

'Rogues and Rebels': Nostalgia and Night Walking in Calcutta

Anuparna Mukherjee

Abstract

This paper looks at the practice of night walking in the modern city, and a strong nostalgia for such nocturnal perambulations that confront some of the assumptions about Calcutta nightlife, largely built upon the colonial stereotype of the 'city of dreadful nights.' From the unorthodox spatial practices that emerge in the decadent nostalgia for the night among the *Krittibas* generation, particularly their endless drunken night walks, the paper charts an alternative cartography of the city which is both anarchic and transformative in its potential.

Key words: Night walking, nostalgia, maps, transgression, city.

The *thick, greasy* night shuts in everything. We have gone beyond the ancestral houses of the Ghoses of the Boses, beyond the lamps, the smells, and the crowd of Chitpore Road, and have come to a greatwilderness of packed houses—just such *mysterious, conspiring* tenements as Dickens would have loved.¹ (emphasis mine)

The excerpt, from the titular anecdote of Rudyard Kipling's experience of Calcutta in *The City of Dreadful Nights* stitches together a string of connections between night and opacity, and by extension to a world of deceit, crime and criminality in the colonial metropolis. Conjuring an atmosphere of mystery and conspiracy, he gives us an ominous picture of the nocturnal city which is suitably substantiated in the following pages, devoted to the accounts of his visit to a musical soiree in the house of a courtesan who had in the past reduced rich men to paupers, an opium den around the red light district, and finally to a shady native quarter where local rogues pitilessly rob the sailors after getting them thoroughly intoxicated. The epithet 'the city of dreadful night' that the author uses for recounting his nocturnal adventures into the depths of the city underworld

TRIVIUM

eventually turns out to be the name for Calcutta itself—a negative appellation that subsequently becomes intrinsically associated with the city’s history. Calcutta is a city of the night, that too, ‘dreadful’ ones. This combination of ‘dread’ and ‘night’, frightfully holding the other countenance of ‘vice’, of course rests the clichéd and yet the most effective justification behind Britain’s civilizing mission—the barbaric ‘other’ in the ‘dark continents’ had not experienced the benefits of European enlightenment. Predicated upon the binaries between ‘light’/ ‘dark’, ‘day’/ ‘night’, ‘White(Town)’/‘Black Town’, the conception of the colonized space was not only crucial in determining the colonizer-colonized relationship, but an important structuring principle behind bifurcating the city into two distinct sections: ‘You’ll understand that this part of the world is shut to Europeans—absolutely,’²the author urges emphatically while describing the native localities (The Black Town) of Calcutta. Starkly different from the White Town, this part of the city is a world in itself, caught up in its ‘time-rotten’³ primitive ‘wilderness’. Kipling’s assumption is semantically cemented by the accent on the ‘absolute’, after a pause signified by the ‘dash’. However, beyond the reductive judgments about the natives, the general picture that emerges about the ambiance of the nocturnal life of the native town, has a resonance in the following passage from a Bengali writer’s account, Kaliprasanna Singha’s nineteenth century masterpiece, *Hootum Pyanchar Naksha*:

The bells and gongs indicating the arrival of evening had stopped ringing. All the street lamps were lit now. [...] The liquor shops were shut, in keeping with the laws of excise department, but it was not as if the customers went back [empty-handed]. Soon it was dark enough to conduct business under cover. It was difficult to tell the Bhadralkos on the street from the lowly folks. They all wore English shoes, striped wraps from Shantipur and Shimla-style dhotis. Smart-assed *yaars* went around in groups, knocking on people’s doors, laughing raucously and spitting out English words, fast and furious. The house lights coming on in the evening were their cue to step out. [...] Huge crowds assembled in the pots and pans market of Mechhuabazar, the crossing of Chorbagan, Poddar’s

'Rogues and Rebels': Nostalgia and Night Walking in Calcutta

shop at Jorasanko, Natun Bazar, Battala, the lanes of Sonagacchi and the four-point crossing of Aharitolla.⁴

