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Curious tales from a city's history



Jawhar Sircar addresses the audience at the Western Quadrangle of Victoria Memorial Hall. Picture by Sanjoy Ghosh

The name Dharmatala came from the folk deity Dharmathakur and the etymological roots of Chowringhee — for all its *phirang* associations — probably lie in Baba Chowringhee (Chourangi Giri who is supposed to have founded the original Kali temple). Many such "Curious Tales from Calcutta's Past" were revealed by Jawhar Sircar in a speech at Victoria Memorial on Friday.

The Western Quadrangle provided a fine setting for these reminiscences as a most distinguished gathering, including filmmaker Goutam Ghose and art historian Tapati Guha Thakurta, turned up to listen to Sircar.

As the Prasara Bharati CEO spoke from a podium below the Warren Hastings Group showing Hastings in consultation with a *pandit* and a *maulavi*, the famous Hastings-Francis duel on Duel Lane and the fact that on the site of the Victoria Memorial once stood the last Calcutta jail before the jails of Alipore and Presidency were built all came up in the course of the speech.

Starting with a reference to places mentioned in *Manasamangal Kavya*, Sircar traced the growth of the first British settlements around freshwater bodies in a sparsely populated land of tiger and dacoit-infested jungles and marshes.

Sircar spoke about the mystery behind the name of Alipore, the first fort built (where the GPO stands today) and destroyed; the first court at the western end of Writers' Buildings, which doubled as a ballroom in the evening, the boundaries between Calcutta and 24-Parganas, the forgotten palaces of Mir Zafar in Alipore later rebuilt at the sites of the Imperial Library of Belvedere, the district magistrate's house and Viharilal College.

He touched upon the way places got their names from trees and professions like Beltala, Bakulbagan, Narkeldanga, Atabagan, Ahiritola (*ahiri* were milkmen), Darzipara and Koshaitola. Sircar also spoke of Orphangunge Market in Kidderpore which came up to support the children of the British and Indians.

Moving back and forth in time, Sircar reminded the audience of interesting events from the way the road leading from Victoria to Presidency jail was made legally a part of Calcutta to facilitate the transfer of prisoners to how Burial Ground Road had to be built through dense forest cover (now Park Street) for the transfer of the fast-dying Europeans.

Jocular references to the way there was a "huge shastric consultation for three years on whether piped freshwater" could be used by Hindus who otherwise used "water from the

Ganges” merged with Sircar’s personal experiences of the three pipes from Palta which became Pipe Road (later BT Road). Many major contributions to the city were from private sources, said Sircar, like those by the lottery committee which set up the magnificent Town Hall and modernised roads.



The talk veered towards the way Bengali Babus imbibed food and clothing from Awadhis who shifted to Calcutta in 1858; how recipes travelled from the courtesans’ *bawarchis* and *khansamams* into the exclusive *andarmahals* while flying kites and pigeons became favourite outdoor sports.

“We have a long history of cohabitation and we have imbibed a lot of good and some of the bad of all cultures,” signed off Sircar, who has behind him “four decades of research and a passionate involvement with Calcutta”.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Dharmatala gets its name from Dharmathakur, a folk deity
- Chowringhee refers to Baba Chowringhee or Chourangi Giri who is supposed to have founded the original Kali temple
- The city’s first court at the western end of Writers’ Buildings doubled as a ballroom in the evening
- Ahiritola got its name from being a colony of milkmen (ahiri)

SEBANTI SARKAR

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