

**THE CITY AS COLONIAL MNEMONIC:
MEMORIALS, MONUMENTS, AND HISTORIES IN
KOLKATA'S URBAN SPACES, 1848-1921**

SYNOPSIS

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Introduction

Some of the most tangible and enduring markers of colonial rule are found in urban landscapes. They take the form of memorial monuments, statues and ordered open spaces (such as cemeteries and memory parks), which publicly establish as well as legitimize ideologies of dominant political groups. By reflecting on the conditions that led to the construction of such spaces and monuments in colonial Calcutta, my doctoral dissertation tries to demonstrate the usefulness of a methodological shift, that studies them in terms of their geographical contexts and the complex processes of visual and textual transmission, through which they acquire political meaning over time.

The Bengal Obituary (1848), a collection of epitaphs from burial grounds in and around Calcutta, serves as the starting point of my analysis. I argue that by transforming personal articulations of grief into a collective discourse, the publication liberated the affective potency inscribed in a static space, by allowing it to circulate in a wider network of Empire narratives. The second chapter is a narratological study of the controversial 'Black Hole' tragedy. It explores how, despite repeated forgetting, the monument acquired layers of meaning, and turned into an object of contestation between two divergent views of history.

Shifting the focus from an individual structure, the third chapter re-contextualizes our understanding of open spaces in the city (such as the Maidan) in terms of how they become sites for articulating a triumphalist military history of the Empire through statues and memorials. The final chapter looks at the construction of the Victoria Memorial Hall, where I argue that for Lord Curzon it presented the ultimate possibility of taming the unruly ghosts and memories of a city, and of re-narrativizing them in the form of an official history of Empire in India built on cooperation rather than coercion. The closing

section ties together the different strands in order to analyze the shifting meanings of these structures in the post-independence city, and speculates about the theoretical possibilities of decolonizing memory in the urban imagination.

Chapter 1: *The Bengal Obituary*: Memory, Landscape, and Text

The opening chapter focuses *The Bengal Obituary* (1848), a collection of over five thousand burial records gathered from cemeteries in Bengal, published by the Calcutta-based undertaker firm of Holmes and Co.. Although compilations of funerary inscriptions, such as the work of ‘Asiaticus’ (John Hawkesworth) or M. Derozario were published earlier in the nineteenth century, the *Obituary* was the first to state its purpose, i.e. to posit an affective argument for the Empire that glorified the past and aimed to inspire future governors of the colonies. Simultaneously, by offering reassurance to natives of England that their beloved dead had not been forgotten altogether, it expanded geographically and temporally the affective reach of the burial grounds in Bengal, granting them at least a verbal presence in the English imagination of grief, mourning, and glorification. Despite the overabundance of information contained in its four hundred odd pages, the *Obituary* does not easily lend itself to analyses of the social or affective history of Bengal in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

For one, being reliant on previous attempts at compiling inscriptions and headstones that were extant at the time, it remains an incomplete documentation of the colonial Christian society in Bengal. It does not, for instance, reflect the large numbers who were buried in unmarked graves or had their headstones replaced owing to shortage of space. A bias towards the wealthier and politically influential sections, therefore, is inevitable. Secondly, it does not offer a spatial understanding of the burial grounds, which, as Trev Lynn Broughton has noted, are indicators of the social networks and

hierarchies.¹ Nor does it offer any clue about the positioning, dimensions, or architectural choices – in short, the materiality – of the tombs or headstones. Attempts to read them as text for their literary merit are also frustrated, as illustrated by Broughton’s article, and discursive studies of the values espoused by the inscriptions by scholars like Peter Robb and Ashish Chadha² (other merits of their articles notwithstanding) seem to go little further than substantiating fairly predictable hypotheses. Thus, the *Obituary* almost seems to hide as much as it reveals about the cultures of death and practices of commemoration in early colonial Calcutta.

