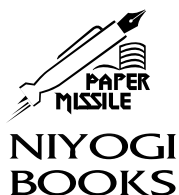


CALCUTTA NIGHTS

HEMENDRA KUMAR ROY

Translated by Rajat Chaudhuri



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A young Hemendra Kumar Roy with his wife Renuka
Courtesy: The Roy family archives

PREFACE: NIGHTS IN THE CITY

A hundred years ago, a young man roamed the mean streets of Calcutta—the capital of British India, night after night, alone and almost unarmed. From the Chitpur bordellos to the Chinese gambling dens of Territi Bazaar, from the green rooms of Bengali theatres to the hideouts of ruthless hoodlums of Mechhobazaar and beyond. Who was this Meghnad Gupta, who was scouring the wastelands of a metropolis while war raged the world over, and the country was ripe for change? Who was this Meghnad Gupta who quotes Tagore at the drop of a hat just as easily as he narrates scenes from the inner recesses of Calcutta's houses of ill repute where babus cavorted with nautch girls? Do we know him? Perhaps we do ...

Calcutta Nights is the real-life story and memoir of this enigmatic Meghnad Gupta who, as the reader will soon discover, is one of the pioneering creators of Bengali fiction—Hemendra Kumar Roy. Translated into English almost a century after the first publication of *Raater Kolkata* in 1923, the popular author of detective novels, sci-fi and children's books reveals the darkest secrets of the second city of the erstwhile British Empire.

Raater Kolkata (*Calcutta Nights*), as someone has said, is the *Hootum Pyanchar Naksha* (*The Observant Owl: Hootum's Vignettes of Nineteenth-century Calcutta*) of the early twentieth century.



AN INTRODUCTION TO BABUS, BORDELLOS, AND GASLIT NIGHTS

Calcutta Nights was written almost a hundred years ago and first published in Bengali as *Raater Kolkata* (author Meghnad Gupta) in 1923. Much of this book is set in a time which stretches back even further to the first two decades of the twentieth century. Calcutta was still the capital of British ruled India then—a bustling metropolis with a dark underbelly, where untold dangers lurked behind the glamour and shine.

Armed with just a stout stick, the celebrated author and crime fiction writer Hemendra Kumar Roy, who used the pseudonym ‘Meghnad Gupta’ for this work, roamed about in the darkness of Calcutta’s mean streets, alone every night. Not to indulge and drown in its sins but to experience, learn and tell true stories.

The first two decades of the last century, which is the backdrop for this book, were turbulent times for this country in general and Bengal in particular. The first Partition of Bengal happened in 1905 with Curzon as Viceroy, the Alipore Bomb Case trials commenced near the end of that decade, and the capital of India was shifted from Calcutta to Delhi in 1911. Following the partition of 1905, there was severe criticism of the British ‘divide and rule’ policy because it had driven a wedge between the largely Muslim-majority-eastern from the largely Hindu-majority-western part of Bengal. With increased civil unrest and violence, the decision to partition Bengal was reversed by the British in 1911. Then in 1912 the provinces of Bihar and Orissa were carved out of Bengal Presidency. The second decade of the 1900s also saw the emergence of Gandhi’s leadership and the launching of his Non-Cooperation

Movement. In this decade too, Rabindranath Tagore was awarded the Nobel prize for literature while the first commercial aircraft flew in this country. The First World War was also fought in this eventful second decade of the twentieth century.

No doubt, the years in which this book is set were interesting times. Written in an age very different from ours, some views of the author could be jarring for our neurotic and politically-correct present. However, any such view needs to be tempered by the understanding of the socio-political contexts as well as the distance of a century that separates us from Meghnad Gupta's Calcutta, the second city of the erstwhile British Empire.

I was made aware of the Bangla original *Raater Kolkata* (*Calcutta Nights*) quite accidentally at an adda session with friends at the old-world Broadway bar in central Calcutta which is one of the areas the author must have passed through during his nocturnal wanderings. The book was first published in 1923, but luckily Urbi Prakasan had reprinted it a few years ago, which is why I could quickly get hold of a copy. I read it rapt over the period of a weekend, realising that this is an important social and historical document about the city in the tradition of works like *Kalikata Kamalalay* (1823) and *Nabababubilas* (1825) by Bhabani Charan Bandopadhyay, *Alaaler Ghore Dulaal* (1858) by Parichand Mitra, *Sachitra Guljarnagar* (1871) a satirical novel by Kedaranatha Datta, and of course Kaliprasanna Sinha's *Hootum Pyanchar Naksha* (*Hootum's Sketches of Nineteenth Century Calcutta*, 1862), which book the author mentions in his prologue.

Hootum's work and some of the others mentioned above are *nakshas* or sketches, a form popular in those times and in fact our book, though written at least half a century later, has the

characteristics of a 'sketch'. Arun Nag, referring to Jatindramohan Ghosh's essay about the subject, points out in his annotated *Hootum Pyanchar Naksha* (2018), that a sketch is characterised by the presence of humour, social satire, a tendency towards brevity, instructions to remove social evils, exaggeration, unrefined language, and suggestive descriptions among other things. Besides all these, *Calcutta Nights* also shares some similarities of character with books like *Crime and Religious Beliefs in India* by Augustus Somerville. So it did not take me long to decide to translate this book into English as I felt this should reach a wider audience.

For Calcutta-lovers, adventure enthusiasts, criminologists, history buffs, researchers, and readers of all stripes and colours, this little book is a veritable goldmine. Like a festive Bengali meal albeit peppered with darkness, this book offers an extended spread in bite-sized portions. Those interested to know more about the debauchery of the *hothath-babus*, the stories of ruthless goons with great musical talent, the glamour of European women of the night in Eden Gardens, the mystery phaeton cars plying around Chowringhee, the dance of lady luck in Chinese gambling dens, the backstage intrigues of Bengali playhouses, the darkness of beggars' hovels, or the scent of jasmine in the hair buns of verandah-belles will find something in these pages.

