City, Space and Literature

Confronting[1] Epochs: The Many Faces of Colonial and Postcolonial Park Street in Kolkata[2]

Arjab Roy

Introduction

The historical studies of colonial and postcolonial India have so far remained restricted to enshrining of various events and occasions within the axes of specialized academic disciplines. The focus has been largely on the combination of detail and precise recording of these historic occurrences, along with analyses from diverse standpoints and perspectives, hinging upon various ideological establishments. However, what seem to be lacking in these studies are aspects of territoriality and spatial dimensions over and within which these events took place resulting in myriad historical changes and transformations. Quite recently cities and city spaces have emerged as one of the seminal areas of study in social sciences. Starting from the technological aspects such as urban-planning, architecture, communication systems, and others, efforts have been undertaken to map the political discourses which cities and city spaces generate and represent[3]. The cities in India with distinct evolutionary trajectories have produced socio-cultural,

political, economic and aesthetic narratives of their own which are subjects of academic engagements.

Park Street was first known as Badamtala and later as Burial Ground Road. It has been authoritatively claimed that "Park Street received its present name in the 1840s" (Nair 18) but that is debatable. A French map of Calcutta[4] and its immediate fringes prepared by Dufour and Benard, published by Rouard in 1839 shows Rue du Parc (Park Street in English) with parts or complete stretches of Russell Street, Camac Street, Wood Street, Hungerford Street, Loudon Street and Rawdon Street connecting it to Theatre Road. It indicates that by that time the name Park Street or close versions of it had wider currency than Burial Ground Road. Keya Dasgupta mentions the map in her *Mapping Calcutta: The Collection of Maps at the Visual Archives of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences* (2009) but does not give any detail about it. Calcutta's evolution as the capital city of British India adopted the "geographical configuration" (Fanon 3) of colonial governance with sharp demarcations between White and Native or Black Towns. Park Street, located in the central part of the former emerged as the entertainment hub of the region and city alike, but with restricted access to the sahibs. The authorities of these entertainment centres officially prohibited admission to Indians – the Bengal Club declared that "Dogs and

Indians not allowed" (Chaliha and Gupta 55) and the Metro Cinema notified, "No admission to Indians" (Mani, "A city worth a look back in wonder." *The Telegraph,* 27 October. 2005) – both the club and the cinema hall belonged to the White Town. The fact that Park Street still enjoys a residual iconic status is demonstrated by two recent events. It was at Park Street that the West Bengal government launched its project of making Kolkata the first Wi-Fi enabled city of India (Staff Reporter, "4G Wi-Fi goes free on party street." *The Telegraph*, 28 January. 2015). Park Street was the centre of attraction again when it was chosen to be converted into fun-and-happy street by the Kolkata Police and a corporate media house (TNN. "Kolkata gets into 'Happy Streets' groove." *The Times of India*, 20 February. 2015)[5].

Western lineage and indigenous adulation of Park Street combined to endow it with an urban phenomenon not to be found elsewhere. It has been called "the centre of the world" and a destination of "pilgrimage" (Hazra, "Kolkata Chromosome: Being gobbled up in Park Street." *Livemint*, 30 November. 2013). It's new name Mother Teresa Sarani did not enthuse many – none of the offices, educational institutions, bookshops, art and photography galleries, hotels, restaurants, pubs, bars and discotheques, cake and coffee shops, among others withdrew Park Street from their addresses. The name Park Street remains etched in public imagination and finds usage

in their daily life. Witty citizens even crack jokes about the insensitivity of the municipal authorities who compel them to indulge in morally upsetting acts of drinking and having fun at a place named after the saintly Mother! Evidently, the language of decolonization of Park Street did not have many buyers.

Construction and Colonization of Park Street

Park Street is a site of multi-faceted struggles and contestations over long duration of time and reflects the trajectory of urban spaces gradually evolving from pre-colonial to colonial and later to post-colonial eras. As the British colonized this country, they also carved their own space – the White Town within the sprawling capital. The building of capital began with that of the new Fort William in 1781. The architectural design resonated with the political successes that the East India Company had met with in India – "the East India Company began to erect public buildings which expressed this newly-found confidence and pride" (Davies 2). "Viewed from the Hooghly Calcutta has the appearance of a city of palaces", wrote Leopold von Orlich in 1840 (qtd. in Davies 1). While there was an estate of colonial buildings along with the Temple of Fame, a Corinthian basilica built in 1813 at Barrackpur in the northern suburbs of Kolkata, there was also the Palladian