Do these readings, then, render it useless as an archive of funerary and commemorative practices? I suggest that while the *Obituary* cannot yield much as a comprehensive point of reference, it can be productively studied in conjunction with other methods of reconstructing the cultural practices surrounding the death of individuals. The chapter proposes – and tries to demonstrate – a methodological shift that situates the text within the geographical context of the necropolis in Calcutta in order to understand the cultural and spatial implications of these practices within the broader framework of colonialism. That is to say, it calls for an inter-disciplinary approach that blends urban geography and history, architecture and literary studies, retaining a strong grounding in archival research. Such a reading is not without historical precedence: commemorative monuments were an essential part of the descriptions of London even in the early modern period, where they served as tangible signifiers in public spaces that connected the present to the past. In terms of the narrative too, they offered convenient segues from geographical exegeses to a historical one – and authors rarely failed to

¹ Trev Lynn Broughton notes that Urquhart’s *Oriental Obituary* was the first to do so. See Trev Lynn Broughton, “The Bengal Obituary: Reading and Writing Calcutta Graves in the Mid Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 15, no. 1 (2010): 39-59. DOI: 10.1080/13555501003607677.

² Ashish Chadha, “Ambivalent Heritage: Between Affect and Ideology in a Colonial Cemetery,” *Journal of Material Culture* 11, no. 3 (2006): 339-63.

mention the importance of preserving them, so that their moment in history could not be faulted for breaking the continuum that was so essential to a historicized sense of community across time. Important works on Calcutta's history by amateur colonial historians, such as H.E. Busteed or H.E.A. Cotton, make use of similar strategies and dedicate chapters to the descriptions of burial grounds in and around the city.

However, as we attempt to study the culture of mourning in colonial Calcutta and its subsequent insertion within a political framework, the inadequacy of reading it as independent of the growth of the city and of the European community becomes apparent. The chapter posits that studies of the cemeteries, like studies of the *Obituary*, tend to analyse them spatially and their post-colonial status in isolation. A closer reading of the city today, substantiated by maps and archival research, reveals that the most celebrated cemetery, i.e. the South Park Street Cemetery, was just one among many in a long belt of burial and cremation grounds that extended along the erstwhile western boundary of the city. It was not just a place of burial for Anglicans but a shared necropolis for Catholics, Dissenters, Muslims, Jews, Parsis, and the Chinese community of Calcutta. Along with this unexceptional status of the South Park Street Cemetery in the context of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Calcutta, its distance from the city proper meant that it was accessed by very few people. This brings us to the question of the reception of the cultural articulations that took place in the form of poetic inscriptions or architectural choices. Thus, other events around the death of individuals come into relative prominence, such as the final journey down Burying Ground Road (the earlier name of Park Street), or announcements read in Church following the death of one of its members.

Rather than detracting from the historical value of the *Obituary*, my reading ascribes to it greater importance, particularly for its ability to facilitate what I call a

“deferred readership.” By distilling into a textual form the commemorative practices of colonial Calcutta, it succeeds in producing an argument that transcends the personal, becoming thereby both collective and political. The *Obituary* achieves this not simply by arguing that the future generations owe commemorative tributes to their forebears because of the pains and sorrow that they underwent in establishing the Empire. It does so by appealing to different kinds of rhetoric, not restricted only to the poetic epitaphs. That language – “the calm commerce of condolence,”³ as Esther Schor puts it – carries a distinct political charge that emerges from an economic reading of affect, or perhaps an affective reading of economics. Following Schor and Broughton, we try to read the *Obituary* in the light of Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), which offers a useful bridge between the analogous emergence of capital and colonial enterprise, under the sign of affect.

Chapter 2: The Empire’s Mythography: The Curious Case of the Black Hole of Calcutta

At my current job as part of the Education and Outreach team of *Ghare Baire*⁴ at the Currency Building on B.B.D. Bag (earlier known as Dalhousie Square, Tank Square, or Lal Dighi) I occasionally take visitors around the exhibition. Chronologically, the first stop is a gallery dedicated to European artists in Bengal in the late eighteenth century, such as William Hodges, Thomas and William Daniell, James Baillie Fraser, Henry Salt, and others. Most of the prints in this section show the European parts of colonial Calcutta, rarely venturing north of the Tank Square. There are two paintings that I like drawing visitors’ attention to as an exercise in observing artworks closely. They are both of the

³ Esther Schor, *Bearing the Dead: The British Culture of Mourning from the Enlightenment to Victoria* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 11.

⁴ A museum-exhibition of art from Bengal since the late eighteenth century, curated and produced by DAG in association with NGMA, and commissioned by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India.

