

Calcutta

Two Years in the City

Amit Chaudhuri



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A Purchase

It was probably three years ago that the poet Utpal Kumar Basu reported to me a couple of observations he'd overheard in the nocturnal din of North Calcutta. They both came from the same source, an old woman whom Utpalda calls, with some irony, *khurima* ('aunt') and *gyana-bhandar* ('treasure trove of wisdom'). The woman, herself homeless, would cook for the homeless on a porch near Sealdah Station. The memory is from circa 2003, and Utpalda is pretty certain that the group of people he saw that year must have moved on. Utpalda possesses a context for Khurima's first observation: a man had once come to the group of destitute and desultory wage-earners looking for someone – say, Nipen – with Nipen's address (probably a landmark and directions) on a piece of paper. Khurima had responded dismissively: '*Thhikana diye ki hobe? Soye kothhai seta bolo.*' That is: 'What good is an address? Tell me where he rests his head.' Utpalda had found the remark 'illuminating' (his word): 'Quite true,' he thought. 'For the homeless, an address has no meaning. What's far more important is where they find a place to sleep.'

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Her second remark was probably made in self-defence and with pride, though Utpalda can't remember whom it was directed at: '*Amra bhikeri hote pari, pagol noi.*' Or: 'We may be beggars, but we aren't mad.' This may well have been addressed to a policeman. Utpalda reminded me that, in the conditions in which people like Khurima found themselves, sanity must be a prized asset. To be homeless, destitute, *and* mad meant you were totally defenceless. As an afterthought, Utpalda recalled that there *was* a mad person in the queue of people who came to her for food. Khurima's aphorism made me wonder about this city in which the difference between the beggar and the madman was near invisible and also immensely wide.

This, then, is the city as it is now: not its only incarnation, certainly, but one of several. It is always possible to glimpse it – through a car window at night – or to walk through it; it is possible to absorb it without being wholly aware of it. For a long time, I didn't see *this* city – so formative, probably, were the impressions of the Calcutta I'd visited as a child to me.

'*Erai amader nagarik,*' says Utpalda to me gravely, as we discuss Khurima. 'Nagarik' means, at once, city-dweller and citizen. '*These* are our citizens.'

My parents, after living in Bombay for twenty-seven years, moved to Calcutta in 1989. During that period – from the early sixties to the late eighties – people had been steadily departing Calcutta: middle-class people, of course, but also workers. My father had arrived into, and left, the city twice. Once, in the early forties, he'd been a student here at the Scottish Church College, an institution then favoured by East Bengali migrant students for its boarding facilities. Another Chaudhuri, Nirad C, had studied history at the same college, about twenty years before my father. The fact that my father and the great memoirist shared the same initials sometimes led people to ask him

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with a disarming innocence, 'Are you two related?' or even, 'Do you come from the same family?' Not the same family, but the same part of the world; subject, eventually, to the same shift in history: the older Chaudhuri from Kishoreganj, my father from Sylhet, both bits of Bengal that would go with Partition. My father claims that the present spelling of his surname was given to it by a registrar's clerk in Calcutta University on the day he enrolled there. This standardisation of the spelling of that variously spelt surname at the university might have been a practice at the time, and would explain why the spelling is common to alumni from two or three succeeding generations. The story has had the effect of making me feel I don't know my father very well; neither does he have a very clear idea of how he became who he is.

From him, I got a fleeting sense of North Calcutta as it was. Those anecdotes, related intermittently over decades (he doesn't repeat stories, as my mother does), weave into what little I know of the East Bengali scholar's Calcutta – of the 'mess', the hostel room, communal meals, cheap restaurants, and 'cabins' – from the writings of Nirad Chaudhuri and Buddhadev Basu. He lived in the Hardinge Hostel, which, when he pointed it out to me for the first time (seventeen years ago), was an unremarkable run-down brick building, surrounded by numbing but entirely expected traffic on its way to Sealdah. But, already, things had moved on to such a degree – not just for me and my father, but for Calcutta itself (which had changed not visibly, but in every other way) – that I found it difficult to make a connection with what was just a building. Yet there used to be a romance in my father's allusions to the northern and central parts: whether this was retrospective, or whether he'd brought this romance to the city when he'd arrived here in 1941, I don't know. Some of this romance is difficult to disentangle from remembered sojourns to eating places, and private, momentous discoveries of food.