While translating this book, I have tried to retain some Bengali words and sometimes employed archaic expressions or slightly convoluted constructions to best reproduce the language and mood of those times. For the benefit of the interested reader and researcher alike, I have also added detailed endnotes to further illuminate the setting of this book while including suggestions for further reading.

A simplified romanisation has been used for place names approximating the Bengali pronunciation, exceptions being Calcutta, Chowringhee and a few others. Words in Bengali which won't be familiar to all readers have been italicised in their first use. Also, it won't be out of place to mention here that Anindita Roy Chowdhury in her meticulously researched *Prostitution in Calcutta during the Twentieth Century—A Study in Gender Perspective* had included translated passages from one chapter of Raater Kolkata. These translated passages sourced from Biswanath Joardar's *Prostitution in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Calcutta* have helped me a couple of times to take decisions about the choice of certain words in that chapter.

Hemendra Kumar Roy was undoubtedly an accomplished stylist and in my translation of his work, I have tried my best to retain the flavour of the original. In my own reading of this little dynamite of a volume, I have encountered Dickensian darkness under the gaslights of Calcutta's streets, I have enjoyed gothic interludes in scenes of winter nights that would remind you of Edgar Allan Poe and I have also sensed a writer's keen interest in backstory and character. Being a writer myself, this aspect of *Calcutta Nights*, which is essentially a memoir infused with social satire, adventure and insights about a place, a time, and a people, appealed to my sensibilities. I hope the reader will enjoy the nuances of his style in this translation as we do in the original.

In a few rare instances certain expressions, words, slants have been removed or expressed differently in this translated text to address the genuine sensitivities of our times. This has been done

only two or three times in the whole book without affecting the spirit of the narrative.

While there is no indication in the 1923 edition of *Raater Kolkata* that the author was using a pseudonym, the third Urbi edition (January, 2018) tells us that the author of *Calcutta Nights* was no one else but the popular Bengali writer Hemendra Kumar Roy (1888-1963). This is supported with a quote from a feature by Satadal Goswami, which appeared in *Desh* magazine (15 October, 1988), who asserts that Hemendra Kumar Roy wrote this book with the pseudonym Meghnad Gupta. He goes on to say that Roy used an assumed name because he didn't want his guardians to find out that he had written this book. There is other evidence presented in the Urbi volume proving that Hemendra Kumar Roy, the much-loved author of detective fiction, children's literature, and science fiction, indeed wrote *Calcutta Nights*. Now we also know the real identity of the author from authoritative sources like his family members.

I feel honoured to be able to present Hemendra Kumar Roy's portrait of my city to a wider audience. My efforts wouldn't have gone in vain if it created further interest about the past, present and future of Calcutta.

Rajat Chaudhuri

Kolkata



PROLOGUE

Calcutta Nights has been written for an adult male audience.

In *Hootum Pyanchar Naksha* (*Hootum's Vignettes of Nineteenth-century Calcutta*), we get a picture of the Calcutta of those times. My book too is a series of sketches or *naksha*. Here you will find images from certain time periods of the Calcutta of modern times. But my brush doesn't have the wide and mature palette that Hootum possessed, it's quite possible people won't like it. I am only banking on the fact that if milk isn't readily available, people will happily drink *ghol*, the bland 'buttermilk' made by churning out the creamy 'butter' from the milk.

If nothing else, these vignettes will be perfect medicine for many whose vision has been clouded by cataract. For most of us, the mysteries of Calcutta's nights are exceedingly blurred. *Calcutta Nights* will cleanse their vision. Fathers of young boys and girls will realise where and what the real dangers are. It is because of their carelessness that minors fall into bad company, and begin their visits to hell.

Still, I haven't provided a complete picture. I could have drawn the whole picture, but that completeness is so unimaginably fearsome that I didn't feel like attempting it. The little I have presented might indeed raise the hackles of champions of morality. But what can I do, there is no way one can camouflage this. 'Sketches' of this nature cannot be written in a more courteous style and in a more decent language. But I have been more careful than Hootum both in the matter of language and subject. To depict local colour, I have occasionally

taken recourse to the use of words from rural dialect and have at times raised the curtains to hell. In certain instances, I haven't been able to completely avoid *adirasa* or eroticism. However, such dialect words, scenes from hell, and eroticism are very much present in the highbrow literature of these times. Moreover, modern novelists have progressed further than I have. My only consolation is in the fact that compared to modern novels and plays, *Calcutta Nights* is sacred like the Bible. The diligent reader will also notice that I have always depicted sin for what it is. I have tried to evoke hate and displeasure towards it and, unlike many modern novels, nowhere in this book is there an attempt to evoke sympathy for sin in the reader's mind. So I am firm in my belief that not a single reader will find *Calcutta Nights* to be obscene. There is no effort in this book to unfairly present obscenities.

I have been witness to most of the things mentioned and written here. I could have written about many other things if I had depended on hearsay, but I didn't do that. Like a detective, I have roamed the streets to gather these accounts. While gathering the accounts of the prostitutes' quarters, I have received assistance from many first rate 'experts'. If there is any such expert among the readers, he can verify whether the material obtained from my own 'experts' are dependable or not. I am still left with an uncounted store of material which covers many other facets of Calcutta. If the response from the reading public is one of eagerness, then I will be back with those in the near future. Otherwise, this will be the end of it.

Meghnad Gupta
(Hemendra Kumar Roy)