*The 'under cover' business of the night that obliterates distinction between good people and the knaves, or the clandestine visits to the prostitute quarters, hint at the corruption that is embedded in the perverse pleasures of nightlife. Indeed, in popular imagination, night's opposition to the daytime is often perceived by linking it with lawlessness, felony, delinquency, darkness and danger in myriad shapes and forms, and at the same time with an exhilarating sense of freedom. Taking off from these thoughts, this paper will focus on both the actual practice of night walking in the modern city, and a strong nostalgia for such nocturnal perambulations that overturn some of the assumptions about Calcutta nightlife, largely built upon the colonial stereotype of the 'city of dreadful nights'. The memories of night walking in Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Smritir Sahar (City of Memories)* for instance, generate an alternative cartography of the city which is both 'transgressive' and 'transformative' in its potential. This paper will explore some of the unorthodox spatial practices that emerge in the decadent nostalgia for the night among the *Krittibas* generation, particularly in their endless drunken night walks on city streets. Night walking is read against the specific climate in postcolonial Calcutta as well as a broader tradition of rambling or strolling in the night in large postindustrial cities; and equally stout urban nostalgia for that tradition among the poets and artists. In fact, the nightwalker is a stalk character in modern literature, harking back to the days of the *flâneur* who became a cult figure in the streets of *fin de siècle* France, variously associated with a high-born aristocratic dandy, wandering in the streets and arcades of Paris, an indolent idler, 'a man of the crowd,'⁵ or an explorer of urban landscapes. In *The Painter of Modern Life*, Charles Baudelaire gave us the most comprehensive picture of the *flâneur* both as an 'artist-poet' and a disengaged observer of the metropolitan life:*

For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the

TRIVIUM

world—impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito.⁶

Drawing upon Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, who enhanced the interest in the *flâneur* an object of academic enquiry in the twentieth century, described him as a quintessential urban figure, who is both a spectator and an “investigator” of urban life. While Benjamin shows that the true *flâneur* gradually died out with the avalanche of consumer capitalism, it left a lasting impression as the representative face of the modern metropolis, in its disconnectedness and alienation. Several writers and artists in various ways have nostalgically invoked the figure of the *flâneur* both in their aesthetic praxis, as well as in their personal lives by imbibing the art of mapping the urban landscape on foot. The spectre of the *flâneur* haunted the modernist artist beyond the ambit of the European cultures. Walking was a regular habit among several writers who were strongly influenced by the literary archetype of the ‘artist-poet’. Nonetheless, the practice of night walking however, had a more acute transgressive dimension in the manner in which it locked horns with the coercive regimes of discipline, starting with its encounter with the law. In night walking, both ‘night’ and ‘walking’ affirm the subversive potential that is intrinsic to this practice of ambulation. The nightwalker is a ‘modern antihero’⁷ as Beaumont calls him, often indulging in an act of transgression with the purpose of reclaiming the city space, among other things: ‘So if the nightwalker is a fugitive from the ordinary, everyday life of the city, his half-illicit activity obscurely reclaims, redeems or transfigures it.’⁸ While with the night, the associations of subversion are more obvious, walking itself can be seen as a useful ‘tactics’ to combat the numerous tangible and intangible ‘nets of discipline’⁹ saturating our everyday existence. Responding to the urgency of resisting this ‘violence of order’¹⁰ in *The Practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau looks at ‘popular procedures (also “miniscule” and quotidian) [to] manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them.’¹¹ Walking becomes one such practice that challenges the documentation of people and spaces by urban cartographers who relentlessly measure and classify the city space with the overarching goal of disciplining the urban population, and control its resources. The act of walking can potentially confront the narratives with

'Rogues and Rebels': Nostalgia and Night Walking in Calcutta

their embedded ideologies, authored by the geographers, surveyors and other agents of Government by 'enunciating' alternative and often contradictory maps from one's subjective experience. This tradition of night walking in Bengali urban literature reached its acme with the *Krittibas* poets of the fifties. Their nostalgia of the city where their 'dreams were first unchained,'¹² has ineluctably influenced the creation of subversive spaces synonymous with artistic freedom. Their penchant for night walking might have originated from a sense of adventurism, but equally strong was the urge to discover an unknown, and perhaps a more radical side of the city.

Krittibas, a little magazine published in 1953 under the joint editorship of Sunil Gangopadhyay, Ananda Bagchi and Dipak Mazumdar as a platform for young experimental poets, eventually became a trailblazer of a literary subculture in the next couple of decades following the independence. The poets of this generation were known for their strident opposition of literary establishments in their creative practices that locked them into an inexorable conflict with canonical traditions. They discovered a heady joy in challenging the paternalistic authorities and institutions through a repudiation of bourgeois moralism that contributed towards maintaining the façade of social hypocrisy.