garden house built at Tollygunge in southern Kolkata in the late 18th century by Richard Johnson, an employee of the English East India Company. However, in those times Calcutta did not extend either to Barrackpur or Tollygunge, and new residential areas came up at Chowrangi, Alipur and Garden Reach. Alongside colonization of land, there was a redrawing of the skyline. At the centre of Calcutta and close to the Fort was the White Town, the colonial power centre. The grand public buildings built in the European classical styles included St. John's Church (1787), the Belvedere (late 18th century), the Government House (1803), the Town Hall (1813), the Indian Museum (1814), the Ochlerlony monument (1828), La Martiniere Boys' School (1835), St. Paul's Cathedral (1839-47) and the Metcalfe Hall (1840-44). "By the early nineteenth century, British aspirations had exceeded the purely mercantile and assumed an overtly imperial dimension and this was expressed in the architecture" (Davies 7). The first phase of grand public buildings ended with transfer of power from East India Company to Queen's Government after 1857.

Colonization made statements of imperial ideology and aesthetics in architecture and simultaneously conducted relentless struggle against diseases, epidemics and death that eventually amounted to war against natives. "Inspite of all the surface grandeur," wrote Philip Davies, "life for

many was just two monsoons" (12). Fear of death constantly haunted the sahibs:

> On November 15 every year, the Europeans met to congratulate one another for having survived. Those who did not were interred in the Park Street Cemetery, a vast imperial necropolis of neo-classical funerary sculpture crammed with pyramids, pavilions, and tombs in a state of perpetual romantic decay (Davies 12).

The need to preserve and secure public health and city hygiene for the Europeans was high and for modern town planning technology imported from west was utilized. In Partho Datta's words, "Neighbourhoods were prised open, festivals and crowds prohibited, "nuisances" like smelly tanneries and abattoirs, and employment associated with these, banished to the margins" (Datta xiv). Streets and roads were built to facilitate connectivity, faster conveyance and ventilation. Regulations were promulgated for policing public places and street lights were put up to facilitate surveillance. These required large scale clearance of *bustees* or slums. Drive to provide for civic services such as potable water supply, drainage and sewerage pushed the colonial masters to colonize the undergrounds of Kolkata, its *lower depths*.

The beginnings of Park Street were rather humble. The Esplanade was grand –"A row of large superb buildings extend from the princely residence of the Governor-General, along the Esplanade and produce a remarkable striking effect", wrote Leopold von Orlich (qtd. in Davies 1). However its backyard, including Park Street, was yet to be colonized. With the Asiatic Society at its Chowrangi end and the cemeteries at its present Mallick Bazar end, it seemed least destined to develop into entertainment hub of the white town but benefited from the existent factors. Being sparsely inhabited by poor people, its land prices must have been relatively low. Perhaps that was why Mrs. Esther Leach built her theatre Sans Souci, at Park Street. She started staging dramatic performances from March 1841 to November 1843. Accidentally a fire engulfed the theatre, its owner and chief performer. However, a lucrative real estate and entertainment business at Park Street waited to be grabbed by people with money, enterprise and vision.

Post 1858, the government developed the urban infrastructure of white town and some of its surrounding areas, but apparently kept the British out of the real estate business. According to Bangla litterateur Sankar, the government's policy of not allowing the British buy their own homes or marry Indian women was to prevent them from making this country their own and fight to wrest it from the British government as those in America

did in the 1770s. So rulers permanently remained tenants and persistently complained about rising rents (Sankar 223)! The formation of the city municipal corporation and its adoption of different projects, laying down terms and conditions for buildings, development of roads, and installation of sewerage and drinking water systems, road lights and electrification helped White Town to take shape. Meanwhile Park Street and its adjoining areas evolved into smart and swanky entertainment and celebration zone of Calcutta. The Armenians took to real estate business and in late 19th and early 20th centuries built exquisitely designed palatial buildings in Park Street and adjoining areas. Johannes Gaulstaun built Queen's Mansion, Harrington Mansions, Gaulstaun Park (Nizam Palace), Stephen Court, Grand Hotel, Astor, Astoria, Carlton, Fairlawn, Kenilworth, Lytton and New Kenilworth in White Town. He built more than three hundred buildings in central and south Calcutta and donated Rupees 25,000 for building Victoria Memorial. T.M. Thaddeus, another builder, built the Park Mansion (Chaliha and Gupta 55).

