

**VISUALIZING THE CITY:
PHOTOGRAPHY, MODERNITY,
CALCUTTA (1850-1950)**

Dissertation

**submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts,
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By

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Certified that the Thesis entitled

Visualizing the City: Photography,
Modernity, Calcutta (1850-1950)

submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of ~~Prof.~~

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And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere / elsewhere.

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This thesis has been in the making much longer than I would have liked it to be. Part of it is because of my own professional commitments, part of it because of institutional systems, and part because of the newness of the area that the thesis was trying to grapple with. But at the end of the day, more important than the delay are the people who made it possible. My immense thanks are due to my advisor Prof Moinak Biswas, without whom the thesis would not even have started. This is because the acceptance of the thesis proposal owes it to his willingness to go beyond the mandate of the Film Studies Department at Jadavpur University, Kolkata. Apart from the intellectual guidance, he has also helped me in accessing archives and suggesting, again and again, to not get distracted from the primary research question. I am also grateful to the faculty of the Film Studies Department – Anindya Sengupta, Madhuja Mukherjee, Subhajit Chatterjee, Abhijit Ray, Manas Ghosh - for being more friends than colleagues and making me feel at home whenever I stepped into the department's domains. In the same vein I am indebted to the experts who were present at the interview to finalise the thesis topic at the end of the coursework, as well as to the experts who had attended the pre-submission seminar that I delivered earlier this year.

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Sayandeb Chowdhury

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THESIS ABSTRACT

The project proposes to interrogate the ways in which the topography of colonial Calcutta – the grand architectural buildings, the river and the banks, the streets and shops, the ports and the stations – i.e. landmark city-spaces - was visualised in photography. This straightforward premise may be divided into two discursive domains. First, taking Calcutta as the locus of enquiry, the project proposes a critique of the methods of reproducing an archetypal colonial city. Two, this reproduction is not any form of cultural viewing of foundational colonial spaces but a specific act of seeing *through* the camera and its attendant *frames, regimes* and principles. Photography, the project argues, not only brings the emergent colonial city-space under a series of optic templates but also empowers that space with the possibility of (re)producing a spatial modernity of its own. This is the primary theoretical proposition of this project. Hence, this project is about the visual remembrance and representation of Calcutta's *spatiality* and the construction of a cultural memory that this act of remembrance brings to the fore. To that end, the project locates itself as an inquiry into the construction of Calcutta as a *photographic* city. The *photographic* city is not only how a city lends itself to image-making but also how the reproduced modes of visibility mobilises a cultural idiom of its own. The key term in this project is hence *encounter* - *encounter* between the camera and the city, between the optics of seeing and the architectonics of modernity; and between photography *as* documentation and photography *as* witness.

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CHAPTER 1

THE CALCUTTA CAMERA

History's goal and ambition is not to exalt but to annihilate what has in reality taken place. A generalised critical history will no doubt preserve some museums, some medallions and monuments — that is to say the materials necessary for its work — but it would empty them of what, to us, would make them *lieux de mémoire*.

Pierre Nora¹

1.1 RESEARCH PROPOSITION

Photography travelled to India in the first year of its European pronouncement in 1839² and since then has remained a key technological and cultural apparatus; and like most modern democracies, has mirrored the nation-state's coming into its own. The fact of its early arrival has meant that the history of photography in the region is as old as that of Europe. As visual anthropologist Christopher Pinney - a pre-eminent scholar on systems and practices of image-making in this part of the world - says his introduction to *Photography in South Asia*³:

A century and half on, the study of photography in South Asia remains in its infancy. Photography reached India in 1840, just a few months after its announcement in Europe, and by the 1850s, there were thriving photographic societies in Calcutta and Bombay. The 19th

¹ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Lieux de Mémoire*', *Representations*, 26 (Spring, 1989) (trans. by Marc Roudebush) pp 7-24; pp 9.

² Like all inventions that changed the course of history, photography too has multiple claimants and multiple histories, which eventually merged into an obsession to record light on a specific surface for posterity. The millennia-long discourse about the science of light dancing on a surface began, systematically at least, in the age of Islamic Enlightenment in Spain with AlHazen's seven volume *Book of Optics/Kitāb al-Manāẓir/De Aspectibus*. AlHazen's work travelled to Renaissance Florence and was most conspicuously revisited by Leonardo da Vinci. His ground-breaking experiments in *perspective* led, eventually, to several imaginations of the *camera obscura* (dark room) and the first usable contraption of that nature, which was made by Johann Zahn in 1685. Camera obscura's further development was complemented by a parallel history of laboratory experiments with light-sensitive salts, especially in Germany, by Johann Schulze and others. Early 19th century saw several experiments in efforts to record light on a surface, in which Jacques Charles in France and Thomas Wedgewood and Humphry Davy in England played key roles. But the first real image was pinned only in 1826 by the Frenchman Nicéphore Niépce, even if his later collaborator Louis Daguerre is usually conferred that distinction. Daguerre improved considerably upon Niépce's work, used silvered surfaces for better effect, had better resources at his disposal, and could successfully draw the attention of the French scientific community. The first proclamation of Louis Arago in 1839 of a mechanical image that was named *daguerreotype* is usually, even if erroneously, considered as the year of the birth of photography. The announcement of Henry Talbot's calotype the same year in England has only strengthened the reputation of that year.

³ Christopher Pinney, *Photography in South Asia*, Oxford Bibliographies. Pp 1-14. p4

century generated a host of significant practitioners, Indian and British, who generated significant primary documentation.

In spite of the prolific practice of photography in colonial South Asia, there seems to be a skewed curiosity in the partisan perception of that history, inclined as they are towards a certain kind of image. For example, a series of monographs and catalogues have in more recent years tried to restore to public discourse a major body of work from early years of photography in India⁴. They reveal a long and expansive history of the camera in the subcontinent. But the bulk of these publications, from archives and collectors, have focussed on indoor or studio photography; or racialized portraits of ethnic groups; or the proverbial languor of India's numerous diamond-studded local sovereigns. Looking loosely, the collections seem to have been collated to entertain a kind of *souvenir* astonishment. To that end, it is not difficult to conclude that sentiments that had tickled the colonial imagination continue to find lavish reproductions now - as a sort of commercial memorialisation of an exotic past that had beholden the imperial gaze.

In the existing framework, there is a substantive and noticeable lack of interest about various other uses, practices and possibilities that photography had triggered in South Asia. As new archives come into view and newer collections are able to cross-refer to each other, what is emerging is that the other genres, interests and impulses of photography in the colony is not only in need of a critical visitation but is likely to reveal a different history of photography in India than it has been so far understood. It is to this limitation in holistic and contemporary scholarly investment in Indian photographic history that propelled Pinney, in the same essay, to observe⁵:

Photography in South Asia has largely been approached with a view to understanding what is "Indian" about it, and this has entailed a marginalization of historical complexity and process in order to make

⁴ See Rahaab Allana et al *Painted Photographs* (2008), Rahaab Allana et al, *The Artful Pose* (2010), Rahaab Allana and Devy Depelchin, *Unveiling India* (2014), Nathaniel Gaskel & IDiva Gujral, *Photography in India: A Visual History from the 1850s to the Present* (2019) etc. Also see a review of the photographs of this nature from a particular collection in <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/03/12/arts/photography-review-out-of-india-history-and-beauty-in-a-colonial-context.html>

⁵ Christopher Pinney, 'Photography in South Asia',

the cultural category of India more visible. One consequence of this is that the majority of writing on photography in India follows a one-way trajectory from the general case of photography to its specific (belated) iteration in India. A reverse movement then becomes difficult, and very little work on photography in India has contributed to broader discussions about photography as a world system. Given the intensity and scale of early photography in India, this is surprising.

Pinney makes two very critical observations: one, that there seems to be a rush to sequester 'India' as a colonial project from the global archive of early photography; and (two) consequently, there is little observable traffic between photography in India and its practices outside, which should have considered it part of a global convulsion in the aesthetics of the visual. A close look at the colonial archive in South Asia, vast as it is, makes Pinney's surprise all the more pertinent. For there are as many instances of portraiture and *carte-de-visite* as there were other kinds of photography, like say, the archaeological or medical photography. Not to speak of the vast numbers of photography of open spaces, monuments, cities, bridges and buildings, offices and institutions, streets and transport, crowds and buses etc. But were they really of the same register? Even critical histories of photography in the West, anyway hardly attentive to colonial geographies, end up, more likely than not, in coalescing all kinds of colonial photography together and considering them being fixed by an unambiguous, unfaltering *colonialist* gaze.

What this history fails to reveal is that the proliferation of topographical and architectural photography in the colonies (and the various ones that feed into this motif) were not unlike the photographic regimes that we see in European capitals. The *City* in the colonies had lent itself to a very wide range of image-making and production and is not reducible to merely an anthropological *object* of study. This is because the conceptualization of the city in the nineteenth century - part of the metropole-colony hegemony - was increasingly a relationship of encounter rather than just being in the hermeneutic of conquest and expansion. For example, a rigorous and robust site of colonial modernity - Calcutta - does not necessarily foreclose the possibility of having birthed regimes of scopic intent that was unique to its own position as a progenitor of modernity. It would hence be instructive to rethink colonial

urban photography as somewhere between just a technologized commodity and a cultural form of seeing; between one kind of emerging urban consciousness of native citizens and another kind of imaginary urbanism of settler colonialism. In other words, one would want to re-imagine the colonial city as a modernist metropolis through *a history of them being seen through photography*. This is what is the primary aim of this thesis.

By moving away from the existing critical trope and responding to Pinney's invitation, this project hopes to situate city photography in colonial India as tied to the global circuit of technology and wonder of photography in the mid-19th century. The project would claim that unless situated within the global logic of technological transference, the essential nature of colonial urban imagery cannot be satisfactorily revealed. Moreover, for a city like Calcutta, at the forefront of a planetary locomotion of goods and people in the mid-19th century, it is only natural that topographic photography would find a rich station for itself in the city. This project takes the arrival of photography in the subcontinent as a starting point. Then, through a cluster of pertinent archival illustrations, it hopes to contest and counter the limitations of the existing positions from the vantage of visual theory. By referring to both seen and unseen archival material, the project hopes to revisit the current thinking about what it calls *colonial visuality*; and proposes to bring colonial photography closer to the contemporary concerns in visual theory.

A broad and overarching historical re-visitation like this might raise questions of manageability. However, it can be addressed by insisting on a specific temporal scope and by imposing generic limitations. I have already noted that I am taking into critical consideration only one type of photography – *city photography* - as my scopic *field*. As far as the temporal scale is concerned, I have in mind the period from 1850-1950. Even if the 1840s is when the camera's arrival in Calcutta is unambiguously recorded, it took about a decade for the new-fangled technology to become part of the city's consumptive and affective life. On the other end, 1950 – the year of the birth of the Indian Republic - is a compelling bookend. First, because we are in the political domain of the *post-colony* and hence a range of colonial practices are in incontestable retreat. Second, the 1950s is also when the primary order of visual representation,

especially of *the city* in South Asia, is undergoing an irreversible shift from photographic record and memorializing to that of cinema and the moving image. In both ways, hence, it is a good period to close this project.

Is this project then a history of photography in Calcutta? Or is it a history of Calcutta through photography of the city? It would be important to state that this project endorses both but also eschews equally. This project takes the history and attendant historiography of photography in the subcontinent as a starting point to revisit some of the debates that have been put forth *by* and *about* photography in India. But history is not what this project is keen on remapping. It, instead, proposes to shift the contours of the debate along which history of the visual in the subcontinent has been written.

1.2 CALCUTTA AS THE SITE OF ENQUIRY

In South and South East Asia, there is hardly a city more suited than Calcutta that can be so intuitively appropriate to be the site of inquiry for a thesis of this nature. Birthed, governed, administered and sustained for over two and half centuries as an archetypal ‘colonial’ assembly, Calcutta was born into colonial modernity, was without a *prehistory of the modern*⁶ and was sustained by a colonial logic of administrative dispensation and governmentality. For most older city historians, Calcutta is best dated to an August day in 1690, when, thanks largely to the adventurism and industry of cunning English trader Jobus Charnock, it was officially *founded* as a colonial trading post⁷. Within little more than a century Calcutta had assumed the explicit shape of a colonial metropolis, invested with the desire and demeanour of the overseas capital of a large imperial power. Growing at a rate unimaginable anywhere else in India, colonial Calcutta was not unused to spectres of

⁶ There is scope for doubt whether Calcutta’s antiquity is tied exclusively to the arrival of the first envoy of the East India Company. That there was pre-British settlement in the three villages that coalesced into Calcutta is without doubt but there is no indication that the settlements were itself of any particular dispensation to have secured British approbation. So, the claim that Calcutta the city is without any urban history of its own is not without merit.

⁷ This date has increasingly come under heavy criticism from newer body of historians. The debate is philosophical, in the sense that a city cannot have a date of beginning as such and neither should Calcutta. So the date given here is not referenced as an unproblematic endorsement but merely as a popular lore about the city’s history. After all, the date is still marked in bold letters in the city’s calendar of events.

violence and conflict, however the surety of its energetic subsistence managed to prevail over the uncertainty of its anxieties. Its growth mirrored the growth of the Empire itself. The city grew faster than any other subcontinental city before or after, sustained by commercial energy, immigrant aspiration and colonial instrumentality, ushering in almost every mark of the modern Indian state first within its own, fervent confines. Most things that Calcutta housed were to become fundamental to the emergence of modernity across South and Southeast Asia: the modern judiciary, civil services, postal service, railways and transportation, electricity, science and invention, telegraph and telecommunication, printing and in social reform, to setting trends, later in the colonial period on the stage, in modern letters, in photography, in radio and broadcasting and of course, cinema. No wonder early in its colonial life it came to be known as the Second City of the British Empire, seat of both technocratic power and modern intellectual ambition, of local enterprise and global trade, of immigrant ambitions from across the globe, of mighty architectural monuments and great modern institutions of education and knowledge.

Why it was able to become such a success is, however, a matter of deep disagreement. The swampy conditions of Calcutta's topography attracted virulent disapproval from the very early days, when in the 1760s Warren Hastings, buoyed by his decisive victory over the local Nawab, planned to shift the company's administration from the imperial city of Murshidabad to the emergent new urban dispensation downstream on the Hugli, by then known as the British honorific Calcutta. To bypass the unfavourable conditions, writes Natasha Eaton, Hastings' supporters — in good Whig tradition—wanted to recast the city in mythic terms⁸. Such mythologizing and reimagining of a British settlement in a colonial backwater as a kind of *twice-born London* was instrumental in sustaining the colonial imaginary under the debilitating, trying and pestilential conditions that the British found themselves in. If one part of this mythologizing was the construction, half a century down the line, of the *Black Hole* episode as a imaginarium of native brutality,⁹ the

⁸ Natasha Eaton, *Mimesis across Empires: Artworks and Networks in India, 1765-1860*. Duke University Press, Durham, 2013.

⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power*, Princeton University Press, 2012.

other concerned the spatial appropriation of the city's central districts¹⁰. And that is how a small trading outpost, competing with more established trading hubs upstream the Hooghly, became the commercial epicentre of British India and a touchstone of colonial modernity. Adding to Eaton's concerns is that of Swati Chattopadhyay, who critiques the European instrumentality in establishing a historical vantage point for colonial cities¹¹:

The complex multi-layered landscape of colonial Calcutta demands a multi-centred approach. Instead of a fixed-point perspective from historian to artefact, we need to adopt a mobile perspective that describes the heterogeneous topography of power. Such a mobile perspective would help us recognise the historicity and ideological underpinnings of the knowledge we have inherited about the city, and the stories we perpetuate.

So, further to its origins having been reimagined in hyperbolic projections, Calcutta's spatial legacy remains coupled to the conditions under which they came to the fore. And that became decisive about how the city had self-fashioned itself as well as how it had lent itself, repeatedly and persistently, to the gaze of the lens. Drawing from Eaton and Chattopadhyay, one can concur that the mythical projections of its early rulers were concomitant to how that space came to be visually imagined, mapped, reconstituted, and discursively disseminated. In other words, Calcutta's spatial and conceptual urbanity is ontologically a condition of its coloniality and should hence be understood within that historical and genealogical legacy.

¹⁰ The Supreme Court had originally opened in 1782 and the orientalist Sir William Jones was judge from 1783 until his death in 1794. Criminal and civil cases were heard here for both Indians and Europeans. It shifted to the new building designed by Walter Granville, which was inspired by the Cloth House in Belgium's Ypres city, including the famous, 180 feet belfry in 1872. The Old Mint, resembled the Temple of Minerva in Athens. Marquess Wellesley became Governor-General of Calcutta in 1798 and decided that the existing Government House in was not a suitable building for his position and needs. Captain Charles Wyatt, the architect of the new Government House, based his designs for the building on Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire. Four large ceremonial gateways marked each end of the carriageways on the north and south facades. These were based on Adam's archways at Syon House in Middlesex. Apart from these behemoths, there are several buildings with Corinthian, Gothic revivalist, Ionic, Eton and Italian Doric influences and from the late colonial era, of Art-Deco style as well. Apart from these, the river is often mentioned in early images with Chandpal Ghat being the touchpoint at which the river came closest to the city in the proximity of Esplanade Row. It was the official landing stage for visitors to Calcutta.

¹¹ Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism, and the Colonial Uncanny*, Routledge, London, 2005, p 10.

Calcutta's unique coloniality and its position in South Asia as an early progenitor and inheritor of colonial modernity means that there is an expanding potential for revisiting its history through shifting critiques of urbanism, visuality and modernism. The city has registered itself in widely-known and discussed debates¹² around polity, class, governmentality, trade and commerce, gender, social and cultural reforms, art practices, the collective of which eventually produced the historic conditions for the late colonial state to strive towards political autonomy. More recent studies have also highlighted the need to re-imagine and recast the debate towards a more complex understanding of urbanity, mass culture and civic records¹³. But Calcutta's role in visual meaning-making and in constructing a heterotopic cultural space remains somewhat of a lack¹⁴.

What I mean is that modernity and coloniality have often come to become complex modes of simultaneous habitation and are doubtlessly most visible in the colonial city, often the actual and actualised seat and site of colonial power and its restive transformation. The rhetoric and politics of this mixed mode has often fed back into the reception of colonial histories in most of the Global South. Histories of colonial cities have largely restricted themselves to historicist readings which make significant allowance for archival studies and surveys, but do not embrace the more theoretically abstract and epistemologically diverse idea of modernity in the context

¹² See for example, Geoffrey Moorhouse, *The City Revealed*, Penguin India, 1971; Joseph Lelyveld, *Calcutta*, Perennial Press, 1975; SN Mukherjee, *Calcutta: Myth, History*, Subarnarekha, 1977; PT Nair, *Calcutta, Origin of the Name*, Subarnarekha, 1985; HE Busteed, *Echoes from Old Calcutta*, Rupa, 1888 (1999); Nisith Ranjan Ray, *The Profile of a City*, KP Bagchi, Calcutta 1986; Jeremiah P Losty, *Calcutta: City of Palaces*, British Library, 1990; Ranjan Ray, *Calcutta: A Streetside Story*, OUP, 1990; Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed), *Calcutta: The Living City*, (Volume I: The Past, Volume II: The Present and Future), OUP, 1990; Rathin Mitra, *Calcutta Then and Now*, Ananda Publishers, 1991; Krishna Dutta, *Calcutta: A Cultural and Literary History*, Supernova, 2003; Simon Winchester, *Calcutta*, Lonely Planet Publications, 2004; Tim R Barrett, *Calcutta: Strange Memories, Foreign Perceptions*, Deep Prakashan, Calcutta, 2004;

¹³ See Partho Datta, *Planning the City: Urbanization and Reform in Calcutta, c. 1800- c. 1940*, Tulika Books, 2012, Bidisha Chakraborty & Sarmistha De, *Calcutta in the Nineteenth Century: An Archival Exploration*, Neogi Book, Delhi, 2013. Ranabir Ray Chowdhury, *A City in the Making: Aspects of Calcutta's Early Growth*, Niyogi Books, New Delhi, 2016; Siddhartha Sen, *Colonizing, Decolonizing, and Globalizing Kolkata: From a Colonial to a Post-Marxist City*, University of Amsterdam Press, 2017,

¹⁴ Three works have, however, tried to consider the visual as the fundamental discursive tool to revisit Calcutta's illustrious history: Pratapaditya Pal, *Changing Visions, Lasting Images*, Calcutta Through 300 Years, Marg Publications, 1990; Brian Paul Bach, *Calcutta's Edifice: The Buildings of a Great City*, Rupa, 2006; and Sudhir Mahadevan, *A Very Old Machine: The Many Origins of the Cinema in India*, SUNY Press, 2016.

of colonialism. So, the scope of re-imagining the colonial city has not exhausted itself. In fact, a whole new paradigm opens up to discuss the idea of the colonial city when examined through studies in visual cultural history, most often mapping them through late urbanism, urban visibility and cultural memory¹⁵. Postcolonial scholar Neil Lazarus presents a compelling case for the same¹⁶. He writes:

In turning from ‘country’ to ‘City’, let us begin by referencing the important work of such as David Harvey and Marshall Berman, that sought to theorise the relationship between modernization, modernity, and modernism, that is between capitalist urbanization, consciousness and cultural representation. This scholarship contains much that is of direct relevance to the ‘postcolonial’ context- and Berman, indeed, was presumably already thinking along broadly ‘postcolonialist’ lines when he turned his attention to St Petersburg, under the rubric of ‘the modernism of underdevelopment’ in one section of the book. The radical transformation of the built space of the city, subject to creative destruction’ of capitalist development, in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth is not peculiar to London, Paris, Berlin, or New York. Strictly contemporary with developments in these cities – and linked precisely to them- are analogous developments in St Petersburg, Calcutta, Buenos Aires, Shanghai, Istanbul and Cairo. In the latter contexts, also, we can note the existence of crisis of representation – an attempt to register ‘the shock of the new’, as the forms of space consciousness and time consciousness demanded by life in urban contexts in which the commodity has become the dominant social form are counterpoised with inherited ways of seeing and knowing”.

So, while recent studies on the colonial city have rightfully highlighted the need to re-imagine and recast the debate towards a more complex understanding of space, urbanity, polity and civic records, the question of *representation* within the fold of capitalist modernity and technology remains under addressed. It is to this need that

¹⁵ See Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: *Lieux de Mémoire*’, *Representations*, 26 (Spring, 1989), trans. by Marc Roudebush, pp 7-24. 1989; James E Young, *The Counter-Monument: Memory Against Itself at Germany Today* in WJT Mitchell (ed) *Art and The Public Sphere*, University of Chicago Press, 1993, Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and the Film*, Verso, 2002.

¹⁶ Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, Cambridge University Press, 2011; p 60

this thesis is further addressed - to rethink the visual regimes of *representation* in an archetypal colonial.

1.3 LOOKING AT CALCUTTA

Calcutta before photography is a veritable visual compendium of paintings, etchings, engravings, aquatint and lithographic prints. And they were by no means limited to city views but covered habits and manners, interiors, festivities and of course, portraits. The subjects were mostly the settler white community and their lives and ways but there were occasional forays into the world of 'native' peoples, including the local aristocracy. The number and scope of these versatile forms of illustrative art and the critical issues thereof have received significant scholarly attention. For noted art historian Tapati Guhathakurta, the story begins with Tilly Kettle and the famous John Zoffany, whose work lacked any identifiable imprint of their Indian visits, except the portraits of Company's conquistadors like Hastings, who had assumed the status and purpose of a ruler in early colonial Bengal. As far as paintings go, since we are limiting our concern to landscape/topography it was with William Hodges that we first notice a delectably Indian presence. Tapati Guhathakurta writes:

First and most prolific of the landscape painters was William Hodges (1744-97), whose travels during 1781-84 bore fruit in a set of aquatint engravings, *Select Views of India* (1786) and then in *Travels in India* (1793). Hodges was followed by the famous team of uncle and nephew Thomas (1749-1840) and William Daniell (1769-1837), who made Calcutta their first base in 1786-87 before setting out across the country.¹⁷

What we see in them are the city and its surroundings - buildings, open spaces and rudimentary street life in late 18th and early 19th century Calcutta. We shall have an extended look at them in the following chapter. Do we also see traces of proto-

¹⁷ Tapati Guhathakurta, 'Art in Old Calcutta: The Melting Pot of Western Styles', in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed) *Calcutta The Living City* Vol 1 (The Past), OUP, 1990. pp 146-155. p 146

photographic instances in such art in the years leading to the arrival of photography? Yes, very much. As Guhathakurta continues¹⁸:

Their (Daniell's) *Oriental Scenery* (completed 1808) was preceded by *Views of Calcutta* (1786-88) a series of engravings which recorded in vivid and meticulous detail the vistas, buildings, roads and riverside of British Calcutta. With time, these panoramic visions yielded to more intimate, on-the-spot recording of 'Indian' scenes among amateur sketchers and visiting professionals like George Chinnery (?-1852), Charles D'Oyly (1781-1845), Balzathar Solvyns (1760-1824) and James Braille Fraser (1783-1856).

The work of these 'company painters' - the unrelated but successive retinue of talented painters and etchers, are an invaluable resource to understand techniques of early city views as well as an unmatched visual repository of early topographic print culture in the colony. Most of them show enviable draftsmanship, a versatile colour palette and a keen eye for detail, especially of the grand buildings around Esplanade, invoking the city as a romantic assembly of European determinism. With the arrival of photography, paintings - at least the form of city views that was popularized and patronized by the East India Company's elite - declined, because the aim and tool of representation shifted to photography. But several other forms of topographical views continued as supplementary to photography or independent of it in various popular print techniques - lithography and offset lithography specially. As Rosy Dias writes¹⁹:

Establishing, comprehending and controlling this landscape necessitated the production of visual records and representations in unprecedented volume and in a variety of forms. The Company was active in its production and patronage of landscape records and representations, training its employees in draughtsmanship, and encouraging and commissioning both British and Indian artists. The functions of this imagery (which was produced both within and beyond official Company policy) ranged from literal recording to outright propaganda – in between these, a host of personal, professional, aesthetic and political concerns can be detected.

¹⁸ Ibid, p 146-147

¹⁹ <https://www.bl.uk/picturing-places/articles/recording-and-representing-india>

The penchant for city views, panoramas, vistas, landscapes, greenery, roads, people and buildings hence go back well into the history of the British East India Company's painters and, in that sense, the new technology of photography provided a continuity with older methods of envisioning the burgeoning city's magisterial edifices. On the other hand, photography arrived across the world with a unique claim of embodying properties that could provide unmistakable *fidelity to nature*, and hence evidence of documentation, an unprecedented sense of *being there* and an astonishing access to forlorn lands and people. Together, art and photography (in every form but landscape in particular) entered a phase of tensed co-habitation from the mid-19th century, which would continue for over a century. This was inevitable, since the automation of photography and its limited scope for individuation would test the artistic reputation and marksmanship of lens-men. At the same time, the commodity value of photography and its ability to document life with new clarity and urgency made it popular and powerful, in turn putting the artist under new kinds of expectations. There were hence raging debates about the true nature and standing of photography in comparison to art. Calcutta was no less a station than others across seas to have witnessed, first hand, the shifting visual order between painting and photography. Significant parts of the ensuing chapters are about the debates concerning the *encounter* between the two, as well as their inter-medial, interdependent practices. This is particularly the case for the chapter on panorama and the one on the river Hooghly. In the third chapter, the curious case of Fiebig also invites comparison with the politics of *chromophilia* in art. There are also references to cartographic practice as a precursor to a distinct but uncharted history of Calcutta's *aeriality* in another chapter. Together, it could be said that between continuity and contestation with art is where lies the real nature of Calcutta's evolving relationship with the eye of the camera.

1.4 PHOTOGRAPHY IN CALCUTTA

Though it is difficult to assign a particular date to the arrival of photography in Calcutta it is certainly very close to its public pronouncement in Paris. Christopher Pinney writes.²⁰ that Daguerre's discovery:

²⁰ Christopher Pinney, *The Coming of Photography in India*; New Delhi: OUP. p 9

Provoked three long articles on the subject in the *Bombay Times* in December of the same year (1839) and by January 1840, the Calcutta firm of Thacker, Spink & Co was advertising daguerreotype cameras for sale. By March 1840 the *Calcutta Courier* was able to record what was almost certainly the first daguerreotype produced in India. Reporting on a ‘highly delighted’ meeting at the Asiatic Society the *Courier* noted how ‘Several [photographs] were exhibited to the meeting, of the Esplanade and other parts of Calcutta.

For John Falconer, this photographer was none other than Dr William Brooke O’Shaughnessy, who left proof that as early as October 1839, he was experimenting with photographic drawing using light sensitive properties of gold, rather than the more common silver. He took to the daguerreotype as soon as it was announced and by March 1840 has been able to exhibit to the members of the Asiatic Society of Bengal his Photogenic Drawings of Esplanade and other parts of the city²¹. If this is indeed the case, then it makes the antiquity of city photography in Calcutta as old as that of Paris! But there is hardly anything extant. Falconer reasons that lack of fresh chemicals, skilled teachers and the unforgiving climate may have played a part in the slow progress of photography in the decade in spite of the intrepid early experiments and their equally emphatic reception among the city’s scientific community. And the fact that this early body of work has been lost makes it all the more difficult to ascertain any regularity of a practice to them. A surviving reproduction of a daguerreotype of the Sans Souci Theatre — a Parthenon-shaped theatre building on what is now Park Street — could be one of the photographs from the ‘lost’ period, since the theatre was partially destroyed by fire in mid-1840s and declined soon after (see Fig 1.1). The daguerreotype of this handsome theatre must be very close to the year of the camera’s Calcutta debut. Siddhartha Ghosh, Calcutta’s own historian of photography, in fact, dates²² the photograph to about 1840. Soon, there were other establishments, introducing the camera to Calcutta’s discerning consumer. Ghosh writes:

²¹ Falconer, pg 10-11

²² Siddhartha Ghosh, ‘Early Photography in Calcutta’, in Pratapditya Pal (ed) *Changing Visions, Lasting Images*, p 143

Calcutta was witness to battle between the photographers of Talbot's School of calotype and the Daguerrean artists, operating from photographic studios and the Daguerrean galleries respectively.

One of the early Daguerreans mentioned by Ghosh is Monsieur FM Montairo, who was advertising in the *Englishman* as early as July 1844. One Mr Schranzhoffer is credited with opening the first full-fledged calotype studio in 1848. Ghosh also provides a more detailed account of the extant daguerreotypes of this early period. He writes²³:

Very few daguerreotypes have survived the hot and humid climate of Calcutta but there are notable exceptions. As far it is known, only one daguerreotype taken by (JW) Newland still survives in the competent custody of the Science Museum in London.



Fig 1.1: Clockwise Calcutta and its various spaces through the arc of optic modernity - from the earliest extant daguerreotype of Sans Souci Theatre (place of leisure, top left) to Governor House (site of governance, top right), Dalhousie Square (the heart of administration, below right) and Sealdah Station (the foundation of intra-city mobility, bottom left).

²³ Ibid p 144

Extant photography on Calcutta dates to the end of 1840s and beginning of 1850s. Amateur lithographer and photographer Frederick Fiebig has left behind an astonishing 450 images of hand-coloured salt prints. Fiebig apart, Josiah Rowe, had established a reputation for panoramas. Unlike Rowe, Frederick Fiebig was primarily a lithographer based in Calcutta, who when he switched and did a prolific profiling of the city's public spaces. Since the daguerreotypes and calotypes of the 1840s seem to have been mostly lost, we may consider Fiebig and Rowe as the first systematic photographic 'eyes' on Calcutta, and the Ochterlony could well be said to be already emerging as a foundational vantage point for photographing the city. The panoramic images of Josiah Rowe, Oscar Malitte and Samuel Bourne, from the heights of the 1828-built Ochterlony Monument, help reproduce the central districts of Calcutta, as it was built around the critical *open space* around Fort William. The expansive greenery of that open space is seen surrounded by an entire colonial paraphernalia. Panoramas reproduced the recurrent motif of using the Ochterlony as a vantage point to view the growing modern city from the summit of built space. A concomitant sub-genre of the panorama form was also common, using as a vantage the heights of newly built commercial and luxury properties along the Esplanade East, the Old Court House Street, the Strand Road and the then Supreme Court Building.

Many of the early photographers, as per the records and minutes of photographic societies — especially in Calcutta and Bombay—were primarily amateur photographers looking to establish businesses around the new invention, smelling great commercial opportunities. Most of them went on to set up shop in Calcutta with a dedicated customer base not only of the British elite, but also of a growing number of Westernised Indians. The most famous among these studios were Bourne and Shepherd (which shut down as late as 2016) and Johnston and Hoffman, but advertisements in *The Statesman*, the premier English-language daily newspaper, reveal, at least from 1875 onwards, that several establishments in and around the Chowringhee: Harrington and Norman, W. Newman and Co, John Blees, Stanley Oakes and Co, J. Murray and Co, F. Kapp and Co, Kodak, Bengal Photographers, Bathgate and Co, photo artists Captain Stretton and Raymond, and the pioneering Anglo-American Bioscope Company Pathé, which had its Indian headquarters in

Bombay and dedicated agents in Calcutta's Great Eastern Company (1992). There were visiting Dutch, French, Scottish, German photographers as well as the stereoscopes of American James Ricalton and the extensive city photos of the studio of Johnston and Hoffman.



Fig 1.2: A panoramic view of Calcutta from the Ochterlony Monument, with the Governor House, Town Hall and Supreme Court in prominent view. 1890s.

These establishments advertised a range of photographic services from outdoor photography to portraiture, and sold everything from camera and films to early cinema paraphernalia like animatographs and oxyliths²⁴. It would be not wrong to assume that a robust commercial culture in and around Calcutta's business districts grew out of photography's unique appeal, both personal and public, which expanded the cultural sphere around photography both as a recording tool and as a symbol of modernity²⁵. But most importantly the *camera* made it possible for the first time to

²⁴ Sudhir Mahadevan, *A Very Old Machine: The Many Origins of the Cinema in India*, SUNY Press, 2016

²⁵ There were several local photographers too. See Sidhartha Ghosh's *Chobi Tola: Bangalir Photography Charcha* (Ananda Publishers, 1982, 2015) and Judith Mara Gutman's *Through Indian Eyes* (OUP, 1982) both pioneering surveys about photography's local reception, indicating the enthusiasm with which the new technology was co-opted by Indian lens-men of varied training, means and location.

view the city as an organic, spatial entity, if not in full at least in a substantial measure. So the camera and the burgeoning modern city became a mutual referent of each other, something that is central to the methodological argument of this thesis.

In short, Calcutta (and also Bombay, Madras) became critical sites of production, dissemination and debate about photography fairly early in the life of this new and circulating technology. The fact of its early travel to India should help us to reconsider the possibility that the camera came to South Asia as part of an inter-colonial circulation of technology, goods and materials and not as part of a programmatic colonial mobilization. Just like its arrival, photography soon mobilised a life for itself in South Asia. G Thomas²⁶, one of the earliest commentators on India's photographic history wrote:

Indeed, officers of the British Army, between service forays and civilians in the district posts had so much leisure on hand that they did not do what to do to while away their time. In a country endowed with bounteous sunlight they found opportunities offered themselves to indulge in the pastime dallying with photography. These were soon followed by Indians with wealth and position.

These observations about amateur production, circulation and demand are supported by other historians of early photography, like Ray Desmond²⁷ and John Falconer²⁸. Together they lead us to the possibility that there was nothing immediately official or governmental in the early arrival of photography in the east. Moreover, even if the colonial government was soon keen to tap into the new-fangled technology to build upon their penchant for ethnographic profiling and control through production of knowledge, urban photography could not be easily schooled into a programmatic, unidirectional predicament.

1.5 A BRIEF SURVEY OF EXISTING LITERATURE

Without referring to the overall reach and dominance of postcolonial theory, it would be instructive here to look at a few recent debates within this field, particularly in the

²⁶ G Thomas, *History of Photography: India 1840-1980*, Andhra Pradesh State Academy of Photography, 1980.

²⁷ Ray Desmond, *Photography in Indian during the Nineteenth Century*; India Office Library and Record Report, 1974.

²⁸ John Falconer, *India: Pioneering Photographers 1850-1900*; The British Library, 2011

domain of colonial photography. By doing so, one can proceed to make a case for transcending the limitations set by post-colonial theory on a project like this. Since this project aligns itself to an interdisciplinary theoretical orientation, the nature of inquiry within postcolonial visual critique would act as a signpost, indicating the need and value of moving away from it.

There is no denying that the existing scholarship is often revealing and assiduous and manages to foreground the following observation: that photography in India sits comfortably and contemporaneously with similar techniques of colonial governance and surveillance, driven as it were by an ethnographic desire to collect India's great diversity under a practicable colonial lens. This would be par for the course for the post-colonial project, under whose influential critical framework most existing scholars make their case. Not unexpectedly hence, scholarship on the history of imaging in India has been anthropological in nature and to that end, has offered a critical historiography of the controversial (and deeply problematic) portrait and ethnographic samples. Apart from Pinney²⁹ himself, Elizabeth Edwards³⁰ and her team of anthropologists have vigorously sought to rework the history and Eurocentric focus of photography in general and bring to relief the vast archives of the colony under academic and public scrutiny.

To begin with, critiques of colonial photography have followed the expected trajectory, powerfully marking the use of the camera to construct a regime at the behest of the Empire. The critical consensus here is that the impetus of newfound realism drew out photography's skewed anthropological importance more powerfully than anything else at the time, making photography the chief tool among the Empire's apparatuses of actual and desired control. Recent studies have highlighted specific instances of how the new recording device was utilised for ethnic mobilisation, converting indigenous people into curiosity and exhibit. especially after 1857. Before

²⁹ Pinney, C. (1998), *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (2008), Pinney, C., *The Coming of Photography in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Pinney, C. 'The Look of History: The Power of the Aesthetic', in *New Cultural Histories of India: Materiality and Practices*, Chatterjee, P., et al. (eds.), 115-138. New Delhi, Oxford University Press (2014).

³⁰ Elizabeth Edwards, *Photography, Anthropology and History* (ed, with C. Morton). Ashgate, Aldershot; 2009.

coming to South Asia as a specific case study, I would want to draw attention to Behdad and Gartlan's collection, which, having been influenced by Edward Said's seminal work, focused on the Middle East. Their work is important because along with usual studio-centric imagery, they also make a powerful case to see even outdoor and landscape photography as part of a series of imperial power relations. In his introduction, Behdad writes³¹:

Art historians and museum curators have generally treated early amateur and expeditionary images of the Middle East either as distinct artistic expressions of individual photographers or as documentary projects to provide European audiences, in particular archaeologists and Egyptologists, with truthful images of the Holy Land and Egyptian antiquity. What these approaches conceal is the network of relations that enabled the production of these images in the first place as well as the politico-cultural context, which made them so rapaciously consumable as visual and exotic objects. That the representations of the "Orient" figured so prominently in the early history of photography, specifically in England and France, speaks to the network of aesthetic, economic, and political relations between Western Europe and the Middle East, a network that provided the logistical means and conceptual paradigms for various photographic projects.

This is important as a critique while it is also important to go beyond this position. We shall soon see how. James Ryan's work is more specifically focussed on India and Africa. Ryan's argument is compelling and he sums it up at the very beginning. He writes³²:

My arguments are thus oriented towards the construction of a 'visual history', charting the territory between approaches which on the one hand fail to situate images within their wider historical and cultural settings and on the other omit to examine critically the images themselves. My starting point is that photographic images do not simply 'speak for themselves' or show us the world through an

³¹ Ali Behdad and Luke Gartlan, *Photography's Orientalism: New Essays on Colonial Representation* The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2013, p 14

³² James R. Ryan's, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*, Reaction Books, London, 1997; P 19-20

innocent historical eye. Rather, they are invested with meanings framed by and produced within specific cultural conditions and historical circumstances. I thus argue that photographs- composed, reproduced, circulated and arranged for consumption within particular social circles in Britain - reveal as much about the imaginative landscapes of imperial culture as they do about the physical spaces or people pictured within their frame. In this respect they are themselves expressions of the knowledge and power that shaped the reality of the Empire.

Both Behdad and Ryan hint that a Foucauldian notion of power at the centre of the unequal geopolitics of the colonial state, and its relationship with the colonised subject were determinant of how photography, as a new technology, was co-opted into the framework of imperial knowledge production. Further to it, as Peter Hoffenberg, says in his review of Ryan's book, was the politics of visibility. Hoffenberg writes³³:

Photography helped address the compelling Victorian obsession with cataloguing and measuring, making some sense out of the twin dilemmas of distance and variety. Common metaphors are important here. To contemporaries, the Empire brought 'light', as did photography; the Empire invaded private space, as did photography; the Empire penetrated 'darkness', as did photography. Both took advantage of distance and mystery to make things close and demystified. Both were allegedly accurate and scientific.

In recent years, Zahid Chaudhary (2012), and Malavika Karlekar (2005; 2013) have made important contributions. Zahid R. Chaudhary, in his *Afterimage of Empire*, has written persuasively on how the British Empire, once it assumed full administrative control of India after 1857, sought to launch an anthropological blitzkrieg, arming its envoys with the fresh technology of photography. Chaudhary argues³⁴:

³³ Hoffenberg, P.H. 'Review of James R. Ryan's book *Picturing Empire: Photography and Visualization of British Empire*', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 31(3): 55-557. p 556-557.

³⁴ Chaudhary, Z. *Afterimage of Empire, Photography in 19th Century India*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2012, p 1.

Following the well-travelled rules of global capital, photography arrives in India not only as a technology of the colonial state but also as an instrument that extends and transforms sight for photographers and the body politic, British and Indian alike. Such perceptual transformations are congruent not only with the techno-material changes within photographic practice but also with transformations at the level of aesthetic forms.

Chaudhary is rightfully disgusted by the disposition on part of the British administration to concoct a triumphalist visual rhetoric through political uses of photographic evidence. Drawing from Pinney's *Camera Indica*, Karlekar also stresses the imperial gaze of the years just before and after 1857. Like Chaudhary, she convincingly writes about the increasingly louder argument in the administrative-intellectual circles of British India about the imminent need to make photography a successful apparatus of control and governance. In the field of medical anthropology and criminology, photographic evidence, says Karlekar, had important import for the colonial state. She writes³⁵:

As it moved into becoming a vital part of the colonial state's structures of surveillance and control, the camera was identified with veracity and truthful representation. This was clearly vital in a climate of growing distrust particularly after 1857, where the rulers felt that they had to embolden themselves with objective evidence and information about a people so different in race, temperament and inclinations.

Ali Behdad's critique is perceptive but one has to remember that since at least Napoleonic wars in the very years of the 19th century, Egypt was considered a playground of European powers and the exorcism of its exotica was undeniable to the average European consumer. To that end, photography fulfilled a long desired lust to hoard Egypt's famed antiquity as a framed souvenir, a reprographic trophy that was now easily collectible and consumable through photography. Ryan's argument, convincing as it is, can also be used for purposes that were opposite to his aim. That is to say that if one has to be careful about the *social life* of photography in the imperial

³⁵ Karlekar, M. *Re-visioning the Past: Early Photography in Bengal 1875-1915*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2005. P 39

context, one cannot consider *city photography* as equal to that of family albums and other studio photography, which is largely what Ryan looks at. Moreover, without underestimating the Empire's politics of manufacturing perception, one must also note that there was almost a two-decade gap between photography's arrival in India and its purported appropriation as part of the official apparatus of colonial management. That leaves the first few decades open to further debates rather than any brisk conclusion. Also Pinney, and especially Chaudhury and Karlekar look at photographic material that was concerned with military symbolism, quarantined ethnicity, medical anthropology, and *carte-de-visite* portraiture. City and urban photography are conspicuously absent. Wherever they are the subject of critique, they concern temple architecture in India's south, other religious monuments (Benaras, or the Sachi Stupa), medieval Islamic architecture (Taj Mahal, for example), or seat of pre-British monarchy (Lucknow or Hyderabad), which were subject to colonial violence and anti-colonial resistance which were then rigorously photographed to manufacture a triumphalist rhetoric. This was not different from the kind of power networks and colonial souvenir capitalism that Behdad and Gartlan are drawing attention to.

1.6 THE QUESTION OF THE COLONIAL CITY

These narratives are subject to debate, as indicated, when one comes to the burgeoning new urban centres anywhere in the world – be it St Petersburg or Alexandria or Calcutta. At the same time, it can never be safely claimed that representations of the city were completely outside the manoeuvres of colonial control. The current project, hence, makes no sweeping assumption that urban site-specific photography was *unmarked* by any colonial gaze and is hence benignly programmatic in their documentary intention. After all, the series of tools that were employed for overtly colonial regulation were employed in city photography too!

But there are serious deterrents in merging city photography with other kinds of photography in the colonies. Why so, can be enumerated as below:

First, city photography carries an inherent possibility of the frame having unwittingly included happenstance and serendipitous prospects which can be

obliterated in the tightly controlled studio ecosystem. This is simply because the city as a *social subject* is far more complex, networked, random, capricious and volatile than the individual as the subject of photography. So even if there would be a careful design of the imperial optic, which is itself debateable, it would not always be put into any programmatic application.

Second, in India, cities like Calcutta (as well as Bombay, Madras) involved both photographic practice and photographic debate³⁶ which were concerned with the technology and transferability of practice rather than just a one-way traffic of a historically orientalist eye surveying spaces of control. In fact, the city in the colonies, as we shall see in case of Calcutta, has lent itself to a very wide range of image-making and production and is not deducible to merely an anthropological *object* of study. And as far as the city is concerned, the nineteenth century metropole-colony hegemony was, increasingly, a relationship of global continuity, encounter and capital rather than conquest and expansion. In case of Calcutta, the (in)famous (un)containability of the city and the mobilisation of images around its feverish metropolitanism is a potentially rich vantage point to understand its engagement with its temporal and transcultural ontologies. One way of understanding trans-cultural ontologies is by considering the photographic ‘moments’ or archives as a continuous exploration of the city’s multiple selves and the equivocation of the idea of image itself. Hence the project also hopes to connect ‘photographic memory’ to tap into the unconscious of the city’s visual archiving.

Third, several colonial cities, Calcutta certainly, were without the impertinence of the *event* (1857 Mutiny for example), and did not carry landscape that bore testimonial to ancient or medieval built heritage which were either invaded by the imperial powers or co-opted into an orientalist imagination. This is not only because Calcutta echoed much of the *journey* of global photo practice within its representational register, but also because it posed a more complex case of being a *tabula rasa* as a colonial city. This fact sequesters it not only from Cawnpur (Kanpur) and Lucknow, which received photographic attention in some detail but also, to an extent, Madras and Bombay. In other

³⁶ Institutionalized as they were in the active photographic societies and the very dense journals that they published.

words, Calcutta, born to promulgate and populate a specific route and rhythm of imperial mercantilism, had also mirrored its life inside images accordingly - as a city that was amenable - indeed customisable - for newer forms of consumption. Unlike Delhi, Kanpur, or Lucknow, there was in Calcutta no template of urbanity or monarchic imprint that could be juxtaposed against the emerging, imperious control of the Empire. Since Calcutta's architectural and spatial landmarks were mounted on an imaginary, blank slate of memory (i.e. there was no identifiable inheritance and hence no violation of that memory), there is no way to understand the degree of colonial control of the visual space unless the objects in the picture refer back to themselves. Hence if colonial photography of the city's spectacular new architecture were to establish a certain politics of visual determinism, it would nonetheless be true that that same politics could only be measured either against itself or against similar other metropolitan formations in Europe.

Hence, the invisible design of photographing architecture and urbanism of urban colonial modernization is pregnant with a much more complex interplay of visual possibilities than may always be accessible to the postcolonial critical apparatus. So it would be erroneous to club them with all forms of photography. Resultantly, a certain *city photography* and topographical documentation (along with images of the various participatory sites and locations in a city) were not readily available to the determinism of a colonialist project, or at least to its attested, documented practice. So the colonial methods of whitewashing imperial design with photographic certitude, is much more immediately perceptible for the Lucknow of Felice Beato or those of India's ethnic exotica, than, say, the idiomatic imagery of architectural sites, urban topography, the thrust of newer modes of mobility and the eruption of technology that characterised urban life in the three metros, and also elsewhere in the subcontinent.

I would rather propose that considering all kinds of colonial photography to be part of a grand imperial deportment — which strengthens the postcolonial eye, but weakens a historiography of the visible — risks foreclosure of various possibilities, any or all of which could be at play in the constitution of colonial image-aesthetics in the decades after the unveiling of the daguerreotype in 1839. Moreover, as we shall see in the ensuing chapters, photography, like pre-Hollywood cinema later, was what

can be called an *open-source* technology that travelled the world with very similar thrust and often employed very similar means across the West and the East. To forcefully allocate different modes of *city photography* to a common affinity and optic singularity would be to lose out on photography's inherent globalism and the complex debate of transference that it ensured when moving between capitals of the world, Calcutta being a prominent one through much of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century.

To that end, my understanding is that the possibility of colonial photography in Calcutta cannot be said to have served the Empire's interests in any obvious way. If at all, it only sought to create an often flattering but always meaningful portrait of a grand *city-in-the-making*, to the point of mimicking the modern metropolis in Europe. And this is possible because Calcutta fulfilled the primary condition that stations of photography did elsewhere - of being a city that *continuously positioned itself to help construct a visual semantic of its own spectacular modernity*.

It is here where the project sequesters itself from a historicist trajectory and tries to re-imagine the 'colonial' by productively re-engaging with the spatial foundations of a colonial city. Such an engagement - through complex interplay of *gaze(s)* in photographic memory - reveal a technological consciousness that was invested towards an articulate spatiality. This distinction is extremely crucial for understanding photography's complex role in the colonies, because, when applied to colonial photographic practices, this approach reveals a good deal more than what is usually considered to be a visual compendium of a sweeping Orientalist project.

1.7 CRITICAL METHODOLOGY

If this is the theoretical premise of the thesis, it brings us to the closing concern: methodology. The history of optical technologies – photography and cinema (and then videography and digital filmmaking) – is enunciated by them being both part *of* and witness *to* modernity's spread across the world. In the wake of modernization in the west, it would be undeniable that a similar trajectory is *visible* in major colonial centres too. In case of Calcutta, there is both a derivative modernity in it being a spectacular re-imagination of a European city as well as a native urbanity, which were

forged in turn by planetary trade and local commerce, land relations and social reforms; entrepreneurial zeal and state planning, colonial bureaucracy and localised ministration, European planning and compulsions of tropical climate, spatial divisions and networks of intertwined circuitry. So modernity is observable on a scale of temporality and verifiable on a logic of technology but is also, and equally, a complex philosophical process of negotiating those sweeping, unprecedented and compressed changes. This is the modernization that came in the wake of colonization, industrialization, urbanization and the acquisition of knowledge systems and technologies of control that have characterized the cultural and political economy of most western democracies. The question of modernity's Habermasian dilemmas and critiques is of serious import in this thesis, especially when it is captured and memorized through the lens of the camera. But the project wants to begin at the *evidential* part of the process of modernization and then move into the deeper and more philosophically compelling questions of *modernity*.

Recent debates in photographic scholarship is what would guide the project, steering it away, as I have said, from the essentialism of the tightly held postcolonial position. Hence this project proposes an ontological shift from the established notions of colonial visual aesthetics in India towards a more complicated trajectory of colonial photography. More specifically, by 'complicating the archive' on the basis of new scholarship on both photography and colonialism, it is possible to interrogate how the repertoires in Indian colonial photography goes well beyond the standard perception of seeing such sites *only* at the receiving end of the colonial optic. What I ask is, hence, this: do disconnected image-practices generate a realizable narrative of sociological and political aesthetics? If yes, then how are image-regimes constructed and how do they emerge with realizable and effective symbolism?

So there is a palpable conflict between modes of production of the city photography and the image itself, a tension that can only be highlighted if one looks at this body of work from the vantage of contemporary visual theory. Hence in the process of engaging with the technology and capital of photography of the colonial city, this project would also want to foreground the need to *re-think* the epistemological basis for historiography of city-photography in the sub-continent. To

that end, from the postcolonial critique of colonial photographic historicity as a project of anthropology, the project hopes to take colonial photography into a more open-ended territory. In such an enquiry, one is never far from the seminal influence of Walter Benjamin³⁷, and Pierre Nora. Equally important for this work are the studies on photography/image by Siegfried Kracauer³⁸, André Bazin³⁹, Roland Barthes⁴⁰, Victor Burgin⁴¹ Jonathan Crary⁴² and others. However, by taking Calcutta as its object of enquiry, this project aims and hopes to take their ideas further. More importantly, most of the theories, past and recent, have managed to prevail against the classical western cosmopolis⁴³, the cities whose various stages of arrival into modernity and its recent history is attentively archived. In case of Calcutta, while most of the models of debating around a European city will hold true, some of it will slip out into ambivalent territory, thanks to Calcutta's chequered and problematic engagement with modernity, coloniality and visual material practices.

Among the two key influences on this thesis is Jürgen Osterhammel's monumental global history project⁴⁴. Osterhammel's main contention is that the world was too much of an interconnected flux in the nineteenth century to have been proportioned into solitary cohorts and enclaves of power and influence, in spite of the many empires that were in operation across the world. Not just technology and commerce, processes and official records, even architecture was mobile, says Osterhammel. He writes⁴⁵:

³⁷ Benjamin, W. (2008/1935), 'Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility', in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, Jennings, M.W. et al. (eds), Jephcott, E. et al. (trans.), 19-55. Boston: The Belknap Press, Harvard University.

³⁸ Kracauer S & Thomas Y. Levin, (1993) Photography, *Critical Inquiry*, 19.3 pp. 421-436

³⁹ Bazin A, (1960), 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', *Film Quarterly*, 13.4, pp 4-9 (Trans.) Hugh Gray Los Angeles: University of California Press.

⁴⁰ Barthes, R. (1982), *Camera Lucida, Reflections of Photography*, Howard, R. (trans.). London: Hill and Wang.

⁴¹ Burgin V, (1982) *Thinking Photography*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁴² Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer on Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, MIT Press, 1992.

⁴³ See Iain Borden, Tim Hall & Malcolm Miles (ed) *The City Culture Reader* and Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (ed), *The Blackwell City Reader*.

⁴⁴ Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, (Trans. Patrick Camiller), Princeton University Press, 2014.

⁴⁵ Ibid p 7

The nineteenth century is visibly present to us in a quite different way in the cityscapes that often form the backdrop and arena of everyday life. London, Paris, Vienna, Budapest, and Munich are cities whose physiognomy is marked by nineteenth-century planners and architects, partly in neoclassical, neo-Romanesque, and neo-Gothic idioms that refer back to older models. From Washington, DC, to Calcutta, grand official buildings drew on and imitated this past, with the result that the architectural historicism of the nineteenth century offers us a global overview of European traditions.

It is not just the city's built foundations that were part of a global mobility, but an entire apparatus of memorization, knowledge production culminating in the visual practice of looking at that city. As Osterhammel writes⁴⁶:

The nineteenth century is no longer actively remembered, only depicted. It has this in common with earlier ages. In the history of the representation of cultural life, however, it occupies a distinctive place that already sets it apart from the eighteenth century. Indeed, many of the forms and institutions of current cultural life are inventions of the nineteenth century: the museum, the national archive, the national library, statistical science, photography, the cinema, recorded sound. It was an era of organized memory, and also of increased self-observation.

It is here, in a language common to the *invention of modern life* that photography must be included *along with* technologies of mobility, spectacle, communication, self-appraisal, record-keeping and the like. To that end, like every other purchase of modernity in the colony, came photography and like the else, it thrived. Just like the railways, electricity, automobile or the introduction of modern education cannot be anymore seen as just *colonial* in its department, neither, can hence, be photography.

If this is a project of history, the other influence is work of visual theory, that not only challenges a simple and unproblematic connection between the object and the image but also those between the object and the conditions of its reproduction. This distinction is crucial for understanding photography's complex role in the

⁴⁶ Ibid P3-4

colonies, because, when applied to colonial photographic practices, it reveals a good deal more than what is usually considered to be a visual compendium of a sweeping Orientalist project. As Sumathi Ramaswamy writes in her introduction to a recent anthology on the politics of colonial visibility⁴⁷:

We are interested not so much in making a case for the sovereignty of the image — that would be a futile, even undesirable exercise — as in arguing against treating it as merely an eye-catching accessory. At the very least, by placing the ‘colonising’ image (and its linked technologies and subjectivities) at the center of our thinking, theorising, and writing, we aim to expand and complicate the archive on the basis of which both imperial histories and the histories of modern vision in the industrial age have been written so far.

Extending Ramaswamy’s claims, by ‘complicating the archive’ on the basis of new scholarship on both photography and colonialism, it is possible to interrogate how the early repertoires in early Indian colonial photography goes well beyond the standard perception of seeing such sites only at the receiving end of the colonial optic. Sophie Gordon further argues that existing scholarship of this genre fails to pay enough attention to the images *themselves*, which reveal no overarching imperative. Gordon writes⁴⁸:

There is an underlying assumption throughout that all the photographs are consequences of an unwavering colonial gaze. There is, however, scant discussion of the visual aspect of the photographs and it is the context and association of the images that is presented for analysis. The conclusion that one must reach...is that the colonial gaze does not, in fact, exist.

By aligning with both, the project would ask if photographs/images of ‘foundational sites’, collected over time, can reveal how disconnected image-practices generate a realizable aesthetic. By provoking a kind of representational ‘crisis’ as contingent upon the interplay of various ‘visualisations’ of cultural pasts, this project would seek

⁴⁷ Ramaswamy, S, ‘The Work of Vision in the Age of the European Empire’, in *Empires of Vision*, Jay, M., and Ramaswamy, S. (eds.), 1-22. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. P3

⁴⁸ Sophie Gordon, ‘Uncovering India: Studies of nineteenth-century Indian photography’. *History of Photography* 28:2; 2004; 180-190.

to enquire how the Calcutta topography was encountered in visual memory through a complex interplay of signification between the real space and imaginary time, i.e. the space invented in the process of transformation of social (or collective) memory into cultural material. To that end, can a symptomatic *reading* of the various visual representations of the foundational sites re-imagine a certain historical memory of the city? What is at stake here is not the politics of the arrival of photography in India and the inevitable colonial curriculum of that *deus ex machine*. It is more important to understand in what form(s) that curriculum traversed time and incorporated itself in discourses around the same. At the same time this project is an attempt to probe the underlying nature of the *photographic gaze* as it is transported in its physical form from one moment in history to another. It is an attempt to probe how the complex interplay of *gaze(s)* in photographic memory helps understand how an ambivalent colonial modernity was lensed. In short, can a critical interrogation of the *history of looking* at Calcutta provoke us to understand it as a *lieux de mémoire*? To understand this, we need, at the very beginning, foreground two essential concepts. First of them is what Jay and Ramaswamy highlights in their co-authored introduction to *Empires of Vision*⁴⁹. They identify two interrelated concepts as critical to the understanding of colonial photography: *interocularity* - originally proposed by Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge - which was a constituent element of the cultural field; and *intervisuality*, as proposed by Nicolas Virzoeff. *Interocularity* takes note of how the different forms of media — from photography to theatre, from advertisement to chromolithography and film — were all working together and cross-referencing each other in the late colonial period. *Intervisuality* refers to ‘interacting and interdependent modes of visuality’ that make it possible for each visual illustration — from the odd postcard to grand paintings — to erupt with the possibility of something produced prior to it. In the imperial context, these two ideas are particularly useful, they write, in ‘tracking how incoming “colonial” practices ally with or disrupt more established ones, trigger prior associations, catalyse submerged memories, render the unfamiliar recognisable and frequently reconfigure the recognisable’.

