

# City spaces and gender: Readings of urban spaces in nineteenth-century Calcutta

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## Abstract

*Applying Le Febvre's ideas of lived spaces and trialectics of space this paper examines the entanglements of gender with urban space through a reading of the city based on Sunil Gangopadhyay's path-breaking novel 'Sei Somoy'. This study is sited within the intersection of historical geography, geographies of text and textual spaces. I have applied the method of Geo-criticism to map the interplay of gender and urban space in erstwhile nineteenth century Calcutta. Invoking Lefebvre's theorizations of space as well as Soja's elaboration of Third space together with the methodological tool of Geocriticism, this paper aims at a reading of nineteenth-century Calcutta as an enabling space for the materialization of varied forms of masculinities and femininities.*

**Keywords:** *Gender, Urban space, Geocriticism, Calcutta, Masculinities, Femininities*

## Reading Kolkata as an urban space

Described variously for architectural beauty, resilience, cultural values, the city of Kolkata has earned many monikers such as the City of Joy (Lapierre 1985) the city of palaces, *Shundori Kolkata* or beautiful city. Formerly the capital of colonial India till 1911, the city is often referred to as India's first modern city (Ghosh, 2020) and forms the background of several iconic films like *Mahanagar* (1963), *Seemabaddha* (1971), etc., as well as the plot of several novels. Keith Humphrey provided a flaneur's account of the city in his book 'Walking Calcutta' (2011) by walking through abandoned by-lanes of the city and uncovering forgotten stories. Amit Chaudhuri, in his famous work 'Calcutta: Two Years in the City' (2013), through a personalized account, describes the changes that the city went through in the process of

embracing globalization, and elaborates on how people are adapting to this cultural shift. In these cinematic and literary representations the plots and characters are enabled due to specific benchmarks of modernity the city possesses or a distinctive space that the city provides. In other words, the characters are framed within the distinctive space of the city and also at the same time enable a reading of the city and its spaces through their narratives and geographies. It is in this spirit that I read Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Sei Somoy* (transliterated as 'Those Times') to map the multiple femininities and masculinities described. I site this study at the intersections of historical geography, urban studies and feminist geography, noting the paucity of studies that provide gendered readings of textual spaces set in 19<sup>th</sup> century India. There

is no dearth of literature delving into different aspects of colonial Calcutta. Sudipto Basu (2017), analyses writings and representations of colonial Calcutta as portrayed by authors, poets and cartoonists in the form of academic essays, books and cartoons in periodicals of the late nineteenth century. The colonial imagination of the city is juxtaposed against the indigenous viewpoint of nineteenth century Calcutta in his work, to bring out the contrast in the two distinct forms of interpretations of the city. Sumit Chakraborti (2017) analyses clerks' memoirs in contemporary literature in the backdrop of 'The Clerk's Manual' published in the year 1889, which he terms as 'violently repressive.' The author claims that clerks are comparatively neglected in the discourse around 'the Bengali *Bhodrolok*' or 'the educated Bengali man' in imperial Calcutta. They occupy liminal spaces, as on one hand, their education and class privilege earn them some recognition among the middle classes, on the other, the nature of their work, low standards of remuneration and restricted career growth push them closer to the labour classes. By analysing their memoirs as portrayed in contemporary literature, the author delves into the heterotopic spaces carved out by this section of the population in British Calcutta. Sumanta Banerjee (1989) analyses song genres popular in nineteenth century Bengal, such as Agamani, Vijaya, Kirtan, etc. Songs were often composed by women who did not fall under the bracket of formal education introduced by the British. The author elaborates on how these songs, which mostly emerged from the so called lower strata of the society, where a parallel wave of popular culture thrived against the 'high culture' propagated by the elites of the city. These songs had a huge influence on the women of the city, irrespective of their social

status. This was seen as obscene by the elites. Banerjee explains the manner in which the British along with the educated *bhodrolok* who considered it their responsibility to civilize and educate the women, vehemently resisted against this wave of popular culture to 'save' the women from its influence, leading to its subsequent marginalization. Amidst the plethora of themes that have been written about by scholars across disciplines with respect to colonial Calcutta, there is a lacuna of research aiming to view imperial Calcutta and its nuances through the lens of lived spaces. The contribution that this paper makes to research related to colonial Calcutta is by using the lens of space to analyse the manifestations of gendered identities in the city, thus locating itself at the intersection of the theoretical concepts of gender and space.

