

# The Daily Star

## WEEKEND MAGAZINE

### A Tale of Two Cities : Points of Priority

by Tafazzal Hussain

*True, the development of Calcutta is almost at a stand still...The present West Bengal government has concentrated all its welfare activities in villages, where the actual beneficiaries are the landless or marginal farmers, share croppers and agricultural labourers...They are now perhaps getting atleast two square meals a day.*

*In the days of ousted President Ershad, there were constant efforts to beautify Dhaka city and turn it into a glamorous showpiece, irrespective of the country's resource constraint...Now the waiting cars at street intersections, with traffic red signal on, are invariably surrounded by beggars and destitutes asking for alms, a phenomenon not consistent with the beautification concept. Hungry, rootless people are flocking from far-flung rural areas to the city in a continuing process...*

My wife and I had recently been to Calcutta, the capital city of West Bengal (India) — once the pride metropolis of British India. We were there not as tourists, but in transit on our way back from Bangkok. We decided to spend a couple of days in Calcutta, travelling by Indian Airlines.

Instead of staying in our usual hotel in Calcutta, we chose to halt in a new place called 'Restoria' located in Park Circus area. This idea provided us a two-pronged benefit: first, it gave us an opportunity to visit old friends and relations who lived in that locality and second, we could avoid expensive hotels in downtown Calcutta.

I fixed up my hotel before leaving Dum Dum Airport, from where I hired a pre-paid taxi to go to the hotel. The condition of the taxi-cab was so precarious that we were all the time apprehensive that the vehicle would break up in two any moment on the way. I looked around and found that all other taxi-cabs in the stand were in similar tottering condition. However, we were indeed lucky that the expert driver, in full control of the fast moving cab, steered us safely to our destination with great self-confidence and dexterity. The road-side scenario in course of the journey was none too pleasant to the eyes. Nearly three years ago, I made another trip to Calcutta and when driving along the same road from the Airport to the city, I noticed that the street islands with so-called bushy gardens therein were in pitiable condition, devoid of any care and attention. This time, my experience was still worse. I am making these unpalatable remarks most apologetically, lest I offend the sentiments of many Calcutta lovers.

It took us about 45 minutes to reach our hotel. One third of this time was required to go through the congested Park Circus area, where, on both sides of the winding roads and by lanes, one cannot miss the dirty scenes abounding throughout. The road was full of potholes, foot path broken and garbage heaped by the side of open drains, almost everywhere. It was apparent that there had been no repairs at all for a long time. The building alongside the roads presented the same miserable look. The walls did not show any sign of face-lifting, not to speak of any kind of painting or whitewash. On top of this, the various slogans and symbols of political parties inscribed on the roadside walls during preceding election campaigns remained intact; obviously there was no effort to efface them thereafter.

Finally, our taxi stopped in front of our chosen hotel building. Its exterior look was anything but pleasing to the eye. But when we entered the hotel and got inside the room fixed for us, we had a different impression. We were reasonably satisfied to see the beds with spotless white sheets, room airconditioned and the attached bath, though small, with clean marble floor, and other standard facilities.

In course of an hour's rest, however, we experienced loadshedding twice. As the hotel had its own generator, the lights remained undisturbed and the ceiling fans worked well. But the airconditioner did not function. But we were relieved to know that load shedding would hardly take place during sleeping hours at night. After a while, a hired cab brought us to New Market while, on our way, we noticed that the landscape started changing after we crossed Park Street and entered the Chowringhee area. The roads and streets and the neighbouring scenario were much better and well maintained compared to what we saw while travelling from the airport in the afternoon.

The two days I spent in Calcutta were utilized mostly in making visits to friends and relations, besides moving to and from the shopping areas according to my set plan. In between these visits and shopping trips, I was constantly trying to find out why Calcutta was now in such a deplorable condition. In fact, any casual visitor to this city would think that there has been no development effort made here over the ages. Even so, the present leftist government of West Bengal, led by its Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, is being voted to power continuously for the last 15/20 years. The government seems to be firmly in saddle with a large majority in a democratically elected legislature. All this may appear to be enigmatic and one may ask where the mystery lies. That is the big question. I

heard many explanations from various sources, but I was hardly convinced by any of them.