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Most of those eating places and discoveries, once removed from the forties and that romanticism, are disappointing. In the late seventies, my father, executing one of his childlike plans that now and again inflected his very successful professional career, took my mother and me, in Calcutta on a visit from Bombay, to the famous Anadi Cabin to taste its *kasha mangsho* (traditional dry mutton) and *Mughlai paratha*, an oily, flattened piece of bread fortified by egg which always impressed my cousins and me when we were children for its royal provenance. This crowded cubbyhole with damp tabletops alienated us; and I remember the other customers had their eyes averted but were curious. My mother was uncomfortable, and her bright sari probably made her very visible; but she tried to be fair-minded about the *kasha mangsho*, and judge it on its merits. Actually, it was not so much the food: the Calcutta of today was already upon us – the one without space, without a past, and, as in our case, without a real appetite.

My father left twice – before returning here for what seems now the final time. In his memory – as in any memory – national and world-historical events are indistinguishable from personal detail. The year he joined Scottish Church College, 1941, was also the year the poet he and his friends adored died; and I already know that he became a part, for a while, of the great crowd accompanying the body. Although it's a struggle for him these days to articulate sentences, he still informs me indignantly – as I attempt doggedly to ascertain the year – of, at once, Tagore's death and the abrasion on his calf that led to some bleeding, the result of a poke from someone's umbrella in that suffocating crowd. It's a detail I haven't heard before; and, for a moment, I'm unsure, as he lifts the bottom of one pyjama leg, whether he's speaking of something that happened yesterday – because he's now prone to accidents. But it's the crowd he's thinking of as he passionately stutters the words.

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From the other snatches of stammered speech, I learn that he withdrew from the city for a year (a third departure, then, of which I knew nothing) to Sylhet, after the Japanese dropped a bomb on Hatibagan in North Calcutta. Maybe he thought they'd blow up the whole place. He came back gingerly the next year, and began an articleship in incorporated accountancy – as he'd been advised to, shrewdly, by his best friend and still-to-be brother-in-law, because salaries in this line were said to be generous, and prospects generally excellent: because, whatever the fate of engineering companies and medical research, people would always need accountants. Unobtrusively, irrevocably, an important development took place: incorporated accountancy and chartered accountancy merged into one body. After being a relatively unemotional witness to the inevitable moment of Independence, shocked at the nights of post-Partition violence in the city, but recouping and resolving to travel towards becoming a chartered accountant, he made his first, official egress from this metropolis in 1949, sailing to England.

He was there for twelve years. My mother, who knew him since childhood, and was taken by surprise by his proposal of marriage before he left, was reconciling herself to his never returning – when he invited her to join him in London. She flew in 1955 from Shillong to Calcutta – with her mercurial younger brother, Dukhu, who was going on a training course for civil engineers in Germany. Customarily, it's the bridegroom who makes the journey from his town or village or neighbourhood to the bride's home to marry her; this was an eccentric, but unavoidable, inversion. My mother's never been one to romanticise Calcutta – as I, for instance, have – but her first and brief impression of the city was one of beauty and clean air – the latter, if it lasted for more than two or three days that year, is not something that Calcutta has possessed for several decades. Perhaps it's because it was a first encounter, or a transient

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acquaintanceship, or because she knew it would be her last vision of India for a long time, that my mother's memory of Calcutta in 1955 is like a personal intimation.