The milieu in which the *Krittibas* generation prospered after independence, was that of intense financial and social instability. The city was still reeling from the country's division, and the sufferings of the refugee lives. The youth that came-of-age under the shadows of Partition felt restless as they witnessed the 'daily deaths' of ideals on which the new state was founded. On one hand disenchantment pushed them towards nihilistic death drives, on the other, it honed their creative genius. These poets who were widely talked about for their dissident lifestyle, drew much attention for their professed bohemianism. Some of the greatest names associated with this movement, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Shakti Chattopadhyay, Sarat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, Dipak Mazumdar, Samarendra Sengupta or Sandipan Chattopadhyay who excelled in prose, were largely identified as late Modernists in Bengali literature and they powerfully engaged with the city like their predecessors in the *Kollol* generation. The 'Krittibasis,' as they called themselves radicalized the subversive character of the city in night time. The proverbial declaration delineating their relationship with the night streets in Sarat Kumar

TRIVIUM

Mukhopadhyay's poem, became an iconoclastic statement for the entire generation of antiestablishment writers: 'After twelve, four young men rule Kolkata/ from Chowringhee Bhawanipur to Shyambazar Island' ('*Raat barotar par Kolkata shashon kore charjon jubok /Chowringhee Bhobanipur theke Shyambajar bwadweep*').¹³ While the marginalized community of poets and intellectuals (where marginality was also a self-conscious posturing, embraced by these writers in their youth in hostility to middle-class respectability) suffered a sense of alienation amidst the hubbub of the day, they found their true home in the desolation of the night. So strong was their attachment that they envisaged themselves as the overseer of the nocturnal city. Thus in these lines, and elsewhere, such as the recent interview in *Boier Desh*, Mukhopadhyay while reminiscing about the male bonding among the *Krittibas* writers through different gestures of nighttime sociality—be it in the collective drinking in pubs and country liquor shops, or through the act of nightwalking, reaffirmed their ownership over the nights in the city by repeatedly returning to the metaphor of ruling:

Around 1966-67, the thought of *ruling* Calcutta that crossed our minds came from an indomitable courage. Till very late in the night we would ramble in the nooks and crannies of the city. [after a pause] let me tell you something. There seems to be a lot of confusion regarding the identity of the "four". Who were these four men? [...] The *Krittibas* group had about twenty odd people. Anybody out of them could have been the four [in my poem]. There were no definite names. But yes, Sunil and Shakti were a constant presence. Our sojourn would generally start between half past seven to eight; from *Khalashitola*, *Chota Bristol* to somewhere else. Later in the night we would visit the country liquor shop in North Calcutta. Initially six or seven of us would gather in a place, and then gradually disperse on our way back home. In the end there would be only four of us. Sometimes in a cab, sometimes in rickshaw, or simply by foot we would roam around the whole city. North to south nothing was left untouched. In those days very few people were seen on the streets of Kolkata at night. We had police patrolling

'Rogues and Rebels': Nostalgia and Night Walking in Calcutta

the streets with red headgears. They would stare at us but say nothing. This was how we *ruled* the city! We would romp around on the empty streets like a *ruler*. (emphasis and translation mine)¹⁴

Another important aspect that gets underlined in the passage is the stress on collective, interpersonal bonding on the plane of male friendship. Mukhopadhyay, while recalling some of their early escapades in the interview asserts that in those days all of them were 'unmarried' and under 'thirty'. The poets of the alternative tradition often felt cut-off from the mainstream literary circuit at home, because of which they repeatedly dwelled on the intimacy of a self-enclosed community of friends and peers primarily around their common interest in literature.¹⁵ A succinct projection of such male bonding occurs in the anecdote from Sandipan Chattopadhyay's autobiographical piece, *The Days and Nights of Kolkata* where he fondly recalls the old intellectual gatherings in the country spirit bar at *Khalashitola*, rechristened as KT by its frequenters, around the legendary figure of Kamal Kumar Majumdar, a vanguard of the underground literary tradition in Bengal:

Stories about KT are innumerable. My own stock would exceed the thousand and one tales of the Arabian Nights. The high-priest of KT was Kamal Kumar Majumdar. [...] Every Sunday around eleven in the morning, Kamal *da* sat in one of those long wooden tables with his head upright like an open-hooded snake in its full glory. His posture was always calm and erect. He would smile ethereally like a Snake-God as we gathered around him one by one [...] The *adda*¹⁶ would continue almost till two in the afternoon. Even when Kamal *da* left we would linger behind. (my translation)¹⁷

The writers such as Sunil, Shakti, or Sandipan generally spent long hours in KT, and in other bars of the city like the '*Tower*' or the '*Chota Bristol*' in MotiSil Street, before they could saunter back home at the dead of night. Their nostalgia for Calcutta's decadent night life almost attained a cult status in poems such as Shakti Chattopadhyay's '*E boro Sukher Somoy Noy*' ('These are not Happy Times')¹⁸ and Sunil Gangopadhyay's series on

