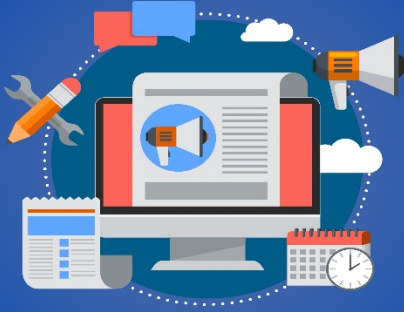


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***Calcutta Nights*, by Hemendra Kumar Roy, Translated by Rajat Chaudhuri, New Delhi, India: Niyogi Books, 2020. ISBN: 978-93-89136-45-6. Pp. 139. Rs 295.**

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Rajat Chaudhuri's *Calcutta Nights* is the translation of a now forgotten Bengali book *Raater Kolkata* [literarily "Calcutta at Night"]. This work describes the nightlife in early twentieth century Calcutta [modern Kolkata], with a focus on the city's criminal underworld. As stated in the colophon in Chaudhuri's book, the original work was published by Pratik publishers in 1923. It is not hard to guess why such a book came out during that period. By 1923, the non-cooperation movement (1920 – 22) launched by M. K. Gandhi had come to its sudden unhappy termination. Militant nationalism in Bengal had suffered a temporary setback after the trial and persecution of the convicts in the Alipore bomb case (1908 – 09), though it was destined to flare-up in full vigour just a few years later. This was then a period of calm before the storm, a fact not lost on the ruling British colonizers. For the rulers, the need of the hour was to maintain a strong check on all 'unlawful' activities. British fear of Indian resistance during this period led to the resurgence of interest in crime in India. Books like Augustus Somerville's *Crime and Religious Beliefs in India* (1931) and Sir George MacMunn's *The Underworld of India* (1933) bear witness to this fact.

One should note that the usual practice of the English writers of that period was to group together Indian nationalism, popular Hinduism, and Indian criminality in order to denigrate Indian resistance against British rule. In stark contrast to such fanciful representations of crime in India, the slender volume under consideration provides a more sober account of the criminal underworld in early twentieth century Calcutta. It was authored by one Meghnad Gupta, who seemingly disappeared forever from the literary scene after the publication of this book. As Rajat Chaudhuri explains in his introduction, there was a good reason behind Meghnad Gupta's mysterious disappearance. It turns out that Meghnad Gupta was a nom de plume used by the

veteran Bengali writer Hemendra Kumar Roy (1888 – 1963). Roy had to use a pseudonym probably because the book provides a peep inside the brothels in Calcutta, something that would have scandalized the sensibilities of his own middle class Bengali ‘bhadrolok’ family (Chaudhuri p. 11). But that might not have been his only reason for adopting a pseudonym. Deeply interested in theatre, Roy had a sense of the dramatic as exemplified by his choice of Meghnad Gupta as his nom de plume. After all Meghnad or Indrajit, the son of Ravana, was known for his ability of concealing himself behind clouds, while *gupta* in Bengali means “hidden”. What could have been a more appropriate pseudonym for the author? Chaudhuri might have added that, like Meghnad Gupta, the name Hemendra Kumar itself was also a nom de plume. The author’s real name was Prasad Roy. Roy might have judged that Hemendra Kumar was a more imposing name for a writer of detective fiction and adventure stories for the adolescents, than the unassuming Prasad. As with all highly successful writers, his real name was soon forgotten for his nom de plume. Even today, few know the author by his real name.

Rajat Chaudhuri deserves praise for making this lost work of Hemendra Kumar Roy available to readers all over the world by translating it into English. The book reappears “almost a century after the first publication”, as he points out (Chaudhuri n.p.). The book is in nine chapters, along with the original “Prologue” by the author. The translator has added a “Preface”, “Introduction”, and “Endnotes”. With a well-researched introduction and explanatory notes provided at the end of the book, Chaudhuri has done all he could to acquaint the non-Bengali readers with early twentieth century Bengali ethos and cultural idioms. In his introduction entitled “An Introduction to Babus, Bordellos, and Gaslit Nights” the translator attempts to contextualize the work by placing it within the tradition of *nakshas* or sketches. The genre was popularized by Babu Kaliprasanna Singha (1841 – 1870) through his *Hootum Pyanchar Naksha* [literally, “Sketches by the Observant Owl”] (1861). *Nakshas* are sketches of the social world, “characterized by the presence of humour, social satire, a tendency towards brevity, instructions to remove social evils, exaggeration, unrefined language, and suggestive descriptions among other things” (Chaudhuri p. 9). However, in Roy’s book, the didactic intention prevails over everything else. He himself acknowledged this in his original “Prologue”, claiming that his main objective was to prevent the youth in Bengal from being led astray. He sought to expose the evils lurking in the metropolis behind all its glitz and glamour (Roy p. 13 – 14). In the process, he provides detailed sketches of bordellos, Chinese restaurants and gambling dens, burning ghats or

