Company was therefore a remarkably British place. Like many other European colonial urban spaces in India at the time, it lacked an effective administration, but also, like them, was a hive of private voluntary endeavour. Its development was largely unplanned and its main services, such as drainage, roads and police, were of a low standard. But the city had ambitiously designed individual buildings, the relics of which now are undeniably impressive, and its wealthy citizens enjoyed many amenities such as books, theatre, music and learned societies" (Marshall 329). P.J. Marshall's conclusion about what the early British residents of Calcutta made of their lives is valid but along with this widely circulated belief should also be placed for contrast, the obsession of these dwellers and others back in Britain; with Calcutta as the black hole: destroyer of health, happiness, hope and life. In *Jane Eyre* one of nineteenth century's most influential British novels novel, the eponymous heroine upbraided by a well-wisher who thinks she wants to sacrifice herself by going to India as a missionary wife is told "…you are much too pretty as well as too good to be grilled alive in Calcutta (Bronte 354). It is obvious from this fragment and from Jane's silent acquiescence that both the heroine and her interlocutor are confirming an axiomatic notion about the city in European imagination. The reader should however also be reminded in contrast that in the novel, the reason; a fairly common one in Britain in the mid nineteenth century, for the confidence these two women felt about eventually securing a modicum of financial security which is indirectly responsible for their dismissive attitude to immigration to the distant reaches of the empire is assured through fortunes earned by their male relations through commercial transactions in tropical and sub-tropical regions like India, in exploitative colonial encounters. This dichotomy and dilemma played out in the English imagination in different contexts and situations from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century; between Britain and its colonized spaces in the east and western hemispheres and nowhere more so than in the quintessential urban settlement of Indo-British transcultural encounter represented by Calcutta.

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