⁴⁹ Martin Jay & Sumathi Ramaswamy (eds), *Empire of Vision*, Duke University Press, 2014; P 29.

My chief contention in this paper is to achieve something similar while also challenging the existing critical reception of colonial photography, especially in the context of Calcutta, by juxtaposing a series of images that open a number of possibilities in the theoretical conceptualisation of *visuality*—as both a historical and an aesthetic practice—the city being both an *intraocular* object and an *intervisual* symptom.

To understand the notion of scopic and spatial coloniality, therefore, the relevant question is not whether colonial photography was “colonial” enough, but what cultural and scopic legacy photography left for the transformed *metropolar* colony. To understand this one has to look closely at the very moment of Calcutta’s transformation from any other city under colonial governance to becoming a sort of exhibit of colonial modernity itself, *enshrined* as it was in the nomenclature of being the *Second City* of the British Empire. Hence, the project would conclude by pointing out at the ambivalent and potentially disruptive possibilities that the colonial urbanist project leaves metropolar coloniality with.

1.8 CHAPTERIZATION

This introductory chapter is followed by the following. Chapter two - **The Calcutta Panorama** – looks at how early photography of and in Calcutta (with a brief reference to ‘Company Paintings’) reveal a distinct fascination *for* and programmatic appeal *of* the *panorama style*, to the extent that it assumed an autotelic image regime, reflecting a city’s perpetually changing skyline. This regime can only be understood if contextualized within the global panoramic discourse - both as form *and* method – and as part of the spatial and temporal arc of modernity itself. This chapter is hence mounted on a scale of comparison with the global history and fascination with panorama from late 18th century onwards. Chapter three, **Calcutta, Open City** is a close study of Calcutta’s everyday colonial imagery, in which the city is seen to be broadly divided into spaces of movement and spaces of stasis. Concentrated largely on Samuel Bourne’s *city views* and that of the studio of Bourne and Charles Shepherd, this chapter is a comprehensive assessment of the city seen by commercial photographers. It divides the overall archive of colonial urban Calcutta into moments

of pause and mobility because that is how most cities of photographic interest had developed their relation with the newfound visual language of the camera. There is also a separate section on the hand-painted salt prints of Frederick Fiebig, which offers a pair of hypotheses about the little-known pioneer's purported *chromophilia*. **The Liquescent City** - chapter four - traces the life of river Hooghly in the arc of colonial imagination - from its early days of being a fabled frontier to the taming of its expanse in the late colonial period. As much as the river incited early accounts of fascination, every effort was consequently made to make the river a part of the city's commercial (trade), administrative (port) and spatial prospect. In doing so, the chapter reveals a historical and continuous visual imagination of the river that not only parallels the city but also projects on to the river the city's coming into being from proto-colonial period to that of late coloniality. Chapter 5, which calls itself **The City From Above** deals with a rare set of images that record Calcutta from the air, which could be seen either as an extension of the desire for an ever-higher altitude (to transcend the limits of panorama); or as an image-practice that was new in its conceptualization of urban space. Drawing from pre-modern and early modern cartographic practice and a history of *aeriality* in the west, this chapter tries to theorize the captive and perspectival gaze of photographing a colonial city from the air and how it figures in the competition for aerial gaze among rival European powers since early 20th century. The final chapter – **In Lieu of A Conclusion** - is about a crisis of *perception* in late colonial Calcutta and the emergence of a new visual rhetoric of radical exigency of urban public space. What does the visual archive of the city in the late colonial years reveal about the liminal state of urban reconfiguration in the moment of transition to postcoloniality? In asking these questions, the chapter highlights the provocative possibility that Calcutta's visual nemesis in the 1940s is in actuality a political anti-aesthetic. The thesis ends by provoking a new question: Can a city like Calcutta – an archetypal colonial assembly as it was – make any reasonable transition to *postcoloniality*?

CHAPTER 2

THE CALCUTTA PANORAMA

2.1 PANORAMANIA

Whereas the Tower overlooks not nature but the city; and yet, by its very position of a visited outlook, the Tower makes the city into a kind of nature; it constitutes the swarming of men into a landscape, it adds to the frequently grim urban myth a romantic dimension, a harmony, a mitigation...

Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower*⁵⁰

THIS chapter is about the panorama *in* and *of* Calcutta, between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries. Early photography in Calcutta revealed a distinct fascination *for* and programmatic appeal *of* the *panorama style*. Taking the wide open expanse of the greenery (Maidan) at the heart of the city as its primary (but not exclusive) site, the panorama had assumed, quite early in the history of its iteration, an image-making regime, reflecting a city's perpetually changing skyline. Starting as early as the 1840s, the panorama attracted all of Calcutta's early visual chroniclers (a sample of one of them, Josiah Rowe, is in Fig2.1) and continued to be part of Calcutta's photographic history well into the 20th century. The unmistakable antiquity and regularity of this optic vantage makes it possible to identify an image-regime that started in the early hours of photography in the subcontinent and continued for decades. So, the panorama can be said to have mirrored an emergent city-space, while also bringing the city-in-the-making under the gaze of the camera. Taking note of this discursive dualism, this chapter seeks to interrogate the encounter between a putative 'gaze' and an encounter with metropolitan modernity. This is to ask if the panorama as an optic template *also* empowered the city-space (Calcutta) with the possibility of (re)producing a spatial modernity of its own. Moreover, not only was Calcutta being repeatedly *recorded* from the heights of the Ochterlony and other nearby *altitudes*, but the similarity of composition and the purposes for which they were being circulated seem to be tied to global habit and logic of circulation and consumption.

These factors, I contend, creates a tension *within* the image that cannot be understood unless panorama is contextualized as part of the city's history, as well as

⁵⁰ Roland Barthes, 'The Eiffel Tower' *AA Files* 64 (2012), pp 112-131, Architectural Association School of Architecture, p 125.

part of a widely practised global form of *seeing*. In fact, as we well see, the panorama - both as form *and* method - marks itself across the spatial and temporal arc of global modernity in the nineteenth century and as such was a critical part of the optical unconscious of the process we call modernization. There is no doubt that Calcutta's case was part of this circulatory system. This chapter, hence, proposes that the panoramic views, which found long consummation in Calcutta, directs us towards a critical moment in the history of photography as much as it *captures* a momentous change in the history of this city.



Fig 2.1: A part of Josiah Rowe's 8-part panorama of Calcutta, mid to late 1850s

2.2 PANORAMA BEFORE PANORAMA

The idea of a *panorama* or the desire to view *all* things at *one* time from *one* space (the all-encompassing gaze) - did not begin with photography. It did not begin with painted panorama either, which is seen as a predecessor of photographic panorama. Panorama was one of those ideas which were long in the imagination and stayed centuries in partial execution⁵¹. In fact, scholars⁵² have called both panorama and photography as *over determined*, “the product not merely of newly available technology but also the realization of a mode of vision that actually preceded the

⁵¹ Scholars like William Uricchio has pointed to the use of extended linear space to erect elongated visual narratives in almost all prominent pre-Christian civilizations: the Chinese, Egyptian and Babylonian; to the Roman *bas relief* on buildings and burial crypts; or 12th century *emaki* works of Japan. See, William Uricchio, A ‘Proper Point of View’: the panorama and some of its early media iterations’, *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 9:3, 225-238 (2011), Routledge, T&F.

⁵² Angela Miller, ‘The Panorama, the Cinema, and the Emergence of the Spectacular’, *Wide Angle*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 18:2, 1996, pp. 34-69, p 48.

technology that materialized them.” In short, panorama is to be seen both as a way of looking at (or optically engaging with) the world as well as a highly sophisticated artifice (as an assortment of technology aided by a set of paraphernalia) that actualises that regime. We must hence, briefly, look at the emergence of panorama before it eventually settled into a powerful and popular practice (and trope) in the dying years of the 18th century.

The most formidable, if not the earliest example in Europe⁵³, to which a perspectivist panoramic desire can be historically traced are the trio of paintings called *Città ideale* (Ideal City), which were painted around 1480s - at the peak of Italian Renaissance - and said to have been commissioned for the palace of Duke Federico da Montefeltro of Urbino. They are now considered to be emblematic of urban utopianism of Italian art at that time. One painting, attributed to Fra Carnevale (1445-1484) is shown in Figure 2.2.



Fig 2.2: Ideal City, 1480-84, Oil and Tempera on Panel, Walters Art Museum Baltimore

The paved flatness of the site and the magnitude of the buildings point to an unabashed appreciation of anthropomorphic determinism rather than idyllic (and placid) landscapes one usually associates with early art. In a recent review of an exhibition of this trio, *New York Times* commented: “All three are carefully contrived perspective scenes, their rigorous mathematical construction emphasized by the converging lines of receding patterned marble pavings, flanked by palazzos with

⁵³ The great Italian poet Francesco Petrarch claims, in *Familiar Letters*, that on a precise date in 1336, his ascent of Mont Ventoux in Provence in Southern France gave him such a panoramic view of Aigues-Mortes, the Rhone River and the plains up to Italy that it had a mysterious impact on him. This claim dates the antiquity of a *panoramic experience*, even if allegedly imagined by the fabled sonneteer, to the very dawn of early modern Europe.

classical architectural features and more conventional urban houses reminiscent of those of Florence.”⁵⁴

But this was not the only kind of imagination of the city from that time; for another kind of cityscape could also be traced to the latter half of the 15th century, when illustrated travel books like *Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam* (1486) - compiled by German priest Bernhard von Breydenbach with accompanying drawings by the Dutch artist Erhard Reuwich - was published. The views of the cities of travel in these tracts were wholesome, even if they were neither realistic nor very accurate. Soon, however, precision typical to Renaissance graphic arts gained traction. That there was a delectable tilt towards more identifiable representations is proven by the 1544 edition of Sebastian Münster’s travel book *Cosmographia*.

Aided by developments in mathematical sciences and perspective geometry, the bird’s-eye view of cities also emerged at the same time, the most spectacular being Jacopo de’ Barbari’s *Venice*, 1500.⁵⁵ In bird’s-eye view, says James Eliot,

“The city was depicted from a high oblique angle similar in effect to that which might be obtained from a balloon or aeroplane. The bird’s-eye view enabled the cartographer to convey the vertical dimension of the buildings and architectural features of the city, while at the same time retaining a horizontal dimension, albeit one that relied on perspective instead of true scale”⁵⁶.



Fig 2.3: Wenceslaus Hollar, ‘The Prospect of London and Westminster, taken from Lambeth’. 1647. The British Museum.

⁵⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/09/arts/09iht-conway09.html>. .

⁵⁵ <https://www.bl.uk/picturing-places/articles/recording-cities-in-print>

⁵⁶ <https://www.bl.uk/picturing-places/articles/picturing-cities>

The prospect of capturing the city from otherwise unattainable viewpoints continued to enthrall cartographers, illustrators as well as city sovereigns, the totalistic views giving the latter the feeling of lording over their territory. The most well-known work in this regard was done by the Bohemian master etcher Wenceslaus Hollar, whose mid-17th century views of London (Fig 2.3) were considered of rare artistry. Hollar and others made sure that the more regular successor to bird-eye and travel views were the cartographic enterprises that thrived in Europe after the Renaissance.



Fig 2.4: Part of Melchior Lorich’s Panorama (*Prospect*) of Constantinopolis, 1559.

It was thought till recently that the use of the word panorama is to be found in London in the 1790s but a recent restoration of Germanic painter Melchior Lorichs’s *Panorama of Constantinople*, dated 1559, has changed that notion. Remarkable for its precision in depicting the spread of the Ottoman city, this work preempted most things the panorama wanted to *be* more than two centuries later; including blurring the gap between depicting the city as an empirical entity and as an immersive curiosity (Fig 2.4). A recent essay⁵⁷ draws attention to its rarity, saying:

The Lorichs panorama is remarkable both for its rarity, as the earliest apparently reliable “prospective” document of the urban form of Istanbul, and as one of the earliest perspectively based urban panoramas, apparently produced through the assembly of field drawings, and

⁵⁷ Nigel Westbrook, Kenneth Rainsbury Dark and Rene van Meeuwen, ‘Constructing Melchior Lorichs’s Panorama of Constantinople’, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 69:1 (March 2010), pp. 62-87, p 64.

corresponding to the view from ground level, or from elevated structures, in contrast to the earlier convention of the bird's-eye view.

So, whether in maps, figurative sketches or realistic drawings, wholesome city-views were of continuous interest to artists and their patrons for at least four centuries before a delectable set of views, much more spectacular, colourful and showy, and that formally called itself *panorama* came into public reckoning at the dawn of the industrial age.

2.3 THE COMING OF THE PANORAMA

What distinguished the large painted panoramas from all their earlier avatars was the attention given in creating an immersive effect on the viewer and for being - from the beginning - a site-dependent, ticketed public *event* rather than a specimen of private artistry meant for exclusive access of the state or the learned eyes of the scholar. The final difference was in being a spectacle, which genuinely sequesters the painted panorama from all its predecessors. To that end, painted panoramas can be said to have origins in graphic and popular arts like map-making, etching and lithography rather than to tutored forms of studio art practice. That it found itself as the fountainhead of a seemingly endless retinue of visual entertainment since the early 19th century also attests to its public nature.

On the verge of the last decade of the 18th century, American Robert Fulton - a tall, restless man, having felt suffocated in backward Philadelphia - travelled to Europe to canvas his paintings. His miniatures received mediocre reviews but Fulton's eyes opened to the flurry of scientific inventions and political conflagrations that Europe was being swept by. He got busy in merging the two, having been struck by the propeller boat and the stealth of aquatic navigation, something that made his name known in history later.⁵⁸ But there was another thing Fulton got hooked on, because he was primarily a painter. And that was the panorama, for which Fulton had to thank the Irish painter Robert Barker.

⁵⁸ Through the 1790s Fulton was busy trying to convince - first the French and then the British - to try out his water-borne war carriers, none of which cut much ice with either authorities, thanks to the temperamental and profligate nature of the inventions. But they helped him impress, back in America, countryman Robert Livingston - key drafter of the Declaration of Independence and an influential leader of early free America. They formed a partnership which managed to revolutionize water navigation with the successful invention and propulsion of Fulton's steamboat. For more on Fulton, see <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Fulton-American-inventor>

Two years before the French Revolution, in 1787, Robert Barker submitted a patent for permission to commercially exhibit what he called *La nature à coup d'œil* (Nature at a glance)⁵⁹. His patent did not carry the word panorama. The grant-document said that the patent was given to Baker, “for his Invention of an entire new Contrivance or Apparatus, called by him La Nature à Coup d’œil for the Purpose of displaying Views of Nature at large by Oil-Painting, Fresco, Water-colours, Crayons or any other Mode of painting or drawing”⁶⁰.



Fig 2.5: **Left** A cross-section of the Panorama building in Leicester Square, designed to exhibit the paintings of Robert Barker. 1801. **Right** A plate from “A series of Eight Views forming a panorama of the celebrated city of Constantinople and its Environs”, taken from Galata, 1813

By 1792, when Barker mounted the first full exhibition of ‘nature at a glance’, the term ‘panorama’, comprising of Greek pan (all)+horama (view) was pressed into use. He named his first show ‘Panorama of London from Albion Hill’. Few could imagine the scale of what panorama would do to the 19th century, but the beginning was no less than sensational. As Markman Ellis writes:

⁵⁹ There were several foreseeable and re-engineered successors to Barker’s ground-breaking execution of the panorama and to which we will have occasion to refer to, but there was one immediate predecessor in the form of Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg’s Eidophusikon, which in 1781 had already created a staged iteration of moving pictures that were so aided by light, automata and sound that it created some sensation of having invoked a ‘presence’ where one could lose oneself. But Barker’s invention had wider appeal and could also travel to newer locations more expeditiously, managing to leave a rapid footprint across the Continent, and also across the Atlantic.

⁶⁰ See Markman Ellis, The Spectacle of the Panorama, Online source. See, <https://www.bl.uk/picturing-places/articles/the-spectacle-of-the-panorama>. (original spelling)

“Visitors saw a view of the two cities of London and Westminster, from high on the roof of the Albion Flour Mill overlooking Blackfriars Bridge. The foreground was dominated by the bridge and its approaches, while the river covered in boat traffic, with the twin cities, are seen from a distance, including churches, state buildings and cultural sites: St Paul’s, Westminster Abbey and the city churches; the Monument, the Tower, Parliament and Whitehall.”⁶¹

There are several accounts of witnesses to this and follow-up exhibitions, mostly recounting the awe and excitement and what Ellis calls a kind of ‘immersive wonder’. By 1801, the first purpose-built building to the panorama, the Rotunda at London’s Leicester Square was inaugurated. Soon, panoramas of Rome, Berlin, Athens as well as those of faraway and *exotic* cities like Constantinople and Moscow were exhibited (Fig 2.5). The thrill of being in the *presence* of both familiar and alien urban landscapes (and also naval excursions and military passages in far-off lands) were unmistakable. As per Ellis, the fact that panorama was essentially an enlarged, hand-drawn painting that played with the viewer's perspective and tricked him into an illusory and immersive experience was lost to few but most viewers gave in to the thrill, like a spectacle. To hold on to that willing suspension, the exhibited painting had to be changed every few months to ensure that the viewers would return to the panorama theatre. In fact, a recent paper by Daniel E White has revealed that several Robert Baker works, like the panorama of Dover, of Edinburgh, of Ramsgate - after their successful runs in Britain - found an extended life as an exhibit in Calcutta. White also informs that as per an advertisement in *Calcutta Gazette* in February 1812, the Dover panorama was offered as an auction for it was “well worth the attention of any Gentleman wishing so pleasing a picturesque scene in his compound”.⁶²

So where does Robert Fulton come in? He was the first to appreciate the commercial potential of taking the panorama building to places. He bought the patent of the building from Barker and built several of them in Paris, from where, like other nineteenth century paraphernalia of modernity, the panorama started to spread all over Europe. Painted, galleried panoramas of both near and far cities; of places both renowned and newly visible in the European consciousness, were a raging success in

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² See Daniel E. White, ‘Imperial Spectacles, Imperial Publics: Panoramas in and of Calcutta’ *The Wordsworth Circle*, 41:2 (Spring 2010), pp. 71-81. The University of Chicago Press. p 79.

Paris since 1802 and continued to be so, in various avatars till at least the 1830s. The success of them can be gauged by the fact that a street with three such panorama buildings was named Passage des Panorama. German architect Jakob Ignaz Hittorf, says Neumann Dietrich⁶³, wrote about the astonishing realism of these city views:

“Those who were lucky enough to have visited these famous cities believed they had never left them, and those who had not had the pleasure, thought they had been transported there.”

The same Hittorf is credited with building the largest panorama in Paris - having a diameter of 40 meters - at Champs Elysées in 1839, which was also the year of public pronouncement of photography. In fact, Hittorf's became the standard measurement for years to come. Painted panoramas in one form or the other held forth for more than a century, in spite of the humongous change to the idea of what constitutes the visible and the viewable.⁶⁴ The peak popularity of painted panoramas suffered a

⁶³ Neumann Dietrich, 'Instead of the Grand Tour: Travel Replacements in the Nineteenth Century', *Perspecta*, 41, Grand Tour (2008), pp. 47-53, p 48.

⁶⁴ There are numerous records of travelling panorama exhibitions since at least 1802 but very few have survived in their original form, but in sketches and drawings or in the account of witnesses. Three kinds of static panoramas dominated: that of cities and landscapes in the first half of its popularity and military and battle exploits in the second half, when Europe was in the midst of a fervently competitive display of national egotism. Of the first kind, significant examples would be Robert Barker's inaugural 'Interesting and Novel View of the City and Castle of Edinburgh' 1789 or his famous 'London from the Roof of the Albion Mills' (1792); Thomas Palser and Henry Aston Barker's 'Panorama of Constantinople and Environs' (1813), 'A View of London and the Surrounding Country Taken from the Top of Saint Paul's Cathedral' (1845) or views of Constantinople, Moscow etc. Among the non-military latter-day enunciations, one cannot miss mentioning Hendrik Willem Mesdag's 'The Mesdag Panorama' (1881) - a circular painting of North Sea village beach of Scheveningen in The Netherlands. The uniqueness of this panorama is that it is *still* on display in The Hague almost continuously since its inception and has helped formulate a range of reflections on the production and perception of the panorama form. Among the latter-day military panoramas, perhaps the most famous was Anton von Werner's cyclorama *Battle of Sedan* (1883), which was a gigantic panoramic re-telling of the critical Franco-Prussian battle of 1870 and an homage to the rising influence of German Kaisedom under Wilhelm 1 and his Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. It is now considered one of the most blatant examples of using panorama for propaganda or mobilizing public support for war. The other example could be Franz Roubaud's *Siege of Sevastopol*, which was painted on a 14m X 115m long canvas and unveiled in 1904 to mark the 50th year of the defense of the Black Sea port city by Tsarist forces. This is one of the last painted panoramas of this scale. Incidentally, the same Crimean War (1854-1855) was also the first to have witnessed the presence of photography in the front, a historical moment now usually recalled through, if not only through, the work of the British photographer Roger Fenton. The third and more specific case of travel panorama was that of riverine travel, the most famous being that of American panoramist John Banvard's *Mississippi Panorama*, which counted the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow as an admirer and which was brought to England for special show for Queen Victoria at the Windsor Castle.

Throughout its iteration, the India connection is unmissable; for Robert Burford, who owned Leicester Square panorama, had hosted in 1831 the painted city panoramas of both Calcutta and Bombay, while those of Kabul (1842) and Lucknow (1858) were presented as illustrations of respective conflicts - the British-Afghan War and the Mutiny - that they were at the centre of. Notably, the British experience was far from triumphant in Kabul but the panorama was born of it, nevertheless.

relative decline between 1840s and 1880s before considerable mechanical improvements tapped again into a growing public hunger for ever larger and mobile forms of scenery. After the 1830s, several three-dimensional modes of immersive illusions were gradually pressed under the broad category of moving panoramas (specific examples being Mareorama, Myriorama, Cosmorama, Polyorama) directly setting the stage for the coming of motion pictures. As such, there are three moments specific to the history of the panorama, which have attracted substantive critique in recent scholarship.

The first was the modifications added to the static panorama since the 1820s, which would add a repeat value for the audience. Scholar of media archeology Erkki Huhtamo, in a recent article⁶⁵ has revealed little-known details about the *peristrepthic panorama*, a form which had a brief public life for two decades (1820s and 1830s) and can be traced to one entrepreneur - the father-son team of Messrs Marshall of Edinburgh. What is revealing is that among other small changes to the idea of the moving panorama, the *peristrepthic*, a term coined to distinguish this form, had started making use of the shifting, concave screen and some rudimentary sound effects, preempting the multi-media shift that would soon be more publicly used in Louis Daguerre's Diorama. As per Huhtamo, this was the first time that the panorama started to assume, broadly, the purpose of a narrative, with a shifting screen and accompanying lecture that - in the course of a 'show' - gradually revealed an entire scenery. This was an improvement from the singular views of Robert Barker. Huhtamo has found traces that the idea of adding real-time mobility to the panorama could be linked to a barely-known patent that Robert Fulton had acquired in (1801) when he was planning to bring the panorama to Paris in a big way, an idea he probably left in haste to chase his navigation dreams in America.

The second example lies on the other end of the century. It was called Kaiser-Panorama and is considered one of the most enduring entertainments in Berlin and one to which the German philosopher Walter Benjamin was witness to as a child. Built by German physicist August Fuhrmann, it came to Berlin from Breslau as late as

⁶⁵ Erkki Huhtamo, 'Penetrating the peristrepthic: An unwritten chapter in the history of the panorama', *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 6:3, pp. 219-238, 2008; Routledge Taylor & Francis.

1883. It was a projection system for a stereoscopic slide-viewer (a rudimentary peep-show method) with about two-dozen individual viewing booths. Given the individuation of the experience, it had a more convincing effect of simulating spatial transportation on the viewer than the regular panorama. It was thanks to this innovation that Kaiser-Panorama continued to attract visitors till as late as the beginning of WWII, while watching over the gradual decline of most forms of pre-cinematic amusements around.

The third example, occupying the temporal middle-ground was in fact a radical improvement on the ideas of the *peristrephe*. It was the Diorama. Indeed, the year 1839, when the largest panorama opened in Paris, is not the only connection between panorama and photography. Another one was more organically woven. And that was to do with this Diorama, which had its origin in Louis Daguerre - the intrepid inventor, entertainer and man of indefatigable industry. Daguerre began his career painting panoramas in Paris. But soon he realized that he can do more with his large paintings than what was already being done elsewhere. His immediate inspiration was the Diaphanorama by Franz Niklaus König which had similar, if more modest, aims. In collaboration with the painter Charles Bouton, Daguerre improved upon König's idea to create the Diorama in 1822. The Diorama, which created a sensation, featured natural and urban landscapes — such as mountain views, cathedrals, and city street scenes—painted on both sides of a massive (approximately 71 feet by 45 feet), transparent linen canvas. At Daguerre's Diorama theater in Paris, the canvas was viewed through a proscenium arch by an audience seated on top of a platform that could rotate the audience to face two different screens.”⁶⁶ Daguerre created further effects by constantly changing and controlling the illumination on the semitransparent sets, thereby providing not only ample thrill to the audience but also, as if, making them participate in the manufacture of that thrill.

No doubt, the diorama was a spectacle in true sense, something that Walter Benjamin alludes to in his famous study of Paris. He writes⁶⁷:

⁶⁶ See www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/independent-film-road-movies/pre-cinema-the-influence-of-louis-daguerre.

⁶⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century', *Perspecta* 12 (1969), pp. 163-172. The MIT Press. P 166-167.

With construction in iron, architecture began to outgrow art; painting did the same in its turn with the dioramas. Preparation for the dioramas reached its peak just at the moment when the arcades began to appear. Tireless efforts had been made to render the dioramas, by means of technical artifice, the locus of a perfect imitation of nature. People sought to copy the changing time of day in the countryside, the rising of the moon, or the rushing of the waterfall. David counselled his pupils to draw from Nature in their dioramas. While the dioramas strove to produce life-like transformations in the Nature portrayed in them, they foreshadowed, via photography, the moving-picture and the talking-picture...the dioramas, which signalled a revolution in the relationship of art to technology, were at the same time the expression of a new attitude to life.



Fig 2.6: Top Louis Daguerre, diorama with gulf of Naples and Mount Vesuvius, circa 1822, wood engraving. **Below** Hendrik Willem Mesdag's 'The Mesdag Panorama' (1881) which is still on display in The Hague, Netherlands

For Benjamin, the Diorama was part of an expanding network of public entertainment, of which the arcades and phantasmagoria were two distinct imprints. But Benjamin's perceptive eyes hinted a lot more in the Diorama when he called it a new attitude to life, something to which recent scholarship has referred to. But before that we must note that in Louis Daguerre merged two of the 19th century's most potent and popular examples of techno-visual forms, signalling not just a continuity between two kinds of visual technologies but also doing so with a kind of cinematic flourish, something best heard in Benjamin's words. He writes: "In 1839 Daguerre's diorama was burned down. In the same year he announced the invention of the daguerreotype."⁶⁸

2.4 PROJECTIONS OF THE PANORAMA

Recent scholarship on panorama has been attentive to its purposes and projections much beyond its popularity and size and has reinforced in many ways Benjamin's views that one should consider the panorama as a fundamental shift in visual codes of modernity, to which photography and cinema added substantive heft. Two comparatively recent works, an exhibition and a book, have partially triggered this revisit; they being Ralph Hyde curated 'Panoramania! The Art and Entertainment of the All-embracing View'⁶⁹ and Stephan Oettermann's *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*⁷⁰. Not only did they retrieve from obscurity several important illustrations of the form but more or less agreed that panorama was the first mass entertainer in the modern world, setting conventions that were to become standardized over a century. Where they differed was their understanding of the antiquity of the form. For Oettermann, the panorama began in the 1790s with its ticketed environs, for he is more concerned about how the panorama birthed the physical environment of a mass spectacle. Hyde considers the panorama as an image-habit (or optic regime) that preceded the actual coming to being of the panorama and hence dates the form to a time much before its mass debut in the 1790s. This difference notwithstanding, they

⁶⁸ Ibid, P 167

⁶⁹ It was held at London's Barbican Gallery between 3 November 1988-15 January 1989; the accompanying catalogue finding wide scholarly attention.

⁷⁰ Published in 1998 by Zone Books of New York, with lavish illustrations.

have a lot to offer together, for both as ticketed 'entertainment' and/or as a point of view (way of seeing), panoramas had a distinct public life.

In his review of Oettermann's book, Oliver Grau gives a succinct account of what lay at the heart of this popular mode of illusion. He writes⁷¹:

Installed in rotundas, panoramas, sometimes larger than 6,000 sq ft, were gigantic photorealistic paintings that hermetically surrounded the observer. From a darkened central platform, the observer found himself or herself completely enveloped in visual illusions illuminated by concealed lighting. Almost 100 million visitors may have flocked into these specially designed rotundas before the age of tourism. The visitors surrendered their eyes to simulations of distant lands, familiar cities and spectacular natural catastrophes produced by these "image machines." Consequently, panoramas contributed considerably to public images of otherness and foreignness; the more exotic, distant and unreachable the projected landscape was, the greater the profit for the proprietors of the panoramas.

In a similar vein, Alberto Milano's review of Hyde's exhibition reveals another set of concerns that are key to understanding the wide array of critical positions that panorama threw open. Milano writes⁷²:

Panorama also played a part in influencing the taste of the general public, and conditioning the emerging reproductive techniques of photography and cinema. This happened despite the polemics raised immediately about the technique's artistic validity. The debate continued for many years, divided between Ruskin's view that the Panorama was at least useful as educational entertainment, and that of Constable, who dismissed the Diorama as art 'because its object is deception'. The word 'panoramist', used for the panorama painters, assumed a derogatory sense, implying an inaccurate artist...

⁷¹ Oliver Grau, Review of *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium* by Stephan Oettermann, *Leonardo*, 32:2 (1999), pp. 143-144, The MIT Press. P 143.

⁷² Alberto Milano, Review of 'Panoramania! The Art and Entertainment of the 'All-embracing View'' by Ralph Hyde, *Print Quarterly*, 7:1 (MARCH 1990), pp. 81-83, p 81.

Between these two views, roughly, we can find the discursive location of the panorama: as a substitute for travel; as simulation and delusion; as spectacle and deception; and of being questionable aesthetic imprint; of being partisan to a particular, regimented view and finally of standardizing an urban optic order. So, when we turn to panorama in photography, we cannot dissociate it from these multiple presences in its form and affect, to which photography substantially adds to. Moreover, these ‘projections’ of travel, spectacle, construction of a new urbanity and panorama as *point-of-view* have direct validity for our understanding of the Calcutta panorama.

2.5 PHOTOGRAPHIC PANORAMA

How do historians of the image look at the photographic panorama? Regular histories of photography might give an impression that it was largely a technological improvement, the engineered mechanics of camera making it possible to ever more easily capture the expanse of a scenery. Beaumont Newhall’s classic materialist history of photography makes no mention of the panorama at all, while Helmut and Alison Gernsheim see it as little more than an extension of the painted panorama, with some ‘natural’ modifications that the camera had brought forth. Consider the following description by the Gernsheims.

The nineteenth-century popularity of painted panoramas naturally led to photographic panoramas. One of the earliest was a view of Cairo by Francis Frith, made up from seven negatives and over 8 ft. long. When shown at the Photographic Society’s exhibition in London in December 1858 it was regarded as ‘one of the wonders of photography’. Georg B Ottcher, a Munich copperplate engraver, in 1858 took eleven photographs from the tower of the Peterskirche which he combined into a panorama 6 metres (19-ft.) long. The following year Sinigaglia of Padua showed at the Paris Salon a panorama of Venice nearly 4 metres (13 ft.) long and consisting of ten sheets of paper.⁷³

⁷³ Helmut & Alison Gernsheim, *The History of Photography: From The Camera Obscura To The Beginning Of The Modern Era*, Thames and Hudson, London; p 316

This description inevitably carries a sense of how panorama was merely a matter of scaling up incrementally. In fact, it was only a matter of time, as the Gernsheims describe, before a long single sheet of paper, of 39 ft. x 5 ft., made under special ordinance, could print a gigantic view of the Gulf of Naples. This was in 1903, and the picture was made by Neue Photographische Gesellschaft of Berlin.

The question is, was photographic panorama an improvement in technology or did it genuinely contribute in enlivening the spirit and affect of this genre. To an extent, that would depend on the kind of history one is keen to look at. Art history has often seen early photography as an extension of its legacy; while Benjamin considered photography a revolution for tapping into the 'optical unconscious'. Like most aspects of photography in its early days, panorama too has undergone a few stages: being an extension of large-canvas painting; being a radical departure from it; or being little more than a contraption to record what was already there. John Hannavy, in his entry in a relevant encyclopaedia takes a comparative approach. He writes⁷⁴:

Since its birth, photography sought to compete with human vision by the reproduction of reality; with the panorama, it succeeded in exceeding it. The panorama indicates, in photography, an image of the broadest possible angle of vision (up to 360°); it thus exceeds the extent covered by an ordinary lens (50°) and that covered by the human binocular vision (approx. 160°).

So was photographic panorama an extension of human vision; or was merely that of a scenery? Did it ever find use beyond stupefying audiences, mostly at the Great Exhibitions (in London, 1951, Paris 1855) which were co-existent with its emergence? This is to ask, could panorama, at some point, be understood as a method rather than just being a spectacle that continued the 'good work' of its painted forerunners?

Hannavy identifies four stages or processes of the panorama depending on its capacity to enlarge itself and enthrall an audience. They are:⁷⁵

⁷⁴ 'Panoramic Photography', in John Hannavy (ed) *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography*, Routledge, London et al 2008. p 1048

⁷⁵ Ibid, p 1048

Panoramas of views, consisting of a lengthened image, carried out with only one lens and in only one take; panoramas formed of the juxtaposition of several views; panoramas realized by a mobile lens allowing the coverage of an angle of 150° (since 1845); and panopticons, views embracing a complete horizon or more (since 1890). Initially, the juxtaposition of several prints proved to be an effective means to widen the field of vision; but the photographers were not satisfied with this type of properly pictorial representation. The photographic panorama acquired its autonomy thanks to the invention of special apparatuses known as panoramic.

The second and the third methods had the maximum appeal and run; and most surviving examples come from them. The last form of advanced panoramic techniques also had its day but by then cinema was knocking at the doors and the form had lost much of its capacity to singularly hold forth an audience.

That does not mean, however, that panoramic technology for the camera evolved easily. Indeed, like all photographic processes, this one too saw a rush of inventors with intractable mercantilist zeal. The first mentionable invention in this regard, claims Thomas Luhmann⁷⁶, dates back to as early as 1843, when Austrian inventor Joseph Puchberger patented a swing lens camera. Hannavy draws attention to the 1845's Megascop - Frederic Martens's bespoke, specially designed room to view daguerreotypes. What followed was a spirited race to design or imagine more and more sharp instruments, made by people engaged in various fields other than photographs - Napoleon Garella, Martens Schuller, Thomas Sutton being some of them. Luhmann's survey enlists developments that mirror both the commercial interest in panorama and the technological desire to match the same. "Already in 1858", he says, "the first photogrammetric panoramic cameras were constructed by Porro and, independently by Chevallier".⁷⁷ Porro's camera, Luhrman illustrates, could

⁷⁶ Thomas Luhmann, 'A historical review on panorama photogrammetry', *International Archives of the Photogrammetry, Remote Sensing and Spatial Information Sciences*, 34, 2008.

⁷⁷ Ibid, no page number mentioned.

be rotated around a vertical axis. “The camera of Chevallier consisted of a cylindrical shaped image area where an attached photo-sensitive paper was exposed”⁷⁸.



Fig 2.7: **Above** Friedrich von Martens’ *Daguerreotype panorama of Paris*, 1845. George Eastman House, New York. **Below** Eadweard Muybridge’s *Panorama of San Francisco* from California Street-Hill, 1877. Library of Congress.

This was clearly an effort to mimic the hand-painted canvas with a more tractable contraption. Parallel to them came cameras that combined a rotating lens with moving plate or film, like John R. Johnson and John A. Harrison’s 1962-patented Pantascopic camera. As Luhmann contends, “early panoramic cameras were not used successfully in photogrammetry. Obviously, the main problem was the mechanical precision of the rotation mechanics, and the more complicated imaging model that

⁷⁸ Ibid , no page number mentioned.

required higher effort during the image restitution process⁷⁹.” There was also one SA Stewart of Calcutta, who, as per John Falconer⁸⁰, ‘displayed his patented panoramic camera to members of the Bengal Photographic Society’, which received enthusiastic acceptance and also some whispering doubts about its ingenuity.

Inventions continued well into the last years of the nineteenth century, two most important inventions being the Cyclograph of Damoizeau (1890) and before that of P Moessard, who in 1884 filed for a patent for what he called *Cylindrographe* camera. “The panorama camera of Moëssard shows a professional layout”, Luhmann concurs, before he enlists one Pelletan of having invented the motorized panoramic camera in 1910⁸¹. In spite of what seems like a relentless zeal to improve upon the panorama cameras, Luhmann confesses that inventions such as the above did not always find ready takers. As John Hannavy adds, the first mass selling panorama camera came only as late as 1897, it being *Al Vista*. Parallel to it, Stirn’s *Wonder Panoramic* (1889), No4 *Panoram Kodak* (1899), Stewart and Co’s camera (1895) etc anticipated the popular and easy to operate *Cirkut* camera in the early 1900s.

Accounts of such technological inventions do not fail to mention that sophisticated lenses could not necessarily substitute the interest, curiosity and labour that panoramas extracted. This is primarily because cameras with wide-angle lenses would inevitably render the object much smaller in height than breadth, eventually diminishing the sense of amazement rather than amplifying it, which would defeat the very purpose of the panorama. So, photographers mostly stayed put with standard format cameras and used their own sense of exposure and expanse to create even more evocative specimens of city panoramas. And in that they were helped by other forms of invention. For example, Englishman Frederick Scott Archer’s wet collodion (or collodion) process, which came into large-scale use in early 1850s was a natural (and much speedier) evolution in photographic process, corroborating Louis Blanquart-Evrard’s *Albumen* prints, adding new layers of clarity in both image processing and printing. These pair of inventions bolstered the panorama. Collodion

⁷⁹ Ibid , no page number mentioned.

⁸⁰ John Falconer, *The Appeal of the Panorama*, in *India Through the Lens, Photography 1840-1911*, (Ed) Vidya Dehejia, Mapin Publishing (with Smithsonian Institution et al), 2000.

⁸¹ Ibid, no page number mentioned

became the *de-facto* method, in comparison to both Daguerre's daguerreotype and Fox Talbot's calotype, even if the former has since come to enjoy iconic value, given the difficulty of its know-how, the silver-coated metallic image-surface and the resultant rarity. Luhmann highlights a composition of eight daguerreotypes photographed by one WS Porter in 1848, often said to be one of the oldest extant panorama sequences.

Whether as a new-fangled contraption, as a commercial asset (as part of the specific circuit of what is known as 'views trade') or as a method of seeing, photo-panorama, as a gloss of history would reveal, was widely and wildly popular in the early decade of photography. There are numerous names associated with the practice since its early days; Robert Fenton for example, mentioned above as the photographer of the Crimean War, excelled in the panoramas of Sebastopol and Balaclava. But if one considers that Fenton, when he made his images available in 1855, was more than a decade late in his engagement with panorama, one might have an idea about the antiquity and geographical footprint of the form, its finding iteration, in the very first decade of photography in places as removed as Philadelphia, France and Calcutta. Along with European and American cities and landscape, the thrust for sacred in the Oriental was felt at the very beginning with Hector Horeau's *Panorama d'Egypte et de Nubie*, that was published in 1841, at the very beginning of daguerreotype's commercial spread. Between 1840 and 1847 could also be traced *Vues d'Italie d'après le daguerréotypes* of Louis Cherbuin and Johann Jakob Falkeisen, they being memorable particularly for two panoramas of Arno and its bridges. The craze and appeal for panorama could eventually establish particular early views of cities and sites as foundational to that city itself: examples being French daguerreotypists Marie-Charlesisidore Choiselat and Frederic Ratel's Alps and South of France, Wilhelm & Friedrich Langenheims' 1851 Panorama of the Falls of Niagara, Rome of Achille Morelli and Lorenzo Suscipj, Warsaw of Karol Beyer, Bangkok of Francis Chit, Hong Kong of Felice Beato, Basile Kargopoulo's Istanbul, Jacob Olie's Amsterdam, Baron Gros's *Fête des Aigles sur le Champ de Mars*, George Fardon's San Francisco and Charles Fontayne's Cincinnati. Alexander Hesler's Minnehaha Falls, Antoine Claudet's London, Edouard Baldus' Paris and Francis Frith's Cairo were not just

views but major improvements on the clarity and conceptualization of the panorama form and also, often in associated showmanship.

2.6 PANORAMA AS TRAVEL SIMULATION

There is little disagreement about the proposition that one of the primary ‘functions’ of early panorama was to act as a substitute for travel to places that were out of bounds of even most of the European elite, not to speak of the emerging middle-class. Depending on how one is dispensed towards the historical specificity of the European *age of travel* since the 1850s, one might think of the panorama as a precursor *of* or as displacement *for* travel to places beyond the possible. For Dietrich Neumann, this factor can be traced to the proximal sites of operation in Paris, where next to Passage des Panorama, in 1823, opened Passage de l’Opéra. Their proximity, apart from sharing the growing public taste for spectacle and theatrical effect, also gave the audience the unmistakable feeling of having been transported elsewhere. She writes⁸²:

The panoramas fulfilled a purpose not unrelated to that of the agency in the Passage de l’Opera: their visitors found themselves temporarily transported to a distant part of the globe without having to leave the safety of Paris, and without spending considerable time or money. When the Passage de l’Opera opened in 1823, the panoramas nearby were showing views of Athens and Constantinople.

Interestingly, Newmann says that if contemporary witnesses are to be believed, the panorama’s appeal superseded other media. One eloquent description from *Blackwood Magazine*, which Newmann quotes from Hyde’s catalogue, gives a sense of the sensory attractions of an otherwise static medium⁸³:

If we have not the waters of the Lake of Geneva, and the bricks and mortar of the little Greek town, tangible by our hands, we have them tangible by the eye - the fullest impression that could be purchased, by our being parched, passported, plundered, starved, and stenchd for 1200 miles east and by south, could not be fuller than the work of

⁸² Dietrich Neumann, ‘Instead of the Grand Tour: Travel Replacements in the Nineteenth Century, *Perspecta*, Vol. 41, Grand Tour (2008), pp. 47-53 MIT Press, p 48

⁸³ Ibid, P49 originally published in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine 1 5 (1824): 472-73

Messrs. Parker's and Burford's brushes. The scene is absolutely alive, vivid, and true, we feel all but the breeze, and hear all but the dashing of the wave.

Though this is before the advent of photography, it is most likely that the perceptive thrill of having been transported momentarily and under strict conditions in which one's subjective station could be suspended was not a force that would die easily. And in some ways these willing subjections to a simulation were becoming part of bourgeois habit. As Angela Miller says⁸⁴:

A tame and domesticated bourgeois public now found itself present at catastrophes at sea, fires, scenes of battle, and other places and experiences beyond their reach. The displacement of real by armchair travel was an instance of the spectacular nature of the new medium, in which the travails of actual experience were displaced by an expedited, edited, and misleadingly simple passage through a simulated reality.

With time, says Neumann, the simulation of panorama as replacements for grand tours became key to its continuous popularity and its resurfacing in related and emergent technologies. In other words, the thrill of derivative participation, the *romance* of war and the sense of figurative presence across lands gave long life to the panoramas - whether static or moving. It was no surprise that both photography and cinema tried to replicate these virtual forms of exhilaration, at least during their respective beginnings.

2.7 PANORAMA AS SPECTACLE

To the 21st century audience it may not be immediately conceivable how the static or even moving panorama could pre-empt the experience of cinema. But not only have there been threadbare comparisons between the two, scholars of media have gone so far as to compare virtual reality - a form unique to the post-celluloid world - with the panorama, asking us to consider panorama as that hyper-real experience that as much bewildered its audience as virtual reality does to us. Even if VR or virtual reality is outside the scope of this project, it would be necessary to look at the earlier

⁸⁴ Angela Miller, 'The Panorama, the Cinema, and the Emergence of the Spectacular', *Wide Angle*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 18:2, 1996, pp. 34-69, p 41.

comparison - between panorama and cinema - in some detail. Walter Benjamin had already indicated the tangled nature of the two but here I will consider two recent works, both written in the wake of the new archival revelations that have come to surface after Hyde's exhibition or Oettermann's book. As Miller says in her essay⁸⁵:

Both the stationary and the moving panorama can lay claim to being antecedents of the cinema ... as a form of reputedly stunning illusionism that approximated both cinema's visual field and time/space continuum; and in its last years, as an entertainment that anticipated the drama, movement, and epic spectacle of early film.

Miller offers a detailed exposition of how the panorama pre-empted cinema. The similarities were long- the experience of being inside a darkened theatre; the sequestering from a world outside, the singular projection of an image, the rudimentary accommodation of time and space *within* that image, the accompanying illumination and lectures, the thrill of 'being there', and the spectacle of a forlorn or faraway narrative were all new; even if staged theatre did in its own way, offer some of these attractions. For Miller, the striking difference with theatre lay mostly with the image, which moved, widened, narrowed, darkened and got illumined, taking the spectator along; a spectator which had already indicated its active participation in the manipulation by being there in the first place. Nowhere was this found to be more profoundly telling than in the panoramic scenes from history, which in many ways prefigured cinema's apparent and problematic 'neutrality' or 'automation', giving the unmistakable spectacle of having history unfold before one's own eyes. As Miller says⁸⁶:

The possibility of representing action as it unfolded in time and space clearly appealed to audiences thirsting for greater verisimilitude in representations of landscape and history, and tantalized those with an eye to profits... The image of a mechanically controlled narrative with a definable beginning, middle, and end encouraged a view of history as a series of unfolding scenes fluidly connected with one another, giving to audiences the illusion of mastery over random, distant, or otherwise incomprehensible events.

⁸⁵ Angela Miller, 'The Panorama, the Cinema, and the Emergence of the Spectacular', *Wide Angle*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 18:2, 1996, pp. 34-69, p 37.

⁸⁶ Ibid, pp 45-46

For Alison Griffiths not only did the panorama succeed in conditioning an audience for the cinema to come but through specific uses of re-staging, reenactment and re-visitation, introduced some of the finer tropes that narrative cinema will thrive on for years to come. As she says⁸⁷:

Through the repetition of place, time and a ‘seeing body’, our vision is aligned with that of the artist; and yet, in witnessing the scene through the panorama artist’s eyes, we are constantly reminded of its status as spectacle, especially in the 360-degree circular panorama, where, as (art critic) Wolfgang Born argues, we are ‘expected to disregard traditional aesthetic standards such as unity of space and pictorial quality in favour of what might be called cosmic effect’. The panorama thus invited suspension of disbelief at the same time as it vividly reminded spectators of its plasticity.

So, for both Miller and Griffiths, panorama managed to conjure a heavily illusory and emotionally immersive experience, which along with new experience of space along arcades, architectures of movement and transition⁸⁸ and the emergence of a new visual time⁸⁹ created the right kind of ecology for cinema to not only evolve but also, almost immediately, thrive. It should perhaps be noted here that very close to both *Passage des Panorama* and *Passage de l’Opera* was the Grand Café on the Boulevard des Capucines, where the Lumière brothers projected the first ever ‘movie’ to an audience on December 28, 1895.

Though most of the critical take on travel and spectacle are heavily invested in painted panoramas, a comparison with photography would not be extraneous, given photography’s seminal magnetism as an exact and unerring ‘view of nature’ and its formidable stint as a veritable simulacrum. Painted panoramas could have been better travel replacement or immersive spectacle only if one took their gigantic sizes seriously and the fact that they were to be enjoyed only under strict and controlled conditions. Early photography could not be enlarged at will, had severe technological

⁸⁷ Alison Griffiths, ‘“Shivers down your spine”: panoramas and the origins of the cinematic re-enactment’, *Screen* 44:1: Spring 2003, OUP, pp. 1-37, p 32.

⁸⁸ See Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, Verso, London, 2007.

⁸⁹ See Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Harvard University Press, Boston MA, 2002.

limitations and its dissemination was not remotely as preconditioned as that of the panorama. But photography enjoyed the long admiration of the new bourgeoisie as trade views and made industrial circulation of the *viewable lands* a part of everyday life in modern Europe. In fact, by the time photography appropriated the term panorama, says John Falconer, “the word itself had come to mean any wide-ranging and inclusive overview, used indiscriminately by both writers and artists. And it was in this broader sense that photographers throughout the nineteenth century were to offer their customers panoramic views, ranging from no more than a slightly wider-than-normal angle of view to large ambitious productions that required special production techniques.”⁹⁰

What is important is not so much the competitive attractions of panorama and photography but what one medium had lent to or let be carried forward by the other. To that end, photographic panoramas widely shared the impetus of both travel and curiosity that painted panoramas did, complete with the retinue of re-visitation or re-enactment (a surely not only for benign ends⁹¹), or for that matter mystery and seclusion⁹². Benjamin⁹³ has also alerted us to photography’s immense potential to tap into a world beyond human vision and its substantive claim over realism. Also, hand-painted panorama may have had a greater claim as popular cultural phenomenon in the mid-19th century but it could not displace photography as the chief art form of the industrial age; as an endlessly reproducible and circulating surface; as that ‘democratic’ form which needed no patrons and virtually no labour (which panorama

⁹⁰ John Falconer, ‘The Appeal of the Panorama’, in *India Through the Lens, Photography 1840-1911*, (Ed) Vidya Dehejia, Mapin Publishing (with Smithsonian Institution et al), 2000. 35-67, P 36.

⁹¹ Zahid R. Chaudhary explores how Felice Beato re-staged a ‘necro-politic’ retelling of the 1857 violence by stacking skeletons of deceased native subjects, which were exhumed and arranged in front of bombarded ruins. See ‘Phantasmagoric Aesthetics: Colonial Violence and the Management of Perception’, *Cultural Critique* 59 (Winter 2005), pp.63-119. University of Minnesota Press.

⁹² The historian of photography Ian Jeffrey, for example, cites the work of Dillwyn Llewelyn, whose Tenby photographs attracted significant attention in the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1855. Jeffrey writes: “These remarkable images of vapour and breaking waves survive. Yet even after many generations of instantaneous photography they still look unusual, largely because they allot such an inferior place to man. Dillwyn Llewelyn, intent on clouds and drifting steam, reduces human involvement to a minimum. Figures in the distance blend with the settings. The pictures, with their large open spaces, sea and sky, have distinctly fatalistic implications”. See I Jeffrey, *Photography, A Concise History*. Thames and Hudson, London, 1996 (1981) p 33).

⁹³ Walter Benjamin, ‘A Short History of Photography’, *Screen*, 13:1:Spring 1972. Pp 5–26. Oxford University Press.

did) and neither could be always programmed as per the will of the state or the monarchy. In other words, photography (most forms of it, including panorama) could claim to be much more of a potentially ‘mass’ medium in the true sense of the term, more than anything of its ilk, both as technology and as visual language, even if it lacked spectacle.

2.8 CITY PANORAMA: THE CASES OF BERLIN AND SINGAPORE

Very closely related to panorama’s task of simulating travel was the invocation of cities near and far. Cities afar were of interest anyway and those near were made equally so, by trying to show them from previously inconceivable points of view. Paris and then London, thanks to photography being born there, had received further irrigation with gifted practitioners and dedicated city imagists⁹⁴. Both cities amassed a large collection of early photography, be they of *carte-de-visite* and portraits or those of topographic and architectural vintage. But Berlin, at least when the comparison is Calcutta, offers a very fine history of how a city may have been constructed through a programmatic use of panoramas. Berlin is a comparable case because the dating of old Berlin to the 13th century notwithstanding, modern Berlin as a royal capital and an industrial city of power and influence can be dated to no earlier than 1701, when the first Prussian King Frederick 1 shifted his Royal residence to Berlin. To that end, just like Calcutta mirrored Britain’s expanding imperial geography in South Asia since at least the late 18th century, Berlin did the same for Prussia, and then Germany, since the mid-19th. So, with the exception of St Petersburg, Berlin is a comparable European case. As Miriam Paeslack writes in her new book:⁹⁵

Representations of Berlin, filtered through conventions or framed through language, were increasingly employed for the sake of creating narratives for visitors, starting in the 1880s and peaking around 1900. The aerial or panoramic view was well suited to convey these narratives. Tourist albums, illustrated journals, stereographic images, and large panoramic or dioramic installations were the technically generated manifestations of this distanced overview.

⁹⁴ London had its Fox Talbot, William Kilburn or the expat John Mayall; Paris had Louis Daguerre of course, and then Gaspard-Félix Tournachon (Nadar), Charles Marville, Eugene Atget and others.

⁹⁵ She is quoted in Miriam Paeslack, *Crafting the Metropolis: Constructing Imperial Berlin Book*, University of Minnesota Press, 2018. Pg 1

All these forms - panoramas, albums, illustrated journals and stereographic images (not dioramas though) were *also* employed in Calcutta and at the same time, providing us with a crowd of images that do articulate, in tandem, a certain imagistic construction of a city. What is also striking, like Calcutta (see Chapter 1), are the divided opinions that had greeted Berlin since the very early days of its announcement as a new European capital with ambitions. She was called flat, featureless, unduly aspirational and in fact so young that could well be competing with upstart Chicago rather than with her illustrious European neighbours. But the most important deficiency, and something key to your case, was said to be the ‘blank state of history’ that she purportedly inherited (or didn’t). Consider Berlin’s assessment from Swiss-German intellectual and author Germaine de Staël, who said that she would rather welcome new cities and laws in America because⁹⁶:

There, nature and freedom resonate enough with one’s soul, so that memory is dispensable; on our old continent, however, we rely on traces of the past. Berlin, this entirely modern city, does not make a ceremonial, serious impression, as pretty as it may be: One neither feels the imprint of the country’s history, nor of its inhabitants’ character.

For a European city, imprints of memory and history, as Baudelaire immortalized with Paris, was an almost inevitable cultural template, against which the forces of modernity were to build its case. But in the case of Berlin it was different, for much of Berlin’s reputation in the nineteenth century was built through the newfangled spectatorial and consumptive forms of panorama and photography. As Paeslack writes⁹⁷:

Similar to photographers in the burgeoning cities of North America, architectural and urban photographers in Berlin of the 1870s through the 1890s picked up on material transformations of the city and registered shifts in the ways in which the city was experienced. They began to photographically “map” Berlin, driven by either public and private commissions or their own interest in the city’s changing

⁹⁶ Ibid p 3

⁹⁷ Ibid, p 14

appearance and nature. They captured new public buildings, main traffic axes and nodes, train stations, and other infrastructural sites, as well as the city's new residential neighborhoods and street life. The daily and illustrated press soon began to play a crucial role in the city's cultural climate and self-promotional rhetoric.

This breathless 'mapping' of a city; the manufacture of a visual rhetoric of self-assertion; the claims to modernity, public space, new arrangements for and encounters with a burgeoning urban population; the attendant anonymity, estrangement and surplus of stimulus is to be found not just in these endless pictorial reproductions but also, in time, in both Expressionist art and Symphony films of the Weimar Berlin of the 1920s. In short, Berlin continued to call attention to its newness, its fervent coming into being and its readiness as a modern city. This is the case in Calcutta as well, and Peaslack's observation seems to fit for it. From Berlin, let us turn, briefly, to Singapore, a city nearer - in both geography and temperament - to Calcutta (Fig 2.8).

In a brief essay on colonial Singapore, Jason Toh, curator of Singapore's National Museum, provides a series of views of Singapore, starting 1863. His work, like most recent scholarship on South East and Far South histories of photography, point out the trajectory of technology and viewing habits as they spread to the colonial outposts. Toh stresses the fact that panoramic photographs were popular across the colonial world because they made excellent commercial sense. To that end, says Toh, the privileged position of the commercial colonial photographer was unassailable, as it could offer the viewer unprecedented access to the gradual emergence of a colonial city. Apart from the views that were part of the broader image-trade, Singapore's panoramas particularly point to two distinct factors, both comparable to that of Calcutta. Toh compares two sets of panoramas - one taken from St Andrew's Cathedral by Sachtleer & Company in 1863; and the other taken from Fort Canning Hill, by G.R. Lambert & Company, in the mid-1880s. The first comparable case is about the privilege of a position, in this case the Fort Canning Hill location of the Governor's residence (between 1829 and 1850), which gave an unparalleled view of the spread of the city, much like the Ochterlony did in Calcutta. The second case is

about what the image was likely to convey and how, given Singapore has had a similar trajectory to Calcutta under colonial rule. As Toh says⁹⁸:

In the span of half a century, Singapore has morphed from a frontier coolie town into a busy emporium for British and international trading interests...The tightly packed but ordered Chinese style roof-tops of godowns and shophouses represent the burgeoning ethnic Chinese immigrant working-class population oiling the machinery of trade. This is contrasted sharply with the evenly spaced out bungalows and churches of the European part of town on the left.



Fig 2.8: Above Albrecht Meydenbauer, Panorama of Berlin from City Hall, 1868
Below Panoramic view of Singapore from Pearl's Hill, August Sachtler, 1860s.

So, Singapore, like Calcutta (as we shall see) as much determined the form of its wide-angle picturization as a trading hub and colonial outpost as much as it also

⁹⁸ Jason Toh, 'Photographic Panoramas by German and Chinese Photographers In Singapore', *The Newsletter* 46, Winter 2008, International Institute of Asian Studies Leiden, p 26-27, p 26.

determined how exactly that picturization would benefit it to continue as a trading and colonial outpost. This is the key.

2.9 THE PANORAMA POINT OF VIEW

This detailed history of the many *uses* of panorama and its several forms of affect, including those which were reflected by the *city views* brings us to the final question. Was there something called the *panorama point of view*? One would begin by arguing that if spectacle is the intent, can propaganda be far behind? Cinema history has repeatedly alerted us to the ability of spectacle, among all cinematic practices, to embed propaganda with the most stealth. This is generally because of the reach of the image beyond limitations of both language and literacy. But this is more pertinently because of the sophisticated case of the spectacle, where the natural capacity of image to hide its purpose is most fruitfully borne - the viewer being incorporated into the buoyancy of the fold and the form without the knowledge of that appropriation. So, the scholars of all three forms - panorama, photography and cinema - have been interested as to how the panorama became a way of mobilizing spectatorial conformism; with the apt use of the sheer breadth of the canvas in the static panorama and/or the multi-medial simulation of the moving panorama. If it is indeed so, then can one see the panorama not only as a way of looking *at* the world but also constitutive of a certain ideological propensity?

