

CALCUTTA AS IT WAS

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As Calcutta approaches its tricentury (1990), and urbanologists and forecasters quarrel over its future, nostalgia rules the day for a dedicated band of historians, researchers and simple Calcutta-lovers. Anthologies, histories, sketches and hitherto unknown facets of the city's chequered past are churned out with persistent regularity. The latest book on old Calcutta is mainly a reproduction of the writings of two famous 19th century British commentators who lived and worked in this city, and is profusely annotated and edited by an Indian expert.

Three hundred years is a relatively short span for a city to gather antiquity, but then, the famous cities of the New World have had less time. Though Calcutta has witnessed several epoch-making events of history, as the capital of the British Indian Empire, the word "Ancient" in the title is a misnomer which should have been avoided.

The social life of the British in early Calcutta, or for that matter in the Indian Empire, is a sphere of historical and sociological inquiry that has been covered quite extensively and leaves little room for originality. Eighteenth Century chroniclers, Alexander Hamilton and Stavorinus the Dutch, tell us how things were in the early days of the Settlement in Calcutta, while Dr. Busteed, H.A.E. Cotton, William Carey, Colesworthy Grant and Blechynden recall the good old days of John Company. Women are quite expectedly, chatty about the social scene and the published letters of the Hon. Emily

Eden, Eliza Fay and Mrs. Kindersley add spice to the curry of British Indian social life. Dennis Kincaid, R. Pearson and Douglas Dewar have traversed this field once again in comparatively recent years, which leaves P Thankppan Nair little elbow room.

But Nair, who has been toiling over Calcutta's past for years with dogged determination (and had come up with an informative anthology on Charnock a few years ago) is not easily deterred in his strides, with Rev. Long and J.H. Stocqueler on either side.

Rev. James Long (1814-87) the crusading missionary of "Neel Darpan" fame (it was "infamy" to his compatriots and Indigo planters in those days) developed a deep understanding of Indian life and affairs, that has rarely been surpassed. His earlier writings, 'Calcutta in the Olden Time — its localities and its People' have been reprinted separately by two publishers a decade ago, while his 'Selections from Unpublished Records of Government, 1748 to 1767' presented us with many unknown facts and interesting details. His insides into the social life of the people and their rulers, spread over numerous articles and monographs, are informative and meticulous.

J.H. Stocqueler (1800-1885), the founder editor of the Englishman and the founder of the Calcutta Public Library that was to mature into today's National Library, was a colourful personality and a versatile writer. His travelogues and descriptive guide-books (including the famous Hand book of British India), and writings on diverse topics ranging from the life of the Duke of Wellington and Alfred the Great to a cyclopedia on Shakespeare and a military encyclopedia, betray the restlessness of the man who roamed across

three continents and was journalist, dramatist, actor, author, sportsman, military-expert and historian — all at the same time.

Long's paper, entitled 'A Peep into the social life in Calcutta a Century Ago', was read before the Bengal Social Science Association in 1868 and is adopted by Nair, to cover the "second half of the 18th Century". But this is not an easy task as long tends to leap forward and backward beyond the 50 years ascribed to him, and the reader has to remain cautious all the time. Long's narrations are illuminative but unsystematic and certain description of social life are scattered in installments all over his piece.

The missionary, who delivered his paper before social scientists, obviously believed that his audience was aware of most of what he spoke about (and had presumable read his Selections and monographs on Calcutta's people and localities). Readers, more than a century later, who may not have read his earlier writings, are likely to miss the purport of a major part of his delivery. Here, Nair comes to the rescue with his plentiful annotations, footnotes and explanations. At times, Nair's notes surpass Long's original descriptions, both in length and content. In fact, while Long takes 32 pages to narrate his "Peeps" Thankappan Nair's Additional Notes by the editor runs into 66 pages of laborious and sometimes tedious research. Cross-noting and cross-references are likely to mar the pleasure of the casual reader, as much as they might delight the serious student of Calcutta's history.

Long's descriptions of Calcutta — bulls, lepers and fakirs squatting in the middle of public thoroughfares ; the macabre scenes of "Aghoris eating dead men's flesh"; decomposed corpses and carcasses floating down the

Hooghly; windows burnt alive on sati fires at Chandpal Ghat — conjure a picture of a Hindu society desperately awaiting reforms. The High rate of mortality among the first British colonists and the deplorable state of public health and medical care are given appropriately under the sub-title, Doctors and Undertakers.

