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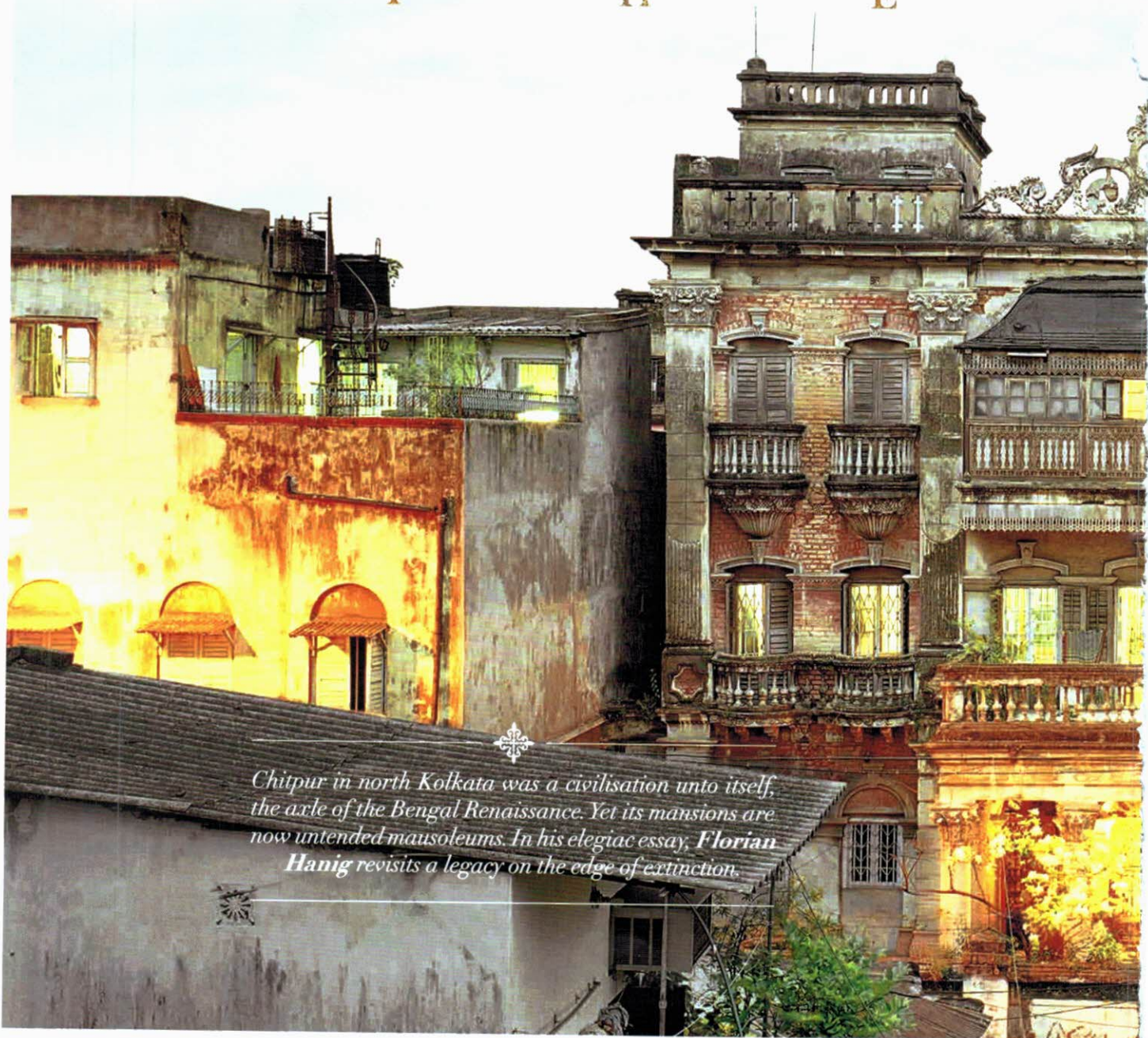
JECC, JAIPUR
22-25 DECEMBER 2017

JAIPUR JEWELLERY SHOW

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REMA

T H E



Chitpur in north Kolkata was a civilisation unto itself, the axle of the Bengal Renaissance. Yet its mansions are now untended mausoleums. In his elegiac essay, Florian Hanig revisits a legacy on the edge of extinction.

INSIDE DAY



Courtesy: Halje Cantz

Courtesy: Haije Cantz

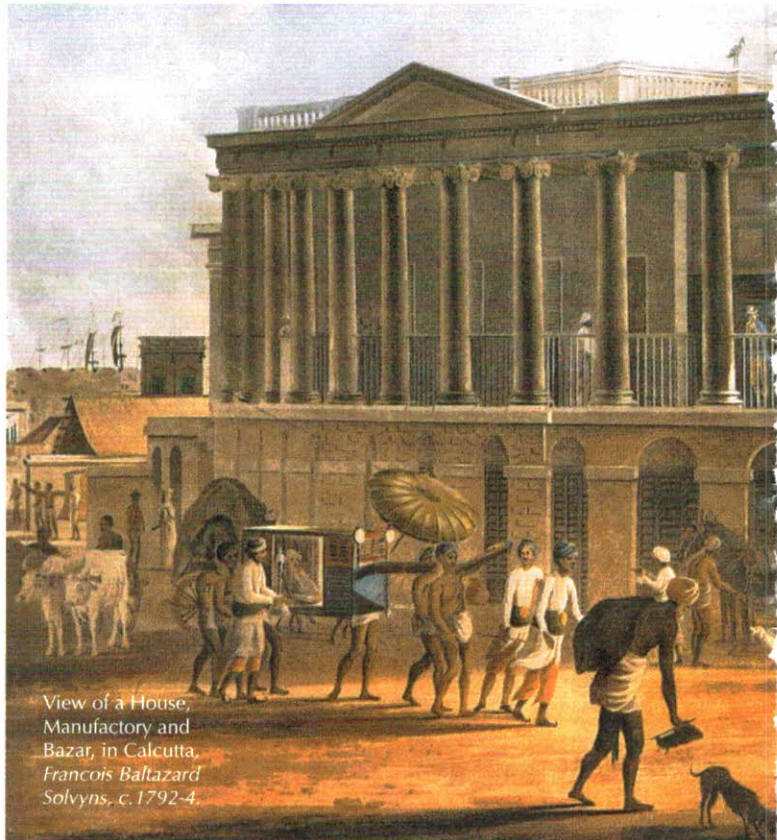


*Darpanarayan
Tagore Street, Kolkata
Heritage Photo.*

In any other city of the world it would be something special to have your office in a building like Tagore Castle. Here, they use it to store scrap.

My grandfather had lighted lamps of wealth everywhere,” wrote Rabindranath Tagore, “but they went out with him. All that remained of that festival of wealth were the soot marks from the burnt lamps, ash, and a single quivering and weak flame.”

