

CALCUTTA

THE CITY THAT REFUSES TO DIE



Nowhere else in India do people engulf you as they do in Calcutta. From the moment you step off your train or plane, and begin the ride into the city, you will be surrounded by hundreds of thousands of them. Your car or taxicab will plough into the slow crowds like some tropical ice-breaker. The city's smells will punish you from the beginning—dirty streets, perspiring bodies, untended garbage piles, food cooking. Calcutta's seams always seem to strain to contain its people.

There are over 9 million of them within the 533 square-mile circumference of the Calcutta Metropolitan District. Crowded dangerously on both banks of the Hooghly (a tributary of the Ganges), densities of population range from over 200,000 persons per square-mile in North Calcutta, to less than 2,000 in other parts.

To be really enveloped by Calcutta's populace, however, you will do no better than to visit the city during the Durga Puja (this year it comes in late October). For it is then that Calcutta's people come out in full strength into the streets of the city. Moving in endless snakelike convolutions, they wander the streets from sunset to dawn, stopping to gaze at colorful clay images of Durga, Saraswati, Lakshmi, Ganesh and Kartik, that adorn every Puja *pandal*. Normal, everyday life comes to a virtual standstill during these days, and Calcutta's people bubble up and out on to the surface in their festive best.

'Calcutta is forever', reads a huge billboard a few hundred yards from the sooty Howrah Railway Station. As my cab comes down off the bridge and begins the long swim through the sea of torsos, I recall the conversation I had with my fellow-passenger on the train—a Bengali, resplendant in *dhoti*, *kurta*, and slip-on shoes, chewing a wad of betel leaf. "The outsider always homes in on Calcutta's most hopeless faces," he told me in heavily accented English. "Agreed, Calcutta is sordid, Calcutta is appalling in its dirt, its poverty, its overpopulation. But stay here for a year or two, and the city's magic will reach out to you."

Indeed, Calcuttan after Calcuttan that I met in the days that followed echoed this sentiment. All were captivated by the city, and yet all complained about the difficulties of living in it. "Calcutta is like a steady, uncomplaining, faithful wife," said an immigrant from the south. "Sometimes I desert her and have a fling with some other city. But it all

seems illicit, and I return to Calcutta sooner or later." Another person from Uttar Pradesh waxes poetic: "Calcutta is an ugly duckling that has never metamorphosed into a graceful swan. Sometimes in winter, when the smoke from thousands of coal-fired braziers obscures my vision, I dream that Calcutta will shake off her sores, and glide, beautiful, down the Hooghly."

There is much in Calcutta that would send an artist, a filmmaker, a photographer, an author, or a statistician, into raptures. Many have examined the city under the microscopes of their perception, turning it round and round as though it were a corpse up for a post-mortem. The artist has translated Calcutta into vibrant colors on his easel—the greens of occasional patches of trees, the reds of the Communists who rule the State today, the mottled blues of skies polluted by the city's industries, the greys of the swarming *bustees* (slums) that speckle the city's skin, the blacks of misery, poverty, death.

Jamini Roy's portraits of doe-eyed Bengali girls have won thousands of hearts. The filmmaker interprets Calcutta in terms of haunting blacks and whites—international audiences have gasped at the squalor and hopelessness shot by Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen. Photographers like Raghubir Singh have captured Calcutta's many faces in glowing color, while authors like Joseph Lelyweld and Geoffrey Moorehouse have executed lingering pen-portraits of the city.

But it is the statistician who has a field day in Calcutta. The slightest encouragement sends him off into a rehearsed monologue of gloom. Calcutta, he claims, is a dead city. It died long back. What we see today is its ghost. What else can one say, he intones, about a city that will have a population of 12 million by 1986, and 16 million by the year 2000? The majority of the people live below the subsistence level; there are hardly 130,000 dwelling units for the 3.5 million people of Calcutta proper; only 11 per cent of the people have independent bathrooms of their own. The litany goes on: one man in three in Calcutta city and one in four in the metropolitan area is a slum-dweller. A room measuring roughly 100 square feet, made of mud plaster, bamboo, and tin, accommodates a family of five or six. There is one water tap for 50 persons, and one sanitary latrine for every 25. Only 60% of the children of the age group 6-11 go to school. The public transport systems carry only 3 million passengers daily, whereas the demand is for over

VICTORIA MEMORIAL, SHINING IN EARLY MORNING SUNLIGHT



CHAITANYA KALBAG



TYPICAL OFFICE HOUR SCENE
NEAR SEALDAH STATION

7 million. An average Calcuttan has only 20 square feet of open space.