Holwell monument painted from the western corner, showing the Writers' Buildings extending along the northern edge of the Tank Square. The earlier one, drawn by Thomas Daniell and engraved by William and Thomas in the 1790s,⁵ is a more matter-of-fact urban landscape, representing the presence of the obelisk along with many Indians who go about their daily lives. It could have been painted at any time of the day, as the lighting appears flat and conducive to factual documentation. The later work by James Baillie Fraser⁶ from the 1820s is considerably more dramatic. The eastern sky is lit by the rays of a rising sun as the steeple of the newly-built St. Andrew's Church catches its light. The perspective of the artist is at a lower altitude, which makes the monument tower in the foreground.

Even the uninitiated visitor does not fail to notice a significant difference between the two images: while in the Daniells' work, there is a metal railing surrounding the obelisk, the Fraser painting shows a more relaxed interactivity between the "natives" and the colonial monument. The monument looks weather-worn as locals lounge in its shadow, among them a barber, who has set up a make-shift stall to ply his trade against the monument. Fraser's painting, it can be surmised, is one of the last documentations of the Holwell monument, which was dismantled in 1821 by municipal authorities in favour of clearing passage for traffic.⁷ This was not, however, the last time that the "Black Hole" monument would disappear from the south western corner of Dalhousie Square. My second chapter, therefore, is an attempt to understand the unique events and narratives that led to its initial construction, the counter narratives that questioned its affective

⁵ Thomas Daniell, "The Writer's Buildings, Calcutta," aquatint, Plate 4 from the second set of Thomas and William Daniell's *Oriental Scenery* (1798), shelfmark: P939, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, BL.

⁶ James Baillie Fraser, "A View of Writers Buildings from the Monument at the West End," aquatint, Plate 6 from *Views of Calcutta and Its Environs* (1824-1826), shelfmark: X644(6), Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, BL.

⁷ Letter from W.B. Bayley to H. Shakespeare, Judicial (Criminal), 16 March 1821, Cons. 10, WBSA.

charge, and its reappearance as part of a larger project to colonize and monopolize Calcutta's history.

The Holwell monument was constructed in 1758 by John Zephaniah Holwell, one of the survivors of the infamous and controversial "Black Hole" tragedy of Calcutta. Along with the myth of a founding father of the city, namely Job Charnock, the Black Hole myth proved to be one of the most potent and enduring narratives of the colonial presence in Bengal. The incident that took place during Siraj-ud-Daulah's siege of Calcutta is supposed to have taken place on 20 June 1756. According to the most prominent narrative of events written in the form of a letter by Holwell, interim governor and one of the survivors, to his friend William Davis in February 1757, 146 individuals had been imprisoned in a small dungeon inside the old Fort William, of whom 123 had suffocated to death.⁸ In the years after the Battle of Plassey, Holwell's version of events gained wide circulation around the Empire, arousing a sense of oriental horror, followed by racial triumphalism spurred on by a sense of revenge. The version seemed to justify, even necessitate, the consolidation of British rule in Bengal that would be part of the larger project of civilizing colonized peoples. Holwell had built the obelisk at this own personal expense to commemorate the dead who had been thrown into a pit with no mark of recognition.

During the nineteenth century, the Black Hole narrative gained currency in English historiography. Although it was mentioned in passing by James Mill,⁹ it was Thomas Babington Macaulay's landmark essay on Robert Clive (with a section titled "The seizure of Fort William, and above all the 'Black Hole of Calcutta,' must be

⁸ See J.Z. Holwell, *A Genuine Narrative of the Deplorable Deaths of the English Gentlemen, and Others Who Were Suffocated in the Black Hole in Fort-William, at Calcutta...in a Letter to a Friend* (London: Printed for A. Millar, 1758).

⁹ James Mill, *The History of British India*, 5th ed., ed. H.H. Wilson (London: James Madden, 1863) 3: 117-118.

avenged”) that set it in a chain of historic causality.¹⁰ By the time the essay appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* (LXX, January 1840), the original monument had already been destroyed. Public attention to the absence of the memorial monument was drawn in the most significant manner by H.E. Busteed in his *Echoes from Old Calcutta* (1882), who found in it a symbol of urban amnesia about the past. Insidiously, by making a claim on the collective consciousness of the city, Busteed reinforced the idea of a single narrative of history that must be remembered and preserved. In the winter of 1880, Richard Rosell Bayne had discovered sections of the wall of the old Fort William during construction work on the new Eastern Railway Headquarters at Fairlie Place. His publications around the discovery in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*¹¹ became the foundation of subsequent archaeological attempts to uncover the exact location of the Black Hole prison and of piecing together an accurate map of the Fort William.