The rise and growth of Park Street as the hub of European entertainment was a result of changes in the world of western entertainment itself. In early colonial times, entertainment of the sahibs – mainly English, Portuguese, Swiss, Italians and other foreign communities – consisted of:

sports and games (cricket, tennis, polo, hunting etc), outings (evening drives in the pleasant Maidan area) in fashionable carriages and river rides (in barges), social gatherings with their strange pass-times (Mukherjee 45). The need to socialize gradually led to the rise of a culture of clubs. Important clubs included Royal Calcutta Golf Club (1829), Calcutta Rowing Club (1858), Saturday Club (1875), Tollygunge Club (1895) and Calcutta Club (1907). As the 20th century advanced, a new craving for cheap and quick entertainment at restaurants-cum-bars accompanied with music caught up with the sahibs and a number of such joints came up in Park Street. These included Olympia, Park Restaurant, the tea-and-cake shop Flurys, Trincas and Golden Dragon on Chowrangi Road close to Park Street. The Second World War (1939-45) brought loads of American soldiers to the city and with them came Jazz music. Jazz had reached Calcutta earlier but only after the city became the headquarters of the Allied forces in the eastern theatre of war in the 1940s, that it took Calcutta by storm and Park Street became its centre. Restaurant-cum-bar business in Park Street boomed and one of its results was the launching of Magnolia in 1945 by an American lady.

Park Street was the hub of sahibs far away from their homes. Its hotels, restaurants, bars and pubs remained crowded where they bathed in entertainment till late night. The frequent visitors to Park Street included

Anglo-Indians and those Indian elites who were acquainted with the ethos. Money and English language were great levelers – the sahibs and their subjects drank to their full to wish the west a long, prosperous and happy life. European pastries, furniture and curios entered the houses of local elites via auction houses like Victor Brothers, Staynor[6] and Russell Exchange located in and around Park Street. The street acquired a cult status and the Indian elites made the best out of it. People still alive tell stories of culinary cultures, music, cinema and dramatic performances prevalent in Park Street and adjacent locations[7]. A letter of Richard Beard, US Army Lieutenant Psychologist in the Calcutta Hospital in 1945, gives an idea of the white town entertainment of those days:

> Tonight was a big night. Gus and I (. . .) drove to Karnani for dinner. We had a whiskey and soda or two at the bar, wine with the meal of chicken-fried steak. Then we proceeded on up town to the Lighthouse to see Deanna Durbin in *Can't help Singing*. I liked the fountain in the closing scene (. . .) Clouds partially obscured a brilliant full moon. We stopped at the club for coffee, drove past the lovely lake whose border of trees was mirrored in its

> bosom. Placid, calm, restful. Calcutta going to sleep ("Tickets to the Lighthouse Theater". gypsyscholar.com).

Decolonization, Reclamation and Appropriation

The dynamics and idioms of decolonization in India varied across places. Decolonization in Park Street took interesting forms. Post 1947, the ownership of centres of entertainment in and around Park Street gradually passed into Indian hands marking a distinct economic and political change in its aesthetics. In fact, the entire ethos of Park Street started changing with the terrain of entertainment itself showing signs of changes. The exclusivity of prevalent modes of entertainment discontinued, new and modern forms of economic activities started emerging in Park Street. Ferrazzini's and Firpo's closed and Great Eastern Hotel declined, but all three were at some distance from Park Street. The old restaurants and bars of Park Street managed to retain their clientele and some new outlets emerged. Decolonization touched every aspect of life in Park Street, even the nomenclature of the street. In 2004 the Kolkata Municipal Corporation decided to rename the street as Mother Teresa Sarani (Banerjee, Nirmalya. "Park Street to be renamed Mother Teresa Sarani." *The Times of India*, 26 November. 2004).

There is yet another dimension in the decolonization of Park Street. The Indian bourgeoisie which appropriated White Town understood the value of its social space, invested money to preserve and capitalize on its iconic status. Even entertainment outlets established after 1947 were co-opted by these interests. Bunny Suraiya's *Calcutta Exile* (2011) vividly captures those days when Blue Fox featured Pam Crain with the jazz band Louis Banks Brotherhood, Mocambo hosted Vivian Hansen, Shirley Myers commanded a strong fan following at El Morocco and Eve at Trincas attracted the younger generation who opted for "jam-sessions". There were other outlets also in and around Park Street such as Magnolia, Skyroom, Scherezade (Shenaz), Kenilworth, Astor and Maxim's. Apparently the legendary Duke Ellington came to play in India in 1963 but there are doubts regarding the time. He had come in the 1950s and performed at Scherezade, as Molly Hamilton fondly recollected the event from her memories of Park Street (Hamilton, Molly. "Duke Ellington at the Grand". gypsyscholar.com). During 1960s and 70s many famous musicians performed in Calcutta; Golden Slippers, Prince's, Mocambo and Moulin Rouge hosted revelers until 6am. The culture of musical productions and performances in Park Street produced a number of professional musicians and singers like Benny Rozario, Carlton Kitto, Louis Bank, Nandan Bagchi, Usha Uthup, Lew Hilt and others. Versatility was an

essential quality that these performers had to possess since after playing classical items of Beethoven, Bach and Tchaikovsky at lunch they played mainstream jazz in the evenings. Even in the turbulent 1970s, the nightlife of Park Street had few competitors in India.