Panoramas of the military conquests, examples of which some I have provided earlier, was surely the easier wager. The whole of Europe, through the 19th century, was a virtual war room. At the same time, thanks to burgeoning literacy; industrialization, wealth, popular journalism; new institutions; and a growing urban middle-class, there is an increasing clamour for public debate, including about statecraft. In short, the public across most of Europe were increasingly asserting themselves and had to be taken into confidence, even if partially, for decisions of that nature. For monarchies wary of such assertion, the panorama - given its ubiquity and popularity - was a potent mass medium to manufacture consent (especially about the

heroics of war). Starting with Louis-Napoléon, who was decidedly followed upon by his arch-enemy the Prussian premier Wilhelm 1, military panoramas found use across the continent, placing on them a certain virtue. As Miller writes⁹⁹:

The image of a mechanically controlled narrative with a definable beginning, middle, and end encouraged a view of history as a series of unfolding scenes fluidly connected with one another, giving to audiences the illusion of mastery over random, distant, or otherwise incomprehensible events.

This is doubtlessly a textbook case of initiating a regulated view of military exploits through an endorsement of narrative certainties and sequential patterns. While the idea of propagating an idealized view of history was by no measure new to art, what made the case particularly potent is the scale of the panorama and it having become an event worthy of public participation, making it particularly amenable to the principles of propaganda.

What is much less manifest is if the apparently benign scenic city views and other forms of panorama could also reinforce an ideological position; and appropriate a view of the city as something more than just a transient form of immersive wonderment. Here too, the public, non-elite nature of the form plays a role; for panorama assumed no particular artistic or intellectual schooling. So, by suitably simplifying matters, it dedicated itself to a language of mass comprehension, opening itself up to being a participatory mass medium. And it is because of this large admittance available to the panoramic image that photography and cinema would eventually look for in the legacy of the panorama¹⁰⁰. Second, it was far easier to shoot cities - whether restive or in repose - than to actually conjure military adventures and armed conflicts in distant lands for purposes of photography. Painted panorama could do it. But for both photography and early cinema that would be unthinkable. Hence, it

⁹⁹ Angela Miller, 'The Panorama, the Cinema, and the Emergence of the Spectacular', *Wide Angle*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 18:2, 1996, pp. 34-69, p 46

¹⁰⁰ Uricchio, for example, lists the prevalence of the films listed as 'panoramic views' either in United States between 1896 and 1912 or in the Pathe pantheon in Europe at the same time, hinting at how early cinema was keen to reproduce the advantages that panorama had already secured for the medium.

would be worthy to ask if photography (and cinema), in the pursuit of viewing scenes (cities or nature) ‘as it is’ would also want to play with viewpoints, vantages and totalities of its viewers.

One can say, firmly ensconced as one is in the 21st century, that photography and cinema can and does manipulate what it wants to show as neutral views. So it is not so much a question of *if* but *how* one could turn a so-called neutral landscape view into an ideologically-loaded ‘perspective’. And hence it would be instructive to concentrate on this latter - more furtive - *manufacture* of point-of-view in the panorama of the cities and related topos.

There has been considerable discussion in recent panorama studies about this point-of-view problem. William Uricchio, for example, wants to go back to the beginning of the panorama form to interrogate its latent potential for harbouring a point of view that was pre-adjusted for the viewer. He writes¹⁰¹:

The panorama entered the world not as a visual format but as a claim: to lure viewers into a particular relationship with their visual environment. Robert Barker’s 1787 patent for a 360-degree painting emphasized the construction of ‘a proper point of view’ with the stated goal of making the viewer ‘feel as if really on the very spot.

In fact, Uricchio prefers the translation ‘spectacle’ for the Greek noun ‘horama’ - the source word - putting the act of control of a sight at the etymological heart of panorama. He also draws attention to the fact that Bentham’s Pantopticon was conceived almost at the same time as Barker’s panorama and to which both Foucault and Jonathan Crary have referred to. For Uricchio, they share a method of staging a set of strategies that would enhance participation of a set of subjects in establishing total control of what they could see. There were also differences, many of them, for example, as Uricchio says: ‘one convincing the viewer that she had visual access to everything that could be seen from a particular vantage point, and the other

¹⁰¹ William Uricchio, A ‘Proper Point of View’: the panorama and some of its early media iterations’, *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 9:3, 225-238 (2011), Routledge, T&F. P3

convincing the viewed that they were always being seen”¹⁰². Even so, it is obvious that the notion of having ‘visual access to everything that could be seen’ was a prospect that the panorama - since its early days and through its artifice - had made part of its telos. And that is central to it emerging to be the front-running mass entertainment since the dawn of the industrial age. Moreover, the fact that panorama had sought to bring to view far-off cities that lie at the various ends of the European imperial cartography, it is unlikely that it was immune to the usual epistemological manipulations typical of the empire anywhere. As Miller writes¹⁰³:

The panorama, with its sense of an amplified geographical and political perspective, served well the needs of a public for information about new areas being colonized by Europe. As the cinema would later do, it offered a sensationalized simulacrum of the real — rendering the newly colonized regions of the world both accessible and visible, glorifying the imperial state, and imposing the illusion of order onto the fabric of the rapidly urbanizing cities of Europe and America.

So in this sense, panoramas of the cities and landscapes had staked their claim as an organizing principle of the empire itself, giving the viewer the feeling that not only are major parts of the world now visible but they were also equally governable - the elongated canvas or the stitched sequence of the photograph being the representational equivalent of an actual space of concentrated control. In other words, the panorama could be said to have simulated and hence drawn its power from perpetrating a unified world order (with, of course, the imperial powers being that world) for the uninitiated European viewer. So we can conclude that the wholeness of a perspective that panorama foregrounded became a cultural and methodical custodian of the mass. But an equally possible reading to this metaphoric function of the panorama was its opposite. If distant panoramic views gave the average viewer a sense of partaking in the imperial project of control, it also, at the same time, provided

¹⁰² Ibid, P 4

¹⁰³ Angela Miller, ‘The Panorama, the Cinema, and the Emergence of the Spectacular’, *Wide Angle*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 18:2, 1996, pp. 34-69, p 47

a sense of repose from their daily lives that was increasingly beyond their perceptive and cognitive capacity. As Alison Griffiths writes¹⁰⁴

By the second half of the nineteenth century, panoramas may have offered audiences temporary respite from the rush of modernity and, like the early motion picture theatre, provided working-class audiences a place to exercise control over some portion of their daily lives, increasingly ruled by the assembly line and transport timetable.

Are we then to assume then the average European viewer, beleaguered by the ‘montagist’, fleeting nature of modernization and in an effort at escaping it, was looking into the panorama for a sense of certitude and omnipresence, which the nineteenth century literary narratology abounds in? Are we concluding then that the entertainment ‘value’ of panorama was in its reassuring ‘entirety’? In this sense then, the panorama was both an immersion and an escape; it was as much about culpability in the imperial project as much it was a means to look away from it. To that end, the politics of the panorama, if we can say, is far from being a conclusive one. Barthes’ eloquent essay on viewing Paris from the Eiffel Tower, which we will look at subsequently, or Michel de Certeau’s iconic essay on late-modern *flaneurie*¹⁰⁵ are wonderful testaments to that effect.

Considering its equal appeal across varying registers of travel, urban self-projection, spectacle; and the onus of protruding a discursive unity on conquests of the colony one needs to be circumspect about assigning the panorama any one set of ideas. On one hand it did find commercial and cultural capital in trying to bank on a set of very detailed views, which over time received the felicity of various inventions, enhancements, methods of canvassing and endorsements from various establishments, including the state. On the other hand, the panorama was too vast, too multitudinous and too popular a form to have been subjugated to one set of cultural, social or representational values. As Uricchio says, much of our views “draws upon a social

¹⁰⁴ Alison Griffiths, ‘“Shivers down your spine”: panoramas and the origins of the cinematic re-enactment’, *Screen* 44:1:Spring 2003, Oxford University Press, pp. 1-37, p 35.

¹⁰⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Trans) Steven F Rendall, University of California Press; Berkeley, 3rd edition, 2011.

and historically accrued perspective”¹⁰⁶ because we have seen, through the arc of modernity an “ever-more pervasive integration of the spectacle industry into the larger political-economy of society”, which in fact and retrospectively, projects onto the panorama a ‘general directionality’ to that end. But that does not necessarily mean that its purposes, specially the ideological one (as against that of mere spectacle) were integrally entwined into its being.

It is in such a state of critical incertitude that we enter Calcutta.

2.10 CALCUTTA BEFORE PHOTOGRAPHY

If we discount photography for the time being, we can, in fact, place the antiquity of panoramas in Calcutta to an earlier time, for the first mention of the same is to be found in William Wood’s *A Series of Twenty-Eight Panoramic Views of Calcutta* - the lithograph collection having been published in London in 1833 from the views made by Wood in 1831. Wood’s series, says John Falconer, was not only the first comprehensive panoramic record of the Calcutta’s Esplanade area but also were “not taken from a single vantage point, but favoured a shifting view that permitted a closer and more accurate head-on view for each section”¹⁰⁷.



Fig 2.9: Left ‘A View of Calcutta, taken from Fort William’ - Plate 110, William Hodge’s 1793 engraving series *Travels in India*. Right ‘A View of Calcutta from Fort William’, coloured aquatint by M Dubourg after Samuel Davis, published by Edward Orme, London 1807.

¹⁰⁶ William Uricchio, A ‘Proper Point of View’: the panorama and some of its early media iterations’, *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 9:3, 225-238 (2011), Routledge, T&F. P12

¹⁰⁷ John Falconer, ‘The Appeal of the Panorama’, p 40



Fig 2.10: Top Right and Left Pen and ink drawing of parts of the garden front (left) and East Wing of the Government House by Amherst, Lady Sarah Elizabeth, 1824. **Below right and left** Lithographs derived from plate 1 (left) & plate 3 of William Wood's 'Views of Calcutta'. 1833. This was the first lithographic series on Calcutta than by engraving or aquatinting.

As a whole the views stretched “from the River Hugli in the west, to Fort William in the South”¹⁰⁸. We can see two of the images from that collection in Fig 2.11. But if one is not particularly beholden to the use of the term panorama, it would be instructive to look at one of William Hodges engravings from 1793 (which was about the same time that Barker's panorama had made its debut in London) which offer a rather wide-angle view of the city from the roof of the Fort William, spitting the rear canvas into the river and the adjoining landmass; and letting the sky dwarf the figures and the buildings (Fig 2.9 left). An almost same view is repeated in an 1807 aquatint (Fig 2.9 right). Both were as panoramic in intent as anything else, giving a hint of the value that popular print was increasingly assigning to expansive views of colonial cities. So seems to be the case for Charles D'Oyly's paintings, which mostly survive as lithographs (Fig 2.13). A popular protege and student of the romantic painter and teacher George Chinnery in Calcutta, baronet D'Oyly had an eventful stay in the city between the 1830s and 1840s and was one of the last key figures of

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, P 40

western-style city painters. One should also mention the distinctive case of Lady Sarah Amherst, whose pen and ink drawings (Fig 2.10) were delectably different, even though she too was Chinnery's student. A final case here would be the Indian painter Shaikh Muhammad Amir of Karraya, who was a popular painter of standardized views of Calcutta to British residents and was an important Indian painter in the 1820s and 1830s. (Fig 2.12).

As practice, paintings, lithographs and engravings (re)present a different set of concerns than photography, for ultimately they were under no obligation to produce nature as it is (unless as reproduction of photographs) and as such were amenable to the artist's (or other, more insidious) intent. At least far more than photography would, in the early days, make allowance for.



Fig 2.11: **Above** Muhammad Amir, Shaikh, of Karraya's watercolour 'View of Government House and Esplanade Row from the Old Course', 1830. **Below** Coloured lithograph from plate XXV of Charles D'Oyly's, *Views of Calcutta and its Environs*, 1848.

For example, Hodges, a student of Classical Idealism, found the light in the Subcontinent intriguing. Moreover, he found the objects and scenery in the East so fascinating that it forced him to change his style to a set of personal views (rather than structured scientism, which was what he was originally assigned to follow). For

Mildred Archer¹⁰⁹, by playing with light and objects from a state of personal enrichment, he pre-empted arch romantics like John Constable and William Turner. Compared to Hodges, the Daniells, wrote Archer, were conventional painters of the picturesque. Between them and their successors - especially Chinnery and D'Oyly - they consolidated what was to be the British view of India. As such hence, the critical reception of this art has been to see them as some kind of a cross between a picaresque romanticism¹¹⁰ and sober realism. This is proved by the detailed iterations of particular buildings (Fort William, Governor House, Chowringhee, Ochterlony, Chandpal Ghat) which are then cast against a piquant sky, a limitless realm, an arresting palette and highly evocative atmospherics, rendering streets and humans merely as minutiae. Further to their styles, most of these painters were hosts of the Company, if not from the start, then definitely on arrival. Together, hence, their work has been consigned to have strengthened an imperial design, the Company making the visitation of these painters a part of their plan for extensive control of their conquest through visual simulation.

To that end, it is not surprising that they employ some of the motives of the panorama. Rather than the large-scale environs, they borrowed a certain kind of panoramic point-of-view; of expressing a visual symbolism as a metaphor for optic management. In this sense then, they can be held instrumental in popularizing a romantic visualization of the Orient and of having contributed to the much-maligned representational politics of the term. At the same time, it will always remain a matter of interpretation to claim with absolute certainty that these paintings were trying to put forth a very definitive and calculated imperial agenda. Between the two purposeful interpretations lies the third. Which is, that these illustrations, along with writings and other records to that effect, refer unfailingly to a perceptible topographic pattern which, with liberal doses of romantic clichés, could be channelized to evoke in the British viewer a sense of wonder of a faraway land and the attendant excitement of having conquered the same with an unmistakable European footprint. I would like

¹⁰⁹ Mildred Archer, British Painters of the Indian Scene, *Journal of The Royal Society Of Arts*, 115:5135 (October 1967), Pp. 863-879

¹¹⁰ See Hermione de Almeida & George Gilpin, *Indian Renaissance: British Romantic Art and the Prospect of India*, Ashgate, London et al, 2005

to add that as far as city views are concerned, these illustrations make their case more compliant by their preference for individuation of architecture, which unlike photographic panoramas that were to come in a while, prevented the city from emerging into the image as a whole. This discursive dismemberment of the city adds to their reception as specimens of romantic picturesque or are at least inclined to be so; and hence more easily amenable to a covert imposition of a preordained perception.

Photography would start to change some of that soon, for the 1850s was not far from when D'Oyly's posthumous views of Calcutta was published. The days of Company-backed painting were now over. Both in terms of commercial attraction and institutional support, Calcutta was to join the new-fangled global circuit of *writing by light* that had taken Europe by storm. And like everywhere else, it was certain that the city's visual rhetoric and self-appraisal were to change forever.

2.11 CALCUTTA OF OCHTERLONY

As we have seen in the case of Berlin and Singapore (and many others), there are several possible ways of *looking at* a city of which one or two ways of *looking* become habitual over time, mostly— if not only — through regimes of representation. In other words, over time and a range of cultural reproduction, a certain vantage point becomes more visible than others, having enjoyed the advantages of repetition through representation, and seems to stake a claim of having become foundational to the city's image-archive. Calcutta's Ochterlony Monument is one such prominent and pregnant repository of visual imagination. To that end, the history of the subcontinent's visual historiography should not fail to consider how Calcutta's topography emerged as a primary object of a specific photographic intent.

What is startling is not that the Ochterlony emerged as a consummate vantage of early photography. What is startling is the antiquity. This is because the Ochterlony started to lend its height for the purposes of viewing the city surprisingly early, along with most European capitals, as Pinney's findings, referred to in the introduction has already pointed out. It is also known who could be this photographer or what kind of images provided the delight to the members of Asiatic Society, which point to a rare

early iteration of the panoramic daguerreotype in Calcutta. Since Pinney talks about daguerreotypes, it is to be noted that given the heat and humidity of Calcutta and the price of metal plates, it must have been a major challenge to reproduce panoramic images of the landscape through that method. In fact, it would have meant setting up some kind of a processing unit at the height of the Ochterlony itself because there was no way that early daguerreotype would allow for the lapse of time between the act of taking the photograph and its processing. It is hence no surprise that most chroniclers of early Indian photography associate the regular practice of panorama with the coming of the collodion in early 1850s. So, it is rather intriguing that the first views of Calcutta's buildings were already being exhibited in the early 1840s. Yet, the first decade of photography is shrouded in comparative lack of specific instances. The extant examples are from studios, where the records can be gleaned more easily. Panorama is a complex case because there are no actual surviving examples, even if there are mentions, like the one above.

The interesting connecting link to two practices of popular print and photography in the earliest days of the latter in Calcutta is the amateur lithographer turned photographer Frederic Fiebig, who produced a staggering number of hand-coloured salt prints of Calcutta. We will look at his work in greater detail in the following chapter but his panorama lithographs, which survive in exquisite print, offer a clue to the antiquity of the 'Ochterlony view', being dated to the late 1840s. Among the many surviving topographic photographs of Fiebig, there is no image *from* the Ochterlony. Either it could be lost or, what is more likely, Fiebig replicated a photographic image in his lithograph, which was quite common. This means that his 1847 lithograph of the Calcutta panorama (Fig 2.14) is predated by either a calotype or daguerreotype. Whether this was part of the same daguerreotype series that Falconer mentions (Ch1) or whether it was a later one cannot be ascertained. The iconic Sans Souci daguerreotype that Siddhartha Ghosh mentions (Ch 1) predates Fiebig, so could have been a series of now lost panoramas *from* the Ochterlony¹¹¹.

¹¹¹ In fact, Ghosh does confirm that, "Two excellent views taken from the top of the Ochterlony Monument by an unknown artist, lie somewhat over-preserved, in an iron chest in the Victoria Memorial Hall." The antiquity of them must be ascertained.

But there still remains a significant gap between Fiebig's panoramic lithographs of the 1840s and the series of well-known panoramas of the city that are now available. After a very early beginning, work on the panorama may have seen a decade's lapse (mid-1840s to mid-1850s) or could be lost to history. But one thing is certain; that the heights of the Ochterlony seems to have continued as the preferred vantage of seeing Calcutta. As art historian Tapati Guha-Thakurta writes in a catalogue to an exhibition she co-curated a decade ago¹¹²:

The fascination with panoramas and use of Calcutta's favourite landmark, the Ochterlony monument (erected by public subscription in 1828) for the taking of such views is exemplified by a 1858 ten-part series by another little-known pioneer, Josiah Rowe. Over the next decades, the photography of the city's grand vistas and buildings took off with the arrival in the 1860s and 1870s of Samuel Bourne, Charles Shepherd and John Edward Saxe, and the opening of studios across Calcutta, Bombay and the North Indian hill stations.

So the heights of the Ochterlony, it can be gauged, remained a curious pursuit of the *panoramist* since the early days of photography. The vantage changes but the impulse for panorama continues - from the classic panorama to a plethora of 'panoramic views' of the city. In what can be called Calcutta's classic panoramas, the camera eye sits atop Ochterlony attesting firmly to the spectacular series of buildings that flank its north and east. If not the Ochterlony, then it pans from the High (then Supreme) Court building on the extreme up-right corner to the set of buildings that follow on Chowringhee East to then merge into the main thoroughfare which is seen up close with its wide roads lined with trees. The Governor House, exactly behind the Ochterlony; and the spires of the St Andrew's Church or the GPO dome were often captured. Along with daguerreotype, calotype and collodion and later halftone, Calcutta witnessed stereoscopic views too, all of them invoking, in their own way, the spatial elegance of the city's impressive colonial architectural bequest. Together, they represent not only an extensive visual archive of the city viewed panoramically but also a temporal range that spans almost a century. Moreover, they also invite, by the

¹¹² Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The City in the Archive: Calcutta's Visual Histories*. Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, 2011; pp 48-49.

sheer number of illustrations, a set of critical registers that were to be found in other capitals of the world. We will first look at the genesis and development of the panorama in Calcutta, along with their historical specifics. We will then proceed towards critical and comparative observations about the fate of the form in the colony.

Interestingly, within two decades of its completion, the Ochterlony, a memorial to a special British military officer, had come to serve a completely different purpose, as a towering vantage from which the city could be semi-aerially considered for the first time. Calcutta, one of the Empire's most invested colonial metropolises, was now available in full view, under the overarching gaze of the photographic eye. But what exactly is the Ochterlony Monument? Why did it come to serve such a purpose in the history of panorama in Calcutta and by extension, of South Asia? Why were the set of visualizations of the city from its heightened vantage crucial for its own reception as a monument? And how does that vantage associate itself with the spatial expanse of the city below?

This early-nineteenth-century edifice (built in 1828) was once a triumphant British war memorial; and then the site of several and successive panoramic visualization of the city, making the form a recurrent and potent template of memorializing the city's emergent and increasingly cosmopolitan central expanse. Built of eastern architectural traditions, this unique, erect form was also at the same time a foundational symbol of metropolitan Calcutta, repeatedly photographed, mined, and cited in endless visual reproductions, both in the colonial period and since. The Ochterlony then passed into a period of prominent post-coloniality as the chief site of Calcutta's political spectacles and multitudinous congresses (See Ch 6), was re-baptized as an act of symbolic purging of this 'history', and co-opted as a tourist site with a complex relationship with the space around it; all the while being available for all forms of impervious gazing at the downtown city-space.

The Ochterlony is not available anymore for civilians to mount its height but a comparatively recent account of American architect Brian Paul Bach gives a poetic

description of the entering the monument and climbing the stairs inside this Calcutta landmark. I am tempted to quote him in entirety¹¹³:

After entering the burial vault looking for metal doors, one suddenly faces 215 whitewashed corkscrew steps, made of Chunar stone. Suddenly there is a deserty feel, rather like climbing the minar of an ancient arid fortress. For here at the bottom of the steps, is an instant remoteness from the city centre, tempered by the magic of the insulator Maidan. Poised at the base of the tube, a draft of air spirals upwards—the smokestack principle. Yet the perspiration flows in the closeness, adding to the utter, unexpected sensuality exuded at every angle, up, down, and out the tiny air/light perforations, which appear with far too little regularity on the way up. Light is also taken away far too soon, though the passage is small enough for one human body to feel its way onward by the sliding of palms, knees, elbows, shoulders, even cheeks, along the smooth and cooling walls. The effect is quite similar to the inside of the ‘Iron’ Pagoda in Kaifeng, China. There are audio tricks as well. Anyone talking inside the column’s entrance can be clearly heard at the top of the stairwell so many metres above. Near the top, the stairs become ultra-narrow, which increases the urgency of the inevitable anticipation. Then, like the burst of freedom at the top of all such vertical tunnels, light, high Maidan ionosphere (it seems), and altered realities present themselves, proving that we have arrived at a castle in the air.

If one can imagine a cinematic moment when a figure climbs a monument blindfolded and then, only when at the top, is allowed to ‘oversee’ the city below — *an altered reality* — which could also happen to be that person’s first sighting of the city, one can get close to the idea that the early panoramas taken from its top were trying to foreground. Further to its very substantive purpose, the monument itself has history and character written all over it. The Ochterlony Monument was erected through public subscription in memory of the distinguished British general David Ochterlony, who led Britain to victory in the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814-1816). He was the first British soldier in colonial India to be awarded the Knight of the Grand Cross (GCB)

¹¹³ Brian Paul Bach, *Calcutta’s Edifice: The Buildings of a Great City*, Rupa, New Delhi, 2004; pp 529-530

for his services to the British military. A charismatic and influential military commander in his heyday, he fell afoul of the British Governor-General William Amherst and had to quit the army. By then he had converted to Islam and had settled into a lavish Persian life in Delhi with thirteen concubines and an army of servants and elephants. He later ran out of money and died penniless in Meerut in 1825. Partly for architectural reasons and partly as a tribute to his colourful life, the Monument built in his name in Calcutta in 1828 to oversee the Maidan was entirely of Middle-Eastern (or West Asian) design. It was built with about 35,000 in the prevailing currency raised through public inscription under the supervision of the architect JP Parker, who executed the design of Charles Knowles Robinson. At 165 feet in height, it is about 40 feet less than the Christopher Wren-designed 202 feet London Monument to the Great Fire, built in 1677, to which the Ochterlony bears a not so surprising element of similarity. The Ochterlony's cube-shaped base or plinth is an example of Egyptian square-fluted architecture; the column that narrows up to two round-fenced balconies on top is Syrian, and the dome and metal cupola are typically Turkish. The foundation of the edifice is made of up to eighty-two 20-foot-long teakwood logs that were pressed 2.4 metres into the soil. On them stand 2.4 metres of masonry built of chalk, burnt bricks, and stone chips. There are 215 (in some accounts, 218) steps inside the Monument that lead to the top. The steps were built as a spiral with one end of each step held together by cast iron while the other end secured into the brickwork.



Fig 2.12: Left Lithograph of Ochterlony Monument by Vincent Robert Alfred Brooks from *Eight views of Calcutta*, 1870. **Right** Statue of Lord Hardinge and Ochterlony, photographer unknown, about 1865.

It was a unique undertaking in Calcutta's history to dedicate such an expensive public monument to a soldier whose connections to Calcutta were, at best, tenuous. Most of Calcutta's other colonial buildings were dedicated to the offices of the colonial government or to emerging legal, economic, and educational initiatives. The rest were museums, cathedrals, theatres, or mansions for private use. The last part of Calcutta's imperial memorials — marble statues of the British royalty, governors-general, figureheads of the colony, and other functionaries — were common and adorned various public spaces in Calcutta for a long time. But an erect, soaring edifice in the heart of a city, to a figure who had forsaken both the Christian world — which as a Scot he was born into — and the colonial military service to whose highest ranks he had climbed, resists easy taxonomy.



Fig 2.13: Two parts from the 6-part coloured lithograph of the Calcutta panorama, Frederick Fiebig, 1847. Reproduced here from *India Through the Lens, Photography 1840-1911*, (Ed) Vidya Dehejia, Mapin Publishing (with Smithsonian Institution et al), 2000.

The coloured lithographs of Frederick Fiebig (Fig 2.12), full of small, intriguing details, were published by the Asiatic Lithographic Press. Fiebig takes some liberty with the details, not too unusual for a lithographer. But his is close to being a specimen of detailed painted panorama, revealing a city's minutia in an

elongated view that stretches the canvas to maximise viewer visibility and minimise the breaks between frames. John Falconer writes that the six-part panorama takes in almost the full 360 degrees¹¹⁴,

Starting from the south towards the curve of the Hugli anchor, with shipping at anchor, the eye is taken around to the north and the east, embracing the classical splendours of Government House and Esplanade Row before moving on to the classical mansions lining Chowringhee Road.

One can, in the first frame, clearly distinguish the tents and the Governor House behind, its stand-alone gate and the crowd of buildings at the entry of the Old Court House Street. This is part of the Maidan that is seen extending up to Fort William on the far end of the canvas. On the other image we see the more brick-and-mortar undulation of the city towards its eastern marshlands. Fiebig's lithographs signalled a beginning of the popular panorama prints as well as a shift to photography. As Falconer writes¹¹⁵:

Apart from the topographical and documentary significance office work Fiebig possesses additional significance as a figure straddling the period at which visual media were being slowly superseded by photography as the prime vehicle of topographical and architectural documentation. This trend is graphically demonstrated in Fiebig's own work: soon after the creation of his Calcutta panorama, Fiebig himself took up photography.



Fig 2.14: A 1899 offset lithograph showing Esplanade from Ochterlony.

¹¹⁴ Falconer, p 41

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p 41

The future dominance of photography is more than evident but it did not dent the demand and circulation of cheaper print technologies - engravings and lithographs (whether independently or as postcards), which continued to be circulated through the second half of the 19th century (Fig 2.16). In fact, with photography, the production of machinated reproductions became cheaper.

These views ‘across media’ should avoid a collapse into categories of popular art and photography. Like everywhere else, the coming of photography in India and its claims to unmodulated views of nature could not dislodge lithographed or etched works, especially of subjects and prospects which they shared with photography. This is very clear from the years (1847-1899) covered in the images above (including those of the Ochterlony). In essence then, the wide inter-medial use of Ochterlony for panoramic purposes (and to see as part of the city’s key central landscape) opens up the scope for the same kind of issues that we have encountered elsewhere. They are, in fact, a substantive addition to the debates about the panorama ‘point of view; and why the use of media in panorama is secondary to what the form had set out to fulfil. Even if the cheap reproductions did not add anything special to the established views from the Ochterlony and continued with the visual pattern that photographic panoramas had established, they hint at an alternate commercial circuit, trade view route and demand-supply network than that of studio-propelled photographic images. Also, such prints (and certainly postcards) were often sent back home by settler communities as visual mementos from the colony.

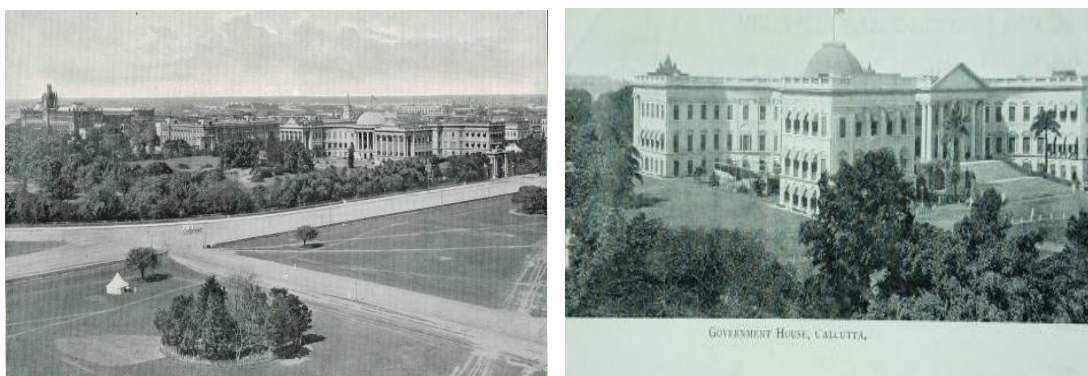


Fig 2.15: **Above** View of Governor House from the Ochterlony - wood engraving by unknown artist in *The Graphic magazine*, 1875. **Below** Postcard of Calcutta showing the Government House, published by Thacker, Spink & Co, Calcutta.

We will come to the photographs next but the above examples, which mimicked the earliest panoramas of Calcutta, have already hinted at a visual regime connected to the Ochterlony. The fact of this regime being unfailingly and programmatically panoramic prompts the conclusion that Ochterlony had birthed the photographic panorama in India.



Fig 2.16: Two parts of Josiah Rowe's 8-part 'Panoramic View of Calcutta from the Ochterlony Monument', 1858.

So, along with engravers and lithographers came the more notable work of the photographers, who took serious note of Calcutta's coming into modernity through at least half a century worth of panoramic views. The images reinforced the recurrent theme of using the Ochterlony to look *at* the burgeoning city from above. Starting intermittently in the 1840s and then regularly since 1850s, photo-panoramas were undertaken throughout the latter half of the 19th century, including those taken during Prince of Wales' tour of Calcutta in 1875; and in the first mapping of the city's topography by Survey of India in the dying decades of the nineteenth century. Needless to add perhaps, the Ochterlony continued to be used for this sort of imaging in most of them.

Josiah Rowe reveals the exact set of views of Fiebig. His panorama (2.16) minimises human agency, captures large vistas, open skies and spatial alignments of the city's premier colonial settlement, which is stitched into an expansive view of the Maidan from the Ochterlony — as it stretches into the river on the horizon. Rowe is perhaps the earliest extant practitioner of panorama in Calcutta. As per John Falconer

he was primarily a surveyor¹¹⁶, and was later appointed a professor of drawing and surveying at Presidency College, Calcutta in 1856. Rowe is known to have exhibited five calotype views of different parts of Calcutta at the Photographic Society of Madras that were deemed to be ‘clearly focused, well printed and of a good tone’, as per a mention in the *Indian Journal of Art, Science and Manufacture*¹¹⁷.



Fig 2.17: Above Left Calcutta from Ochterlony, 1865. British Library catalogue identifies this image as uncredited but its similarity with Bourne is unmistakable **Top right and Below** Two parts of Samuel Bourne's panoramic views, 1868. The picture above looks North along Chowringhee Road. The one below looks south with an array of private and public buildings on the far side of Maidan. From Bourne's *Views of Calcutta and Barrackpore*.

Although, ironic as it may seem, the journal also criticised Rowe for placing his horizon too high, arguing that ‘the lines of perspective in consequence too sudden and angular in the foreground to be pleasing’. However, his now-lost five views of Calcutta and 25 daguerreotypes (including a five-part panorama of the city) displayed at the Photographic Society of Bengal Exhibition of March 1857 received great acclaim. The Society meeting of 21 January 1857 cited in the *Journal of the*

¹¹⁶ John Falconer, *A Biographical Dictionary of Nineteenth Century Photographers in South and Southeast Asia*, 2001. Pp 140.

¹¹⁷ Issued dated 1(4): 175, 1856, 2nd series.

*Photographic Society of Bengal*¹¹⁸ took note of daguerreotypes by Mr Rowe, specially of the panoramic view from the top of the Ochterlony Monument and noted that ‘nothing but a strong magnifying glass could do justice to the minute accuracy and beauty of these pictures’.

Falconer says that Rowe kept returning to the panorama over the years earning mostly praised if one his images were criticized in the 1962 exhibition of the Bengal Photographic Society for “the absence of moving life in so extended a space crowded with houses¹¹⁹”. In short, the jury’s problems – too high an altitude and lack of human figures -- is what was also and ironically, the primary reason for Rowe’s success in establishing a panoramic view of a city. Also that did not stop his colleagues from calling Rowe, ‘Calcutta’s first photographer’.



Fig 2.18: Top right and left Two panoramas by Oscar Mallitte, 1860s/early 1870s. From *Photographs of India and Overland Route*. **Below** Halftone print of Panorama of Calcutta, 1911.

That Rowe’s methodical privileging of the panorama is not accidental is

¹¹⁸ *Journal of the Photographic Society of Bengal*, #3, 20 May 1857.

¹¹⁹ Falconer, p 42

attested by the fact that Ochterlony served as a similar, nee exact, vantage repeatedly over next few decade as prominent photographic entourages arrived, most notable being Englishman Samuel Bourne and the Frenchman Oscar Malitte. The anonymity of Fig 2.20 perhaps attests to its regularity for it is much like Bourne but there could well be others who went for similar views at the same time. But it was Bourne who undertook a thorough ‘re-visitation’ of Rowe’s multiple-part stitched panorama about a decade later.

In Figure 2.21, Samuel Bourne (we will go back to him in detail in the next chapter) virtually repeats the gaze of Rowe, his view revealing no major originality, but an indulgence of an established view. But one must consider that his panorama, taken in the late 1860s, exhibits unusual clarity, highlighting Bourne’s habitual experience and brilliance in using natural light and his command over the collodion process. He also seems to highlight the Governor’s House with unfailing acuity.

Falconer makes a wonderful comparison between the two views:¹²⁰:

The attraction of the panorama view to the surveyor is clear, allowing the relationship of parts of the city to be viewed as an integrated whole, particularly in a series taken over time and charting the growth of the city. The appeal to the commercial photographer is also evident, for such a view supplied the resident or visiting customer with the most easily “readable” visual account of the city, allowing individuals views to be placed within their urban context. It is unsurprising therefore that Samuel Bourne should have produced a view almost identical to Rowe’s for commercial sale a few years later.

As if to prove the efficacy of the panoramic enterprise, Oscar Mallitte’s lens in Figure 2.22 records a lapse of actual time, for, the image on the left shows the Governor House and the Town Hall but not the building of the Supreme Court¹²¹, which is then seen, visible in its Ypressian glory¹²² in the image on the right. This means that the image on the right is dated 1872 or after while the one on the left is of years prior. Little is known of Malitte except that he was a French photographer working in

¹²⁰ Falconer, p 42

¹²¹ Which, since the shift of capital from Calcutta in 1911 became the High Court.

¹²² See the description of the Supreme Court in Chapter 1

Calcutta in the 1860s (which explains the earlier image), who taught photography at the School of Industrial Art. He is said to have sold most of his collection to Francis Frith's company in England; his photographs being available in several archives under the title 'Photographs of India & Overland Route'.

It should be noted that Frith is a special case as far as early Calcutta photography is concerned. Photo historian Ian Jefferey's assessment of Frith perhaps holds a clue. Jefferey says that Frith set out to the 'east' a number of times — the earliest trip was famously to Egypt. What distinguished Frith from his immediate peers was that Frith's commentaries were less about the monuments and sights as eternal objects of contemplation, and more about the fact of his travelling as a 'witness' to these remote places. For Jefferey, "Frith worked with a new emphasis: above all he wanted to give the feel of things, to show just what it was like to be there, on those roads, among just those rocks".¹²³ Since there is no proof that Francis Frith actually came to India, a large number of pictures of old Calcutta are incorrectly assigned to his name. This is because a group of photographers, of which Oscar Rejlander was the most prominent, had most likely sold their India collection to Frith's successful company in the late nineteenth century. It is quite possible that having missed out on his India voyage, Frith quickly acquired a large collection and ascribed his name to them, to continue with his pronounced fascination to be at the scene himself. But many of these photos actually belong to the little-known Rejlander, who remains an intriguing figure in early photography in India.

The next set of images will reveal that a concomitant genre of panorama was also not uncommon, using as a vantage the heights of newly built official, commercial properties like Governor House, Old Court House Street, and the then Supreme Court.

¹²³ Ian Jefferey, *Photography, A Concise History*. Thames and Hudson, London, 1996 (1981), p 35.



Fig 2.19: Top Left The expanse of the Maidan, from the top of the Government House **Top Right** View of Esplanade from the Supreme Court. Mid-1870s. **Below Left** Old Court House Street empties itself on the Maidan. **Below Right** A stretch of Hare Street from the top of the Telegraph Office. Last two images are from *Album of Views of Calcutta* by A Hone, 1878.

What these photographers witness over a period of about 20 years (mid-1850s to mid-1870s) is very similar. Having gained substantial height on reaching the top of the Ochterlony, the panoramic view reinforced the sensation of lording over the scenery. The images reproduce the central districts of Calcutta as it was laid around the open space of the Maidan and is seen encircled by a retinue of striking colonial architecture — government and military offices, judicial and legal buildings, departmental and supply stores, institutions, organizations, hotels and gourmands. All the images concur with the exponential growth and attraction of the upscale Chowringhee, as it was taking shape in the mid-nineteenth century, when Calcutta's gains in commerce, art, and education were unsurpassed by other colonial cities in the subcontinent. As clear as the sky that frames them, the photographs extol the

spectacular spatial magnificence of a colonial metropolis emerging from what were swathes of swamp on the eastern bank of the Hooghly.

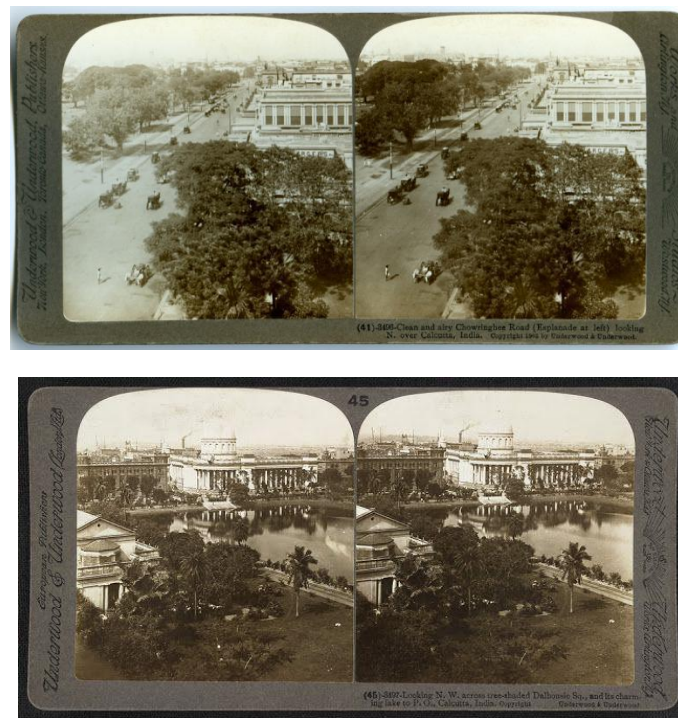


Fig 2.20: Stereoscopic view of the ‘clean and airy Chowringhee’ and ‘charming lake at Dalhousie Square’, James Ricalton for Underwood & Underwood, 1903.

Later, as the worldwide influence of stereoscopes spread, such images are here seen celebrating the Chowringhee and the Tank Square — both foundational to the city’s cosmopolitan, convivial downtown. They are both by James Ricalton, the hardy adventurer-photographer from upstate New York, who visited India and stayed put in Calcutta for a few months in 1889. The images capture the emergence of the city into a veritable metropolis from two ends of the downtown, allowing the panoramic to survey a city in constant shift and change, both vertical and horizontal. The whole last set is testament that while the Ochterlony continued to operate as a recurrent site for panoramic views, the panorama form itself had grown beyond the need for a staple view and became part of a regular viewing of the city from multiple and often untested heights and vantages. These images hence significantly add to the discursive delineation of the panorama form in Calcutta while also revealing the city from new and unusual heights and perspectives.

2.12 CALCUTTA'S CONTESTED SPACE OF HISTORY

There has been one major critique of this viewing regime, which is to interpret the Ochterlony panorama (and the associated wide-angle views) as one of the sites in the multiple topographies of imperial power and exclusion. This is because, as one of the images say that Calcutta's "exceedingly Westernized" imperial quarters were in contradistinction to the cluttered "native districts." It is hence no surprise that not many early photographers ever entered the native districts and hence there is a limited parallel visual record of the so-called native quarters of the city that had concentrically spread around the colonially supervised "white" town. The limited visual evidence of non-white districts hinders any imagination of the city's gradual evolution as a whole. But the so-called *white town* was routinely exposed to cameras, calling for consideration of a certain pattern of producing imagery that became iconic for a time, perpetuating the format. James Ryan, for example, mentions the role of the Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee or COVIC¹²⁴. Based on plans prepared by Oxford Historian Halford Mackinder, in 1907 the COVIC selected Hugh Fisher as the photographer-artist to travel around and record the Empire, India being the first location. Ryan writes that

"Photographs of imperial cities and their architectural achievements were common in published surveys and celebrations of the Empire. Images of monuments and memorials built under British authority in India were particularly prolific¹²⁵."

As for Calcutta, adds Ryan,

"(Fisher) discovered that by obtaining a high vantage point he had a particularly efficient way of encapsulating these public sights. From the top of the Ochterlony Monument, for example, like other British photographers before him, he surveyed with his camera Calcutta's monuments to the Empire, from Government House to the distant spire of the English cathedral. In his lectures Mackinder explicitly contrasted these lofty views with an image of Calcutta's Turret Bazaar Street,

¹²⁴ James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). P 195

¹²⁵ Ibid., 195.

epitomizing for him the “Native City with its narrow ways and crowded life.”¹²⁶

One can little doubt that the panoramic image-regime was doggedly centralised and channelized to purposefully view the city’s showpiece part while abandoning to invisibility the nether parts that would render the city as being undesirable. Moreover, the optical measure of these photographs can be compared to aerial photography and the imagination of control that is intrinsic to such a spatial organisation of vision.

At the same time, this kind of programmed urban visual rhetoric is neither rare nor consigned to only the colonial cities. For example, if the allegation of debarring human life is to be taken seriously, then that has been the case for all panoramas of that time everywhere. Why panoramas, even topographic street-views, are pointedly emptied of movements. But few would see that as an exercise in power. Also, as examples in this chapter have shown, it is in the nature of panorama to make humans appear negligible in the schematic representation of a city in its horizontal glory. It was surely not peculiar or particular to Calcutta or even colonial photography. Similarly, the practice of populating urban photography with one kind of vantage or one kind of scenic trope is not remotely specific to Calcutta. To that end, almost all cities of the world suffer from the bipolarity of visibility and invisibility, whether during the colonial period or after. So, to see the Calcutta panorama as an exercise of power is of limited currency, to see it embedded within a complex and global play of panorama is much more rewarding.

Hence, we need to revisit the issues of technology, spectacle and travel – which, as we have seen, historically informs the panorama as a practice. Given that all the photographers above had parallel lives as itinerant surveyors, teachers and studio proprietors, it makes ample sense to consider their work in Calcutta as part of a travel circuit. Calcutta may not have had the aura of a Cairo or Constantinople, but for many British and European citizens it embodied the Empire’s most discernible achievements in the East. So it would not be erroneous to identify a sentiment similar

¹²⁶ Ibid., 197.

to that of Francis Frith at work here too, provoking among photographers the need *to be* in Calcutta and to be able to *observe* the new city from the vantage of its chief site of elevation. Also, many European photographers were travelling across Asia, strengthening the case for travelling photography that was focused on locations rather than pandering to structural surveillance on behalf of the Empire. In Calcutta, both Bourne and Mallitte were such figures. Moreover, for Rowe, Malitte, and Bourne, there was a technological imperative of eyeing the city from atop its heights. The fact that their work exists in Albumin prints attest to their familiarity with the collodion process, emboldened by which they might have set out primarily to grasp, in kaleidoscopic sweep, the reach and scope of the photographic apparatus. As commercial photographers, it would only be natural for them to explore the depths of the imaging that collodion could produce. So the imperative of travel and technology are intrinsically bound to the practice and proliferation of the panorama in the colony, neither of which necessarily lead to a ‘colonial gaze’. In other words, none of these two prospects — technology and locationality — entirely undermine a programmed politics of representation, but neither of them are the same as being at the beck and call of the Empire’s controlling ministration. The study of colonial photography should hence distance itself from exclusively referring to the photographs in terms like ‘light and darkness’, ‘techno-materiality and perception’, and ‘surveillance and control’. In fact, if at all, such photography lends itself to a visual vocabulary of looking and seeing, continuity and confrontation, engagement and enumeration, that reinforces a colonial scopic regime that is wider than the imperial lens.

The third deterrent to an overwhelming imperial purpose is of a more complicated nature, whose import is much more historically nuanced than technological innovation or travelling thrills. It concerns Calcutta’s emergence as a visual motif, concomitant to its gaining prominence as one of modernity’s most effective metropolitan manifestations in the colonies. Like the European capitals of modernity — but on a lower scale, Calcutta’s burgeoning architectural and commercial flamboyance was unmistakable fodder for knowing, mapping, and recording, as much as for other records, memoirs, accounts as much it was for the photographic lens. With the advantage of its height, the Ochterlony Monument (and

other elevations) seems to generously embrace the city's open and large spaces and reduce the agency of its human architects to a bare minimum. This act of minimizing agency and privileging of built space can also be read as a symptom of the coming of age of a metropolis —from a colonial outpost with specific outlets to service the commercial hunger to a city on the full flight of modernity. It is the moment of Calcutta's coming into a full consciousness of its spatial deportment, a consciousness that is projected onto the viewer from the heights of the panoramic vantage. Hence these pictures mark the historic moment when the city came to look at itself, through photography.

2.13 BETWEEN SEEING AND KNOWING

The panorama, as the detailed exploration of its history would reveal, had embodied various presences - the utopianism of an ordered city and the desire for a visual totality; the impulse to view the city from unattainable or altered vantages, the wonder of travel; the ability to manoeuvre perspective; and the need for visual spectacle. The last part, as we have seen, also connects panorama's history within the nineteenth century protuberance of the spectator, it being different from both the passive viewer or the attentive audience - the latter etymologically closer to hearing than *seeing*. In short, the spectator was a willing participant in the heightened experience of the spectacle.

These presences, as the practice of panorama in Calcutta shows, were not successive but simultaneous. Hence, for every possibility of it being at the service of an imperial gaze; it is also an exhibit as a travel curiosity; a key port of call for technological and visual circuits; and a station for both commercial consumption and cultural testing. Together there is no one Calcutta that is colonially framed under its new-fangled lens but a vibrant metropolitan space that is ever willing to lend itself to newer forms of seeing and visualizations. Moreover, as we have seen, panorama has always been a conjuring artifice that simulates and projects rather than performs the function of simple documentation. To that end, the fact that the Calcutta panorama projects a dominant identity of the city is in keeping with the planetary nature of panorama and not a deviation from it. I would like to

end with Barthes's extraordinarily evocative essay on the Eiffel Tower. After laying out why Eiffel Tower's greatness is in its 'uselessness', Barthes turns to the panorama. He writes:

[Hence] we approach the complex, dialectical nature of all panoramic vision; on the one hand, it is a euphoric vision, for it can slide slowly, lightly the entire length of a continuous image of Paris, and initially no "accident" manages to interrupt this great layer of mineral and vegetal strata, perceived in the distance in the bliss of altitude; but, on the other hand, this very continuity engages the mind in a certain struggle, it seeks to be deciphered, we must find signs within it, a familiarity proceeding from history and from myth...¹²⁷

Between this history and myth, between the horizontal elasticity and the vertical sovereignty, between the actual city and its projected unanimity, between the impression and the actualization; and between the act of seeing and that of knowing lies the panorama. So of Paris; so of Calcutta.

¹²⁷ Roland Barthes, 'The Eiffel Tower' *AA Files* 64 (2012), pp 112-131, Architectural Association School of Architecture, p 126.

CHAPTER 3

CALCUTTA, OPEN CITY

3.1 MULTIPLE LIVES IN/OF AN OPEN CITY

By early 1850s, as we have seen, Calcutta's downtown was dotted with several photographic establishments, most of which made their business from private visitations for portraits and salon (*carte-de-visite*) photography and were in service of the settler whites and Bengali aristocracy. Most advertisements of that time refer to these practices.

But there are also numerous images of the city, and that too across a range of photographic practices, styles and technology, of which only one – the panorama – is what we have traced in the preceding chapter. The downtown was changing every day with newer additions and attractions, which partly explains the recurrence of the panorama in particular and the itinerant, bird-eye views in general. But spaces that could be called formative, foundational, defining etc. were several and their memorification was burgeoning, as photographic technology democratized. There was hence a strong and powerful (if less advertised) interest in the general spaces and public places that stood cheek-by-jowl in the downtown of the capital of the colony. Hence a rudimentary form of street photography – on-ground, up-close and in tandem with the movement and mobility within the city – is also quite palpable. This chapter is a close study of them; of colonial Calcutta's *everyday* imagery.

Calcutta's emergence as the *urbana prima* in colonial South Asia was coterminous with it being the seat of the empire, the *primus inter pares*. This ensured it being both a provocateur and preserver of the colonial imaginary, as it became the site of encounter between colonial governmentality and colonial modernity. Calcutta's urban imagery was a visual repertoire that was largely built on a variation of this theme. From Frederick Fiebig's painted images to Samuel Bourne & Charles Shepherd's calotype city views to James Ricalton's stereoscopes to Peter Johnston & Theodore Hoffman's varied city images, to the images of itinerants Edward Sache, Lionius Tripe, F Kapp etc., a comprehensive assessment of the city as viewed by the entourage of commercial photographers for over half a century is hence imperative. They had shot the city as part of a programmatic site of *seeing* as well when the city is unguarded and permeable to the gaze of the camera. This chapter will concentrate on Fiebig and Bourne (and his studio) largely. This kind of cultural mirroring of the city is what Jonathan Raban famously termed as a *soft city*. He famously wrote¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Jonathan Raban, *Soft City*, London: Harvill, p. 10.

The city as we imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate in maps and statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture.

Calcutta, the *open* city, is also hence Calcutta, the *soft* city. It is *open* because many hundreds of images reveal no obvious or linear line of photographic representation of the teeming, unfolding, expanding colonial metropolis. At the same time, they reveal the city's multiple selves, layers of meaning and a visual archive that coagulates into the city's optical unconscious. Which is why Calcutta was *also* an archetypal *soft* city. Needless to say that such a vast repertoire of a figurative *soft city* like Calcutta could have been apportioned in several ways. But looking at the patterns, likenesses and understated analogies, I have preferred to divide Calcutta's urban colonial imagery between *spaces of stasis* (contemplation) and *spaces of movement* (commotion). They are preceded by a separate section reserved for the early salt prints of Frederick Fiebig, who unveiled large-scale urban photography in Calcutta. His legacy, largely made of hand-coloured images, provokes a pair of key hypotheses about his *chromophilia*. These collective of images, evocative anyway of the *soft city* nomenclature, would further argue in favour of seeing Calcutta as a site of an emergent practice of *photographic city* (rather how the *soft city* would transition into a *photographic city*) that had gained artistic (and commercial) heft across the world between mid-and early twentieth century. My idea of the *photographic city* would be partly self-explanatory, while it is also partly indebted to the more recent¹²⁹ definition of the same, which we shall return to at the end of the chapter.

3.2 CITY OF COLOUR, OR, FIEBIG'S CHROMOPHILIA

Frederick Fiebig, whose panoramic lithographs we saw in Ch 2, was an amateur lithographer who took to photography. Little is known about Fiebig except that he was born in imperial Prussia, and as per the Bengal and Agra Directory & Annual Register (1849-1850), was a piano teacher¹³⁰; and had visited Singapore before Calcutta. But it was in Calcutta where he changed his ace from being a lithographer of repute to one

¹²⁹ Vladimir Rizov, 'The photographic city', *City*, 23:6, 2019; pp 774-791. Taylor & Francis. DOI: 10.1080/13604813.2020.1718411

¹³⁰ See Anantanarayanan Raman, 'Photography and photomicrography in 19th century Madras' *Current Science*, 25 September 2011, 101:6, pp. 800-802.

who made photography his home; and went about taking extensive views of Calcutta and later Madras, Ceylon, Mauritius and Cape Town - his travels hinting at one of the routes of commercial photography. What is also known is that he offered the prints of his photographs for sale to the East India Company in 1856.



Fig 3.1: Clockwise from top left: Hand-coloured print of Courthouse Street looking north from the Maidan; Picnic pavilion in the Botanical Gardens; The Hindu College; A bungalow in Garden Reach; All photos from Frederick Fiebig's *Views of Calcutta and Surrounding Districts*, 1851.

Approximately 450 prints of principal buildings and the other places of interest at Calcutta and elsewhere, taken by Fiebig, are available with photo archives, giving us an unprecedented glimpse of Calcutta in the mid-19th century. It was indeed an exercise of a very uncommon order, to have taken hundreds of photographs of not just Calcutta and its surroundings but also of nearby river-towns like Hooghly. Almost all of them were taken between late 1840s and early 1850s. Apart from their collective antiquity, what is also interesting is many of them were painstakingly hand-painted with salt-colour, and vividly rendered, giving them, at least in passing, a painterly disposition. There are also extant uncoloured photos and coloured lithographs by Fiebig.

This section will refer to the hand-painted collection of topographic views exclusively for having been the first to create a well-anointed visual catalogue of Calcutta's built environment. But there is also a deeper question. What could be the reason(s) for Fiebig to have so painstakingly coloured his images? Was it an act of whim, or were there commercial or cultural reasons? Our understanding of Fiebig's *chromophilia* will, to an extent, also define our understanding of Calcutta's photographic antiquity. But it can only be an informed guess, as there is virtually no literature on Fiebig, or his practice. His entire series otherwise reveals, *prima facie*, three things. First, that there is a sense of abandon with which he took the pictures. Instead of recurrence and repetition of the same spaces and same angles and vantages that we see in later photographers, Fiebig seems to have followed no fixed pattern, was not trying to fit into anyone else's gloves, was not trying to live up to any established norm, however rudimentary it may have been in the late 1840s. Except a certain foregrounding of the native subject who seems to be present in all of his images (some even more distinguished by the pose of having their folded arms rest on their pelvis), there is no obvious pattern in these pictures. The second impression one carries from the images is to do with the access Fiebig has had. From the kitchen gardens of local aristocracy, to broad city roads; to church compounds, to the precincts of Fort William, Fiebig's series reveals the photographer's ability to go beyond the confines that doubtlessly existed between the ordinary citizen, administered zones and Company-surveilled spaces. That he was a white man no doubt played a role in his ability to take pictures whenever he willed and could put his camera on but Fiebig was not a Briton, had no apparent dealing with the Company; and there is no record to show that he had any expressed or official purpose or permission to make an extensive visual catalogue of the city. This leads us to the third prospect: Fiebig's interest in everyday spaces and buildings of a city of Calcutta's magnitude was overarching and not limited to those which had a defined colonial imprint. He had, and that too very early, not only ventured much outside the so-called *white town* (which several of his immediate heirs seemed to have refused or ignored) but did so with no less interest and enthusiasm than what he had reserved for his pictures of the 'European' quarters.

But Fiebig becomes much more interesting when we look beyond this random cataloguing of the emergent city space, being dotted as it was with increasingly mushrooming markers of modernity. His extensive *chromophilia* allows for at least a pair of conjectural reflections on the *act of colouring* and the purpose that Fiebig brought to this practice. The questions that need to be asked are: Was this colouring an act of *familiarizing* the west with the perceived exotica of the orient? Or was Fiebig trying to *defamiliarize* the *cameratic* object from expectations of banality that photography was battling in his early years? In doing so, did he want his world to resemble an image-habit perpetuated by art in general and the ‘company painters’ in particular?

3.2.1 CONJECTURE ON CHROMOPHILIA: ABOUT COLOUR

The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy divides reflection on colour into two aspects: “eliminativism — the view that physical objects do not have colours, at least in a crucial sense, and subjectivism — the view that color is a subjective quality”¹³¹. Sciences and psychological sciences, have, respectively, redefined and refined these two positions, which are also in various degrees interdependent. That is to say that there is no clear consensus that colour belongs to either physical properties or our sensory perception of it. The most commonly subscribed view is that colour resides at the cusp of these two positions. We are unlikely to gain any major advantage by trying to resolve this issue here because Fiebig’s chromophilic tendencies, if at all, were not contingent upon finding either a philosophical or physical resolution of what colour could be. It is likely that he saw colour as any artist in his time would do, which is something that transmits specific meanings to the viewer. At the same time, a colour philosophy that was informed by the above debate could have played a part in the popular imagination, at least for Fiebig, who was working in the mid-19th century and could have well been acquainted with the perceptive ambiguity of colour. In fact, it would not be hazardous to guess that as a Prussian, he could well be familiar with

¹³¹ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Color, First published Dec 1, 1997; substantive revision Fri Apr 13, 2018. url <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/color/>

Goethe's influential (if very flawed) treatise on colour, which was published in German in 1810. So, the first conjecture here would consist largely of what kind of legacy Goethe's treatise may have left behind for a commercial lexicographer turned photographer working in the 'Orient' about half a century after the treatise was made public. Goethe wrote:

Color is chiefly meant for the sense of vision, the eye; in its most general and basic form, without regard to the character or shape of the surface on which it appears, it acts on man's inner nature through the mediation of the eye. Hence we will not be surprised to find that its effect has a direct connection with the moral realm. A single color acts specifically, while a combination of colors has an effect which is partly harmonious, partly individual, even inharmonious, but always distinct and significant. Thus color, as an element of art, may serve the highest esthetic purposes¹³².