Strangely, though, Calcutta refuses to die. Although its decline began in 1911, when it lost its place as the capital of British India to Delhi, it never knuckled under to the pressures that threatened it thereafter. The Second World War, the great Bengal famine of 1943, the gory Partition of the region in 1947, and finally the Bangladesh war in 1971, when over 1.5 million refugees poured into the city, all helped worsen the chaos. Yet, Calcutta continued to live.

The city's administrators woke up to the situation in 1970, when the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) was set up, and the biggest urban renewal ever in

'Calcutta Does Not Hide Its Squalor'



B. K. BANNERJI

Mr. B.K. Bannerji, 50, has spent a third of his life in Calcutta and another third in various cities around the world. But he refuses to use the latter as a yardstick for assessing the former. "It is not just the comforts it offers that justify a city's greatness," he maintains. "It is people who matter. In Calcutta the people make all the difference."

"I like Calcutta because it faithfully represents India," he continues. "In its poverty, in its indomitable will to survive, in its everlasting dissatisfaction with itself, in its sporadic, vain efforts to improve, Calcutta is an embodiment of what India

is today. Unlike some other cities—Bombay, for instance, where a man can get off the plane at Santa Cruz and drive to the Taj, via Marine Drive, without even noticing what the real Bombay is like—Calcutta does not hide its squalor. It holds out in truth everything it possesses—its slums and its palaces.

"Calcuttans are liberal. While so many other states have made it a rule to offer priority in jobs, education and other opportunities to the local population, Calcutta has consistently refused to accept the 'sons of the soil' theory even in its legislature. Bengalis have never opposed the entry of migrants.

"Being emotional and intelligently critical, Calcuttans involve themselves in all aspects of life—be it politics or sports. Many misunderstand their enthusiasm. Bengali literature from Bankim Chandra Chatterji to Rabindranath Tagore to modern times has been spreading democratic ideals. The creative genius of Calcuttans can be seen in their theater, music, films, poetry, art and sculpture.

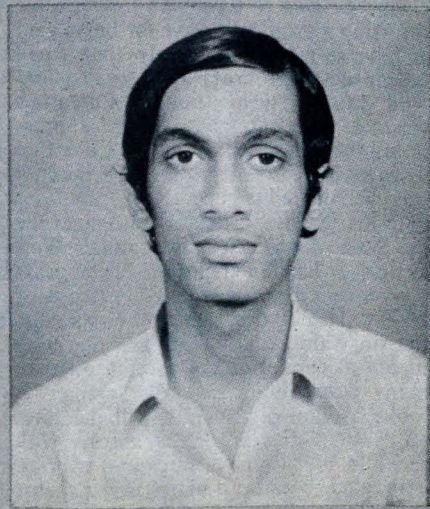
"Unlike other cities, Calcutta will never be a dreamy, seamy, holier-than-thou city, where the State orchestra performs a concert of Hindi pop while the black-marketeers collect their loot and the country burns!"

Dipankar Ghosh, 21, left Calcutta when he was ten, and moved to Bombay. Since then he has been returning to Calcutta for short intervals annually. "Calcutta is a far livelier place than Bombay," he says. "The kind of entertainment offered in Bombay is not only vapid and superficial,

but also extremely expensive. In Calcutta, on the other hand, the entertainment available is not only culturally richer, but also within the reach of the city's middle and working classes."