### **Reading *Sei Somoy*: Relevance and methodological moorings**

Before discussing the relevance of 'Sei Somoy' (1981; 1982) as the novel of choice for this study, it is imperative to mention that this work is the first of the three works of historical fiction authored by Sunil Gangopadhyay, the second one being *Purba-Pashchim* (1987) (transliterated as 'East-West') which dealt with the post-Partition chronicles and the third, *Prothom Aalo* (1996) (transliterated as 'First Light') documenting the times of Bengal Renaissance.

*Sei Somoy* is an unparalleled work when it comes to retelling the stories of Calcutta in the nineteenth century. It captures the lived spaces of colonial Calcutta and brings back to life the city of the past. This novel portrays a vivid image of imperial Calcutta replete with descriptions of important events that shaped the city, as well as with detailed accounts of

the mundane everyday lives of people from different economic and social backgrounds. Some of the characters in the novel are based on the lives of real individuals. There are other characters inspired by real-life personalities, with their names altered in the novel. There are fictional characters too, who beautifully depict the lived spaces of colonial Calcutta in the nineteenth century. With numerous characters and parallel storylines, this novel provides a perfectly nuanced portrayal of the city. It provides descriptions of the physical space of colonial Calcutta too. It puts forth a researched analysis of the complex caste structure prevalent in Kolkata, by unravelling its roots from the colonial era. The key events that shaped Calcutta in the nineteenth century, such as the emergence of new forms of land settlements, advent of the English education, the practice of indigo cultivation and increasing incidences of social reform movements and the emergence of a new class of educated Bengalis, all find space for documentation in this novel.

In the sections that follow I describe my methodological moorings before presenting readings of multiple femininities and masculinities in the novel.

The methodology used in this study is purely qualitative. The approach is interpretative. It involved secondary observations of Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Sei Somoy* and its content analysis. This falls within the larger theoretical ambit of Geocriticism (Westphal, 2007), which is a method of literary analysis and literary theory that incorporates the study of geographic space. The particular type of content analysis that has been used in the study is Directed Content Analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), where the study starts with theory. Codes

are defined both before as well as during the analysis of data, from theory as well as relevant research findings. From the key themes that emerged by coding and analysing the data, it was possible to identify distinct spaces marked by manifestations of masculinity and femininity in nineteenth century Calcutta. The Spatial Triad of Lefebvre (1974; 1991) and Soja's (1996) theorization of space have been used to understand the manifestations of these spatialities.

My multi-layered identity from the standpoints of caste, class, gender, race, religion and region has had impacts on this study, since it is an interpretative exercise. My analyses have been coloured by my positionality. I have a longstanding and permanent association with Kolkata, and I bear the different facets of my identity-consciously and subconsciously. As a feminist geographer, I acknowledge the fact that these factors have had implications on this study on all levels, such as selection of the topic, data analysis and finally writing this paper. Since it is an interpretative study, a different positionality could have possibly looked at the data from a different angle and may have reached different conclusions.

### **Spatializing masculinity in colonial Calcutta**

Drawing from Lefebvre (1974; 1991), and borrowing from Soja (1996) when he talks about the trialectics of being, I have attempted to argue here that after analysing my data, I have been able to identify primarily three forms in which masculinity has been portrayed to be manifested over the space of colonial Calcutta. Each of these three categories has been elaborated upon in greater detail in the section below:

## ***The Babu***

The Babu culture that plagued the city of Calcutta back in the nineteenth century was a result of Bengal's exposure to the western way of life. It was particularly relevant around mid-nineteenth century and the term was mainly used to indicate the luxurious lifestyle exhibited by a particular section of the society inhabiting nineteenth-century Calcutta, particularly the absentee landlords, the newly emerging mercantile class, the agents of the British, etc. The title of *babu* which was one of honour during the times of the rule of the *nawabs* (Viceroys) came to be used in a derogatory sense by the British, which is why the newly educated class of Bengalis exposed to western education loathed the title as well as the culture it stood for. The following excerpt from Gangopadhyay's novel, originally in Bengali, translated into English by the author of this paper, further sheds light on the lifestyle of a typical Babu:

*“Babu Bishwanath Motilal has earned enormous wealth in a single generation. He is one of those many people who got lucky because of the salt trade. After becoming rich, in his later life, he became immersed in music and other fine arts. He had divided his wealth among his descendants. He had established a huge market close to his house and made one of his daughters-in-law the owner of the same. This market came to be known as Bowbazar. Gradually, the entire locality got the same name. This area is quite unique. It has been a red light area since a very long time. The rich people of the city have built houses for their mistresses in this area (Gangopadhyay, 1981; 41)”.*

