

## AN ARCHITECTURAL INVESTIGATION OF COLONIAL CALCUTTA THROUGH LITERARY WORKS CASE STUDY: CITY OF DREADFUL NIGHT BY RUDYARD KIPLING

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**Abstract:** Calcutta - renamed Kolkata since 2001 has been vividly described through countless accounts since the colonial regime. Writers, poets, artists, social reformers, economists and of Indian and European origin have discussed it as a colonial capital and a post-colonial city and its implications on historical, socio-economic, political aspects through fictional and non-fictional works. The views of the writers differ greatly resulting in considerably contrasting imagery despite the subject of their writing being the same. The various reasons for this include differences in their socio-cultural and economic backgrounds, the climate of their native countries and the architecture that they call their own that has determined their way of life. This paper examines the potential of analyzing the historically significant built environment in the colonial city of Calcutta through literature. This city is said to be an epicenter of art and literature and the objective here is to use the media into inquiring about its architectural past. Moreover, the creative threads that have been nurtured in the city do not a single origin or nationality but are an amalgam of inquisitive Europeans wishing to describe the undiscovered and proud natives glorifying features that many would be compelled to remember and reminisce long after they have been morphed with time. Literature therefore is a creditable medium of inquiry which can be analyzed through principles of semiotics in order to create a timeline and transition of an architectural site.

**Keywords:** Colonial Calcutta, historically significant built environment, Literature, Semiotics.

**Introduction:** - Using literature as a document for architectural research "Literature is an excellent place to go for 'the image of a city' in Kevin Lynch's sense: the look of a city, its identity, structure and meaning; how it feels to live in it, the atmosphere and ambience that urban planners and sociologists have begun to be deeply concerned about. A whole study is yet to be done in this field, interpreting the images of cities, the informing sense of orientation that differs from culture to culture." - Ramanujan, A.K.

A literary document has an intuitive grasp on structure, a vision and perspective. It presents facts that are at times perceived more accurately with the help of information and imagination. Literature provides a range of perspectives, otherwise unavailable; conclusions that are reached at only as a result of rigorous fact finding. It can project a series of strong indicators of the physical geography of a place and provides an opportunity to look at the built environment over and above 'real time.' Through this medium, a variety of scales can be perceived, as a work of literature is sensitive to both structural design and the significance of detail. It remains true to the description of the built environment in the sense that it constantly relates each space or element to each other; doesn't consider the built environment as a fixed point of reference. For example, it does not look at a city in itself, but as one member of a paradigm of city-country and/or city-village-jungle.

Each work of literature projects a particular person's imagination; therefore every other work on the similar subject will present an image of a different

nature. There are certain limitations and drawbacks however, for using a literary document.

The literary medium has a certain depth (structure and style) through which it can distort reality and present an image that is morphed in order to project the author's imagination.

Writers express symbolic values through the 'facts' and 'objective entities' and the literal use of facts presented by the text can lead to misconceptions and inaccurate conclusions.

**Case Study:** "The City of Dreadful Night" - Rudyard Kipling Joseph Rudyard Kipling was an English poet, short-story writer and novelist chiefly remembered for his celebration of British imperialism, tales and poems for children. George Orwell called him a "prophet of British imperialism". Literary critic Douglas Kerr wrote: "He is still an author who can inspire passionate disagreement and his place in literary and cultural history is far from settled." He is opinionated and his works are controversial. He also uses very strong imagery in his writing. 'The City of Dreadful Night' was originally the title of a long poem written by James B.V. Thomson, about the city of London. Kipling's short story is a gloomy portrayal of Calcutta that displays strong views about sanitation, pollution, inefficiency and the laid back nature of people. Kipling's innate ability to create mental maps for his readers is visible through many of his descriptions. An essay that has reviewed Kipling's portrayal of Calcutta as Geographers says, "The perceptual dimension of a place is one in which geographers are inherently interested. Literary geography provides an understanding of the feelings,

values and attitudes of people, which are unavailable in 'scientific' modes of analysis. Objective descriptions coupled with feelings, provide geographers with the complete picture of a place." – Dhussa, R.C., Erski, T.I.

Fig. Calcutta – city centre and routes

This is extremely relevant even if one is looking at the works of Kipling through an architectural point of

view. As Dhussa and Erski both agree that Kipling's works have so far been unexplored through a geographer's eye, the same could be said for that of an architect. As architects we ought to benefit by capturing the power of literature and directing it towards a deeper understanding of the perceptions of space, light, movement, mass and void and the various other tools that contrive architecture.