"One thing that is very noticeable about Calcutta is that its people—even the poor, weighed down by their struggle for survival—are exceptionally humorous and witty. This is because their association with life is closer. They do not lead a mechanical existence. As cities go, Calcutta is one of the friendliest. No one there is really alone. In general, people there form closer, truer relationships. I would say also that there is less class differentiation observed in Calcutta than elsewhere. You will see in the markets on Sundays, managing directors standing in the queue to purchase fish and often conversing with workers in their own factories!"

DIPANKAR GHOSH





FLYOVER BEING CONSTRUCTED AT BRABOURNE ROAD TO RELIEVE LOAD ON APPROACH TO HOWRAH BRIDGE

India was launched. 116 projects in five areas—water supply, traffic and transportation, sewerage and drainage, slum improvement and area development—are presently under way. Funds totalling over \$250 million have been poured into the city's tortured lungs. In effect, Calcutta has become the test case for all urban planners in India. Although it follows behind Tokyo, London and New York in population, its problems have been uniquely its own, and the thirty-mile length of Greater Calcutta teems with a host of them.

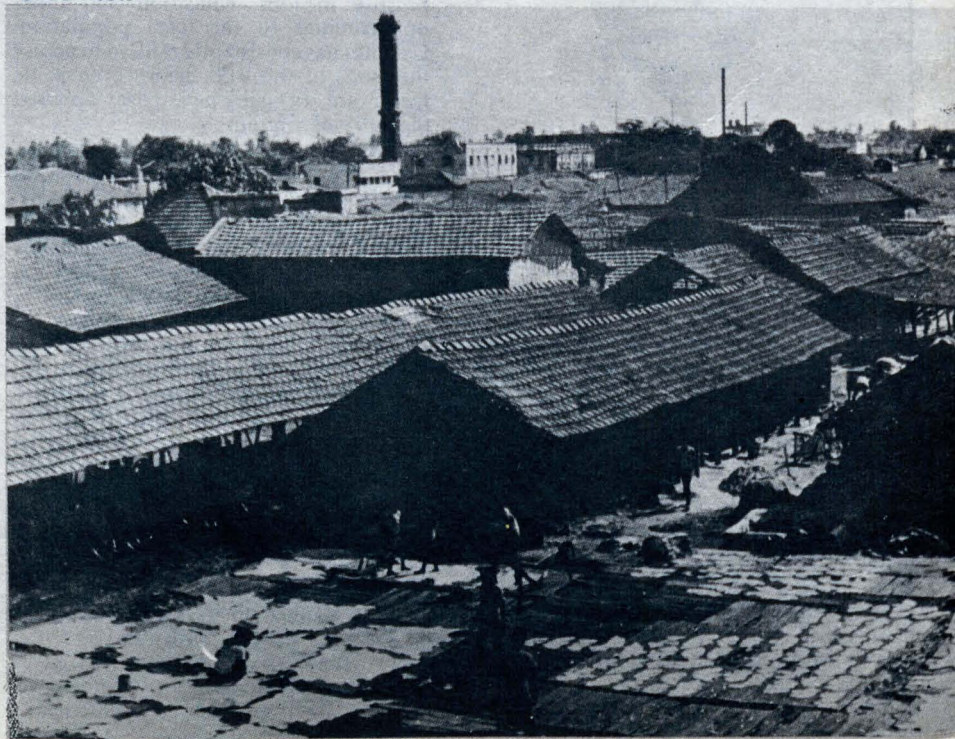
Above all, it is the people of Calcutta who continue to breathe life into their beloved city's innards. Says a professor of English: "What have foreigners given Calcutta except their most prejudiced criticism? Kipling called it 'The City of Dreadful Night'. Clive said it was 'the most wicked place in the universe'. Churchill wrote to his mother: 'I shall always be glad to have seen Calcutta for the same reason papa gave for being glad to have seen Lisbon, namely, that it will be unnecessary for me ever to see it again.' And Mark Twain thought Calcutta's weather was 'enough to make a brass doorknob mush'. But every Calcuttan loves his city, and no Kipling or Churchill can ever shake his belief."

