

# THE BOOK REVIEW

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## **Humayun in a New Light**

Amar Farooqui

## **Of Encounters between Two Literary Traditions**

Vikas Rathee

## **Tuning in to the Past**

Faiz Ullah

## **Constructing Histories through Curatorial Selections of Objects**

Amol Saghar

## **A New Account of International Relations: Creating a World Order of Concentric Circles**

TCA Ranganathan

## **Deafening Silence of the Stage**

A Mangai

## **Who wins in the Game of History?**

Vasundhara Sirnate

## **Fiction as History and Historiography**

Anup Singh Beniwal

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## ADVERTISEMENT MANAGER

Mervyn Basil  
mervyn@defindia.org

## WEBSITE MANAGEMENT

Digital Empowerment Foundation  
thebookreview@defindia.org

## COMPUTER INPUTS, DESIGN AND LAYOUT

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## Please Address All Mail To:

The Book Review Literary Trust  
239, Vasant Enclave  
New Delhi 110 057

## Telephone:

91-11-41034635

9278089024 / 9811702695

## Website:

www.thebookreviewindia.org

## email:

chandrachari44@gmail.com

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# Contents

Amar Farooqui	<i>The Planetary King: Humayun Padshah Inventor and Visionary on the Mughal Throne</i> by Ebba Koch	4
Meena Bhargava	<i>The Broken Script: Delhi Under the East India Company and the Fall of the Mughal Dynasty, 1803-1857</i> by Swapna Liddle	6
Vikas Rathee	<i>The Lotus &amp; the Lion: Essays on India's Sanskrit and Persianate Worlds</i> by Richard M. Eaton	8
Faiz Ullah	<i>Radio for the Millions: Hindi-Urdu Broadcasting across Borders</i> by Isabel Huacuja Alonso	10
Partho Datta	<i>A British Rome in India: Calcutta—Capital for an Empire</i> by Michael Mann	12
Amol Saghar	<i>A History of India through 75 Objects</i> by Sudeshna Guha	14
Swaha Swetambara Das	<i>Citizenship Regimes, Law, and Belonging: The CAA and the NRC</i> by Anupama Roy	15
TCA Ranganathan	<i>Global Discord: Values and Power in a Fractured World Order</i> by Paul Tucker	17
Avijit Pathak	<i>J. Krishnamurti: Educator for Peace</i> by Meenakshi Thapan	20
Kartik Bajoria	<i>Parenting in the Age of Anxiety: Raising Children in India in the 21st Century</i> by Abha Adams	21
Sampurnaa Bharadwaj	<i>Juvenile, not Delinquent: Children in Conflict with the Law</i> by Enakshi Ganguly with Kalpana Purushothaman and Puneeta Roy	23
A Mangai	<i>Performing Silence: Women in the Group Theatre Movement in Bengal</i> by Trina Nileena Banerjee	26
Abhik Majumdar	<i>Soumitra Chatterjee: His Life in Cinema and Beyond</i> by Amitava Nag	28
Ann Susan Aleyas	<i>Indian Christmas: Essays   Memories   Hymns</i> edited with an Introduction by Jerry Pinto and Madhulika Liddle	29
Avipshu Halder	<i>Cricketing Lives: A Characterful History from Pitch to Page</i> by Richard H. Thomas	31
Vasundhara Sirnate	<i>Victory City</i> by Salman Rushdie	33
Amandeep Caur	<i>Dark Star</i> by Ranbir Sidhu	35
Malati Mukherjee	<i>Sylvia: Distant Avuncular Ends</i> by Maithreyi Karnoor	36
Madhumita Chakraborty	<i>Song of the Golden Sparrow: A Novel History of Free India</i> by Nilanjan P. Choudhury	37
Namita Sethi	<i>Through a Looking Glass: Stories</i> by Aruna Chakravarti	39
Payal Nagpal	<i>Tapestry of Women in Indian Mythology: Poems</i> edited by Meenakshi Mohan and foreword by Devdutt Pattanaik	40
Anup Singh Beniwal	<i>Yamuna's Journey (Yamunaparyatan)</i> by Baba Padmanji translated from the original Marathi by Deepra Dandekar	42
Mukul Chaturvedi	<i>A Most Noble Life: The Biography of Ashrafunnisa Begum (1840-1903)</i> by Muhammadi Begum (1877-1908) translated from the original Urdu and edited with additional material by C.M. Naim	43
Neelakshi Singh	<i>Gandhi aur Saraladevi Chaudhrani: Barah Adhyay</i> by Alka Saraogi	45
Asma Rasheed	<i>Raw Umber: A Memoir</i> by Sara Rai	47
Anjana Neira Dev	<i>The Garden of Tales: The Best of Vijaydan Detha</i> translated from the original Rajasthani by Vishes Kothari	49