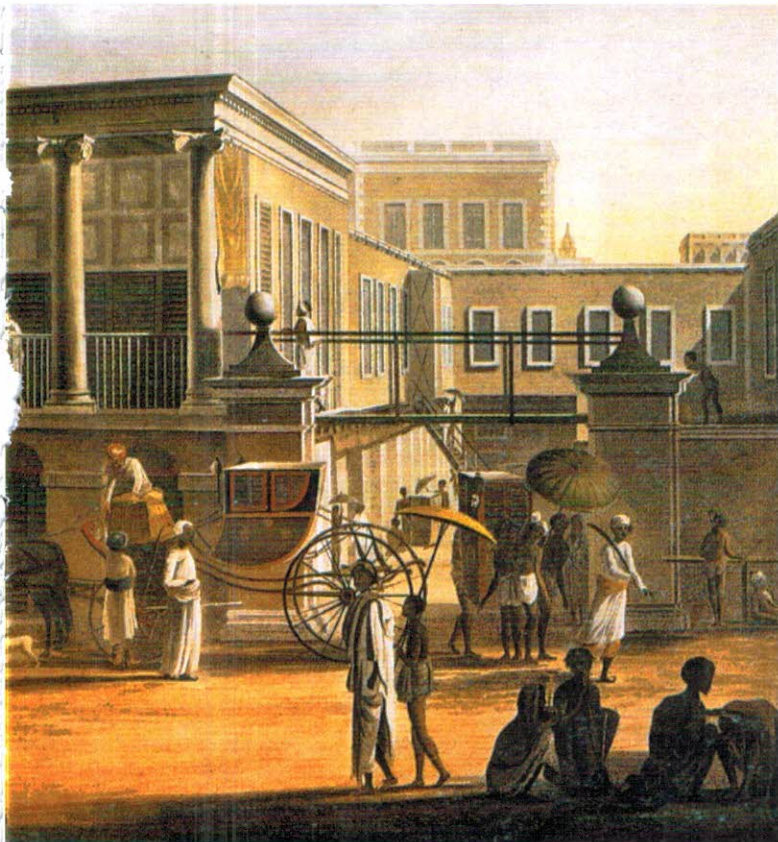
Sixty-six years after Tagore’s death, that flame still lights an entire street in Calcutta. At dusk, six massive columns bearing a red-painted Greek gable tower up before us—a building as imposing as the White House, hidden in an alley so narrow that no two cars can pass each other.



*View of a House,
Manufactory and
Bazar, in Calcutta,
Francois Baltazard
Solvyns, c.1792-4.*



Aphay Mitra
Street, Kolkata
Heritage Photo



To most, north Kolkata means crooked alleys and crumbling walls, far from the new suburbs where call centres sit ensconced in their glass skyscrapers.

Schoolgirls move past the columns, a swelling sea of black braids, red hair bands, and starched uniforms; market women squat on the sidewalk, a handful of mangos and withered bunches of beans spread out before them.

Kamalika Bose points to a crumbling tower alongside the house: musicians used to play there, and the people in the garden behind the high wall and on the street would listen. "Close your eyes," she says, "and you can still hear them." Across and down from the white palace of Tagore House there is another surprise: a medieval

castle, only a few hundred meters from the Ganges. The walls are sheathed in a spider web of electric cables, advertisements cover the windows, and additions bulge from

In 1850, the architects of Martin Burn & Co. built Tagore Castle for the merchant Kali Krishna Tagore, modelling it after a fortress in the Scottish Highlands.

Tagore Castle 1907, Claude Campbell.

National Library, Delhi



the house like tumors. Yet the oriels, turrets, and castle gate are still clearly visible: in 1850, the architects of Martin Burn & Co. built Tagore Castle for the merchant Kali Krishna Tagore, modelling it after a fortress in the Scottish Highlands.

Bose shakes her head. “In any other city of the world it would be something special to have your office in a building like Tagore Castle. Here, they use it to store scrap iron and fabrics.” Tagore House and Tagore Castle do not even appear in the travel guides. Nor do any of the other great merchant palaces in the north of the fifteen-million metropolis of Calcutta—though it was in these salons that the Bengal Renaissance, an intellectual, political, and spiritual renewal in late eighteenth-century India, was born. Only the marble palace of the Mallick family, with its “curious accumulation of Western art,” is occasionally mentioned. Anyone who wants to understand the north needs another guide.

Kamalika Bose is twenty-six. She says that for twenty years, she paid almost no attention to the north part of the city. She comes from a middle-class family, and the schools she attended as well as the galleries, cinemas, shops, and cafés where she and her friends would meet were all

British Library, London



Dalhousie Square, Calcutta, 1865.

Another medieval castle has walls sheathed in a spider web of electric cables, advertisements covering the windows, and additions bulging like tumors.

located in central and south Calcutta, in the former British cantonment or the new suburbs where the software companies and call centres sit ensconced in their glass skyscrapers.

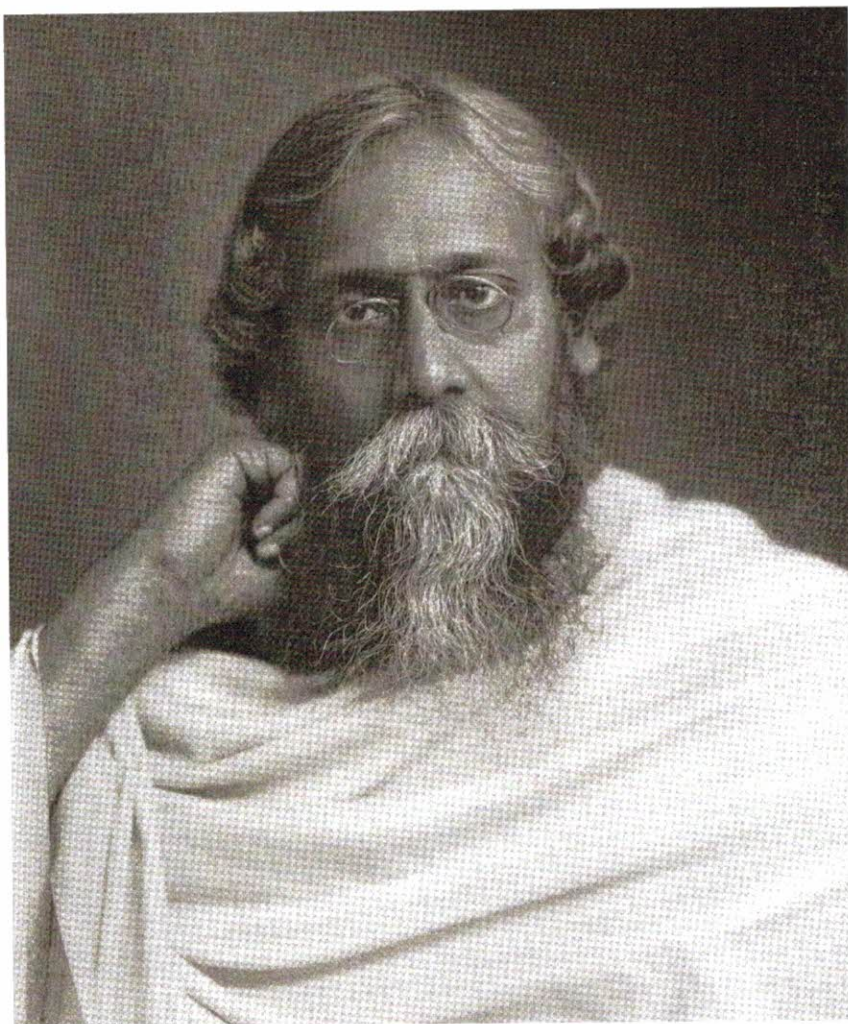
For the middle class, the north means crooked alleys, crumbling walls, and stinking markets. Not until she studied architecture in Ahmedabad—about a thousand kilometres away—did Bose

Kamalika Bose discovered the morbid beauty of the old city and decided to write her thesis on the merchant palaces lining either side of Chitpur Road.

discover the morbid beauty of the old city of Calcutta and decide to write her thesis on the corridor of merchant palaces lining either side of Chitpur Road. She intended to take five buildings as examples for her thesis. “But you can’t go to north Calcutta with a plan,” Kamalika comments. She spent the first six months, she says, getting lost every time she went there. And instead of five, she ended up measuring and photographing fifty-five buildings, knocking on doors and speaking with owners. And so Kamalika Bose became a specialist in historic preservation, primarily in preserving one thing: memories.

How was it possible for people to amass such great wealth in such a short time—and for it to slip through their descendants’ fingers so quickly?