## ***The enlightened youth***

This category pertains to the emerging class of anglicized Bengalis who were exposed

to the English education and were critical and ashamed of their indigenous culture and everything it comprised. The mid-nineteenth century was a particularly tumultuous time, especially for the social sphere of the city of Calcutta. This was shortly after Henry Derozio was sacked from his post at the Hindu College by the managing committee comprising of orthodox Hindus, which was biased against him. This got his students, who were ardent followers of his, thoroughly outrageous and completely against the so called respectable class of the society. They went on a spree of activities intended at ridiculing the Hindus, particularly the orthodox ones. We find the mention of these some of the actions of these youngsters in Gangopadhyay's novel:

*“The followers of Derozio had organized themselves into a group known as ‘Young Bengal’. This group was the eyesore of the conservatives on one hand, while on the other some of the youngsters had started to become their followers. Initially, this group used to engage in different kinds of crazy activities. For example, on seeing an orthodox Brahmin on the streets, they would chase him, announcing that they eat beef and threatening to touch them, while the Brahmin, out of the superstition of losing his caste on being touched by them, would scurry away. Sometimes they would get on to the terrace and scream out, letting their neighbors know that they drink water touched by a Muslim and eat beef. As a token of proof, they would strew bones here and there all around them” (Gangopadhyay, 1981: 67).*

## ***The faceless strangers***

Other than the elites and the rebels of colonial Calcutta, this novel portrays the everyday lives of the common people of the city. These are men who fall in neither of the two

categories, but form a key part in shaping the unique lived spaces of the city. They occupy the public spaces and are nameless entities that provide a glimpse of what life in nineteenth-century Calcutta was for the subaltern, and shed light on the kind of lived spaces that were produced.

The following is an example of the lived spaces of the city, as penned down by Gangopadhyay, translated by the author of this paper:

*“It’s a Saturday night and the streets are quite crowded. Since it’s a full moon night, it is not pitch dark. Light from the nearby houses is coming on to the streets. Many pedestrians are carrying lanterns in their hands. A lavish car is stuck between two bullock-carts. There are huge open drains on either side of the Chitpur road. The voices of the people can be heard over and above the noise of vehicles. Everyone seems to be talking to one another while walking down the road, although really seems to be listening to the other person. A small procession is moving in the midst of all this. Two people are playing drums, someone is carrying a lighted lamp in his hand and all the others are singing songs about Lord Shiva. In one of the corners of Hedua, a native Christian is singing hymns in praise of Christ. Beside him is standing a foreigner with a lantern in his hand. A heap of copies of The Bible are kept close at hand. In a few minutes, when these copies would start getting sold, people who cannot read a word of English would fight among each other for a copy of the same. Sometime copies of the Bible bound in good Moroccan leather can be found abandoned near some roadside drain. Yet, that does not bring down the enthusiasm of the Christian missionaries” (Gangopadhyay, 1981:12).*

## **Spatializing Femininity in colonial Calcutta**

In this section, I attempt to earmark the feminine spaces of the city, by applying Lefebvre’s (1974;1991) and Soja’s(1996) theorization of space to the manifestation of femininity over the spaces of colonial Calcutta. Three prominent categories have been identified. These have been discussed in detail below:

### ***The Wife***

The wife is portrayed as the woman with no agency. She is the one who is confined to the domestic spaces of the household. Therefore, she is an actor of the private realm. These are the wives of the *Babus*, who formed one of the major components of the triad of masculinity, as discussed in the previous section. As was the trend of the time, daughters from the upper class families of the society used to be married off at a tender age to families which were at par with those of their own, as far as financial conditions and social stature were concerned. The existence of these brides was made to revolve not just around their reproductive roles, but about providing a male heir to her husband’s family. She was completely inaccessible to outsiders, especially men. Her interactions were limited to those with her husband and with the female household helpers and maids. The following excerpt from Gangopadhyay’s novel, translated by the author of this paper, sheds light on the restricted mobility, limited access to public space and fulfillment of motherly duties that marked the lives of the wives of the elites of the city:

*“Bimbabati is sitting inside the palanquin. It is a ritual for her to take a dip in the Ganges on the occasions of full moon and new moon.*

*These days she has been bringing her son along as well. Nabinkumar has just turned two years old, but it is difficult to keep him from mischief. Bimbabati cannot leave him alone without supervision even for a second. Even bringing him along on her visit to the Ganges does not help. For the little while that Bimbabati goes for her holy dip, her son got out of the maid's hold one day and sprinted towards the water. So these days, other than the maids, the house agent Dibakar and a guard also accompany the palanquin. They keep an eye on Nabinkumar at all times. Once the maids and the child get off, the palanquin bearers carry the palanquin down to the river. There are no separate bathing ghats for men and women, people take a dip wherever they find space. The palanquin bearers started screaming to ask people to make way. The regular visitors to the bathing ghats immediately identify the palanquin to have arrived from the houses of one of the big babus. Everyone made space for the palanquin belonging to the Singhi family. On seeing such a guarded palanquin, the common people automatically realize that a beautiful woman must be present inside the palanquin. Curious eyes try to catch a glimpse. If by a stroke of luck the beautiful woman can be seen even for a fleeting second (Gangopadhyay, 1981: 67)".*

