

Book Reviews

RANJIT SEN, *Calcutta in Colonial Transition*. London: Routledge, 2019. 284 pages, £115.00. ISBN 978-1-1383-6691-6

The existential philosopher Henri Lefebvre, writing about urban life in his influential book on *The Production of Space* (Blackwell Publishers, 1991), argues that “[social] space is a [social] product”, by which he means that space once produced serves “as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production, it is also a means of control [...] of domination, of power; but that it escapes in part from those who would make use of it. The social and political [state] forces that create this space try to but fail to master it completely” (Lefebvre 1991: 23). Explaining it further, Lefebvre says that the “state consolidates on a world scale by weighing down on society in full force with the help of knowledge and technology. It plans and organizes society ‘rationally’. It also enforces a logic that puts an end to conflicts and contradictions and neutralizes whatever resists it by castration or crushing. But in this same space there are other forces on the boil, because the rationality of the state, of its techniques, plans and programs provokes opposition. The violence of power is answered by the violence of subversion” (ibid.: 26).

Ranjit Sen’s new book *Calcutta in Colonial Transition* is a depiction of one such space – a Calcutta that was elevated to the seat of the British Empire in the East and then abandoned when the Bengalis revolted. He narrates its “checkered history” by indicating how it originated as a “riparian village” and became the second city of the British Empire in India and the capital of the Empire itself. Says Sen, “as the seat of an imperial power Calcutta was also the house of a new culture: the Renaissance of the nineteenth century [...] giving rise to a cosmopolitan culture speaking of a global humanity of which Rabindranath Tagore [...] [was] the best specimen” (p. vii).

Sen, who is a former Professor in the Department of Islamic History and Culture at the University of Calcutta, knows the city well. He explains that he is not trying to illustrate the origin of the city in this book. In fact, that was the subject of his first book, *Birth of a City: Calcutta*. Rather, he is analysing the process of urbanisation undergirding the development of Calcutta under the British administration.

The urbanisation of Calcutta began when the Marathas started invading the area in 1742. This led to a mass migration of people to the city. The fort that the English had built for their own safety became a sanctuary for the local people. This led to a bond of trust between the Bengalis and the English. While the English extracted taxation from the local people, they offered protection

and sanctuary from robbery and slave traders. The spatial expansion of the city began only after 1757, at the conclusion of the battle of Palasi, when the commander of the Bengali forces Mir Jafar, who betrayed Siraj-ud-daullah, the Nawab of Bengal, and helped the British win the war, granted three things to the British East India Company: free tenure of the town of Calcutta, *zamindari* (landlordship) of 24 *parganās* (administrative units), and a sum of one crore and seventy lakhs of rupees (or 17 million rupees) as restitution money to cover damages caused by the invasion. As the door opened for migration into the city, many respectable people from the interior gradually moved their families and assets to the city. The city became so wealthy that the renowned journalist Bhabani Charan Bandyopadhyay called it *kāmālaya* – the abode of enjoyment, the dwelling place of Lakṣmī the goddess of wealth.

From Wellesley's Minute of 1803, which organised the city with the aim of improving health conditions, to 1857, Calcutta expanded geographically. To make the city the eastern outpost of western capitalism, the English allied themselves with the disaffected elements of power in the Nawabi administration and helped establish a class of comprador merchants, the *banians*, who functioned as early collaborators with the new Empire. By the middle of the 19th century, colonial Calcutta had become the base of the military supremacy of the English, with its periphery stripped of its potentialities for an industrial revolution. The British benefited from the vacuum created because of this, gaining military supremacy, political mastery and a complete command over the economy (p. 134).

From the time of the collapse of the Union Bank in 1848, Calcutta became an appendage of the British Empire and Indian industries became captive fields for British capital. The economic and political domination caused widespread unemployment amongst members of the educated elites, who started protesting. This led Calcutta to become a centre of nationalist agitation. The agitation had four characteristics: a resurgence of the Hindu cult of Shakti; an identification of India with the concept of a motherland; the emergence of leadership drawing inspiration from Hindu mythology, employing its symbols for mass mobilisation; and a boycott of British goods to hit the Empire where it counted – in its purse (p. 241). To counter this movement, the British partitioned Bengal in 1905 along communal lines, eventually moving the capital from Calcutta to Delhi in 1912. Calcutta then became a politically motivated centre of national awakening (p. 243).

While Bengalis gloat over the emergence of prominent leaders of this movement, such as Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh, Bipin Chandra Pal, Rammohan Roy, Vivekananda, Vidyasagar and K. C. Sen, it is important to realise that they were products of a colonial education that the colonisers were unable to repress. But given that much has been written on that subject

elsewhere, Sen does not elaborate extensively on the Indian independence movement that originated in Bengal.