However, the character of Park Street was changing fast with Calcutta's changing demography and culture. The Europeans as well as other foreigners moved out of the city in large numbers and so did a considerable section of Anglo-Indians. Moreover, shifts in the culture of western music through 1950s to70s in the form of pop, rock-and-roll, country-folk and jazz caused disenchantment among the Calcutta elites who had affinities for popular western music. Consequently, various sections of the audience failed to negotiate with these cultural alterations and ultimately were forced to retreat from the scene. Few other factors have been cited to explain the dwindling popularity of Park Street as a hub of western popular culture. These include a steep hike in entertainment taxes, changes in popular tastes and emergence of alternative sites and forms of entertainments, altered political-cultural-moral ethos, rising competition between the restaurants themselves over their need to provide entertainment at lower prices so as to suit new and wider clientele, changes in their ownerships and others. *Finding Carlton* (2012), Susheel Kurien's recent documentary on the jazz musician Carlton

Kitto, who has been performing since the 1970s informs us about the fading popularity of the western entertainment and culture which Park Street epitomized in the last decades of 20th century. He performs even today but in half empty lounges[8]. Blue Fox closed down and Mocambo stopped musical performances. Flurys survived by changing hands – established in 1925 by Mr. and Mrs. J. Flury, the famous Swiss confectionary is now run by Surendra Apeejay Group. Trincas played Hindi popular chartbusters along with the usual old western classics. Only Someplace Else, the pub founded in August 1994 in the hotel The Park, still holds live music every day, that is, 3285 hours of live music every year – this is unmatched anywhere in the country.

In the post-global scenario, the entrance of such multinational chains as KFC and McDonald's in Park Street was not unnatural. Yet these have taken their place in Park Street amidst restaurants each of which have its tradition and serve its own brand of delicacies. For Park Street, becoming international is essentially losing its own distinct identity. The cynosure of late colonial sahibs and post-colonial Indian elites, the Park Street appeared to lose much of its European aura.

Post 1947 the people of Calcutta and adjoining areas who possessed the taste, time and money to enjoy the drinks, food and luxury which its bars,

pubs and restaurants offered, gradually began to occupy some space in Park Street thereby carving their own niche at Park Street. Sumanto Bandopadhyay in *Nishir Dak:Smriti Niye Chelekhela* (*The Call of the Night: Playing with Memories*) (2014) wrote about the gathering of reputed personalities from Bengali journalism and literature in Olympia. The gathering included Niranjan Majumdar of *The Statesman*, Gour Kishore Ghosh of *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, Shakti Chattapadhyay the poet and Samaresh Basu the professional Bangla literary figure. A hotel or restaurant of the erstwhile White Town, including Park Street, was also a place of a celebration evident in Satyajit Ray directed *Seemabaddha* (*Company Limited*) (1971). Ray used the dining-cum-ball room and filmed a sequence of a cabaret that such places hosted. Amit Chaudhuri loves Park Street from his childhood days during late 1960s – it was the place whose cake-pastry shop (Flurys) and restaurants were visited regularly by the affluent sections and occasionally by the middle classes. Chaudhuri explains that his love for Park Street is for its uniqueness, notwithstanding its indigenization. “Park Street is neither Oxford Street nor the Champs-Elysees but (. . .) it has an energy comparable to no other downtown district that I know” (21). While Kolkata, even with its colonial buildings, was “so Bengali in its metier”, the

Park Street culture "was like nowhere in the city" (21-22). This is evident in its celebration of Christmas. Chaudhuri writes:

> Calcutta had the most effervescent and the loveliest Christmas in India – probably (. . .) the loveliest in the world. Warm, convivial, unfolding in smoky weather, it had the vivacity of a transplanted custom that had flowered spontaneously, but still retained the air of an outing, of an encounter with the strange. Its beauty and atmosphere derived not only from the Anglo-Indians, or the last of the English living and working in Calcutta, but also from a certain kind of Bengali who had embraced the festival (25-26).

However, for the men and women just written about, Park Street is the eternal rendezvous; none of them lives or belongs to Park Street.