In the sweltering midday heat, the great great-grandson of the Raja of Shobhabazar stands next to two wrecked cars and a smoking pile of garbage. He takes us into the cool garden of his childhood: “Here were the beds with the flowers offered to the goddess.” He points to a corrugated iron shed, from which large-eyed mechanics with oil-smearred faces stare out at us: “There we climbed the trees.” Behind the overgrown wall is the tennis court. With his black eyebrows and shock

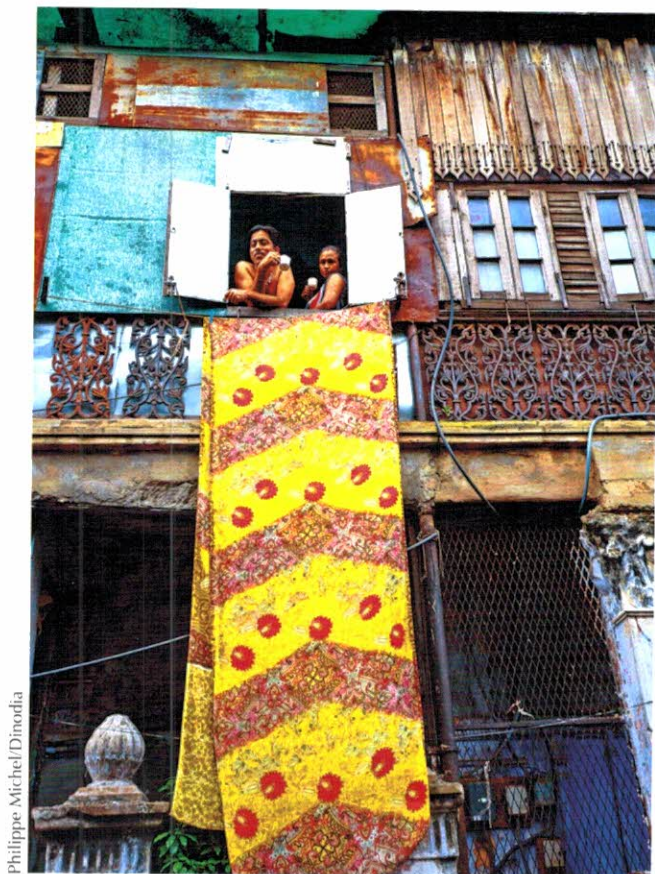


Classic Vision/Dinodia

Rabindranath Tagore,
1861-1941.

She spent the first six months getting lost every time she went to Chitpur Road. And instead of five, she ended up measuring and photographing fifty-five buildings.

of hair, Probal Deb, the Raja’s great-great-grandson, looks like an Indian incarnation of Groucho Marx. On the street he towers over the residents by a head or two.



Philippe-Michel Dimodia

*Old structures
modified to
fit new demands.*

Now in the Natmandir, an assembly hall modeled on a Greek temple, steel girders support the ceiling, and empty paint buckets litter the floor.

The two stone lions guarding the entrance to his palace watch over a ruin. The second floor of the main wing has collapsed; in the Natmandir, the assembly hall modeled on a Greek temple, steel girders support the ceiling, and empty paint buckets litter the floor. Upstairs the air is so heavy with tile dust and pigeon droppings that we can hardly breathe. Coughing, we make our way through one of the cradles of modern India.

In 1863, influential Indian merchants gathered in the great hall of the Natmandir to demand the release of a British clergyman arrested for denouncing inhumane working conditions on the cotton plantations. For the first time, the citizens of Calcutta joined forces against the colonial administration, a protest in the spirit of the Boston Tea Party. For this reason, Deb's family handed over the building to the municipal administration for a nominal sum, with the stipulation that it be renovated—a commitment the city has heretofore only partially fulfilled.

In the two-room apartment where he lives, the great-great-grandson of the Raja invites us to make ourselves



John Henry Claude-Mil/Dimodia

*The bustling
Rajabazar
vegetable market.*



Raqueel Carbonell/Dimodia

Right Children in the streets of North Calcutta.



Palash Khan/Dimodia



Yoko Aziz/Dimodia

Above and centre Street life on Chitpur Roads.

In 1863, influential Indian merchants gathered in the Natmandir to protest, the first time that citizens of Calcutta joined forces against the colonizers.

comfortable on the bed. Then, from a dented steel cabinet decorated with stickers of German soccer players, he retrieves an old drawing of the palace and a genealogical table he has been working on for twenty years. He can trace his ancestry back sixteen generations; from the eighth on it gets exciting, with Nabakrishna Deb. The latter, Deb tells us, was “very friendly” with Warren Hastings. In the history books, I later read that in 1690, the English established a trading post in the region of modern-day Calcutta, expanding it in the years that followed. Since they spoke neither Persian—the courtly language of the time—nor Bengali, the foreigners needed interpreters and mediators, men like Nabakrishna Deb, who gave Persian lessons to the first governor general, Warren Hastings. Or like Ratan Sarkar, a low-caste washer who was hired onto a British ship as a *dobhashi*, a translator, because he misheard and thought the seamen were looking for a *dhoba*, a washer. He quickly adjusted to his new profession and ended up becoming one of the richest men in the city.



*Old Fort Galt,
Calcutta, 1810, Thomas
& William Daniell.*



Anil Dave/Dimedia



Tramways ply the roads in old Calcutta.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the British increasingly challenged local authority and the merchants of Calcutta conspired with the English.

Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, the British increasingly challenged the authority of the Nawab, the Bengali governor of the Grand Mogul, and it was the merchants of

Calcutta who conspired with the English adventurers and paved the way for the change of regime.

As a reward, they received honorary titles from the British—and riches

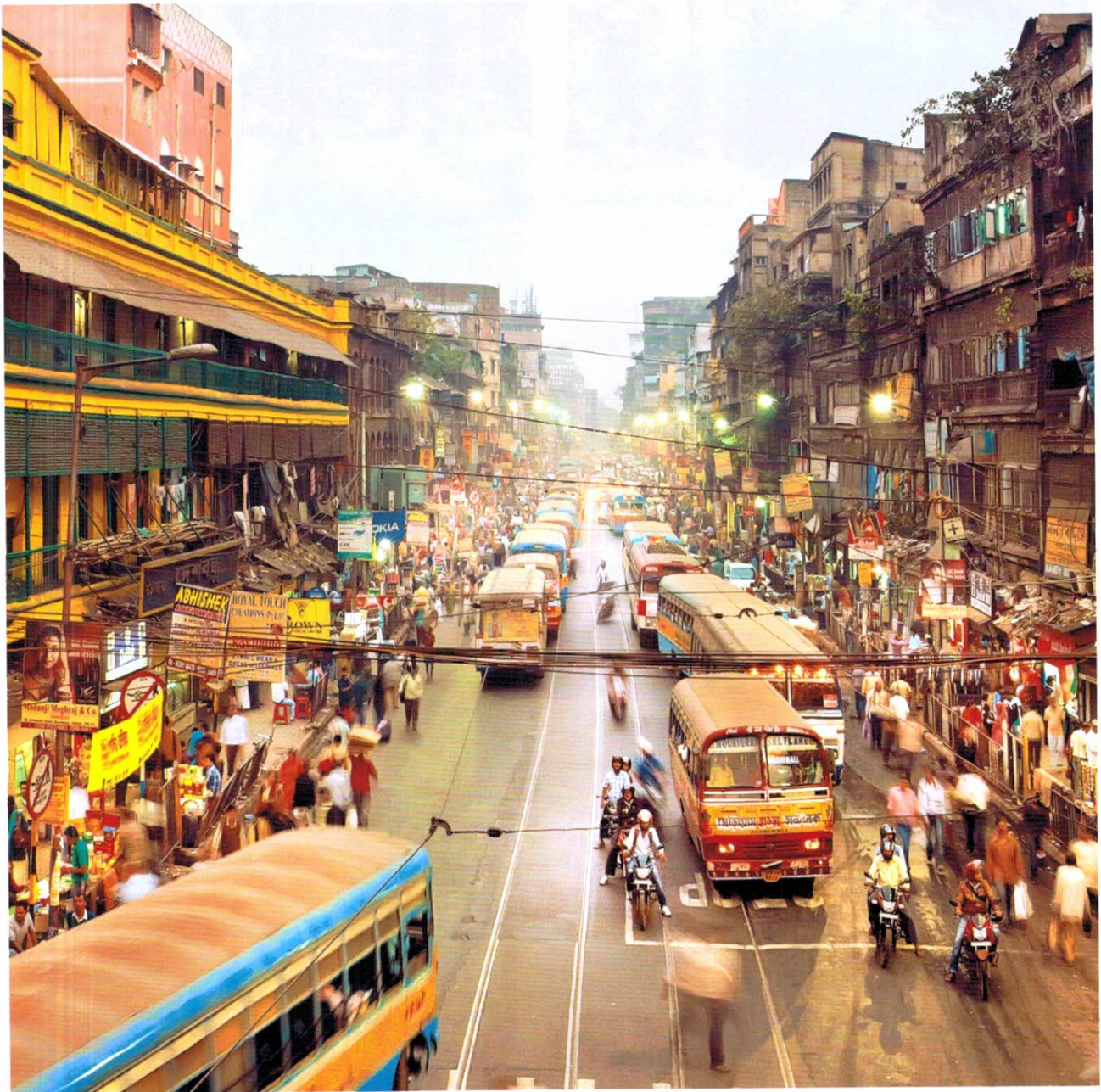
from the treasuries of the defeated Nawab. In 1757, at just thirty-four years of age, Nabakrishna Deb built the Shobhabazar Palace.

