

GLIMPSES OF OLD CALCUTTA

Jawhar Sircar

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The history of Calcutta in the first half of the 18th Century remains a never-ending source of interests and speculation. Yes, speculation — for the official records of Calcutta were all destroyed during Shiraj-ud-Dowla's attack and occupation of the city in 1756. Hence, the supreme importance of non-official reports and letters, including those of travellers.

The latter half of the same century witnessed the phenomenal growth and consolidation of British power in India, primarily from the citadel of Calcutta. It was in this city again, that the experiments in imperial administration were conceived and tried out. Though official records of this period are in abundance, the first-hand reports of travellers and residents continued to enliven the archives of chroniclers.

P.T. Nair's book, a compilation of the impression of 15 European travellers who visited 18th Century Calcutta, provides those in Calcutta's history with a rare opportunity to get a lot of valuable information in one volume of 320 pages. The compiler has taken considerable pains to present all the available but scattered primary historical records on the subject in an orderly keepsake. Some of the narrators like Captain Hamilton, Mrs. Fay, De Grandpre and Stavorinus are well-known, while others like James Mitchell and William Mackintosh are less famous. Nair has dug up a few like Father Ripa and the "unknown Scotsman" about whom even serious researchers had hardly known. The writings and extracts are given verbatim and footnotes are, in most cases, original.

The 15 travellers present a rather medley line-up. There are seafarers; a Dutch admiral, an English Captain, a naval surgeon, as also a Captain's clerk. An Italian padre, a French army man and an English painter are put together with a map-maker and a gunner. A couple of Civil servants and housewives are there too, for good measure. Naturally, therefore, styles and emphases differ, but almost all the travelers do give us at least fragments of the picture of life in 18th Century Calcutta. Nair has laboured to edit then writings to bring out only what is relevant to Calcutta, but the reviewer feels that he would have fared even better with some more scissors-work.

Repetitions are there — as is inevitable. We get almost a dozen descriptions of the journey from the sea to Calcutta; we get narratives on the Ganges and the ritual centering around the holy river; we get recitals on “Gentoo Customs”. Though vexing at times, these repetitions have the effect of mentally transporting the reader to that period and also give the critic a chance to observe the subtle changes that the city and neighbouring landscape underwent from the first to the last decade of the century. A word of caution — the same name does not necessarily mean the thing. Writers who refer to “Fort William” in the first sixty years of the century connote the fortified area where the present-day GPO stands. Travellers who mention it in the latter part of the 18th Century meant the present day Fort William that stands where the village of Gobindapur once was.

Speaking of names, the writers had field-way when it came to the spelling of Indian names, Calcutta is called Golgotha, Golicatan, Gollicata, Goulicatta or Golcongthe. Hijili becomes Hidgelli, Ingaley or Ingellie, just as Khejuri becomes Kedgerree, Kidgery, Kedgerlie, Kidgerie or Cadgery. The standardization of the British Raj was obviously yet to come.

The editor starts with an extract from Alexander Hamilton’s *A New Account of the East Indies* which is one of the earliest English works on India and the Far East. Captain Hamilton’s style has the distinct stamp of the English language as it was written three centuries ago, with a liberal and unpredictable use of capitals. Hamilton visited the settlement only seven years after the English merchants purchased the rights of the three villages and only a few brick houses punctuated the horizon of thatched tentaments. Palaces, for which the city was to become famous, were unheard of. “The Town was build without Order, as the Builders thought most convenient for their own Affairs.” The unhealthy climate and corruption that the traveller mentions were there to stay. His descriptions of Charnock’s sadism and paganism are a bit far-fetched, but his other statements, like the high rate of mortality among foreigners, the rampant prostitution that existed in Baranagar and the freedom of religion are factually correct.

Hamilton is followed in 1709 by a Roman Catholic priest, Matteo Ripa, who visited “Bengala” en route to China. The missionary’s attitude is rather rigid and his view quite critical (“my surprise at the ignorance and blindness of the idolatrous natives” or “St. Anne’s, the church of English heretics”, for example) and his descriptions of the Calcutta are only incidental. He is amazed to see jackfruit, papayas and plantains but is quick to perceive the Hindu attitude towards cows and the holy river. Father Ripa has also a few words on the religious sects of India, Sadhus and the belief in “transmigration of souls”.