My father, at last a full-fledged chartered accountant, with other professional qualifications like useful appendages, returned, with my mother, to a job offer in Bombay in 1961. Soon after, she was pregnant, as an Indian doctor in London had predicted she would be: 'Childbearing has a lot to do with happiness and mental peace.' Coming back to India, at least in those days, was a matter of fulfilment, an occasion for optimism – something we tend not to remember or acknowledge. Dukhu had returned earlier from Germany, and had a job in Calcutta; he insisted my mother come to his house to have the child. The reason for this was a combination of practical need and common sense and the precedent of tradition, the last anyway being a consequence of the first two, not to mention economic hard-headedness. Tradition asks the childbearing woman to journey temporarily to her father's house before giving birth. In this way, the nuisance of birth is wished away and literally transported to the 'other' place. Importantly, the psychological closeness between mother and pregnant daughter is seen to be a necessary condition for the birth – a small bending of a regulation to briefly replace the mother-in-law's vigilance with maternal attention; and the general support and care of her own family is essential to the mother-to-be. My mother had no in-laws to escape from; my father was an only child, displaced by Partition; both his parents were dead. So she kept putting off the journey to Dukhu's flat on Fern Road, where their mother lived with him and his new wife. She knew it was going to be intolerably hot by the end of April. Still, because there was no family at all in Bombay, she arrived in Fern Road early that month. By temperament a nervous insomniac, she found sleeping difficult because of the yowling of street dogs

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at night and the passage of traffic at the Gol Park roundabout. My grandmother contributed to her well-being by knocking firmly on her door at around 6 a.m., just when she'd embarked on her first slumber, so she (my grandmother) might walk to the adjoining balcony and receive the city's sounds and sights. As a result of decisions taken without conviction, and slightly regretted in retrospect – all, of course, is transmogrified by a mother's eventual joy – I happened to be born in Calcutta in the middle of May: a difficult time of year to be here.

My father changed jobs. Leaving Bombay, he took up a position at the head office (which was then in Calcutta) of Britannia Biscuits. We lived, for a year and a half, between 1964 and 1965, in a recent suburb, New Alipore. I seem to summon, without too much effort, a memory of a veranda or porch, and the courtyard and the main road beyond: it could be, of course, that I'm imagining I remember these things. Their shapes and unremarkable colours, and the daylight they inhabit, are pretty consistent, though. This is the time that my mother is jotting down, in a book with a white hardback cover, all the relevant information concerning 'Your Child's Name' and 'Your Child's First Word'. I would see this solemnly inscribed book after growing up, but I think it is finally lost. I could have grown up in Calcutta, and had a very different relationship with it, but I am a Bombay person. By just a few years, I missed the trauma and the impress of change that would come upon this city. Britannia, anticipating labour unrest in the wake of radical left-wing politics, relocated its head office to a more amenable metropolis. What remained in Calcutta was a husk called the 'Registered Office'. It was the usual story of the time: this gradual emptying of the city of commerce; the absolute reign over it of what it had always harboured – politics. My father, on the ascendant, left it for the second time.



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It takes a while to understand that a city has changed, and that change, like most change, is irrevocable. By the time my parents moved back to Calcutta from Bombay in 1989, roughly seven years after my father's retirement, the city itself had traversed a great distance from where it was when he'd left it in 1965. Besides clearly being in decline, it had the strange air of something that's been a symbol of the zeitgeist for more than a hundred years, and now embodies nothing but its severance from what's shaping the age. It had become a city that was difficult to connect with in an emotional and intellectual way. For me, in many ways, it was not the 'true' Calcutta.

What was 'true'? Throughout my childhood, I'd encountered Calcutta during the summer and winter holidays – as a place of freedom from school and a realm of childish anarchy. My uncle's house – Dukhu's house, now no longer in Fern Road, but further south, in petit bourgeois Pratapaditya Road, in a lane lined with two-storeyed, different-shaped houses – was my playground. I've written about that house and that Calcutta in so many works of fiction and essays that, when someone suggested I write a non-fiction book on this city, I put it off for years, because I felt I had nothing more to say about it. The Calcutta I'd encountered as a child was one of the great cities of modernity; it was that peculiar thing, modernity, that I first came into contact with here (without knowing it), then became familiar with it, and then was changed by it. By 'modern' I don't mean 'new' or 'developed', but a self-renewing way of seeing, of inhabiting space, of apprehending life. By 'modern' I also mean whatever alchemy it is that changes urban dereliction into something compelling, perhaps even beautiful. It was that arguable beauty that I first came across in Calcutta, and may have, without being aware of it, become addicted to. I ran into it again in New York in 1979, on my first American trip, after a stifling ten days among the monuments of Washington and the sweet prettiness of California. Walking