In many ways, Calcutta epitomizes the the State of which it is the capital: West Bengal. It has taken close to seven years to recover from the cathartic experience of the late sixties, when the Naxalite uprising, industrial unrest, and alarming flights of capital out of the State led to many despairing Calcuttans saying, "It looks as though Calcutta will die after all." But today, Calcutta throbs with renewed life. Its poverty cannot ever be concealed, because it stares every visitor in the face. And yet, in its cultural aware-

ness, in its literary wealth, and in its gifted people, Calcutta holds its ragged robes up with pride.

Nowhere else in India will you be accosted by a young man on the pavement at Chowringhee, peddling copies of Sarat Chandra's novels, trailing after you with an extempore lecture on the novelist's greatness if you refuse to buy a book. Over 5,000 theatrical groups operate in the city, and yet every night, millions of people

SPRAWLING SLUMS LIKE THIS ACCOMMODATE MORE THAN ONE-FOURTH OF CALCUTTA'S POPULATION



convert pavements into their private bedrooms. Rabindranath Tagore's Jorasanko house is a center of pilgrimage; so is Dakshineswar, a few miles upriver, where Ramakrishna Paramahansa stayed. But return from a trip on a tourist bus, and as you turn into your hotel, you will encounter a rickshaw-puller who offers you prostitutes ranging from Rs. 5 to Rs. 50 a toss. You will be able to admire the lush vegetation surrounding the Rabindra Sarobar lakes and to watch the oarsmen of the Calcutta Rowing Club flexing their muscles; and on the way home, you will probably stumble over a dying beggar.

Calcutta has a lot to offer to the interested tourist—the mammoth National Museum on Chowringhee (which is the city's main thoroughfare), the quaint environs of Chinatown (whose borders have blurred with time), the Chinese shoe-shops along Bentinck Street, the elegant headquarters of the Ramakrishna Mission at Gol Park, the Victoria Memorial, where relics of the *Raj* are on display, and Sealdah Station, out of which millions pour every morning on their way to work.

The Calcuttan himself is the showpiece *par excellence*. He will turn to you in a rattling mini-bus, a total stranger, and ply you with kind questions about your wife, your income, and your health. He will gladly offer directions to some tucked-away shop that sells delicious *mishti doi*, the Bengali version of sweet yoghurt, or other milk-sweets like *rosso gollas* and *sondesh*. He will bend over backward to help cram you into a groaning double-decker bus, and tap you on the shoulder when your stop arrives. The Bengali is very Latin in temperament: he can oscillate between extremes of emotion, dear friend one moment, arch-enemy the next. He respects

OLD CALCUTTA

The Foothold Of The Empire

Calcutta was founded around 1686 by Job Charnock, who, on behalf of the East India Company, occupied the three villages which existed then on its site. The population of the settlement in 1710 was only 10,000 or so, but it grew rapidly, and by the middle of the 18th Century it was around 200,000. The first authoritative enumeration in 1872 showed it to be 633,009. By 1901 it had risen to more than 900,000.

The three villages which stood within the boundaries of present-day Calcutta were Sootalooty, Calcutta, and Govindpore. It was only in August 1690 that Charnock succeeded in establishing a firm foothold in the area. The next year the English obtained a patent from Aurungzeb, allowing them to trade free of customs duty, on condition of an annual payment of Rs. 3,000.

By 1703, the settlement of Calcutta had attracted such a large number of inhabitants that the Company, in 1707, declared it a separate presidency, accountable only to the Directors in London.

Modern Calcutta dates from 1757; the battle of Plassey, fought on June 23 that year, established the English supremacy in Bengal, and from that date

the growth and prosperity of the new capital of the British Empire in India spread, unchecked.

There are a few stories woven around the name of Calcutta. Some say the name came from Kalighat, where the famous Kali Temple stands today. Others say it was derived from Khal Kata, meaning a creek that had cut its way in floods.