Over the next two centuries, as

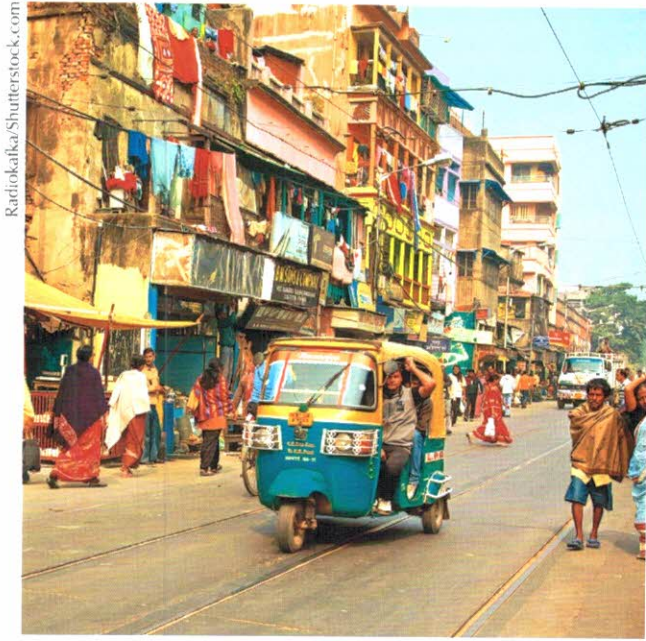
many as 300 members of the family dwelt in the expansive estate—the women invisibly in the zenana, women's quarters in the main house. The family had its own bazaar that

After the change of regime, these merchants received honorary titles from the British—and riches from the treasuries of the defeated Nawab.

Traffic patterns have since changed.



Radiokafka/Shutterstock.com



Calcutta was founded c.1690 as an East India Company trading post.

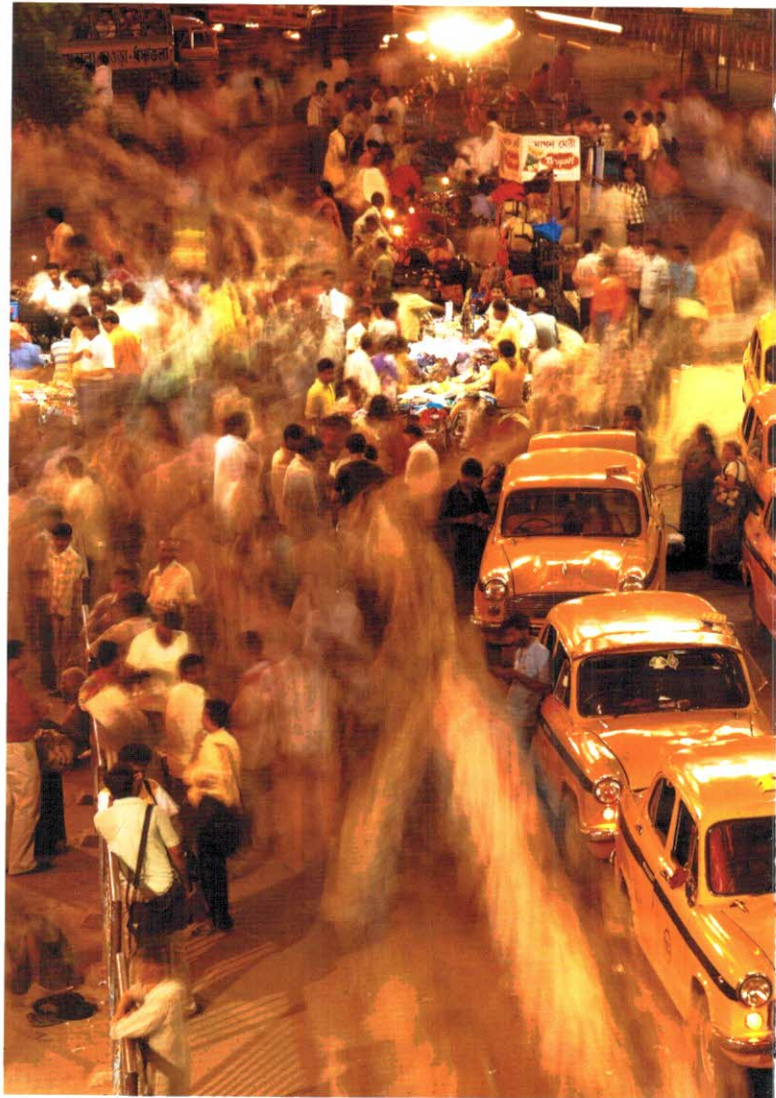
The great founders' descendants, called Babus, boasted that they lit cigarettes with bank notes and never wore any article of clothing twice.

supplied it with groceries, while outside the palace walls a busti grew a slum where servants and employees lived. The estate was financed by the income from land and rents.

Like most of the other great families, the Debs had become feudal lords: with their fortune they acquired immense holdings of land from which they were permitted to levy taxes, keeping a percentage for themselves. They also dispensed justice.

The same development occurred in almost all the families, says Kamalika Bose. In the eighteenth century, the so-called Babu culture flourished in the palaces. The great founders' descendants, called Babus, squandered their inheritance and boasted that they lit cigarettes with bank notes and never wore any article of clothing twice.

They filled their palaces with all that was expensive, ostentatious, and European. Their children and grandchildren, however—often educated at the best English or colonial schools—turned away in revulsion from the luxury and excesses of the Babus, devoting themselves to social, cultural or spiritual interests. Radhakanta Deb, the last Raja of the Shobhabazar family and Probal Deb's great-great-grandfather, published a Sanskrit dictionary in eight volumes and set up a printing press in his home for this purpose. He wrote numerous books and published a schoolbook for girls, also establishing a school for them.