crematoriums, beggars' shanties, goondas' or hoodlums' haunts and playhouses in early twentieth century Calcutta. But it must be admitted that Roy's manifest didacticism prevents him from reaching the level of Kaliprasanna Singha's humour. At times, he even sounds uncomfortably sanctimonious; as when he bitterly condemns the apparent insensitiveness of the helpers in a Hindu crematorium who cook "a pot of rice" over funeral pyres (Roy p. 67). He fails to reflect that in their struggle for survival, the poor have little option otherwise.

The main strength of the book lies in its portrayal of the underclasses. Despite Hemendra Kumar's protestations to the contrary, the book contains a fair bit of salacious gossips and anecdotes. Prostitution in Calcutta is discussed at length. Roy describes not only how the Bengali prostitutes entertained their clients but also how the European and the Anglo-Indian ones ran their business. He tracks the prostitutes at work inside the Bengali playhouses, at religious gatherings, and even in Hindu crematoriums. He also shares anecdotes about 'respectable' upper class ladies prostituting themselves by choice. Understandably, the author's gaze also turns to their clients - the social upstart profligate Bengali Hindu *captain babus* with their antique *ten-anna-six-anna* hairstyle. He describes their grotesque inebriated *amod* or merrymaking in prostitutes' quarters and in playhouses. Naturally, some salacious details emerge. Some might be induced to think that the author deliberately wrote a prurient book, because such books sell well. But we need to understand that the book remains an invaluable source of information for scholars researching on prostitution in the early twentieth century Bengal. In fact, Chaudhuri mentions two studies that used this book as source – Anindita Chowdhury's *Prostitution in Calcutta during the Twentieth Century* and Biswanath Joardar's *Prostitution in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Calcutta* (Chaudhuri p. 10). The rest of Roy's work focuses on other categories of underclasses like the goondas and the beggars. He shows some respect for the goondas (Roy p. 106 – 110). One is naturally reminded of the sympathetic portrayal of the goonda Piruthakur in his novel *Priyo o Priya* ["The lover and the beloved"]. Probably their reckless lifestyle attracted Roy, who saw in it a display of manly vigour. Roy also describes the restaurants and playhouses in Calcutta of that period. There is a very interesting sketch of the Chinatown with its eateries and gambling dens. The generous use of anecdotes, that remain scattered between the descriptive parts, make the book an entertaining read.

Some observations on Rajat Chaudhuri's success as a translator are in order. One must say that he has done a commendable job. For him, the main challenge lay in making Bengali cultural idioms intelligible to non-Bengali readers. He is largely successful in that. There are certainly a few instances of mistranslation. For instance, *subarnagardhav* (literarily "golden donkey") - Roy's term for the nouveau riche - is translated as "fair-skinned donkeys" (Chaudhuri p. 22). But the reference here is not to skin colours, as Chaudhuri's rendering seems to indicate. Rather, Roy is saying that like donkeys the nouveau riche carry sacks of gold (wealth), without realizing its true value. Likewise, "hunger of the eyes" is a too literal translation of a Bengali idiom (Chaudhuri p. 90). But such minor faults can be easily ignored. One also feels that the "Endnotes" section could have been made better. There are inaccuracies, indicating hasty copy-editing. For instance, the prostitute 'Matal Hari' is not mentioned in page 58 of the book as the notes say, but in page 83. Some of the explanatory notes should have been more detailed, like the ones on Hindu mythological figures like Karna and Tilottoma. The translator should have had in mind the needs of the Non-Bengali and non-Hindu readers, who are expected to know little about Hindu myths.

Over all, *Calcutta Nights* is a good translation of a laudable work by an accomplished author. Researchers who do not know the Bengali language will be profited by its publication. The topic is certain to interest scholars researching on criminology or gender issues. The ordinary readers will also find it interesting, if only for the entertaining anecdotes that the book narrates.