The bid to reclaim and appropriate Park Street by the people of Kolkata and outside is, however, not without its tensions. Chaudhuri writes that, once the celebration of a new pleasure seeking Bengalee middle class-bhadralok, the Christmas is still a festival for the people of Kolkata "uncannily lit by its past" (56). The people of Kolkata appropriated the western Christmas but they did it by transforming it. He quoted a perceptive observation of one of

his friends that the people of Kolkata did not have "sign of the crucifix" (63) or "the awful mournfulness of Christianity" (63) – for them "Its all about Santa" (63). Chaudhuri approved. For Kolkata, Christmas neither means a solitary stocktaking nor the notion of the return of God to earth but a kind of "make-believe" (63). This is not unusual; Christmas appeals to Kolkata's festive mood of winter, its best season, and gives the city an occasion to celebrate – " (. . .) in which part of the world could you have such a Christmas afternoon, with its special aimless anticipation – except in Calcutta, and here? People were at large (. . .) cheery provincialism, of a city no longer emblematic but ordinary," (56). In whatever image the people of Kolkata might have sculpted its Christmas, they never forget that the occasion is essentially western and uses the celebration to walk into Park Street, once the hub of the sahibs.

After Christmas within a week's time Park Street turns to be the site of celebration of yet another occasion, the New Year. Chaudhuri observes young men coming from different places in mock-leather jackets gathering in Park Street for fun and excitement to bury the old year and welcome the new one. He notes:

> Park Street isn't their natural terrain; out of a suppressed sense of exclusion, maybe, and from genuine excitement,

> they walk about in proprietary groups in front of the famous restaurants of the middle class – Bar-b-que; Moulin Rouge; Peter Cat. A resentment simmers, which somehow gets channelled into the celebrations (68).

For them, Park Street is the eternal "saheb-para" (locality of sahibs), grand and beautiful, the place of unbridled luxury and entertainment, a place of dream far beyond their real life and reach. Chaudhuri cannot help but think of the words of poet Utpal Basu: "Erai amader nagarik –These are our citizens" (68). A strange ritual plays out every year whereby motorbikes pass successively in which the pillion-rider raises both arms, as if in victory, and roars with those on the pavements roaring back as if to reciprocate. The entire drama conceals its tension between its sense of triumph and loss, triumph at being able to celebrate New Year at Park Street and loss because they had no other way to connect with its world. Chaudhuri feels out of place in Park Street and then overhears a lady exclaim that the scenario resembled Times Square "except Times Square's worse" (69). What runs the glitz and glamour of this annual spectacle is the lubricated network of indigenous business interests and calculations.

The relation between the culture of Park Street – real and imagined – and Bengalee middle and lower-middle classes far below that of

Shyamalendu Chatterjee (male protagonist of *Seemabaddha*) was one of unease and tension. Two movies, *Fariyad* (1971) and *Hotel Snow Fox* (1976), may be referred to in this connection. In *Fariyad* the protagonist played by Suchitra Sen is a dancer in a restaurant who endures all kinds of exploitation by its owner so as to ensure that her son establishes himself in society. In *Hotel Snow Fox* – the title bearing close proximity with that of the Blue Fox at Park Street – the protagonist played by Uttam Kumar is a singer in a restaurant. He helps women subjected to all kinds of exploitations secretly, collects information on the culprits and eventually hands them over to the police. The message is thus clear: for the Bengali middle and lower middle classes, the hot spots of Park Street culture and entertainment embodied the dark and the evil even after two decades of independence. It is significant that while the actual singers of Park Street mainly sang popular romantic numbers of their times, those of the Bengali movies preached philosophical and moral lessons.

The Politics of Nostalgia – Resisting Decolonization and the Tale of Two Streets

As the colonial masters and their Indian collaborators would have liked to see it, decolonization severely dented the aesthetics of Park Street. In his

article on Park Street, Professor Barun De, who resided there from 1941 to 1954 before going abroad to become a historian, interrogated this decolonization from two angles. His first angle was of aesthetics and taste. He writes, "Park Street used to be British Indian elegance personified." (De, Barun. "Erasing the Past." *The Telegraph*, 14 December. 2004). He remembered old garden houses extending up to the Survey of India building, Murshidabad House and the three buildings of number 87 and added that they were all "ramshackle, requiring restoration" (De 2004). He wrote about the stately mansions which gave the street its "architectural consistency" and rued its ruin by "unthinking further buildings over whatever front lawns were left some without any regard for the way the frontage of the ensemble of buildings gives specific character to streets" (De 2004). He illustrated his words with apt examples. "The building housing the residence of the deputy commissioner of police (South) is completely hidden by the unsightly barracks built around it after independence; it used to be a fine pair with the Catholic Archbishop's Palace next door" (De 2004). As a result of these the street is now "a medley of architectural neglect and promoters' vulgarity" (De 2004). De was concerned not only with the aesthetics of architecture. His concern also touched the quality of life it housed and the quality of taste it

provided with: “Fine restaurants” of Park Street “have deteriorated or been liquidated” (De 2004).