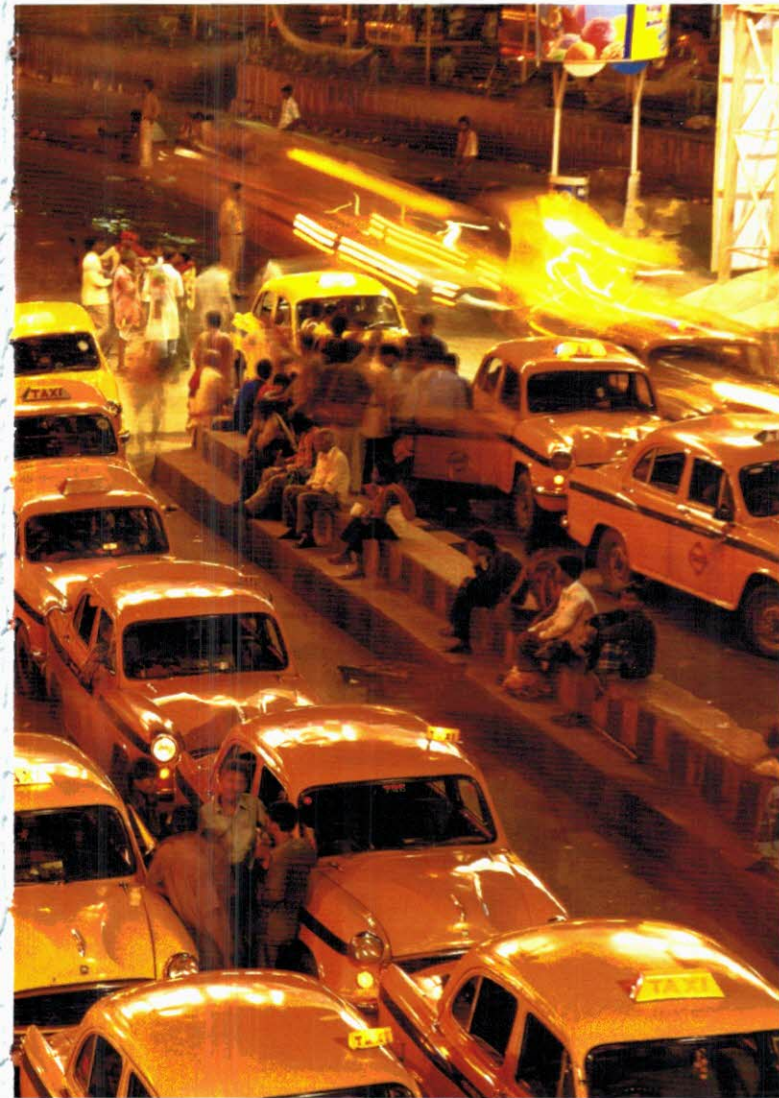


No family, however, was as outstanding as the Tagores. They were musicians, published journals, founded political parties and universities, and fought for the reform of Hinduism and the abolition of the caste system. In their palaces, the sons and daughters were taught together by their own relatives or English tutors.

Tagore even learned German within a few months in order to read Heine and Goethe in the original. With regard to his reading of Faust, he later wrote in a self-critical vein: "I believe I found my entrance.... not like one who has keys for all the doors, but as a casual visitor who is tolerated in some general guest-room, comfortable but not intimate." Today he is often compared to Goethe in his universalistic knowledge and bequest to posterity. The anthems of India and neighbouring Bangladesh both stem from his pen.

But wealth only lasts three generations, according to a Bengali proverb. In Calcutta, there was more to it than just the declining initiative of spoiled heirs: in 1912, the British grew weary of the rebelliousness of the enlightened and urbane Bengalis and moved the capital of the crown colony to Delhi, 1,500 kilometres away. In 1947, India achieved independence, and East and West Pakistan were partitioned as a homeland for Muslims. Calcutta lost almost its entire hinterland, and millions of refugees poured into the city. In the 1950s, the Indian state began restricting the power of the large

Wealth only lasts three generations, according to a Bengali proverb. In Calcutta, it was more than just the declining initiative of spoiled heirs.



Van LaorDinodia

Right
The crowded
flower market at
Mullick Ghat.



Radiokafka Shutterstock.com

estate holders and placed limits on land possession. The Babus were left with the income from buildings in the city, and there the strict regulations with which socialist state governments courted voters held rents at the lowest levels.

Probal Deb's hands circle over the plan with the



Amil Dave/Dinodia

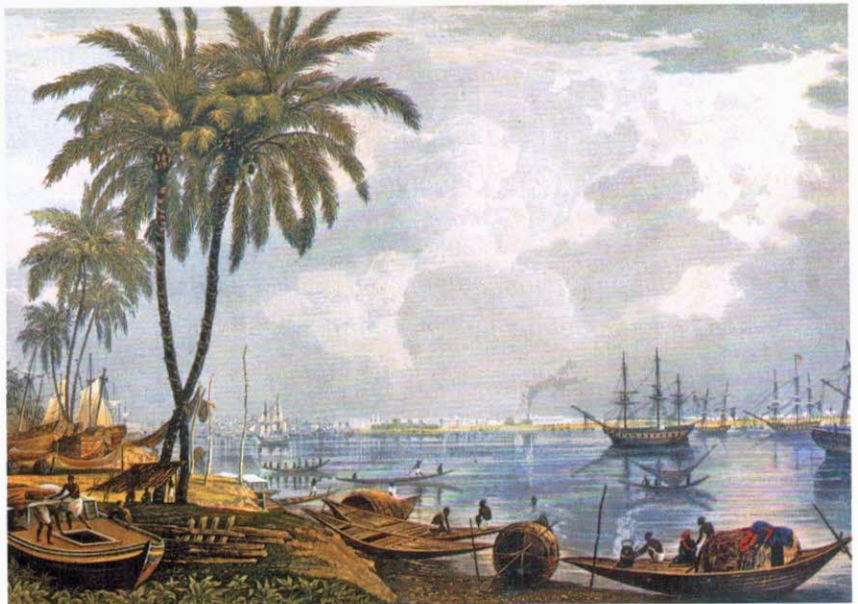
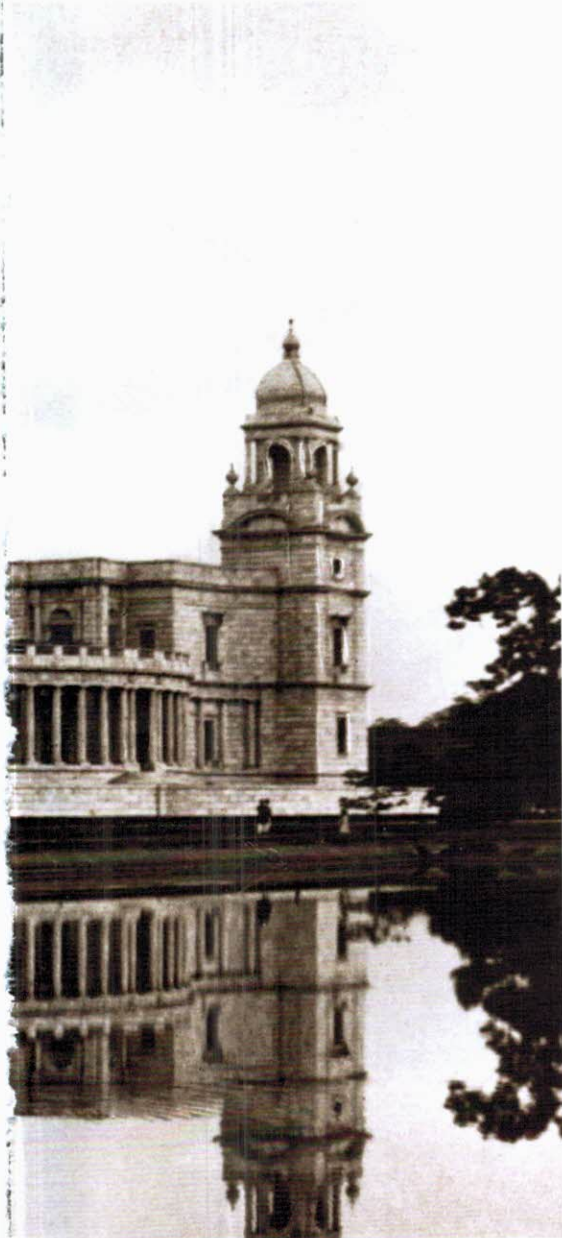
The marble Victoria Memorial built between 1906-1921, now a museum, is still well preserved.