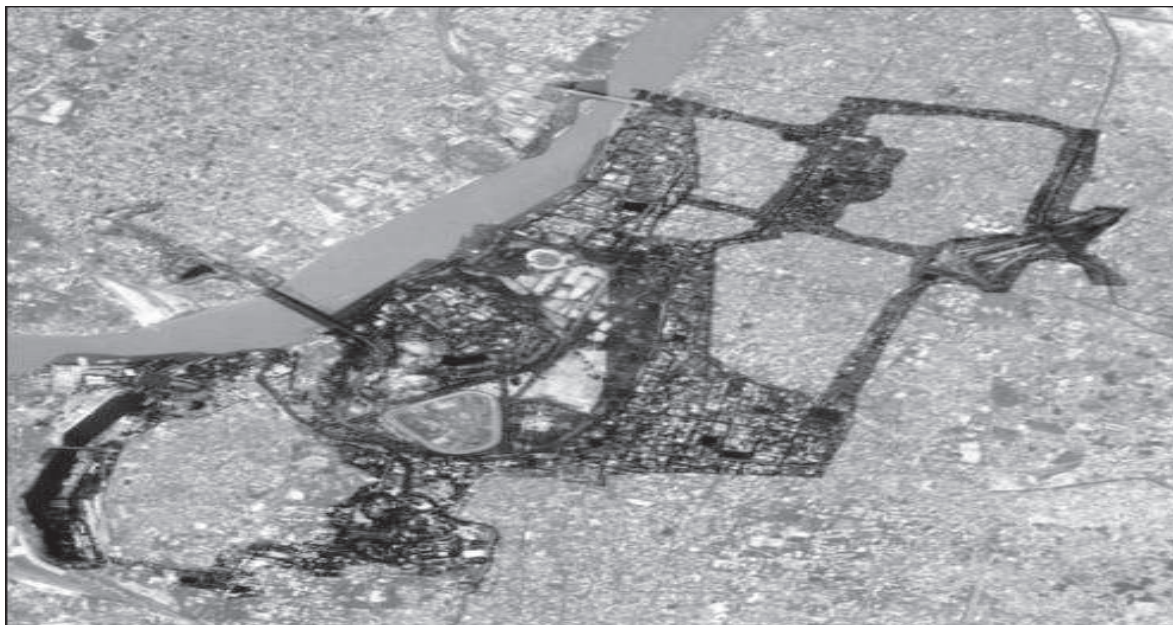


Fig. Territory demarcating the original city of Calcutta and its growth along the cardinal axes.

1. **Analyzing the text** : - breaking it into a system of signifiers which are indicative of a place. Kipling vividly describes the Maidan and Chowringhee - 'And now, 'Let us see the handsome houses where the wealthy nobles dwell.' Northerly lies the great human jungle of the native city, stretching from Burra Bazar to Chitpore. That can keep. Southerly is the maidan and Chowringhee. 'If you get out into the centre of the maidan you will understand why Calcutta is called the City of Palaces.' The travelled American said so at the great Eastern.' 'The size of the Maidan takes the heart out of anyone accustomed to the 'gardens' of up-country, just as they say, Newmarket Heath cows a horse accustomed to more shut in course. 'The large expanse of green space that is better known as the lungs of the city, 'dwarfs everything except the frontage of the faraway Chowringhee Road.' 'It is big-it is impressive. There is no escaping the fact. They built houses in the old days when the rupee was two shillings and a penny. Those houses are three storied, and ornamented with service-staircases like houses in the Hills. They are very close together, and they have garden walls of masonry pierced with a single gate. In their shut-

upness they are British. In their spaciousness they are Oriental, but those service-staircases.

Key phrases or signifiers: 'size of the Maidan' 'frontage of the Chowringhee Road', City of Palaces, 'three-storied', 'ornamented with service-staircases', garden-walls of masonry' 'shut-upness'

In the passage, a few salient features of Chowringhee and the Maidan have been highlighted

- Large expansive green space.
- Low visibility from the Maidan toward the interior of the city. Visibility only with respect to the public realm created by the frontage of the Chowringhee Road.
- The microclimate of the area as a result of direct sunlight, height of buildings and tree cover.
- The house type primarily consisting of a three storied house with a courtyard puncturing the mass with external service staircases, and a compound wall enclosing a garden.
- The privacy in the house form as opposed to its openness and accessibility. The notion of a closed form or an exclusivity being associated with the English.



**Fig. Calcutta – City and its Environs, Maidan and Chowringhee at present showing the extent of green cover and existing water bodies, the accretion of squares and routes.**

Unsanitary conditions due to the existence of open drains along the Chowringhee Road at that time. The first footpath in the city was constructed on Chowringhee Road, now known as Jawaharlal Nehru Road, by the filling of an open drain.

Significant elements in the area that have not been referred to in the passage include the tanks or water bodies excavated to draw drinking water. These are located at various intervals along the Maidan as well as near residential built form in the Chowringhee area.