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## An Imperial Project under the Lens

Partho Datta

### A BRITISH ROME IN INDIA: CALCUTTA—CAPITAL FOR AN EMPIRE

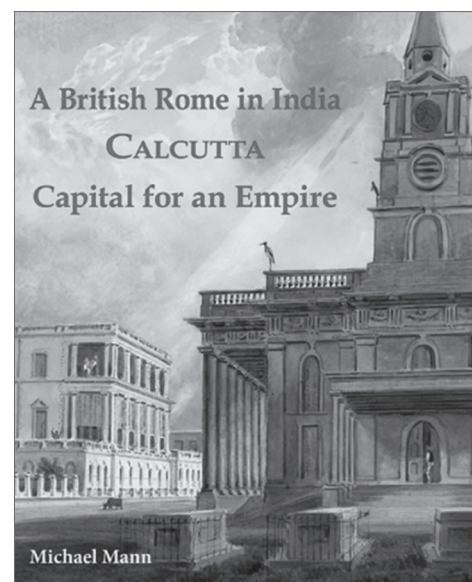
By Michael Mann

Wernersche Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2022, pp. 214, €78.00

In Gillian Tindall's engaging book on Bombay, *City of Gold* (1982), she describes initial encounters with colonial buildings and her incredulous response: 'Hallo! Fancy seeing *you* here?'. Indeed, colonial buildings may seem strange implants in the tropical landscape despite their historic presence for three centuries on Indian soil. Michael Mann argues for Calcutta that between 1770s and 1830s, the East India Company committed itself to a vision—that of building another Rome and set a trend. It fitted well with imperialist ambitions in the East and it projected a remarkable confidence also. Neo-classical buildings radiated power, stability, superiority. Its replication ensured continuity with European history. But neo-classical buildings needed artistic sensibility and

Mann's book is authoritative and combative; it offers a fresh interpretation of early Calcutta which is to be welcomed. It will revise the way we think about colonial buildings and spaces. The illustrations are carefully reproduced and the interpretations offered by Mann make you think.

investment; and the careful attention to detail and workmanship was indeed remarkable. They created new spatial enclaves, theatres of power, became receptacles for pageantry. Historians located in South Asia



have usually focused on economic and political aspects of colonialism, debunking claims about benevolent rule. They have been sceptical, wary, even dismissive of its accoutrements. Spatial form and architecture are secondary in this view, a carapace, a top-up for naked colonial power. The rituals of the colonial state were nothing but self-indulgent fancy dress by a ruthless European elite (the extant statuary of portly Governor Generals in Roman dress does give this impression).

Mann offers a new and sober reading of the fancy dress, play-acting and buntings. In chapter five he argues that colonial buildings need to be seen in the context of state ritual, not as mere edifices showcasing architectural styles. According to him, these buildings created opportunities for endless display of power the ramifications of which ran wide. The dominated—Indian elites and subalterns—were awed and impressed but could not connect to the neo-classical vocabulary. Mann says bluntly what has been assumed all along, that European Calcutta took its shape the way it did because it was built primarily for the consumption of the European elite. He also says that the first half century of Calcutta's history—its buildings, spaces, rituals should be read as a significant phase in itself. He is critical of historians who see the early history of Calcutta as merely setting the stage for a more mature colonialism of the later nineteenth century. Calcutta before industrial technology (sanitation, drainage, piped water supply, railways) should be studied on its own terms, he argues.

The book has six chapters and is in a big format and profusely illustrated. A welcome move is to make the illustrations more than supportive and integral to the argument of the book. Mann's deep knowledge of European precedents has been put to very good use here. He teases out the visual references, the allusions, the oblique gestures in the design of buildings in Calcutta. He has used with great skill the legacy of drawings, etchings, prints and paintings of colonial edifices and spaces.