In the 1950s, the Indian state began restricting the power of the large estate holders and placed limits on land possession.

The Babus were left with the income from buildings and the socialist government's strict regulations held rents at the lowest levels.

Above *The Writer's Building, 1798, Thomas Daniell.*

Below *A View of Calcutta, from a Point Opposite to Kidderpore, 1826, James Baillie Fraser.*



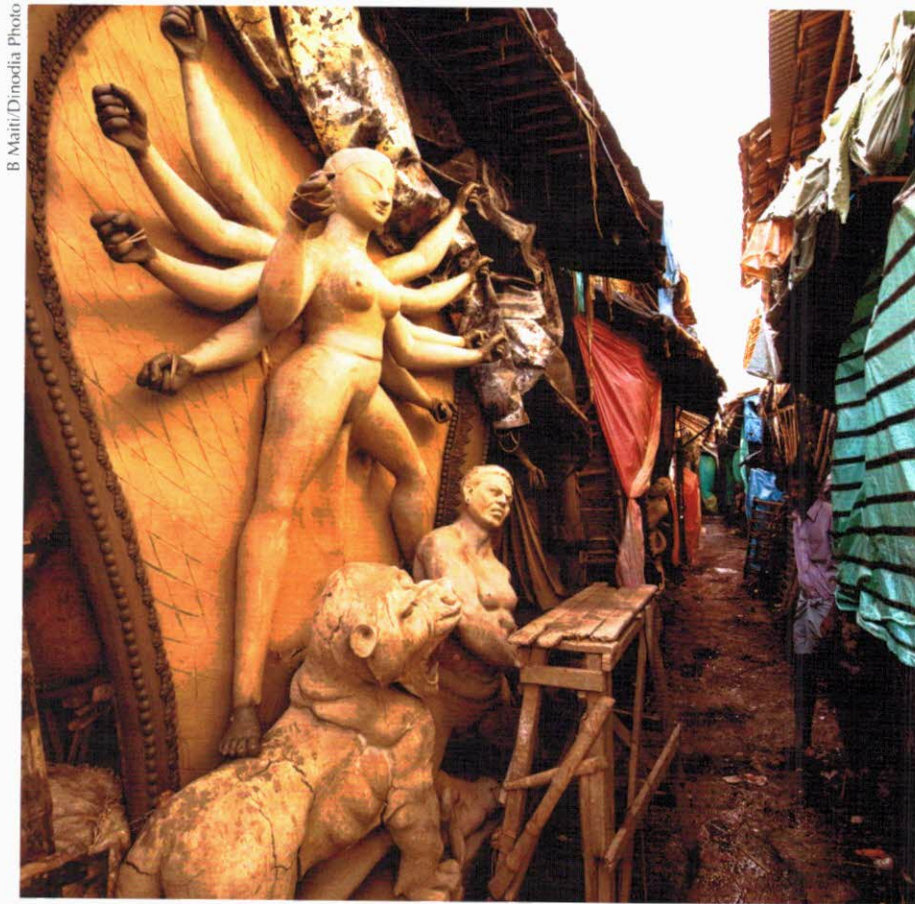
drawing of the palace. In 1920, the main house was torn down to make space for an apartment building; the great rotunda followed in 1940. In the 1960s, the rental income dried up. At that time, Probal was working at a marketing firm in Bombay, but after the death of his father he moved back to Calcutta to take care of the family estate.

Professor Jayanta Kushary Kritya Kavyatirtha shows an impressive business card, with eight positions including Principal N.B.S.S.S., and Organizing Coach W.B. Vaidic Academy, as well as the title “Eminent Author, Critic and Dramatist.” The

words “Gold Medallist” appear in parentheses after his name—but in which discipline?

Professor Kushary is a young man with a boyish face and a crew cut. His house at the end of a narrow alley consists of a small inner courtyard

The Durga Puja in the Shobhabazar Rajbari is the most important, and most traditional service in honour of the goddess Durga. No ritual has been shortened or changed.



B. Maity/Dimodia Photo

*Kumartuli potters
in the seasonal
festive fray.*

One person sings the name of Durga 100,000 times in the fifteen days before the actual celebration. It is the most difficult puja in Calcutta, the high priest says proudly.

with a house temple, as well as two chambers and a lavatory. The shelves of the rooms are filled with books and cooking utensils.

His father, Kushary tells us, led the Durga Puja in the Shobhabazar Rajbari from 1957 on. It is the

oldest, most important, and most traditional service in honour of the goddess Durga. No ritual has been shortened or changed. One person sings the name of Durga 100,000 times in the fifteen days before the actual celebration begins.

great epic poems *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, while another man takes care of the fire. A total of eighteen priests are involved, and in the kitchen, prasad, or offerings, for 200 people are prepared. It is the most difficult puja in Calcutta, the high

of these newfangled things with the face of a Bollywood star or a fashion model.

It takes the potters of Kumartuli six months to produce a statue like that. An entire colony of them had once settled on the banks of the

Two wise men from the holy city of Benares recite from the *Vedas* and the two great epic poems *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, while another man takes care of the fire.



PhotosIndia.com/Dinodia

Idols of Durga in various stages of readiness.

It takes the potters of Kumartuli six months to produce a proper statue of the goddess—not one of these newfangled things with the face of a Bollywood star or a fashion model.

Five persons sing the Chandipath song of praise twenty times, while another five sing the same work twenty-two times, and that takes fifteen days as well. Two wise men from the holy city of Benares recite from the *Vedas* and the two

priest says proudly. Moreover, at the end of the four day celebration, the clay statue of the goddess is not just dumped over the edge of a boat, but is slowly sunk down into the waves on ropes. And of course it is still a proper goddess—not one

Ganges to supply the Babu palaces with goddesses; today, their descendants also earn their living by creating fiberglass Roman columns for the new middle class—or replicas of the Eiffel Tower.

In early March, to be sure, most of the potters are busy making figures of Kali, the patron goddess of Calcutta. The embodiment of the feminine power Shakti, she has four arms, a garland of skulls around her neck, and a skirt of dismembered arms. For the bodies, the potters use a glossy black paint. The master potter explains that since she is sticking out her tongue, it is a destructive Kali.

The story goes as follows: While fighting against evil spirits, Durga plucked out one of her eyebrows, which turned into the goddess Kali. Kali defeated the demons in a bloodbath that would make censored video games

Center A Kumartuli potter works on an assembly line.

Below Immersion of the idol in the Hooghly river.