But this is just one part of Goethe's mediation on colour and his detailed codification of what colour conveys - yellow conveying light, blue darkness etc. The other part, as Michael Taussig reminds us in one of his key works, is that Goethe was invoking the virtues of colour while also being very cautious of going close to it. He writes¹³³:

"Men in a state of nature," wrote Goethe in his book on color, "uncivilized nations and children, have a great fondness for colours in their utmost brightness." The same applied to "uneducated people" and southern Europeans, especially the women with their bright-colored bodices and ribbons. ...On the other hand, in northern Europe at the time in which he wrote in the early nineteenth century, people of refinement had a disinclination to colors, women wearing white, the men, black. And not only in dress. When it came to what he called "pathological colours," Goethe wrote that people of refinement avoid vivid colors in the objects around them and seem inclined to banish vivid colors from their presence altogether.

¹³² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Essential Goethe*, (Ed & Intro) Matthew Bell, Princeton University Press, Princeton & Oxford, 2016, pg 959.

¹³³ Michael Taussig, *What Color Is the Sacred?* The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2009, p 3



Fig 3.2: Clockwise from top left Hindoo Temple on the Banks of the Hooghly; View of Tank Square looking west; Chitpore Road, the heart of *native* quarters; Exterior of Fort William. All images from Fiebig's collection.

Was Fiebig's compulsion of colouring his images an outcome of this Eurocentric ambiguity of seeing colour both as a marker of aesthetic sensibility as well as non-European philistinism? If we look at the set of images in Fig 3.2 we see determinedly coloured images of various Calcutta spaces. The images are lavish and convey a sense of the city's downtown, a view of Hindu religious architecture, the restricted spaces of the Company's commandment; and a street in the so-called *native* quarters of the city. They are idiomatic and appealing but also significantly implicative, if we choose to see it that way, of oriental exotica for the average European consumer if not also evocative of a *lesser* people. In other words, Fiebig's notional relationship to colour could well have been influenced, through Goethe, to forcefully convey his location as a photographer of the East, whether he was using colour as a compendium of sensory identification or as one where colour is a clear marker of civilizational difference.

3.2.2 CONJECTURE ON CHROMOPHILIA: ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY

The second hypothesis is in some ways obverse to the first, for here, colour is not about the object *coloured* within photography and the meaning it might carry but about the traditional value attached to the idea of *sublime* and its relationship with banality that photography seemed to have been battling. Photography, as is best revealed in the writings of Baudelaire¹³⁴, did not enjoy the musings of the artistic elite till at least the 1860s, mostly because of its association with the banality of everyday life. And yet, for Benjamin¹³⁵, it is precisely the first two decades of photography that gave it an individualistic aura, comparable to painting, which it lost soon after its industrial-scale reproducibility and transportability was made collateral to its consumption. Fiebig could well be considered to have been at the cusp, unwittingly of course, of this debate between banality and aura.

It is in the light of Baudelaire's rejection one must turn towards photography and modernity and the emergence of a new visuality produced by both, since the middle of the nineteenth century. The modern industrial city, with its mobilities, masses and its proactive temporalities, provided a challenge to the classical aesthetic model. And as its visual ally, so did photography, whose emergence was an urgent and instant subversion to the elitism of art and its esoteric, plutarchist consumptive patterns. It is exactly why dedicated aesthetes considered photography as undeserving of artistic attention. One of the earliest to equate photography with a kind of degenerate industrial life was Victorian aesthete and thinker John Ruskin. Though initially enthusiastic about the new technology, he soon found photography merely a technological distraction and below the high ideals of painterly ambition. In his fourth Oxford lecture on art, writes Michael Harvey, Ruskin complained that the whole system and hope of modern life "are founded on the notion that you may substitute mechanism for skill, photograph for picture, cast iron for sculpture".¹³⁶

Ruskin's observation is in keeping with a prominent discourse across the Atlantic between painting as art in comparison to photography that is not, a discourse that had, among its early debaters, Edgar Allan Poe and his French translator Baudelaire. Against Poe's fascination with the daguerreotype,¹³⁷ Baudelaire, notwithstanding his otherwise

¹³⁴ Charles Baudelaire, *The Mirror of Art*. Ed & Trans Jonathan Mayne. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1955.

¹³⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al., trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. Boston: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008.

¹³⁶ Michael Harvey, 'Ruskin and Photography', *Oxford Art Journal* 7.2 (1984): p31.

¹³⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Daguerreotype', *Alexander's Weekly Messenger*, 15 January 1840.

ready embrace of modernity, found photography¹³⁸ a frivolous pursuit that at best could be a handmaiden to science and at worst, thanks to what Bazin later calls a ‘resemblance complex’,¹³⁹ would destroy the artistic capacity for imagination and mystification. Poe’s and Baudelaire’s positions reflect a series of discussions on this pressing matter that went way past their own lifetime and spilled noisily into the twentieth century. This was in spite of an increasingly complex jostle of ever-provocative artistic and literary movements problematizing the very idea of the *real* and the *representable*.

Likewise, Ruskin, Baudelaire and other aesthetes wanted to entirely sequester the aesthetic question from photography’s realist stimulus, thereby allotting to it the banality of a tool that merely presents the reality as it is. But photography’s artistic life from the very first years of its coming into being had not relented to such reductionism. And that it need not do so was powerfully argued by Edward D. Wilson. Stating that painting is a representative art form of the pre-modern, pastoral age and hence steeped in the natural beauty of the planet, Wilson writes¹⁴⁰:

The very age, however, which created the roaring locomotive, the grimy smoke-stacks and the filthy waste-laden river has created a new form of art. This is photography. A photograph lacks color but easily rectifies this deficiency by the delicate tones which only (a) photograph can possess. Industry has little color, only gradation of tones. Photography, then, is excellently suited to reproducing its beauty.

What is important is that Wilson, because he was also writing in an era by which photography had gone through multiple mutations in form and practice, points us to the aesthetic dimension in photography’s urban-industrial genealogy. He concludes his essay by saying¹⁴¹:

... [In] the city beauty must be discerned from the uninteresting, like diamonds are separated from clay ... What constitutes its beauty? It is not its color that is always a repulsive tint if it exists at all. It is its mechanical perfection, its supreme ugliness. So, beauty is accomplished at the two

¹³⁸ Charles Baudelaire, “On Photography,” in *Charles Baudelaire: The Mirror of Art*, Jonathan Mayne (Ed). London: Phaidon Press, 1955.

¹³⁹ André Bazin, ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image’ (trans). Hugh Gray, *Film Quarterly*, 13.4 (1960): pp 4–9.

¹⁴⁰ Edward D. Wilson, “Beauty in Ugliness,” in *Photo-Era Magazine: The American Journal of Photography*, 64.6 (1930).

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

extremes — by complete lack of ugliness and the complete presence of it.
That which reaches either extreme is a thing of beauty.

Wilson considers photography as foregrounding a different idea of beauty not through existing notions of extracting what is appealing but by institutionalizing its exact opposite — the abhorrent. Wilson's observations hold weight because firstly, he determines beauty and ugliness not as situated within a pyramidal aesthetic architecture of high and low but as equals in a spectrum with two extremes, both in their way reaching their sublimation in beauty, even if understood as opposite values. Wilson's argument rests on the following observation: that photography as a product of the industrial age is the most compelling apparatus to mirror its entrenched ugliness.



Fig 3.3: Top left and right Row of European Mansions at the busy Lalbazaar, Balzathar Solvyns, late 1790s; Menagerie at Barrackpore, coloured lithograph, Charles D'Oyly. 1848; **Bottom right and left** Dwelling of an English gentleman (Garden Reach); and Barrackpore Ghaut, both photographs by Fiebig, 1851.

The question that this hypothesis is asking is: Is Fiebig, conscious of the

monochrome everydayness of his subject, colour them, thereby denying to his images the primacy of documentation and wanting them to rather manufacture the aura that was exclusively reserved for paintings?

Above are a set of examples to that effect. The painters chosen here are not entirely random. Balthazar Solvyns travelled extensively in Calcutta and to Bengal's interiors, which makes his paintings a just companion to that of Fiebig's variety. Charles D'Oyly was the last most significant of painters and his work was contemporaneous to that of Fiebig's photography. And both D'Oyly and Fiebig have the Barrackpore Gardens (which we shall discuss at length in the following section) as their subject. What we see is that the use of vivid colours give both Solvyns and D'Oyly's works a quality of distinction and a romantic aura one readily associates with painting. The operative factor is not a true-to-life capability of the paintings or even their documentation value. The paintings are simply about a charmed, imagined life in a faraway country which also happened to be an outpost of the empire. There are of course embedded cultural tensions within the paintings, some of which we have seen in the discussions on panorama (or in the chapters that follow). But *prima facie*, both paintings also enliven their canvas with scenes of movement and animation. Photography could neither simply *imagine*, nor could play with the colour of the sky, the shade of the river, the palette of dresses worn by people frequenting the scenes, or could incorporate a sense of movement into his frame. A photographer's harvest is what he sees and what he chooses to memorize. This means that photography's claim of representing 'what is out there' can be seen as a provocation to provide the aesthetics with a material, historically observable object rather than simply a language of representation; as in the case of art.

Fiebig could well be aware that his photos including that of the plantation at the suburban retreat of Barrackpore (bottom left) and a what looks like a gathering at an Englishman's house in Garden Reach (bottom right) might be helpful for the purposes of documentation but will always be lacking in the aura that a painting perpetuates. Hence he chooses to hand paint them, in the process also complicating photography's straightforward relationship with *reproducing nature as it is*. If we imagine that a famed Calcutta stationer like Thacker, Spink and Co, would be selling the reproductions of both D'Oyly and Fiebig in early 1850s, it is most likely that the eye of the consumer,

attuned habitually to the *aura* of painting, would naturally want to buy the D'Oyly, wondering what would be so unique in a drab everyday image of plantation in a city garden. D'Oyly's menagerie would be so much more attractive.

Two Dutch critics of art in their essay on art and photography at the dawn of the latter, confirms that more than early photography endangering the artist, the discovery presented new challenges for photography. They write¹⁴²:

Concrete evidence that photography presented the existing arts with serious competition is evidently sparse and not easily tracked down. There are also other voices signaling the opposite, and they are more numerous. One of the most telling views, especially in the light of the above, was expressed by Dr D. (probably H.M. Du parc) in an article published in the journal *Onze Tijd* in 1855: "As is the case with all inventions, people have quickly got used to the wonders of photography. Indeed, after the initial enthusiasm passed, it was even said that this remarkable discovery would be the death of art; but experience shows that it marks the breaking of a new dawn for art by producing a different, unexpected outcome each day."

So, it is quite likely that anxious to compete with paintings and coloured lithographs, Fiebig, an experienced lithographer himself, would want to *re-familiarize* his viewers with the touch of colour on his photography, which would immediately affect the rawness of the monochrome image, giving a painterly character and also some distinction about its location and habitation. If so, then Fiebig is clearly hinting at the tensions that were at the heart of photography's contested relationship with art in that period, as much as he is creating a signature form of practice - marrying a whim for extensive documentation with a touch of hand-painted shrewdness.

Fiebig's is one kind of reaction, no doubt pressed as he is by his antiquity too, to the alleged limitations of photography. In the next section, we shall see how other, more experienced and accomplished photographers, responded to this problem.

3.3 CITY OF CONTEMPLATION OR, THE OPEN SPACES OF HISTORY

¹⁴² Hans Rooseboom and John Rudge, 'Myths and Misconceptions: Photography and Painting in the Nineteenth Century'; *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 32:4:2006; pp 291-313, p 293. Courtesy Stichting Nederlandse Kunsthistorische Publicaties.

From Fiebig's *enforced* hand-painted colours, it would be *de rigueur* to move into the monochrome recurrence of the colonial greens, so to say. And it is so because there is a recurrent presence, in fact proliferation, of open, natural spaces in early Calcutta photography – the lens specially hovering around the Maidan/Esplanade, the Botanic Garden, the Eden Garden and the leafy, forlorn Barrackpore House - the Viceroy's residential retreat bordering Calcutta's north. Photographs of these sites are bereft of any determinable human congress and the sites are imaged as exclusive, secluded and *natural*; though they are all essentially 'built spaces' doubling as sites of colonial activity and leisure, if not also governmentality. It would perhaps be an overestimation to call them consciously *ecological* spaces but there is a determinable difference between these spaces and other, officious, instrumental *sites* of colonial authority and signification. To that end, to see them as spaces of contemplation could push us towards a more complex understanding of photography's relationship with governed space in the colonies. Essentially, what I call the *city of contemplation*, is made of these urban sites which have a rudimentary ecological imprint but are by no means natural and marginal to colonial Calcutta's burgeoning relationship with modernity and imperial interest. So, what is the reflection in these photographs of the colonial moment? Do these images convey an impression of colonial estrangement or of colonial authority? To that end, is the anthropomorphic *barrenness* of these ecologically evocative spaces a commentary on the nature of colonialism itself?

We shall start with the sprawling, breezy, sweeping space that sits right in the middle of downtown Calcutta. The Maidan. Persian in origin, the word refers to a large open space. We have encountered the same Maidan as a panoramic space in Ch 2 where as here we shall see it as a space of instrumental public engagement. For the average Calcutta resident, the Maidan has been an everyday term in living memory that denotes a range of meanings: a downtown destination, a leisure destination, a sporting destination, an unmistakable part of the city; the green 'lungs' of a choked metropolis etc. But Maidan's spatial configuration is far more interesting than that and in fact, a matter of contestation, as we shall see. To that end, its purposeful, fond and repeated representation in panorama was only a part of the many kinds of memorification that Maidan received. We shall begin this section by looking at some of them and examine

what they reveal about what two historians Sarmistha De and Bidisha Chakraborty have fondly referred to as *the open space of history*.

To start with, the Maidan was an enormous empty space encircling the Fort William, which could be supervised from the top of it. In this way, the early company rulers could keep a watch on the land while also keeping an eye on the river. As Siddhartha Sen, in his new work on Calcutta, says¹⁴³:

(The Maidan) was created in the vicinity of the fort so that its defenders would have a free view and firing space. The Foucauldian notion of surveillance seems to be the rationale for this type of planning. By clearing the space around the fort, the British could observe the approaching enemy and use the level field to repulse them. This spatial restructuring of Kolkata after the British victory at Palashi in 1757 was a critical turning point in Kolkata's imperial urbanism as it ushered in the beginning of social and political control through planning endeavours.

Sen has drawn an equation between the Panoptical position of the Fort and the area around it¹⁴⁴; for the Fort had the river on one side and the Maidan on the other, indicating the ease of surveillance and the readiness to repel enemy attack. If this was about *why* the Maidan was planned, city historians Sarmistha De and Bidisha Chakraborty have given an account of *how* the Maidan was birthed:¹⁴⁵

The present Fort William, Eden Gardens and the pleasant grassy plain of the Maidan' was originally the village of Gobindapur. Out of a total area of 1178 bighas of land, only 57 bighas had any human habitation. The rest was dense jungle - pools of stagnant water and happy hunting grounds for the Bengal tigers. After Plassey the reclamation of waste and jungle was done very rapidly and by 1800 the original residents of

¹⁴³ Siddhartha Sen, *Colonising, Decolonising, and Globalising Kolkata: From a Colonial to a Post-Marxist City*, Amsterdam University Press, 2017, p 53.

¹⁴⁴ The Company's first fort, a little north of the current one was sacked in 1756 by the incumbent Bengal ruler and the British suffered heavy losses, including the perpetuation of what came to be mythologized as the 'black hole tragedy'. So, when the Company had the city under control post 1757, it was careful not to repeat the mistake.

¹⁴⁵ Sarmistha De and Bidisha Chakraborty 'Maidan: The Open Space in History' *Social Scientist* 38:1/2:2010, pp. 3-22. Pp3-4.

Gobindapur were displaced and the foundation of the present Fort William was laid. The jungle around the Fort was cleared and 'foundation of the present Maidan' was laid.

But soon the Maidan started to serve as a space of leisure *in* addition to that of imperial separation and sovereignty. To begin with, Maidan sequestered the emerging civic mansions of Esplanade and Chowringhee from the Fort William - the centerpiece of East Indian Company's military ministration in the city (and by extension, the empire). What was interesting, that by this logic, the colonial city came *into being* around the expanse of the Maidan, whose contours seem to have been secured long before Calcutta started to emerge into a metropolis. Also, as it is evident, a distinct civic life took shape at a visibly sequestered zone from the military life, the Maidan being a kind of spatial connecting link between them. De and Chakraborty add ¹⁴⁶:

The decade of the 1870's in particular saw the physical consolidation of the principal offices of both the imperial and provincial governments within a well-defined area centered on Dalhousie Square, with Writers' Buildings to the north and the Government House to the south. Several magnificent new buildings came into existence - the High Court, the Imperial Secretariat Building, the General Post Office, the Central Telegraph Office, the Custom House, etc.

In addition to this came up the Indian Museum, the Geological Survey building, the school of government art, while the Asiatic society continued to flourish on one corner. Added to them were the mansions dedicated to hospitality, leisure, commerce and trade ((Whiteway & Laidlaw, Kellner and Co, Thacker, Spink and Co.), religious institutions (The Bible Society). Together, an entire apparatus of a typical modern city came to congregate along the sylvan rectangle of the Maidan. As the two historians say¹⁴⁷:

Thus the entire space was devoted to the pursuit of Colonial Knowledge. Along with the fort and the offices of power and administration, the institutional structure of Colonial Knowledge found

¹⁴⁶ Ibid pp 9-10

¹⁴⁷ Ibid: p 10

its place around the Maidan. This need not be a coincidence and certainly was not.

Maidan, then, was more than just a panoptical space no sooner than it was conceived as one. As Calcutta's social history reveals, even if militarism was the fundamental reason for conceptualizing the Maidan, except a couple of brief instances of Japanese bombing in 1942 and 1943, the city has never faced an invasion since its founding. And that is why the Maidan has hardly been associated in the city's collective memory as space for enemy surveillance and military hedging; but rather for something opposite – as a suggestive space of leisure and pleasure. So, more than a space for military deterrence, the wide, open expanse of the Maidan became a space where colonial urbanism was in full and handsome view. It became, in the manner of European capitals, a *part* of the planning of a city characterized as it was as an open space fenced by built architecture on three sides and the river on the fourth. To that end, the Maidan, the sprawling heart of Calcutta's downtown is a wonderful specimen of a *non-denominational* space - open to claim and contestation - in an otherwise planned topography of a colonial city. As the city grew (and military rivalry over Bengal waned), the city administrators started to advertise the space as an expanse of open greenery that bordered the river for purposes of relaxation for colonial officers and their families. This meant that the fact of it being an ecologically potent space was never lost to the colonial government. De and Chakraborty's further research¹⁴⁸ has attested to the debate that ensued through the nineteenth century and how each generation of administration grew increasingly sensitive towards the upkeep of Maidan as both a necessary open space as well as one that *defined* sophisticated downtown.

So what we have is a complex history of Maidan, if there can be a history of an expansive, unmanned and unwallled stretch of greenery, which was, in fact, originally one-and-half the size of Hyde Park in London. This history of this open space takes us through a fortuitous assortment of military anxiety, settler enthusiasm, heady town planning, and exhibition of wealth, as Maidan grew into a veritable compendium of British life in India. Generations of British residents, in their finery, made the best of the

¹⁴⁸ Bidisha Chakraborty & Sarmistha De, *Calcutta in the Nineteenth Century: An Archival Exploration*, Neogi Book, Delhi, 2013.

river breeze as they sauntered down the Maidan on Calcutta's balmy evenings. There are numerous settler accounts of the Maidan and its adjoining areas and almost all of them talk about the palaces and grand buildings; the access to the robust river; and the general air of prosperity and fortuity that such a distant colonial outpost could provide. Sen quotes two well-known accounts. The first is from the painter William Hodges, who wrote: "The glacis and esplanade are [...] bounded by a range of beautiful and regular buildings. [...] The streets are broad; the line of buildings, surrounding two sides of the esplanade of the fort, is magnificent; and it adds greatly to the superb appearance, that the houses are detached from each other, and insulated in a great space."¹⁴⁹ The other account is of the Englishwoman Eliza Fey, who as early as 1780s, wrote, "[t]he town of Calcutta reaches along the eastern bank of the Hooghly; as you come up past Fort William and the Esplanade Row it has a beautiful appearance. Esplanade Row as it is called, which fronts the Fort, seems to be composed of palaces."¹⁵⁰ Historian Eugenia Herbert, in her book-length study of colonial gardens, says that though oriental in its nomenclature, English accounts have always referred to the Maidan as a necessity of British life in the colony. Journalist GW Steevens, in his *In India* (1899), repeatedly invokes this idea of Maidan, says Herbert. Echoing him, Calcutta historian Krishna Dutta, says that it was as a place where¹⁵¹:

Small English children would ride out for exercise on beautifully bedecked ponies, accompanied by a retinue of ayahs, coachmen, umbrella bearers, watchmen, syces and other attendants for man and beast.

Other historians and scholars too have tended to the imperial logic of such a grand investment and invocation in westernized urbanity. For Tristram Hunt, the central district was an imprint of a western model of metropolitanism that was associated with the highest ideals of British life. He writes¹⁵²,

A fiercely Enlightenment notion of progress and improvement, crucial to European self-approbation, was evident in the development of Calcutta. Out of the dense jungle of Bengal and the thick swamps of

¹⁴⁹ Sen, p 58

¹⁵⁰ Ibid p 58

¹⁵¹ Eugenia W Herbert *Flora's Empire, British Gardens in India*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2011; p 73

¹⁵² Tristram Hunt, *Ten Cities that Made an Empire*, Penguin, 2014. p 198

the Hooghly there arose a glistening tribute to Western civilization protected by the might of Fort William. It was, as William Dalrymple puts it, “as if Regency Bath had been relocated to the Bay of Bengal.

Natasha Eaton presents an even more curious probability. She concurs that the first generation of British administrators was desperate to bypass the unfavourable conditions that they inherited. Hence, someone like Hastings and his supporters — in “good Whig tradition”, says she — wanted to recast Calcutta in mythic terms. And it was done through the spatial appropriation of the city’s central districts. She writes¹⁵³:

In the development and codification of the modern city, public monuments, architecture, as well as maps and artistic and pathological topography (as a form of ‘paper memory’) performed a crucial role in the consecration and maintenance of history as colonialism’s *lieux demémoire*. Like early maps of the city, topographical views highlight the tiny colonial district between the Esplanade and the Town Square as being the most fashionable as well as political heart of the ‘White Town’.

In addition to its spatial centrality in the metropolitan design and its fantastical associations (whether realizable or not), the long history of Maidan’s *potential* encroachment and the repeated calls to protect it provide an unbroken link between the earliest alignments of the city with that of its gradual advancement into a fully realized (and *visualized*) modern metropolis. To that end, the Maidan *ticks* one of the primary requirements of being considered as an *eco-urban* space: a sort of primeval spatial continuity of contemplation, reflection and ennui. In Bourne’s pictures - whose Calcutta stint in the 1860s coincided with the robust urbanization of the city - we see a fascinating glimpse into all the aspects that could be associated with a space as potent as Maidan - leisure, surveillance and an inviolable green space. And so, exceptions aside, the images of the city’s central expanse could be said to have been mimetically embedded in the European — indeed *Haussmanian* — idea of the 19th century metropolis with clearly defined and regimented divisions, an austere sense of order and a sensible civil apparatus that imagines and maintains the space as such.

¹⁵³ Natasha Eaton, *Mimesis across Empires: Artworks and Networks in India, 1765-1860*. Duke University Press, Durham, 2013; p 68



Fig 3.4: **Top left** A panoramic view of Maidan, which stresses upon its greenery and openness than on the city that was burgeoning next to it. Though of unknown authorship, the image is from the 1850s and was part of the craze for panorama. **Top right** Samuel Bourne's image of local people resting on the Strand on the western end of the Maidan, at the corner of the Eden Gardens. **Below right** The statue of Lawrence Peele in front of the Eden Gardens, by Samuel Bourne. **Below left** A reflective, picturesque evocation of St Paul's Cathedral from the precincts of the Maidan, photographer unknown.

In Fig 3.4, the anonymous panorama, which as we have seen already, was a recurring form in early Calcutta photography, thanks largely to the elevation provided by the Ochterlony. What certainly distinguishes this image from all others we have so far seen is the sequestering of the green space from the more regular observance of the expanding city next to it. This is done by tilting the camera slightly to the left of the common panoramic position, capturing thereby the green expanse of the Maidan that leads straight into the river, giving the anthropomorphic space a primeval, natural, quiet countenance.

The next two images are by Bourne, who will also populate several of the later set of images in this section. In the image on the left, signed by Bourne and taken here from the facsimile reproduction of his original album on Calcutta, the renowned early lensman has positioned himself on the ground level, letting the greenery swing into the

view of the observer. The buildings that flank the Maidan have been obliterated, giving an impression of resplendent span of greenery. The demarcated area of the Eden Gardens is seen on the right. The diminutive figures add to the exotic charm, drawing out a sense of quiet and easy poise that foregrounds a native sloth not uncommon in cities with tropical climate. What is interesting here is that while most photographers were interested in capturing from the heights the emerging colonial headquarter that Calcutta was being seen as, Bourne chose to shoot just the Maidan *itself*, giving no hint of the spectacular architecture that flanked it and obviously characterized the city in the eye of the European. This image is hence devoid of the essential markings of Calcutta but carries a whiff of its *natural* boundaries in the greenery and the river. While the first image seems to position the Maidan as an intermediary green space occupying a central position in a city's ambitious urbanization, the second gives it an automatism, a sort of timeless *neutrality* as a site and space. Bourne's other image is that of Lawrence Peel (1799-1884) - a popular administrator and then Chief Justice of Calcutta - who was bestowed with a statue in 1855, when he was in fact, only 56 and hearty and living. The image is full of the expansive openness of the greenery, the solitude of the statue and the oblique presence of the Eden Gardens behind. Here too, the lack of human presence gives the image a contemplative, reclusive quality. The fourth image, a meditative long shot of the St Paul's Cathedral (called Calcutta Cathedral then), is notable. The unknown photographer plays with the waterborne mirroring of the spire, transmitting a poetic and timeless image of the city. The steeple tower, which is precisely what makes this image so remarkable, had in fact collapsed in the 1934 earthquake, never to have been rebuilt. The historical steeple's fall and the unrecognisable change of the area in front in the ensuing decades has ensured that this image is both historic, irreproducible and nostalgic at the same time.

These images are unpeopled, giving the topography an aura of frozen, unmanned vastness. Together they do evoke an idea that sits comfortably with the Maidan's historical reception as less of a place of military command and surveillance and more as a habitation of languor and leisure, windswept greens, quiet and sacramental remembrance and so on. In short, they reveal a space without a closure.

3.3.1 BOURNE SUPREMACY AND A SUBURBAN IDYLL

Bourne's work is so widespread, so visible and so unmistakable in Calcutta's early topographical itinerary that he deserves a separate mention. Though not all images that are circulated as that of Bourne are so because many were from his studio Bourne and Shepherd and those who came to take charge of it after Bourne left Calcutta in the late 1860s. But Bourne was not only prolific and adventurous but also a virtuoso, so his work left a mark and created a legacy for others. Below is one of the several profiles of him.

One day in late August, 1866 Samuel Bourne stood on the glacier of the Manirang Pass 18,600 feet above sea level in the Indian Himalayas and made three photographic views of the pass and surrounding mountains that expanded the known frontiers of both Victorian England and the medium of photography. It was the culmination of years of photographic exploration in India. Never before had a photograph been exposed from such an elevation.

This extract by Arthur Ollman¹⁵⁴ tells three things: that Bourne managed to achieve the near impossible within the domain of early photography; second, that his work as much as it expanded photography, also expanded the borders of the Empire; and three, that it came after years of honing his skills in photography in India.

The son of a Staffordshire farmer, Bourne bloomed early under the tutelage of the distinguished daguerreotypist Richard Beard. Having found fame in England as a landscape photographer, he came to Calcutta in 1863, by then an almost regular stopover for the itinerant commercial photographer. He was, by most accounts, full of conceit for his origins and bullying towards natives but had a 'lunatic persistence' in pursuit of hazardous expeditions to achieve ends in photography that only a handful chased before him. He found Calcutta flourishing with photographic business and this is where his most successful studio, in partnership with Colin Shepherd, flourished and continued to do so for the next 150 years (under various hands) after he had left India. But beyond a point, the city could not keep him caged. He kept leaving for the Himalayas and got some of the most outstanding views of the ranges that photography

¹⁵⁴ Arthur Ollman, *Samuel Bourne: Images of India*, Untitled 33, Friends of Photography, 1983, p 5.

anywhere in that period could have allowed. Having spent in and out of Calcutta between 1863 and 1870, Bourne left India.

For Ollman, Bourne's image of the extreme north of the Himalayas 'fuses' the 'expanded' border of photography with that of the Empire. In other words, by being the witness to and recording as such the extremes of the elements and the elevation of India's north, Bourne's *images* secured the Empire an expanded geography of influence. To that end, one can interpret these images to be somewhat at the service of the Empire.

But that is not the only Bourne that we see, for his commanding presence in early photography in India, leaves scope to revisit his work; and not least because of his recurrent interest in *alfresco* framing and spaces with ecological imprint. In fact Bourne was in no way on commission to serve the Empire, but was rather interested in the exotic as the playground for his experiments with the aesthetic of photography. Further, Bourne's success in India was not a fluke, and neither like some of his peers, did he let his images get scattered over space and time. Apart from having a well-managed studio, Bourne was also meticulous, orderly and disciplined. A very large number of his images are still available across collections and one can gauge with utmost interest at Bourne's very wide range of subjects. That is precisely why it is difficult to put him down to a single volition and offer his work as being in unabashed service to the Empire. As Xavier Guégan writes¹⁵⁵:

Through landscapes, rural scenes and images of indigenous Indian subjects, Bourne's photographs offered both an idealizing and nostalgic vision of India and the image of an 'undeveloped' society to contrast with British modernity, in a manner which served commercial purposes. By contrast, his equally popular images of Calcutta and other Westernized cities depict a sophisticated and developed urban landscape.

¹⁵⁵ Xavier Guégan (2011) 'Visualizing Alienation: Symbolism and Duality in Samuel Bourne's Photographs of British India', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 12:3, 349-365. P350. Also see Sarah Macdonald, 'Man of his Time', B&W (Getty Foundation), 2005. pp 94-95.

This is precisely why his Calcutta studio Bourne and Shepherd have had an inestimable influence on colonial city photography of Calcutta, perhaps matched only, if at all, by the studio of Johnston and Hoffman. Bourne's images of Calcutta's various landmarks is central to any long-duree theorization of Calcutta through the lens. We will look at several of his photographs that bring to the fore a very different Calcutta than what he, as a commercial photographer, would perhaps have been interested in. At the same time, he seems to have been much less interested in exploring Calcutta beyond the jugular, unlike what Fiebig did.

Bourne's oeuvre perhaps lay in making familiar sites unfamiliar, making him a central presence in what we call a template for the *city of contemplation*. As it would be clear, Bourne was interested in these spaces both as the spaces themselves but also, as it quite likely, because he was keen to get as close to nature photography as possible, as a kind of training for his later Himalayan excursion. Several of these images were taken close to each other, is visually striking and betrays thematic continuities. This is most suitably revealed in Bourne's almost singular preoccupation with the Company's outpost of Barrackpore, which was a rare distraction from the city's main and visible landscape. Bourne ventures 15 miles north of Calcutta's core area into what was the suburban residence of the Viceroy. Since 1772, this riverside site – Barrackpore - the name bearing its purpose - was where the East India Company under Marquis Wellesley had set up its first cantonment (barrack) in India. Barrackpore's actual history can be traced to the 15th century and there is ample illustration that once it became a retreat for the highest officer of the Company in India, it became an object of study for painters and at least one visitation of the camera before Bourne. They all wanted to capture it in all its lush glory. Two examples would suffice. They are below.



Fig 3.5: Left Governor General's House and Park at Barrackpore, watercolour, Edward Hawk Locker, 1808; **Right** Barrackpore Bridge, photograph Frederick Fiebig. 1851.

By the end of the 18th century, the garden became important for itinerant visitations of the company elite, who went there both as a respite from the hustle of Calcutta as well as to oversee army preparedness from time to time. It became known as a 'little Calcutta way from Calcutta'. Bourne travelled to the site to shoot the sprawling white colonnaded residence of the Viceroy, the complex of which included an equally impressive annex, later named the Flagstaff House. But why exactly did Barrackpore interest him?

In her work on imperial flora, Herbert writes¹⁵⁶:

(Barrackpore was) a short distance, one would think (from Calcutta), but enough to guarantee a respite from the sweltering heat that descended on the capital of British India for much of the year. Its gigantic trees, luxuriant shrubbery, and gentle lawn sloping down to the river's edge held the promise of shade and fresh breezes, even a hint of home in a distant land. Like the name of the place itself (referring to the nearby cantonment of soldiers), the garden was a hybrid, both Indian and English. As it evolved, it mirrored not only the individual tastes of the inhabitants of the house but also the exigencies of the country itself. At the moment when India was reeling from the unexpected ferocity of the Uprising of 1857, the gardens of Barrackpore reached their apogee under the gentle hand of Lady Charlotte Canning.

Charlotte Canning, after whom a Calcutta sweetmeat has been famously named, was an artist and botanist of considerable fame and was keenly interested in the imperial gardens of Calcutta. This was, after all, the city where she assumed the rank of India's first vicereine in 1858, when the British Crown took direct control of India. She took individual interest in the flora of Barrackpore specially before she passed away in Calcutta, aged 44.

¹⁵⁶ Eugenia W Herbert, p 62

This site is in continuation with the overall schema of colonial-administered sites that Bourne was imaging extensively. At the same time, in the pictures chosen here, Bourne deviates from any official commitment to photograph the residential complex or any obvious armature of power. In fact, he keeps the concrete out of view and seems to foreground what Charlotte Canning had done to the cantonment. In the first two pictures, Bourne has his wife as *the* subject, who seems ‘lost’ in the midst of a sinewy, thick network of trees, in a poised posture, as if lost in contemplation amidst the sylvan surrounding of a lush tropical landscape. The stillness of the postures and the quietness of the surrounding are discernible. Moreover, this is a rare case of an outdoor Bourne photograph which foregrounds a clearly discernible human subject, most of his other topographical pictures having minimised any such prospect.



Fig 3.6: The suburban idyll of Barrackpore in various incarnations. The two images on top are of Bourne’s wife. The two pictures below show local people in a state of leisurely congress in front of the Viceroy’s house and in the surrounding garden. All pictures are by Samuel Bourne.

In these images Bourne recasts his wife as a woman of distinction roaming the forested environs of a riverine embankment. An imagined comparison with Charlotte,

fondly remembered in England at that time as an archetype of feminine beauty and sensibility, cannot be ruled out, given the centrality of the figure in the images, who is both conscious of the surroundings and lost at the same time. The images, incidentally, recall very closely a story by Uruguayan writer Enrique Amorim¹⁵⁷, in which a French settler woman in colonial Uruguay is desperately looking for a suitable backdrop for a photograph that she wants to send home to her mother, as a subterfuge to hide her otherwise rudimentary and unremarkable life in an alien country. Likewise, Bourne could be also invoking the charms of a forlorn topography and the proverbial solitude that the Orient would enforce on a displaced British native. One can read these pair of images as carrying the overt centrality of the settler in the colony, an honour not even remotely reserved for the otherwise insignificant native figure. The other two pictures are indicative of that very same practice, where Bourne's distinctive eye for the atmospherics of a place is invoked through the unguarded indolence of the native subjects, who seem to be unaware or uninterested in Bourne's endeavour. They could be posing or they could be simply lazing, allowing Bourne to move around his camera to capture, in great detail, the expanse of the land around them. But these images can also be read as one that uses a tropical site as sylvan idyll that draws out quiet contemplation from both foreigners and natives alike. To that end, the pictures would reveal a seductive lushness of the faraway land rather than an imperious eye of the empire. One can also observe, if conscious of the facts, that in these pictures Bourne's skill of framing the landscape is evolving meaningfully, a skill he was no doubt honing for his adventures in the high Himalayas. But what Bourne could do with his framing is most evident in his images of the Botanic Garden, to which we shall turn next.

3.3.2 THE GARDENS OF EARTHLY DELIGHT

Calcutta's earliest parks emerged as an inalienable part of the city for providing daytime rest and moonlight serenades long before the city assumed any shape of distinction. Earliest records refer to Perrins' Garden in what was the city's extreme north (the area

¹⁵⁷ Enrique Amorim, *The Photograph*, collected in *The Oxford Book of Latin American Short Stories*, ed. Roberto Gonzales Echevarria, OUP, 1997; pp 201-204.

later morphing into the heaving heart of north Kolkata as *Bag Bazaar*) and Surman's Garden which later became part of the Company's Alipore estate. Both were breezy and lush private gardens that had aired, literally, the Company's ambitious plans to make a settlement in the difficult plains of a tropical marshland. But as the company found its feet in the soft alluvial soil, the plans for more elaborate parks and botanic spaces became part and parcel of imperial planning. We shall consider the two of the most famous of them.

If the Hyde Park lurks uncertainly behind the custodianship of the spatial protuberance of Maidan, Calcutta's other major inheritance of imperial ecology is less of a conjecture. It was by all means stamped with imperial interest in botanical sciences, in revenue generation, in controlling disease and pestilence and, also to create a bit of England in faraway lands. The Botanic was considered a most significant part of Calcutta's bouquet of colonial 'attractions', even though it is actually located on the west bank of the Hugli river, on a 270-acre patch of green in neighbouring Howrah. The opposite area in Calcutta, on the east bank of the river has for long been called Garden Reach.

To start with, then, the Royal Botanic Garden of Calcutta, which, as the name suggests, was part of the pax-empire initiative. As Eugenia Herbert writes¹⁵⁸:

It has often been said that the English are a nation of gardeners, with a passion for plants and flowers surpassing that of all other people...Wherever they went, they took with them as part of their cultural baggage their love of gardens and their certainties about what a garden should look like. nowhere was this more evident than in India...The farther from home one ventured, the more one longed for familiar cowslips and hollyhocks and Michaelmas daisies, for well-trimmed lawns and neat flowerbeds.

To that end the Botanic Garden was part of a colonial plan to import into the east one of the richest models of harnessing flora that became a major scientific programme in the

¹⁵⁸ Eugenia W Herbert p XII

west. As Caribbean historian Richard Drayton writes¹⁵⁹ in his book-length study, the Kew Garden was reproduced across the colonies not just as a site to test biological diversity but also serve the services of the empire itself, though any *prima facie* connection between a botanic garden and colonial control seems fuzzy. As Drayton writes: “In the gardens of Port of Spain, Kingstown, Grahamstown, Calcutta, Peredinaya and Singapore, lakes and alleys of cabbage palms opened vistas for the pleasure of Europeans and the colonized.”¹⁶⁰ British administrators, says Drayton, were initially unhappy with the staff that was being deployed in the royal gardens, complaining that they were ‘mere gardeners’. But, adds Drayton, “the ‘mere gardeners’ were perhaps engaged in one of the most irreversible and unnoticed effects of imperialism: the protected propagation of European plants, animals, and ideas of landscape, in new conditions. It would be wrong to see any conspiracy here. The British took their horticultural passions, and flowers and fruits they loved, wherever they took up residence, founding horticultural societies in Bengal, the Punjab, Sydney and elsewhere.”¹⁶¹

Without discounting this history of botanic colonialism, recent scholarship has moved away from seeing the Botanic exclusively through the lens of feral colonial knowledge being hoisted on conquered lands but part of a complex traffic of scientific temper. As Zaheer Baber says in his new essay¹⁶²:

Although the development of elements of modern botany was intimately associated with the conquest and colonisation of India, a related argument is that the production of botanical knowledge cannot be reduced to only colonial interests and imperatives. Rather, as argued here, botanical science represented, to deploy Chandra Mukerji’s formulation from a very different context, the “complex social embeddedness and autonomy” of science.

¹⁵⁹ Richard Drayton, *Nature’s Government: Science, Imperial Britain and the ‘Improvement’ of the World*, Orient Longman, 2005.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid; p 181

¹⁶¹ Ibid; p 181-182

¹⁶² Zaheer Baber, ‘The Plants of Empire: Botanic Gardens, Colonial Power and Botanical Knowledge’, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 46:4, 2016, pp 659-679; p 660.



Fig 3.7: Top left and right Samuel Bourne's spectacular images of the Botanic Garden - the great banyan tree reflected on a lake next and to it; and the avenue of palms; **Bottom right** Botanic Gardens, Calcutta by Dutch photographer JK de Cock; **Bottom left** An image of the Great Banyan from the holdings of Francis Frith, actual photo likely by Oscar Malitte.

There is also increasing evidence¹⁶³ that the proposal of a Botanic Garden in Calcutta and its subsequent establishment were related to at least three apparently disconnected forces that came to impress themselves upon Britain's overseas ambitions in the second half of the 18th century: a shaky idea of philanthropy in the colony; the Bengal famine of 1774, and Britain's declining finances after the loss of America in 1776. These different but interconnected histories must meet the methodology of imperial scientific transfer to be able to give us a more nuanced origin of the botanic gardens in Britain's colonies.

In Bourne's extraordinary image (Fig 3.7) of reflection, the distinctive nature of the green zone is unfailingly captured through the reflection of the talismanic Great

¹⁶³ See Adran P Thomas, 'The Establishment of Calcutta Botanic Garden: Plant Transfer, Science and the East India Company, 1786–1806', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 16:2, 2006, pp. 165–177. The Royal Asiatic Society 2006.

Banyan – the centerpiece of the garden – on the lake, on which the miniscule European figures are seen taking a boat ride while the locals are watching from a distance. Bourne intelligently uses the empty space in front of him to produce the marvellous reflection, locking the primary object and its mirroring in a spatial continuum. There are indeed other pictures by him of the gigantic tree itself and various other locations inside the garden but this one stands apart. Bourne's take is artistic and contemplative while not forgetting to highlight the meaningful detachment that is clearly visible between the imperial and native subjects. Like the Maidan and the Barrackpore garden Bourne seems to be less interested in the simple outlay of an imperial garden of 12000 specimens of flora that is stretched across the acres and acres. He is keen to reproduce an aesthetic meditation of the ecologically pregnant space while symbolically hinting at the garden being an imitation of a model back home. His other image of what was called *the avenue of palms*, Bourne highlights the serene surroundings of the Garden, this part being populated by towering palms, which seem to dwarf the local people standing frozen in front. The other two images, in many ways, compliment Bourne, for the picture of the Banyan's distinct spread and foliage, from the collection of Frith, seems like a near-replica of Bourne's image. Similarly, the little-known Dutch photographer de Cock's capture of the sinuous flora of the Botanic as reflected in the lake waters recalls that of Bourne.

Like its recent history of embodying a complex politics of *botanism* in the colony, the images present to us a varied visual compendium. Nowhere in the images do we find any obvious imperial signifier, unless one wants to interpret the native figures as having been dwarfed by the towering trees. What is rather obvious is an appreciation of an ecologically potent retreat that also doubles up as a scenic habitat of exuberant natural flora and fauna.

The final site in this template of contemplation is the other, more obviously city-park, which was much smaller than either the Botanic or the Barrackpore Gardens and was less of a place of retreat than of quick repose. But this garden had occupied, unlike the other two, the heart of the city. In fact, it was a part of the Maidan but if that space was distinguished by its expansive openness, movement and vantage of overseeing, Eden Gardens was walled, purposeful and placid.

If Charlotte Canning tended to the Barrackpore Gardens, the other one near the Maidan was indebted, by most accounts, to the sisters of George Eden, the Earl of Auckland and Governor-General of India from 1836 to 1842. The sisters Emily and Fanny are said to have taken care of the garden when it became part of the government's estate in 1840. It is after them that the garden was said to have been named. This claim may not be entirely true and some have even suggested that the name is Biblical. Either way, Eden Gardens became a famous, blooming public garden soon and was a veritable attraction for the British citizen, longing for the cool breeze and lush environs of the park, only a stone's throw away from the administrative offices that dotted the Dalhousie-Chowringhee area. In a little more than a decade, the park's interiors were distinguished by the presence of a Pagoda, which was brought from Prome in Burma after the Second Burmese War and erected in 1856 by Andrew Broun-Ramsay, 1st Marquess of Dalhousie, who served as Governor-General of India from 1848 to 1856. That the park was in good stead and had continued to serve its purpose for at least another half a century is clear from the notes of SW Goode, one of the early historians of Calcutta's municipal life. He praised Calcutta as having as much green parks as any large western city and Eden Gardens particularly for being a rather popular evening promenade¹⁶⁴.

As Herbert writes, quoting those smitten by the beauty of the gardens:

Edward Lear, too, couldn't resist branding the Eden Gardens, laid out about 1840 by Emily and Fanny Eden and considered the pride of Calcutta, as "a sort of Cockney-Calcutta Kensington Gardens." In due time the Gardens would sport a cricket pitch, a sports stadium, and a racecourse. The maidan itself struck a visiting journalist at the turn of the century as "magnificently English, Clapham Common, Hyde Park & Sandown Park all in one." Of course the clubs that became so integral a part of British Calcutta replicated life back home even down to the trim lawns and rustic chairs...beneath the shade trees; here expatriates could "perhaps imagine themselves on an uncommonly stifling day at home in or on a visit to the suburban woodlands of England."

¹⁶⁴ Goode, S.W. *Municipal Calcutta. Its Institutions in their Origin and Growth*. Edinburgh, 1916.



Fig 3.8: Clockwise from top left The Eden Gardens, Calcutta with its Pagoda, bandstand, culvert and walkway respectively. The same culvert is visible on the left of the Pagoda in the first image. Image of pagoda by Bourne and that of the culvert from Francis Frith's collection. Other two are of unknown origin.

In spite of the many descriptions of it being daily populated by British citizens who were eager for some repose and comparative privacy in the Eden Gardens, the images are almost entirely de-populated or are diminutive, even the white figure in the image of the bandstand. The lens rather focuses on the atmospherics (like each other space that have been mentioned above) and wants to invoke a sense of serenity around the Pagoda, the small waterbody, the culvert and the walkway that parallels the river.

Unlike the Himalayan photographs of Bourne, Calcutta's images (of him and others) do not testify to the frontiers of the Empire in any obvious way because the parks and green spaces of Calcutta are unlike in every which way to the (till then) untouched, impenetrable and forbidding heights that Bourne managed to reach in India's northern tip. At the same time, the Calcutta sites convey a *naturally* lush south Asian topography even if as an enterprise, design and reproduction they not only carry clear signs of European make but even their flora were not typically tropical. By separating the sites from their immediate location, the lensmen of Calcutta's *spaces of*

pause have managed to infuse them with an unforced primacy, creating contemplative, meditative zones within the otherwise feverish encounter with modernization that the city was witnessing through the 19th century.

There could be one more reason for Bourne and others to have taken a habitual deviation towards sites of sylvan prolificacy and ‘natural’ lushness. Ian Jeffrey, historian of photography, has drawn attention to early photography’s proclivity to continuously draw a parallel between the *topos* of photography and nature. ‘Drawn after nature’ was, in some ways, the manifesto for photography’s earliest inventors like Nicephore Niepce and Henry Fox Talbot. It was in some ways a provocation to bring to unacquainted eyes the distant worlds or worlds beyond the ordinary through the peculiar power of camera to capture nature as it is. As Jeffrey writes¹⁶⁵:

Pioneer photographers were especially attracted by symmetrically branching trees and by reflections-ready-made compositions. Fox Talbot found and photographed a fan shaped group of oaks at Carclew Park in Cornwall. Edouard Benecke, a French traveler, photographed one of the Cedars of Lebanon in the same orderly way in 1852...Felix Teynard, the French photographer and civil engineer who traveled up the Nile into Nubia in 1851-52, acknowledged Nature similarly. ...Teynard applied himself rigorously to architecture but included two photographs of palm trees in his survey, largely because, with their symmetrical growth, they looked like a match for Egyptian architecture.

One has to remember that the images of Calcutta that we see here come from the earlier decades of photography’s rapid global dissemination and this historical reference to a dominant practice, traced to an originary impulse of photography itself (of mirroring nature) is helpful. They reveal why early photographers to the colony, abreast with photographic styles in Europe, were so keen to map the symmetry, the mirroring, the parallelism that nature so abounds by. They hence developed a certain way of permeating even anthropomorphic sites with a romantic triumphalism of nature. Moreover, the history of the coming into being of these spaces/gardens reveal that these sites were not necessarily meant to *act* as direct interventions in the project of colonialism but had complex foundations, while the sheer force of their aesthetic invests them with an aura of natural self-regulation, turning them into ecologically potent and purposeful space within the colonial imaginary.

¹⁶⁵ Ian Jeffrey, ‘Photography and Nature’, *Art Journal*, 41:1: Spring1981; pp. 26-32, p 28

These images could be said to represent a fetish for colonial gardens imaged purposefully to feed the desires of a wide-eyed European consumer. But that would certainly reduce the complexity of the various modalities of representation that these images carry, any purposeful and dogged interpretation being further undercut by the stylistic intricacy and artistic capacity of Bourne and others. To that end the images not only resist any easy categorization but significantly add to the complex nature of *visualizing* the east.

3.4 THE EMPTY CITY

Looking at a section of photographs of early Calcutta (as those above) one is particularly struck by how depopulated, empty the city is. Prima facie this is because capturing objects in motion remained largely outside the capacity of early camera technology. But that is not the only reason for the *empty city*, as we shall see, is a common photographic subject between the middle and late 19th century. There is a pattern that is in vogue rather than emptiness being a marker of exceptionalism.



Fig 3.9: Clockwise from top left Louis Daguerre, *Paris Boulevard*, 1839; Charles Marville, *Rue de Constantine*, 1865; Chowringhee Road by Samuel Bourne, 1860s; Another photograph of a stretch of Chowringhee Road by Bourne, 1860s.

In the images above, Louis Daguerre's iconic early daguerreotype of a Paris boulevard is clearly missing out on the carriages and the people. Only one lone man, waiting to get his boots polished, seems to be caught by the camera's long exposure time. If we look at Bourne's image on the left, something similar is happening because a human figure in motion and a carriage on the right hand of the frame seems to have been blurred in what is otherwise a steady focal view of a recognizable stretch of the Chowringhee Road. In this view from the north end of the road, one can clearly see north-west across the Dhurumtollah Tank, towards the façades of the houses along Esplanade Row, with Government House at the extreme left. The flat-fronted building with verandah behind the premises of William Coish & Co is the Adjutant-General's offices. Among the commercial premises on Esplanade Row are Mountain's Hotel, Madame Nielly, Payne & Co's Belatee Bungalow and Thomson & Co.

Now, if we look at Marville's image next to Daguerre, it gives a sense of how the camera deliberately captures an empty city. Marville's work was famous for reflective, *frozen in time* views of mid-century Paris and in this most immediately recognizable of his images, he suspends *Rue de Constantine* into almost an empty, timeless frame. Bourne's other image of the Chowringhee, no doubt taken at the same time as his first, does something similar. In this view his camera is eyeing the path along the Maidan, which is on the left, and shows the Government House and the Ochterlony Monument. His position here is slightly behind the other one. But here, like Marville, motion is not blurred. It is simply absent. Incidentally, many of Bourne's pictures are dated 1865, even if the two above are dated as belonging to the 1860s. If taken along with his other images of similar style and vantage, Bourne's image would belong to not only the same period but virtually the same year as that of Marville. This comparative temporality is instructive to see these pictures within that paradigm. But the question remains, why the stillness? Why the freeze-frame?

Photography's *stillness* was never considered a liability until a few decades later when photography gave birth to cinema. The contention of Benjamin¹⁶⁶ and Kracauer¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al., trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Boston: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

¹⁶⁷ Sigmund Kracauer and Thomas Y. Levin, "Photography," *Critical Inquiry*, 19, no. 3 (1993): 421–436. See also Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973).

that cinema came with an unprecedented advantage of recording time *within* the image, stealing from photography the element of real time, is well taken. But this also gave photography, as Barthes¹⁶⁸ and Burgin¹⁶⁹ claimed later, an access to the transcendental in the contingent. It is hence not a surprise that before cinema, photography's desire for invoking the temporal and the mobile in the modern city was indecisive. In fact, a significant genre of early urban photography anywhere is *without* the hurly-burly of the modernist city, foregrounding instead the emptiness, the vacuity of the modern metropolis in an apparent subversion of photography as testimony to the obvious chaos of the modern city. Maria Antonella Pelizzari and Paolo Scrivano, for example, point at the Second Empire photography of Parisian Édouard Baldus. They write¹⁷⁰:

Baldus's photographic 'style' carved buildings from the urban context with the specific intent of interpreting Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann's (1809– 1891) politics of *dégagement*, where monuments appeared as new beacons within open vistas. This attitude persisted for long, since early twentieth-century architectural historiography built its narratives on the identification between objects and their photographic representations.

More recently, Steven Jacobs has historicized this spatial imperative of early city photography. He writes¹⁷¹:

The city was the perfect subject for early photography: the open air guaranteed sufficient light; the fixed, stable forms of urban space eminently suited to a medium still primitive and struggling with long exposure times. The tremendous activity of the boulevards, however, could not be captured. At a time when artists and writers were starting to define the modern metropolis as a place of hurried activity and fleeting impressions, photography reduced the same scene to a panorama of motionless, lifeless objects.

The effectiveness of such praxis is found in Paris in the early photography of Marville and the comparatively later street photography, of say, Eugene Atget or the Manhattan

¹⁶⁸ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000).

¹⁶⁹ Victor Burgin, *Thinking Photography* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982).

¹⁷⁰ Maria A. Pelizzari and Paolo Scrivano, 'Intersection of Photography and Architecture – Introduction', *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation* 27, no. 2 (2011): 108.

¹⁷¹ Steven Jacobs, 'Amor Vacui: Photography and the Image of the Empty City', *History of Photography* 30, no. 2 (2006): 108.

photographs of Alfred Stieglitz and Paul Strand. Jacobs traces this artistic proclivity, unsurprisingly, to Charles Baudelaire's unveiling of the metropolis in his poetry as a locus of disorientating, if banal, modernity. He says¹⁷²:

The modern metropolis, with its aleatoric diversity, is subject to the aesthetic gaze of the flaneur who is able to read the city's banality allegorically. Psychological isolation, an aspect of life in the modern city, is one of the poet's themes in *Le Spleen de Paris* (1864) ... This predilection for places of emptiness and silence, however, cannot be reduced to a form of escapism. On the contrary, Baudelaire stresses the duality of the modern metropolis: it is precisely in its banality and ugliness that poetry may be found. By giving form to vacancy, the artist suggests the frantic tempo of the city.

Photography in this case is more reflective than representative. Early city photography in the colonies is often cited as an exclusive and determinable aesthetic of projecting the imperial aura on an emergent metropolis. But clearly this was not something unique to either colonial photography or the colonial city. Let us turn to one of Calcutta's most imaged buildings to look at the imperative of the *amor vacui*. The Writers' Buildings.



Fig 3.10: Clockwise from top left-The Writers' Buildings, from the same angle, over eighty

¹⁷² Ibid., 109.

years: Thomas Daniell, 1798; James Baillie Fraser, 1826; Frederick Fiebig, about 1851; and unknown photographer, 1878.

These paintings and photographs had all been taken from the same position - the north-west corner of Dalhousie (Tank) square. While the position itself reveals a fascinating continuity and an inter-connected intermedial visual leitmotif, there are two marked differences. The first is obvious, which is the obelisk of the Holwell Monument. The paintings show it not only as a very conspicuous part of the frame but gives it a visual centrality for it being a monument to British suffering in the *cause* of empire-building¹⁷³. It is absent in the photographs because at some point in the first half of the 19th century, the 15 metre monument had disappeared. As per some accounts, it was removed to make way for a wider road. The second and more nuanced difference is that both the paintings are populated with native figures who seem to go to work, stroll around and are somewhat sequestered from the scenery of *empire at work* that Writers' – a citadel to the Company's bureaucratic rigmarole and aspirations of administrative control – signified. The photographs, in comparison, are totally empty, almost deserted. In the anonymous image of 1870 there still seems to be some movement lost to a lens unable to capture speed from such a distance but in Fiebig, there is little of what can be called human (or locomotive) traffic.



Fig 3.11: A good example of sequestering showpiece buildings through *dégagement*. Photographs from an original album, dated roughly 1860s, that of one Maj-Gen FW Stubbs, presented by his daughter to the British Library in 1912.

If we turn to Fig 3.11, we shall get a better idea of the *empty city*. The set of four photographs give the buildings, by their time a busy muddle of offices, tradesmen,

¹⁷³ See Partha Chatterjee, *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power*, Princeton University Press, 2012

visitors etc. almost a mythic, forlorn quality of an edifice standing in solitude. This is what Pelizarri and Scrivano call *dégagement*, and this is repeated across topographical views of Calcutta for much of the 19th century. This row of images on the same film paper is a classic illustration of the solitude of an unconnected sequence of buildings: Fort William, Adjutant General's Office, the Town Hall and the Upper Orphan School.

The *empty city*, which can be seen both as an extension of the *city of contemplation* as well as a preparation for the emergence of the *photographic city* is, like several other photographic regimes, had a very unambiguous imprint in Calcutta. In other words, what we in fact have as a historical record of Calcutta is not very different from early city photography in the West. Calcutta is similarly emptied and as distant to the human eye as any. In fact, as we would see, photography of the city continued to display the currents in the West, when over the course of about half a century or more a transition from a predominantly vacuous city to a predominantly brimming one had also mirrored in Calcutta with no less lucidity. This is what we shall turn to next.

3.5 CITY OF COMMOTION OR, THE PHOTOGRAPHIC CITY

It is not before the early twentieth century, when cinema became the recording machine par excellence, that photography reorganized the scope of its visual register to measure the taxonomy of the teeming city, with an unnerving sense of the *now* and *here*, enveloping the convergent crowd, the swelling streets and the overflowing cafes. If the emptiness of the city is a distinguished genre of early urban photography, the hurly-burly of the bustling city is the predominant theme of the later genre. Wonderful examples of the emergence of the alienated, lonely individual in crowded cities would be the candid photography of Henri Cartier-Bresson or the images used in Annie Haven Thwing's 1920 publication *Boston's Crooked and Narrow Streets*¹⁷⁴, among many others. It is through this wide representational axis — from vacuity to crowd, from the excident to the imminent — that emerges the idea of the *photographic city*. The camera established itself as more adept at recording the modern forms of urban fleetingness than being keen to preserve an exclusive domain of aesthetic value, which was what it

¹⁷⁴ Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked and Narrow Streets of the Town of Boston, 1630–1822*. Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1920.

did in the early years. This particular shift from recording the empty city to being a witness to the heaving, teeming city distinguishes colonial urban photography too, even if the final consequences of it, as we shall see in the concluding chapter, was an overt political imagination of a battered colonial city. Which is very different from its referents in the West. And that is what differentiates the visual template between cities of the west and that of the imperial east. But that would still be decades away since when the camera started to represent/memorize Calcutta as a thriving colonial metropolis which shared an equivocal if deferred realization of cities in the West. This section is hence intended as an inquiry into the possibility of seeing Calcutta as a *photographic city* in tandem with European metropolises of the mid-19th century. The idea of the *photographic city* is in itself in a state of germination rather than maturity; and is hence of less consensual stature in critical literature than say the *cinematic city*, which has found increasingly powerful critiques from both city and cinema scholars.