Ultimately, I got the real answer perhaps on the day I was leaving Calcutta, at the departure lounge of Dum Dum Airport. My wife and I were sitting there, just waiting for the boarding announcement.

In this context, I recalled that in 1980, I visited the rural areas in the outlying districts of West Bengal as a member of a study team representing Bangladesh to see the land reform measures initiated by the West Bengal government. We had the opportunity to attend open-air village meetings where share croppers freely

opment work was being and are now being spent for largescale rural uplift programmes leaving almost nothing to be diverted for urban development purposes. This phenomenon clearly explains why development of Calcutta is now at its lowest ebb. The present government is also not much bothered about it. As

Although elderly, she still retained the tastefully preserved glamorous effect in her appearance. My friend was also known as an intellectual personality. Both of them were my distant cousins. Obviously, they were thrilled to see us unexpectedly at their place. We talked of good old days and spent a pleasant time with

her family in 1950 and later got married to a wealthy industrialist. My wife was pleased with her informal straightforward outlook and invited her to visit Dhaka. She readily agreed and on her turn asked us for drinks next evening at her Bhowanipur house. My wife politely declined, saying that our confirmed return flight

of the electorate in the State. This phenomenon indicates beyond doubt that the Abu Dhabi engineer was perhaps correct in his evaluation of Calcutta's poor development condition.

Let me now look at the situation in my own country, Bangladesh, vis-a-vis Calcutta. Undoubtedly, the development



Dilapidated Calcutta thoroughfare.

Suddenly, I noticed that the famous Indian film actor Utpal Dutt and his wife were quietly sitting two rows ahead of us, while one row behind them were seated a famous Bangladeshi playback singer, along with a teenage girl. Both of them were glamorously dressed in salwar-kamiz. I got up from my seat and made a spontaneous dash to meet the Indian film star, clad in a very casual attire — a shirt and trousers. Giving my identity, I asked Mr Utpal Dutt if I could take his snapshot in my camera. He stood up modestly and with a smile in his face agreed to my request. The desired snapshot was taken and we shook hands. He told me that he was going to Bangladesh to take part in the shooting of a jointly produced Bengali film named 'Padma Nadir Majhi' (the boatman of the river Padma).

When I came back to my seat, I noticed that in the front row were seated a Bangali gentleman and his family. I was told that they were returning to Abu Dhabi after a month's holiday in Calcutta. The gentleman, an electrical engineer, had been working under the United Arab Emirates government for quite a long time. In course of our conversation, I learnt that he hailed from Calcutta, where he makes a regular annual or biennial visit with his family to meet his parents and other relations. Unwillingly, I made the same question to him which I was repeating to many during my short stay in Calcutta: Why Calcutta's development is neglected so conspicuously? Prompt came the answer from the Abu Dhabi engineer. What he stated is summarised here, as follows: True, the development of Calcutta is almost at a standstill. But substantial development work has already taken place in the rural areas of West Bengal. The present government has concentrated all its welfare activities in villages, where the actual beneficiaries are the landless or marginal farmers, share croppers and agricultural labourers. The standard of life of these poor people has appreciably improved. They are now perhaps getting at least two square meals a day. All-out efforts of the government are now directed to the alleviation of their poverty. This is the main reason why the appearance of beggars and destitute is rarely seen in Calcutta streets. In short, the poor village folk are the target class in the development plans of the present West Bengal government. This obviously explains their deep-seated popularity in the rural areas, where the number of voters is the largest.

turned up to have their names recorded by government agencies. We also visited local offices of land survey department and were amazed to see how meticulously the job of recording was being done. This programme was termed as 'Operation Barga' and seemed to have proved a success. In this context, we saw the working of 'gram panchayats' (village councils) system. All this on-the-spot experience of ours was revealing and we had reasons to believe that the West Bengal leftist government's efforts went a long way in improving the lot of rural population.

