

Book Review-4

Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay, *Streets in Motion: The Making of Infrastructure, Property, and Political Culture in Twentieth-Century Calcutta*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, P. 305

The streets essentially reflect the shadow of the past; the shadow of the past civilization and past glories. Sometimes it reflects the legacies of sadness and miseries. Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay is such an author who brings out a bunch of events and memories of colonial Calcutta in his recent book *Streets in Motion*. He took the initiative of presenting the untold story of the giant streets and paths of colonial Calcutta. He has essentially tried to make a historical as well as political narrative of pre-independent Calcutta where streets have become the principal or polemic character from all aspects. There we can see a manifold use of theories to establish or correlate the close relationship between the civic livelihood of colonial Calcutta and the making and unmaking of the 'lively' streets. This work became so relevant due to the politico-historical analysis of 19th-century movements, protests and mass antagonism organized and sometimes fragmented in the body of streets. So we can see a historical journey that started from the 19th century's mass movements and turned towards, the 20th century's mass-political process that grew up in the dusty lap of the streets of Calcutta. The central theme of this book is that – streets are as lively as humans and the 19th and early 20th-century mass movements have surrounded the webby streets of Calcutta. This piece has been well furnished with a meaningful full cover, maps, tables, appendices, images and abbreviations. In the main text, we can find five chapters with different themes.

Since the beginning of the urbanization of Calcutta, the Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) has played a significant role. The author has mentioned the efforts of CIT's chief Engineer Mr Richard – who prepared a report on the systematic use of cameras and it was well-recognised by the urban planners of that time. The author has made a synthesis of elite elements and subaltern elements in making the history of modern Calcutta. Now, in this project, the streets and roads have acted as a pioneering role. The industrial areas of Calcutta were never attached to the municipal areas, and this can also be seen in London. So, the urbanization and industrialization processes were detached from each other. In the industrial sectors of Calcutta, the working class has attached and assembled quite differently concerning Manchester or Bombay. In the very beginning, the workers started to settle under the temporary shed near the roadside and especially at the footpaths; the workers mostly preferred the footpaths to the

so-called urban slums. Hence, the streets and paths have become the workplace as well as the residents. Now, quite significantly the author has sketched the narratives of communal politics, economic antagonism of classes and socio-political as well as geo-political dominance of streets in a categorical way.

At the very outset of the 20th century, the 'joyful' Calcutta has seen and feels the outbreak of colonial politics. The communal outbreak has mixed with institutions and organized politics. A few significant factors influenced the emergence of Hindu extremism, the emergence of the *Marwari* community as a superior category in terms of political and economic reality and the segregated and fragmented status of the Muslims. In this phase, the author shows how communalism has resulted in the riots of 1918 and 1926. The people of Calcutta have experienced two developments – the rise of communalism and the construction of new roads and streets. In the decade of 1880s, a new road was planned from Sealdah to Howrah, and it was termed as Harrison Road. The author has introduced many new ideas of construction in the development of the transportation sector; the Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) decided to undertake a massive area of land beyond the necessity of road construction has been marked as a new urbanization policy in colonial Bengal. This new strategy of CIT has enriched their treasury as well. The same style of land acquisition has been experienced in the making/construction of Central Avenue. This work presents that since the beginning of the 20th century due to the construction programmes the *Marwaris* have mostly benefited; and the demographic scenario of Calcutta has completely changed. The initial changes were mostly seen in mid-Calcutta, where a majority population of Muslim people have left their residence and shifted elsewhere. The author has argued that the extension of Calcutta as a metropolitan city has equally influenced the communal polarization mechanism in a very decisive way.

It is noteworthy to say that, this book presented the idea of 'motion' stands for two kinds of meaning: first, the new 'involuntary social relationship' that people get into by producing and reproducing their living existence within a normal mode of production; and, secondly, the forces of the 'self-propelled' or self-directed movement of capital. In other words, 'motion' in this book essentially refers to the unintentional basic aspects of society, polity and economy. Actually, in this book, the author described how the wheels of motion have been attached to the 'real' world through the dialectical processes of history. The dialectical processes are also associated with obstructions; and obstructions are 'momentary, unstable and creative' – as described by the author. It is important to note that, through obstructions motion or the universal phenomenon of motion acquires meanings historically. Now, as far as the historiographical understanding of urbanism and urban property is concerned modern India has largely fixed itself to the pursuit of private property ownership, land acquisition and compensation regarding the conflict between private ownership and the public utility of property. This work has essentially constructed manifold

narratives about the colonial Calcutta- its institutions, social practices and the communal nature of property with a deep account of communal riots.

The present work is quite successful in assimilating a number of issues in a single volume, such as – Chapter 1 focuses on the organized political activities among different sections of the masses. Chapter 2 is dressed with communal mobilization and territorial warfare/conflict in Calcutta between the years 1918 and 1926. The Chapter comprehensively focuses on the communal riots (Hindu-Muslim) and communal inconsistencies during 1946. It is noteworthy to say that, all these incidents (social and political) are been adjacent to the streets or pavements of colonial Calcutta. Now, Chapter 5 highlights the transition of mid-20th century Calcutta with an account of popular sovereignty and mass democratic interfaces. Between 1947 and 1952 we see a fundamental transformation in the real subject position of ordinary Indians; the new Indian republic brings some new purposeful settlement with its adult citizens. Hence, this book is really useful in the account of studying and restudying colonial Calcutta and Bengal as well. This book tells us how streets and political activism on streets equally affect each other. The main/central characters of the streets are- the common masses or mass agitators, small merchants, the police, engineers and the workers of colonial Calcutta. In sum, this present work presupposes an alternative narrative in which the blackish/dark streets have become an instrument of living, livelihood, protest and freedom.

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