However, the views presented in these illustrations are celebratory. Buildings appear on their own in social voids (i.e., devoid of people) which highlight the spectacular and the grand. This view of Calcutta showcases artistic convention and may be misleading. Heat and dust (to use two colonial stereotypes about tropical weather), odour, vegetation, mortality, rot and the decay and disintegration of grand colonial buildings may have qualified and made the project of imperial confidence tentative. All these factors contributed to another strain in imperial city-making right from its inception, a point barely addressed by the author. This latter view also has the advantage of being holistic and inclusive—climatological and topographical imperatives and the anxieties it produced offer a more complete picture of the developing spatial form of Calcutta. Mann is critical of the accepted stereotypes of ‘Black’ and ‘White’ town, yet his own focus is on European buildings exclusively (incidentally, geographers have pointed out that European and indigenous enclaves in colonial towns remained distinctive among other things because of differing land-use). Despite this, what comes out strongly from Mann’s text is how persistent and determined was the project of building an imperial Calcutta.

Readers will find chapter three, ‘Built Sovereignty’ (public buildings), title is self-explanatory, and chapter six, ‘Cultures of Commemoration’ (cemeteries) a particularly absorbing read. There are many insights here that only a historian steeped in the conventions of building and state power in early modern Europe could have made. Interpretations of ceremonial gates, wide steps that offered an elevated stage for grand receptions, the serliana (high windows at the end of the main hall) offer a fresh take on the ceremonies of power that Mann argues were integral to early state buildings in colonial India. These architectural and visual conventions travelled from England and Europe and took on new meanings in a tropical environment. It was as much about impressing power as about conceit and buttressing the occidental

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self. I was particularly struck by John Zoffany’s 1783 painting reproduced in this book (now in the Victoria Memorial) of Warren and Mrs Hastings with their Ayah where Hastings gestures towards a large house set amidst a wide plain. It is reminiscent of John Berger’s famous interpretation in *Ways of Seeing* (1972) of Thomas Gainsborough’s Mr and Mrs Andrewes (1780s). Mann points out that the ‘picturesque’ was all about possessing and controlling land. A related point not emphasized by him is the ‘bucolic’ nature of neo-classical architecture imported to Calcutta; many buildings were adapted from models of the English country rather than the town house. The European elite in Calcutta fashioned themselves as landowners with estates (not Republicans in the city).

About cemeteries, particularly the Park Street Cemetery, Mann says that colonial graveyards evolved as spaces where the distinctiveness of the deceased was emphasized (obelisks, pavilions, chest tombs) in a public manner. Thomas and Barbara Metcalf have argued that public cemeteries in this form were an innovation and together with ‘English Literature’ and Archaeological Survey (and one may add finger printing, a distinctive form of surveillance established in Calcutta in the late nineteenth century), significant contributions by the colony to the creation of western modernity.

Mann has also revised the usual labels and conceptual categories through which we understand Indian history and early colonialism. Mughal rule is referred to as Gurkani (the Mughals used it themselves but historians in South Asia still prefer the British misnomer ‘Mughal’). Another is ‘thalassocratic’ (dominion over the seas) for the East India Company elites, certainly an acute and more relevant characterization. Also interesting is his theory of ‘synoikism’—the political or military aggregation of spaces. This is a new contribution to the theory of colonial urbanization and it remains to be seen if it will be adopted by other scholars. In *The Indian Metropolis: A View to the West* (1989), a pioneering book that married architectural design and planning histories of the colonial metropolis, Norma Evenson argued that Indian urbanization was a reproduction of western modular forms (therefore, the title ‘A View to the West’). Mann seems to be saying the same thing arguing his case for Calcutta with substantive detail.

Mann’s book is authoritative and combative; it offers a fresh interpretation of early Calcutta which is to be welcomed. It will revise the way we think about colonial buildings and spaces. The illustrations are carefully reproduced and the interpretations offered by Mann make you think. I hope this book will see an Indian edition soon; it needs to be widely read, debated and appreciated by Indian urban historians.

**Partho Datta** teaches at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.