

**Mahua Sarkar**

***The Gasping City: An Environmental History of Calcutta, 1817–1913***

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Colonial masters promoted the notion that they were the only benefactors and guardians of India's growth throughout their time there, branding the country as dark, superstitious and reluctant to accept change. The British administration in India implemented various policies, rules and regulations under the guise of 'development'. Sometimes, these developmental initiatives had a detrimental impact on society and disrupted the equilibrium between people and nature. Sarkar's book serves as a poignant reminder of this fractured relationship, particularly within the context of colonial Calcutta, where the modernisation effort achieved its zenith.

The environmental history of a city, encompassing its ecology, public health and diverse impacts on the populace, has recently been examined by scholars such as Mathew Kingle and David Soll.<sup>1</sup> In the context of South Asia, Sarkar's endeavour to document the history of Calcutta from an environmental perspective is a recent contribution to this genre. The work under review covers nearly a century (1817–1923), and consists of three primary chapters, in addition to an introduction and conclusion. In the introduction, Sarkar briefly summarises the creation, growth and development of Calcutta, followed by its rapid urbanisation and industrialisation with an influx of population, which ultimately transformed the city (pp. 14–18). While appreciating numerous historical works that have been written about urbanism, public health and environmental history in general, she asserts that her current study is a modest but unique attempt to construct an environmental history using both official texts and vernacular sources.

Chapter 1 discusses how the urban geography of Calcutta was subject to regularisation initiatives: by the Lottery Committee (1817), the Calcutta Improvement Trust (1911) and the Calcutta Corporation (which was initiated in 1876). However, the processes of rehousing, transportation, electrification and sanitation led to considerable disruption of traditional lifestyles and the deterioration of urban ecosystems. The alleged urban design of Calcutta, with congestion, dust, heightened smoke pollution, changes in land topography and excessive water consumption, has significantly impacted the environment (p. 52). The author notes that Calcutta exhibited a 'scientific temper' during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but did not adequately tackle pressing public health issues and pollution. The inflow of people caused outbreaks of diseases such as malaria, kala azar, leprosy and tuberculosis. Sarkar asserts

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1. Mathew Kingle, *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); David Soll, *Empire of Water: An Environmental and Political History of the New York City Water Supply* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

that, despite the enactment of various legislations, their implementation was often ineffective. An illustrative example is the Smoke Nuisance Act of 1905, which ostensibly tackled environmental pollution; however, its principal aim was ‘to maintain the brilliant whiteness of the white marble edifice of Victoria Memorial’ (p. 52).

Chapter 2 delineates the perspectives, apprehensions and admonitions of the *bhadrolok* society<sup>2</sup> and their growing concern about urbanisation, environmental degradation, pollution and the emergence of numerous ailments in nineteenth-century Calcutta. Sarkar aims to comprehend the complex essence of the ‘colonial bourgeoisie’, which adopted modernity and Western science while yet preserving traditional belief systems. The *bhadrolok* community, as demonstrated by Sarkar, engaged with contemporary journals and periodicals to discuss various issues such as hygiene, sanitation and dietary practices, but ironically abstained from commenting on issues such as ‘toilet facilities’ or the ‘nature of toilets’, which received the most severe criticism from Europeans (p. 70). This chapter emphasises the emerging wave of ‘urgency in scientific education’ in Calcutta, led by innovators such as Raja Rammohan Roy and Mahendra Lal Sircar, who advocated for the convergence of science and religion. Sarkar references two significant Bengali works, published by Peary Chand Mitra (*Alaler Ghorer Dulal*) and Sivanath Sastri (*Ramtanu Lahiri o Totkalin Bongosamaj*), to illustrate the deficiencies in the healthcare system, city environment and poor infrastructural condition.

In Chapter 3, Sarkar conducts a thorough analysis of two Bengali journals, namely *Bamabodhini* and *Bangomohila*, to investigate how the lives of *Bhadromohila* (Bengali middle-class women) were shaped by contemporary Western scientific concepts such as ‘public health’, ‘sanitation’, ‘cleanliness’, and issues pertaining to women’s health and hygiene. A compelling micro study of women’s experiences in late nineteenth-century Bengal is evidenced through health initiatives presented by these two journals. Sarkar has examined several essays that address discipline, cleanliness, timeliness and women’s diet, which distinctly illustrate the ‘patriarchal and protectionist idea regarding the development of the European concept of public health among women’ (p. 77). Both these vernacular publications endeavoured to reconcile Western modernity with local concepts of health and medicine in their discussions on women’s health and sanitation in Bengal.

Carlo Ginzburg<sup>3</sup> has emphasised the importance of microhistory – a method that integrates the study of minor and local events and concentrates on area histories with the use of local documents. Sarkar’s book offers an example of this methodology, and she deserves praise for her broad use of vernacular

2. *Bhadralok* is Bengali for the new class of ‘gentlefolk’ who arose in the Bengal region during British rule.

3. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996).

REVIEWS

Bengali sources to trace the history of Calcutta's urban ecosystem. Her study will be invaluable to scholars interested in environmental history from a city-centric viewpoint.

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