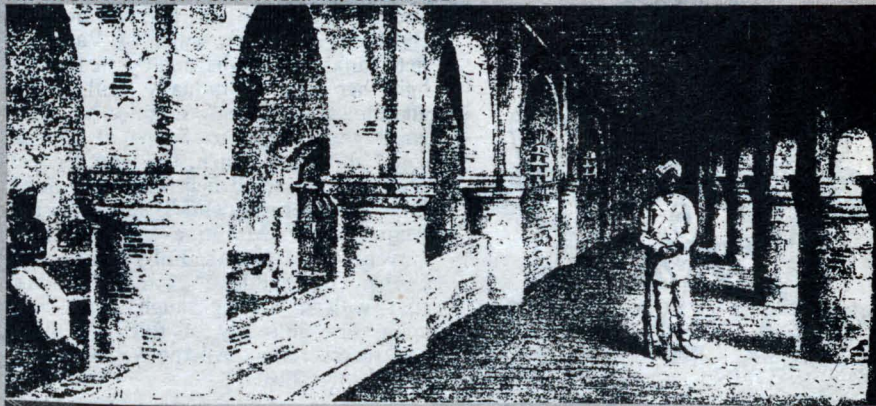
Charnock died of ill health a few years after he occupied the three villages, and

he was laid to rest, on January 10, 1692, in the burial ground of the settlement, which at present forms the churchyard of St. John's.

When the glories of the Mughal rulers of India began to wane, the English quickly seized the opportunity to obtain permission from Aurangzeb to build defensive structures in Calcutta for protecting their interests. They built a fort on the bank of the Hooghly, and named it 'Fort William', after their reigning king. Thus it was that they obtained the foothold from where, gradually, the British Empire in India spread through the rest of the country.

On December 2 1911, King George V proclaimed that the capital of India would be shifted from Calcutta to Delhi. Lord Hardinge was the Viceroy then.

AN ENGRAVING OF FORT WILLIAM, CIRCA 1827



womanhood immensely, perhaps transferring his worship of female deities like Durga and Kali into everyday life. If he were to invite you into his home, he has paid you a huge compliment: for the Bengali's home is sacrosanct to him, not to be intruded upon even by close friends.

Yet, the Calcuttan cannot ignore the problems that overwhelm him. He lives in a city that offers only 6.5% of its total land space to roads. Calcutta's vehicular traffic doubles every eight years. From the city's earliest years, there has been a peculiar polarization in development. After Job Charnock anchored his boat on a swampy stretch of ground on the banks of the Hooghly on August 22, 1690, and set up a settlement for the East India Company, the city burgeoned in no time. Dalhousie Square, known as the Great Tank in the days of the Company, developed as the city center. Arrayed around it, down Esplanade and Chowringhee Road, were the residential and administrative buildings of the Company. This was the European Quarter, with sumptuous architecture, towering pillars, graceful arches, statue-studded gardens. Around it came up the 'Black Town', or the Native Quarter, in stark and appalling contrast to the European Quarter.

Over the centuries, people from the hinterland migrated to Calcutta in search of a brighter future, and ended up swelling the

borders of the Black Town, with its dingy lanes, festering open drains, and rickety slums. Calcutta developed into the largest city in India, with a concentration of the rich and the poor. Marwari businessmen

and Bihari laborers rubbed shoulders on its streets. Yet, the city's systems did not expand in time with the population. For instance, along the 45-mile stretch of the Hooghly dividing the city into its east and

BUSTLING BAZARS LIKE THIS ARE SITUATED NEXT TO FESTERING GARBAGE HEAPS—THE CALCUTTAN'S NIGHTMARE



The Goddess With The Thousand Arms



The lady with the thousand arms (our clay modellers, alas, portray only ten) sits astride a flaming lion, her eyes blazing: clearly the poor, grotesque, half man-half buffalo at her feet doesn't stand a chance. The composition one sees at every Durga Puja *pandal* in West Bengal, and wherever