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in Manhattan, I was reminded, at once, of Calcutta. New York was in economically troubled times, and still possessed – even for the short-term adolescent visitor – an air of menace and fortuitous unpredictability. The addict of that particular strain of modernity, to whom noise and stink are oxygen, and odourless order death, can sniff it out quickly in foreign places, and swiftly connect it to their own history. 1979 was probably the last year of its reign. New York no longer reminds me of Calcutta; with globalisation – maybe even before it happened – the paths of these cities diverged. With Giuliani, New York famously gentrified its seedy areas; while Calcutta became one of those strategic, deceptively populated outreaches that the wave of globalisation has never quite managed to reach.

The ‘modern’ is man-made; but it’s also a way of conferring life upon things. These things, as a result, enter your world organically. What I remember from the Calcutta of my childhood has that living quality – a neon sign over Chowringhee, of a teapot tipping into a cup; tangled clumps of hair – wigs – at the entrance of New Market; the judiciously dark watercolour covers of my cousins’ Puja annuals. To these man-made objects, modernity, as it governed Calcutta, gave an inwardness and life. This extended to elements of architecture, elements I thought were essentially Bengali – never having seen them anywhere else – but which must have arrived here as Calcutta grew through its contact with Europe.

The most ubiquitous of these are the French windows that are a feature of the older residential and office buildings of North and South Calcutta; unless the house belongs to North Indians and Marwaris, in which case the architecture often echoes the ancient, and even more foreign, *haveli* style. (I’m talking of the older Marwari buildings. The new ones can echo everything from Roman villas to a Disney illustration.) The French windows are, for some reason, always green. My uncle’s

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house had them; if you parted the slats using the spine (in Bengali, the onomatopoeic word for this lever is *kharkhari*), the street would flood in through the crack, without any part of you seeping out. This was another feature of this city's modernity: the importance – for no discernible reason – of looking. The windows were foreign and yet part of my conception of Bengaliness – and they possibly conveyed what I felt about Calcutta intuitively: that, here, home and elsewhere were enmeshed intimately. Subconsciously, I may have presumed the windows were part of Calcutta's colonial history; but, since they were hardly to be seen in England, this explanation didn't hold.

The windows probably came here in the late seventeenth century. In 2007, I'd been invited to preside over a prize-giving ceremony in Chandannagar, where, in 1730, the French general Dupleix had set up his grand colonial headquarters in what was already then, for almost sixty years, a French colony. Power – and the struggle for malarial Bengal – was poised tantalisingly between the French and the British, until it tilted decisively towards the latter in 1757. However, Chandannagar remained a curious and remote French outpost until recently – not so much a quasi-colony, like Pondicherry, but imprinted distinctively with a Franco-Bengali ethos. The prize-giving, ironically, was for excellence in the English language. It took place in the lawns next to Dupleix's beautiful, sepulchral house.

It takes about three hours of breathing in dust and smoke, then gazing in resentful wonder at the new Indian autobahns that are replacing the old alley-like 'highways', then turning into one of those highways and travelling vacantly past small towns and countryside awash with plastic bags, tarpaulin, fields, and crushed mineral water bottles, to finally enter this bit of French history: a beginning on the banks of the Ganges, a hazy but still-indelible sketch. The promenade, which surprises you as you enter the town, is still very French, as is the jetty that hangs

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like a promontory on the river; the Ganges is pure Bengal, but the jetty is elsewhere, and one can imagine a young Frenchman and his fiancée standing on it, absorbed in each other, more than two hundred years ago, feeling 'home' revisiting them, dizzied and dwarfed, at the same time, by the East.

Not so with the French windows: they are French only in name; they've become indivisible from what Calcutta and Bengality mean.

Do we actually see these windows – through whose slats I looked out at the world as a child? Can the windows begin to look back, as if *we* were on the outside?