TRIVIUM

Calcutta, *Smritir Sahar (City of Memories)*. To these somnambulant nightwalkers, the city reveals ‘other’ spaces and subterranean communities that remain invisible in the public gaze during the day:

‘In the deeper night I saw a myriad families on sidewalks,
On Howrah Bridge the carefree, terrifying laugh
Of the naked powerful madman.’¹⁹

While night conceals the familiar under its pall of darkness, spaces within spaces or unseen forms that now become perceptible in the strange chiaroscuro of light and darkness, transform the city into an ‘elsewhere’: ‘The nighttime city is another city’²⁰ as Matthew Beaumont nails it. It is these ‘elsewheres’ or the ‘other spaces’ of the nocturnal Calcutta that become the setting of some of the nostalgic reminiscences in Gangopadhyay’s series *City of Memories*. Some of these poems, referring to a city that has been transported into memory, goes back to his tryst with the city in his early youth, responding to the seduction of its nightlife. These poems unfurl the gradual discovery of the forbidden arteries of city at night in the ‘secret hells’ of:

Kolabagan, Goabagan, Ponchanon-tola, Raja Bazar
Chitpur Tunnel, paradise of Chinatown,
Brothels of Sonagacchi, Wattgunj, Meteburuz.²¹

However, it may be worthwhile to take a note of the title that the poet chooses—‘city of memory’ as it were, for this cluster, since memory vis-à-vis nostalgia operates in multiple layers in these poems. As an aesthetic devise, it engenders a narrative by plucking out memories from that vast, amorphous repository of the past and arranging them in a manner that inspires poetic utterance. And again, since these maps of Calcutta are plotted from memory they must be given concession for the inaccuracies in recollection. This only allows the narrator a greater liberty, complementing the poetic license that he enjoys in conceiving his own maps, charting personal routes and even generating counter-factual ones within the real city space. In these poems nostalgia has been significantly deployed to counteract upon the epistemology of empiricist cartography. An important contribution of nostalgia to this end is the incorporation of both imagination and affect into the human landscape of the map. Here the body of the poem itself becomes the body of nostalgia, by fusing different

'Rogues and Rebels': Nostalgia and Night Walking in Calcutta

temporalities, in its oscillation back and forth in time. And like the actual body, it is pervaded by affects generated by the sense stimuli. Thus the most well known poem in this series, "The City of Memories 1" opens with a tactile description of nostalgia:

At me *tugs* night's sleepless river,
At me *pulls* the secret dark
Breaks my sleep and opens wide
The locked doors of midnight.
(My emphasis)²²

The choice of words like 'tug' or 'pull' presents nostalgia in its affective embodiment that impinges upon his body, drawing the poet out of his sleep to explore the secret recesses of the night like he has done in his youth. As he surges forth into the darkness, the desolate streets of the city stretching to the infinite ('roadways filled with sky')²³ opens the window to the horizons of the world that connects the 'here' to the 'elsewhere':

Through whores' neighbourhood and crashing glasses
I walk beyond the rivers edge
A new odour pervades the city
To west and east, the world lies open.²⁴

While charting his walking tour of Calcutta in the map of nostalgia, the poet instantiates a whole new ecology of nightlife ('Now awakens the worm and flowers')²⁵ in the city that shows that the modernist artists' precarious predilection is towards the dark and the damned. The rebellion against the dominant social order and the state apparatus of discipline, comes together with their love for the nocturnal city. 'Who walks *alone* in the streets at night?' Beaumont poses the question in his book. The answer is hardly unfamiliar:

The sad, the mad, the bad. The lost, the lonely. The sleepless, the homeless. All the city's internal exiles. The night has always been the time for daylight's dispossessed – the dissident, the different. Walking alone at night in the city by both men and women has, since time immemorial, been interpreted as a sign of moral, social or spiritual dereliction.²⁶

TRIVIUM

It is not unnatural that the nocturnal landscape would become the chosen habitat of the dissident poets who strongly identified themselves with these peripheral populations of the city. A romanticized nostalgia about the decadent figures in literature, and the prototype of the Bohemian, dissident artist not only attracted them to the forbidden places and transgressive bodies (lepers, madman, prostitute), they took upon themselves to alter the representations of the night as a drive to decolonize the mental landscape from the social prohibitions and preconceptions. They incorporated into literature a new interpretative geography of the city through the act of night walking. By casting aside, the questions of sin or virtue, these poets venture in the forbidden alleys of the prostitute quarters, the company of pot smokers in the burning Ghats, turning each of these into an aesthetic experience, inspiring intense creativity.