THE GODDESS WITH THE BLAZING EYES

Bengalis congregate elsewhere in India, is a misrepresentation, really. It hardly gives the impression that Mahishasura (for that was the demon's name) once terrorized the "three worlds", that Durga was created as a last resort by the gods to stop his senseless carnage. Mahishasura began by propitiating Brahma, the Creator, to an extent where the latter was forced to take note of his devotion. Brahma asked Mahishasura whether he wanted any boon. "I want to be immortal," the demon replied. Brahma could not grant this request: a person once born, he pointed out, had to die. Mahishasura then declared that if he had to die at all, he would like to do so at the hands of a woman. He was positive that no woman would ever have the strength to kill him. The boon was granted. Emboldened, Mahishasura marched his army onto the heavens, fought a fierce battle with the forces of Indra, the King of the Gods, defeated him after a hundred-year war, and established himself king. "Thrown out of heaven by the evil-natured Mahisa," says the *Devi Mahatmyan* or the *Sri Durga Saptasati* (700 *slokas* on Sri Durga), "the hosts of *devas* wandered on earth like mortals."

Finally, after consultations with Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—the Hindu

Trinity—the gods came to a solution: they created a female form out of their combined strength. "Then issued forth a great light from the face of Vishnu who was full of intense anger and from those of Brahma and Shiva, too. From the bodies of Indra and other gods also sprang forth a very great light. And all this light united.

"By that which was Shiva's light, her (Durga's) face came into being; by Yama's light her hair, by Vishnu's light her arms; and by Chandra's light her two breasts. By Indra's light her waist, by Varuna's her shanks, and thighs, and by the Earth's light her hips." Gradually, with other anatomical parts being supplied by other gods, the composite figure of Durga came into being. Then, the legend goes, each god presented her with a weapon: Shiva gave her a trident, Vishnu a discus, Agni a spear, Maruti a bow and two quivers full of arrows. Fully armed and clothed, the goddess "gave out a loud roar with a defying laugh again and again. The entire sky was filled and there was reverberation. All the world shook, the seas trembled."

A reading of this ancient text proves that our ancients had few reservations about sex, and fewer ones about violence. The battle that ensued between Durga and Mahishasura is described in details so graphic that the reader is either repulsed, or amused. "...the *Devi* killed hundreds of *asuras* (demons) with her trident, club, showers of spears, swords and the like, and threw down others who were stupefied by the noise of her bell; binding others with her noose, she dragged them on the ground. Some were split into two by the sharp slashes of her sword, others smashed by a blow from her mace, and some, severely hammered by her club, vomited forth blood.

"Pierced in the breast by her trident, some fell to the group. Pierced all over by her arrows, and resembling porcupines, some of the enemies of the gods gave up their lives on the fields of the battle. Some had their arms cut off, some their necks broken; the heads of others rolled down; some were torn asunder in the middle of their trunks; and some great demons fell on the ground with their legs severed."

Finally, after heavy losses on both sides, the two principal adversaries met face to face. Mahishasura changed into a buffalo, wreaking havoc, "tossing mountains into the air with his horns." Durga flung a noose around his neck and bound him. Quitting his buffalo form, the demon changed into a roaring lion. Chandika

(as Durga is also known) cut off the lion's head. He changed into an elephant. She cut off his trunk. He reassumed his buffalo shape. To give herself added vigor, the goddess, clearly no milk-drinking prohibitionist, "quaffed a divine drink again and again, and laughed, her eyes turning red, and with showers of arrows she pulverized the mountains Mahishasura flung at her, and said: 'Roar, roar, O Fool, for a moment while I drink this wine. When you are slain by me the gods will soon roar in this very place.' She then jumped upon the great demon, kicked him in the neck with her foot, and pierced him with her trident. Then the demon himself, in his true form, emerged halfway from the buffalo's body, and at once the Mother cut off his head."

However, it is important to note that Durga Puja does *not* celebrate the victory of Durga over Mahishasura. The origin of the Puja itself is explained by another legend. Apparently, Rama first performed this Puja to seek Durga's blessings before going out to battle against Ravana, although Valmiki's *Ramayana* does not mention this (the Bengali *Ramayana* devotes several pages to it).

