
Book Review

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1–3

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Michael Mann, *A British Rome In India: Calcutta – Capital For An Empire*, Wernersche Verlagsgesellschaft, 2022, 214 pp. ISBN: 978-3-88462-411-1 (Hardback).

There is an anomaly in the title of Michael Mann's book. Rome was the home territory of the Romans, hence the natural hub of their empire. By that analogy, the heart and hub of the British Empire, including the British Indian empire, could only be London. Calcutta (to use the appropriately old form of the name) could at most be the field headquarters.

The objection is validated by two points. One of the book's chief strengths is that it relates the architectural and social growth of Calcutta to European models and influences. A corresponding problem is that it does so with a striking disregard of Indian elements in the compound and the overwhelming Indian presence on the scene. Even British historians of the city, from James Long to H. E. A. Cotton, gave the latter substantial if not proportionate importance. So, of course, did Indian historians even in English works, increasingly from A. K. Ray to Pradip Sinha. One depressingly assumes, as always, that Bengali sources will be left out of reckoning, from Prankrishna Datta to Radharaman Mitra, not to mention literary writers from the very period this book treats of: Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay or (somewhat later) Kaliprasanna Sinha.

Surprisingly, Mann dismisses the division between Black and White Towns central to most accounts of Raj Calcutta. The dismissal is not substantiated. Of course there was no formal apartheid between the two sectors. Humble Indian service providers fringed the European quarters with their subdued presence, socially alienated even while materially indispensable. At the other end of the spectrum, privileged Indians, chiefly compradors of the Raj, visited the European quarters, nearly always on formal occasions. Both categories find only passing mention in the book; the bustling life and thriving (if equally exploitative) culture of the Black Town to the north, none at all. The 'grey' town abutting on the colonial heartland at the centre, populated by a variety of races, is as cursorily treated.

In 1965, Nirmal Kumar Bose wrote a classic article entitled 'Calcutta: A Premature Metropolis'. Bose argued, perhaps to excess, that Calcutta was not a true metropolis as its many communities inhabited disjunct quarters and settlements. Unsurprisingly, Mann does not cite Bose, for his view of the city

excludes the disjunct elements. Even while admitting the confluence of migrant communities from the start, he focuses exclusively on the world of the British rulers, chiefly from 1772 to 1836, which he considers ‘the most decisive phase in the establishment of colonial rule in India’.

There is a logic to his choice. A surprising number of Calcutta’s celebrated Raj buildings date from the earlier nineteenth or even the eighteenth century. The heart of the city remains as laid out in that period, barring a few major realignments by the Calcutta Improvement Trust in the earlier twentieth century, most notably Central Avenue. Further rebuilding on anything like that scale seems out of the question.

In other words, the physical impact of the British on the inner city is palpable to this day. The narratives enshrined there retain some of their force. To this narrative Mann does full justice. The British contribution to Calcutta’s growth is examined with a depth and richness of detail not found in histories with a wider perspective.

Two features are especially valuable. First, the pan-European context, both historical and architectural, is extensively reviewed. Most historians underplay or even ignore these deeply salient factors. Calcutta was developed, insofar as the British did so directly, in response to currents flowing not only from London but from across Europe and even America. These were the active forces guiding the actions and policies of the East India Company. Their impact was passed on, at one remove, to the Indian population.

In one direction, Mann meticulously analyses the physical development of British Calcutta in his chosen period, paying attention to both individual buildings and area development. In another, he examines the social practices of the colonizing community: celebrations, spectacles, entertainments, even funerary conventions. On such matters, the book offers a comprehensive range of material.

The second feature is even more notable. The book has a uniquely rich collection of illustrations placing Calcutta’s buildings and vistas against European models from the previous two hundred years. It thereby brings out similarities not only of design but of purpose and ambience, a monumentalized idiom of rule—‘built sovereignty’, in Mann’s extended application of the phrase—evolving from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century. Mann is enlightening on Calcutta’s neo-Palladian legacy, while perhaps mingling it too readily with the entire range of classical styles and adaptations from Vitruvius to Inigo Jones. More questionably, he links this architecture of power to the notion of the Picturesque, which surely indicates a freer and more affective style in a closer setting of nature, a product of the romantic sensibility ostensibly opposed to rule, power and monumentality.

In sum, this book is a detailed and authoritative study of British Calcutta in the strictest and most literal sense. What might disconcert the reader is the glaring exclusion of everything outside that ambit. Barring brief mention of the Lottery Committee’s improvements, there is no reference to the planning, or lack thereof, in the rest of the city, especially what we cannot but regard as the Black Town. Hence Mann can talk of a grid-like street plan where, viewing the entire city in 1914 under commission from the Calcutta Improvement Trust, E. P. Richards

found a singular lack of such a plan. The account of health and sanitation measures also focuses on the European town. There is scarcely mention, let alone discussion, of the very different but imposing architecture of north Calcutta's mansions and 'palaces', enshrining the new wealth created by the Empire among Indians through landowning and trade. This world might as well not have existed.

The account of social practices is similarly restricted to the European community. Needless to say, that is how those practices operated in reality. This restricted them to a narrow 'self-referential' function in Mann's phrase, inadequate and even self-defeating for the 'capital for an empire'. They upheld pride and morale solely among the ruling community: an aspect that Mann sufficiently examines. What he leaves unsaid (except by understated implication) is that beyond generating an awed alienation, they did not impact on the subject population. Let alone active participation, the latter was visually excluded from these spectacles and ceremonies for the most part. This contrasts with the way the local or native population thronged to such spectacles in organic centres of trade and empire like ancient Rome and colonial (or even more, pre-colonial) London.

The urban ambience evoked by Mann is thus framed in by a curious 'isolation' in the literal sense: an islanding, imaged in the deserted streets surrounding the magnificent buildings illustrated. This emptiness could scarcely have been so total even in that age and is patently unreal in the present. The view of Writers' Buildings in 2018 could only obtain during a general strike.

This drastic decontextualizing becomes a badly limiting factor in the book's critique of empire: in fact, it precludes a critique in any true sense. As an instance, the story of the Black Hole of Calcutta can be upheld in all innocence.

Calcutta is, and always has been, a city whose total reality overwhelms, subverts and effectually deconstructs the grand narratives of its history and cityscape. For all its wealth of research and analysis, Mann's study misses this basic truth about the city and the empire that spawned it.

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