Philippe Michel/Dinodia



Philippe Michel/Dinodia

An entire colony of Kumartuli potters had once settled on the banks of the Ganges to supply the palaces of the Babus with idols of goddesses.

look harmless, and then, intoxicated by her murderous rage, set about destroying the entire world. Only when her husband Shiva threw himself on the ground before her and she put her foot on him—rather atypical behavior for Hindu women—did Kali come to her senses, stick out her tongue in surprise and

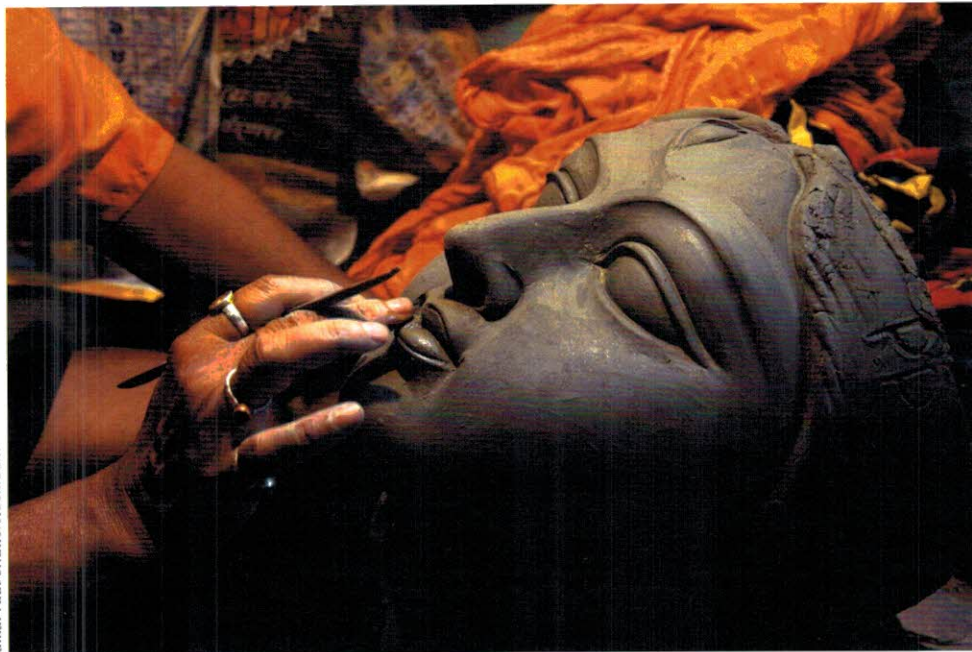
shame, and cease from her wasting slaughter. Even Indians from neighbouring provinces, admits Bose, find Kali a little threatening.

We are allowed to watch how at the end of the process, the master potter paints the three eyes in glowing red-orange. Then he immediately binds the shiny black-painted head

Today, their descendants earn their living by creating fiberglass Roman columns for the new middle class— or replicas of the Eiffel Tower.



photosindia.com/Dmoxia



Saikat Paul/Shutterstock.com

Center Imparting facial expression to the idol.

Above The deity is instated in her pandal for 15 days.

with a banana leaf. When the high priest removes this blindfold, the goddess will come to life.

A total of 1,300 houses are registered with the municipal administration as historic monuments. "But," as Alapan Bandyopadhyay, Municipal Commissioner and chief historic preservationist, says with disarming honesty, "the list is rather nebulous." No one really knows the criteria by which it originated. He is an elite civil servant of the Indian Administrative Service, a young man with black pants, a white shirt, and a voice that gets more high-pitched the faster and more emphatically he speaks. When I compare the architectural treasures of Calcutta with those of Havana, he nearly explodes: Havana?

Havana is a copy of a Spanish city on a blank piece of land in the New World. There is no comparison whatsoever with

Calcutta, the city where the largest and most powerful colonial empire in the world encountered the oldest living high culture. “We are the new Rome! London was much too small, but here the English had room, here they could build the Pax Britannica in grand style.” Accordingly, his priority is to preserve the majestic public buildings that bear witness to

A total of 1,300 houses are registered with the municipal administration as historic monuments, but no one knows the criteria by which the list originated.

this meeting of two high cultures — Dalhousie Square, Victoria Memorial, — and not so much the private homes. “Chitpur is exquisite,” he exclaims, and then an octave higher: “exquisite.” For, he says, the street forms a straight line connecting pre-British Sanskrit culture with the British settlements. No wonder

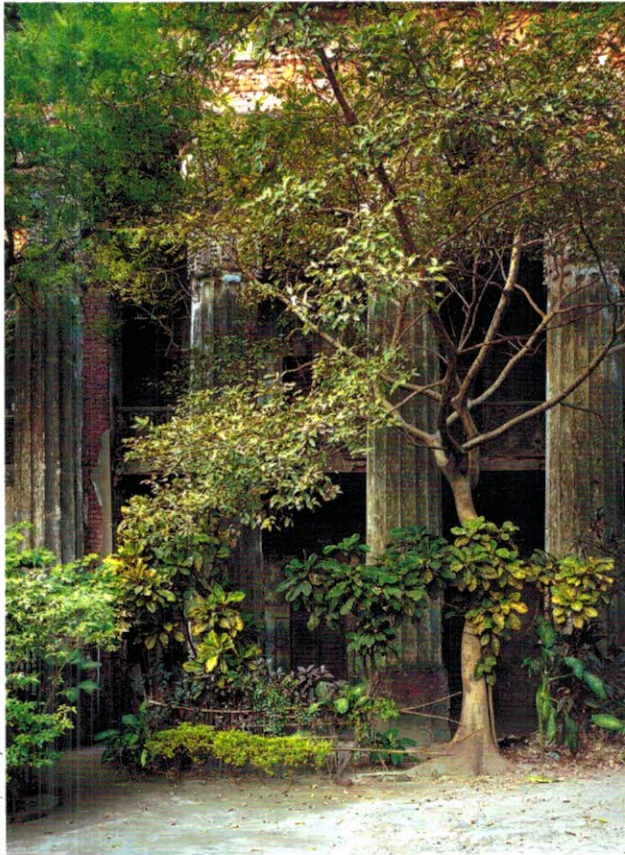


Courtesy: Halje Cantz



Above Old Jorabagan Police Station, Nimtala Ghat Street, Kolkata Heritage Photo.

Left View on the Chitpore Road, Calcutta, 1797, Daniell Thomas.



Courtesy: Hatje Cantz

Tagore lived there, at the crossroads between India and the Empire. That is also why the Tagores' houses became citadels of emancipation. Do we know that it was the wife of a Tagore brother who was the first women to perform her ritual morning bath in the Ganges, washing under her sari before the eyes of everyone present? Up to that point, the women had been

Chitpur Road is a line connecting Sanskrit culture to British settlements. No wonder Tagore lived there, at the crossroads of India and the Empire.

let down into the water in their litters. Shortly thereafter she instigated a second scandal: she rode out onto the Maidan, the Hyde Park of Calcutta, on horseback next to her husband.

The Commissioner gushes over the long-dead Tagore women with the passion of a man in love. Then he leans back, sighing: "When we

Above Basubati, Nandala and Pashupatinath Bose, 65 Bagbazar Street, Kolkata Heritage Photo.

Right A view in the Bazaar, leading to the Chitpore Road, 1826, James Baillie Fraser.



lose Chitpur, we lose our history.” Unfortunately, he says, while they can forbid the demolition of certain buildings, they can do nothing for them financially.

On the way back, Kamalika Bose wants to quickly drop off some plans

The first inner courtyard of Mullick Palace is probably the most beautiful in all Calcutta, with ornamented iron railings and Art Déco gas lamps.

Marble Palace,
Muktaram Babu
Street, Kolkata
Heritage Photo.



Courtesy: Haije Cantz

she had drawn. She jumps out of the car, but after two minutes she returns and pounds excitedly on the window: “He says you should come in.”

On my first visit to Jadulal Mullick’s house, I was only allowed into the office and the first inner courtyard. It is probably the most beautiful in all Calcutta, with ornamented iron railings and Art Déco gas lamps, a stage where dances and puppet theatre were once performed, and

colonnades on two floors so that even the women and children could watch the spectacle in the courtyard.