The Abu Dhabi engineer further observed that most of the available resources for devel-

they consider that the city of Calcutta is inhabited mostly by middle class 'bourgeois' people, where priority as development target is the lowest. The engineer from Abu Dhabi ended his observations here, saying that this constituted his own personal evaluation of the existing situation in Calcutta and there could be room for a dissenting view. But it was nonetheless clear that there was enough justification in what the gentleman stated.

Our Park Circus hotel on Beckbagan Road was close to Amir Ali Avenue crossing. One evening, I visited the 3rd floor flat of a dear friend of older days over there. His wife, once a noted film actress of undivided Bengal, was also present.



Elegant Dhaka lay-out.

them. When we were thinking of leaving, a middle aged lady — about 45 years old — with aristocratic looks came and joined our conversation.

In her talks, she was articulate; in demeanour, pleasant. She addressed the former actress in a familiar tone, saying, "How is life, Lily? You have not visited us for quite sometime. So, I thought I would come and see you. I was feeling bored at home." Lily introduced us to her smart visitor. She made many queries about Bangladesh. It seemed, she nurtured nostalgic memories about her erstwhile homeland, where she spent her early years of life while studying in school. After partition of India, she migrated to Calcutta with

was on the following evening.

The above story just gives a pen-picture of the middle class society in present day Calcutta. Our ex-actress cousin told us that the number of above mentioned so-called aristocratic families in the city was fast rising and added to them are the newly educated wealthy 'marwari' business families, who are now too frequently seen in the social horizon. It can be easily imagined that they are obviously not the class of people for whom the leftist government of West Bengal have any headache. For them, the people who matter are the landless and marginal farmers, besides the share croppers and agricultural labourers, who form the bulk

of roads and other amenities in new Dhaka city area is now much better than before. Streets have good pavements and at night they are well illuminated with expensive sodium lights. Well planned gardens and children's parks have been laid. Street corners are decorated with magnificent fountains. In the days of ousted President Ershad's autocratic rule, there were constant efforts to beautify Dhaka city and turn it into a glamorous showpiece, irrespective of the country's resource constraint. If we compare new locations of Dhaka city with downtown Calcutta, the gap in development work will appear to be enormously wide. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate

nately true that Dhaka belongs to a country which is known as one of the poorest in the world. The per capita income here is one of the lowest, globally. Illustrations of this unhappy situation come to our notice everyday at every street intersection. Our waiting cars at these points with traffic red signal on, are invariably surrounded by beggars and destitute asking for alms. These ugly sights which are a common phenomenon in this city are, of course, not consistent with the beautification concept. Hungry rootless people are flocking from far-flung rural areas to the city in a continuing process and taking shelters in makeshift shacks forming fast-growing 'bustees' not far from the big hotels and luxurious houses.

The remedy lies in improving the lot of the village folk. In the past autocratic regime, village development took place — to cite one example — in the form of establishing many a 'guchhagram' (clustered villages). This was a misconceived idea of a kind of land reform and was obviously used as a 'stunt' for consumption of foreign aid giving agencies. Statistics show that the quantity of available surplus government (Khas) land is limited, whereas the number of landless cultivators is enormous. The 'clustered village' projects did not provide for any income-generating vocations for the families settled therein. This is why many of the 'clustered villages' established in the past regime disappeared overnight. In fact, alleviation of rural poverty lies in planning for the overall improvement in the purchasing power of the village folks and pragmatic implementation of relevant projects. Side by side with the alarming population boom, development priorities should be in rural areas and not in big cities. Along with improved method of cultivation, modern inputs, high-yielding seeds, irrigation and fertilizers, there must be alternative sources of income for the village people to survive. It has now been proved that without providing for income-generating sources, it is useless to settle the landless or marginal farmers.