De’s second angle was destruction of history and historical memory by decolonization. It destroyed those valuable landmarks of Park Street which carried its history and transported it to the posterity. “The Road to the Burial Grounds” (De 2004) which Park Street was once called led to:

> three (cemeteries) at the eastern end before the New Cemetery opposite to Mullick Bazar (. . .) The French or Tiretta cemetery was desecrated to build one of Calcutta’s early high-rises near Rawdon Street in the Fifties. The bigger cemetery opposite the old one that is now preserved was pulled down to build the Assembly of God Hospital (De 2004).

The renaming of Park Street as Mother Teresa Sarani erased historical memories. The seemingly patriotic stance to replace the memory of infamous Impey who sentenced Maharaja Nanda Kumar to death on false charges of fraud with that of the saintly Mother was, according to Prof De, misplaced. He stated that, “The morality of a society in the bygone past has nothing to do with the heritage of a city that owes its entire urban existence to that society and to its evolution” (De 2004). Renaming of public places doesn’t

help giving them better looks or making them more useful. He pointed out that Chowrangi, Lower Circular Road, or Theatre Road, which Park Street connected, had in no way been improved despite naming them after Jawaharlal Nehru, Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose and William Shakespeare by the Road Renaming Committee. "The architectural uniformity of a street front, the cleanliness of its pavements, the care devoted to the maintenance of its buildings and the civic value of its inhabitants, passersby and traffic give character to a street or road, not the iconism of some fad, whether patriotic or internationalist" (De 2004). Exercises in nomenclature without aesthetic or service backup are, according to Prof De, simply "cynical tinkering with public memory" and "sick joke" (De 2004).

De wrote as a civil society member but with the colonial gaze inherited from the British Raj and its collaborators. Is this gaze not that of nostalgia, the ideology and politics of which has been branded as irrational, ahistorical and retrogressive by the advocates of modernity? "Nostalgia", originally a late 17th century word used to describe a medical condition involving pain resulting from one's desire to get back to one's home implies new meanings today indicating uncertain relations with modernity and history:

> (. . .) the word was transformed from a disease of memory
>
> (. . .) into a problem of the imperfect assimilation of the

> categories and practices of history, that is, the condition of those who did not have what in modernity gradually became the dominant relationship to the past. Nostalgia thus became a label used to define those who fell outside the modern framework (Natali 11).

Thus for once at least, it seems, the ideologues and practitioners of modernity realized the value of what they themselves denigrated and used it to engage with the post-colonial decolonization of Park Street. De used nostalgia to rue the loss of the aesthetics of colonial inheritance and to appeal to preserve and protect those which are still in place. For singer-song writer-filmmaker Anjan Dutt and writer-academician Amit Chaudhuri and many others familiar with the cultural productions of the west who visit Park Street regularly, the politics of nostalgia takes another form: it reminds them of the late colonial and early post-colonial culture that created it and assures them that a slice of that culture is still there for them. Anjan Dutt visits Park Street regularly for its culture of western music and for going back to "his own Kolkata"; when he cannot, he sings his way to his cherished land "(. . .) *Ei Kolkata sholo amar* (*This Kolkata sixteen is mine*)". Amit Chaudhuri goes again and again to Park Street to seek the place of his childhood love. "Ever since I was a child, I've loved going to Park Street, and still do (. . .)

restaurants" (29-30), he writes. "Actually, I long for Park Street (. . .) I feel a desire, like a muted undercurrent, to go to Park Street" (43) he explains. In addition to these a brief glance at newspapers or a simple browsing of internet shall bring to us countless nostalgic reminiscences of the musical performances of Pam Crain, the Park Street Diva who passed away in August 2013, and in that connection, the musical life of Park Street during its hay-days. The politics and culture of nostalgia have been strategically fused with economic aspirations to fulfill the objectives and requirements of modern times by creating a euphoria surrounding the Christmas and New Year celebrations in Park Street. Ironically, the government of West Bengal has also started encouraging and patronizing these celebrations recently.

Matters related to public memory and heritages are undoubtedly important, but problems arise when the questions arise regarding the subjects and recipients of this public memory and heritage. The memories are of those of our elites and are strictly limited within the "250 metres stretch of this amazing thoroughfare", which was bordered with colonial architectural structures and where every evening (in the 1960s and 1970s) about 80 performers – singers, dancers and musicians entertained guests with western performances at about half a dozen joints till late night. There is no nostalgia about the other Park Street ensconced in the hard lives of the

numberless who sell cheap foods, cigarettes, newspapers and magazines, carry on shady deals in the dark rooms of the abandoned mansions, or simply beg, to survive; there is no nostalgia about the unauthorized dwellers of Karnani mansion and Thakur house, or the bustees behind the Kohinoor building. Writing about Ramayan Shah's Chandan Hotel on Park Street close to Free School Street, Amit Chaudhuri writes, "I can remember a time when these businesses didn't exist in this location, and one could walk from Park Street up Free School Street without any interruption" (20). Nobody knows when and how these people surreptitiously entered Park Street and made it their own – it would be evident before long that this appropriation is no less important than that of the English in the late 19th century.

