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# Goodbye P.T. Nair, Kolkata's Chronicler

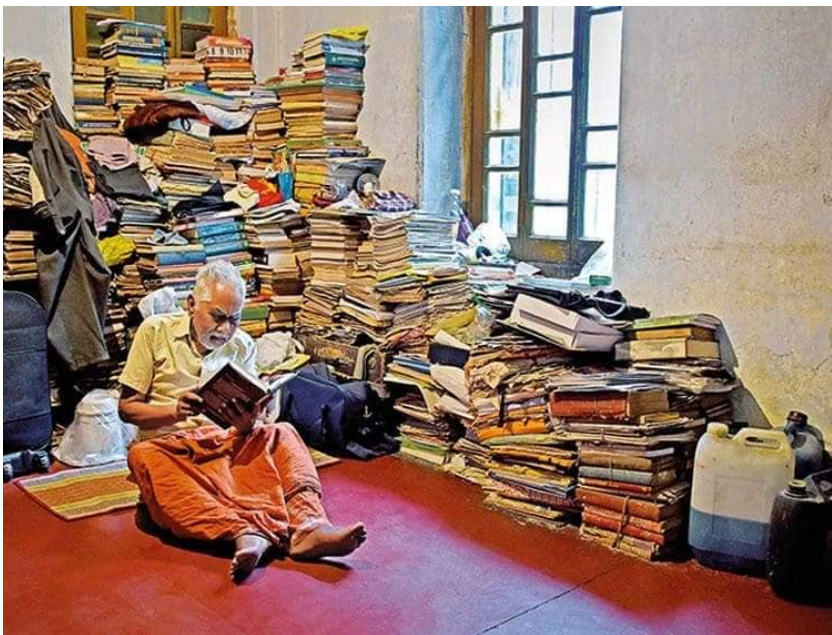


Jawhar Sircar

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*He wrote some 70 books, mostly in English, on the history of Kolkata and the social life of the colonial masters – including their internecine quarrels – and their view of the colonised 'native'.*



P.T. Nair (1933-2024). Photo: Facebook/Pallab Ray

Many people in Kolkata, which includes my wife and I, are shattered to learn that our dear P.T. – P. Thankappan Nair – the barefoot historian of Kolkata, is no more. He was 91 and died in his home in Aluva, Kerala.

Kolkata's residents know him as a researcher and historian of the colonial city, but to me he was a personal friend, though he was two decades older. He guided me in my spare-time research on Kolkata in the late 1970s and 1980s, when I was a young director-level officer.

He had come to Kolkata in 1955, from a way-off little village in Ernakulam, Kerala, looking for a typist's job – which he found. He then moved to a better-paid government post but it involved a transfer from Kolkata. So he left it and chose a life of penury. The reason was that he

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had fallen in love with this city. I know very few such persons who had the guts to quit a government job for research and writing. Publishers never paid him much, but he managed somehow.

P.T. travelled on foot to every nook and corner of the metropolis to check up the history of each road and locality. After that, he would pore over records and notes kept in the libraries and archives, to verify what he had been told. This was before the city was destroying almost every old building and redesigning traditional precincts in the name of modernisation and to accommodate an ever increasing population. So, if one wants to know a bit more about how each place was before it became so glitzy and upmarket, one has to look up P.T. Nair.

P.T. lived in just one room in a humble house in Kansaripara Lane, which he often shared with a couple of young Malayali students or job seekers. He lived amidst his pile of books, many of which were quite rare, and only he knew where to dig his dump for a particular book. He had no phone or mobile or email and if one wanted to meet him, one would have to wait at his doorstep until he was back. As his place was quite close to our government flat in Minto Park, I would go to his neighbourhood if I ever wanted to contact him, and leave word with someone there. Everyone knew him.



The covers of some of the many books written by P.T. Nair.

P.T. would have his day's meal by 9 am every day, and then walk a couple of kilometres to the National Library, where he would work from morning till its closing hour. He knew exactly where to find the right book or report in the massive library that had several 'sections' and 'collections'. He and I often met while browsing through the prized 'Ashutosh Collection' of Sir Ashutosh, the father of Syama Prasad Mookerjee, which was located in a building away from the main library, housed in the stately Belvedere. But he brooked no disturbance when he went on copiously copying page after page from very old books. One waited patiently for him to complete. Only then would he look up and respond to questions.

P.T. was a veritable encyclopaedia where the history of British social life in Kolkata was concerned. His approach was never 'academic' and he used to say that academics write only for each other, in inscrutable style

and jargon. So, he wrote in a simple, rambling manner for the people. His English prose was, I daresay, rather weak but it conveyed more information than those with better grasp over the language. Bengali scholars would sometimes accuse him of not understanding Bengali. I know that he could speak it in a passable manner but he never learnt the written or typed letter well enough. But that did not deter him, for he could manage to take down notes if someone who read it out to him. One can argue that he did not need to learn Bengali as he was unravelling the lost histories of the British civilian, common colonists and a few of the ruling class.



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P.T. would drop in occasionally at our flat, to tell me something new that he had found about Kolkata or to argue on some point. He could be argumentative but that was because he was totally unpretentious. He was always in a hurry and would never stay for too long. Nair would refuse to eat anything and it was only at my wife Nandita's strong persuasion that he would take some food and relax a bit.

He wrote some 70 books, mostly in English, on the history of Kolkata and the social life of the colonial masters – including their internecine quarrels – and their view of the colonised 'native'. He also wrote in Malayalam, in which he was prolific too. His most useful book was *A History of Calcutta's Streets*, which is encyclopaedic and reliable. I was tickled pink when he dedicated a book to me. Among his other publications are *The First Circulating and College Libraries of Calcutta*, *Calcutta Tercentenary Bibliography Volumes 1 & 2*, *British Social Life* and many more on Kolkata in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.

The variety of his interests are clear from his books on diverse subjects, like *Indian National Songs and Symbols*, *The Mango in Indian Life and Culture*, *South Indians in Kolkata*, etc. I reviewed some of his books in *The Statesman* those days, as *The Telegraph* was yet to grow up.

Kolkata honoured him on quite a few occasions, but he deserved more. Kolkata Municipal Corporation purchased his rare books for its library and those very few lakhs is all that he could take home to Kerala, after a lifetime of service. He was not idle in Kerala and he went on writing till the end. He spoke to me last from Kerala – about three years ago. He said he was terribly occupied with writing and he rued the fact that he had lost the Kolkata he had seen in the 1950s and 1960s.

Every busy man needs some rest and may god now give his soul rest and peace.

*Jawhar Sircar is a Rajya Sabha MP of Trinamool Congress. He was earlier Secretary, Government of India, and CEO of Prasar Bharati.*

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