The idea of the *cinematic city* is no more than two decades old. When David B Clarke's book¹⁷⁵ foregrounded this idea, cinema scholarship of the city was mercurial and under-represented. By then however, de Certeau¹⁷⁶, Harvey¹⁷⁷, and Soja¹⁷⁸ among others¹⁷⁹, had already made the city the centre of an enormous corpus of scholarship of space - ranging from philosophy of belonging to sociology of urban ennui to postmodern fragmentation and de-centering of subjectivity. Before them and very influentially so, both Raymond Williams¹⁸⁰ and Marshall Berman¹⁸¹ had brought a fundamental change in how literary modernism was to be seen as a cultural movement entirely embodied in the cities of modernity. What was imperative was the need for

¹⁷⁵ David Clarke (ed) *The Cinematic City*, Routledge, London, 1997.

¹⁷⁶ Michel de Certeau, 'Walking in the City' *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 102-118. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

¹⁷⁷ David Harvey, *The Urban Experience*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1989.

¹⁷⁸ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. Verso Press, London, 1989.

¹⁷⁹ Also see, Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Black & Red, New York, 1984; Simmel, G. *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, K. Wolff, (trans.), 409-424. New York: Free Press. 1950/1903; Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, (ed) Mark Poster, Stanford University Press, Stanford; 1988; Habermas, Jürgen *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*, Polity, Cambridge; 1962 (1989); Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, 1969

¹⁸⁰ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, Ingram, London, 1975.

¹⁸¹ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, Penguin, 1988.

cinema studies to go back to the very early days of the moving image - and map its spatial imperatives within the emergent concepts and propositions of Modernism and urban cultures. As James Donald said about cinema's relation to the city¹⁸², almost echoing Raban, "Urban space, then, is doubly textured. It is concrete, but just as brutally it is fantastic." This *fantastic* is often at the cusp of modernity's self-appraisal through technology that is caught in an ephemeral moment, in a concentrated thrust of the principle of ceaseless mobility. As Stephen Heath says¹⁸³:

Meaning, entertainment, vision: film produced as a realization of a coherent and positioned space, and as that realization *in movement*, positioning, cohering, binding in. The passage from views to the process of vision is essentially that of the coding of relations of mobility and continuity.

Needless to say that mobility is the synoptic thrust of this argument, as a visual regime of the modern metropolis - the *ville moderna* - was unveiled, first by photography and then, by cinema. In the wake of a whirlwind of new technologies of visibility (some of them have been mentioned in Ch 2) one can see how the *metropolitan space* was being negotiated across them from the early days of the 19th century. As the speed of urbanism and that of life within the cities intensified, newer and newer forms of visual devices manufactured newer and newer forms of visibility of the city. Among them, photography emerged to be the most opportune, wide-ranging and adaptive apparatus. Photography and the city were hence in conversation from the very beginning of the latter's innovation, both trying to understand their own ontological status vis-à-vis the rapidly and radically shifting regime of life since the mid-19th century. In other words, photography as an abrasive young form and the rapidly changing city were trying to make sense of a *new* vocabulary of time, mobility and space, as was made imminent by the rapid and irreversible changes brought by modernity, mobility, capitalism and technology. Laura Marcus, in *Modernism and Visual Culture*¹⁸⁴, sites Martin Jay's nod to James Joyce's "the ineluctable modality of the visible", suggesting that modernist

¹⁸² *The City, the Cinema: Modern Spaces*

¹⁸³ Stephen Heath, *Narrative Space* in Philip Roser (Ed) *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, Columbia University Press, Los Angeles, 1986; pp 385

¹⁸⁴ Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period*, Oxford University Press, 2007

cultural practice plays a particularly important role in the exploration of visibility and culture, bringing together explicit, and at times violent, optical imagery with the indirections of mediated or internalized concepts of 'an inner eye' or 'mind eye'. Mary Ann Doane¹⁸⁵ also notes, even if her thrust is on cinema, how with the emergence of industrial time a new visual regime became imperative:

The pressure of time's rationalization in the public sphere, and the corresponding atomization that ruptures the sense of time as exemplary continuum, produce a discursive tension that strikes many observers as being embodied or materialized in film form itself. For film is divided into isolated and static frames – 'instants' of time, in effect - which when projected produce the illusion of continuous time and movement.

It is hence no surprise that the most influential book in this area - David Trotter's *Cinema and Modernism*¹⁸⁶ - draws upon André Bazin's concerns in his 1945 essay, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*¹⁸⁷. Bazin understands the camera as an indifferent recording medium, which delivers an image that might be unhinged from subjectivity. Film's indifference — what Trotter calls its neutrality— deals in a vexed duality, marking, on the one hand, an ability to record "existence as such" or to guarantee presence, and, on the other, to do so in the absence of a human audience. As Trotter says¹⁸⁸,

“[t]he will-to-automatism was the instrument with which writers and film-makers explored the double desire at once for presence to the world and for absence from it”.

Modernity's encounter with the city, hence, was through this series of possibilities of mapping the space through the desire for an optic sensibility, something that can be referred to as the *photographic unconscious* of modernity, doffing the hat obviously to Benjamin's theorization of the same. This is because the triad of the modern metropolis (with boulevards, cafes and street life), the new architecture of modernity, and

¹⁸⁵ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Harvard University Press, 2002, p 9

¹⁸⁶ David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2007

¹⁸⁷ André Bazin, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, in Allen Trachtenberg (ed) *Classic Essays on Photography*, Leete's Island Books, Maine, 1980. Pp 237-244

¹⁸⁸ David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2007; pp 1-16.

photography — established a protean, vibrant relation with each other with constantly shifting registers and parameters of stillness, neutrality, exactitude and mobility. Given this protean, unpredictable relation between *iconicity* and *indexicality* in urban photography, its aesthetic is also, at the same time, political. This is why photography starts with the *empty city* and then moves to capture, closely, the city as a site of constant and congenital flux. Also, photography, to paraphrase Trotter, was the medium that first (and till cinema came the only) new technology that could explain modernity to itself. This is at the heart of the emergence of a *photographic city*.



Fig 3.12: Clockwise from top left Old Court House Street during the busy hours of the day; A panoramic view of the Esplanade from the Museum; Strand Road with bullock carts and horse-drawn carriages and sailing ships and other boats on river in Calcutta; Hogg market late 19th century; First image by Samuel Bourne. The rest are all from the studio Bourne and Shepherd, in the collection of Victoria Memorial Calcutta. They are all pictures of Calcutta's streets, carriages and vehicular traffic in the 19th century.

Naturally, forces of imperialism proliferated these *ways of seeing* from the west towards the provinces of modernity across the globe - in northern Africa, in southern America, in Japan and the east and in South Asia. This proliferation did mirror or was at least symptomized in the affective relations between city and camera in cultures away

from the centres of western modernity. Like in the west, in Calcutta too, photography was the inaugural medium to disseminate a particular visual and optic mobility that metropolized the consciousness of modernity. This is to explore the possibility of extending the debate around photography in the history of urbanism that it represented, memorized and foregrounded in Calcutta.

This is what might be referred to as an exploration of Calcutta as a *photographic city*, for photography doubtlessly predates cinema in constructing a template for a restive encounter between the city and the lens of the camera. The possibility of the *photographic city* does not exhaust with the images that would be highlighted in this section. Rather, the two chapters that follow this one – on the city's porous affiliation with the Hooghly; and the way the city was imaged from the air – continue with variations on the theme of *photographic city*.

In the images of the 19th century (Fig 3.12), Calcutta's centre districts emerge as spectacularly wide, open and uncluttered, the vehicular services ranging from bullock carts, to hackney carriages to later in the century, the tram. The four pictures above, for example, show a city otherwise empty but also, at the same time, on the cusp of movement. This seems to change as Calcutta wades into the 20th century (Fig 3.13): streets are visibly more occupied, vehicles are more varied, jaywalkers and passers-by spill over from the walkway to the roads. If the idea of a verifiable public space emerges in these images, it is because the images are meant exactly to do the same, which in turn makes the idea of a *photographic city* more obvious. Also, in the later city images, the focal attention of the frames has shifted from the Old Court House Street (the high street of the 19th century), the much-imaged Strand and the Maidan/Chowringhee rectangle to Chowringhee's busy bays, the Dalhousie Square, the office premises in Clive Row, the Writers' etc. The photographic frame, still desirous of capturing Calcutta from distances or heights, seems to have expanded the frame (and scope) of what constitutes Calcutta's public sphere. It is not a large enlargement for much of *native* Calcutta is still quite a rarity for the camera to pursue. But British Calcutta (in postcolonial pejorative, *the white town*) became much bigger in visual scope. Along with it, the idea of the public sphere, limited in the 19th century to the rectangle that ran parallel to the Hooghly from the High Court to the Fort William,

expanded too. They now included the offices of the government, merchant and shipping offices, shopping, banks and places of leisure. There are other photos that depict the entirety of Park Street, the Wellington area, the length of Brabourne Road, the space around Howrah Station (the last we shall see in Ch 4) and several such comparatively newer, busier and more embattled public spaces that were somewhat deficient in camera's eyes (or were emptied) in the 19th century.



Fig 3.13: Clockwise from top left Calcutta's 'European Quarter', 1920s; Writer's Buildings witness to a clutch of traffic (both of unknown origins); Clive Waddell's Chowringhee, 1945; Ahmed Ali's Dalhousie from atop Brabourne Road, 1950s. All of them, needless to assert, witnessed Calcutta's busy streets in the first half of the 20th century.

Sudipta Kaviraj's now classic essay¹⁸⁹ argues persuasively about how the ideas of segregated public space were impossible to enforce in Calcutta. For Kaviraj, there were material, spatial and indeed even logistic deterrents to creating autonomous spaces for native and British citizens repeatedly. Secondly, the British elite were dependent on the native elite who in turn were dependent on the urban poor. So there was a constant

¹⁸⁹ Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Filth and the Public Sphere: Concepts and Practices about Space in Calcutta' *Public Culture* (1997) 10 (1): 83–113.

encircling of conceptually concentric spaces which at the same time also were interdependent and intertwined. In fact, as Kaviraj and others have pointed out, historically Calcutta was to witness apartheid that was far feeble, if at all, in comparison not only to several colonial cities but indeed several western cities as well. When we compare western cities, say Paris, which was a kind of exemplar of modernist *overhaul*, we come across a much more complex notion of town-making than a colony-metropole contrast was likely to achieve. For example, Vladimir Rizov, in his new essay about defining the *photographic city* says¹⁹⁰:

Ultimately, Haussmann's efforts created a 'holistic vision of an entire city brought into line,' in a manner typical for the Enlightenment, through the combination of technical knowledge and research with a conviction of achievable progress through amelioration (Vidler 2011, 94–95). In fact, the project of urban change relied to a great extent on, and according to Vidler 'had waited' for (2011, 95), the development of modern photography and cartography. The former emerged as a novel form of transmitting visual information in a manner that allowed the state, or its institutions, to implement measures of control, policing, and surveillance.

If this is the case in Paris, it is the same in Calcutta, as Hunt and others have pointed out again and again. If grand architectures, new roads, extensive walkways, boulevards and buildings of great attraction were part of an *exhibition* of power in Paris, it was also indeed the case here. So the fact that native Calcutta's crowd and crooked streets barely made it to any official or programmatic visual circulation of Calcutta in the colonial era is merely one part of the arrangement of power which has got less to do with colony and more to do with the nature of civil reconstruction in cities across the globe. Friedrich Engels called Haussmannization as a way of making the city an apartheid idea, which divided to rule, separated to maintain status quo. So what was so unique about the so-called and largely unrealized *two-town* policy of the British, that we need to see Calcutta as different from cities in the west? Or as a case of racial colonial administration? It is simply about how cities were made (Calcutta or St Petersburg) or remade (Paris, Berlin) in the image of power, whether in the west or in the east. Rather,

¹⁹⁰ Rizov, 780

it was a matter of how one must *image* the city as the place (re)*made* for the exultations of the modern. As Rizov says later in his essay:

...Haussmann's city planning was centred on perspective, vision, and order. This was the period in which Paris became 'the place where modern vision was developed' (Rubin 2008, 17). On an abstract level, the modern city is photographic exactly due to its architecture and urban planning.

Similar was the case for the geometric, wide, planned, programmed and sequestered (at least in want) space that we see in image after image of Bourne and others (Or will see in ensuing discussions). So it is not in the dichotomy between two spatial taxonomies that one should look for the emergence of a city cosy with the camera but in the landscape of races, cultures and bodies that seem to have emerged into the much visited (and revisited) central quarters of Calcutta from the mid-19th to mid-20th century. Indeed, Calcutta's *metropolization* was synchronous and synonymous with the idea of modernity in the colony. In some ways, it is in Calcutta's central districts that the *photographic city* in the colony was born.

CHAPTER 4

LIQUESCENT CITY

4.1 ALL THE WATERS

I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable, Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier; Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyer of commerce; Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.

TS Eliot, Dry Salvages
Four Quartets (Section III, Lines 1-5)

Is a history of a river possible? A river is beyond historical time; or geological periodicity. Ganga, nourisher-in-chief of half of the land we call India has flowed into historical records from deep into prehistory and into the Holocene from much beyond the Pleistocene. This is apart from its fabled origins and continuous presence in the geo-aesthetics of devotional mythmaking. Ganga's 'sacred topology'¹ hence encompasses a wide sociology of belief, and phenomenology of rituals, especially within the non-secular traditions of Hinduism. This chapter is not about the mythology of the river; or the awe it provoked among innumerable travellers; or about its sacred taxonomy. This chapter is rather about a geographical *section* of the river, which was explicitly documented within a historically determinant period. This part of the river is referred to as the Hooghly (as Ganga's fragment within Bengal is known) and the time I am zeroing in is roughly between mid-18th and mid-20th century. In that sense, topology here would refer, rather, to the homeomorphism (continuous transformation) of the river's fluidity on the space of history.

Unlike the panorama and aerial form, the natural topography of the river cannot be coalesced into a singular photographic regime. If at all, imaging the river is part of early picturesque photography, which was in turn connected with the politics and representation of imperial travel and exploration. But the archive of images of the Hooghly that this chapter deals with goes way beyond just the benignly picturesque or the programmatically orientalist. Either of them would fail to reveal the complexity of

¹ In mathematics, Topology refers to a scenario in which two objects are considered equivalent if they can be continuously deformed into one another. The main topics of interest in topology are the properties that remain unchanged by continuous deformations. I am borrowing the term to refer to how the mythical properties of Ganga's topography were allowed to remain unchanged through the many curves of history. For more about topology, see [britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com/science/topology). <https://www.britannica.com/science/topology>

the camera's encounter with the expanse of the river, an encounter that birthed and nurtured the city of Calcutta from the very beginning. In fact, the river's width, bent and tide and its diminishing distance from the Bay of Bengal was the very *raison d'être* as to why a marshy triad of villages embanking it was found to be the fittest station of Britain's lofty overseas aspiration in this part of the world.

The chapter hence does not follow the methodology of comparative visual historiography, as the chapters on panorama, or aerial photography. This chapter begins and stays with Hooghly and follows the river's life within the arc of colonial visual imagination - from its early days of being a fabled frontier to its emergence as a chief conveyor of commerce, to the taming of its expanse in the late colonial period through cutting-edge engineering. As much as the river incited early accounts of fascination, every effort was consequently made to make the river a part of the city's commercial, administrative and spatial prospect. This temporal spectrum – represented visually - would also reveal how the history of Hooghly since the 17th century, mirrors the global tide of trade, navigation, migration and urbanization. Like all grand rivers of the world.

This chapter is divided into four parts. The first section coalesces centuries of extant accounts and recent scholarship into a very brief history (till the 18th century) of the river as a both mythical and geographical entity. The second section begins with the unveiling of the colonial era and its consequent portrayal, mostly in paintings, as a formidable and intractable natural frontier. By the time of the camera's arrival, the river had become a permeable landscape, having emerged into Calcutta's primary natural reserve for instrumental usage and accessibility. The third section hence constitutes the camera's recording of this process of familiarization and usability, especially in the context of the port and two banks of the river. The fourth section look closely at the visual record of the engineered river, which, first through a pontoon passage and then, at the very last decade of the colonial period through the cantilever wonder of the Howrah Bridge, continued to provoke a range of visual possibilities about the river, the city that it feeds and the seething multitudes that is sustained by both.

Together, the chapter would hope to reveal a visual imagination that was concurrent to the fascination and fortification of the river as much as they captured how

the river participated in the city's coming into being. In fact, so integral has the river been to the visual archive of the city's past that it is perhaps the most continually imaged embedment of it, in both pre-photographic visual imaginary as well as the protracted cataloguing of its prospects and precincts by the camera. To that end, the phrase *Hooghly captured* has both figurative and instrumental meaning. In other words, Eliot's invocation of the river as a brown god and fearful frontier that is subsequently tamed mirrors the Hooghly in colonial imagination to the last syllable.



Fig 4.1: A panoramic take on the ships on the Hooghly by Samuel Bourne, 1860s.

4.2 A HISTORY, IN BRIEF, OF A NOURISHER-IN-CHIEF

Ptolemy's erroneous 2nd century BCE world map, which made severe mistakes elsewhere, did assign Ganges the deserved centrality in this part of the world. There has been barely a time since when the river and the sea it relieves itself into – The Bay of Bengal – were outside the reckoning of travellers and itinerants if not also merchants and seekers of fortune. The Ganga's sacred eminence and its omnipresence as a provider has been recounted by almost all visitors – starting with the Buddhist scholar Hiuen Tsang, who in the 7th century CE, called it Foshwui – 'the river of religious merit'². The Moroccan explorer Ibn Batuta in the 13th century and the inquisitive French duo Jean Baptiste Tavernier and François Bernier in the 17th (among many others) pointed out that Ganga as source of munificence enthralled not just the Hindus but also the Sultans and the Mughals. In fact, the rich deltaic plains, the alluvial soil, the variety of crops, the bounteous beauty and the opulent materiality of the region also ensured that those who ruled the large landmass we now called South Asia, wanted to have an imprint in the Gangetic basin. Early northern empires like the Mauryans to the

² Jagmohan Mahajan (Ed) *Ganga Observed: Foreign Accounts of the River*, Indica Books 2004. p16

local Sen Dynasty in the 11 and 12th centuries, to the dynasts of the Sultans and the Mughals left their mark along the river. Through these centuries, and especially through the first half of the 2nd millennium, south of the ancient city of Benares new centres of learning, trade and culture developed. Visitors have also noted, with unfailing acuity, that along with being the nourisher in chief, the waters of the Ganga were also the final pilgrimage of the ardent believer, the comforter of the dying, and upon death, the force of ablution that ‘released the soul from the prison-house of the body’. In short, Ganga, through history, has been deemed pristine and perilous in local lore and revered almost universally as a boundary and benediction of nature. In length and influence Ganga has always enjoyed comparison with both the Nile and the Mississippi.

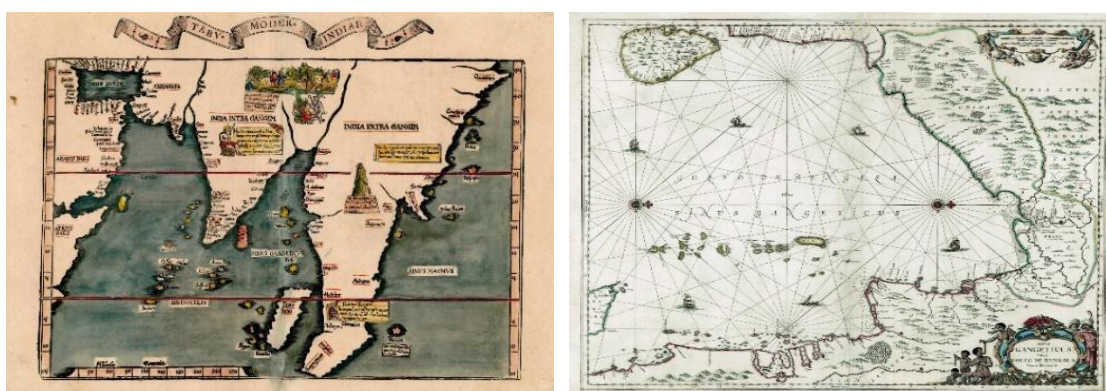


Fig 4.2: Left Tabula Moderna Indiae by German cartographer Lorenz Fries, made after Martin Waldseemuller's 1513 version of Ptolemy's Geographia. Maps such as these came in the wake of the newly discovered sea route to India in the late 15th century and were comparatively more accurate than the previous maps based on Ptolemy. Right: A decorative map of the Bay of Bengal coast by Dutch mapmaker Jan Jansson, *Atlantis Maioris* (Vol V), 1650. The map has a west orientation (west is up). The Ganges is shown on the right, splitting into two branches; one going towards Hooghly (Ougely) and the other towards Dhaka (Dacca).

It would be a serious oversight to think that Ganga's epic presence on the Indian landmass was only celebrated by visitors and pilgrims from afar. In local lore and literature, Ganga was revered no less. In early Bengali literature for example –Bipradas' *Manasamangal Kabya* and Mukumdaram's *Chandimangal Kabya* - there are opulent descriptions of the river. *Manasamangal* chronicles the travels of the chivalrous merchant Chand Saudagar from Katwa to Chitpur two centuries before the founding of Calcutta with colourful accounts of life around the river, while the descriptions of late 16th century holy gatherings in *Chandimangal* can rival those of any of the visitors. Be

it reverence or fear or an entrenched sense of pride, the Ganga was always considered too insurmountable to be tamed by human engineering, and too sacred to be amenable to human authority. As historian Sudipta Sen writes:

Even during the periods of the last great empires such as the Mughal and the British, which were built on surplus generated from one of the largest peasant economies in the world, when irrigation and the redistribution of water became a significant priority of statecraft, the virtuous river and its pilgrim landscape remained vivid in the popular imagination.³

Sen contends that Ganga could compare only to China's Yangtze for how it has shaped politics, and for its inexhaustible holy appeal, to River Jordan. But it was not politics or piety but Ganga's natural abundance and strategic attraction that seduced the European imperialists from the 16th century, who came to consider the Bengal region as the vantage of their overseas authority over the rim of the Bay of Bengal. Soon, the great waters of the Ganga became the precinct for competitive imperial sovereignty. In fact, the massive wealth of Bengal subah (state) became known around the world and it was the river (and the adjoining sea) that was considered both the reason for this prosperity as well as, ironically, the passage to attain sovereignty over it. On a less serious note, the European palate seems to have been unsated by the gift of Ganga's waters, as the French duo mentions mixing their wine with water drawn from the river and regretting it ever after. Even the Dutch authorities avoided drinking them, they claimed⁴. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why the Europeans, on arrival in Bengal smelling profits, concentrated on trading over those waters rather than drinking them. As Sen writes, referring to Sanjay Subrahmanyam's work:

In 1515, following the death of the legendary pioneer of the Portuguese seaborne empire, Afonso de Albuquerque, the young Lopo Soares de Albergaria ... like his predecessor ... gave a wide berth to Portuguese casados (tradersettlers)— not just fidalgos (aristocrats)... Such casados included not only white (branco) married settlers, soldiers, and

³ Sudipta Sen *Ganges: The Many Pasts of an Indian River*, Yale University Press (New Haven and London), 2019. pp 18

⁴ Jagmohan Mahajan (Ed), *The Ganga Trail: Foreign Accounts and Sketches of the River Scene*, Indica Books 2004, pp 31

ecclesiastics but, as Bocarro pointed out, an increasing number of native and mixed-blood Christians or *casados pretos* (blacks).⁵

Indeed, the Portuguese were the first to get the licence to trade in Bengal in 1580 having had experience in the western coast and having convinced Mughal Emperor Akbar of their 'fair' trading intentions. In the next few decades, the town of Hooghly flourished under them, thanks to an economy that was built, contrary to the official pledge, around slave-trade. Akbar's grandson Shah Jahan, on knowing the true nature of the trade, sacked Hooghly in 1632. But profit was (and is) too much of an attraction and the legacy of a fort (factory) town was one that was latched on to by the European progeny of Portuguese voracity - the emergent imperial powers. Hence, all four of them – the Danish, the Dutch, the French and eventually the British came to build their own factory town on two sides of the Hooghly river in the century after the Portuguese fled. These powers were emboldened with new navigational techniques and an obsessive zeal to mark their presence on the most far-flung of territories. As such, each of them were trying to outdo the other in competitive navigational competence for seafaring ships. The primary stuff of trade, especially in the post-Portuguese phase were silk, textiles, sugar, rice and spices.

Till the late 16th century, Ganga's main waters, after it forked into two at Farakka, flowed into its western side through what was the Bhagirathi channel. But then it made a decisive shift of course eastward. which started to infuse Bhagirathi's parallel stream Padma with more and more of its waters. Bhagirathi flowed downstream for about 290 kilometres till it turned suddenly south-eastwards at Khidirpur and continued as a feeble channel which has since got the name Adi (original) Ganga. The bulk of the water in the channel below Khidirpur is that of Saraswati, a distributary of the Bhagirathi that separates itself at Tribeni about 50 kilometres north of Calcutta, runs parallel and then joins it back at Kidderpur. It was to distinguish the new period of the river from the old that it was named Hooghly (variously Hugli/Hugly), christened as it was from the thriving Portuguese town, which in turn referred to the Portuguese term *gola*, meaning storehouses. By renaming an ancient river with the name of the new

⁵ Sudipta Sen, *Ganges* pp 338

town, a new period in the history of the lower Ganges was unveiled in the late 16th century, thanks to a unique fusing of geological and mercantile forces.

If one counted the variety of settlers who had dropped anchor on the bank of the Hooghly, along with the various trading communities, pilgrims, religious sects, visitors, merchants and folk related to fishing and coastal economy, the rich plains watered by the river were already a heady mix in the earliest years of the advent of European powers. One just had to know how to harness the river and the people around it to grow the empire. And as it turned out, the British were the one who had learnt it the quickest.

4.3 WHEN JOHN COMPANY DECIDED TO GO WITH THE FLOW

The United Company of Merchants of England trading to the East Indies had earned the local name John Company. We usually know it as the East India Company, the history of which in the subcontinent usually concerns itself with how they understood business. This is evident from how a shadowy group of merchants ran a ruthless empire across thousands of miles and at its peak controlled 20 percent of the world's population. But no less key was how the Company understood the tides and turns of the Hooghly. For, the Hooghly not only played a decisive part in the Company's robust foundations in this part of the globe but progressively participated in the act of imperial hedging, so that tentative mercantile ambitions could morph into a sustainable, economically viable and vast empire.

Backed by Thomas Roe and smelling great profit in the trade of cotton and silk, the 1600-founded East Indian Company was in India by 1616 and in Bengal by 1630s, which chimed well with the firing of the Portuguese. By 1651, it had made it to the city of Hooghly. In less than two decades it got permission from Mughal officers to bring large sea-faring vessels upstream the river. As Robert Ivermee⁶ notes, in 1672, a 200-tonne English vessel called *Rebecca* had sailed up safely to the town of Hooghly, guided by *Diligence*, a special purpose river surveyor that the company financed and had sent to Bengal. By the mid-1670s, the river seemed to have been mastered and the company's investment in Bengal amplified almost ten-fold. All this while, the English

⁶ Robert Ivermee, *Hooghly: The Global History of a River*, HarperCollins, 2021, pp 67

were stationed in Hooghly and other parts of the coast of Bengal and Orissa. In about two decades, English ambitions over grew their existing stations and the need for a new fort with new warehouses and a new set of administrative infrastructure would become necessary. But it was not clear where the new establishment of the company could be safely and cheaply built. Also, John Company was in no position to imagine a fully financed colony in the late 17th century. The primary if not the only interest of the Company was expanding trade and maximising profit, and all pilferage, corruption and plundering to that effect was tolerated as long as they helped the company gain mercantile foothold at the cost of rival companies of Dutch or French parentage. But that was also what the rival companies were doing.

The difference was in the way the English understood geology. Nothing else explains their interest in the three villages next to which they had dropped anchor in the last decade of the 17th century with an aim to develop a so-called *tabula rasa* in their own likeness. There are divided opinions about the extent of commercial footprint that already existed in the three villages of Sutanuti, Kalikata and Gobindopur before Charnock's arrival. And there is some consensus that even if Kalikata was all wild forestry, Sutanuti and Gobindopur were far from it. So, when, on a rainy day in August 1690, Charnock first pitched his tent on the bank of the river, he was not stepping into virgin land for sure but he was not invading a thriving mercantile community either. As Siva Prasad Das Gupta notes⁷:

In August 1690, when Job Charnock was looking for a good landing-place on the Hugli to set up an outpost of the East India Company, the present site of Calcutta was possibly the best available. It provided not only the space for strong fortifications and a growing trade centre but also – being 130 kilometres from the sea – a safe and commodious harbour for the large-sea going vessels of those days. Though Charnock was severely criticised by many of his countrymen for having chosen an extremely unhealthy site, close to the steamy marshes of the Salt Water Lakes, the location was actually ideal from the navigational point of view as also for defence, being protected by

⁷ Siva Prasad Das Gupta, 'The Site of Calcutta Geology and Physiography', Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed) *Calcutta The Living City* Vol 1 (The Past), OUP, 1990, pp 2-4, p 2.

the mighty Hugli river on one side and a vast expanse of salt marshes and wetlands on the other.

Apparently Charnock's associates found the new site so repulsive that they had named it Golgotha. But Charnock persisted and so did his successors. Future historians have argued if Charnock's choice of station was more about fortuity than fortitude. But as it is clear from the spectacular recorded history of Calcutta in the ensuing decades, the choice of the place of anchorage down south of the Hooghly was not so much serendipity as it was an act of confident speculation. And over time it returned one of the richest dividends to any empire anywhere else in the world.

But it did not come easy, however, because Charnock had merely smelt a possibility. The real work was to be done after. As Ranabir Ray Chowdhury's recent history of early Calcutta tells us, the Company's dependence on and despair regarding the Hooghly's truant ways was a matter of consistent discussion in the records of the Bengal Council, which overlooked the management of the new outpost. And those debates played a key part in deciding if the British would continue to invest in a land of a bounteous river or should pull away for the fear of a Herculean effort that was needed to make the river amenable to the cause of imperial greed. As we know, the British stayed put, the debates preferring to conclude on the side of making Calcutta from scratch. Two things were needed. A fort had to be built on the river and the river had to be disciplined. Work began without delay.

As Choudhury writes...⁸

While the river was eating into the eastern bank at some places it was also shifting its channel westward, a result of which was that a lot of land on the eastern bank was being reclaimed. This is of interest in view of the fact that, at that point of time, the land on which the Strand Road of today is built was under water...Cleaning up the river bank was one of the earliest steps taken by the English after they landed in Sutanuti in 1690.

⁸ Ranabir Ray Chowdhury, *A City in the Making: Aspects of Calcutta's Early Growth*, Niyogi Books, New Delhi, 2016, p 80-81



Fig 4.3: **Left** A mezzotint engraving by the prolific British engraver Elisha Kirkall, made after a work by George Lambert of old Fort William, published in London in 1735; **Right** Coloured engraving *A Perspectival View of Fort William*, Jan Van Ryne, published by Robert Sayer in London in 1754.

By the time the earliest of painters started to depict John Company's East, the fort was built in full. The earliest paintings hence show the Hooghly as a fabled and mighty frontier, on which the fort had laid an anthropomorphic claim. The paintings obviously romanticized the arrival of Europeans in a distant land as a triumph of will and zeal. Both the images in Fig 4.3 are testaments to that. The first is an engraving of a George Lambert painting that was especially commissioned to adorn the courtroom of the Leadenhall Street headquarters of the East India Company. Theatre painter and social wit in equal measure, Lambert was a pioneering landscapist, and here his talents have been heavily utilized to imagine a fantastical country, where the English had resolutely set foot (even if Lambert hadn't). The huddled ships, the billowing smoke and the distinct waviness of the river indicate a strong sense of purposeful arrival, having mastered the winds and tides of the mighty Hooghly.

The painting champions the old Fort William, named after the then king of England, William III. Just six years after Charnock's arrival, in 1696, construction of the fort started under Charles Eyre with the orders of John Goldsborough, both high-ranked officers of the Company. The fort was situated on the bank of the river at a slight bend; had two storeys and projecting wings with the spire of Church of St Anne's visible from a distance. By 1706, a year before the demise of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, most of the fort was complete, Captain Alexander Hamilton – the British sailor and not the American statesman - had left behind a lively account of his time in India in *A New Account of the*

East Indies. We are not to take him literally but his account of the old fort, which he called ‘an irregular Tetragon’ made in *puckah* is one of the rare records of this period⁹. The Old Fort contained the governor’s house, officer’s residences, barracks, go-downs and factor’s quarters. It was virtually a city in itself and was the centrepiece of early colonial settlement in Calcutta. Few buildings existed outside. Dutch draughtsman Van Ryne’s engraving, which identifies the land as the ‘Kingdom of Bengal belonging to the East India Company’ gives the full expanse of the fort and diminishes the church, so as to reinforce the idea of a robust, military supremacy. The paintings, both of the first half of the 18th century, give us a spatial sense of the earliest settlement in the newly founded city of Calcutta, even if none of the paintings can be seen as literal representations. Also, in both the paintings (more visibly in the second), the local people, drawn obviously in darkest of shades and having the most diminutive of stature, seem to be oblivious to the ‘mighty’ work of the Empire going on next to them and going on with the daily chores.

It is without doubt that in two decades – the time that separates the two engravings – East India Company had made formidable strides in claiming not just Calcutta but the whole land as their own, which still belonged to the local sovereign – the Nawab of Bengal. The Mughal empire had lost its hold over the far corners as its power waned after 1707 and local sovereigns became increasingly more involved in deciding the fate of their land. Incensed by the audacity shown by a mere Company, in 1756, Bengal’s Nawab Siraj ud-Daula attacked Calcutta, sacked Fort William, renamed the city as Alinagar, and went back to his capital in Murshidabad upstream the Hooghly. The fort became the site of the infamous ‘black hole tragedy’, the scale of which was superseded by English propaganda to that effect, which further peddled the lie that the British conquered Bengal to avenge the tragedy. But as the old fort and its overseas impressions amply exhibit here (along with several other sinister designs that historians have pointed to repeatedly¹⁰), the British were for long treading into all

⁹ See Jagmohan Mahajan, ‘John Company’s Calcutta in the Eighteenth Century in Pratapaditya Pal (Ed) *Changing Visions, Lasting Images: Calcutta through 300 Years* (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1990), 17-30 p 18

¹⁰ Several histories point out the British designs of greater control of their trading outposts, in the mid-18th century, chief among them being Bengal. See. Among several others, see William Dalrymple, *The Anarchy: The East India Company, Corporate Violence, and the Pillage of an Empire*, Bloomsbury, 2019

possible privileges of the local Nawab, provoking the backlash. Incidentally, the old fort was so badly damaged that after the formal conquest of Bengal a year later it was handed over to the commercial department of the Company and then, much later, bulldozed. The new Fort William came up a couple of miles down south.

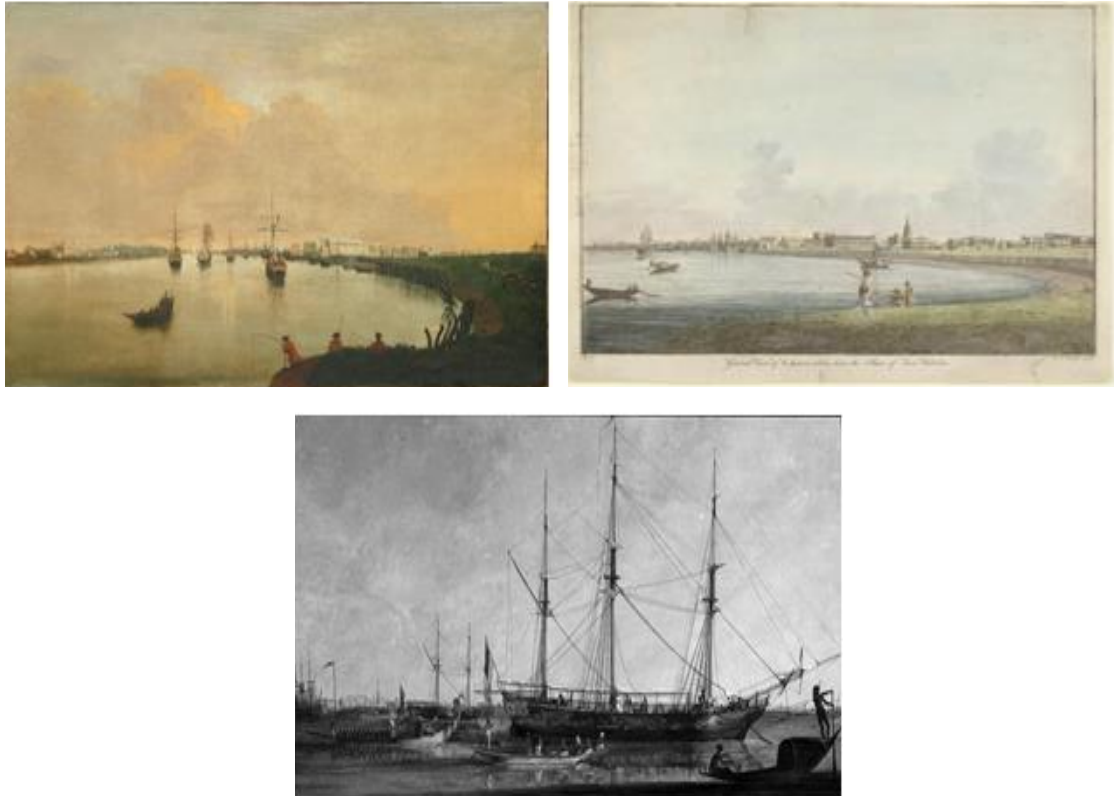


Fig 4.4: Clockwise from top left George Farrington's *View of Esplanade, Calcutta from near Fort William*, 1785, is distinct for its panoramic evening sky and evoking serene life; William Baillie's hand-coloured etching with aquatint, taken from near the sluice of Fort William, which is plate VII of his *Twelve views of Calcutta*, 1794; Frans Balthazar Solvyns' *East Indiaman, Calcutta harbor*, 1794 captured the American ship at anchor in Calcutta harbour.

That the Battle of Plassey was a game changer is too well known to recount all over again. More important is how Calcutta's providence changed radically from being an outpost of a fledgling mercantile power to being the second city of an empire. As Philip Davies says¹¹

With the resumption of British control, a major change occurred in the form and pattern of the European settlement. A huge new fort was built but unlike the old Fort William where the principal buildings were

¹¹ See Philip Davies, 'Capital of the Raj' in Pratapaditya Pal (Ed) *Changing Visions*, pp 1-16; p 2

concentrated within the walls, the city now developed outside, beneath the protective ramparts of the most impressive European fortifications in the East... The new fort altered the entire plan of Calcutta. In order to obtain a clear field of vision, a huge open space was formed – the Maidan – which not only rendered the fort unassailable but also provided an enormous vista around which a splendid collection of houses and public buildings arose. The golden age of Calcutta had dawned.

Clearly, the Hooghly's turns and moods and the confidence to allow growth outside the fort after 1757 were substantive reasons for the development of a new city. It went beyond being dependent on either forces of history or that of the tide of the river. With the river and the fort on one end, the city started to grow around the semi-circular open space of the Maidan, which, as we will see across this project, gave it a unique spread and a spatial temperament that soon became a social talking point, a planner's schooling and an artists' delight. True to expectations, Calcutta started to grow with feverish urgency and by 1773 had become important enough to be declared as the headquarters of the expanding British influence in this part of the world. In 1776, after America was lost, Britain looked more and more closely at the east and Calcutta became the fulcrum around which its ambitions grew. There are several testaments about the awe Calcutta inspired on visitors during the later decades of the 18th century. Just one of them should suffice - that of the fifth Governor General Richard Wellesley. Wellesley, once a classical scholar, described Calcutta in effusive terms, in no small way contributing to the growing clout of the trophy-term 'City of Palaces'. The popular historian Tristram Hunt cites a passage by Wellesley when he was arriving, in 1798, to the capital of British India to take over the office of governance¹²:

Nothing could equal the magnificence of my approach to this town. For nearly three miles the river, which is as large as the Thames at London, is bordered by lovely well-built country houses with porticoes and colonnades. The town is a mass of superb palaces in the same

¹² See Tristram Hunt, pg 183, for the quote from Iris Butler, *The Eldest Brother: The Marquess of Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington's Eldest Brother* (London, 1973), p. 134.

style, with the finest fortress in the world – all this is, as in Rome, mixed up with miserable huts and gardens. The green of the lawns surpasses anything you can ever have seen – an extraordinary effect in such a hot country.

True to their task, the picturesque paintings that spanned the latter half of the 18th century to the beginning of the 19th, reveal not only a sprawling river but also the spectacular emergence of a city from the low plains that it drained. In Fig 4.4, we see three paintings from the first generation of expatriate painters who arrived in the fourth quarter of the 18th century. The little-known George Farrington studied under the American expatriate painter Benjamin West, who pioneered a form of historical painting. Perhaps that explains why in Bengal, Farrington preferred to live in Murshidabad as a guest of the Nawab (a hollow title by then), eventually dying there when he was just 36. As Giles Eyre informs, the above painting was part of his three most well-known oils, all painted after 1784. Charles Greig adds:¹³

In the foreground three Europeans are fishing in the Hugli. One looks towards the shipping at anchor, the other is facing the New Court House, which had been completed in 1784. The sky takes up half the canvas and the stillness would suggest evening.

Farrington is interested, as suits a seasoned pictorialist, in conveying a serene, leisurely view of the Hooghly rather than trying to chronicle the empire at work, so to say. Ditto for William Baillie's hand-coloured etching. The vantage is the same as Farrington. But Baillie shows the Esplanade Row - the most important thoroughfare of British Calcutta that ran east-west to the north of the Maidan. What is important is that both the paintings depict the proliferation of public buildings that came up post-Plassey, in the process obscuring the need to see the city as synonymous with the fort and rather as an independent urban figuration in conspicuous blossom. The Belgian Balthazar Solvyns, as is usual with him, depicts a different aspect of the city. With his characteristic eye for detail and his skilled brush, he offers a glimpse of the Hooghly-based trade that the

¹³ *Landscape Paintings in the Victoria Memorial Collection: Chiefly by European artists*, Introduction and short biographies by Giles Eyre, Catalogue and text by Charles Grieg. Victoria Memorial Calcutta 1991. Pp 49-50

newly independent America had established with Bengal. Susan S Bean's essay gives us a glimpse of this comparatively neglected part of Calcutta's economic history. She informs that between the late 18th and early 19th century the trade had reached a peak, and involved a set of Bengali merchants (baniyas) unlike that of the Company, which largely traded through agency houses. She writes¹⁴:

American ships brought lumber, naval stores, New England ice and manufactured goods, European wines, and silver currency, to return with Indian cotton and silk textiles, sugar, indigo, ginger, saltpetre, jute, linseed, and hides. At Calcutta, the most active Indian port in this commerce, a number of Bengali banians became specialists in the trade with Americans.

The next set - Fig 4.5 – is made of three other key 'company painters' and were drawn between two to four decades after the set in fig 4.4., offering distinctly different views of the city. James Fraser arrived in Calcutta in 1814 and in the next half-a-decade or so produced these lively sketches of the busy city, which were later published as a collection of twenty-four aquatint plates. Fraser's view of the river between Garden Reach and the Botanic Garden is tantalizing. Garden Reach was so named because it was the point on the east bank from where one could ferry to the Botanic Gardens on the west. In the painting, one can see the Botanic Garden House on the left and the palatial country residences of the expatriate suburb of Garden Reach on the right. The house on the left, built in 1795, was the residence of botanist William Roxburgh. The gardens were originally established by the Company a decade ago with Robert Kyd being the man behind the establishment, he being the first superintendent. Unlike Fraser's translucent river and sky, Daniels reverts the view as he is seeing the city *from* Garden Reach in a more restrained composition with a dominant ship and at the distance the skyline defining Governor House.

¹⁴ Susan S Bean, 'Calcutta Banians for the American Trade' in Pratapaditya Pal (Ed) *Changing Visions*, pp 69-80, p 69,



Fig 4.5: Clockwise from top left Plate IV from James Baillie Fraser's *Views of Calcutta and its Environs* (1814-1820); William Daniels' *Calcutta from Garden Reach*, 1834; Coloured lithograph *The Town and the People* (plate V) from Charles D'Oyly's *Views of Calcutta and its Environs* (1848).

The testament that the painters were not exaggerating their subject is to be found in a number of written accounts of the period. Writer and illustrator Maria Graham, for example, gave a detailed personal view of Calcutta in her inaugural journal, published in 1812. She wrote:

The river was covered with boats of every shape, villas adorned the banks, the scene became enchanting, all cultivated, all busy and we felt that we were approaching a great capital. On landing, I was struck with the general appearance of grandeur in all the buildings... groups of columns, porticoes, domes, and fine gateways, interspersed with trees, and the broad river crowded with shipping, made the whole picture magnificent.¹⁵

¹⁵ From Maria Graham's *Journal of a Residence in India*, quoted in Tristram Hunt, *Ten Cities that Made an Empire*, Penguin Books, London 2014, pp 196.

As if to reinforce the grandeur and its effect on the artist, Charles D'Oyly – the last of the great painters to have adorned his palette with view of Calcutta – constructs a split field of vision by having a tree conveniently divide the view of the city into the Esplanade, on the right, and Hooghly river, on the left. The vantage of the painting is what later was the tip of the Strand Road, even if D'Oyly has played with the perspective. The scene portrays a sense of liveliness and gaiety and it is likely that the painter at the centre is D'Oyly himself. Unlike all the other paintings where the white-attired Europeans have largely shadowed the natives out of visibility, D'Oyly's Calcutta is different. The native population seems to be all concentrated on the side of the town, generally employed as attendants to the European families. Nothing much changes there. But the inclusion of a turbaned figure with a blue cape riding a horse on the extreme right, who is clearly of Arabic descent, is what makes it interesting. More arresting is the left side of the image - the riverside – where we see people of several races mingling and moving, of which two dancing figures with cowboy attire and sombrero; and a couple of bare-chested men with Moroccan Red Fez are distinctive. By the 1840s, when this painting was made, Calcutta was so diverse, is such a magnet for commerce and is such an integral part of a global trade route that D'Oyly could in no way have missed its cosmopolitan charm. By his time hence, the city has assumed a character beyond a conglomeration of eye-popping public buildings.

The final two images in this section are unique and cannot be clubbed with the paintings. They are also dated much later than the peak of landscape paintings that we saw. But they are still illustrations, both, and come from two widely differing sources, while referring to curiosities on the Hooghly. Kalighat painting, the paragon of popular print culture in Calcutta through the 19th century – was famous for its proclivity to satirise Bengali baboo excesses and their moral infirmities. But here Becharam Das paints a newfound fad – the paddle steamer - that had caused considerable flutter among the city's pleasure-seekers. Becharam here is depicting, in the unmistakable perspective-flattening Kalighat-style, a chock-full of white settlers dressed for the part sauntering on the colourfully canopied steamer. The expanse of the Hooghly, barely of the same length as that of the steamer, is quintessential Kalighat, perhaps indicating the domination of the river by the members of the white community.



Fig 4.6: **Left** Paddle-steamer on the Hooghly, watercolour over a lithographed outline, Kalighat painting by Becaram Das Datta, 1857. **Right** *The Horses' Morning Bath at Calcutta*. *Harper's Weekly*, November 7, 1868.

The second Illustration accompanied a news report in the popular American periodical *Harper's Weekly*. The report, barely about the horses, gives such a lively account of the city and the river that one would be hard-pressed not to quote it at length. It said:

From five to seven o'clock in the fine season the resident or visitor at Calcutta may improve his health and find plenty of amusement for his mind by rambling, either on horseback or on foot, about the suburbs of that great city; or may inhale the fresh breeze of morning on the banks of the Hooghly, where he will see many things worthy of remark. Along Garden Reach, for instance, the elegant villas with their verdant lawns and tasteful flower-gardens, have a very attractive aspect, while the distant view of Fort William, and the stately houses of Chowringhee, as well as the Esplanade, with its monuments, the noble Grecian edifice called Government House, the Townhall, and other public buildings, give an appearance of truly palatial grandeur to the supreme metropolis of British Asia. The river itself, broad as an estuary, or arm of the sea, is thronged with vessels of many different kinds, both large and small, both of European and native construction, and where their masts and sails are seen through the stems and branches of an avenue of fine trees the effect is singularly agreeable. The chief landing-place, called the Chandpaul Ghaut, with the strand extending northward, is adorned with many handsome buildings of an ornamental character. This and the other ghauts, or quays, are scenes of

much lively bustle at an early hour of the day, when a multitude of native people, chiefly servants and women, come down for water. The syces, or grooms, in the employment of the rich, are likewise accustomed to bring their horses down, and to plunge with them into the river, while it still retains the pleasant coolness of the night. This, indeed, is the only hour of the twenty-four, during the hot season at Calcutta, in which the mere physical sensation of life is a pleasure. When the sun once more makes his tyrannical power felt by every living creature, the sensation of life is a burden to horses as well as to men.

With the arrival of photography, such eloquent imaginations of the river had to give way to instrumental depictions and documentation, the river eventually shifting in imperial consciousness from being a fabular frontier to being a key companion in the city's spectacular growth.

4.4 FROM A FABLED FRONTIER TO A PORT OF CALL

Calcutta was gaining traction as a modern colonial city well before the sunset years of the eighteenth century but it took about half a century since then for the city to emerge into a veritable metropolis. By mid-nineteenth century Calcutta was a city full of opportunities and commercial vitality, which was appealing equally to traders, investors, buccaneers, missionaries from Europe as well as to the pastoral population from the vast hinterland. Along with the architecture of modern administration, judiciary, bureaucracy, literacy and education, we also see - John Company being at heart a commercial establishment - a modern mercantile economy, signified by the opening of the first organized merchants' chamber¹⁶. Together, they displayed a surefooted metropolitan ambition and its many attractions, being increasingly charitable to the dispensation of the aspiring classes as well as for those looking for quicksilver pleasures from a booming economy. Riding on the riverine economy, a stable geography of trade, cheap labour, social reforms and education and a mixed-race,

¹⁶ The Calcutta Chamber of Commerce, a body of this nature being the first in Asia, was founded in 1834 as a loose coalition of business interests, which morphed into the Bengal Chamber of Commerce in 1853. Bengal Chamber had a major stake in getting the railways on track, the port commissioned and the pontoon bridge built. The campaign to demolish the pontoon bridge and build a new, giant bridge over the Hugli was a key issue with the Chamber.

cosmopolitan population that was eager to embrace in endless bequests that modernity was bestowing upon the city, Calcutta was an exemplar of *urban prima*.

Krishna Dutta, one of the city's several biographers, captures Calcutta during this time. She writes¹⁷:

Calcutta— and the Bengal Chamber of Commerce — began to prosper as never before from the late 1850s. Trains carried coal to the capital from the neighbouring Raniganj, power-driven factories beside the river turned raw jute into gunny sacks, auction houses busily traded tea from Darjeeling and Assam. In 1853, the total value of exports and imports from Bengal was some £28 million; by the turn of the century, it had quadrupled to £111 million. The first bridge across the Hugli, a pontoon type linking Calcutta with Howrah, opened in 1874; horse-drawn trams appeared in the streets in 1880, bicycles in 1889 and motorcars in 1896. Telephones arrived in 1882, and in 1898 the first moving picture, showing Queen Victoria's 1897 Diamond Jubilee, was shown at the Star Theatre...

Needless to point out, at the heart of this extraordinary growth was the Hooghly, which aided navigation, bolstered trade, provided leisure and fuelled the jute industry. The port, which came into formation in various stages, made the river commercially viable and an instrumental hand. On the other hand, the Strand Road and the entire stretch that flanked Fort William on either side was a singularly attractive downtown that provided every possible minutiae of modern life. Third, the river continued to be an attraction for bathing, festivals and pageantry that involved the local population. In short, the city's distinctive life was most discernible in and around the river and secured, since the arrival of photography, a veritable visual practice.

The images in Fig 4.7, from the early decades of photography, show the ships that crowded the Hooghly for as long as one can remember. The panorama, as I have stated in the concerned chapter, makes the river's expanse all the more encompassing of the city's green stretch with the hulls of the ships giving a sense of the river's daily business. Fiebig and Bourne's image show ships with auxiliary steam, which were moored variously on the expansive stretch of the river but were often found to have anchored, like in Bourne's

¹⁷ Krishna Dutta, *Calcutta: A Cultural and Literary History*, Supernova Publishers, 2013, page 111.

image, at the Custom House Ghat. The ghat was named after the clearing house because that is where substances of import were first off-loaded. Likewise, we see the off-loaded barrels in the front of the picture as well as budgerows and other local boats behind.

The last image looks north along the Strand Road towards the High Court, with sailing ships at their moorings. The Strand was originally constructed from Chandpaul Ghaut that went north and later went south towards the Fort and beyond. It was part of the embankment development project of Governor-General Marquess Wellesley. Together, the images reveal growing commercial and navigational activity around the river which spilled over, gradually and inevitably, to cover the banks which were dotted with buildings, offices, stores and warehouses that India's most prosperous river economy had birthed. The fulcrum of this economy was the booming port, which came into its own over many years but was formally commissioned on 17 October 1870 under the Calcutta Port Act, finding a permanent administrative home. We shall turn to it next.



Fig 4.7: Clockwise from top left: Frederick Feibig's characteristically colpured photograph of the Hooghly, early 1850s; A part of Rowe's 1858 panorama with the Hooghly at the distance; Sailing ships moored on the river by Samuel Bourne, 1860s; W. G. Stretton's image of anchored ships next to the Strand, 1870s.

If one simply wants to recall the history of the port of Calcutta, then its antiquity was almost as old as the city, for since the very beginning of the 18th century, ships would find a river anchor to drop wares and also carry new ones in exchange. A dedicated place for anchorage was not felt as long as the ships stayed close to Fort William and enjoyed the protection of the company. But often, like in the cyclone of 1734, ships were damaged heavily, having no shelter whatsoever. A protected port was mulled for decades, but not until 1758 did the Company set up the nucleus of a port by setting up a Marine Establishment and soon a wharf was constructed. But the company did not invest in a protected dock system for another century. Battered by two other cyclones in 1842 and 1864, the Bengal Legislative Council, in 1866, passed an act to establish the River Trust, which later in 1870, through Act V was morphed into Calcutta Port Commission.

Eight jetties opened on the Strand in 1869-1870. The opening coincided with the inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1869, which cut the distance from England by 6,500 kms, giving the new system a massive boost in trade. The wet docks of the port shifted slightly north to Kidderpore in 1892, making the latter an all-weather wet dock, which, given the bend of the river, was also a protective site from the scourge of cyclones. While the Calcutta Jetties, upfront on the river remained a popular place to visit, it was the wet docks at Kidderpore which eventually assumed the weight and expanse of what is officially called the Calcutta Port. In fact, one of the etymological sources of the nomenclature Kidderpore is said to be the British engineer James Kyd, who had designed part of the dock complex and the lock gate that connected the port with the river.

The first two images in figure 4.8 are from a rarely-seen private album at the British Library which gives a detailed, stage-by-stage account of the setting up of the wet docks, and was clearly an official documentation project. The two images show the excitement of the local population, the size of the ships, the extent of construction and the scale of the port. The third and fourth image show the jetties on the Strand, one close-up of the Outram Jetty giving us a clear view of the purposeful docking of the

small boats. The final image reveals the busy Strand north of the administrative complex with the river's embanked paraphernalia. Together, the images provide a robust account of how the river was tamed and re-purposed for the birth of what is still India's only major riverine port and since its beginning, the largest.



Fig 4.8: Above left and right Kidderpore dock in a state of construction in its very early days, from private album, 1890s; Below right and left The Outram Jetty on the strand with anchored small boats to ferry stuff from the warehouses, P Bose & Company; Hooghly from Supreme Court, looking north over the rooftops of export and import jetties; Johnston and Hoffman.

Much of the life of the river was mirrored on the way the city's eastern bank was coming into prominence, much of which consisted of the Strand Road. This is what we see in the two images of the Strand in Fig 4.9. One of the ships is interesting for having the photograph note the name of each of them standing erect in a line, in a pose of readiness.



Fig 4.9 Clockwise from top left The Strand Road and the anchored ships, Johnston & Hoffmann; Steam ships Laomene, Four Winds, Sofala, Calirrhoe, and Elbe stand next to each other on the Hooghly, State Library of South Australia; General and wide panoramic view overlooking steamships in the harbour area at Calcutta, 1900; photographer unknown; People bathing at the Jaganath (Chhotulal) Ghat, 1870s.

The Strand, notes Ranabir Ray Choudhury, was in the imagination of the city's administrators for a long time as a possible walkway where the city would meet the river. Early records reveal that given the flat banks of the river and the ease with which the ships could anchor close to the land, a lot of trade interactions could be undertaken in real-time. Much of these trade negotiations culminated in the 'respondentia' contracts, which eventually gave a stretch of the river's banks the name of Respondentia Walk, which was even entered in an 1856 map. There is doubt, however, if it was a road or it was a row of buildings forming the southern edge of the city. Either way, they eventually became part of the Strand Road, which was in discussion since the 1820s. A couple of decades later, a description of the road by CJC Davidson, quoted by Choudhury, went like this¹⁸:

¹⁸ Roy Choudhury, pp 196

The strand road....is one of the greatest improvements connected with the times past. It commences from the higher parts of the European city of Calcutta and runs along the bank of the river, to the dockyards at Kiddepore, forming an extensive and beautiful walk or drive, mornings and evenings, and also greatly shortening the road to Garden Reach.

By the 1860s the Strand had become a busy thoroughfare and a major part of the city's burgeoning urban sprawl with the robust river on one side and the grand buildings of the Esplanade on the other. In fact, the Strand itself was a repository of several merchant and shipping companies, warehouses, banks and other commercial establishments. Close to the river on the Calcutta side was Burrabazar, once Asia's biggest wholesale market, around which a large part of the commerce was headed. Also, on the Calcutta side, embankment on the river, and right up on the Strand came up the Town Hall, the Metcalfe Hall, the High (once Supreme) Court, little further down was Dalhousie Square - where company's foot soldiers toiled – and of course the Governor House- the grandiloquent seat of the government. Keeping the Fort in the middle, the Strand has expanded in either direction and a major part of it was also to act as a leisure promenade for the city's well-heeled. The Eden Gardens was one of the major attractions to that effect. Further south, the city morphed into the Garden Reach on one side and the Botanic Garden on the other, while on the southern end, stood the viceroy's retreat of Barrackpore, which, as we have seen, was a splendid garden house far from the madding city with the river kissing its steps.

The final image of the ghat is but one sample from a recurring motif in city photography – of people attempting ablution in the river while ships and boats keep crisscrossing it, except for major festivals, when the river was cleared a bit for the thousands to take a dip. Many of the city's poor have since the very earliest days of the city used the river for washing, bathing and other connected professions like massage, wrestling and small-time hawking. A whole life unfolds on the banks of the river, in all its naked simplicity and under the gaze of city's administrators and middle-class passengers. In short, administration, trade and the daily life of the river continued

unabated for over a century and half, even as the river was being gentrified¹⁹. In this sense, this image provides key to a throbbing life in the river, as much as the other photographs before which in many ways stand as testimonies to the river's varied capacity to behold, control and conjure up a life of its own.

