

Remembering P Thankappan Nair (1933-2024), the historian-archivist-bibliographer of Kolkata

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I wish I were in a position to begin this obituary with a personal anecdote. Perhaps, I would recall my last visit to Parameswaran Thankappan Nair's spartan two-room home in Bhowanipur's Kansaripara, where the elderly chronicler of Kolkata sits amid a pile of books, eager to see me off so he can return to his work-in-progress manuscript. I would speak of his faithful Remington typewriter, a rare issue of *Bengal Past and Present* protruding from a wobbly shelf, and the absence of any communication device, mobile or static.

But the fact is that I never had the chance to meet Nair (April 30, 1933-June 18, 2024) in person. When, as a starry-eyed final-year Masters student at Jadavpur University I was first getting acquainted with his work, one of my professors had doused my eagerness to make his acquaintance. "Do you have something specific to ask?" he had said. "If not, I suggest you consult his books first, before imposing on his time." This was sage advice, and I do not regret missing out on meeting the Kerala-born scholar. What little I know of Nair is through his books on Calcutta, and it is on their place in the city's historiography that I wish to dwell on by way of my reflections after his death in his home in Kerala.

Major currents in his work

In an empathetic portrait of the scholar, Soumitra Das had written of how Nair arrived in Calcutta in 1955 from his native village of Manjapra in Ernakulam district, "armed with a certificate in shorthand and typing." After starting out as a stenographer in Dalhousie Square, he had found a job at the Anthropological Survey of India, acquiring simultaneously an interest in the built heritage of the city. "He started his career by writing on things of 'topical interest' like Christmas celebrations in Kerala," notes Das, before deciding to quit his job and take up journalism. By most accounts, Nair has written over 60 books since then, many of which have to do with colonial Calcutta. Any attempt to survey his entire oeuvre, therefore, is likely to omit more than it can encompass. Instead, I'll try to delineate the major functions (for want of a better word) he undertakes in his work, which tend to coexist in different combinations in each volume, before offering a few reflections.

The first is the function of the bibliographer. In its earliest recorded use, "bibliographer," derived from Greek *bibliographos* stood for a "writer of books, transcriber, copyist." In the early 19th century, the meaning seems to have shifted to "one who studies or writes about books." The bibliographer's labour is often invisibilised as, understandably, books containing long lists of other books (and articles) are not the stuff of cozy afternoon reading. Tedious and thankless as it may seem, this work does constitute one of the fundamental building blocks of most scholarly undertakings. Ironically, however, the long-standing hierarchy of mind over matter – translated variously as ideas or "intellect" over mechanical or manual labour – combined with consumption practices, often leads to a misrecognition of the bibliographer's work even in academic circles.

PT Nair was a bibliographer in both senses of the term: a compiler of texts and lists of publications. He capitalised on the National Library's proximity to his Bhowanipur residence, and turned it into a daily haunt. Jawhar Sircar, who knew him well, recalled in his [obituary](#) how he would often find Nair in the annex, browsing the Ashutosh Collection. "But he brooked no disturbance when he went on copiously copying page after page from very old books", writes Sircar. "One waited patiently for him to complete. Only then would he look up and respond to questions."

This was Nair's strong suit. He would try his luck at various libraries, pulling out old, brittle books, copying relevant sections, before re-arranging them to tell stories about the colonial city and English society. His *Calcutta in the Eighteenth Century: Impressions of Travelers* (Firma KLM, 1984), for instance, contains accounts of no fewer than fifteen travellers, culled from the holdings of the National Library, the Asiatic Society, Jaykrishna Library (Uttarpara), the Goethals Library (St Xavier's College), and the private collection of one Rathindranath Mukhopadhyay. The sources he used were not easy to access in those pre-digital days but this model served him well across numerous edited volumes.

As a compiler of lists of publications, Nair's most substantial contribution has to be the *Calcutta Tercentenary Bibliography*, published by the Asiatic Society to mark the city's (controversial) 300th birth anniversary. An updated version, titled *Kolkata Heritage Bibliography*, was brought out by the National Library of India, in the aftermath of the 175th anniversary of the Calcutta Public Library (founded in 1836). Divided into fifteen sections, this prodigious bibliography contains lists of publications on the city's demography, maps, food and drink, literature, and so on. (I realised later that the professor who had asked me not to seek an appointment with Nair was seeing him through the final stages of this project at the time. I like to think my obedience spared him a few typos.)