Bibliography

Baudelaire, Charles. 'The Painter of Modern Life', *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, tr., and ed., Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964).

Beaumont, Matthew. *Night Walking: A Nocturnal History of London* (Verso: London, 2015).

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1999).

Chattopadhyay, Sandipan. 'Kolkatar Din Ratri' ('The Days and Nights in Kolkata'), *Uponyas Samagra II* (Kolkata: Ajkal 2005).

Chattopadhyay, Shakti. *Shrestha Kabita* (1973; Repr. Kolkata, Dey's Publishing, 2012).

de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 1* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

Gangopadhyay, Sunil. *City of Memories*, tr., Kalyan Ray and Bonnie MacDougall (New Delhi: Viking, 1991).

Kipling, Rudyard. *The City of Dreadful Night and Other Sketches* (New York: Alex Grosset & Co., 1899).

Mukhopadhyay, Sarat Kumar. *Srestha Kabita* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1999).

Singha, Kaliprasanna. *Hootum Pyanchar Naksha. (Sketches by Hootum the Owl: A Satirist's View of Colonial Calcutta)*, tr., and ed., Chitrallekha Basu (Kolkata: Samya, 2012).

'Rogues and Rebels': Nostalgia and Night Walking in Calcutta

Endnotes :

- 1 Rudyard Kipling, *The City of Dreadful Night and Other Sketches* (New York: Alex Grosset & Co., 1899), pp.58-59.
- 2 Kipling, *The City of Dreadful Night*, p.63.
- 3 Kipling, *The City of Dreadful Night*, p.63.
- 4 Kaliprasanna Singha, *Hootum Pyanchar Naksha (Sketches by Hootum the Owl: A Satirist's View of Colonial Calcutta)*, tr., and ed., Chitralekha Basu (Kolkata: Samya, 2012), p.17.
- 5 From the title of a short story by Edgar Allan Poe.
- 6 Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life,' Jonathan Mayne, tr., and ed., *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon, 1964), p.9.
- 7 Matthew Beaumont, *Night Walking: A Nocturnal History of London* (Verso: London, 2015), p.11.
- 8 Beaumont, *Night Walking*, p.11.
- 9 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol.1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. xiv-xv.
- 10 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol.1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. xiv.
- 11 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, p. xiv.
- 12 Sunil Gangopadhyay, 'City of Memories 1,' Kalyan Ray and Bonnie MacDougall, tr., *City of Memories* (New Delhi: Viking, 1991), p. 14.
- 13 Sarat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, 'Motto Obosthyay Rochito' (*Composed under Intoxication*), *Shrestha Kabita* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1999).
- 14 Sayam Bandyopadhyay, 'Interview with Sarat Kumar Mukhopadhyay' (*BoierDesh : 'Sakhyatkar'*), <http://www.desh.co.in/story/%E0%A6%B6%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%A4%E0%A7%8D%E2%80%8C%E0%A6%95%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%AE%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%96%E0%A7%8B%E0%A6%AA%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A7%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AF%E0%A6%BE%E0%A7%9F>. Accessed 05/08/2016.
- 15 This connection often extended to other anti-establishment and avant-garde literary/artistic communities across the world. For instance, several poets of the *Krittibas* group developed a great camaraderie with the Beat poets of America such as Allan Ginsberg when he visited India.
- 16 Drawing from various definitions, Dipesh Chakrabarty translated *adda*, which was predominantly a male practice in the public sphere of modernity, as “a

TRIVIUM

place' for careless talk with boon companions" or "the chats of intimate friend" [...] Roughly speaking, it is the practice of friends getting together for long, informal, and unrigorous conversations' c.f. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Adda: A History of Sociality,' *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000; Repr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 180-181.

- 17 Sandipan Chattopadhyay, 'Kolkatar Din Ratri' ('The Days and Nights in Kolkata'), *Uponyas Samagra II* (Kolkata: Ajkal 2005), p. 248.
- 18 Shakti Chattopadhyay, 'E Boro Sukher Somoy Noy', *Shrestha Kabita* (1973; Repr. Kolkata, Dey's Publishing, 2012), p.48.
- 19 Gangopadhyay, 'City of Memories 21', p.26.
- 20 Beaumont, *Night Walking*, p.3.
- 21 Gangopadhyay, 'City of Memories 21', p.26.
- 22 Gangopadhyay, 'City of Memories 1', p.14.
- 23 Gangopadhyay, 'City of Memories 1', p.14.
- 24 Gangopadhyay, 'City of Memories 1', p.14.
- 25 Gangopadhyay, 'City of Memories 1', p.15.
- 26 Beaumont, *Night Walking*, p.3.