They inserted themselves in Calcutta's consciousness very subtly. Testament to this are some extraordinary, but rather odd, paintings. As Calcutta began to grow from clusters of neighbourhoods into the monstrous, unprecedented metropolis it would become, with teeming settlements and certain luminous landmarks – high court, hospitals, jailhouses, university – a new kind of city type began to emerge from every kind of social class, a little before the advent of the *bhadralok* – the genteel Bengali bourgeois – and his suddenly all-encompassing way of being. ('Bhadra' means polite and 'lok' is person; this polite person's culture, books, and way of approaching things would reign over Bengal from the late nineteenth century to the 1970s.) The *patuas* belong to this nineteenth-century churning (when the British had already been entrenched in the city for a hundred years): anonymous painters, some of them Muslims, working on Hindu devotional themes outside the temple of Kalighat, selling their products to the common-or-garden urban devotee. Their work is associated with watercolour and with economical but emphatic outlines, as well as the styles of the metropolis: Shiva and Parvati and Ganesh looking like contemporaries of their worshippers, the embarrassingly handsome Lord Kartik (Parvati's son) appearing up-to-date and fashionable, in buckled

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shoes and a Prince Albert haircut. This is not to mention the secular scenes depicting Calcutta – of lascivious babus, their mistresses, and their domineering wives. None of these pictures exhibit the obliqueness or psychological realism of bhadrakalok modernity: only the vivid footprint of a new, impatient, marching being – the common man.

Although, for much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the work of the anonymous patuas was done in watercolour, there is an aberration, an experimental foray, maybe in the early nineteenth century, when their counterparts in Chinsura town outside Calcutta tried out a new medium: oil. These paintings are astonishing: they have the resplendence of oil painting but none of the gloating that oil brought to a great deal of the European Renaissance – where it coincided with the new supremacy of perspective, with a manufactured realism, and the world, henceforth, condemned to becoming a spectacle in every gradation of colour. These Chinsura oils are like secret visions of an ancient mythology, brought to light in a moment of change; most of them are owned by the newspaper magnate Aveek Sarkar. They are displayed not in his drawing room, which is populated by other artefacts, but in the dining room – which means people must access this inner sanctum, and partake of the ritual of dinner, to view the pictures. During dinner, they are illuminated by overhead lights; if, turning your attention from the orchestrated courses and movements through which dinner unfolds, you glance at them, you'll see that their subjects are epic or devotional. There is the mystic Chaitanya, in an ecstatic, free-floating dance, with his entourage; there, and there again, is the god Shiva, with his family and a group of tranquil stragglers – presumably followers. The oils glow and simmer in, and reflect, the electric lights: you have to squint to catch all the activity and nuances. Behind these figures, you may, one day (looking at a reproduction, or if you're lucky enough to be invited to dinner a second or third time), notice

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the French windows – so unobtrusively have they become a part of our lives that there is no context in which we might find them incongruous, or even worthy of comment. The French windows are attached to colonial-style buildings. Has Mr Sarkar stopped in his dining room to look at them? I'd been unaware of them until, almost by chance one day, they inched into my field of vision; there to stay. Part of the difficulty of noticing the windows is the relative abstention from perspective in the paintings, so that they are not so much in the background (they can't be, as everything, in a sense, seems to compete equally for the foreground) as self-contained and iconic: among the magic points of focus and revelation comprising the scene. Once you see them, you realise what you're looking at is the emergence of a metropolis, with its eccentric visual field – something that hadn't existed a few decades earlier. In front of the slatted windows and those colonial buildings, Shiva – unsurprisingly *louche*, but unexpectedly pot-bellied – and at least some members of his party begin to resemble what they were probably modelled on: the common people of the day, the ones who entered, irresistibly, the city's spaces without really owning them, and surge into them still. The *bhadralok* is nowhere in sight. In fact, now that he's departed (this time, surely, forever) after that unique interim of more than one hundred and fifty years (during which his imaginary universe was all that was real), Shiva, his family, and his gang seem, once again, very close. They occupy and visit the public spaces of our persistent city. They are, as Utpal Basu said of the old woman in *Sealdah*, our 'citizens'.