Again there is absolutely no nostalgia about the Park Street on the eastern side of the Acharya Prafulla Chandra Road that touches the Park Circus seven-point crossing and leads the way to Park Circus railway station which is mostly inhabited by Muslims immigrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The movement from the western end of Park Street eastwards to the Park Circus station is actually a movement of:

> (. . .) from rich to poor, from high employment to low employment rate, from low percentage of slum population to high percentage, from historic mansions to high-rise to

> slum dwellings, from international brands to local sellers, from upper class restaurants to street food stalls, from Hindu part of the town to Muslim ghetto, from a place where everybody meets to a place where Kolkatans fear to go, from a part which gets rejuvenated to a part which first needs to be properly built, from a colonial part of town to a non-historic part, from formerly white town to formerly black town (ETH Studio Basel and The Kolkata Studio 64-70).

In comparison to the western part of the Park Street, its eastern part is far more densely populated, has a higher rate of petty crime and lower rate of modern education. Far away from international connections, tourism and entertainment itinerary of foreigners and fun and frolic loving elite of this city, the eastern Park Street is always treated with silence lest it barges into the public domain for all wrong reasons and creates unnecessary embarrassments. From the written sources available about the areas the street passes through reflect the daily lives of the people who live and engage with diverse occupations and professions. Dr. Habibuz Zaman who lived at Beniapukur during late 1930s, wrote about the locality in his memoir *Seventy Years in a Shaky Subcontinent* (1999) where congested houses,

activities of labourers and domestic helps, commonwater reservoirs, bathrooms and toilets, and absence of electric pumps constituted the regular life of lower and middle class residents[9]. The stretch of road connecting Park Circus seven point crossing and Park Circus railway station with Beniapukur and Topsia on its north has been described by writer Raghab Bandyopadhyay in *Journal Shottor* (2000). Its landscape was dominated by slums and scattered residential households, small markets, shops, factories, and tanneries. It was precisely here that Bandyopadhyay was actively engaged in the radical politics of Naxalbari Movement in the 1970s[10]. Not far from Park Street, these localities constituted a stark contrast to it [11].

Confronted with decolonization in Park Street, the irreconcilability between the politics of modernity and nostalgia gives way to a tactical alliance between the two in which the former mobilizes the latter to its service. Nostalgia and public memories about Park Street are regularly produced, reproduced and propagated by the media; but so far as political leaders are concerned, stakes in the matter are too high to be left to the media alone. So the Kolkata Municipal Corporation set up Heritage Conservation Committee with people from different walks of life to ensure that "heritage" sites are never out of public memory. Symbols do matter. If the renaming of Park Street as Mother Teresa Sarani was one form of symbolization,

preserving Park Street in the addresses of all government institutions – state and central both, was another form of symbolization. Perhaps the latter was a far more machinated form of symbolization. This 250 metres stretch could be nothing else than Park Street with all its history, culture and politics. The politics of keeping nostalgia about the western Park Street alive through various cultural productions is strategized to hide the other Park Street with its subalterns, underbelly and, most important, its eastern stretch enmeshed with poverty, squalor and crime. Hiding the other Park Street is to pretend that it does not exist and maintain silence about it. This discursive resistance runs counter to the politics of decolonization and tries to uphold Park Street's uniqueness in the history and politics of post-colonial Kolkata, celebrates it as "Happy Street" (TNN. "Park Street wakes up to happy hours." *The Times of India*, 23 February. 2015) and exalts at the proclamation of it being the first free Wi-Fi zone in the megalopolis.

Conclusion

The idea that Park Street began its life sometime in the 1840s and that its 175th anniversary belonged to any time in or after 2015 is misplaced but gave the opportunity to revisit the street, rethink its status in terms of our relations with the residual colonial hangover, complicated processes of

decolonization and subsequent negotiations with them. What Henri Lefebvre says about city is largely true for the post-colonial Park Street:

> To think about the city is to hold and maintain its conflictual aspects: constraints and possibilities, peacefulness and violence, meetings and solitude, gatherings and separation, the trivial and the poetic, brutal functionalism and surprising improvisation. The dialectic of the urban cannot be limited to the opposition centre-periphery, although it implies and contains it (qtd. in Kofman and Lebas 53).