By the second visit, I am no longer a stranger. Rajat Mullick, the only grandson in a large family full of daughters, opens the door to the grand salon and quietly enjoys the amazement of his visitor, who does not know where to look first – at the finely painted wooden ceiling, at crystal chandeliers the height of a

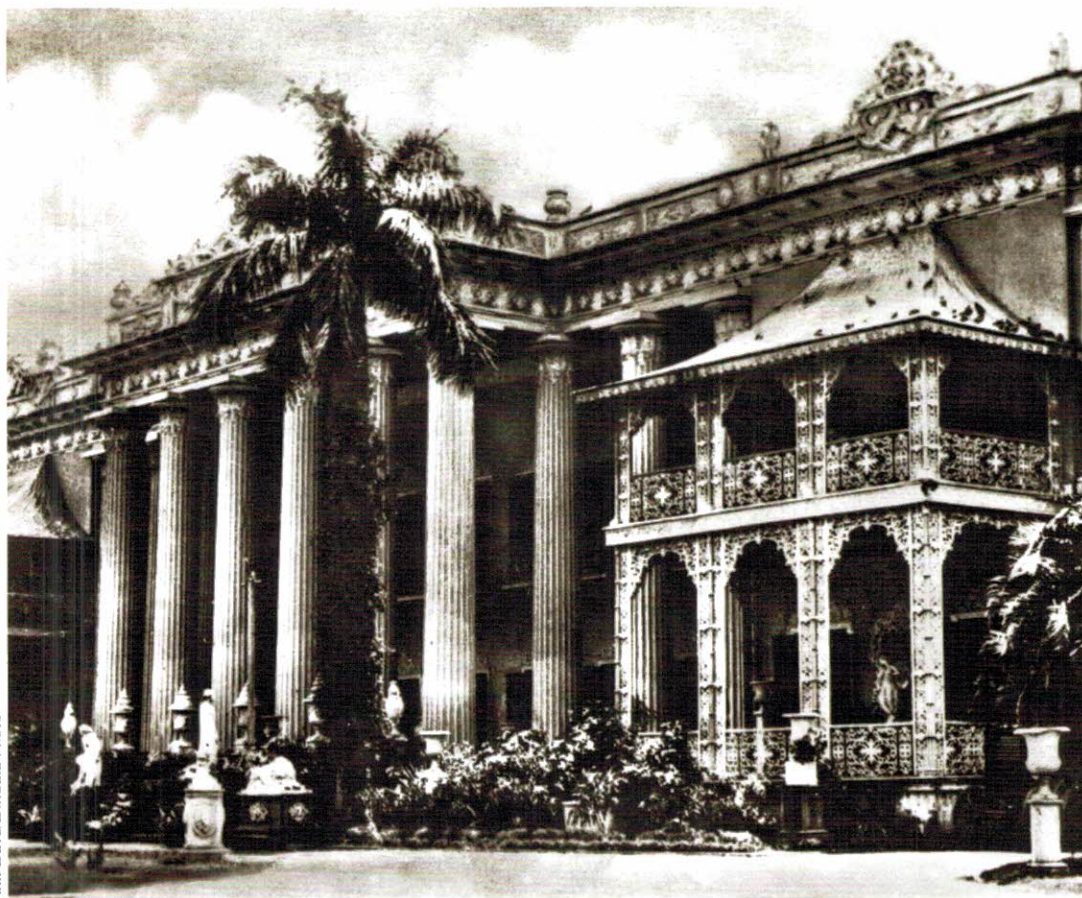
man hanging in plastic cocoons over a dining table that once seated forty to fifty people, at the marble sculptures of Europa, Venus, Atlas?

His ancestors, Rajat Mullick tells us, were somewhat eccentric—his great-great-grandfather Manmathana Mullick drove a zebra-drawn carriage through the city—but also very spiritual: Ramakrishna Paramahansa, the great Hindu mystic, experienced transcendental illumination on the

stage of the inner courtyard.

Every nine years they celebrate a forty-day festival to the family goddess, together with all the relatives from South Calcutta and even some from the United States—“from the green pastures,” as Rajat Mullick says.

The responsibility of preserving the house has fallen on his shoulders, but the rental income from the family’s other houses is nowhere near sufficient. From the outside, it is hard



Anil Dave/Dinodia Photo

A postcard view of the Marble Palace, in better repair.

Visitors, do not know where to look first—at the finely painted wooden ceiling, at crystal chandeliers the height of a man, at the marble sculptures?

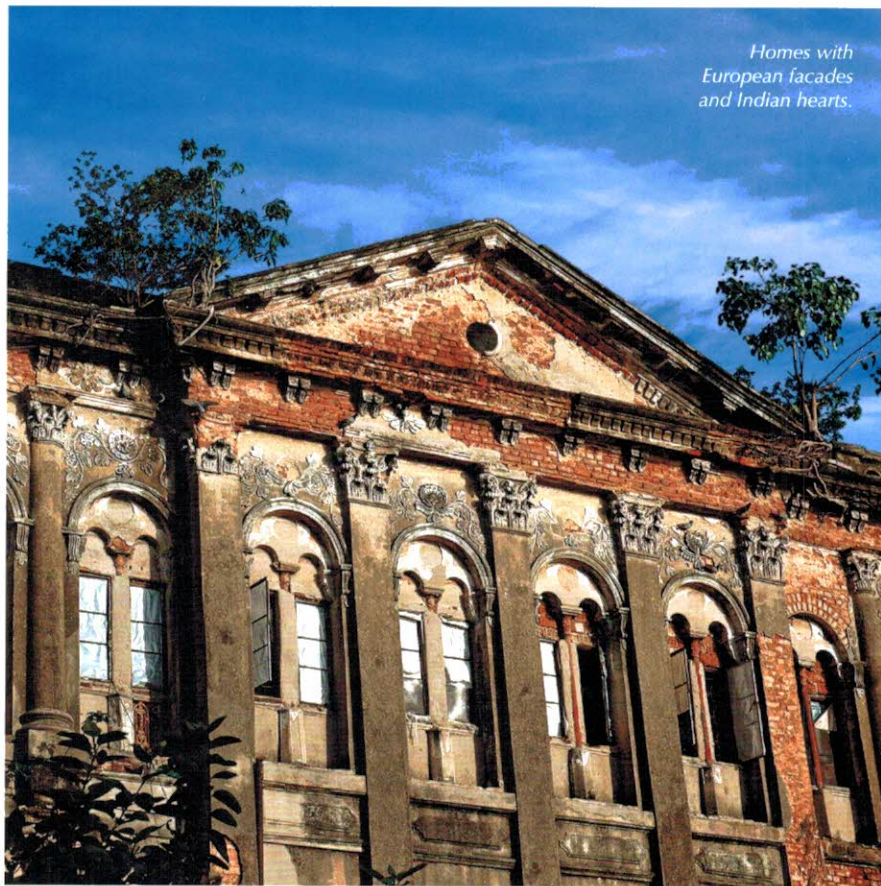
to believe the house is still habitable.

“In twenty years,” says Kamalika Bose, “these houses won’t be here anymore. At least not in this form.”

But will the new architecture that replaces them not be more authentic, more Indian? Bose shakes her head.

The houses were perfectly suited to the climate and the needs of their inhabitants. The columns and capitals were just decoration, a ploy by the merchants to make the British take them seriously—and thus served a function as well. “But the houses always had Indian souls.”

The houses were perfectly suited to the climate and the needs of their Indian inhabitants. The columns and capitals were just decoration, a ploy.



Prasanta Biswas/Dinodia

The embellishments served a function — they made the British regard the Indian merchants more seriously. But the homes always had Indian souls.

says Bose. As so often in India, the Western appearance was only a façade—intended for all those who would have been frightened by the image of a black goddess with a red tongue. 🌺

Kolkata Heritage Photos courtesy *Hatje Cantz Publishers, Germany.*