And how can we forget his *History of Calcutta's Streets*? An Excel-nerd's dream, this erroneously titled tome (it is ostensibly a history of street names) contains details about countless streets arranged alphabetically, including intersecting wards, former identities and detailed stories behind their current names. The entry on a street as obscure as Phear Lane (near Tiretti Bazar) runs into two pages! More than any other book, I feel this one deserves a digital, searchable publication that's open to updating and amending.

Apart from compilations and bibliographies, Nair penned several monographs, both on Calcutta (*Calcutta: Origin of the Name*, 1985; *History of the Calcutta Press*, 1987; etc.) and on other subjects (such as *Peacock, the National Bird of India*, 1977; *The Mango in Indian Life and Culture*, 2 vols., 1995-96). Personally, I do not find them easy to read cover-to-cover, although I have nursed a secret admiration for the encyclopaedic mind that is at work, refusing to identify narratives or arguments and presenting all that seems even remotely related. A section on idlis in *South Indians in Kolkata* (2004), for instance, has archival news reports warning the public of the advent of soyabean idlis, a recipe of the genuine article, and results of the New Delhi idli eating contest in 1976. (FYI, K Ramamurthy had emerged victorious that year, polishing off 34 idlis in 15 minutes.)

Retrospection, Introspection

The response to Nair's work, however, has not been uniformly warm. While there are many for whom Calcutta's "barefoot historian" (an epithet I am yet to find a convincing explanation for) is like a time-travelling tour guide to the city's past, others have taken issue with his methods. The most common critique is that Nair's scholarship does not do justice to regional language sources (primarily Bangla), whether as primary, archival material or secondary, scholarly writings. Given the overabundance of writing on Kolkata in Bangla, this does seem like a significant omission. This is not to say that monolingual bibliographical is without value – far from it – but that it can be misleading without appropriate caveats and confessions.

When it comes to narrative history, such biases become more problematic, particularly when we look back at the history of history writing about the city. Self-aware attempts to record Calcutta's past can be traced at least as far back as James Long's mid-19th century sketches, which were followed by the work of Bangla writers like Rangalal Bandyopadhyay and Prankrishna Dutta. The most productive period of English historiography, however, came at the turn of the century when the efforts of a number of chroniclers – some of whom had been working independently earlier – received George Nathaniel Curzon's patronage and dovetailed to form an imperialist history of the city's birth and growth that still holds sway today. Overreliance on the material and the logic of colonial archives, therefore, is likely to replicate ideological biases.

Bangla has not one but multiple traditions to boast of when it comes to writing about the city's past. One thinks of Purnendu Pattrea's playful vignettes, Sripantha's (Nikhil Sarkar) effortless rigour, Radharaman Mitra's diatribes – without even getting into more recent scholarly work. But there is a need to introspect even when it comes to positing regional language archives in opposition to the colonial one. Even with the most rigorous empirical scholarship, there is a tendency to slip into categories of colonial construction, for example, the Black Town / White Town dichotomy.

The fact that even within the category of the “native” there were hegemonic groups and silenced voices (and geographies) often escapes the historian's attention, owing in part to the paucity of documented archival sources. Meaningful critique, thus, cannot rest on a convenient racial binary opposition; it needs to introspect and productively address biases within its own archives, maps and other narratives.

Looking back at what I have learnt from PT Nair's work – and I owe him a fair bit – I realise that an informed scepticism has stood me in good stead. Whether or not the reader wishes to categorise him as a historian, an archivist or a bibliographer is up to them; the function I find most useful in his work is the bibliographic one. There was a time when I would regard Nair's reluctance to take on narrative responsibility (beyond a chronological arrangement of information) or indeed his unfiltered approach to including archival material as a lack. Of late, I see in it the anxiety and urgency of an archival researcher working with fragile resources, mortified at the thought of losing forever some obscure piece of information they have uncovered unless it finds a home in a published volume; an undiscerning mind that believes in the potential of every factoid to tell a story even if that is not immediately apparent.

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