The panic gripping the early settler at the mention of the Mahratta marauders and Mug river-pirates and kidnappers assumes fearsome proportion when one realizes that the labyrinthine waterways of the Mug-infested Sunderbans were hardly two miles away from the settlement and it was only the Hooghly and the Circular Mahratta Ditch (hence the sobriquet "Ditchers" for Calcuttans) that saved the colony from the "Bargi" hordes.

Open slavery in the street of Calcutta; the perpetual quarrels among the ladies of the Colony which warded off boredom; the strolls along the Park (later to be known as Dalhousie Square, and then B.B. Bag); the lazy riverine excursion in budgerows; Prince Dwarkanath Tagore's kinsman, Radha Tagore's flogging and beating with a slipper by the English collector for his "insolence"; public auctions and lotteries; dramatic performances at the rare theatres; all conglomerate to fit into the diverse social mosaic of Calcutta, before and after Plassey. Present day readers may be surprised to learn that executions took place at Lalbazar, near the police office (Where the Great Jail was located) for petty crimes like stealing of watches. That the "Sahibs" lived in thatched house and conversed in Persian may again amuse readers.

While long is more descriptive and sympathetic, if somewhat disjointed, Stocqueler is critical and more inclined towards opinion, though

his prose is better with sweeping remarks like "there is no society in India", and pomposities like "unwhetsonable bluntness and "divertissements" of society" the journalist sneers at the limitations and failings of English society in Calcutta, peering through the tinted monocle of a cultured aristocrat viewing his backward kinsmen.

Stocqueler's comments on the farce of "husband-hunting "by the English Ladies of Calcutta and the most popular sport of the city : wooing, gives Nair just the opportunity he seeks to lay before his amused readers the existence of "Spinsters' Secret Societies" and the " jolted" bachelors' "Jawaub Club". Stocqueler bemoans the " uncultivated minds" of the society of Calcutta and the mediocrity of the judges, magistrates and staff officers, whose opinions he brackets as " backward and bigotted". The deficient quality of table linen, cutlery, glasses and wine invite his critical glare, as does the tendencies to substitute quantity for quality at dinner tables.

The attentive reader may discern the changes that took place in British India society between the period of Long's study (the second half of the 18th century) and Stocqueler's range (the first half of the 19th century), that is between the period of the company's decisive victory and the Crown's final take over of Indian affairs. The easy life style of the early period with working hours from 9 to 12 in the morning, followed by a heavy luncheon (dinner, as it was called) and the inevitable nap gave way to a hectic 9 to 5 working schedule, while the late night drinking sessions gradually surrendered to a "bed-by-eleven" routine.

The Company's director expressly forbade its servants from owning

horses and buggies in the formative years of its rule, whereas a century later, it became a matter of status for the successors of these civil servants to keep at least a pair of horses and a carriage. "Nautches", specially at native residences, continued to entertain the British but " Hookahs" were losing their popularity. Strips of earth that passed off as roads in Clive's period became less tortuous and less bumpy and more and more carriages eased out palanquins. The jungles of Chowringhee which provided so much sport and hunting (including tigers) during the 18th century slowly gave way to the "Maidan". Excursions to the country now stretched up to Barrackpore and the Botanic Gardens, instead of being confined to Bhabanipur, Dum Dum, Chitpur and Captain Perin's garden's (later known as Bugbazar). Invitations to the Governor General's house continued, however, to be flaunted about as medallions of social success.

Stocqueler's piece on domestic expenditure is quite an eye opener and Nair has done well to complete the four articles by Stocqueler (that were originally contributed to the Asiatic journal of 1883-84 under the heading : Calcutta, As It Is) with a few pages culled out from Stocqueler's Handbook of British India.

On the whole, Nairs edition is informative and one wonders why he chose to add notes to the writings of Long and Stocqueler instead of either publishing his own third piece in the same book or venturing to document his own researches and knowledge in the form of a distinct publication. The latter would have at least saved the reader the bother of flicking back and forth through the book, and remembering who wrote what.

The price is on the high side, especially when considering the 350-odd items of Errata which discredit the publisher and the printer. The combination of Long, Stocqueler and Thankappan Nair produces a bubbly compound like soda water, which may be liked by some and disliked by others, but can be useful to all — at least to serious students of Calcutta's only pride, its past.

*British Social Life In Ancient Calcutta — 1750 to 1850. By James Long and J H Stocqueler; edited by P Thankappan Nair. (Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, Rs. 160).