In mid-2007 I saw that another one of the genteel bourgeois houses of South Calcutta, this one in a frequently used by-lane in *Ekdalia*, had come down. Nothing unusual about that; it's been happening for twenty-five years, and, these days, this destruction is almost a daily occurrence. In fact, though I must

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have passed this particular house a hundred times, I hadn't really noticed it until now, when it was already demolished – that, too, wasn't wholly surprising. What caught my attention, as the car went past, were the French windows that, loosed from their original locations, had been stacked vertically against each other on one side. They'd been left facing the pavement; I got out of the car to look, never having seen the windows like this, out of context, before.

That night, I had a brainwave – that I would buy one of the windows. What I'd do with it I still had no clear idea. Was it part of some incipient project I'd been half-heartedly entertaining for the past two years – another flabbergasting branching out, moving from novel-writing to music-making, from music-making to musical composition, from composing to collecting? Whatever the reason, I wanted to acquire that window.

When I told my wife the next day, she didn't throw her hands up in despair, but nodded in a way that suggested that what I'd said made perfect sense. That evening, we took a detour – because Ekdalia is both near her parents' flat and near Gariahat Market – and entered the by-lane to see those windows. She was transfixed by them. We wondered what would happen if we just lifted one and took it home, except that would be stealing – besides, it was too big (and dirty, the frame covered in dirt) for our car. A watchman at the shop opposite and a boy observed us, but no one could give us anything but vague advice about whom to contact if we wanted to buy a window. A few days later, half-expecting them to have gone, I convinced myself and my wife to visit the lane again – but during the day – to make one last effort. The windows were there; this time my wife, more curious and more of an explorer than I am, slipped into the site, lost to her own speculations, and called me after a few minutes. 'Look at that,' she said – a door from the same house was leaning against a wall. It was painted a green – the generic colour of the French windows in Calcutta – which

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was still bright in patches, though much of it had peeled off in scabs. What was striking – at least to us – about the door, which comprised two doors contained within a doorway, were the rectangles on the upper halves, which themselves framed two nubile lotus-shaped iron grilles. These would have been inner doors then, but not the main one (given their slightly decorative and pervious quality)? It was difficult to be certain.

The family – like the house – had vanished. Everything pointed towards them being Bengali: the location of the house; the kind of house it was; their inability, or desire, to hold on to it. Possibly West Bengali – that is, people from these parts; it was unlikely (but not impossible) that a displaced East Bengali family could, after Partition, have afforded property in this area. The house might well have come up before Partition, of course; its remnants, the door, especially, reeked of bygone *bhadralok* respectability.

It was proving difficult to contact them now. Neither the watchman at the shop nor the boy nor any of those who hung out on the pavement had any idea how to, nor saw it necessary to have any idea. Someone on the site finally gave me a mobile number and a name – not a Bengali name – and told me to call this man if I wanted a window. He was neither the builder nor the contractor, but had something to do with the construction of the new building.

At least two kinds of migration have shaped Calcutta in the last thirty years. The first has to do with the flight outward of the middle and upper middle classes, which began close on the heels of the flight outward of capital – leading, eventually, to the sale of houses like the one in question. You can wager that the story behind the sale is simple and typical. The younger generation is elsewhere: New Delhi, or even New Jersey. The ageing parents (or parent) live in the house, which they may or may not have built, but where the children were born. Upkeep is difficult.

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One day, their secret wish comes true – a ‘promoter’ makes an offer: a large sum of money, and two flats in the building that will come up where the house was.

The second type of migration has been taking place within the city itself, feeding the property boom of the last decade, in that false dawn of investment in the state. Although people woke up from that dawn in 2009 to find things reverting to a stubborn, paradoxical, politics-induced changelessness, that migration – and, to an extent, the incongruous boom – continues. It involves Marwaris who’ve been moderately successful as traders and who’ve lived traditionally in the North, moving to the more desirable South, where the boxwallah, or corporate employee, once lived – not to mention the bhadralok, and, long ago, in places like Alipore, the old colonial rulers, and, even today, the great Marwari industrialist families (Birla, Goenka, Jalan, Khaitan), who are to be found behind immense gates, in serenely ensconced estates. The other principal candidates for buying up flats and condominiums in the new buildings are the dreaded NRIs, who are of the city and yet not of it, who are Bengali despite being something else. These are people who left thirty years ago for Michigan, New Jersey, or Atlanta – the ugly acronym stands for Non-Resident Indian, and encompasses movement, desire, pride, memory, and, plausibly, disappointment. The NRIs are not necessarily coming back; against their better judgement though, they do want to keep one foot planted in the city in which they grew up.