There were counter-narratives too, most notably authored by one Akshay Kumar Maitreya, and later in the pages of *Bengal Past and Present* by a seemingly eccentric Englishman, J.H. Little, who sought to completely invalidate the very premise of such an event. The Black Hole myth, however, was not the only contentious point of this debate: one of Macaulay’s significant arguments revolved around vilifying Siraj-ud-Daulah as an “oriental despot,” a characterization resented by several Indian historians who looked to resuscitate his historical identity during the proto-nationalist phase in the late nineteenth century. Partha Chatterjee’s recent work on the Black Hole offers a detailed analysis of such attempts.¹²

¹⁰ Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Lord Clive,” *Critical and Historical Essays* Vol. I, ed. A.J. Grieve (1907), at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2332/2332-h/2332-h.htm>.

¹¹ Richard Rosell Bayne, “Notes on the remains of Old Fort William discovered during the erection of the East Indian Railway Company’s Offices,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 52, no. 1-4 (1883): 105-119

¹² Partha Chatterjee, *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), 248-251.

The discourse around the monument reached its apotheosis under Curzon, who was inspired by Busted's chastisement of the European population of Calcutta for forgetting their history. Ever eager to establish his credentials as a preserver of history, Curzon took it upon himself to collect and verify the data that an army of amateur and semi-governmental historians had gathered, and to give it a concrete articulation in the form of a resurrected Black Hole monument at almost the exact spot of the original but with minor changes. Eventually, in the years leading up to India's independence, the monument would disappear once again – or relocate – to the safe precincts of St John's Church under political pressure mounted by Subhas Chandra Bose and fellow nationalists. This chapter, therefore, is an attempt to understand this complex and oft-revisited history, focusing on the negotiations through which a physical monument and its visual representations inform historical narratives, and how through urban histories it returns to claim a place in the sentimental geography of the city.

Chapter 3: Monuments and Statues: Colonial Memory in Open Spaces and Their Afterlives

From monuments or spaces commemorating death, the focus shifts in the third chapter to a broader conceptualization of the Calcutta Maidan as a triumphalist memory park that narrativizes the military achievements of the British across the Empire. Before speaking of the cultural articulations that took place on the Maidan, however, the chapter explores the implications of Debjani Bhattacharya's significant recent contribution to scholarship on urban development in Calcutta.¹³ Decentring the human history of the city, Bhattacharya's study seeks to understand the origins and changes in the colonial notion of land, property and ownership in the context of the anthropocene. Her work takes us

¹³ Debjani Bhattacharyya, *Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta: The Making of Calcutta* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

back to mythic pasts that speak of the churning of the ocean and the birth of “*Kilkila*” – identified as the lower Bengal delta – from the breath of the gigantic tortoise, Kurma. Contrasting regional narratives with the colonial interpretation of the topography, Bhattacharya concludes that, in effect, recent geological studies appears closer, metaphorically, to the Kurma legend as it suggests the possibility of Bengal being born out of a “remnant oceanic basin.”¹⁴ Her archival research reveals how the process of colonization of the territory by the British had to first encounter and solve the problem of a constantly shifting, marshy landmass, giving it a fixed definition. Following the clearance of the erstwhile settlement of Gobindapur from the vicinity of the new Fort William, the Maidan itself, she argues, was little more than a glacis that surrounded the military base, flooded for significant parts of the year. Before the space was culturally produced, therefore, it had to be managed hydrologically and cartographically.

While this process continued through the early decades of the nineteenth century, in 1828 the British built themselves one of the most iconic landmarks of the city: the Ochterlony monument, in memory of the British military leader, David Ochterlony, who had engineered two significant victories against the Marathas and the Gurkha army of Nepal. Although it was ostensibly a memorial monument, it appears to have become the favourite vantage point of painters, print-makers and photographers, who sought a panoramic representation of the “City of Palaces.” Indeed, from the Ochterlony monument, only the European front face of the city was visible, the rows of houses, market places, squares and tenements behind being reduced to flattened rooftops, punctuated by the occasional church spire. Much has been written about the erotics of the totalizing view of cities from high places,¹⁵ and the popularity of these panoramas in

¹⁴ Ibid, 3.