There is no point in wasting our energies, efforts and meagre resources in beautifying the metropolitan cities before trying to ensure that millions of our people living in villages in abject poverty get their minimum requirement of food, shelter and clothing. The West Bengal experiment tends to demonstrate that this may not be simply a pious wish.

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## The Shipwreck of the "Meduse"

Jean-Marc Dupuich

**The "Meduse" was not the ship of the mad, but its "double" captain had lost his senses. Just like, a century later, with the "Titanic", the shipwreck of the "Meduse" was a tragedy of human stupidity.**

leon was in exile and Louis XVIII, Louis XVI's brother, reigned in France. England was restoring the colonies it had confiscated during the

on board, an expeditionary corps consisting of 160 men and about twenty officers and petty officers, civil-servants, colonists, doctors, scientists, a

And the ship sailed on until it hit the Arguin Bank. Chaumareys, dumbfounded, took to the bottle. Richefort was almost flung into the water. The

anything. So it was decided to use a life-raft.

It appeared that appropriate manoeuvres and removing some of the ballast would have been enough to set the ship afloat again. The only problem was that one could not get rid of his Majesty's cannons just like that. It would have been like throwing the king himself overboard. Far from uniting the castaways, the distress led them to drink, pillaging and insubordination. The "Meduse" started to take water. On 5th July, the passengers and the crew were shared out among four lifeboats, a rowing-boat and a raft. It was total disorder. People shouted "Long live the king". Seventeen people were left on board. Forty days later, three survivors were picked up.

On 8th July, the governor and Chaumareys, whose lifeboats were not very full, reached Saint-Louis. The people in the other boats, after landing further north, walked in the torrid desert for days before reaching the capital of Senegal. It had been a trying adventure, but for the majority of these castaways of the ocean and then the Sahara, it was not fatal.

However, this was not at all the situation on the raft, onto which 150 people had climbed: 120 soldiers and infantry officers, 29 sailors and passengers and one woman, all standing on the platform, 12 metres by 7. The barrels of flour had been thrown overboard in vain. The water came

half-way up their calves as it was. The provisions were ridiculous: 5 casks of wine and a 25 pound sack of biscuits. After 13 days, the brig "Argus" picked up the 15 survivors of the disastrous raft. The bad weather and despair had swallowed up a few unlucky ones. But the fight for survival demanded a more ferocious kind of elimination. Night covered silent murders which reduced the number of castaways.

The 15 survivors were officers or men with responsibilities. A mutiny by the soldiers, which had no doubt been manipulated, allowed the officers to charge the disarmed troops with sabers. The dead and wounded were abandoned to the waters. But soon enough, pieces of flesh were cut from the bodies and dried before being chewed. After eating leather, linen and a few providential flying fish, the survivors had to resign themselves to eating man as well as finally drinking urine, the respective tastes of which were compared. The wretches, suffering from hunger, thirst and despair, groaned in the heat of the sun when the sail of the "Argus" on the horizon gave them new hope.

After thinking of Gericault, whose famous painting is said to have inspired the following words from Louis XVIII: "That is a shipwreck which will not wreck the artist who painted it", one should plunge, in all safety, into the fascinating and minutely documented account of the "Véridique Histoire des Naufrages de la Meduse" (True Story of the Meduse Castaways) (published by Actes-Sud) by Michel Hanneb. This journal of events reads like a thriller.



Survivors of "Meduse" wrecked on July 2, 1816. The catastrophe inspired Gericault to the famous painting.

Empire, back to the monarchy. So the "Meduse" set sail towards Saint-Louis in Senegal, carrying the future governor

few women and children, not forgetting the 112 crew members. In all there were more than 350 people.

governor tried to take the situation in hand, but it was utter confusion. "Absolutely anybody suggested absolutely