### ***The Concubine***

The Concubine occupies the other end of the spectrum, as opposed to the wife, in that she represents the 'other' woman. The concubine is portrayed as someone who has much more agency compared to the wife. She has a space of her own and is not bound by the restrictions that the wife has to comply with. She is also portrayed as the woman who has control and power over the heart of her rich patron, unlike

the wife. An actor in the public realm, she is represented as the epitome of poise, grace and beauty and is also essentially bestowed with talent in the arts of singing and dancing, thereby being highly desirable to the rich and elite of the society.

*"A lot of people have gathered in Kamalasundari's house in Janbazaar tonight. Ramkamal Singha has invited an Ustaaad of classical music and a Tabla player from Lucknow. All of this arrangement is for the entertainment of Kamalasundari. Kamalasundari's fame as a dancer has spread far and wide and she wants to take further training. Ramkamal Singha does not care about expenses. He is always eager to fulfill all of Kamalasundari's demands. One has to admit that Ramkamal Singha knows how to really be a Babu. Nobody has ever invited people from outside to show off the dancing talent of their mistress. Baijis are called to perform in front of guests. But one's own concubine is usually kept away from the eyes of strangers. But when other people praise Kamalasundari for her talents, Ramkamal Singha brims with pride and happiness (Gangopadhyay, 1981: 85)."*

### ***The Widow***

The third manifestation of femininity is the widow. Unlike the wife, who was a part of the private realm and the concubine who was an actor in the public sphere, the wife cannot be neatly made to fit in either of the two. Although she is confined to the domestic spaces of the household, she is not quite regarded as a part of the same. She cannot access all spaces and is faced with the dichotomy of being both the insider and the outsider. She was someone to whom the society assigned the attributes of sanctity and spirituality. She was expected to be inclined towards spirituality and renounce

all forms of worldly pleasure, including that of conjugal or sexual indulgence. As a flip side to this, Gangopadhyay's novel shows us that it was not very uncommon for widows to end up being trapped in the prostitution business, for a plethora of reasons. For one, the young widows were vulnerable in a society where the demand for prostitution was perpetually on the rise and they had no 'legitimate' male partner, 'protector' or 'provider' to shoulder their responsibility or take care of them. In the context of the time we are dealing with, women who were 'alone' in terms of having a husband were considered easy targets. The young widows from financially poor backgrounds often were left with no other option but to choose this life for themselves. In the context of those from the rich and upper classes of the society, we find instances of young widows sent away to Kashi, modern day Varanasi, which happens to be the oldest pilgrimage site for Hindus in the country. These women were often sent away by their own families, out of apprehension that they may cross the thresholds imposed on them by the society in terms of indulging in material and bodily pleasures. Ironically, Gangopadhyay's novel provides accounts of how Kashi (Varanasi) was a favourite haunt for the rich and elite from all over the country who used to visit the holy city with groups of friends and indulged in all kinds of delinquencies and promiscuous activities. Many of these young widows who used to attract the attention of these rich Babus ended up being mistresses and concubines to them, thereby posing a huge question on the false and double standards of the society. These accounts are presented in the novel in the form of more subtle undertones and not as overt excerpts that may be quoted. The following account throws light on the plight

of widows in colonial Calcutta, where the crossing of the 'line' between childhood and womanhood rendered the lives of these widows more and more constricted.

*"Bindubasini never let her widowhood control her. She always tried to look for happiness in the smallest of things. Due to the inherent strength of her character, nobody ever tried to impose anything on her. Until one day, when all of a sudden, everyone around her suddenly decided that she was no longer a girl, but was now a woman. And this is why she will no longer have the freedom to access spaces according to her own wish, not even inside her own home"* (Gangopadhyay, 1981: 50).

### **Concluding remarks**

This study looks at a particular space in the context of a particular time period of the past. Kolkata is a city which is known to have the colonial 'hangover' even to this day, with the colonial architecture and heritage still very much prominent in parts of the city, as the present-day developments continue going hand-in-hand with the same. In order to understand the present, one has to look through lens of the past, which is where this study comes in, within the larger discourse around gender and urban space.

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