But it was Maharaja Krishnachandra, who ruled Krishnanagar in the mid-18th Century, who turned the festival into something of a social event. Before him people worshipped the deity within the privacy of their homes, often making do with a *ghata* (pot) if they had not the money to get a clay model built. The Maharaja's Puja scaled dizzy heights of ostentation. After Krishnachandra, the *nouveau riche* of those times took over. By the early 19th Century, the Puja had been relegated to a corner in its religiosity, and entertainment reigned supreme: dancing nautch girls became as indispensable to the Puja as *aarti*, and meat and wine were the standard *prasad*.

Until the 1850's, and even after, Durga Pujas were mainly family affairs—each one was organized and paid for by one particular family. The community Puja, and the *chanda* (donation) tradition began only when the richer classes began to disintegrate. The first community Pujas were held around 1820, but they really caught on only around a half-century later. Then, as now, they were known as *baroari* Pujas, perhaps because the first time twelve friends had got together and organized it.

Debashish Mukerji



PEDESTRIAN SUBWAY CLOSE TO HOWRAH STATION

west banks, there are even today only two crossings—compared to New York's five across the short stretch of Manhattan. The traffic across the bigger of these two—the Howrah Bridge—is over half a million persons a day in volume. Close to 2 million people commute every morning to the 1 sq. mile area of Dalhousie Square. Despite this build-up, there has been no appreciable improvement in the city's roads; today's Dharamtolla Street or Chitpore Road stand practically as they did a century back.

World Bank officials, who visited Calcutta in 1960, called the neglect of the city's development "one of the most dangerous weaknesses" in Indian plann-

ing. Today, it looks as though Calcutta may still pull itself out of the quicksand it is sinking into. Roads have been widened, overbridges built, water supply strengthened, slums renovated, and the transportation system augmented. Two underground tube railways, between Dum Dum and Tollygunge and between Baranagar and Behala, will ease transportation considerably. But the prospect of hanging precariously onto buses and tramcars (Calcutta is the only city in India to have tramcars plying on tracks laid in the middle of arterial roads) may continue to haunt many a commuter even in the year 2001. Calcutta Port, the city's link to trade and the outside world, which

OVERCROWDED BUS (NOTE CONDUCTOR TRAVELLING ON FRONT) NEGOTIATING WATERLOGGED STREET DURING MONSOONS



is always in danger of silting up, may be rescued by over 40,000 cusecs of Ganges water due to pour into the Hooghly soon. Giant water works under construction at Garden Reach and Howrah would, by 1986, assure a per capita daily water supply of 40 gallons in most parts of the metropolis, against the present daily averages of 10 to 20.

This October, though, when Durga Puja comes around, the air over Calcutta will hold a special tang. Things are looking up for the city and the state, and the new Communist government headed by Jyoti Basu has put in sober work during its first three months in office. Industrial unrest is on the rise, however, but nobody pays much attention to it. In fact, the peculiarly Indian labor-protest tactic of *gherao* (siege, literally), some claim, was invented in Calcutta. Militancy and mob violence characterize the city as much as its culture and history have.

A LAZY CALCUTTAN ENJOYS THE BREEZE NEAR TRAMWAY TRACKS



CHAITANYA KALBAG

"We have seen the worst. We have hit the bottom, and have risen again," says an official of the CMDA. "Our spirit is not flagging. And it is time for other people to catch up with Calcutta. It will not wait for cynics, critics, and admirers."

Another old resident says, "I have not understood Calcutta in all the years I have spent here. How can one explain why people cling to the city? How can one explain flowering of art and culture in a city of such bad reputation? The spirit of the city lies in its people. I am proud to be a Calcuttan."

Indeed, the air seems hardly funereal, as my taxicab wades through the crowds on the way back to Howrah Station. There is about me a quality of life that vibrates with vigor and good humor. A wizened old Bengali waves out from a tramcar window, while a rickshaw-puller breaks stride to exchange pleasantries with a passerby. Calcutta looks as though it will go on forever, reincarnation after reincarnation of Charnock's city refusing to die, stepping back from the grave every time its critics think it has been buried for good. Calcutta lives on.

Chaitanya Kalbag