¹⁵ Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City,” in *The Certeau Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford, 2000), 101-102.

the history of Victorian spectacles cannot be overemphasized.¹⁶ The Maidan continued to serve as a heterotopic space for diverse recreational activities that included, above all, sports, theatre, circus, and variety shows, hot-air ballooning, and public ceremonies of different kinds. The Great Exhibition of Calcutta that took place in the winter of 1883-84 was perhaps an organized culmination of its spectacularity.

Apart from the totalizing views of the Maidan that were taken from the top of the monument, for wealthy British and Indian families, who could afford carriages and, later, cars, the space was carefully planned to optimize navigability and the pleasure of viewing the landscape. The large stretches were punctuated by statues of British military men, whose deeds in India and abroad were celebrated for consolidating the Empire. The chapter offers a case study of one of these monuments, namely, the striking equestrian sculpture of James Outram. I suggest an alternative to the productive methodological approaches offered by art historians like Barbara Groseclose and Tapati Guha-Thakurta, who have studied these statues as aesthetic objects, by turning to a more reception-oriented analysis of their collective visuality within the urban landscape.¹⁷ This entails reading the statues' presence through reports of their inaugural ceremonies as well as responses to them in post-independence political scenarios. They are also situated within a particularly Victorian tradition of naturalist/realist statuary, which would leave an indelible mark on everyday commemorative practices in the post-colonial city even if the imperial objects themselves receive scorn.

¹⁶ Daniel E. White, "Imperial Spectacles, Imperial Publics: Panoramas in and of Calcutta," *The Wordsworth Circle* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 71-81. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24043598>.

¹⁷ Barbara Groseclose, *British Sculpture and the Company Raj: Church Monuments and Public Statuary in Madras, Calcutta, and Bombay to 1858* (London: Associated University Presses, 1995); Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Why Statues Matter: The Changing Landscape of Calcutta's Colonial and Postcolonial Statuary," lecture delivered at Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata, on 3 August 2018.

As I was writing my chapter, monuments, which Robert Musil had famously declared to be the most invisible of objects, suddenly re-asserted themselves in public discussions in the form of the Black Lives Matter movement. It seemed pertinent, therefore, to reflect not just upon the cultures of commemoration and ideological imposition through tangible objects at the moment of their creation but the cultural responses to them after a significant shift in their political position within the nation. A broad survey, which includes analyses of the Nehruvian response to colonial statuary across Indian cities as well as more recent acts of iconoclasm, focuses on two critical years in the history of statuary in Calcutta: 1969-71.

The public debate around statues in post-independence India had come into force particularly on the eve of the centenary celebrations of the First War of Independence. Pressed in Lok Sabha debates, Jawaharlal Nehru had clarified that he perceived statues in India to be of three kinds: statues of historical importance, statues of artistic importance, and statues that were provocative or offensive to Indians.¹⁸ He expressed his interest in removing the provocative ones with minimum fuss so as to not create ill-will between India and England, while the ones that had historic or artistic import, he suggested, could be moved to museums. Nehru joked that the ones that had neither artistic/historic significance, nor were directly offensive to Indian sentiments, he was willing to give away as gifts. While the removals took place in Lucknow, Calcutta had to wait until 1969, when the United Front government decided to remove the statues – as Nehru had said earlier – with minimum fuss.

What happened in 1971, however, with the Naxalite attack on statues, was remarkably different and unanticipated. With the colonial statues removed either to the

¹⁸ "Removal of British Rulers' Statues," *The Civic Affairs* (July, 1957): 70.