Burnell has little to say of Calcutta except his meeting with Governor Russel (1712), but Mitchell's perceptions of the city (1747-48) are more interesting. He paints vividly the threat of the local populace from tigers and crocodiles (he mistakes them for alligators) and he must have observed closely the life of poorer natives to give the accurate description of their customs that he did. The corpses floating along the river repulsed not only this traveller but almost all others before and after him. His description of Durga Puja, the "Gentoo's grand annual feast", is lively and his claim that tigers and jackals "come into the city during the night and clear the streets of every impurity" (aided by crows and dogs in the daytime) speaks volumes about early Calcutta's civic amenities.

The next two travelers describe the city during the period of Shiraj's attack and Clive's recapture (and eventual victory at Plassey). Both accounts, seen from English eyes, are graphic and moving — especially the tragedy of the "Black Hole". Ives, the surgeon, speaks of the fatal monsoons, the scurvy and gastro-enteric fever, while Ives the traveller is charmed by the cities incomparable hospitality. Grose is more academic in his approach and goes into the details of the garrison's fortifications, not forgetting to mention the paltry strength of 300 Europeans who humbled the Nawab's forces.

The wife of an English soldier, Mrs. Kindersley, has left behind a series of letters which provide invaluable source material for scholars. The intricate details of each class of servant retained in the "Sahib's bungalows" is rarely matched and her portraiture of British life in Calcutta in the late 1760s is excellent. Diwani had vested with John Company — its servants were the masters of three large, prosperous provinces of India and the new schemes of in the letter. The change in the life-style and attitudes of the civil servants displayed a marked difference from the early days of struggle and frugality — though the climate and disease continued to torment them as before. Mrs. Kindersley felt that Calcutta's town planning was "so irregular that it looks as if all the houses had been thrown up in the air and fallen down again by accident as they now stand".

Stavorinus, the Dutchman who briefly visited Calcutta in 1768, is more charitable in his descriptions, but his Calcutta was one of banquets, balls and gun-salutes. He sees St. Andrew's Church coming up and intense building activity everywhere. The city of palaces was coming up fast, as was the new massive new fort.

For the 1770's, we have two accounts. "Asiaticus" (Philip Dormer Stanhope) is enchanted by the beauty of Indian women but finds the English ladies "immoderately fond of dancing, and exercise ill-calculated for the burning climate of Bengal". His description of Hastings is flattering, but his comments on the new system of administration are not. He feels that citizens are not favourably disposed to the Supreme Court that has just been set up. While this traveller's recital could have been better edited, Mackintosh's one sermonizes more than it narrates. Mackintosh is exercised about the smoke of "Chullahs" and pollution and feels strongly about illegal encroachments and the corruption of the city's police. His portrayal of A day as it is commonly spent by an Englishman in Bengal is precisely informative.

Eliza Fay hardly requires introduction to readers of Calcutta's history and her Original Letters, from which P T Nair presents us extracts, is a well-known work. The housewife's statements on thieving Banians and domestic servants, monthly household expenses, marriages and the city's entertainments have always been acclaimed as delightful. We get contemporary accounts of Hastings and his famous duel, as also of the politics of the Company's administration and the Supreme Court.

One wonders why Hodges, the painter, has been included by Nair as his sketches are far better than the few words he has penned. Monsieur De Grandpre, the French Army Officer who came to Calcutta in 1789 and 1790, covers the period when the English roots were striking deeper into Indian soil. Yet, the Frenchmen perceived even then that though "England rules the country, were the Indians to unite is a single point only, her power would soon be at an end." His perceptions into the communal divisions among Indians and the chances of rioting if a Hindu Puja and a Muslim festival came together on the same date, shows an uncommon insight for his times. He is all praise for the local clerks and babus: "the ease with which these people learn anything is wonderful". The gradual subjugation of the native economy is also depicted — "the English have established manufactories for printed linens in the neighbourhood of Calcutta that in no long time will totally ruin those manufactured by the natives of Patna, which are greatly inferior". But not all his descriptions were correct: Madam Dourga (goddess Durga) and his confusion over Bengalis and "Brahmins", are examples.

Twining, who writes in closing years of the 18th Century, describes the majestic architecture that adorned Calcutta. Britannia had really begun to "rule the waves" and opulence had become a way of life. His portrayals of William Jones, the founder of the Asiatic Society, and Lord Wellesley, the Governor General, are quite good.

The illustrations in the book could have been better. A few plates from Zoffany, Hodges, the Daniells, Solvyns and the like could have been included to give life to the text.

* Calcutta in the 18th Century Impressions of Travellers, Compiled by P. Thankappan Nair. (Firma KLM, Rs. 85).