While Sen ends his narrative at this point, we can see how Lefebvre's theory aptly describes the manner in which the British tried to control Calcutta. Even with all their military and economic might, they not only failed to prevail over the inhabitants of Bengal, but had to retreat from the entire subcontinent less than fifty years after 1912.

The British colonisation of Bengal not only provides a rich source of information for theorists or urban philosophers like Henri Lefebvre, but also intrigues scholars of postcolonial theory in several ways. For instance, in the description that Sen provides of how Calcutta was developed, one sees the colonial racial mindset play out in all its gory details. The planner of Calcutta imitated London in the 19th century so that it could become a colonial town where the eastward-moving Britons could see the image of London reflected in an "oriental" setting. They envisioned a segregated growth for Calcutta where "the 'natives' were concentrated in the north and the south was retained for the whites with a grey zone that was in the middle where the Portuguese, the Danes, the Dutch, the Armenians, and the Muslims 'of diverse origin' lived" (pp. 7–8). This, Sen says, was the buffer zone that helped the white town maintain its character.

Raymond Williams (*The Country and the City*, Oxford University Press, 1973), writing of the development of London, says: "It was ironic that much of the physical squalor and complexity of 18th century London was a consequence not simply of rapid expansion but of attempts to control that expansion. For complex reasons, ranging from fear of the plague to fear of social disorder – there had been repeated attempts to limit the city's growth [...] to prevent the poor from settling there. Yet the general changes were of an order, which made exclusion impossible. Not only retinues of servants but many thousands of others flooded in, and the main consequence was [...] forced labyrinths and alleys of the poor. And this was happening as part of the same process as the building of town mansions, the laying of squares and fashionable terraces."

One sees a similar iteration of the development of Calcutta in Sen: "The physical setup of the city had a dualism in it. At the first sight, it was a dualism between the black and the white town in which the black town of the north gradually progressed towards the south swallowing up [...] the 'grey town'. Under pressure, the white town progressed a little to the south-west, letting the rich members of the white community have their garden houses and community clubs at Alipur, Khidirpur-Garden Reach area. In Calcutta, slums grew around mansions not because of lack of space [...]. They grew out of the need of the Empire itself. European households in the white town had a large retinue of attendants as their routine necessity [...]. The result was that in the rear

side of the spacious Chowringhee [...] there grew up an extensive slum zone where access was difficult except through one or two crooked lanes. [...] These were ineradicable slums and they persisted defying official frowning throughout the colonial rule” (p. 57).

Since the author, in his description of the urbanisation history of Calcutta, also follows the establishment of the British colonial rule, this book is of interest to scholars interested in British colonial strategies, postcolonial studies and Indian economic, social, cultural and, of course, political history alike. The book focuses on the period between 1757 and 1912, from when Calcutta was captured by Lord Clive in the Battle of Palasi to when the capital of India was moved from Calcutta to Delhi. The structure of the narrative is complex and Sen goes into much detail about several questions that he raises in the course of the book. This sometimes requires him to review information already covered elsewhere in the book. If, therefore, one is expecting a linear narrative, one might be disappointed. But the richness of the research and details provided about several historical events of Calcutta makes this book a must-have for one’s library. It would have been made even richer had maps of the various historical configurations been provided. Also, a list of the glossary of Bengali and Sanskrit terms would have been very helpful.

Mahua Bhattacharya

UPINDER SINGH, *Political Violence in Ancient India*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. 616 pages, 4 maps, €42.00. ISBN 978-0-67497-5279

Upinder Singh’s recent monograph on political violence in ancient India, from the 6th century BCE to the 6th century CE, consists of an introduction, five chapters and an epilogue. Singh has chosen the very common (modern) misperception of a nonviolent Indian past as the starting point for her critical study. The first three chapters of her book are chronologically arranged, whereas the last two chapters follow a more thematic approach.

Chapter 1, entitled “Foundations”, covering the time from 600 to 200 BCE – and thus in terms of dynastic chronology, the pre-Maurya / Maurya period – is perhaps the most “traditional” of all chapters. Singh provides a systematic overview of the discourse on violence in textual sources usually related with this period, starting in the 6th/5th centuries BCE, “the most fertile period in the history of ancient Indian thought” (p. 25), which witnessed a great deal of prominent critique of violence and much discussion of ethical values. Referring to Buddhist and Jaina texts, the *dhamma* messages in the edicts of Maurya