**2. Collection of historical data :** The Maidan was originally created as a requirement for the new Fort William. At present, the large expanse with patches of green space is used for rearing horses. The grounds are used as cricket pitches to train young players, by people for evening walks, leisure and recreation. This oblong stretch of open

ground acts as a breathing space to complement the dense fabric of the city. It lies between two monumental structures namely the Victoria Memorial and the Raj Bhavan or Government House and looks onto the centrally located Chowringhee area stretched out on the north-south axis with its back facing the Fort William premises. It acts as a connector between sporting grounds and club premises and predictably these activities and sports spill out onto the available open ground. Originally this was the large, level ground that had the potential to offer an unrestricted field of fire from Fort William in case the Fort was attacked. Chowringhee Road is a two-mile-long road which was later renamed Jawaharlal Nehru Road and has been referred to as the pilgrim path or ‘the road leading to ‘Collegot’ or Kalighat.

Chowringhee was named after the quarter adjacent to it. The name Chowringhee is derived from the word 'Cherangi' or 'The Square' which was a neighbourhood or a locality. It is indicative of the

formation and development of the area as an accretion of squares. The route developed as a primary north south axial connection.



**Fig. The Maidan and Chowringhee, 1800 - 1900**



**Fig. The Maidan & Chowringhee, 1945.**



**Fig. Sections through the Maidan and Chowringhee Road showing a courtyards and an adjacent waterbodies.**

3. **Drawing, documentation and analysis of the site** : to record the present conditions Transformations and adaptations of built forms in the European settlement resulted in the combination of several single storied structures or horizontal spreads vertically stacked into a single block. This was done due to the space constraints and the increase in land value. The block was formed with horizontal divisions of space and functions. The mass on the upper levels was recessed and the combination introduced the concept of inner balconies and colonnades that functioned as shading devices for a courtyard that punctured the mass. Staircases were added externally. South facing verandahs caught the wind and shaded the structure from the sun.

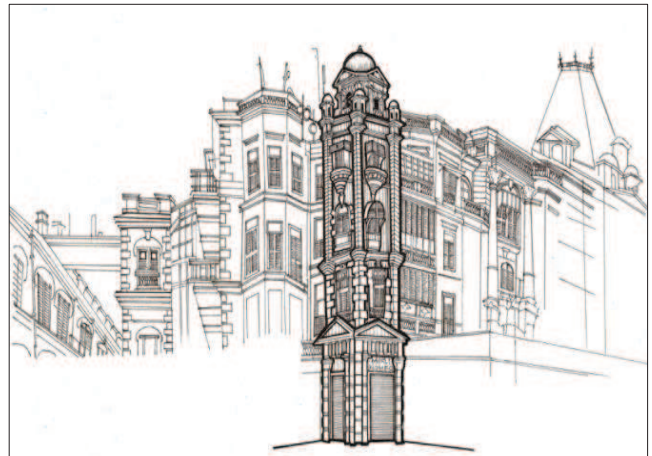
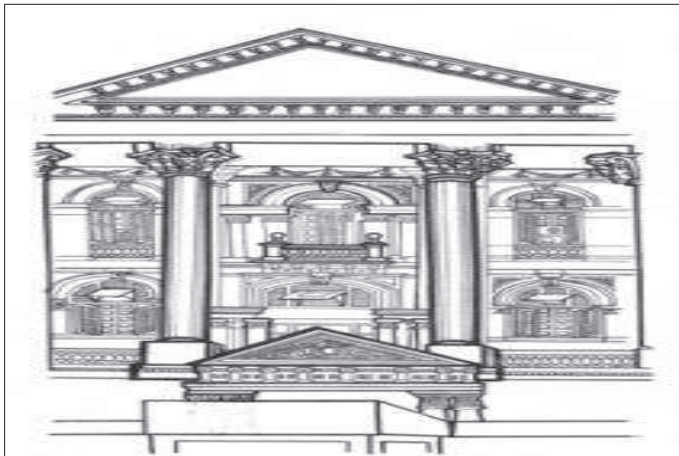
The buildings styles after existing European structures were adapted to suit the climate of the city with cost-effective construction techniques. The Indian styles were receptive of the European influences and ornaments while retaining their

original forms. The borrowed elements were often more prominent enabling the built form to be more visually receptive to the European residents.

**Conclusion** : Swati Chattopadhyay in her work 'Representing Calcutta: modernity, nationalism and the colonial uncanny' points out that '*that European eye formulated over two centuries of colonial encounter was not just any point of view. It was a scientific understanding of the experiential world that could be deployed with superior advantage when traveling through a strange country.*'

The British were driven by curiosity. Those who talked greatly of the Indian cities paved a path for more to venture into the unexplored territories. They had a preconceived nature of this 'enchanted land' but when the darker side of the same land that 'consisted of half-savage people inhabiting a dark and uncontrolled natural world' failed to escape the European eye, the responses were of the nature contrary to that which had been written about previously.

**Fig. Façade and elements characterizing the Frontage of the Chowringhee Road.**



The 'innocent' vision depicted by earlier writers was at times marred by their successors due to the unawareness of course realities. Therefore '*the British response to Calcutta was complex – a result of unfamiliar landscapes, climate and cultural practices,*

*as well as racism and the economics of imperialism.*' Therefore it is interesting to document the places described in a text and compare the findings with the description, as well as note how a particular place may have changed over a period of time.

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