4.5 A RIVER TAMED

Having served as a frontier, a passage and a conveyor, it was time for the river to be tamed. And that became necessary because of a game-changing invention that shook the foundations of all civilizations of that time. Railways. In this part of the British India, railways connected Howrah²⁰ with Bengal's coal-rich hinterland and by early 1860s much farther north. The railways started to lend itself to urban life like few things before – as a traveling wonder, a conveyor of men and materials; and as a purveyor of modernity. To complement the railhead, came the pontoon bridge, built in 1867, which soon became one of Calcutta's representative sites, complimenting Hooghly's recurrent attraction. The infinitely more spectacular cantilever version of the bridge, which opened in 1943, pushed the envelope of contemporary engineering. Together, the bridge (in both the pontoon and cantilever form) stood as the visible mark of arrival to and departure from the city, and hence intimately connected with conceptualisation of city space; motorability and modern engineering; aspiration and urban living. Nowhere is the synecdochal synergy between the railways, the Howrah Bridge and Calcutta more profound than in the immense visual material that was generated in photography and allied art - match-boxes, tourist guides, graphic literature, film posters. In photography, the bridge has been embodied and dis-embodied in complementary and contrasting ways, making it one of the most iconic, and most representative of Calcutta's metropolitan materializations.²¹ To that end, the representational politics of the bridge

¹⁹ Novelist Amit Chaudhuri's *Calcutta: Two Years in the City*, Penguin Books, 2013 is a perceptive and lyrical new work on the city's troubled encounter with neoliberalism, globalization and consumerism.

²⁰ Howrah, on the west bank of the river, is an older settlement than Calcutta but its growth and sustenance as a modern township has been conjoined with Calcutta. It's riverfront once housed the entire jute industry, the foundries and all major engineering factories.

²¹ In Brian Paul Bach, *Calcutta's Edifice: The Buildings of a Great City*, for example, the American architect makes a special case for the bridge and the station among his personal catalogue of Calcutta's sites of multiple histories.

over the Hooghli is inseparable from the city, the railway station, the river; and the surrounding paraphernalia that fed into the armature of a liquescent modernity.

This phase of the historical life of the river began in 1854, with the unveiling of the railways, which also, one can say, pushed the city firmly and conclusively into the fold of colonial modernity. The railways appeared in quick succession in Bombay and Calcutta and brought in their wake the awe and the spectacle of engineering power, an unprecedented promise of mobility and a prospect (or spectre) of irreversible transformation. None of this, it must be noted, was unique to the South Asian experience in more ways than it was, say in the United States or South America. At the same time, the impact of the railways in each part of the world had a phenomenological impact unique to that landscape. Edward Davidson, an engineer whom the colonial Bengal government consulted, described the railways as an irremediable epiphany, in a prophetic, if arrogant, account of its coming in India. Davidson wrote²²:

Railways, which had gone far in England to annihilate distance, were in India to reduce to a manageable extent the vast distances of the continent; were to strengthen the government; to bind races together; and by giving impetus to commerce, to vivify and give such a bias to the character of the people of India, as ages had not affected and ages would not efface. Railways, in short, placed upon the country itself the broad and indelible stamp of England; laws could be abrogated, education could be neglected, and even roads might be obliterated and canals choked up; but the conveniences of the railway speed having been once experienced they become a necessity; and, change what may, they will remain firm and unaltered memorials of British rule.

The railways not only signified an irreversible and unmistakable sign of progress but also unsettled a major part of the colonial public still steeped in orthodoxies, archetypal social stratifications and almost non-existent consciousness in the politics of the modern state. In other words, the most significant transformation of a restive south Asian landmass into a cohesive geographical, demographic and politico-cultural order was signified by the coming of the railways. In certain ways hence, the coming of railways

²² Edward Davidson, *The Railways of India: With an Account of Their Rise, Progress, and Construction*, E&FN Spon, London, 1868, pp3-4

in India is much akin to that of England. In many ways, given the colonial peculiarities, it wasn't.

The railways in the east was a closely fought competition between Ronald Stephenson's East India Railway Company and Dwarkanath Tagore (Tagore, Carr and Company) promoted Bengal Great Western Railway, both having been registered in London in 1844. Stephenson prevailed (thanks to, if not only to, Tagore's early death) and his plan for the railways was singled out for execution. The East Indian Railway company was formed in 1845 but the execution got delayed, among other things, by the loss of the inaugural batch of coaches from England in a shipwreck²³. On completion of the first rail link on June 28, 1854 between Howrah and Raniganj – the mineral-rich city - the railway proved to be a major success. Some three thousand people are said to have applied for tickets on its very first journey, only a handful of whom could be accommodated. The railways caught on sooner than expected, gradually also lending itself to remembrance – reportage, memoirs, fiction and photography²⁴.

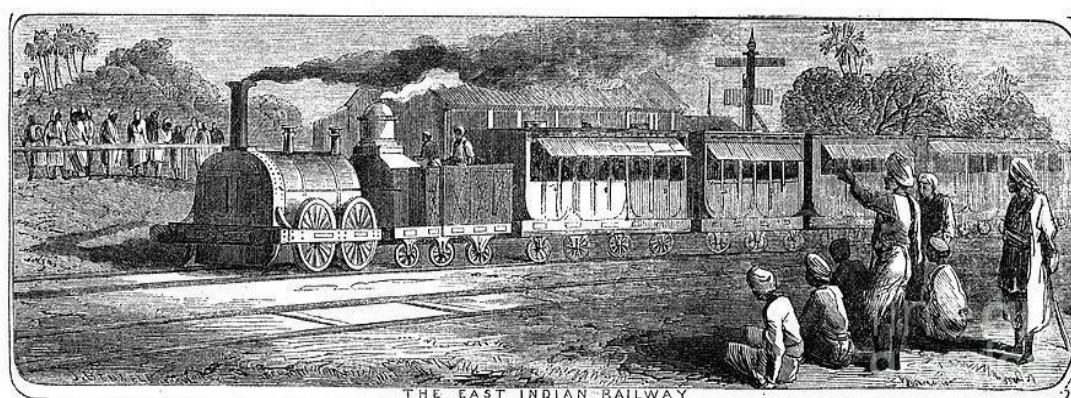


Fig 4.10: An undated illustration of an early train journey in eastern India, courtesy American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO)

²³ See Sukanta Chaudhuri, 'The Railway Comes to Calcutta', *Calcutta: The Living City*, [Volume 1: The Past], (ed) Sukanta Chaudhuri, OUP, 2013 [1990], 238-240.

²⁴ Marian Aguiar's monograph *Tracking Modernity, India's Railway and the Culture of Mobility*, (Minnesota University Press, 2011) eloquently critiques some of the concerns and conflicts between the emergence of railways in India, its technological impacts, its thrust on modernity and mobility and the complex web of representations that it has produced.

An eyewitness account from one who called himself just GN gives a hint of the excitement, even if the date mentioned is of the beginning of regular service:

The 15th of August 1854 is a date worth remembering, for it was the day on which the first passenger train steamed out of Howrah and the first section of the East Indian Railway was opened for public traffic; well may it have been called by the enthusiastic journalists of the times ‘a red letter day in the idea of progress.’²⁵

That the railways soon attained boisterous acceptance among a wide variety of the public is undeniable and its own history of how it became part of travel and lore in India is a thrilling one. There were several vernacular testimonials to the awe and wonder of the newfound locomotive machine which seemed to make more decisive inroads into the country’s landscape every day; and with each passing year one more province, so far self-absorbed in an isolated idyll, would fall to its noisy conquest. Scholar Abhijit Gupta has resuscitated one of the early tracts about the newly laid tracts by the freethinking rationalist and liberal pedagogue Akkhaykumar Dutta. Gupta writes²⁶:

Expectedly, the new technology aroused awe and fear in equal measure. How safe were the railways? Would the train come off its rails? Would the wind of its passing harm cattle and bystanders? ...So forward Akkhaykumar Dutta. In 1854, a slim pamphlet was issued by the Tattvabodhini Press, with a bilingual title: ‘Directions for a Railway-Traveller’ or ‘Bashpiya ratharohidiger prati upodesh’. Literally translated, the Bengali title meant ‘Advice for those riding the steam chariot’.

Dutta’s instructions were basic but important: how to embark and disembark, why not to travel on the roof of the train, how not to be fooled by its slow speed etc. His 20-page pamphlet also offered a fare chart and a timetable, in the process providing a rather detailed idea of the salad days of the railway in Bengal.

²⁵ ‘The Opening of the East Indian Railway’, *Bengal Past & Present*, Vol 2, Part 1, (Jan-July 1908) pp 55-61. This was the second railway line in India. The first was opened a little more than a year ago by the Great Indian Peninsular Railway between Bombay and Thane (April 16, 1853).

²⁶ See the section on early printed books in India in the British Library. <https://www.bl.uk/early-indian-printed-books/articles/raising-steam>

After enumerating as many as a dozen directions, Akkhaykumar added some ‘fast facts’ relating to the service from Howrah. We learn that the service did not operate on Sundays, and that ticket counters closed three minutes ahead of the scheduled arrivals at most stations. Return tickets could be bought, infants in arms did not have to buy a ticket, and half-tickets could be availed of by those below the age of eight. Freight rates were also given (one anna per maund for every three miles of travel).²⁷

Hutom Pyanchar Noksha, the 1862 vernacular classic from the mercurial Kaliprasanna Singha could have been another lively reference for early experience of the railways (it describes a visit to Allahabad) but I want draw attention to a later fictional ‘testimonial’, which captures - almost in cinematic style – a day in the life of the new-fangled railways. Durgacharan Ray’s satirical novel *Debgoner Morte Agomon* [When Gods Came Down on Earth] chronicles the travails of a gang of Hindu Gods, led by the all-knowing Brahma, who decide to descend upon Earth and have a close look at the urban curiosity called Calcutta. Expectedly, they are bedazzled by the growth, wealth and busyness of the metropolis and return to their abodes wanting to set up a museum and court of justice in the Heavens. Below is the section where the eternal visit the Howrah Station.

Then the Gods, waiting inside the locked compartment, merrily watched the surroundings (of Howrah Station). There was no dearth of hullabaloo in the station. Sahebs. Memsahabs and Bengali babus, many in number, were strolling on the platform. The coolies were carrying around the luggage on their two-tyre carts and depositing them with heavy thud. The air was buzzing with vendors shouting ‘snacks’ and ‘tea’. The lowly cleaners were running around with their brooms , the Mussalman water suppliers were going to-and-fro. The Gods veered at the other compartments and saw passengers preparing to depart with their bag and baggage. Most of these passengers’ faces hung in gloom, having been without wash or proper meal for a couple of days now. And to make things worse, their clothes were covered in

²⁷ Ibid

coal dust, having made the journey through those parts, marking them with the appearance of having just returned from Hell! ²⁸

The description gives us a sense of the plaza-like character of the station, where people of various creeds and beliefs mingled and unmingled, joined and separated from others. Clearly, for the likes of Dutta, Sinha or Ray, the railways signified a great churn in the urban spatial consciousness as much as it was something that had to be embraced with an equal show of awe and suspicion. This willingness to instruct and be intimidated gives the literary reflections on the railways a rather piquant character.

As more and more stops and stations were added, the railways continued to need additional paraphernalia even though the grand structure of the station, which is still operational, did not come up in one go. It was completed, in several instalments, only in the early 20th century. As far as the terminus was concerned, the beginning was justly celebrated but one insurmountable problem remained. The real target for companies investing in the railways was Calcutta, which lay on the other side of the ‘unbridgeable’ Hooghli and unless Calcutta was connected seamlessly to Howrah, investments on the railways were unlikely to be returned profitably. Howrah was no more than an old, shabby town and did not remotely have the commercial and political heft to become the terminus of the technological wonder that were the railways. So unless there was a way to bridge the mighty river, the railways had little chance to grow in business.

Keeping in mind the implications, the Legislative department of the Government of Bengal passed the Howrah Bridge Act, in 1871, under the Bengal Act IX of 1871. Sir Bradford Leslie's floating pontoon bridge was completed in 1874, almost coinciding with the establishment of the port of Calcutta. The Bridge, complementing the railhead at Howrah, was 1528 feet long and 62 feet wide and on its day considered quite a feat of engineering. Since then, the bridge has stood vigil to the Howrah Station, which grew up to be much to the credit of the bridge, India's busiest railway terminus and site of an immense commercial traffic. Incidentally the traffic caters not just to the two cities of Calcutta and Howrah but also to an

²⁸ Durgacharan Ray, *Debgoner Morte Agomon Bidyodoy Jatra*, Calcutta, (1889) pp. 264. Translation mine.

astonishingly large hinterland of three other federal states and a couple of nations across India's eastern border. Having connected the station with the city of Calcutta and triggered the birth of the Calcutta Port, the bridge became symptomatic of not one but three interconnected signifiers of metropolitan ambition: the commercial valence of the port, the connectivity and mobility of the railway and the engineered mastering of the vast river.



Fig 4.11: Clockwise from top left A very early photograph of Howrah Station from an original album attributed to Aaron Penley in the British Library; Howrah Station soon after it was completed in 1905; A rare image of Howrah from the air, 1930s; Howrah Station from Howrah Bridge, Jayant Patel, 1945.

The pontoon-type Howrah Bridge (also variously referred to as Hooghly Bridge) was a popular motif in 19th Calcutta's city documentation. The four images here date from the 1870s to 1910s - the robust new building of the station was finished only in December 1905. The images above sequentially bring to the fore the animating of the bridge and its two banks over time. Whether from the Calcutta end or the Howrah end, we can detect more and more establishments as the decades progressed, indicated, among other things, by the smoke coming out of the chimneys. Except the first image

of the early days of the bridge, all the rest capture, in fleeting detail, all of the early importance of the bridge and the station in one frame. The station, the ephemeral establishments next to it, the busy bridge and the ships anchored on the Hooghly, the public making their way from one side of the bridge to the other etc. bring into focus the river, the station and their diverse paraphernalia of commerce, mobility and connectivity. In that sense, the pontoon bridge was far from being an isolated spectacle which attracted considerable attention.

Traffic on the bridge is visible and so are the pedestrians but what is delectable is the structure of the bridge, with its many flanks that jut out of the main frame and anchor themselves on the body of the river. The station initially consisted of no more than a red brick structure with corrugated roof (originally built on a site of a catholic orphanage) and a single line flanked by narrow platforms and stood on the south of the present station building. As the railways grew in size, so did the station²⁹, while the ticket booking office stayed for a long time only on the Calcutta side, perhaps indicating that the railways expected no passengers exclusively from Howrah, though Howrah was already a busy town for jute and foundry industries.

Describing the floating bridge as the most famous of its kind when built, a visitor's guide published in 1929 gives a thorough description of the bridge's importance in conjuring a Calcutta that the visitor would want to experience³⁰.

The Howrah Bridge connects up with Harrison Road and this is the main thoroughfare between Calcutta's two great railway stations, Howrah and Sealdah. A drive through the crowded Harrison Road, lined with great buildings containing offices and residences belonging chiefly to the wealthy Marwaris, is of considerable interest to the visitor. The wayside stalls adjoining huge buildings; the throng of pedestrians of all nationalities, and the roadway where motorcars, gharries, bullock carts, rickshaws and palkis jostle each other are a sight not easily forgotten.

²⁹ Halsey Ricardo, a London-based architect, was the designer for the new station. He was not a prolific designer. He studied the local conditions carefully before he designed a station that was grand yet very functional without compromising its late Romanesque design style. The design, in spite of its visibility and prominence, was rather utilitarian by comparison to the exaggerated neo-Gothic style of Bombay's Victoria Terminus. In 1905, when the new station opened, it housed six platforms.

³⁰ *Visitor's Guide to Calcutta*, including a brief history and up-to-date map illustrated, Introduction by Pat Lovett, Newman and Company, Calcutta, 1929, pp 62-63.



Fig 4.12: Clockwise from top left The pontoon bridge in the 1870s as revealed by the empty embankment on the other side; the image being from the Francis Frith collection; The pontoon by an unknown photographer from the Strand Road, taken in 1880; View of the bridge from Howrah end from *Views of Calcutta and Darjeeling* (undated) by Messrs P Bose, Bennet and Coleman Limited; Johnston & Hoffman's pontoon in early 1900s from the Calcutta end, the Howrah side clearly having grown in the intervening years.

Evidently, the pontoon bridge was part of a wholesome civic planning which was put into operation from the second half of the nineteenth century to invest into Calcutta's potential as a modern metropolis. Accompanying the invention was a whole new materiality of its coming into being – the real and imagined romance of the steaming trains, the paraphernalia of services attached to its daily conveyance, the collateral commercial mobilization, and most importantly the built space that came in its wake – stations, buildings, offices, warehouses. Railways majorly affected the future planning of cities as much as their spread intervened into the skyline of India's emerging metropolis spaces.³¹ The bridge had provided yeomen service to the station and contributed majorly to the growth of Calcutta into a teeming, throbbing, vibrant

³¹ Partho Datta, *Planning the City: Urbanization and Reform in Calcutta 1800 – 1940*, Tulika Books, Delhi, 2012.

metropolis between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. It was operational for more than seventy years before the present structure came up. Though its successor was an infinitely grand feat, the pontoon-type's utility can never be underestimated in the economy of Calcutta.

In 1943, the pontoon type gave way to the new Howrah Bridge, which was not an exercise in scaling upon the by-then rickety pontoon but was a completely new bridge of magisterial engineering imagination. M/s. Rendel, Palmer and Tritton submitted their report including the design and drawing of the bridge in the 1930s. The construction commenced in 1936 under the supervision of the Howrah Bridge Commissioners. A brief history of the building of the bridge is offered by Soumitra Das, a city journalist who has spent a lifetime tracking down the intricacies of Calcutta's colonial monuments. Das writes:

The Cleveland Bridge Company of Darlington bagged the contract in 1936, although the quotation from Krupp's of Germany was lower. Of the 26,500 tons used, 23,500 tons were supplied by the Tata Iron and Steel Company of Jamshedpur. The best non-corrosive type steel with a high percentage of copper was used. Braithwaite, Burn and Jessop Company, who joined hands for this project, were the fabricators...Work continued apace, short breaks for local festivals and the outbreak of World War II, notwithstanding. (...) Thousands of people gaped at the mammoth construction work and the giant cranes weighing 610 tons each. Gradually the steel towers came up, and by 1940 the cantilever arms were being erected.

This iconic all-steel cantilever wonder still stands tall among its architectural peers, while also ferrying about tenth of a million vehicles and double the amount of pedestrians each day. Given the enormity of the cantilever bridge³² and its cultural symbolism as an engineering spectacle, photography of the city, since the 1940s, has often foregrounded the bridge as a symbol of the city's maturity as an urban enticement. The images offer a wide range of visualizations of the new Howrah Bridge. In fact, one

³² The suspension-type balanced cantilever bridge has a central span of 1500 ft. (457m) between the two main towers with anchor arms of 325ft each (99m), cantilever arms of 468ft each (143m) and a suspended span of 564ft. (172m).The structural details of the bridge are culled from <http://howrahbridgekolkata.nic.in/>, accessed on February 25, 2016.

would not hesitate to call it as one of the two *topophilic*³³ sites of Calcutta, the other being the Victoria Memorial.

Of the four selected here, the first image is a silhouette of the Howrah arm of the bridge, rising like a behemoth next to the flanks of the cantilever. Pictures of construction of the bridge are often found taken in low light, most likely because of them being the war years with several restrictions. In fact, Gurney Nyss mentions³⁴ that the bridge could not be photographed during the war years. So, there is a good chance that the work-in-progress photos taken were either in clandestine (illicit) shifts or taken for administrative records which were later made available to the public. Either way, the shadowy images give the making of the bridge a quality of mysterious happenstance. Once the war is over and after the completion of the bridge, photographs galore. There are indeed numerous photographic reproductions of the bridge in the very early years of its function, which also had spilled over into the 1950s, by which time the bridge became a totem, not felicitously, of the epic inflow of Partition refugees.

It is hence no surprise that the three other images in Fig 4.13 replace the expanse of the river for that of the bridge, which dominate the frame. Just like the pontoon version, both at the Howrah and the Calcutta end, there is a busy urban landscape that seems to have mushroomed around the bridge. But in this case we see omnibuses and public carriages and goods and people, together providing a more modernized version of the paraphernalia that we see in the pontoon images. The entire city seems to be in a state of perpetual movement, briefly frozen by the camera. The Calcutta Port was shifted to further south of the city to make way for large ships once the Bridge was in full activity but the sight of smaller ships, barges, boats and vessels was common sight. The Calcutta end of the bridge merged into the Strand Road. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the bridge stood between the station and all other embodiments of the modern Indian nation-state, Calcutta being its capital. Even after 1911, when the capital shifted out, first the pontoon and then the cantilever together never failed to remind the city of its heavy commercial heft and centrality of occupancy in the colonial economy.

³³ We shall have occasion to discuss topophilia in the concluding chapter

³⁴ Garney Nyss, *Memories: A Photographic Essay of India in the 1940s*, (ed) Neil O'Brian and Barry O'Brian, Heritage Resources Private Limited /Steel Authority of India, 1998. P



Fig 4.13: Clockwise from Top Left A photograph of ‘Howrah Bridge under Construction’, says the embedded caption, 1942; The bridge from Strand Road by Jayant Patel, 1948; The ‘new’ Howrah Bridge by Gurney Nyss, 1946; Howrah bridge from station side, Ahmed Ali, 1959.

The bridge not only stood as the symbolic feat of modern engineering having tamed the river and having made the once-famed frontier now bridgeable to even the most modest citizen. The bridge also stood for metropolitan aspiration and an ambitious movement of goods and people; as much as it stood for commerce, employment and connectivity. The bridge – in its steely spread, in its cantilever expanse and in its obsequious service to the city had emerged unambiguously as a monument that defined the skyline of a city as much as it defined the city itself.

The relationship of the bridge with the river, the river with the city and the city with the bridge did not end with simple documentary practice of recording the bridge’s defining structure. It went much beyond. The narrative of colonial modernity and mobility that partook in equal measure in the metropolitan imaginary of the river, the bridge and its surroundings, exemplified convergence of conditions that were not unique to Calcutta for sure but perhaps found a most visually compelling expression in

it. The harbour, the bridge, the Strand and the station hence deeply connect the practices of everyday life that in turn further incentivise memory-making around those sites and spaces. The Hooghly has hence remained an integral part of documentation and memorialization as well as in constructing a wide-ranging cultural memory and visual archive of Calcutta.

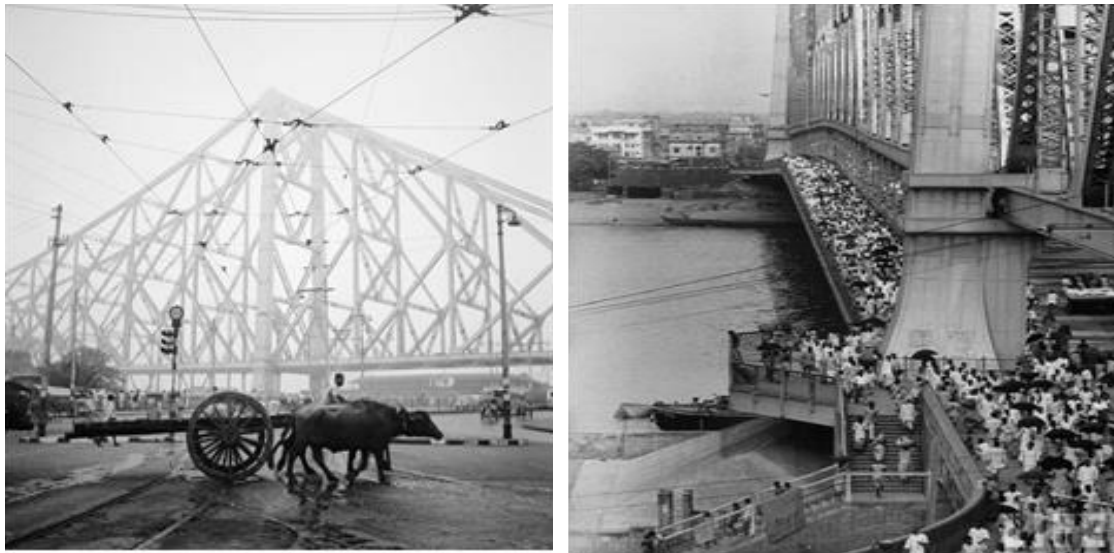


Fig 4.14: **Left** A farmer and his oxcart trudge past the girders of the Howrah Bridge, 1950, photo by Three Lions/Getty Images. **Right** People Crossing the Howrah Bridge; James Burke, *Life Magazine*, 1953.

The final two images, both taken in the 1950s, move away from the panoramic admiration and sense of awe at the monumental bridge and its thriving surroundings to slowly let the public emerge in the foreground. In both these images we get a sense of having arrived at an ambiguous postcolonial moment, a sort of a cusp between two models of survival. The image on the left with the cart amply foregrounds an antiquated provinciality against the mightiness of imperial engineering and civic planning, which in the post-colonial chaos is certainly in the danger of being squandered hopelessly. There is certainly a disdain here for the poverty of imagination witnessed in the daily violation of civic propriety in a post-imperial metropolis. But there is also, if one looks carefully enough, a premonition. The image on the right foregrounds the centrality of the crowd in the modern city - an unmistakable motif of modernist realism. This photograph hints at the ubiquity of the crowd, taking over nook and corner of the vast structure, fixedly walking to their offices— clerks and small-time traders, suppliers and

middlemen, bearers, guards, peons. They are all coming from the Howrah end, signifying the daily humdrum of hundreds who arrive from the hinterlands to eke out a living.

Both images reinforce the increasing scopic centrality of the crowd in a battered post-colonial city. In fact, the images marginalize the river and the traffic over the bridge to heighten their symbolic role as a purveyor of the city's million aspirations. As if the river had become invisible to the city, discernible, if at all, as something to be crossed for better ends, worthy of no more than a gauge during an unguarded moment. As the Bengali writer Raghab Bandyopadhyay once wrote³⁵:

The river linked the city to the land, it brought the white men who founded the city in the first place. But then came the railway, and after that the motor roads. The children of the river began to desert their mother.

One cannot help remember Eliot again here. Eliot's canonical evocation of London in *Wasteland* finds an almost exact re-enactment, especially in picture on the right: "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many/ I had not thought death had undone so many/ Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled, / And each man fixed his eyes before his feet." In other words, the brown god of *Four Quartets* has now been wholly tamed, gradually vanishing into being merely a passage for *Wasteland*'s forbearing multitude to emerge into distressing visibility.

4.6 OLD MAN RIVER

As the river retreated from the instrumental life of the city, it became more and more celebrated as an object of popular memory. It would hence be fitting to conclude the chapter with two images chosen from several hundred visualizations of the river and the bridge *outside* painting or photography. Both of them are posters of films but are separated by almost 60 years. A cult noir made in 1958, *Howrah Bridge* was a murder mystery set in Calcutta in the post WWII period and deals with all the staples that a genre-conscious Hollywood noir would thrive in – theft and embezzlement, gang wars,

³⁵ Raghab Bandyopadhyay, 'Calcutta's river' in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed) *Calcutta The Living City* Vol II (The Present), OUP, 1990; pp190-195, p 190.

men with slippery identities, cabaret performers, shadowy hotels, a murder in the midst of it and a big, bad, cosmopolitan city that connects it all. The poster is straightforward, and highlights the bridge and the romance between the protagonist out to avenge his brother's death and Edna - a cabaret performer. The title exploits the newness of the bridge, which even in 1950s, was a great curiosity for the public at large and symbolised Calcutta's cut-throat mercantilism, aspirational greed and a splashy downtown life, all of which were integral to the movie's noir mood.

The second image is much more interesting because it *reimagines* that period, the film itself having been made as late as 2015. The poster simply utters the name of Byomkesh Bakshy³⁶ - the intuitive, sharp and intellectually deft Bengali detective.



Fig 4.15: Left Poster of the noir Hindi blockbuster *Howrah Bridge*, 1958. Right Poster of Hindi language film *Detective Byomkesh Bakshy*, 2015, with illustration by Bidhan Baidya and design by Grinningtree Productions.

The film is set in 1943 in Calcutta – a city throbbing with war money, arms race, opium trade and restive politics. This was a decade unlike any other in the city's history and the film, by making adjustments with several source texts, situated the detective at the heart of an international crime cartel that was incentivizing the city's outlaws to make hay of Japan's wartime designs to bomb Calcutta. The film - scripted

³⁶ There is a minor variation in the spelling of the detective's name between the film and the translations from the Bengali original. The series by author Saradindu Bandopadhyay, which remains a bestseller to this day among the Bengali reading public, many of who consider him a localization of Sherlock Holmes, though Bakshi was a social conservative and completely without the Baker Street maestro's radical, sociopath demeanour. Two volumes of the stories from the series are available in English: *Picture Imperfect and Other Byomkesh Bakshi Mysteries*, Penguin Books (2000) and *Menagerie and Other Byomkesh Bakshi Mysteries*, Penguin Books (2006). Both translated by Sreejata Guha.

and directed by Dibakar Banerjee - reimagines the world of Byomkesh, using layered periodization techniques which helps him to usurp the received legacy of the detective, otherwise associated with typical Bengali ‘virtues’ of being a cerebral, homebound geek. The poster depopulates the two sides of the bridge, and pales the river to put into visual dominance the bridge and the detective making a run over it. Stylistically, the poster bows to 1940s popular illustrative styles (with particular reference to graphic narrator Mayukh Chowdhury) to make the detective both larger than life and comically enlarged. But what is striking is how the poster uses the bridge as the symbol of enervated, enthralling, mysterious Calcutta. The detective is not crossing the bridge in the usual west-east way, to signify arrival and departure. He is crossing it from North to South, signalling Calcutta’s links to an international community of criminals and the circuit of wartime commerce and opportunism that threaten to further splinter an already stressed city. In the clever reimagining of a wartime local detective overreaching the Howrah Bridge in his desperate bid to save Calcutta on the throes of war, the poster manages to foreground the real and imaginary in portraying Calcutta’s singularly unique relationship with the river and the epic bridge that binds them.

The images used in this chapter – paintings, photographs and popular graphic art - provide keys to several histories of the river, each of which could be read separately as well as in conjunction with each other. That Hooghly was an integral part of Calcutta’s emergence into prominence and then into global repute is not a new observation. But a visual history re-configures this relationship in its own way. Given the proliferation of images and the span of more than a century and a half of their iteration, one might find it helpful to distinguish between three kinds of visual imaginations of the river – the liminal, the temporal and the spatial.

The conceptualization of the bridge, of any bridge, makes liminality a central motif of it being seen as an in-between site, say, in this case, between the industrial hub of Howrah and the epic city Calcutta; between the innovation of engineering and the proverbial *uncountability* of the city, between managing the postcolonial publics and being a symbol of disorderly multitudinal congresses.

Temporarily speaking, both the pontoon-type and the cantilever type are not merely successions of very critical commercial and infrastructural planning but also one of the most famous engineering undertakings to tame a river. The pontoon's lifespan coincides with Calcutta's mutating into one of the world capitals. It is integral, in fact organic, in the growth of Calcutta into a cosmopolitan congregation and a magnet for commerce, aspiration, employment and even one in which persecuted émigrés would come to seek their fortune. On the other hand, 1943, when the cantilevered Howrah Bridge was opened to the public, was the year of the Great Bengal Famine and WWII bombings. It was a rather unsettling year in Calcutta's chequered colonial history, the first of at least three noxious years (the others being 1946, 1947) that Calcutta was to witness in one single decade, years which were so catastrophic as to shake it till the very foundations (see Ch 6). 1943 was the first of the *anni horribili* and the new bridge provided a rare site and sight of instrumental governmentality and public engagement when apathy and wartime blunderbuss were a more common perception of the colonial government.

Spatially, the river emboldened the unmistakable association of Calcutta as an *urban prima* of the British Empire. It is also the signifier of Calcutta's planetary outreach and its connection, through Bay of Bengal, to the world at large. The river not only helped in the actual, tactile founding of the city but gave it its shape – both geographically and socially. As Ivermee writes³⁷:

Little noticed in existing accounts is that Calcutta's remarkable growth during the age of free-trade imperialism was dependent on human control of the Hooghly; the river was indispensable for the transport of people and goods, the provision of food and water, the health and hygiene of inhabitants. Mastering the Hooghly was of great symbolic importance too, representing to the Victorian colonial administrators the progress of man, the advance of civilization, the triumph of capital and the superiority of the West. As the nineteenth century wore on, the British authorities would come to realise that their mastery of the river would never be complete.

³⁷ Ivermee, p 161

Keeping the same in mind, I have tried to offer here a layered reading of the visual canonization of one of Calcutta's leading sites of mobility and memory – the Hooghly river. In doing so, I have tried to read *visuality* as not just a theoretical enquiry accompanying historiography of the city's chequered urbanization but as a historical and archival document in itself. Indeed, photography and related visual material *re*-produce the river in a way that can be read both as a symbolic syncopation as well as a scopic template for the multiple forms of representation. To that end, the scope of multi-visuality of river Hooghly, built to buttress commerce and connectivity in the high noon of the colonial enterprise, has come to symptomatize a compelling synecdoche of the city itself – varied, multi-layered and often, mimetically, unquantifiable.

CHAPTER 5

CALCUTTA FROM ABOVE

5.1 AERIALITY

In the history of photography's complex encounter with the city, *aeriality* is a unique moment. It was, after all, the only way to go after humanity's gaze conquered the panoramic heights offered by ever higher belfries and belvederes and also, in some cases, navigable mountains. In some ways then, aerial views were an extension of the grand view of panorama as it was also the pursuit of an ever-higher watchful eye that unveiled, in case of cities, a new conceptualization of urban space. To that end, aerial photography was a step towards a radical omnipotence of gaze; as well as more penetrative panoptic surveillance; if not also the summit moment in the history of optical technique. UAV (or drones) and remote photography (and other DIY methods) have lately added to the technical advancement of this process, even if such views are now increasingly used – in both still and motion forms – as sources of cheap and instant thrills rather than developing any critical topographic enquiry. The ubiquity of air travel has also, in the last half-century or more, robbed the thrill of seeing the world from above.

But this was not always the case; both professional aerial viewing and air travel had exclusive access for most of the first part of the last century. In fact, there have been several stages of coming into being of what was to be called aerial photography; and one may trace it much beyond the span of industrial modernity to the early fascination with imaginary and figurative bird-eye views; which was later bolstered by the invention of the camera. Soon - like similar experiments in other pictorial practice and performance - explorers, scientists, entrepreneurs and speculators from across Europe, British Isles and America tried to outdo each other in perfecting aerial photography by means of ballooning, kiting, pigeons and even rockets. It was also at the same time, thanks to hydrogen and hot gas, that science could offer a sustained and practicable way of rising above the ground for purposes of seeing and surveying; which over time formed the basis of air-travel as more powerful gravity-defying machines could be assembled. So, travelling through air, scientific surveys and the panoramic desire for a captive view merged in the single purpose of aerial photography; which later received instrumental support of the several military establishments, not least France. In due course, aerial photography not only signalled potentially a new gaze and a new vantage, but also drew substantive attention (and disapprobation) from philosophers of modernity. In recent scholarship,

however, there is a turn away from any predetermined aerophobia in photography. There is hence a long history and a thick discourse on flight and photography between mid-18th and mid-20 centuries which took into account *aeriality* being unique, exploratory and symptomatic of a new relationship between the camera and the city.

Drawing from the history and conceptualization of *aeriality* in the west, which was mirrored in the colonies; this chapter would try to theorize the perspectival gaze of photographing from the air. After setting the context with bird-eye views and cartographic overviews, which constituted much of the pre-history of *aeriality*, this chapter would move to the invention of aerial photography and the attendant spectatorial excitement. It would then move to the recorded history of ballooning and surveying in Calcutta, which had a thrilling prospect in the city's public life; and one of which also led to the first aerial shot of the city. Though that image is lost, there are several other images - from professional flyers; aerial surveyors; stationed soldiers as well as resident amateurs. It is through their record of Calcutta from the air through the early to mid-twentieth century, that this chapter would want to enumerate Calcutta's rarely researched history of *aeriality* and aerial imaging.

5.2 LOOKING THROUGH THE EYE OF THE GOD

The origin of *bird's eye view* is even more antique than the prehistory of the panorama, though they were, naturally, in an axis of continuity rather than opposition. Though conjectural cartographic drawings as late as the early modern period attained the term 'bird's-eye view', the epistemological prospect, if one could say so, is traceable to a fundamental human desire to attain an omnipresent perspective. As Denis Cosgrove and William L. Fox say in their recent work¹:

Viewing the world from high above has many ramifications. Physical elevation and the ability to see across great distances of space give a sense of mastery: think of Satan tempting Christ with world dominion from a mountain top in Judaea, or of the consistent connection humans make between elevation, authority and power. The histories of mapping, survey (literally 'overview') and landscape art are closely intertwined

¹ Denis Cosgrove and William L. Fox, *Photography and Flight*, Reaktion Books, London, 2010, p 8

with power and control in the world's literate cultures. The term 'bird's-eye perspective' acknowledges the close connection between the God's-Eye view and flight, of which humans are physically incapable but of which they have dreamed throughout history.

In fact, not just Satan's act of provocation, the Judaeo-Christian mythic tradition was built, say scholars, on the cosmological view of the world as an image. Paula Amad, for example, quotes James Wood's review of Robert Alter's recent translation of the five books of Moses. Quoting Wood, says Amad²:

In the beginning was not the word, or the deed, but the face. 'Darkness was upon the face of the deep,' runs the King James Version in the second verse of the opening of Genesis. 'And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light: and there was light'.



Fig 5.1: Clockwise *Civitas Venetiarum* by Fra Paolino, 1330; Medieval Siena in Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fresco *Palazzo Pubblico*, 1330s; Constantinople, from Christoforo Buondelmonte, *Liber Insularum*, 1420; John Norden's Windsor Castle, 1607.

² Paula Amad, 'From God's-eye to Camera-eye: Aerial Photography's Post-humanist and Neo-humanist Visions of the World', *History of Photography*, 36:1, 66-86; 2012, pp 67 DOI: 10.1080/03087298.2012.632567

It is in these mythical traditions, says Amad, that the view from above and that from below are interlocked in a perpetual and dialectical contestation. In fact, to such mythic tension can be traced the earliest extant instances of humans trying to think about a perspective in opposition to theirs from the ground. Consider for example, the Neolithic village of Çatalhöyük in Turkey, which displays the capacity of the planners to have conceived their village from a conjectural perspective that gives it a stunning vertical and horizontal geometry. An early example in recorded history leads to the Mesopotamian clay-tablet plan of Tuba, among others. The Romans too had made extensive locational maps, diagrams and sketches in their endless travels and military travails across the length and breadth of the Mediterranean. There are also extant cartographic parchments that refer to 14th Jerusalem. It is also in the 14th century (1330) that is dated the illustration of Venice (*Civitas Venetiarum*) by the Franciscan friar Fra Paolino³; or the Siena frescos, especially the one known as *Palazzo Pubblico*, by Ambrogio Lorenzetti - painted between 1337 and 1339. They are both considered to be some of the earliest views of the city as a representational space from above. A similar intent is obvious, albeit as an architectural method, in Filippo Brunelleschi's astonishing Florence Cathedral built in the 15th century, which still 'towers' over the city and which had long established a vantage of surveying the city from elevations previously unattainable, at least since the heydays of the Romans. Then, came the inevitable. For, a principal character in speculative mapmaking and conceptual urbanism at the dawn of early modern Europe was, as he was in several other anthropomorphic pursuits, Leonardo da Vinci. With him, everything changed. Paula Amad informs⁴:

Increasingly secular renditions of the ocular showdown between God and humans emerged in aerial views in western art from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, including the work of Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Fra Paolino, Filippo Brunelleschi, the so-called 'world landscapes' of Albrecht Altdorfer and the elder and younger Bruegels, and the bird's-eye maps and atlases of diverse illustrators. But the mixture of science

³ A recent discovery of a sketch of Venice dates it to the time just around Paolino and is credited to Niccolò da Poggibonsi, an Italian pilgrim. See <https://news.st-andrews.ac.uk/archive/oldest-known-city-view-of-venice-discovered/>

⁴ Paula Amad, 'From God's-eye to Camera-eye', pp 67

and art typified by aerial imaginary and vision was epitomised by Leonardo da Vinci, who in the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries produced studies of the flight of birds, designs for flying machines, and bird's-eye views of Italian regions.

We will return to Leonardo but for the moment we must also see extant examples from elsewhere - an early example being, unsurprisingly, from Constantinople. A 1420 map of the city, resplendent in colour, lacks perspective and scale, but three-dimensional figures stuck their neck out on it. In the image, the Bosphorus and the St Sophia (not yet Hagia) are clearly made to dominate the view of Constantinople, regardless of the actual lay-out of the city. In fact, from its very earliest enunciations, bird-eye views have been seen as an imaginary and instrumental perspective, to bring to the unruly city a kind of methodical, even if fantastical, perspective and order. These kinds of views increasingly found patronage and official stamps of approval. There is, for example, records that in 1607, James 1, who had taken over England after Queen Elizabeth's death in 1603, had paid 200 pounds to the cartographer John Norden for a series of works of which one, a bird's eye view of Windsor Castle, attained renown for being unusually detailed. This is part of the iconic Henley manuscripts. Though renowned, Norden was by no means alone in his vocation for it was a high-noon of illustrative cartography across much of Europe, though these illustrations, as is evident, had little similarity to what we now know as maps. More than actuality and scale as a founding principle of cartography, these views were a *fictionalised* representation that brought to visibility 'what matters' to an enquiring eye about a site rather than *what it was* in actual terms. As James Eliot says⁵:

Map-makers, indeed, frequently sacrificed the precision of a ground plan for the sake of more pictorial cartographic styles. These offered the flexibility necessary to convey not only all three dimensions of the urban form but also some of the imaginative and symbolic qualities of a work of art, rather than a scientific document dependent for its creation purely on survey and measurement.

⁵ James Eliot, 'Picturing Places'; online resource, permanent url: <https://www.bl.uk/picturing-places/articles/picturing-cities>.

These kinds of topographic illustrations became a distinct practice (sequestered from the cold, unadorned scientific maps) and surveyors and cartographers were often hired to create local maps of this kind, William Cunningham's *The Cosmographical Glasse of Norwich*, 1559 being a prominent one.

5.3 LORDING OVER THE CITY

Leonardo da Vinci, characteristically, was not attracted to perspectival anomaly. Not even in topographic illustrations. He decided to intervene, like he did with landscape and portraiture. And with him, figurative cartographic illustrations became methodical and large spaces became measurable figures. It was Leonardo, in fact, who first coined the term 'aerial perspective' in his *Treatise on Painting* to underline how colours need to be modulated or muted if the painted object is *seen* from a distance. Only later it was known that this was the case because of atmospheric particles and moistures, but da Vinci had hinted at the possibility of great distances between the point of perception and the object in a painting. His patron Cesare Borgia, the son of Pope Alexander VI, having conquered Imola, asked da Vinci to suggest ways of conceptualising its fortifications. So Leonardo, drawing from the polar coordinate technique first suggested by Florentine humanist Leon Alberti, challenged existing conventions of map illustrations. As Cosgrove and Fox says⁶:

(Leonardo's) 1502 painting of the Italian town of Imola, produced in the context of Cesare's military campaign in the region, is often cited as the first accurate aerial view of a town. In appearance it bears some resemblance to the Çatalhöyük mural, but we know from his notebooks that Leonardo measured buildings and streets on the ground before mentally translating the measurements into a vertical perspective image of Imola's plan of streets, squares and buildings, its fortifications and the course of the Sentero river that runs below its ramparts through clearly measured fields. For all its scientific, map-like qualities of orientation, scale and clarity, this is a strongly

⁶ Cosgrove & Fox, *Photography and Flight* pp 16-17.

pictorial image, using colour and shading to generate a feel for the topography.

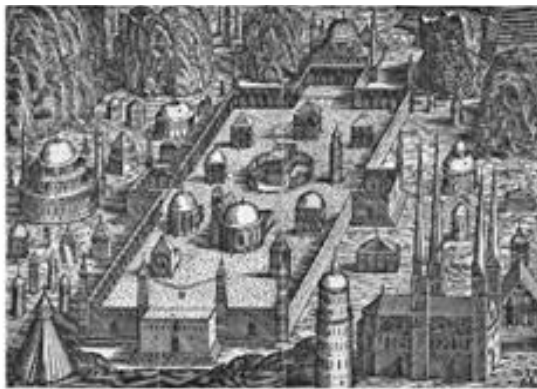


Fig 5.2: Leonardo da Vinci applied the principle of *sapere edere* (knowing how to see) to all of his body of work, including this map of Imola near Bologna, complete with sinuous progress of Sentero, 1502.

Whether the Danish-born Melchior Lorck had knowledge of da Vinci is not known, nor did he particularly create maps, though his remarkable body of work during his residence in the Ottoman Empire in the mid-1500 has astonished art historians, more so because he had been virtually unknown till recently. Post his excavation from obscurity, what is known is that he had travelled widely in Europe and artistically between two warring empires, He was a guest of the Ottomans as part of despatch from the Habsburgs and drew about the former so that he could make a living in the latter. His approximately 12-metre-long scroll painting *Prospect of Constantinople* is the most well-known panoramic rendition of a city (see Ch 2) in that period but his imagined view of Mecca to reveal the arrangement inside the sacred precinct makes clear his skills as a painter of bird's-eye view. This is a rare image where Melchior was not only doing something incredible by imagining himself flying over Mecca but also,

mischievously, inserted a cathedral inside the imagined spatial realm of Islam's guarded holy city.⁷

⁷ For more on Lorck's paintings during his Ottoman stint, see Marina Warner, 'Intimate Communiqués: Melchior Lorck's Flying Tortoise in *Seeing from above: The Aerial View in Visual Culture*, (Ed) Mark Dorrian and Frédéric Pousin, IB Taurus, London and New York, 2013, pp 11-25.



11.63 Melchior Lorck, View of Mecca.



Fig 5.3: Left Melchior Lorck, View of Mecca, undated but 1550s or thereabout; **Right** Cities of London, Westminster and borough of Southwark. Wenceslaus Hollar, 1675.

The other figure whose name is indelibly linked to illustrative map-making (just like panorama) was Wenceslaus Hollar. By his time the Leonardo technique had largely become the standard but Hollar made cartographic illustrations vivid, artistic and complicated, bringing far-reaching changes to it. Hollar was born to a noble family in Prague in early 17th century but had spent considerable time in London; dedicating some of his most detailed ‘views’ to the city where he had settled, both during the Civil War (1642-1651) as well as during the Great Fire in 1666. Hollar was a master of detailed, decorative bird-eye views even if he earned most of his livelihood as a master etcher, portraitist and drawer of fashion plates. Though his later life saw the emergence of more accurate and scientific plans for maps, his pictorial versions found themselves embedded in the Hollar-inspired maps that were to come. Between da Vinci and Hollar, Europe’s expeditions to the world outside increased manifold, and with it the nature and need of mapmaking. On one side, there were demands for more accurate and scientific views. At the same time, rivalry between European cities for trade and architectural grandeur also demanded spectacular city views. So mapmaking meant a range of urban representations that varied between informative, instrumental maps to those that were replete with colour, decoration and exaggeration. Cosgrove and Fox cites the example of *Civitas orbis terrarum*, an expansive compendium of city illustrations - a mix of panoramic and birds-eye view - and was first published by Braun and Hogenberg in 1572. Newer volumes were added till it reached its sixth one (and final) in 1617 which

included an astonishing 546 images of European cities. They were not just popular but gives a clear sense of the way in which European cities was idealising itself as well how each city was starting to set itself as distinguished from other cities in both wealth and spatial prospect.

This sort of mapmaking practice – with detailed cartographic illustrations, decorative or pictured panels and detailed information about sights of interest - travelled out of Europe in no time. And one of the better examples anywhere in the colonies is in Calcutta, where mapmaking became a sincere endeavour of the colonial bureaucracy. Though there are historical documents pertaining to surveys of land and provinces from much before the arrival of the East India Company, modern cartographic history of Calcutta mirrors the increasing British foothold in the city (and the region), for no sooner had they arrived, that the early colonists got busy in recording, in minute detail, the land that they were new to. Here too we see a gradual shift in the purposes of mapmaking - from those made for surveys, to those having overt military purposes, to those that evolved into being an educative tool. As Keya Dasgupta writes⁸:

The first known British map of the city, *Plan of Calcutta*, was published in 1742. Mapping continued for almost the next two centuries, with the patrons of these cartographic ventures belonging primarily to the various branches of the colonial administration. The production of maps on the city therefore very clearly coincides with the changing requirements of colonial power, the purposes of survey differing from one to the other. Each survey is a reflection of either a particular historical event or a phase in urban planning. There were nevertheless a few exceptions.

⁸ Keya Dasgupta, 'Mapping Calcutta: The Collection of Maps at the visual Archives of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta'; Archive Series 02, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta 2009; pp 2.

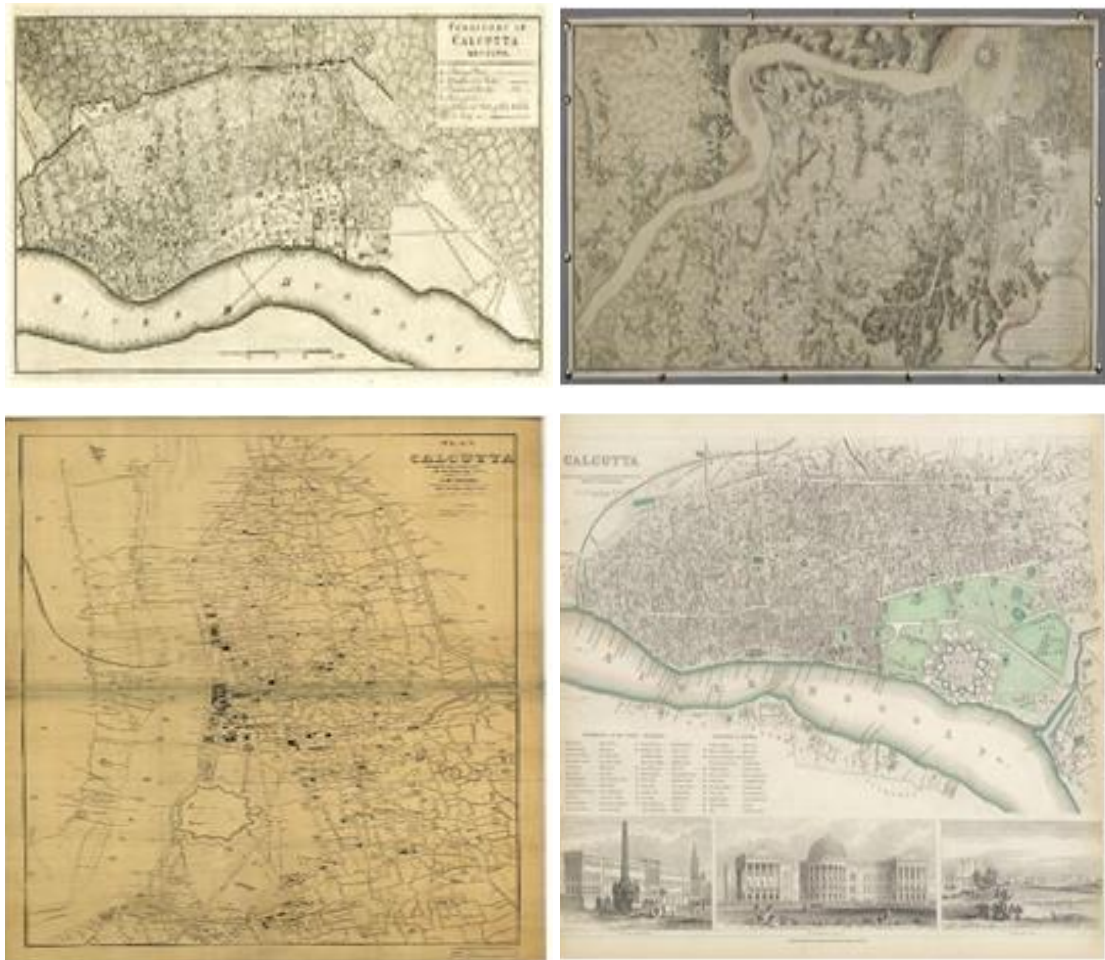


Fig 5.4: Clockwise from top left Territory of Calcutta MDCCLVII (1757); Mark Wood's display map *Survey of the country on the eastern bank of the Hughly, from Calcutta to the Fortifications at Budgebudge*; Engraved map of Calcutta by an unknown engraver, published in 1842 under the superintendence of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge; Survey of India's functional, unadorned, *Plan of Calcutta*, 1854.

The first map of 1742 and its peers in the next few years visually centralized the Old Fort while envisioning the city's topography as that which should primarily encircle the Fort and if at all, grow centrifugally out of it. But as the British stranglehold was reaffirmed in 1757 and started to expand in all directions, it was necessary to create more sophisticated and detailed cartographic plans. Rosie Dias, for example, points towards a 1785 map drawn by Mark Wood - a captain in the East India Company's Bengal army - as a crucial example. This map, says Dias, scrupulously avoids any demarcation of the native (so-called Black) town and concentrates on the British residences. She writes⁹:

⁹ <https://www.bl.uk/picturing-places/articles/a-map-of-kolkata-in-1785>

This particular map ascribes ownership to residential buildings (particularly along Garden Reach – the suburb along the south bank of the Hooghly river, southwest of the fort) and includes recent and projected public constructions, including the prison, hospital, docks and the bridge at Alipore. The map is unique in articulating the precise ownership of the Garden Houses along the Hooghly and it is therefore useful for understanding how neighbourhoods and networks of East India Company employees in Kolkata may have operated.

Among the plethora of different mapmaking practices and cartographic endeavours, including a colourful French map of the city drawn in 1839, one map, says Dasgupta, had a very different purpose and was in fact somewhat of an exception. The map is rather detailed and was visibly mixing elements from cartography and painted landscape; and is annotated with detailed information. Behind this elaborate endeavour was, in fact, a pedagogic purpose. Dasgupta informs that the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, born in London in 1826, wanted to spread geographical information among those with less access to such prospect and had therefore taken upon itself to make maps more eye-catching and pictorial and such that they would stand out from the usual scientific drawings that served just administrative and bureaucratic purposes. As she says:

The 1842 map of Calcutta is known to have expressed the power of the maps to make a working class viewer derive a sense of pride and satisfaction in being British.”¹⁰

The anonymous engraver was clearly going beyond the mandate of a mapmaker and had intended to create an informed document about the view of a city that can also act as a guidebook. The three pictorial inserts show Writers' Buildings, Government House and Esplanade Row, highlighting key governmental assets of the city. No wonder he was employing the credentials of pictorial mapmaking that had been popular in Britain for more than two centuries, and mixed elements from bird-eye views and detailed surveys with inserts of notable buildings to create a strikingly colourful and original drawing of Calcutta in the midst of a spatial thrive. This is also the time when the first panoramic views of the city were being executed and the display and dominance of the

¹⁰ Keya Dasgupta, 'Mapping Calcutta', pp 11

city's key architectural possessions were, as we have seen, unmissable. A detailed, functional and dull map drawn, in 1852, under the supervision of the Survey of India is a sharp contrast to the one of 1842 and amply displays the varying purposes of mapmaking. This one is clearly a surveying tool that could vertically envisage a city.

Clearly, as their control of Bengal (and Calcutta) gained stronger foundation, the British had concurrently used cartography for purposes way beyond the mere functional. This is clear in the discursive process of mapmaking in Calcutta and elsewhere in the British colony, which has been studied with close attention recently¹¹. But the deep-seated politics of colonial cartographic power and control is beyond the scope of this chapter, and in fact, this project. I am drawing attention to, rather, the rhetoric of visual practice embedded in the way the topographic space of new colonial cities was being imagined. This visual politics is not necessarily devoid of the controlling mechanism of cartographic logic but in the visual history of figurative aerial viewing, the desire for an optimal, omnipotent gaze is already embedded. Also, as we shall see later, such overarching city views, later realized in full throttle by aerial photography, became the bedrock of modern urban planning, some of which was no doubt executed in Calcutta for much of its late colonial period.

5.4 THE BALLAST OF THE MILLENIUM

There is still some debate if panorama could be considered a variation of the bird's-eye view or vice versa but there is little debate about the fact that both made the best of emergent reproductive technologies, starting with Aloys Senefelder's invention of lithography in 1796. Through it and with it, both sorts of views started to move beyond the dominion of state-planning and in tandem with the emergent popular press, started to be disseminated more regularly among the public. Since then their trajectories are very different, however. Most scholars agree that the birds-eye view found more meaningful continuity in the aerial images that were possible from the mid-19th century while panorama became a ticketed public spectacle (while also having a distinct life in photography). To that end, if panorama attained a public life that tickled the rhetoric of

¹¹ See, *Mapping Asia: Cartographic Encounters Between East and West* (Ed) Martijn Storms et al; Springer 2019 and Nilanjana Mukherjee, *Spatial Imaginings in the Age of Colonial Cartographic Reason: Maps, Landscapes, Travelogues in Britain and India* – Routledge; 2020

visual hyperbole of Europe's rival empires, bird's-eye views became associated with the surveillance, militarism and urban planning (depending on the extent of use) of post-imperial Europe. But this history is incomplete without that intermediate and thrilling history of man's taking actual flight, an enterprise that was as much a conclusion to a long-desired prospect as it was an entirely new beginning of an era of colonising space.

Between early modern idealization of perspectival space and the actuality of aerial photography came two brothers who made a grand success of defying gravity with a clothed sphere that could rise up through space, literally, when fuelled by hot air. That day in 1783, when ballooning was born, humans decisively went up the air to see the land below. Aerial flight, however jittery and perilous in the early days, was novel, thrilling and fulfilment of one of humanity's most lingering fictions. As the British cultural historian Richard Holmes writes in his history of flying¹²:

Throughout history, dreamlike stories and romantic adventures have always attached themselves to balloons. Some are factual, some are pure fantasy, many (the most interesting) are a provoking mixture of the two. But some kind of narrative basket always seems to come tantalisingly suspended beneath them. Show me a balloon and I'll show you a story; quite often a tall one. And very frequently it is a story of courage in the face of imminent catastrophe.

In the summer of 1783, this most ancient of human reveries assumed a shape and the art and science of ballooning was born. And it is perhaps not entirely idiosyncratic a fact that like the American Wright Brothers who invented mechanised aviation at the dawn of 20th century, gas-ballooning was pioneered too by a set of brothers, about two and quarter of a century earlier in the French countryside. The family of the Montgolfier were in paper manufacturing, which financed their ballooning ambitions. It was at their home in the tiny town of Annonay that the first untethered flights were made possible in June 1783, when Montgolfier Brothers burnt straw and wool under a cloth balloon to let it go up in the air and stay there for ten minutes. That day, the race for space had indeed begun.