The two- or three-storeyed bhadralok houses of South Calcutta, with their slatted windows and floors of red stone, their rooftop terraces, are less valuable than the land they stand on. In London, the prices of the narrow Victorian houses with their dark facades go up and up because the affluent want to move into them. In Prenzlauer Berg in East Berlin, inaccessible to West Germans until the wall collapsed, the bohemian and artistic set pushed property prices upward because they

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wanted to occupy those mysterious, socialist, pre-fabricated apartments. People in South Calcutta shake their heads when an old house comes down – but are also plotting, of course, to move to a better city. When I was last in Berlin three years ago, the memorialisation of the past was relentless, but the attempt, by Berliners, to embrace and re-inhabit the city's troubled post-War history was striking too. Calcutta has still not recovered from history: people mourn the past, and abhor it deeply.

'Kaun baat kar raha hai?' *Who's this?*

Every time I called the number the man on the site had given me, I got to speak to Ram Singh's brother or brother-in-law. Ram Singh was either at the site or having lunch. Two days later, he answered the phone himself.

'Hello – haan – kaun?'

'Ram Singh?'

'Haan, Ram Singh' – a distant concession, coming from one distracted all day by construction work – now in Ekdalia, where he was never to be seen; now, as I was told, in Dover Lane – and unscheduled lunch breaks in the afternoon.

'Woh jo Ekdalia mei khidki hain, main ek kharidne chahta hoon.' *Those windows in Ekdalia – I'd like to buy one.*

There was nothing at the other end except the silence of prevarication – as he tried to piece together what I was on about.

Then, quite patiently, he repeated, 'Khidki?'

Yes, one window – and the door.

In a business-like way, he told me (as if he were inured to this kind of query) that they'd cost me three and a half thousand rupees; this excluded the price of having them delivered in a tempo. Although I didn't know what the market price of used windows was – my guess was nothing – I thought the offer reasonable. I immediately asked him to take down my address, and provided directions.



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For three days, the door and the window stood parked against the wall outside our flat, while I worried if they'd outrage the neighbours. I still hadn't any notion of what to do with them. I called Mr Mitter, who has a carpenter's workshop on Rafi Ahmed Kidwai Road, and who often gets shelves and fittings done for us. I asked him if he'd take them away for a while. Mr Mitter didn't waste time asking questions; he was gracious enough to insist he'd take no rent; to a storage space near his workshop went the window and door.

After a year, Mr Mitter informed me that he was short of space; and that the door might be destroyed by termites. So the two objects returned to where they were previously – the corridor outside the door to our apartment. It was unlikely I'd find a way of exhibiting them; or, more problematic still, find a context for that exhibition. The context was a city in which things were being disinterred and dislodged from their moorings, and being washed ashore by an invisible tide.

My wife said we must bring them in, hang up the window, fit the door – but where? The flat was already colonised by furnishings; each object had its immovable caste and assignation. Firstly, a door was discovered, behind a cupboard stacked with vinyl records, which had been doing nothing in years; it was a connecting door between the drawing room and the guest room that was never opened – and couldn't be because of the cupboard, and the objects on the other side. This door had to be de-hinged, and the corners of the two doors with their rusting lotus-shaped grilles planed for them to be fixed to that frame. That left the French windows: some impulse in me militated against them serving a window-like role in the flat. After much scouring, I found a space in the tiny passage between the front door and the entrance into the sitting room: the wall on the right was vacant. No matter that it's always in shadow and obscured by an inner door: we put the windows there.

As a result of their positioning, neither the doors nor the

A PURCHASE

windows are noticed by visitors. Once their attention is drawn to them (by me), people are always too polite to make anything but approving noises. Whatever's in their mind – obviously, I can't really know – it gives me an excuse to study these purchases again: self-indulgently, maybe, but also, now, with a sort of recognition.