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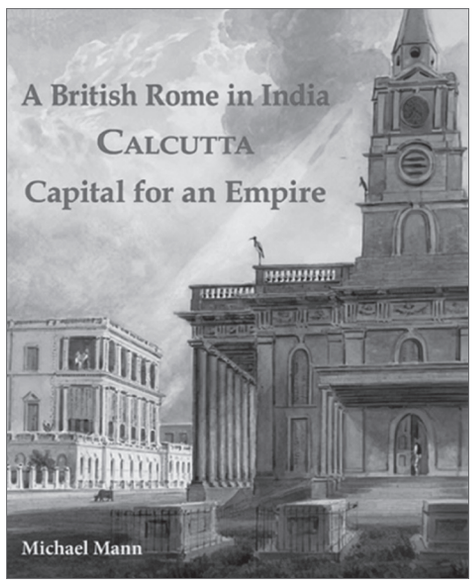
An Imperial Project under the Lens

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 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.

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.

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 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.

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