¹² Richard Holmes, Richard Holmes, *Falling Upwards: How We Took to the Air*, Pantheon Books, 2013, p 9-10

The history of *aeriality* since then is full of the enigma of fanciful flights, hawk-eyed aeronauts, aerophilia, and rival national aspirations to achieve scientific breakthroughs. Before late, the ecstasy of looking at the world below from altitudes higher than was ever gainfully climbed took hold of not just professionals but also both ingénues and seasoned mavericks. Holmes gives an eloquent description¹³.

Balloons have always given a remarkable bird's-eye or angel's-eye view of the world ...To the earliest aeronauts they displayed great natural features ... in an utterly new light. But they also showed human features: the growth of the new industrial cities, the speed and violence of modern warfare, or the expansion of imperial exploration. Long before the arrival of the aeroplane in the twentieth century, balloons gave the first physical glimpse of a planetary overview... The nature of the upper air, the forecasting of weather, the evolutions of geology, the development of international communications, the power of propaganda, the creations of science fiction, even the development of extra-terrestrial travel itself, are an integral part of balloon history.

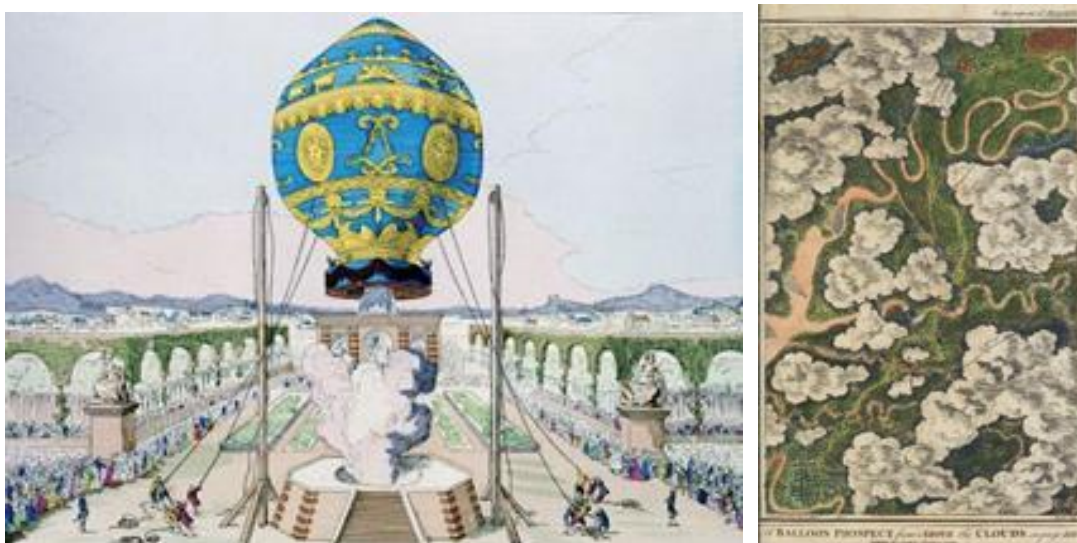


Fig 5.5: **Left** Illustration of Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier and François Laurent ascending in a Montgolfier balloon at the Château de la Muette, Paris, November 21, 1783. Creator unknown. **Right** 'A balloon prospect from above the clouds' from Thomas Baldwin's *Airopaidia*, 1785.

¹³ Ibid

The Montgolfier balloon became the foundation for French ambitions to climb up the atmosphere. No sooner had the brothers made their invention known, influential French teacher Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier convinced King Louis XVI that he would volunteer for the first manned flight, for which he invited the marquis François Laurent. With much fanfare they completed a 25-minute balloon ride over Paris in the winter of 1783. Rozier went on to pioneer the Rozier Balloon - the hybrid hydrogen and hot-air variant- even if he died in a balloon crash on his maiden attempt to cross the English Channel in 1785, when he was just a little over 30 years old. However, the actual idea of using hydrogen as ballast for ballooning was that of Jacques César Charles, the same person behind the Charles Law (1787). His balloon experiments were grounded in the laws of Archimedes and Boyle, which helped him not only write a new law for buoyancy but also use it for the purposes of ballooning just after it had been tried elsewhere with heated air. The non-heated Hydrogen was considered par for the course for long-duration balloon flights. Notably, balloons became a rage almost almost simultaneous to the unveiling of the popular spectacle of large panoramas. They, in some ways, bookended the French Revolution and its most intense days from 1789 to 1793.

Even if Rozier could not cross the channel, his ideas did and deeply affected one explorer from Chester. Thomas Baldwin decided to make the best of the new invention even if he could not manufacture his own balloon. So he secured a flight with the pioneering Italian aeronaut Vincenzo Lunardi. But what he did above on his balloon is history. For Baldwin not only travelled around his town but kept detailed notes, which became the treatise *Airopaidia: Containing the narrative of a balloon excursion from CHESTER, the eighth of September, 1785*. This account, published a year later, is not only one of the earliest accounts of the land below in the eyes of an aeronaut, but is notable for its descriptive power. As Marie Thébaud-Sorger writes¹⁴:

Written in the third person singular, the treatise attempts not only to articulate the emotions experienced by the aeronaut, but also to understand this new way of perceiving the world and even, in the process, to establish some rules relating to the aerial view.

¹⁴ Marie Thébaud-Sorger, Thomas Baldwin's *Airopaidia, or the Aerial View in Colour*, Dorrian, ppc46-65; p 47

For Thébaud-Sorger, the account is different not only because it balances the celebration of the sublime with an eye for the empirical but also because Baldwin was consistently hinting at how the shape of the world is rendered anew from the top and how an ideal aeronaut must appreciate the new optical position that would *de-familiarise* the familiar. The treatise, in fact, wanted to prepare the human eye for the purpose of flying which in the pre-photography era is not only invaluable but also, in some ways, preempts the aerial gaze of the lens in all its complexity.

Ballooning, which is now a popular leisure sport, continued to attract public frenzy and scientific advisory for much of the 19th century with increasingly greater heights, longer durations and bigger spherical circumference. In the emerging field of atmospheric and air sciences; or in landscape surveys; or even in cases of military surveillance and reconnaissance, balloons played a part. As for its travails, the English Channel was conquered soon enough; while after eleven attempts since 1873, manned balloon flights eventually managed to make the transatlantic crossing in 1978. By this time, it was more about setting records than for any improvement in the efficacy of the travel.

Our attention here must shift from ballooning to aerial photography, which was attempted, not unsurprisingly, on a balloon and not much after the camera was invented. Needless to add, with the coming of photography the possibility of memorializing the visionary new vantage of omnipotence got a boost; just like it did for panorama. Only that in the case of balloon photography, the ballast was also literal. What also distinguished aerial imaging's inaugural feat is that it involved none other than an icon of early photography: Gaspar Felix Tournachon, better known as Nadar.

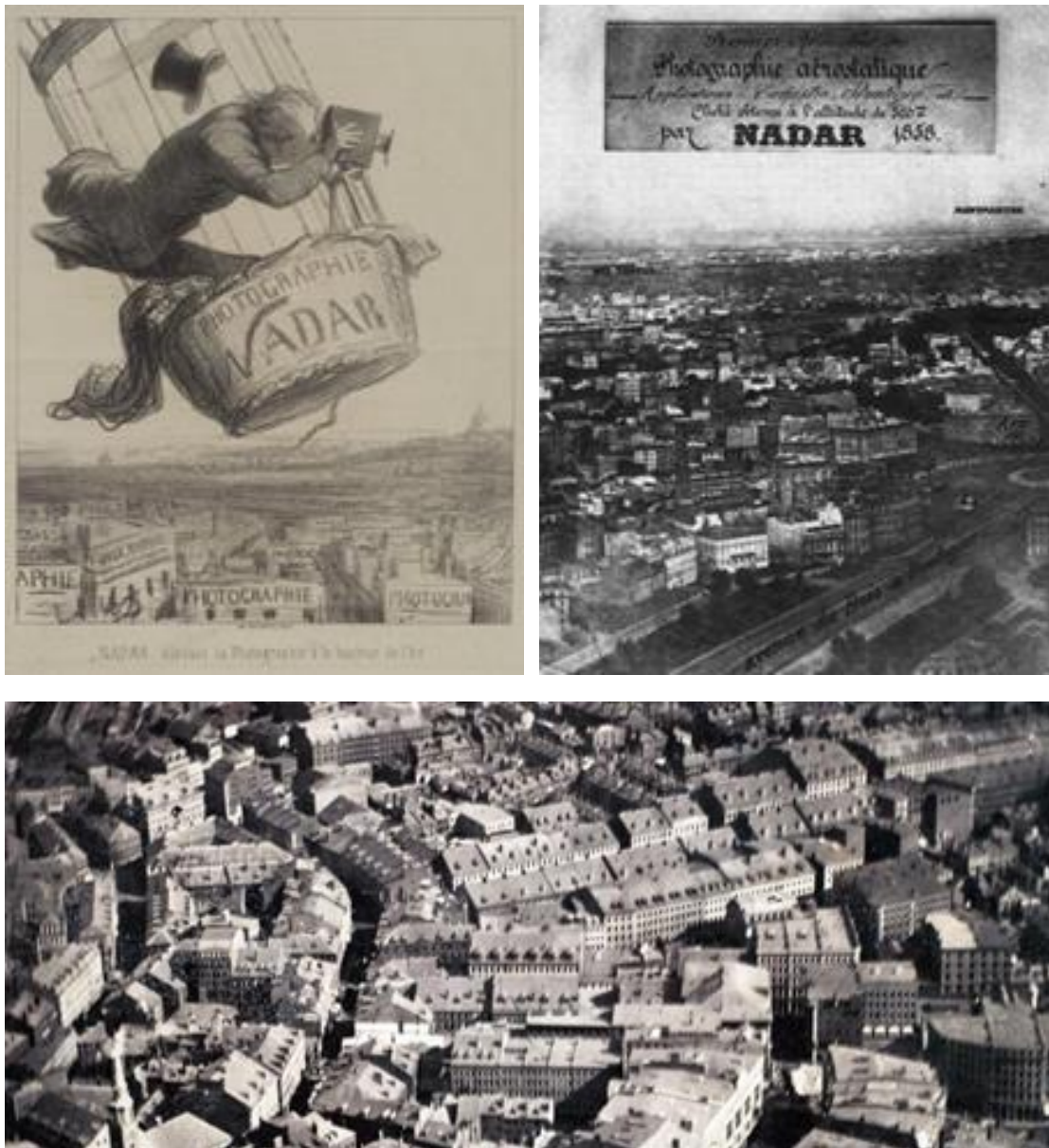


Fig 5.6: **Above Left** Honoré Daumier's lithograph *Nadar élevant la Photographie à la hauteur de l'Art* (Nadar elevating Photography to Art), *Le Boulevard*, 25 May 1863. **Above Right** Nadar's Paris from the heights of a balloon, mid-1860s. **Below:** Boston from a tethered balloon, 13th October, 1860, James Wallace Black.

Portraitist, caricaturist, and eventually a photography pioneer, the Paris-born Nadar was a showman, a self-publicist, intrepid handler of new technology and a social magnet who counted most of Parisian society among his friends. His avant-garde portraits apart (which included fellow aviation enthusiasts Jules Verne and Victor Hugo, and photography sceptic Charles Baudelaire), Nadar declared the intention of shooting Paris from a tethered balloon, which he successfully attempted, after three

years of tinkering, in 1858. Among other innovations for what has come to be called aerostatic photography, Nadar created a dark-room inside the gondola of a large balloon for the wet collodion process, which was a feat in itself. The balloon, tethered sixteen-hundred feet above ground, allowed Nadar to take distinct images of Paris lying below. As a recent news report says¹⁵:

Easily mastering the subtle art of portraiture and hungry for new challenges, Nadar eagerly left the studio to realize the true potential of this amazing technology: he would use his photography to open windows of perception and transport audiences to places unseen. Using a hot air balloon—another technological marvel of the day—to bring his camera high above the rooftops of Paris, he is credited today with inventing the art of aerial photography.

The first images are lost but those taken by him in the mid-1860s can still be seen. But before that we have James Wallace Black's aerial photos of Boston from 1860, the earliest to have survived. Neither Nadar or Black remained exceptions obviously, for no sooner had this fresh way of seeing through the lens been made public than several others, armed with curiosity, a sponsor and a reliable balloon-maker tried to outdo each other in terms of altitude, image clarity and nuance. The coming of dry-collodion made things up in the balloon gondola substantially easier. There were further experiments with aerial photography in the moving image pioneer Eadweard Muybridge's photo-panoramic montages of San Francisco; or the short-lived thrill of simulated balloon ride that Raoul Grimoin-Sanson's Cineorama offered at the 1900 Paris World Exposition.

Other experiments followed. In 1882, a string of kites was put to use by the English meteorologist Edmund D Archibald for taking pictures. By 1903 Julius Neubranner designed a tiny breast-mounted camera with automatic, timed exposure that was strapped to Bavarian flight pigeons for some fascinating results. The postcards made from them were a rage in the 1909 Dresden International Exhibition. Another device used for imaging from the air for a while was the rocket, the earliest proponent of which, in 1897, was Alfred Nobel. His rudimentary efforts were bettered less than a

¹⁵ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-08-02/the-19th-century-photographer-that-captured-haussmann-s-paris>

decade later by the Austrian Albert Maul, who had patented, in 1903, the powdered rocket and took little time to add gyroscopically-fitted cameras to the rocket for aerial imaging. It would not be an exaggeration to say that aerial photography had already attained a degree of popularity, history and genre-specific characters before mechanised aviation made leaps into the atmosphere both with and without the camera, especially as the Great War guided further inventions of either¹⁶.

5.5 THE BABOO BALLOONIST'S AND THE FLYING CITY OF CALCUTTA

Bengal's intrepid historian of science Amitabha (Siddhartha) Ghosh has almost single handedly retrieved Calcutta's own ballooning history, which apart from those who came in from the west, includes the most colourful character of Ramchunder Chatterjee. Chatterjee's ascent is memorable, but there were others who created quite a ripple in the public life of Calcutta.

Ghosh identified two different strands in the French and British history of the aeronaut – the former being that of statist exploration propped by the French monarchy; while the latter was about individual daring that cultivated a degree of showmanship and public spectacle. Calcutta being a British colony, its history of ballooning was largely characterised by the latter, Ghosh observed. This might also explain the time lag between the first manned balloon flights in Europe (1783/84) and that in India (1836), for lack of enthusiasm on part of the British scientific community had hurt the chances of its appropriation by the colonial administration. But, informs Ghosh, there was also the additional factor of gas and equipment, both being unavailable for the purpose. So, unlike the case of photography, magic lantern and later cinema, which arrived on the shores of the colonies almost immediately, ballooning was delayed by half a century. But it did, eventually, with the aeronaut D Robertson. Ghosh writes¹⁷:

The first manned flight in India was undertaken by D Roberson, an itinerant balloonist, on March 16, 1836. There are accounts galore in the contemporary newspapers about the excitement, if not furore,

¹⁶ For more on the early history of aerial photography see, https://papa.clubexpress.com/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=808138&module_id=158950

¹⁷ Amitabha Ghosh, 'The First Indian Aeronaut', *Indian Journal of History of Science*, 27(3), 1992, 291-308, pp 292-293.

created by Robertson, when he took off from Muchikhola, a suburb of Calcutta. Roberson's balloon contained 9600 cubic feet of hydrogen for the preparation of which he had to carry overseas the necessary chemical apparatus, including 24 casks of sulphuric acid.

The difficulty of procuring sulphuric acid plagued balloon flights ever since and it was only in 1853 that D Waldie had set up the first modern sulphuric acid plant in India near Calcutta. But a year later the Oriental Gas Company started producing coal gas, which was cheaper and less cumbersome as a balloon gas. So the next notable flight, informs Ghosh, was intended to be fuelled by coal gas even if a last moment hitch prompted the aeronaut Percival Spencer to switch to good old hydrogen. On March 19, 1889, Spencer's *The Empress of India* flew from the Calcutta Race Course. It created a sensation, no less because Spencer disappeared into the horizon only to reappear two days later near the Sundarbans in south Bengal.

Less than a month later, Spencer undertook the second flight, this time with coal gas filled from the mains at Narkeldanga. And this was the flight in which he was accompanied by a young gymnast who had previously found employment as a trapeze artist in India's first circus company owned by Nabagopal Mitra. His name was Ramchunder Chatterjee. Chatterjee became part of history as India's first native aeronaut, but he was no freak to have found himself atop the Empress on that day, for records reveal his substantive preparedness and daring.

Soon, Ramchunder bought the balloon from Spencer, renamed it *The City of Calcutta* and prepared to make his maiden solo voyage the next month itself, his exploits being funded by the Tagore family of Pathuriaghata, a prosperous extension of the more famous clan from Jorasanko. But on that day in April 1889, inclement weather played the spoilsport in spite of heavy spectator interest at the Gas Company grounds to see Ramchunder climb the air. Couple of days later Ramchunder appeared in the daily *Bengalee*, apologizing for the disappointment of the ticketed audience and promising amendment, if weather permits. So, on May 4, 1889, Ramchunder did make the first flight on *The City of Calcutta*, travelling 4000 feet above the city of Calcutta while witnessing a storm down under, periodically adjusting the ballast and the gas so that the balloon can climb higher and then saunter back to earth without much hassle.

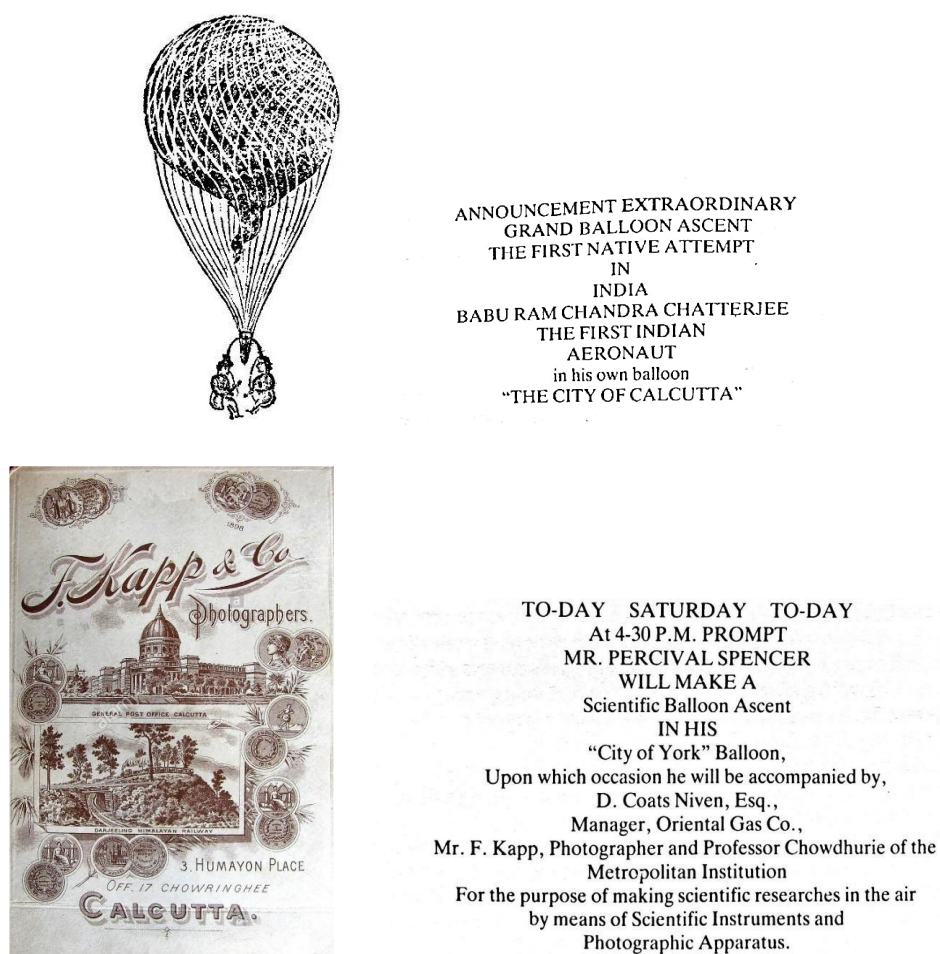


Fig 5.7: Clockwise from top left An illustration showing Ramchunder's balloon journey in Nrityalal Sil's almanac that also carried a brief story about the historic ascent; A newspaper advert announcing the grand feat of the native balloonist; An advertisement in *The Statesman* on 22 February 1890 about the scientific ascent; A studio brochure of Fritz Kapp & Co, which had an establishments in Calcutta and later, in Darjeeling.

His description on the pages of *Bengalee*, as quoted by Ghosh, reveals a rare combination of confidence, pluck and knowledge which Ramchunder seems to have acquired with rare alacrity. No wonder he was planning to start, as he said later, Chatterjee's Ballooning Company and wanted to travel anywhere where sponsors and audience interest existed. But what drove him primarily was a sense of patriotic pride, for he wanted to rival European achievement in the field. He is also credited with being the first native who successfully undertook a parachute descent within a year of his maiden balloon flight. His ambitious plans for an aerial life were, however, tragically cut short by a bout of pneumonia, which killed him in 1892.

Before Ramchunder's maiden flight, Spencer took two more flights from Calcutta, the second of which carried scientific instruments that were loaned from the Meteorological Department, to measure the state of the atmosphere. If this was the rudimentary beginning of atmospheric sciences in India, soon was to come a rather well-advertised and well-orchestrated initiative for aerial photography; the balloon flight being piloted again by Percival Spender. The date was February 22, 1890, by which time Ramchunder's feat was well-known. There were three people atop Spender's balloon on that day, which unbolted from the ground at the Royal Tivoli Gardens. The entourage included Mr Niven of the Oriental Gas Company and the noted educationist and professor of science at Metropolitan College Jogesh Chowdhurie. With skilled hands, recounts Ghosh, Spender let his balloon float lightly at about 3000 feet above the city, which had let Prof Chowdhurie and Mr Niven carry out their experiments.

Next to them stood Mr Fritz Kapp, a commercial photographer with a studio at Humayun Place in Calcutta, who took the first ever aerial photographs of Calcutta, which were in most likelihood the first aerial views of any city in the subcontinent. By all accounts those were images to be treasured. Intriguingly, *The Statesman*, in spite of its promise to the contrary, failed to carry the report of the aerial experiments as well as the aerial images. Both could have been ground-breaking pieces of history in the making, for neither the report nor the images seemed to have appeared anywhere after. Few of Kapp's images are still available but not the ones that could have cemented his reputation as the first viewer of Calcutta from the air. This is a severe loss that can only be mourned, though there are several such moments in Calcutta's history - like the first moving views of Calcutta taken on the streets by Hiralal Sen – which have been lost to the caprices of our collective ability at forgetting our own past absolutely and unconditionally.

5.6 AEROPHILIA IN THE WEST

Ballooning was, for good or for worse, not the only way that humanity pursued aerophilia, either in antiquity or later. I mention antiquity because the history (or imaginary) of climbing up the air physically and not just as a vantage of seeing', goes back to almost all mythical domains in the ancient world. The Greek legend of

Daedalus and Icarus is too well known to repeat here but some outrageous folklore about his efforts to fly across oceans were associated even with Alexander. But in the 15th century there have been innumerable efforts – from seasoned innovators to crazy explorers and all sorts of ingénue in between – to fly into the ether. Several of them involved complicated scientific learning while some were literally flights of fancy. Both endeavours, says historians, were compounded by religious cynicism that found any blatant attempt at flying an open transgression of the spatial limits humanity was providentially predisposed to conform to. There was also the additional danger, if one flew too high, of having stepped alive into the forbidden zone of heaven. In short, the prospect of flying - itself fantastical - was further fraught with physiological and existential dread. It is a fascinating story as such and not unlike all trailblazing human inventions through history; but a detailed account of man's aviary ambitions is outside the purview of this chapter. Few key highlights, however, may not be out of place.

There were, as Clive Hart enumerates¹⁸, some stereotypes associated with the history of exploring the space above the head of humanity. The birdmen (alternately, tower-jumpers), for example, let the onus of humanity's giant leap into air stand mostly on their slender sense of reality; while there were also fancy improvisations and mechanical contraptions – winged bugs, birds and other lightweight creatures - who were designed to defy gravity. Both were in their own way based on tomes – both ancient and relatively modern- on the nature of the upper atmosphere and ways of engaging with the direction of airflow, thereby exploring possibilities of flying. One of the famous reflections on the same came from Leonardo da Vinci.

There are several accounts of tower jumpers or birdmen, like the locksmith Besnier of Sable in France in the late 17th century or one Mr Gascoigne of Knaresborough. Those of Frenchman Jean Francoise Bonnetot or the clergyman Abbe Pierre Desforges - carried out in full view of the public - raised quite a few heckles. They were essentially fearless fools who were too cocksure about their ability to beat physics and logic to fly over Seine (for Bonnetot) or from the church tower of Sainte Croix at Etampes in South of France. Both of these spectacular failures happened in the

¹⁸ Clive Hart, 'Dream and Realities', in *Pioneer Aircraft: Early Aviation to 1914 (Putnam's History of Aircraft)*, (Ed) Philip Jarrett, Putnam Aeronautical Books, 2002, pp 11-31

1770s, though none, incredibly, lost their lives. There are several others. These reckless experimenters were putting into practice what was long-advocated as a theoretical idea, though none of the actual promulgators of bird-like flying – Leonardo da Vinci included – cultivated the eccentricity beyond their notebooks.

In this context, we should take note of Calcutta's own birdmen; for the weird world of babudom in the mid-19th century Calcutta did produce specimens to that effect. Often credited to the *Pokkhidol* named after the working-class songster Rupchand, there grew at least two collectives of baboos who, on chosen days, and under the stimulus of most bizarre substances, designated each other with names and demeanour of birds. One incident included a gentleman who took so seriously to his newfound avatar of a woodpecker that when his father swooped down on their bacchanalia one evening, he was the unfortunate receptor of his son's silent, piercing pecking¹⁹. The second, more telling, incident is associated with an even more notorious group from Bagbazar, headed by the infamous delinquent Shivchandra. Here, on a moonlit night, a gentleman, under the firm grip of narcotics and the impressionable weight of actually having become an eagle, decided that it was time to fly. Accordingly, he took one last look at the moon, opened his 'wings' and sauntered out of the roof of the house towards the Hooghly, only to be found with his head smashed to the ground a few minutes later²⁰. Clearly, the baboo could only borrow the whim and not the fortune of the flying Frenchmen.

The real history of flying rests, of course, with the mechanised and improvised contraptions, the earliest of which, says Hart²¹, goes back to the Greek mathematician Archytas of Tarentum, a friend of Plato, who made a wooden model of a mechanical dove. This became a kind of legendary prototype, to which several learned men went back from time to time. Whether influenced by it or otherwise, Leonardo da Vinci designed a static ornithopter, which rivalled in details his prototype for a helicopter (and that of a pyramidal parachute), though they were found to be impracticable scientifically.

¹⁹ See Arun Nag's notes in *Sotik Hutom Paychar Noksha* and his own collection *Chitrito Podme*, specially the section on the history of intoxication in baboo Calcutta.

²⁰ This story, most likely an apocryphal one, is fictionalized in Sarnath Banerjee's graphic novel *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*, which was a postmodern part-retelling of *Hutom Paychar Noksha*.

²¹ See Hart, 'Dreams and Realities'

There are other thick accounts of several experiments with flying automata in the 15th century Venice by Giovanni de Fontana or in the 16th century by the likes of William Bourne and Giovanni Torriano. A proposed flying dragon by the Italian Tito Burattini (1640s) invited particular attention while the priest Lana de Terzi's 1670 book *Prodromo* proposed a flying ship based on new scientific findings about atmospheric pressure and vacuum. When the Royal Society of London, under the stewardship of Christopher Wren, took to lengthy descriptions of mechanised flying in 1665, the discourse could be said to have moved from assumptive happenstance of individual mavericks to the logical embrace of establishment science. No major breakthrough came even if it is to increasingly methodical experiments in flying that Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg's ornithopter was referenced to, having arrived half a century since Terzi's proposal. Soon there was the fanatical protestant Melchior Bauer's machine or that of Carl Meerwein, both in Germany. Miles and years from it, George Cayley in 1809 managed to put together a glider that, for its time, showed impeccable ingenuity. Through that century there were several experiments in ornithopters, gliders and helicopters, most of them trying to develop the thesis based on bird-flight, leading to Louis Letur's pilot operated glider in 1853. A decade ago, William Henson had taken out a design patent for *Aerial*, which boasted futuristic features but was never actually built. Costumed birdmen, strange flying objects and those in between also continued to populate science fiction since at least Francis Godwin's *A Man in the Moone* (1638).

Once ballooning exhibited the uses of lightweight gas and artificial ballast, the existing 'inventions', whether actual or on paper, started to point towards the possibility of improving upon the foundational properties of the flying object. Also, it was well understood that in the age of mass outreach of technologies, ballooning was both elitist and esoteric. The need of the hour was to move towards a machine that would travel faster and offer ways to scale up. The rudimentary try-outs, gallant go-getting trails and extravagant fictions that were hitherto tethered to the impossibility of the prospect were now on the verge of being rendered spectacularly real.

The period between high-altitude ballooning and Wright Brothers' breakthrough was dominated by a cornucopia of originations in the technology of the airship balloon, fuelled by an ever increasing improvement in the internal combustion engines, Daimler

being the most advanced. The idea of a dirigible airship was first mooted, as early as 1852, by the French engineer Henri Giffard, who exhibited and then patented what he called ‘application of steam to aerial navigation’. Soon, France, Germany, UK and Italy became part of a race to enlarge the volume of the balloon as it changed shape from a horizontal sphere to that of a large, voluminous, vertical one. The most well-known success of this type was that of Count Ferdinand Zeppelin, whose number 3 and 4 versions (1910s) are part of early aviation’s hall of fame. The Zeppelin continued to grow bigger and more ambitious, becoming, in a decade, an ocean-crossing leviathan on the sky, a sight to behold and a key player in German military reconnaissance and also, in US forces. It was ingloriously docked by the ghastly Hindenberg disaster only as late as 1937.

But in the early days of aviation, one also saw various other initiatives, like Alberto Santos-Dumont - the Brazilian émigré in Paris - who had built no less than 16 versions of his Santos-Dumont, flew over Paris with cavalier disregard for his life and often tied his airship to a balcony to have coffee with friends²². There were also extended, expensive and largely failed experiments through the 1890s from the likes of Clement Adler, Hiram Maxim, Samuel Langley, Sinclair Pilcher and the most influential of them - Otto Lilienthal²³. If they got the structure right they failed in aerodynamics. If they tentatively got the flight right, they failed in controlling. The failure seemed taller as several of them were buttressed by leading institutions – from the France Ministry of War to the Smithsonian in the States. This led Alexander Graham Bell, in 1901, to dismiss the possibility of having manned flight anytime soon. A year later HG Wells wrote: “Few people, I fancy, who know of the work of Langley, Lilienthal, Pilcher, Maxim, and Chanute but will be inclined to believe that long before the year AD 2000, and very probably before 1950, a successful aeroplane would have soared and come home safe and sound.”²⁴ The wisdom of the inventor and the eye of the futurist failed resoundingly to see what was coming; for it took not fifty or ten but exactly a year when the first manned monoplane successfully manoeuvred itself through the air above Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. The Wright Brothers, originally

²² Ces. Mowthorpe, ‘The lighter-than-Air Contribution’ in *Pioneer Aircraft*; pp 32-49

²³ Philip Jarrett, ‘Man Flies’, in *Pioneer Aircraft*, pp 87-103

²⁴ Quoted in Richard P Hallion, ‘The Wrights: How and Why they Succeeded’, in *Pioneer Aircraft*, pp 104-120.

bicycle mechanics with a voracious appetite for reading, had made it possible. Not that the Wrights got it right in the first go. Like their peers, they had faced considerable obstacles, heartbreak and cynicism before they could get to the point where they got at least three things right. As Richard P Hallion says²⁵:

The Wrights made three contributions to flight: control (the most important of their contributions), technology integration and creative blending of ground and in-flight testing, culminating in their 1903 powered Flyer.

The Wright-style glider, thanks to its consistency, soon made news across the Atlantic; and France specially launched a zealous effort to develop on the glider technology, sincerely befuddled that two unknown Americans had made possible what they have been trying to achieve for over half a century now. The renowned plane-maker Louis Bleriot and Claude Grahame-White launched fierce campaigns in France and England respectively to make airplanes a sustainable national interest. By the middle of the first decade of the 20th century, long-haul flights were made possible.

Photography did not take time to wake up to the beauty of the manned flight or to the world below that the aeroplane now made realizable. Early witnesses to air-shows at the Issy-les-Moulineaux airfield in France included Matisse, Picasso, Braque and Delaunay. Jacques-Henri Lartigue was the photographer of some of the early thrills that the planes were able to capture among the artists, none of whom having remained alien to the possibility of a new vantage of looking at the earth. The Futurists, by their first manifesto in 1910, had started to sing the song of man's new frontier of triumph. Then came the impetus called The Great War. In fact, as the theatre of war spread to North Africa, in 1915, the fighter was born and with it aerial reconnaissance photography²⁶. The aerial camera, a Goerz, is said to have been first developed by Germans in 1913 and by 1915, Britain's Royal Flying Corps had developed one of their own. The Battle of Neuve Chapelle was the big battle where aerial imaging was widely used by the Allied forces against Germany. By the end of the Great War aeroplanes (and air photography) had become part of modern life's anthropomorphic treasures, having made gigantic strides since the days of the stick- and- string monoplanes. It was

²⁵ Ibid; pp 105

²⁶ See Ken Delve, *World War One in the Air: A Pictorial History*, Crowood Press, Wiltshire, 1997

because of its overtly military use at the very beginning that aerial photography battled the infamy of being just a device of control and destruction. It was much later that aerial photography grew beyond this suspicion into a form of its own, used to some staggering effects in the interwar years in Switzerland by the likes of Edouard Spelterini and Walter Mittelholzer; or in the heydays of visual modernism by both André Kertész and László Moholy-Nagy; and later by Margaret Bourke-White, among others.

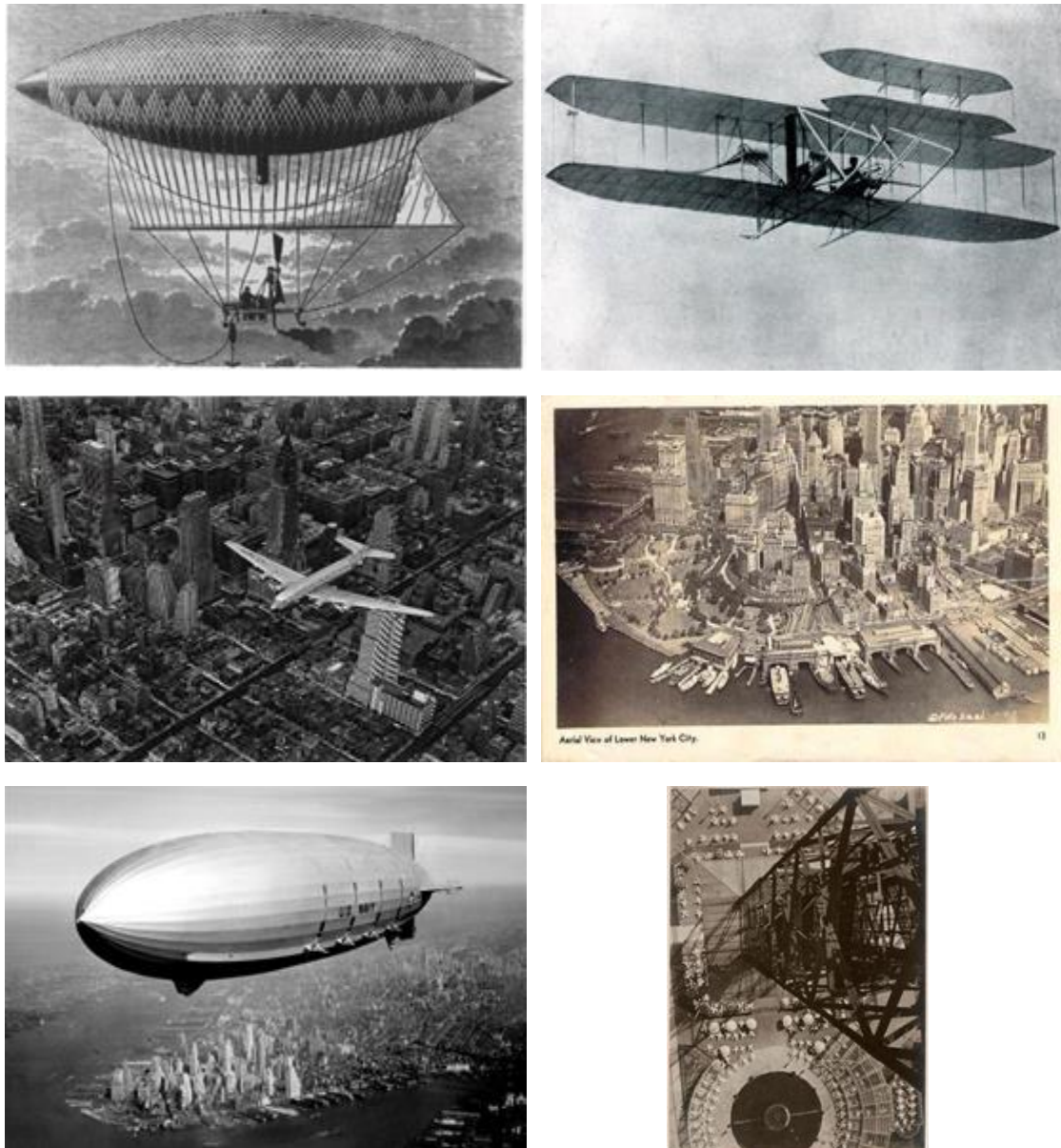


Fig 5.8: Clockwise from top left A popular engraving of Henri Giffard's airship of 1852; Wilbur and Orville Wright making the world's first hour-long flight at Fort Myer, Virginia in 1907; An early aerial view of lower New York City; László Moholy-Nagy's Berlin Radio Tower, 1928-29; A Zeppelin flying above New York in 1933; Margaret Bourke-White's iconic DC-4 flying over New York City, 1939.

5.7 UP ABOVE CALCUTTA

Calcutta lost out, by two days, on its usual retinue of ‘firsts’ to Allahabad when it came to the flights of the monoplane/biplane over the Indian sky. The date of Calcutta’s first aviation flight was December 20, 1910, when Belgian aviator Pierre de Caters took off from Tollygunge Club and flew over it for about 12 minutes on what was likely a Blériot XI monoplane with a REP engine.

That it was a Blériot is confirmed²⁷ but the model of Blériot XI is an informed guess, because it was the one that crossed the English Channel in 1909, creating the possibility of long haul flights. In the case of Calcutta though, they were not flown but shipped to Bombay from where a train brought them to Calcutta. The event created great excitement but there seemed to have been only a few witnesses. A more public event happened on December 22, when the Caters and the compatriot brothers Jean and Jules Tyck flew over Calcutta, alternately using a Henry Farman III biplane and the Blériot. The flights of the brothers were longer but Caters’ was more skilful, going up and coming down in instalments, while carrying one member of the eminent audience on each flight on the biplane. One of them was Mrinalini Devi, the wife of Nirmal Chandra Sen and daughter-in-law of the reformer Keshab Sen.²⁸ She accompanied Caters without a moment of hesitation. She is indeed the first ever Indian woman (if not *the* first Indian) to have been a passenger on a flight atop Indian skies. A similar event, less than a month later, invited no less than 100,000 viewers when Henri Jullerot flew a Boxkite 12 over Calcutta on January 6, 1911.

²⁷ Sidhartho Ghosh (Amitav Ghosh’s Bengali pen name) published the account of ballooning in his Bengali monograph too, which was largely translated from the one in English. The Bengali version, however, carries the extra mention about the first flight over Calcutta. See *Kaler Shahar Kolkata*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata; 1991 (2013).

²⁸ There are variations of this event in other accounts. Mrinalini Devi, for example, mentions autumn (and not winter) of 1910 and the place to be Jodhpur Club (and not Tollygunge Club) in her autobiography; while another report claims the date to be December 28, 1910 while confirming that it did take place at the Tollygunge Club. See Mrinalini Devi’s account in <https://scroll.in/magazine/907444/finding-mrs-sen-the-first-indian-woman-to-fly-in-a-plane-was-a-poet-called-mrinalini-devi>; and the other recent report <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/kolkata-was-on-aviation-map-just-7-years-after-wright-bros-feat/articleshow/64433175.cms>

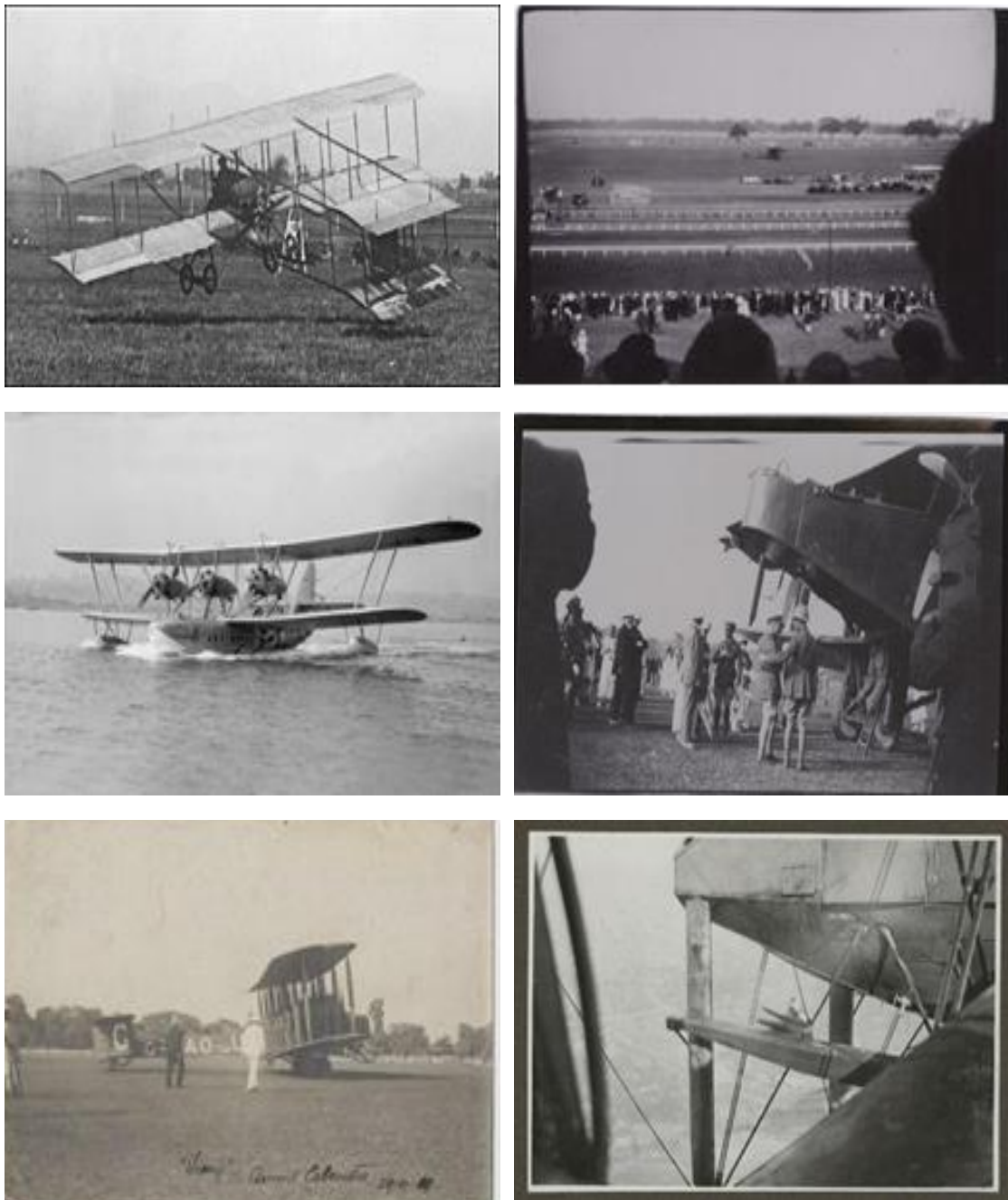


Fig 5.9: Clockwise from Top Left An image of Henry Farman biplane, which flew over Calcutta in 1910, making it the first recorded aerial flight in the city; Crowds assembled for the arrival of Handley Page in Maidan in Calcutta, 18 December, 1918; Handley Page arrives, welcomed by the then Viceroy; Aerial view of Calcutta, taken from Vickers Vimy on November 28, 1919; Vickers Vimy lands with the crew in Calcutta; The metal-hulled biplane Short Calcutta (S.8) that was commissioned by the Imperial Airways and undertook the maiden flight in 1928.

In fact, the family of Keshab Chandra Sen, full of piquant characters, was involved with flying in more ways than this. Keshab's grandson (from his first son)

Errol Suvo Chunder Sen, who was educated in England, joined the RFC and rose to the rank of a second Lieutenant as a pilot of the newly-introduced fighter biplane Sopwith Camels and had made heroic contribution in the Third Battle of Ypres²⁹ in WW1. He was a German POW and on return home, came to be employed with Calcutta Police with signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, the kind immortalised by Septimus Smith in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Suvo Chander's colleague in RFC was another gallant Calcuttan Indra Lal (Laddie) Roy, who had an extraordinary run as a fighter pilot but did not survive the war, dying days before it came to end, in July 1918. These instances create an obvious but underappreciated link between Ramchunder's declared disposition of debunking the myth of the effeminate Bengali and the effortless daring of young men a generation or two apart. And they do the same through the act of flying. Another intriguing link with Calcutta, as far as early aviation history is concerned, is the advanced, stressed-skin, metal-hulled biplane named Short Calcutta (S.8), which was manufactured by Short Brothers and commissioned by the Imperial Airways for part of the British-Indian aviation route. It first flew in early 1928.

The winter months seem to have got interlocked with Calcutta's aviation history. Not only were the first instances above but some key moments in the latter years too were forged during Calcutta's much-loved season of the mellow sun. For example, the earliest image records of aerial attendance in Calcutta can be traced to the winter just after the Great War, and here too the links with the Royal Flying Corps is unmissable. A month after the war concluded, a journey had commenced with five members of the RFC (which had morphed into the Royal Air Force). The trip was undertaken in a Handley Page bomber aircraft that was flown by Ross Smith, General Salmond, General Borton, Sergeant Bennett, and Sergeant Shiers, from Egypt to Calcutta. The duration of the flight was from 29 November 1918 to 17 December 1918, during which it covered 4088 miles over 59 hours and 11 minutes, with stoppages. Calcutta being one end of the flight, considerable arrangements were made

²⁹ <https://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/blog/south-asian-volunteers-in-the-raf-part-one/>

for the ceremonious landing of the airplane and crowds thronged on the Maidan to have a good glimpse of the bomber up-close. The fact that the plane had hit a tree on its way to the landing is noted but did not cause any major disruption in the celebrations. The delegation was welcomed by Viceroy Chelmsford and the proceedings were filmed. Ross Smith's version, recorded on the image, says: 'Just after we landed at Calcutta. Gen. Salmond (in the cap) talking to the Viceroy. I'm talking to Captain Gunning who went to Calcutta to arrange our landing ground. Note the damage to the right wing from hitting the tree, also the cinema at work on the extreme right³⁰.' A year later, when the Australian government proposed a race for a Britain- Australia flight, a team composed of the same Ross Smith, his brother Keith Smith and two others converted another RFC bomber - Vickers Vimy - for the long-haul flight. They started from Hounslow on November 12, 1919 and finished first in the race, landing in Adelaide on December 10, 1919. During the trip, the Vimy not only made a landing in Calcutta (the city being familiar to Ross already) as one of the stopovers but the fliers also took photos from atop, giving us what was the first extant glimpse of the city from the heights of an aeroplane. Their Calcutta landing was dated November 28, 1919. Interestingly, Ross Smith, a decorated member of the Australian Flying Corps, was also the pilot for much of the travels of TE Lawrence in the Middle-East.

The 1920s were relatively calm on the skies, except that in 1924, the RAF landed a flight in Calcutta and the same year KLM started operations from the city, becoming the first commercial airline to do so. It started to use the space known, since the beginning of the century (and adjacent to Dum Dum airfield), as Calcutta Aerodrome, effectively heralding the birth of the Calcutta Airport.

The 1930s seemed to be much busier with several images referring to an ever-increasing practice of aerial imaging and hence it can be well assumed that air traffic increased many times over. One key highlight of that decade was that in June of 1937,

³⁰ The quote and the images are courtesy of the Ross and Keith Smith Collection, State Library of South Australia.

trailblazing aviator Amelia Earhart made a planned stopover in Calcutta. After a wobbly landing on a rainy night, she left, next morning, along with Fred Noonan for Akyab in Burma enroute to Rangoon. The departure, afflicted by severe monsoons, was a risky flight as well, as her diary testifies³¹. This was, in fact, just two weeks before her mysterious and yet unresolved disappearance over the Pacific.



Fig 5.10: Above left Calcutta from the air, private album, 1930s; Above right An aerial view of the Calcutta Port, British Library. Below right A view of the stretch of the river banking Calcutta, British Library, date unknown; Bottom Left Aerial view of the Kolkata Port, India, photograph from *The Illustrated London News*, November 16, 1935, Getty Images.

³¹ See <https://scroll.in/magazine/842977/the-indian-adventures-of-amelia-earhart-before-she-disappeared-into-oblivion> and <https://www.thisdayinaviation.com/tag/calcutta/>



Fig 5.11: Clockwise from top left Grand buildings on the banks of the Hooghly River in Calcutta circa 1930; An aerial view of Calcutta, showing Government House (large white structure to the left), the Post Office (with white dome) and the Esplanade Curzon Gardens in the foreground, 1932; Aerial view of the Palace and of Queen Victoria and surrounding grounds, Calcutta 1932-1937; A travel poster of Calcutta, 1938, highlighting the art-deco distinctions (Tower house, GEC House, Victoria House and Metro Cinema) of its downtown. The aerial views courtesy Getty Images; the poster from Library of Congress.

A series of aerial views of Calcutta are found in the 1930s, concentrating on the river as well as the city's spacious downtown, not unlike the panoramas we saw about three-quarters of a century ago. But the Calcutta they capture is populous, teeming and full of built concrete and in the image of modern metropolis with the paraphernalia of urban growth, transportation and energy that we have come to associate with it. What is also noticeable is the centrality of the river in these images. The first image in Fig 3.10 is captioned as being a view of the port, though in actuality it captures the downtown section of the river with the pontoon bridge seen at the distant end of the image as the only visible mode of crossing of the Hooghly. The second image is likely from the same series or at least from the same vintage even if it is part of an undigitised album at the British Library. The second image, in fact, confirms that they are both an aerial

view of the river with the city's downtown strand and Chowringhee (on the right of the image) and the railways station (on the left, which is the west bank of the river).

These images were shot a year or two before the beginning of the construction of the Howrah Bridge in 1936, and hence marks the last days of the pontoon's exclusive rights over the river, which was in active use from 1867. The images in Fig 5.10 refer more directly to Calcutta Port down south of the river, which had by then become - in its size and importance - a substantive correlative of the city itself, fuelling much of its economic growth, mercantile identity and attraction as a source of employment. No wonder it had become a photographic interest in itself.

The third set of images, also from the 1930s (Fig 5.11) is perhaps the most telling because they are remarkable for their clarity and show the same parts of the city that the panoramas had so diligently commemorated, the latter only adding in their retinue the magnificent Victoria Memorial (inaugurated 1921), which now seem to have replaced the Governor (Viceroy) House as the new attention for imperial topophilia. The incredible aerial views display a robust, highly Westernized, geometrically ordered and composite city in full view. Like the panoramas, these images seem to be deliberately unpeopled and attuned to a specific architectural distinction that helps recast an Eastern colonial town in familiarly metropolitan means for the principally European viewers of these photographs. And this was exactly in keeping with European evocations of metropolitan space, as we have seen repeatedly. The 'image' of Calcutta that travelled through the better part of the 18th and 19th centuries across photographic circles, colonial establishments and the travelling circuits, seems to continue to find traction in these images too, as the poster denotes unambiguously.

The final set, Fig 5.12, is distinguished for having been part of a photographer's body of work, unlike the rest in this section. The earlier sets defy any found pattern or patronage from either the photographer or an adjunct institution which may have commissioned aerial views, for without significant support, aerial views were difficult to have been planned and executed. The support that Clive Waddell (images on top) and Garney Nyss (images below) received are comprehensible, even if the sets below carry a seemingly different imprint of their eye and enthusiasm.



Fig 5.12: Above left Two of Clyde Waddell's images from his album on Calcutta. Below left and right Garney Nyss's aerial images taken in 1938.

When Clive Waddell's images resurfaced a decade-and-a-half ago, it was initially interpreted as a set of random images of a shutter-happy Yankee GI, not least because of the accompanying diary of Waddell, that was called *A Yank's Memories of Calcutta*. But over the years it is clear that Waddell was not only an accomplished lensman but also had an idea what he was shooting and why. In fact, when he had enlisted for the army in the early 1940s, his civil profession was as a photographer for *Houston Chronicle*. Later Waddell found himself posted (and in some cases marooned, thanks to aggressive Japanese advancement in South Asia) between November 1943 and February 1945, as "a photographer attached to the public relations unit of the Southeast Asia Command, serving as 'personal press photographer' to Lord Mountbatten, commander of the allied forces."³²

³² See <https://scroll.in/magazine/877275/photos-the-american-photographer-who-came-to-calcutta-during-wwii-and-fell-in-love-with-the-city>

Waddell had access to resources and was regarded highly in his regiment for his skills as a photographer. What he has left behind is of great value as he makes every effort, not very usual those days, of going out into the streets of the city and making a case for what can be called one of the early instances of mercurial street photography in this part of the world, a genre yet to have found wide acceptance among professional or commercial photographers. His accompanying texts reveal his ambivalent fascination with the city of Calcutta. Twice in 1942 and 1943, the Japanese bombed the city, even if the physical effects were much more tempered than otherwise expected. The war had left behind other scars, the Bengal Famine included, which directly left their mark on the streets of an embattled late colonial metropolis. We will encounter Waddell's more depressive street photos later but here the aerial images present two identifiable (and characteristic) views of the city. He wrote for the first: 'Hooghly river and part of Calcutta's east bank. but for this [giant] stream Calcutta would likely never have been built---and for that matter, many of us [would] just as soon it hadn't. Nevertheless, the river affords many spectacles and has accommodated millions of tons of supplies necessary to the war effort'. The second image and the accompanying text is full of the entrenched cynicism of a soldier in severe isolation from his known habitat. About the second (image top right) the GI wrote, "Aerial view of Calcutta downtown. In the upper left background is Hindusthan building, U.S. Army HQ. The oldest part of the city starts at the esplanade and extends upwards. The city was founded in the early 1700s". In this image, the GI is trying to locate a sense of familiarity in the form of army headquarters amongst the expansive, flat aerial view of the city otherwise of robust, defamiliarizing urban demeanour.

Nyss' case was exactly the opposite. He was Calcutta polyglot, who played almost every game at either the state or national level; had cut several albums on Hawaiian music (with his band Aloha Boys); had serious academic interest in Himalayan birds; was a hockey player of great repute, and was a ground-breaking photographer. Largely unknown outside melophiles in his day and forgotten thereafter, Nyss was an extraordinary talent who roamed the many liberal worlds of Calcutta between 1930s and 1960s. He grew up in Darjeeling and later, along with brother Errol, ran the Nyss Photographers in Calcutta since late 1930s, which cements his reputation as a

photographer of some distinction. His photographs were collected only in the late 1990s in a book³³ that is hardly in print any longer. He was, says the book, “among the first to take a series of specially assigned photographs of Calcutta from an aeroplane”.³⁴ The book also contains a sharp, close image of the Dakota Navdoot, parked in Calcutta that he used. Nyss, no wonder, views Calcutta very differently than, say Waddell, his views being a mix of the picturesque and spectacular. The accompanying text with the image on bottom left says: “The Victoria memorial flanked on either side by the sprawling city and the emptiness of the area still to be developed”. The picture on bottom right, which isolates the memorial, like a similar image in Fig 5.11, evokes the similarity of the monument to Taj Mahal and how its sprawling pathways and garden was a haven for lovers and families seeking refuge from the city. It is to be noted that even if the span of Nyss’ book is the decade of 1940s and it covers several cities across India, in case of the images above, Nyss’ views actually predate that of Waddell by at least half a decade.

5.8 A SYNOPTIC VIEW OF THE WORLD

This chapter began by throwing open the theoretical possibilities of aerial imaging, especially against the context of a colonial metropolis. In the global north, aerial imaging or *aerovision*, as we have seen, has associated itself with a wide-ranging set of ideologies, both utopian and dystopian. The history of its coming into being and the various stages of its maturity from being superficial ancient fantasies to having become a site of advanced scientific iteration reinforce the aerial gaze as central to our conceptualization of the modern world. As Paula Amad says, there was never in history a more concentrated effort on part of humanity to gaze at the world in totality. She writes³⁵:

These nineteenth-century efforts were part of a much longer historical tradition of world imaging connected with the desire to grasp the ungraspable and represent the unrepresentable, namely, the vast scale of the earth.

³³ Garney Nyss, *Memories: A Photographic Essay of India in the 1940s*, (ed) Neil O’Brian and Barry O’Brian, Heritage Resources Private Limited /Steel Authority of India, 1998.

³⁴ Ibid, pp 10

³⁵ Paula Amad, *From God's-eye to Camera-eye*, p 68

Even if that representation played a sinister part in man's participation in warfare, Amad's contention is that the original impetus for aerial vision's extraordinary deportment had a much wider purpose: to pre-empt what Martin Heidegger described in 1938 as³⁶

...the ultimate modernist illusion of mastery presumed in the techno-visual 'conquest of the world as picture' – the latter materialised, not coincidentally, in formats like aerial and satellite photography.

But this very epic purpose weakens substantively when the theatre of gaze and perception leaves the shores of Europe. The history of Calcutta's *aeriality* in general and aerial photography in particular, as we have seen, is sketchy. Archival support and institutional memory is not spacious enough to build a robust theoretical case for detailed aerial conceptualizations of the city. This is linked to Calcutta's own history as a colonial metropolis and as an ambiguous space for the unfolding of an atypical modernity. At the same time, the images that exist, as we have seen, do hint at the concomitant continuity between various stages of evolution of aerial imaging across the global north and its obvious and observable echoes in the colonial city. So, when it comes to thinking through aerial photography in South Asia, one must be attentive to this incertitude, especially in the case of two overriding theoretical positions: militarization and cinematism.

The problematic kinship between aerial imaging and warfare have triggered the most astute critique of aerial photography. This is largely because the technological imperative of *aerovision* and its wide use is inextricably linked to the two global wars in Europe. There has been, as I have briefly mentioned, severe disapprobation about its role in the rapid militarization of the skies, especially from Marxist critics like Walter Benjamin, Alan Sekula and Paul Virilio. For them, the aerial eye not only equipped man's efforts to totalize wartime destruction but also helped to aestheticize that very violence. This is most eloquently revealed by Benjamin, when, after citing Marinetti's glorification of the war in Ethiopia, he writes³⁷:

³⁶ Ibid p 68. See also Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, (tr) W. Lovitt, Garland Publishing 1977, New York: pp 133–4.

³⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, volume 3, 1935–38*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al, Belknap Press of University of Harvard Press, Cambridge, 2002, pp 101–33; p 122.

Humankind, which once, in Homer, was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, has now become one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure.

But such provocative critique³⁸, extremely relevant to Europe's bloody century, diminishes in context as one moves away from its epicentre. In the case of Calcutta - the most important city in south Asian imperial geography - there were two brief phobic periods in 1942 and 1943. Otherwise, the city's skies, in the first half of 20th century, have not been a site of any military conflagration, nor are there records of any prolonged aerial reconnaissance. There is hence little traction to be drawn as such about aerial imaging being used for purposes of military mobilization. If at all, one can take note of how alien airpower perpetuated war in the colonies. Even then, there is nothing to be gainfully concluded which has not been concluded already³⁹.

When not used as an ancillary of war but as supposed antidote - as in art and cinema - aerial vision has again eluded Calcutta's long cultural expression *of* and encounter *with* modernity. In an essay on the parallel and interconnected histories of cinematism and aerial view, Teresa Castro lays down the primary attraction that cinema had for aerial views. She writes:

Contemplating the world from above enables an unprecedented expansion of the field of vision. Aerial vision is thus a macroscopic vision that enables the naked eye to see the extent of a certain territory. Yet the height of the viewpoint is linked to a world that progressively diminishes and loses its characteristic volume.

In the early days of cinema, the period that Tom Gunning has called that of cinema of attractions⁴⁰ aerial views provided one more template of unfamiliarity, which,

³⁸ While Benjamin just hints that aerial photography made war a consumable act, Sekula is more directly disparaging of the practice, from which Virilio draws directly when discussing cinema and war. See Allan Sekula, 'The Instrumental Image: Steichen at War', *Artforum*, 14:4 (Dec 1975), pp 26-35 and Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller, Verso 2000 (1984), London.

³⁹ There are several insightful essays on the social history of wartime raids and Japanese bombing of Calcutta in Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (ed), *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, Routledge, London et al, 2017; see also David Lockwood, *Calcutta under Fire: The Second World War Years*, Rupa Publications, 2017.

⁴⁰ Teresa Castro, 'Aerial Views and Cinematism, 1898-1939', pp, 118-133, p 119

simultaneous to the camera's recording eye, thrilled, stupefied and to an extent, even frightened the public. It established a language of epic determinism and overarching perception that cinema would often use to stunning effect in later years. In its early days however, like all such exigent forms, narrative cinema soon relegated this view to the domain of avant-garde art - either to the fascist fanaticism of the Futurists, to the playfulness of the Dadaist; or to the complex formal inquisitions of Suprematists, especially Kazimir Malevich⁴¹. There are several more examples when new-fangled aerial views became fodder for art, especially in the post-impressionism of Robert Delaunay.

Calcutta's visual history has otherwise mirrored several shifts in the history of art – modern portraiture, impressionism, cubism and abstractism. Cinematic technology too echoed the epistemic shifts from fairground to ticketed odeons, from silent to talkies and from being studio-bound to out of it, among others. But neither the moving image nor art in general seemed to have found any meaningful traction or interest in aerial imaging of the city and its precincts. At least not in any systemic, instrumental way. This leads one to infer that aerial views remained alien, formidable and underappreciated in Calcutta, because of the same reasons it evolved in the west: militarism, surveillance and warfare. It is not difficult to estimate that the technology and operational support needed for viewing the city from above was beyond the aims of colonial administration; and even less so of the public at large. This is perhaps most visible in the evident internalizing of (and continuing admiration for) the panorama and picturesque (and *carte-de-visite* of course) forms among photographers native to the city, as we have seen. But this is not the case for aerial views, except for the very unusual case of Garney Nyss.

These deficiencies are real but not enough to conclude that the existing images of Calcutta are only memorable for their pictorial attraction. For aerial photography in Calcutta was indeed part of a global aesthetic of turning aerial gaze into a perspectival imperative. Unlike the historical contingency of war, perspective is a *longue durée* prospect and in the west, the eye of the aerial camera – more expansive and more

⁴¹ See Christina Lodder, *Transfiguring Reality: Suprematism and the Aerial View*

appropriative than panorama – was a natural corollary of the latter. There have been extensive studies tying clear-sighted perspectival iteration of the cities (through aerial uses of camera) with symptomatic and synoptic management of space, which has had considerable purchase in the political amphitheatre of Europe between mid-19th and mid-20th centuries⁴². As early as 1919, says John Macarthur, when the idea of a systemic ‘town planning’ was but a decade old, RAF pilot and photographer Gordon Holt had laid down a plan to include aerial photography as an imperative exercise for architectural understanding of cities. More and more photographers, planners and geographers asserted how aerial images were a fundamental repository of a city’s holistic self-appraisal. As Macarthur writes,

What the oblique or bird’s-eye view shows is the relation of architectural forms. While the vertical view can provide a dimensionally accurate depiction of area, the oblique view adds an impression of depth, which, while it is unable to be dimensioned, is essential to the understanding of the architect and planner.⁴³

Jeanne Haffner contends that over the years, aerial views fed into the conceptualization of *social space*, especially in the interwar works of Marcel Griaule and his student Paul Chombart de Lauwe. They proposed that the view from the airplane was crucial for connecting the ‘social’ with the ‘spatial’.⁴⁴ Even if Henri Lefebvre later offered a severe critique of ‘social space’ as a space of social control, the idea had considerable influence on urban planning. Cosgrove and Fox, for example, explicitly links Scottish biologist and town planner Patrick Geddes’ work (whose name is inextricably tied to urban planning in Calcutta) to that of the early modern artist Lorenzetti.⁴⁵

(Geddes’) mappings and schematics were based on the idea of making visible the social and environmental relations that tied a city to its surrounding region, a concept that can only be rendered visible through

⁴² See, for example, Andrew Higgott and Timothy Wray (ed) *Camera Constructs: Photography, Architecture and the Modern City*; Routledge, 2016 (2012) and Volker M. Welter, *Biopolis: Patrick Geddes and the City of Life*, MIT Press, 2002

⁴³ John Macarthur, ‘The Figure from Above, On the Obliqueness of the Plan in Urbanism and Architecture’ in Dorrian and Pousin, pp 188-209, see p 190.

⁴⁴ See Jeanne Haffner, *The View from Above: The Science of Social Space*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2013 among others

⁴⁵ Cosgrove and Fox; pp 15-16

the perspective offered by elevation... Geddes's concept of regional survey became a principal tool of planning across the world in the first half of the twentieth century and the newly developed techniques of aerial photography played a key role in providing the necessary documentation.

This claim establishes a direct link between the long desire for a metaphorical order in visualized topography and the instrumentality of modern urbanism, historically marked as it was by an increasingly protuberant presence of technology. To that end, it is not difficult to acknowledge that Calcutta's emergence as an unbroken subject of panoramic gaze did find effective continuity and even re-imagining through aerial photography; in spite of the latter's history being scattered, fragmented and often, disembodied. Whether in colonial cartography, or educational maps, or detailed surveys to stymie the spread of epidemics; or to the extensive town planning of Calcutta Improvement Trust in 1911, there is an unambiguous pull towards perspectival management and its corresponding visual documentation. That is precisely why it was necessary to examine, even if briefly, the peak period of cartographic practice in colonial Calcutta.

This is highlighted in Partho Datta's important work on planning in Calcutta. Dutta meticulously brings to the fore various debates, laws, warring political, social and class interests; and the complications of land holding patterns that were to play a part in the city's planning. That Calcutta was cramped and parts of it were prone to surges of pestilence was not a new find in the early 20th century for since long it was felt that Calcutta's astonishingly stylised westernized parts stood in denial of its overall shape and temperament as a city of unplanned, aimless growth. It needed to change. As EP Richards' 1914 *Report on Calcutta*, as quoted by Dutta, says, 'The crippling of Calcutta would in due course affect all India more or less and would very seriously injure Bengal and Ganges valley. Calcutta Improvement is not a mere municipal problem, but an Indian empire problem'.⁴⁶ No wonder, Richards proposed a gigantic plan for Calcutta, expectedly in the likes of what Baron von Haussmann had done to Paris half a century

⁴⁶ Partho Datta, *Planning the City – Urbanization and Reform in Calcutta, c.1800 – c.1940*; Illustrated Edition, Tulika Books, 2017, see p 234

ago. Patrick Geddes was however opposed to what he called widespread ‘destructive impatience’ when it came to planning cities. Geddes had a much more detailed idea of Indian sensibilities and complexities than other planners of his time and had produced over forty planning reports during his decade-long stay in India. For him, the city was best understood organically and he had hence placed much importance on patterns of growth and accumulation as revealed from detailed surveys. That way, claimed Geddes, planning could avoid the long arm of the state and become infused with concerns peculiar to that of the citizen. Together, Richards and Geddes proclaimed a massive civic project that over the first four decades of the 20th century singularly altered Calcutta’s physical shape and size.

Whether Geddes planned to look at Calcutta from the aerial vantage or if he actually used images to that effect is unknown. But it is not difficult to deduce that his Calcutta reports were taking into account an organic entity that was in existence in the various cartographic and civic visualizations. What happened to his reports, how much of the city’s subsequent urban planning took into account the views of Geddes, or if there was any effort at any point to incorporate Calcutta’s aerial views into its planning is anybody’s guess. What is not in the realm of conjecture, however, is that the city did lend itself to some very fine aerial views. And there is where one must seek to put together an outline of an emerging urban consciousness. It would be worthy here to remember here Michel de Certeau’s famous invocation of New York in the early 20th century from the heights of the Empire State Building. Certeau writes ⁴⁷:

A wave of verticals. Its agitation is momentarily arrested by vision. The gigantic mass is immobilized before the eyes. It is transformed into a texturology in which extremes coincide—extremes of ambition and degradation, brutal oppositions of races and styles, contrasts between yesterday’s buildings, already trans-formed into trash cans, and today’s urban irruptions that block out its space.

Certeau’s was certainly not an aerial view but he *imagines* it to be. And what he sees is a *text*, a topographic language that is only revealed to the eye when one stands on top of

⁴⁷ Certeau, Michel de, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984, pp 92

it. This is precisely what connects, say, the earliest eyes above Calcutta – Robertson, Spencer, Ramchunder with Ross Smith and Fritz Kapp; the unknown photographer of the Calcutta port; the spectacular downtown extravagance of Chowringhee; the commiseration of Waddell, the diligence of Nyss, or perhaps or even the organic city of Geddes. These rare images have largely eluded observation so far, retaining a distinctiveness of the aerial view as well as helping to contextualize Calcutta's *aeriality* as part of a planetary interest and enthusiasm for viewing a teeming, anthropomorphic and this case a colonial city from a dazzling and omniscient perspective. Camera's discursive fascination with the built city of Calcutta that we have seen through the practice of panorama, *city views*, pictorials, documentations and stereoscopes, is doubtlessly expanded in its aerial form, as if to seize the city's burgeoning spatial expansionism. In other words, the extant images of the stout Hooghly, of the heaving port, of the idealistic Victoria Memorial complex; and certainly of the colossal and westernized administrative domain around the Governor House are but part of abstract *aeriality* and a consequent aesthetic of the city's historic habit of urban accumulation and evolution.

CHAPTER 6

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

6.1 AN AESTHETICS OF UGLINESS, OR A POSTCOLONIAL IMPASSE?

In this final chapter, we shall look at a set images, all of them from the 1940s, to understand how and why Calcutta's dominant visual regime, so far spread across a range of spaces, sites and instants was now in the danger of being pushed into becoming a singular, ugly, ungainly vortex of restlessness, suffering and urban infirmity.

To that end, this final chapter goes beyond the questions of urban photography's portability, technological transferability and why alternate techniques of observation of colonial imagery can reveal a global imprint of a project rather than a reductive imperial aesthetic. What we have so far seen is that Calcutta, once the seat of the British Empire's deepest engagement with colonial modernity in South Asia, was also the archetype of a colonial urban imaginary, which ensured that a distinctive visual and technological modernity was directly sired by the colonialist emprise. Concurrently, Calcutta's visual history shows a determinable and dominant practice of viewing the city from carefully orchestrated distances to establish an unmistakable visual authority, logic of observance and optic practice.

The images we shall see here, will, in some ways, deny the expected closure to the imperial scopic order. This is because the attempted closure essentially hints at a contested beginning, a beginning which raises a new argument about not just photography in the *post-colony* but, in fact, about the very idea of the *postcolonial city*.

This is because as we enter the final decades of imperial rule in the 1940s, we see a determinable shift in the established photo-regime, especially as Calcutta hurtled towards an unprecedented and unforeseen transformational tornado at the unveiling of the post-colonial *moment*. That this decade was unsparing, divisive and decisive is no epiphany but the extent of its impact on its time and its unequivocal legacy have only recently started to reveal its full heft. Visually, what we can identify is a severe crisis of perception in the late colonial, ex-imperial capital; the emergence of a new rhetoric of scarcity, deficiency, graphic violence; and the radical exigency of a postcolonial urban public space. In fact there seems to be an unremitting foregrounding of *the ugly* as a prevalent motif in understanding the self-fashioning of the newly exposed postcolonial city as a pestilential site of urban reconfiguration. This shift, especially when compared to the visual alignment of high-colonialism, seems to be born out of a wanton disengagement with postcolonial publics. This changing regime of engagement and

perception leads us to surmise if the visual archive of that period could be said to have established an 'aesthetic of ugliness'. At the same time, there is the very real possibility that the brutality of the transformation and its visual archiving has had a keen role in the visual indictment that post-colonial Calcutta had to endure for decades to come. So there is that teasing, provocative possibility that Calcutta's visual nemesis in the 1940s - a sort of purported *spatial ugliness* - is in actuality a political anti-aesthetic, which complicates the relationship between its history of metropolitan modernity and its transformation into a post-colony.

It is here that we ask the tickling query: is a *postcolonial* city historically actualizable, or is a quintessential colonial city (like Calcutta) so entrenched in the networks of spatial, cultural and social imagination of the imperium, that it is historically incapable of moving into a domain of decolonization? This query is in itself worthy of an argument that is way beyond the scope of this concluding chapter, having much broader contentions to deal with. We can only hint at our participation in it and that too very briefly.

6.2 THE AESTHETIC OF UGLINESS

There is a long history on the kinship between abjection and art, primarily to understand if *ugliness* is a *natural* antonym of beauty or is ugliness, in some forms, a political verdict.

Ugliness is a powerfully and eloquently contested idea, which even before the emergence of modernism as a cultural practice has had an often inexplicable hold on the artistic imagination. With the arrival of mass modernity, especially when visualized through the performative agency of the camera lens, there however seems to be a foregrounding of ugliness as a separate regime that seems to be integral to the unfolding of mass modernity itself. We have hinted about this debate in the section on Fiebig's *chromophilia*. But it goes much farther. Hence, we should take a passage through the debates around ugliness in both art and the photographic image, to be able to trace photography's aesthetic ambivalence. Only then can we hope to look closely at ugliness as a political figuration in the post-colony.

In her book *Plain Ugly*, Naomi Baker traces the etymology of ugliness to the Norse language. Baker writes¹:

¹ Naomi Baker, *Plain Ugly: The Unattractive Body in Early Modern Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p11.

The term “ugly” originates from the Old Norse *ugglig*, meaning “to be feared or dreaded.” Early modern English definitions of ugliness frequently focus on its power to disturb the viewer.

Through the Renaissance, Mannerism, and the Baroque periods and well into the early eighteenth century, says Baker, ugly became a free-floating signifier in Western thought, a protean and portable term to refer to anything that did not fit within the moral architecture of the beautiful. Though instances in which the ugly was perceived as native to its subject are not unknown, ugly was generally considered a freak or joke of nature rather than any reasonable continuation of it. Similarly, the grotesque and the monstrous function as exceptions in Western art, say in Hieronymus Bosch, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Michelangelo Caravaggio, Henry Fuseli, Francisco Goya, William Blake etc² (see Fig 6.1 for some iconic examples of having the viewer confront the abject). As the American author Katy Kelleher wrote in her *Paris Review* piece about the Museum of Bad Art in Somerville, Massachusetts³,

Ugly is also a word that carries hard moral implications; for centuries, ugliness has been associated not only with sickness and deformity but also dishonesty, violence, aggression, and bigotry.

In a certain way, the systematic theorization of beauty by Kant was part of a prolonged process of naturalization of beauty in the West rather than any significant break from it. Hence discussions on Kant’s dissociative notion of ugliness as a category of experience is unlikely to reveal any conclusive answer, at least in terms of defining ugliness independently. It is rather in Kant’s follower Karl Rosenkranz’s 1853 book *Aesthetik des Hdsslichen* (The Aesthetics of the Ugly), that one might find the seminal break with the Kantian tradition, for having considered ugliness as an essential component of art. No wonder, Theodore Adorno’s further theorization of ugliness within the scope of capitalist modernity⁴ can be traced to Rosenkranz and not Kant and his canonification of beauty.

² Frances S. Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³ <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/07/31/ugliness-is-underrated-in-defense-of-ugly-paintings/>

⁴ Theodore W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

As Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer mentions in her essay on ugliness⁵:

In the wake of Rosenkranz ..., Theodore Adorno argued that, in the dialectics of the beautiful, ugliness was appropriated through negation, its sheer opposition to the urge toward beauty generating an inherent tension within the work of art that was an essential, if implicit, component in the production of its structural harmony: the ugly is that element that opposes the work's ruling law of form; it is integrated by that formal law and thereby confirms it.

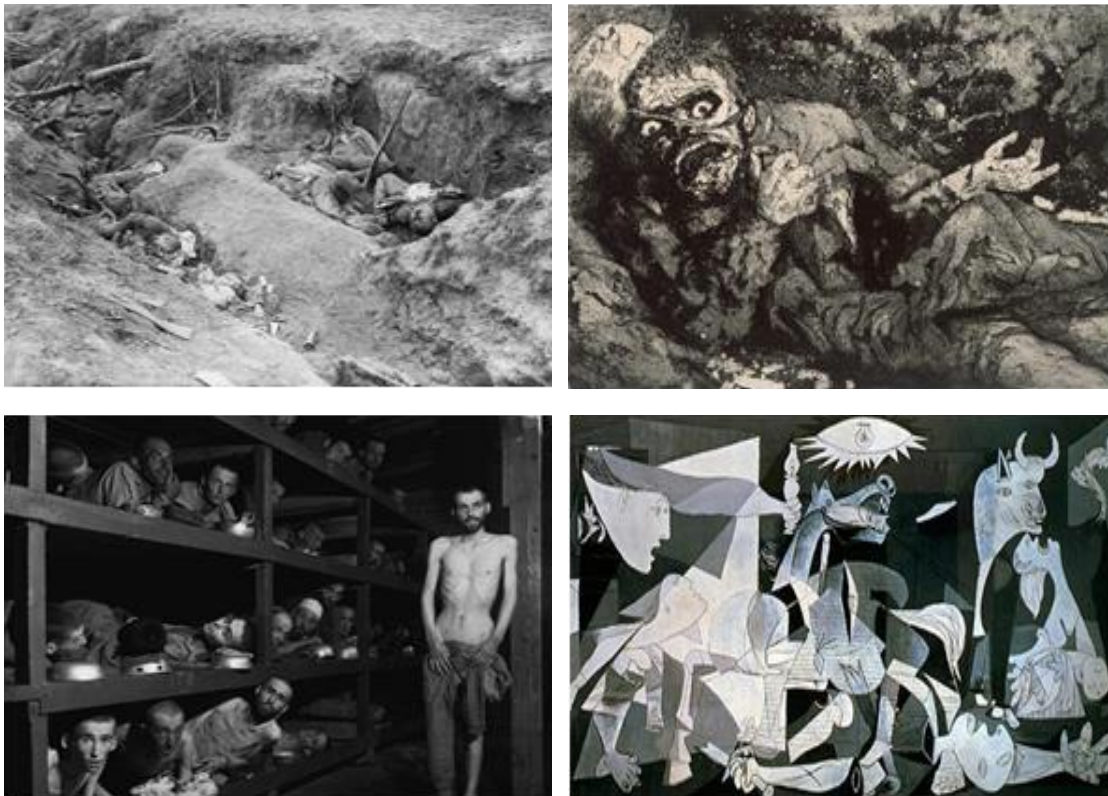


Fig 6.1: Clockwise from Top Left Photograph showing flies and maggots on dead German soldiers in a captured German trench near Ginchy, after the Battle of the Somme, August 1916; Otto Dix, 'Wounded Man (Autumn 1916, Bapaume)', 1924; Pablo Picasso, 'Guernica', 1937; Undated picture of prisoners in barracks at the Buchenwald concentration camp, 1940s.

In other words, Adorno's critique considers ugly as an invisible fulcrum in classical aesthetics, the apparent pull of which provided the impetus to push towards the conformity of beauty as the prevalent drive of art. As per Athanassoglou-Kallmyer,

⁵ Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, "Ugliness," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (ed); Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003; pp 281–2.

Adorno spins an imaginary, creationist tale of ugliness, when he equates ugliness with the beginning — the chaos — and how beauty emerged later as a civilizational impulse to put an order to the disorderly world. As a Jewish intellectual hounded out of Nazi Europe, Adorno's empathy lies with ugliness, because the overemphasis on beauty carries within it the same historical protrusion of a repressive order that Fascism wanted to stamp its dominions with. To that end, says, Athanassoglou-Kallmyer⁶:

In art as in life, Adorno endowed ugliness with moral beauty and a humanitarian mission: to foster sympathy for the degraded, to reverse social inequity.

This is one of the key reasons that art and documentary photography, both long witnesses to 20th century's ghastly catastrophes, hardly had to battle the aesthetic question, because it was well understood that art that is socially relevant and hints at an intractable present through its subject is not to be subjected to questions of beauty, structural symmetry, organic congruity etc. This ensured that much of the documentation of humanity's monstrous tragedies, imaged meticulously, remained unaffected by any need to present themselves as aesthetically attractive. The four images above, all iconic, reveal the affective internment that art and photography could provide to the decisive moments of a century.

6.3 TOWARDS AN ANTI-AESTHETICS OF SPACE IN THE POST- COLONY

In Calcutta, the same compulsion of momentous events and their close observance should have been just a historically necessitated case of photography's documentary effect. But it did not turn out to be that way. Instead the images became, more or less, a notional imprint of the city itself, transferring the contingency of events into a perpetual and perpetuated state of despondency. Why so, is worth asking.

The colony to post-colony transition is the moment of origin of the postcolonial city, if not of the entire postcolonial experience, whose birth, in the case of Calcutta, was attested by an astonishing conflation and compression of time and event, leading from a violent freedom movement to war, then famine, communal conflagration, brutal

⁶ Ibid., 283.

Partition and visceral violence, permanently marking a postcolonial city's coming into being with excruciating memories. Evidently, like other structures of representation, the moment of the city's crisis also proved to be the moment of formidable visual *reproducibility* of that city space. But in Calcutta, it went deeper.

Calcutta was not unused to scenes of public gathering and mass protests, at least since the early years of the twentieth century. Large parts of the city's population had been influenced by the rhetoric and emotion of nationalism from the first decade of the twentieth century. One obvious consequence of this was that the vanguard Indian intelligentsia, fed on the writings of Western enlightenment and European models of resistance, called for public violations of colonially administered city space. This was seen as a symbolic but no less triumphant subversion of the colonial body politic itself.

The unnerving disquiet of the 1940s intensified all forms of resistance. The intensifying discontent of the colony was best expressed in its most eloquent and universal voice. Only a few months before his death, in May 1941, Rabindranath Tagore, only too aware of his failing health and inevitable end, had given a seminal lecture at Santiniketan, the university town he had founded and nurtured about 200 kilometres from Calcutta. Now known as the *Crisis of Civilization*, the essay shows Tagore's deep, almost prophetic awareness about how the long arm of the British Empire was feeding on its own tendons. At the time, Europe, in the grip of Fascist insanity, was bent on destroying the heroic achievements of enlightenment. Tagore, an inveterate internationalist, mourned the death of that Europe. He said⁷:

In the meanwhile, the demon of barbarity has given up all pretence and has emerged with unconcealed fangs, ready to tear up humanity in an orgy of devastation. From one end of the world to the other the poisonous fumes of hatred darken the atmosphere.

Europe's possible demise forced Tagore to ponder the fate of independent India, leading to what is in fact one of the first major intellectual polemics on the emergent idea of the *post-colony*. In the same lecture, Tagore prophesied⁸:

⁷ Rudrangshu Mukherjee (ed), *The Great Speeches of Modern India* (Delhi: Random House India, 2011).

⁸ Ibid.

The spirit of violence which perhaps lay dormant in the psychology of the West, has at last roused itself and desecrates the spirit of Man. The wheels of Fate will someday compel the English to give up their Indian empire. But what kind of India will they leave behind, what stark misery? When the stream of their centuries' administration runs dry at last, what a waste of mud and filth they will leave behind them! I had at one time believed that the springs of civilization would issue out of the heart of Europe. But today when I am about to quit the world that faith has gone bankrupt altogether.

And true to his alarm, it is exactly what happened. Historically, the colonial state, under crisis during the Second World War, was intent on strengthening its exploitative grip on the colony, even if it was for one last time. Calcutta's ties to the colonial circuits of the empire were so undeniably potent that it faced the maximum brunt of its eventual and agonizing demise; and continued to quiver till well into the middle of the next decade. Historicising that decade is hence not just about re-reading the past but also meditating on the extent of the city's brutalisation. As the historian Sekhar Bandyopadhyay writes in his introduction to a recent anthology that focuses squarely on a decade in Calcutta - between early 1940s and early 1950s⁹:

It was a decade that saw the effects of a world war, the severest famine in the history of the subcontinent, the worst communal violence that looked like a civil war, massive anti-colonial and left movements, labour strikes, Independence and Partition, mass refugee influx and migration of its own religious minority – in short urban disorganization on a vast scale, accompanied by significant deaths, and the birth of a new nation state and a new democracy. These were the best and the worst of times, occurring in a crowded sequence, churning up catastrophe and exhilaration in equal measure and ruthlessly compressing vast, unprecedented, indeed unimaginable changes in the urban landscape and demography within a span of a little more than ten years. The city that was forged in and by these years was a very different Calcutta.

⁹ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Introduction: Calcutta in History and Historiography', in *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, edited by Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Delhi: Social Science Press, 2015, p. 4.

Bandopadhyay's essay also powerfully brings to relief the anxieties of freedom, the street-level exuberance of its actualisation, the emergent role of mass movements and the founding of a new poetics and politics of displacement and resettlement. But except the day of the Independence, exuberance is usually absent from the visual rhetoric of Calcutta's documentation in those terrible years.

One can perhaps identify the death of Tagore and the city in mourning as having symbolically unbolted a decade of utmost hardship for Calcutta. While trying to historicize the events of 7 August 1941, one historian hints at Tagore's diffident relationship to Calcutta as a kind of uber-history for that day, when private mourning for a devout humanist was subverted into a public spectacle for a "national" poet¹⁰. Soon, this mourning unveiled the disquiet of the 1940s in the life of Calcutta, for in each year since then, urban life and survival was convulsed to the very limits.

The empire was fighting a war, but it responded brutally to acts of nationalism that were expressed through the violent non-Gandhian modes of resistance during the 1942 Quit India movement. The street violence induced by the movement had barely subsided when Calcutta was scarred by aggressive Japanese bombings in the winter of that year in the wake of the fall of Rangoon. Another fleeting moment of disaster was experienced again in 1943 – when at a particularly high point of confrontation in the war, it looked imminent that Calcutta might finally fall to the Japanese army. The threat of bombing had more psychological impact on citizens than actual physical damage while simultaneously producing the usual wartime mischief about black markets, overpricing, food shortages, civic myopia and the additional, debilitating problem of "war rumour"¹¹. The Great Famine of 1943 was a anthropomorphic calamity thrust on an unsuspecting citizenry already struggling to meet wartime emergencies. It is no new fact that the war helped the British hoard food grains in secrecy, leaving the provinces of Bengal starving. It is even more obvious from recent historical enquiry that the link between war mongering and food supply, condition of labourers, military skullduggery and visual

¹⁰ See Rajarshi Chunder, 'A City in Mourning: 7 August 1941', in *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, Pp 42-61.

¹¹ See Ishan Mukherjee, 'The Elusive Chase: 'War Rumour' in Calcutta during the Second World War', in *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, pp 63-92.

politics of rotting bodies in the open were intertwined¹². The Famine is said to have killed up to three million people by conservative estimates, which makes it not just colossal act of genocide but also one of the largest concentration of human casualties of the entire War. Coterminal to these casualties were generic shifts in the management of micro-economic forces that affected jute workers, tramway men and middle-class women, leading to seminal transformations in social and political collectivization. Even before the violent, visceral impact of the famine could fade, communal violence on a scale previously unseen struck Calcutta in 1946. The Great Calcutta Killings resulted in a permanent shift in the city's demographic and habitation pattern, creating new pockets of tension and apartheid. There were also the effect of what has been called "riot systems"¹³ during the dark days in August of the Great Calcutta Killings. Again, the injury of the killings had hardly mitigated, when news of Partition spread and a deluge of refugees arrived in the city from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), the scale of which was, again, extraordinarily daunting. Nothing had prepared the new Indian civic bodies for this massive offensive on the city's resources and infrastructure. Concurrent and consequent to these defining events were also the Indian National Army trials, severe housing crisis, mass unemployment and breakdown in traditional figurations of family and identity. The fact that planning was minimal, execution dismal and corruption ubiquitous made any hope of purposeful rehabilitation a matter of indefinite prospect.

Thus, Calcutta's emergence into independence on the other end of the transformational tornado of the 1940s came at a cost that was severely disproportionate to any coherent prospect that the post-colony had nurtured for itself.

6.4 THE UNQUIET CITY

A visibly receding British Empire seemed to be unveiling the deformed, unsightly city that was laying itself bare as a distasteful, festering, abject object — a constantly re-occupiable, embattled, violated urban space in which each of its many disenfranchised people were ordained to carry out their labored embodiments of filth and grime.

¹² See Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine, Riots and the End of Empire*, HarperCollins Publishers India, Delhi, 2015

¹³ See Nariaki Nakazato, The Role of Colonial Administration, 'Riot Systems' and Local Networks during the Calcutta Disturbances of August 1946, in *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, pp 267-319.



Fig 6.2: Clockwise from top left Tagore's funeral procession in Calcutta, August 7, 1941; A political rally in early 1940s Calcutta; Violence on the streets close to Chowringhee; Street unrest during Quit India Movement, 1942. Photo by Sunil Janah.

Evidently, even the bleakest of Tagore's prognoses about the post-colony that would be born out of Europe's self-annihilation, could not have gauged the wanton scale of arson, bloodshed, famine and mass migration that it would entail. Little could Tagore guess that the British Empire, at its final demise, would leave behind a state deeply mired in self-loathing, a nation truncated, a people devoured and a city virtually destroyed; and all of this, within less than a decade following his death. Hence, the new image pattern that we see seems to be emerging in keeping with increasingly besieged spaces around Calcutta's embattled streets. This regime could be broadly said to be seeing Calcutta from up-close— as a disempowered and de-aestheticized subject. This shifting regime, it can be gauged, was unmistakably a condition of the cultural re-imagination of the postcolonial city. Any interrogation of Calcutta's emergence into postcolonial metropolitanism through this difficult period must hence take note of how photography during these years constructed this recurring motif.

The first set of pictures (Fig 6.2) carry the overwhelming sense of a city having been pulverized by history. Tagore's funeral procession was as much about a sense of collective grief as it also exposed the wanton disregard for civility that a reckless crowd was able to exhibit even when the occasion was one of mourning. The image of the political rally shows women cadres out in the streets in a collective show of defiance – both political and spatial. The images iconise the operative value of mass congregation on the street of Calcutta in the early 1940s. The other two images carry the unmistakable portraits of street violence. The socialist lensman Sunil Janah had, in the precocious months of 1942, recorded the civic impact of Quit India movement, a mass unrest programme that Gandhi headed against the British. Both his image and the other one show conspicuous outburst of nationalist anger and call to arms, most immediately to protest India's forced initiation into the War.

The second set (Fig 6.3), begins with the rare picture of Japanese bombings near the Calcutta port in 1943. The bombings were caused sparse physical damage but nevertheless scarred, as said, an entire population. A very different impact of the war is seen in the next image - the desperation to save a building of ocular importance. The Victoria Memorial was coated with coalash and natural dyes and its premises were thrown open for the GI's to take bath. The coating of the memorial was important not only to show the real threat of a London-like blitz from the Japanese but also that wartime protection was more fundamentally offered to the seats of the empire's memory than to the people. Glenn Hensley and Clive Weddell's images, being GI's stationed in Calcutta, reinforce an agonizing state of affairs of a city in dire need of civic and social aid. Their photographs 'attest' to civic incapacity and the "filthing" of public space. Similar photographs were taken by the renowned British photographer Cecil Beaton, who was dispatched to India to cover WWII. Beaton wrote a corresponding diary, indicating his outrage about Calcutta, a city which he thought had ploughed the depths of depravity as much as it was gilded in gold. The problem is that the revelation of abject hunger, poverty and privation in public spaces to which no one pays any significant attention had in later years become a recurrent theme in postcolonial urban iconography and images such as these have contributed heavily towards that recurrence. Evidently, these last pair of pictures of Calcutta's street life,

were misread as outside any designation of event but as traces of the changing perceptions of a quotidian life in a city in the midst of an epistemic change. By failing to record the sequence of disasters that were inflicted on Calcutta during this period, these images perpetuate a sense of inevitable, unforced destitution of a city. But as we have seen, divorced from history of that present, the images only foreground part of what was the truth and hence manage to make Calcutta a readymade exhibit of public agony.

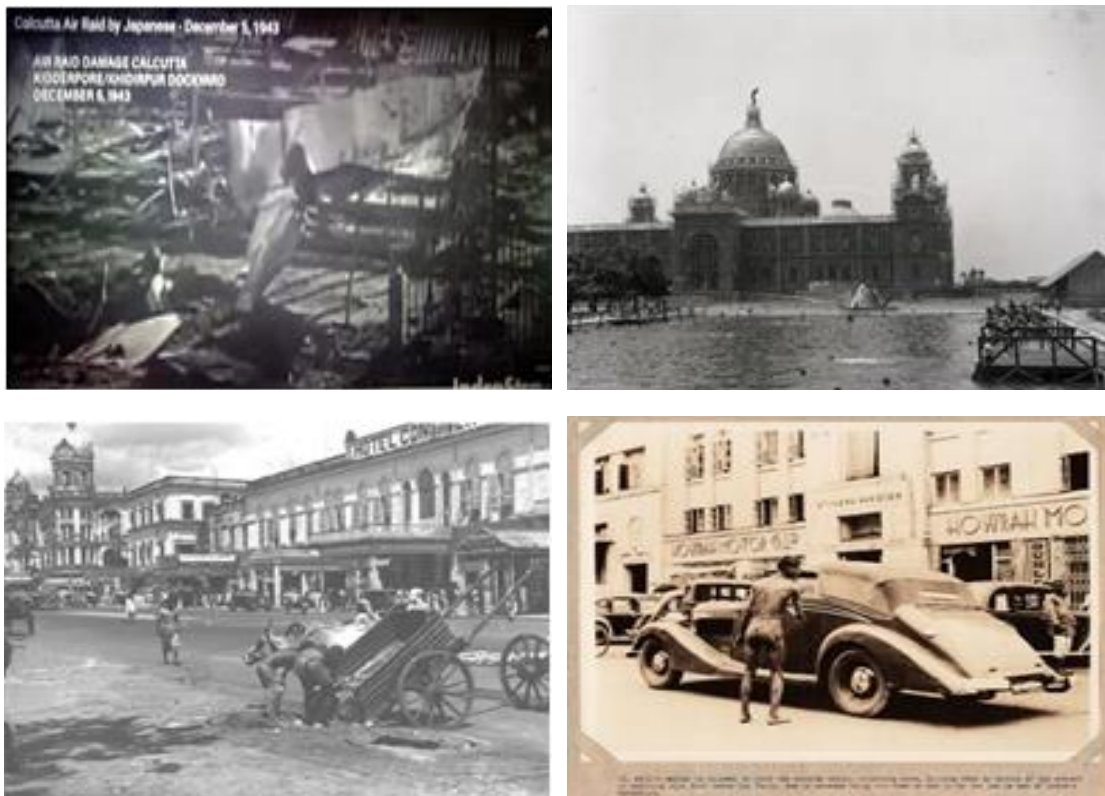


Fig 6.3: Clockwise from top left-Screen grab of documentary on the Japanese air raid at the Khidirpur Docks, December 1943; A blackened Victoria Memorial during the WWII; Clive Waddell's Calcutta of the haggardly madman, 1940s; A glimpse of destitution in the fashionable Old Court House Street, Glen Hensley, 1940s.

The first image of the third set (Fig 6.4) portrays destitution at its most visceral during the Bengal Famine of 1943. It shows Archibald Wavell, the British Viceroy and governor-general of India, in talks with Indian officials during a visit to a kitchen for victims of the famine. The humiliation of the native subject is here total and complete. Two other pictures are about the communal violence of 1946. Sunil Janah records the most disagreeable of sights - stinking and bloated dead bodies of riot victims. The other

image was taken on 28 August 1946, two days after Direct Action Day that produced sectarian violence on a scale unmatched before or after in the city. The photograph carries a description: “Havoc at a road junction in North Calcutta where much of the city’s wealth lies.” The image carries additional text revealing the extent of the violence. It says: “It is possible that more riots will break out in the Indian trouble centres of Calcutta, Bombay etc., at the start of the Moslem festival of Eid-ul-Fitr, which starts on Thursday. All the available troops and police have been mobilised in these centres. It is estimated that approx. 3,000 were killed in the recent four day Hindu-Moslem riots which took place in Calcutta.” The final image refers to India’s Partition — the biggest one-time enforced migration of people in human history. One cannot barely grasp, from the distance of history and unfamiliarity, the enormity of Partition, which in its totality, seems to have had a far more lasting influence on defining the nation and its nature than most would have thought to be the case.



Fig 6.4: Clockwise from top left Victims of famine at a camp, 1943; Bodies left to rot in the aftermath of the communal violence, 1946, Sunil Janah; Havoc at a road junction in central Calcutta after communal riots, 1946; Crowd of refugees in independent Bengal at the Bangaon train station in 1952.

A closer inspection of the images, just a handful from a whole range of photographs that are available, show a clear predilection for focusing on the ungainly body of the native Indian — loitering, rummaging, occupying, disemboweling on the streets of Calcutta. High colonial photography minimized or completely obliterated the human figure in favor of the appreciable built space, but in the photography of the 1940s, the native body came to become the portent carrier of the new state — *the postcolonial state*. Events provide the necessary impetus to foreground the native body as intrinsic to the change of perception of space — from segregation in earlier photography to collision. Time, in that sense, not only unravels through space but through the body politic of the city's nether aspects, embodied in the mauled or mutilated native. Together the images point to an actual breakdown of civic architecture pointing towards a potential *uncountability* of the space as it is being reorganized around the audacious desires of a public caught in the cusp of epic changes. The message these images collectively sent out was that the sovereignty of the imperial administration, so obvious in earlier images, was now in decisive retreat. In doing so, the images seem to *uncover* a city's festering disorder that feeds into a determinable, programmatic propulsion of *ugliness* as the dominant motif of urban life in the post-colony. In other words, the images end up perpetuating the ugly, embattled space as natural and native to a city that is emerging from ordered coloniality to postcolonial unruliness, where the ordered colonial city is increasingly being substituted by a grim, wanton misrecognition of spatial value and hierarchy.

What is absent from this narrative is that the conditions that blighted Calcutta in those decades cannot be explained in terms of its own, provincial doing. Calcutta had been on the global map of the colonial circuits of mobility, technology, power, policy and capital. Throughout its history, Calcutta had been a steady receptor of the Empire's boom and it was only recently before the Second World War that planning in Calcutta, something to the extent of a derivative Haussmannization, was in spectacular operation (as we have seen). Though partially disenfranchised by the loss of its status as the capital of colonial India after 1911, Calcutta nevertheless remained the apex city of colonial administration as much as it was the epicentre of the expanding geography of discontent against the British Empire across South Asia. Hence with the advent of the

1940s, Calcutta was to become the first inevitable and irrevocable catastrophe of the Empire's doom, a doom Tagore had predicted without imagining its decisive, divisive and devastating impact. So what we see in the 1940s is but a historical compression of extraordinary proportions, events that changed nations forever and crises that could test even the most capable. But all this was usurped by a callous and notional circulation of a city's life that could only be measured in the context of its own, epic failures.

The camera, once the chief importer to the West of Calcutta's audacious modernity, hence, also became the prime modality of its abject ugliness. To that end, one can trace a few motifs that emerged out of the community of images that record that restive period. They can be broadly categorized as: the appearance of native body, the exigency of the *event*, the etiology of civic *uncontainability*, the effacement of sovereignty and the seduction of anti-aesthetic. Even if a delectable coloniality is not visible in early photography of the city, in late photography, the camera, increasingly focusing on the native body as a site of contestation, anthropologizes the gaze, rendering what is historically conditioned by necessity and events as normative to the native and integral to its culture. Hence, what we find is an increasingly unflattering viewing regime: unflattering, because the city's civic architecture was now strained to its utmost limits; unflattering because the city was increasingly rendered ungainly by the sight of hapless people—bombed, displaced, famished, violated; unflattering because the city's deformed nether regions were now an exhibit of its wholesome failure to emerge into postcolonial readiness.

The politics of disfigurement of Calcutta as a visually compelling motif is not in spite of the historical sweep but precisely because of it. To that end, photography of Calcutta, as in the West, moves from the heights and distances of framing the city in an empty imperium to increasingly seeing it uncovered in its unguarded, unchecked, suffering moments, in its extraordinary incapacity to resist disenfranchisement. But unlike Western modernity, the city *becomes* the native body and continues to remain so. Hence, as India, in a way microcosmed through Calcutta, poked the sealed book of hermetic construction of a postcolonial subjectivity in the years leading to the postcolonial moment, it had to also pay the price of that desire. Postcolonial India, and definitely Calcutta, therefore had to suffer the purging of its privation through the abject ugliness of its beleaguered public.

6.5 RETHINKING THE POST-COLONIAL CITY

The idea of this shifting image culture in a postcolonial Calcutta could well have brought closure to photography's relation with a diffident, insistent, unrelenting colonial modernity. But because the shift happens at a time when there is not just a change of political regime but also a change in the very discursive foundation of colonialism, the question of how the post-colony negotiates its own *image* hangs in suspense. In other words, these images and their context do carry the germinal critique of seeing modernity only as a comfortable co-habitant of coloniality and *not* post-coloniality. The unapologetic foregrounding of the ugly as the central motif in understanding the self-fashioning of the postcolonial city is, hence, a provocation enough to rethink the politics of postcolonial urbanism.

At this juncture, should we consider rethinking the postcolonial city as an enforced tedium? On the contrary, recent scholarship is more welcoming to the idea than ever before, which also points to the fact the last word on the postcolonial city is far from having been uttered. As scholar AD King, in a widely-read essay¹⁴ on the continuing relevance of defining the postcolonial city, writes:

In everyday usage, postcolonial cities refer to those cities (frequently capitals) in what were previously colonial societies. In addition to this temporal or historical use of the term, however, postcolonial may also imply a particular critique, one which not only emphasizes the distinctive impact which colonialism has had on the economy, society, culture, spatial form, and architecture of the city but also on the way the city itself is understood and represented.

Notwithstanding the possibility that a very generic idea of postcolonial city might end up referring to any city that was once under an administration that was foreign to its territory (for example Dublin), King makes it clear that the term is most readily applicable to non-European cities that were once under the domination of European powers. A prominent debate in this regard, influenced by Franz Fanon and Alan Du Bois, concerned the dual nature of colonial cities, they being sites of spatial segregation and hence needed to be seen from within that discourse. As such, the reception of these

¹⁴ A. D. King, 'Postcolonial Cities', State University of New York Binghamton, Binghamton, NY.

cities in public policy documents, international debates and even in academic studies have been, till 1980s, dominated by an inherent acceptance of the split nature of its spatiality and its attendant problems. For King, this acceptance further problematizes the very notion of a postcolonial city. He says:

As with the term postcolonial itself, it can be argued that the category of the postcolonial city is more of an outsider's than insider's label. It privileges a representation of the city which foregrounds its colonial past, rather than the city's present or future. In this sense, postcolonial can carry the meaning of the failure of decolonization.

King's essay goes on to provide a critique of the whole enterprise of defining a postcolonial city, not least because an increasingly high rate of migration, globalism and international trade and commerce in the post-imperial period have undermined any solipsistic ethos of constricting an exclusive idea of the postcolonial city itself. King also hints at the etymological irony of the word *post-colonial* because it asserts the identity of a city in terms of its new belonging in a free republic as much as it irretrievably ties it to its colonial past. In another essay published two years after that of King, urban historian Eric Beverley published a sweeping survey of new scholarship on urban history of postcolonial cities¹⁵. Beverley's essay reveals not only the fundamental problem of defining the postcolonial city given its many mutations in the post-imperial period in world history but also that there cannot be any singular agreement as to the degree of colonial foundation that a postcolonial city is supposed to either encounter or entertain in its self-fashioning in the period of decolonisation. In other words, the relationship between the postcolonial city and its colonial past is a protean one and particular to each city. Calcutta and Cairo, Colombo and Bombay, Lahore and Nairobi or Hong Kong are all postcolonial in a generally acceptable definition but postcolonial in their own way. Both these studies raise important questions. In the case of Calcutta there is further scope, as I am arguing, to contest the conventional reception of the term and verdict of a postcolonial city. And this contest, as I have tried to put across, comes from comparatively unexplored vantage: the visual urbanism and its construction of a

¹⁵ Eric Lewis Beverley (2011) Colonial urbanism and South Asian Cities, *Social History* 36:4. 482-497.

photographic city. Perhaps a clue of my argument can be found in revisiting Neil Lazarus' contention again¹⁶. He writes:¹⁷

To situate modernism in relation to modernity in the context of a discussion of 'postcolonial' literature is to raise some very large and controversial questions. One might argue, for instance, following Theodore. W. Adorno, that modernism's essential gesture is to say 'no' to modernity. But then it might immediately be objected that this Adornian formula leaves unresolved the question of the relation of modernism to *colonialism*. The point is that while colonialism is commonly taken as intrinsic to the socio-historical project of *modernity*, *modernism* is not typically viewed – for all its 'dissidence' – as featuring an anti-colonial dimension.

This is the key point. If we are to understand Calcutta's grand participation in the global transmigration of images since the early days of photography, we must bring the question of modernity as close to colonialism as possible, something that I have tried to do throughout this project. The question is, what happens to that urban modernity, to that affective metropolization of colonial spaces when we look at the distraught images that perpetuated Calcutta's entry under the portal of a postcolonial paradigm? Modernity and post-coloniality are not necessarily antithetical to each other because the arrival of modernity in major parts of the formerly colonial world was directly sired by colonialism. But they are not willing partners either, since the rites of passage between the colonial period and the period thereafter were often marked by an attendant distrust and disdain for colonial modernity as well.

This complex relationship is further amplified not only because post-coloniality has come to partially obscure colonial urban progress but also because of the discontinuous, mercurial nature of India's modernity itself. However, this discontinuity is far from total and irreconcilable. On the contrary, an image-aesthetic travelled well into the post-colonial period, even when a form of aggressive decolonisation often led to the purging of the colonial memory and symbolism of monuments. This is similar to

¹⁶ Please see Ch 1

¹⁷ Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, Cambridge University Press, 2011. P 28

Ashish Chadha's argument in an essay on the politics of heritage formation in the context of a colonial cemetery in Calcutta. Chadha writes¹⁸:

[In this paper] I argue that postcolonial ambivalence is to be found in the invisible hyphen between the post and colonial of the postcolonial. These monuments of colonial memories are signs of temporal ruptures, which disturb the dichotomy of the colonial and the postcolonial and reveal the discomfort of postcolonial ideology in dealing with its colonial past, a past, which spills over into its present.

The colonial visual space, like the cemetery, can be similarly said to be infused with the possibility of both containment and remembrance, eventually reflecting each in the representations that it lends itself to. Saying that, I leave behind a tantalising possibility: that Calcutta's modernity is so intrinsically a part of its coloniality, that there is no unambiguous way that Calcutta could co-habit comfortably with the demands and retreats it faced during the arrival of the moment of decolonization. Beverly has hinted that historical time informs its relationship with the city in complex ways because every claim of the colonial use of the city as a mode of social and racial control was contested by equally potent claims of interconnected and complex modes of overlapping habitations. This, as per Beverly, renders any simple idea of two-fold spatial control an inadequate description of the colonial city. My contention is that it is not just the more official spaces of control and division but the entire construction of urban modernity in an uber-colonial urban metropole like Calcutta is an ambiguous, fraught and deeply complex idea. It is hence imperative, in case of Calcutta, to re-imagine and re-contextualise the city's ambivalent urban topography and the plethora of sites visibility, visuality, containment, civic management and governmentality that has emerged around Calcutta's making as an archetypal colonial city. As this project has hoped to exhibit, visualization of sites and buildings, of spaces and routes, of collectives and congregations have many layers of relationship with a city's built environment which, when forced to make traumatic retreats, like it happened in Calcutta in the 1940s, only manage to expose the injury to its body politic and refuses to be forced into a post-colonial arbitration of its heavily colonial spatial topography.

¹⁸ Ashish Chadha, 'Ambivalent Heritage: Between Affect and Ideology in a Colonial Cemetery', *Journal of Material Culture* 11: 3, 2006, pp 339-363, p 341.

6.6 POST-SCRIPT: AFTERLIFE OF A KEY COLONIAL MONUMENT

It would be worthwhile to end this project by testing the hypothesis of ambivalent decolonisation by seeing the visual life of at least one key colonial monument in post-imperial period. It could have been several specimens of built environment in Calcutta but nothing is perhaps as potent as the Ochterlony, which as we have seen, was used both as a vantage of panoramic observation of Calcutta's fashionable downtown, as much as it was itself imaged prolifically as a notional metonymy for both the open space of Maidan and spectral presence of the empire. Architecturally, hence, the Ochterlony remains a unique structure whose spatial deportment and locational prominence has not only secured it from oblivion, but has in fact ensured for it an afterlife as part of a wide range of political and cultural usages. In fact, the word 'afterlife' here is not meant casually but denotes a specific life after 'death', borrowed from recent scholarly definition. As Deborah Cherry writes:

The term 'afterlives' is adopted here to suggest the restless multiplicity of coexisting versions, representations, imag(in)ings, and interactions taking place in widely distributed circuits of use, replication, and interpretation. Afterlives are constructed in the corporeal, mnemonic, and sensory engagements between people—individuals, groups, institutions—and sites, objects, texts, and images.¹⁹

It is in this sense of continuity that informs the postcolonial representations of the Ochterlony. From the theoretical understanding of visibility, I argue that as the city developed well beyond the Ochterlony's panoramic gaze it was necessary for a more dissipated aesthetic to evolve around it. The importance of the Ochterlony as a vantage point did not continue much beyond the early 1900s, not only because the romance of its elevation died down, but also because of the emergence of other, more fraught sites that embodied newer visual imaginations of the city. Could this have also paralleled the European shift, where, at least in topographic photography, the flâneur eye was thought to have replaced, intellectually at least, the panoptical sight of the populist panoramas.

¹⁹ Deborah Cherry, D. (2013), 'The Afterlives of Monuments', *South Asian Studies*, 29:1, 2003, pp 1-14, p 3.

George Simmel²⁰ and Michel de Certeau's²¹ now-classic works do stand at the cusp of that shift. But what happens in Calcutta?



Fig 6.5: Top A congregation of people near the Ochterlony on a monsoon day; *Life Magazine*, 1951. **Below** *The Business Centre of Calcutta*, 1960, Ahmed Ali, CSSS, Calcutta.

Each image of *postcolonial Ochterlony* represents a different decade and differing figuration of the Ochterlony. And in doing so, the Ochterlony attains newer meanings in each image - spatial, topographical, congressional, occupational and representational. Given the proliferation of photography by the mid twentieth century, as signalled by the maturation of the newspaper industry, photojournalism, various amateur practices, and improvements in technology, one runs the risk of generalising what could be a specific set of illustrations. For this reason, it would be helpful to remember that these final set of images has been chosen symptomatically: they provide clues to a visual motif, but do not necessarily represent generic undertakings in all of postcolonial photography.

The top image in Figure 6.5, which is dated 1951 and taken from *Life Magazine*, shows the Ochterlony on the right, overshadowed by the cloud and Whiteway, Laidlaw & Co's by-then-defunct luxury store in the distance. The two colonial era buildings and the Morris Minor taxis add a sense of obvious incongruity to the *hoi polloi* in between, scurrying under their umbrellas on a monsoon afternoon. This is an archetypal street-level view of the Maidan area in which the colonial-era buildings are deliberately

²⁰ George Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, Wolff, K. (trans.), 409-424. New York: Free Press, 1950.

²¹ Michel de Certeau, 'Walking in the City' in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Rendall, S (trans.), 102-118. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

poised as distanced and forlorn, as if to stress the city's post-colonial present. But it is those very buildings that deny any easy passage of time within the image. This is similar to the tensions inherent in the image below, dated 1960, where we see an assortment of buildings jostling for spatial prominence in the downtown Chowringhee. In this photograph, by professional photographer Ahmed Ali, what catches the eye is of course the Howrah Bridge rising prominently above the skyline, unequivocally subverting the Ochterlony's spatial claim to the city. In isolation, the diminutive Ochterlony stands like a captive moment from the colonial past. The summit of the Ochterlony, once preferred in the visual articulation of the colonial period, is now *part* of the figuration of a new visual vantage, to whose expansive gaze the once-mighty monument is held captive. The panoramic imperative establishes a sense of continuity with the older images, while unmistakably highlighting the increasingly usurped spatial relationship between the Governor's House and the Maidan.



Fig 6.6: Left A political rally near the Ochterlony, 1970, Alok Mitra; **Right** A balancing game-show in progress near the Ochterlony; Santanu Mitra.

The image on the left in Figure 6.7, taken in 1970, is symptomatic of the Ochterlony's ghostly presence. This image highlights the monument's standing against the scene of a dispersing crowd after a political rally. It is important to note here that in August 1969, on the 22nd year of India's arrival into the post-colonial period, the Ochterlony was renamed by the local government as the Shahid Minar — Martyr's

Tower — an insistence that a dogged vernacular *re-naming* be forcefully imposed on erstwhile colonial monuments. Previously a monument to the triumph of British colonial conquest, it was now to be remembered as a monument to the deceased martyrs of India's colonial struggle. While the Ochterlony was being renamed, the political dispensation — consisting of various subgroups with belligerent ideological formations — were staking claim to governance. Bengal, as a constituent state of the independent Indian republic, was on the verge of a political collapse, having seen three elected governments dismissed in the short, turbulent period between 1967 and 1972. This picture attests to one of the many rallies that were convened during those days of unflinching turmoil. While this context is important to understand the full force of the photograph, its visual impact remains undiminished even when divorced from its newsworthiness. Spatially, the photograph attests to a congressional scenario in which the silhouetted Ochterlony stands distanced from the overpopulated, hyper-occupied space around it. Contrary to Ahmed Ali's panoramic expanse, Alope Mitra's photograph establishes an immediately identifiable contrast with the colonial images of depopulated urban scenery. Moreover, with the people's backs to the Ochterlony, the towering memorial is reduced to being merely incidental to the scene, while also being the exclusive marker of this metropolitan space. The second photograph in Figure 6.7, dated more than a decade later, brings to the fore how the site around the Ochterlony had settled into a practiced insouciance. The image, by Santanu Mitra is specifically dated to 19 September 1981, and is from the series 'Occupations'; which was commissioned by Chitrabani. By the 1980s, the Ochterlony had become a visitor's touchpoint: a slapdash, touristy tedium. The picture shows a crowd in the background watching *Madarir Khela* — an amateur, balancing-act, pedestrian form of trapeze. The crowd with its back to the imposing structure carries the full meaning of temporary habitation around the Ochterlony. Most of the crowd and performers here are daily visitors to the city, daily wage-labourers, whose relation to the city is merely transactional. The image transfers their unawareness of the monument's legacy into the imminence of the pleasure that they seek in the transitory form of entertainment in front of them.

I want to touch upon a final set of images that are not photographs, but make

deft use of Ochterlony. The image on the right in Figure 6.7 is an announcement for a rally of a leftist political party at the site of the monument; The illustration on the left is publicity material for Ritwik Ghatak's *Bari Theke Paliye* (The Runaway Boy, 1958). The poster's artwork, by theatre designer, painter, and illustrator Khaled Choudhury is a wonderfully expressive illustration of the theme of young boy's day out in the city. The jumble of objects dominated by the rotund form of the Ochterlony signifies the dizziness of a teeming, disorderly Calcutta. In both of these images, the Ochterlony is extrinsic to the declared purpose of its use but is at the same time useful to it. During its days of political mobilisation and then as a governing order, the Leftist political conglomeration in Bengal claimed ownership of the site around the Ochterlony. For it, the renamed Ochterlony carries the right kind of spatial ethic to commemorate their long days as the oppositional political force in the 1960s and 1970s.



Fig 6.7: **Left** Publicity poster for noted Bengali filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak's film *Bari Theke Paliye* (The Runaway Boy, 1958). **Right** Publicity material announcing a rally, issued by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Year unknown but in the 1980s.

The film poster, on the other hand, makes use of the Monument's easy identifiability with the central district of the city. In both, the Ochterlony stands not as metonymy for the city, but for its quick familiarity. In that sense, if the first stands for a call to symbolic political action, the other is a plea for popular discernment. Both the images tap into mass recollection of the site but not necessarily the monument's foundational role in the city's visual memory of colonialism. Both images, in order to moderate their own perpetuation of a desired city space, converts the sight of the monument, decoupled from its actual site, into a mobile sign. The visual abolition of a

colonial behemoth is hence, more or less, complete.

These photographic and allied representations of the Ochterlony — itself a memorial to a kind of imperial containment — nudge us, as a specimen, towards the constant registers of change and mobility of a city. These registers operate across the arc of Calcutta - from its colonial and mercantile foundations which produced a compressed sense of progress and time to it being a post-colonial urban formation which is then subject to wanton reorganisation of that very space and time. To register the ambiguity of this shift, as I have tried to do in this concluding chapter, one must critically resist attempts at easy and politically satisfying labelling of postcolonialism. India's decolonizing process did begin with the transition of power, but, like legal institutions, cultural habits, political and educational institutions; and technologies of modernity among others, the archetypal colonial city is resistant to the political lust for easy transferability of spaces, time and ways of seeing. The photographic unconscious and archive of a city like Calcutta must hence continue to critically assess the several overtures of colonial imprint and layers of meaning on its built architecture and spaces of imperial influence. Early views of Calcutta are where modern optics started to administer a compressed sense of time through the reorganization of the public image of a city into a charged photographic order. In the confrontation of that order — which encountered the colonial at the precise moment that it accosted the modern — lies a persistence of a colonial spectrality.

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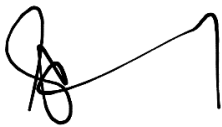
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