

P Thankappan Nair: The man who chronicled Kolkata — for little in return

Jawhar Sircar



Thankappan Nair. (Express File Photo)

When a short, lanky 22-year-old Malayali lad from Ernakulam got off the Madras Mail at Howrah Station, he could never have imagined that he would become famous as the “barefoot historian of Old Calcutta”. It would be beyond the wildest imagination of P Thankappan Nair — PT to most — that 69 years later, so many million informed citizens of Bengal would mourn [his death](#).

A Malayali who hardly knew Bengali well enough to write in it has left behind about 40 books in English for the people of [Kolkata](#), to read and quote. I ran into him, this completely unassuming man some 20 years senior, wearing a crushed bush shirt and inexpensive sandals, in 1979. We were at the Institute of Historical Studies and he was arguing with redoubtable, professional historians. What was interesting was the respect they gave him for his knowledge. Unlike most of them, PT did not confine himself to libraries and archives. He had walked for miles without end to every obscure part of the city and knew the history of each locality.

I remember dropping him home in my government car, to chat on the way, before I rushed to Barrackpore where I was posted. Our friendship lasted from 1979 till his death on June 18, earlier this week — despite our starkly different ages, professions and lifestyles. He breathed his last in his village in Kerala, to which he had moved, after 50 years dedicated to Kolkata’s history.

PT had come to Kolkata for higher studies and landed up as a typist. He once demonstrated his lightning speed to me on his antique Remington. He wasn’t satisfied, so he worked as a journalist for a while and was then given a job in the Anthropological Survey. It paid him much better but entailed rotational transfers from Kolkata. By then, he was getting passionately involved in this city’s past — when such an interest was uncommon.

He took a momentous decision to quit job security and stay back, to roam the streets of Kolkata, for research. Life was tough and I have seen how he crammed thousands of books into his single little room, in a humble house and locality. Many of the books in the huge piles (that only he could hunt down) were rare and he had bought them quite cheap from second-hand shops all over Kolkata.



The Indian EXPRESS
PREP FOR **UPSC** with the best
OPINION, DAILY EXPLAINERS, INVESTIGATIONS ALONG WITH UPSC KEY
SUBSCRIBE NOW

PT had no phone or contact number and one had to drop into his home to meet him or leave one's name with a kindly neighbour if he was out. He took his frugal meal early in the morning and walked all the way to the National Library, as one of its early users. He would slog there, often with just a few biscuits, till the library closed. Locating him in the vast premises of the library was easier: Everyone knew PT Babu and where he was seen last. But he could not be disturbed when he went on copying page after page and would look up only when he was through. In that huge complex, he was one of the rare persons who knew where and what to look for — where the history of British life and times in Calcutta was concerned.

PT Nair never pretended to be an academic — he did not want to be in their cosy circle and speak their esoteric language. He wrote for the common man in his own English, which was weak at times, but conveyed more information than those who wrote better. I reviewed his early books for the Sunday papers, but publishers continued to be stingy even when sales improved. He helped me in his own way, to hone my skills in research on a gone-for-ever Calcutta and we exchanged notes. It was typical of him to drop in unannounced, to hand over some notes which he had either made or dug up. He was not one to sit and take snacks anywhere, and only my wife could compel him to do both.

Nair produced some 40 English books on the history of Kolkata and the social life and reality of India's colonial capital. He also wrote prolifically in Malayalam. His *History of Calcutta's Streets* is both encyclopaedic and reliable. Kolkata did give him honours towards the end of his half-century in the city, but he certainly deserved more. Kolkata Municipal Corporation purchased his rare books for its library so that he could return to Kerala, with some money, after a lifetime of penury — all for Kolkata.



Inform your opinion. Read what today's changemakers are saying. Subscribe to our Opinion & Editorial newsletter

The writer is a Trinamool Congress [Rajya Sabha](#) MP and former CEO of Prasar Bharati