Every Christmas and New Year, the western Park Street goes wild for a few days with light, fun and frolic, revelry and celebration, with restaurants hosting music concerts, dance performances and food carnivals. People across places throng its various joints, bathe and bask in its happy frenzy. If Amit Chaudhuri is correct about the purposelessness of the crowd engaged in this revelry, that is exactly the purpose of the politics of nostalgia. Built on illusion, it thrives on artificialities and works like an intoxicant which cares for nothing, neither for the other Park street within itself and that across

Acharya Prafulla Chandra Road, nor for the Kolkata megalopolis, large parts of which live under different shades of darkness.

Notes:

1. I am thankful to Mr. Pulakesh Roy for suggesting the word 'Confronting' to me. For more refer to his, "Confronting Modernity: RajiblochanMukhopadhyay and his Maharaja Krishnachandra Rayasya Charitram." *Journal of the Asiatic Society*. LIII. 3 (2011): 25-40. Print. I am grateful to him for the comments on the earlier draft of this paper.

2. A version of this paper titled 'The Curious Case of Park Street in Kolkata: Decolonization and Resistance to Indegeneity' was presented in the Two-day National Conference on "Multiculturalism, Identity Crisis and Belongingness in Indian Writing in English", held at Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee, during 21st and 22nd March, 2015.

3. In the context of Kolkata refer to *Calcutta Poor: Elegies on a City above Pretense* (1997) by Frederic. C. Thomas, *City Requiem, Calcutta: Gender and the Politics of Poverty* (2003) by Ananya Roy,

Cities of Imagination: Calcutta – A Cultural and Literary History (2003) by Krishna Dutta, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism and The Colonial Uncanny* (2005) by Swati Chattopadhyay, *Calcutta Mosaic: Essays and Interviews on the Minority Communities of Calcutta* (2009) by Himadri Banerjee, Nilanjana Gupta and Sipra Mukherjee.

4. The city of Calcutta was renamed as Kolkata in January 2001. I have used 'Kolkata' in a general sense while 'Calcutta' has been used specifically in certain places to denote any specific time period prior to January 2001.

5. Park Street's iconicity was reiterated when it was chosen as the site to launch these schemes in order to propel India towards advanced digital connectivity.

6. I am grateful to Dr. Kanta Chatterjee for pointing out the spelling mistake in the earlier draft of this paper.

7. Entertainment meant food, drink and music at Park Street and western movies in the cinema houses located in White Town of Kolkata. Of the seven cinema houses which showed western movies, Lighthouse, New Empire and Metro were air-conditioned but Globe, Tiger, Regal and Elite were not. Most of the movies shown were American. The movies shown in 1940s included *Gone With the Wind*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Rebecca*, *The Great Dictator, The Mark of Zorro, Waterloo Bridge, The Thief of Bagdad*, *How Green Was My Valley*, *Spellbound*, *Casablanca*, *The Black Swan*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Ivan the Terrible – Part 1, The Picture of Dorian Gray, Notorious, Monsieur Verdeaux*, *Hamlet*, *Samson and Delilah,* etc. In fact in 1947 Hollywood even produced a melodramatic war-time crime-cum-romantic movie named *Calcutta* which was in the third position in late-spring box office in the United States. For more refer to gypsyscholar.com.

8. Carlton Kitto was alive when this paper was submitted for publication. He passed away on 28th November, 2016 at the age of seventy four.

9. "On both sides were small buildings occupied by others… some kind of an office, where people, sitting on the floor over spread-out mats, kept writing carefully and ceaselessly… occupied by the owner, a plumber-contractor… occupied by labourers, who presumably worked for the contractor… a much larger cemented water reservoir, which was meant for the use of our household… Domestic helpers would wash clothes here… no underground reservoir and no electric pump… when the city's water supply was likely to be at its best and most forceful… since it was rarely cleaned" (Zaman 18-19).

10. "The map is as follows: a portion of the southern side of east Kolkata. CIT Road is the only big street… What remain on the left are few scattered two-three storied houses belonging to office clerks and teachers. Before getting on bridge number three, near Padmapukur, is the wholesale market of animal skin-pieces, noise and din, and the result - Birshul Bazaar. Right next to this is the housing estate built by Kolkata Improvement Trust for the middle and lower division bureaucrats. Joy-Hind bazaar and slum number seven, twenty two and twenty three, "putulkawl" (local reference to the Bengal Potteries), the railway engine fireman who stayed in the railway quarters, from

cleaner to Bishu who ran a local country-liquor joint, and the dark complexioned-fat about forty years old Padma who always abused the excise police, all of them looked up to the residents of these housing estates with respect" (Bandyopadhyay 190 – translation mine).

11. "Immediately thereafter is the CIT Road – from where begin four and five storied buildings, cars… There is nothing that this individual possesses that may be treasured and hence preserved with utmost love and care" (Bandyopadhyay 191-192 – translation mine)

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Arjab Roy
Ph. D Research Scholar
The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad.
arjabroy@gmail.com