Flagstaff House in Barrackpore or within the safe confines of the Victoria Memorial Hall grounds, the Naxalites targeted statues of Indian luminaries primarily, who were recognized as leaders of the Bengal Renaissance. While this was not overtly an attack on colonial statues, it was an attack on perceived collaborators among the bourgeoisie, recognized and lauded by the British, such as Vidyasagar or Raja Ram Mohun Roy. The methodological approach suggested by this chapter, I hope, would pave the way for studies of monumentality and statuary even in the post-colonial era, where most statues and sculptures are not considered worthy objects of aesthetic analysis. Instead, by looking at them from the perspective of urban anthropological practices of commemoration, I suggest that a longer history that originates in the colonial period may be extended into the present day.

Chapter 4: The Naming of Nature and Gendered Memory

Among public monuments and statues in colonial Calcutta – with the exception of Queen Victoria – there are no representations of the female body. This is in-keeping with Victorian perceptions of what virtues were worthy of public celebration as well as of the conservatism regarding women's visibility in public. Moving away from monuments built by the British, this chapter investigates a relatively under-studied aspect of memorial cultures: naming of the natural world through the emerging discipline of colonial botany, and the memorial associations of gardens and flowers with British women in India. These negotiations take place both within the academic field of knowledge production as well as within realms of pleasure derived from nature, as with the gardens of the Government House maintained by women of the Viceregal families.

The chapter starts by tracing the origins of the Botanical Gardens (at Shipbur) following a set of disastrous famines that devastated the Bengal countryside in the late

eighteenth century. Meant initially as an experimental laboratory that would enable more efficient agricultural practices, the Gardens became a site for the collection and study of botanical specimens from across the expanding Empire. The resulting exchanges are testimony to the networks that were forged between English, French and Dutch colonizers in particular, who divided up territories in South East Asia among themselves, and shared a similar interest in botany and zoology. In Bengal, the early efforts were pioneered by Robert Kyd, Nathaniel Wallich, William Roxborough, who held important positions with respect not only to the Botanical Gardens but also the English East India Company and its administrators in Bengal.

After a brief survey of the poetics and politics of naming the natural world after human agents, the chapter turns to a study of the gardens inside the Government House. The first significant contributions to its beautification were made by Sarah Elizabeth Amherst, daughter of William Pitt Amherst and Sarah Amherst, and taken up, after a brief interruption during Bentinck's tenure, by Emily Eden. There are two notable impulses detectable in these efforts: a British fondness for gardens and landscaping as an aesthetic and spiritual end in itself, and a collector's motivation that, like the Early Modern curiosity cabinets, tried to create a natural museum of the Empire's diversity inside the gardens. While the former resulted in amateur illustrations of their surroundings and numerous diary entries that speak of their fascination with the novelties of the natural world, the latter could only be achieved by maintaining close ties with botanists, who were traveling across the Empire on various bureaucratic as well as scientific missions. The chapter closes with commemorative gestures surrounding the death of Charlotte, Lady Canning, focusing on a scrapbook prepared by her friends and associates following her demise, which includes a page of dry flowers and leaves from her favourite plants in the Barrackpore garden.

Chapter 5: The “Unified Memorial”: Curzon, Victoria Memorial and the Historiography of Calcutta

In over two centuries of colonial rule in India, there is no commemorative monument that matches the Victoria Memorial Hall in Kolkata in terms of grandeur of planning and execution. When it was being conceptualized, the *Hindi Punch* published a caricature that showed a saree-clad woman holding a replica of the building in her hands, while Lord Curzon, its prime mover, admires it. The cartoon is captioned “The Two-fold Memorial” and the accompanying fictitious dialogue suggests that it is as much a memorial to the deceased Queen as it is to Curzon himself.¹⁹ Taking cue from this observation, the final chapter of my dissertation tries to situate the monument at an intersection: of a history of commemorative practices across the Empire, and of Curzon’s view of history as it was articulated through the built environment of Calcutta, and indeed, India at large. Given how keen he was to rewrite a history of British India, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that had Victoria died at a time that fell outside of Curzon’s vice-regency, Kolkata today would not have its most iconic tourist attraction – at least, not in the same form.

In order to understand why Curzon undertook the construction of the VMH with such vigour, it is important to recognize his larger historical project. The chapter addresses two significant aspects of this: firstly, his efforts to establish the hegemony of British rule in India and the relative political positions of native rulers and princes through performative markers; and secondly, his obsession with the colonial history of Calcutta and the desire to tame the ghosts of the past that haunted the city’s memory. As an illustration of the performative marker, we turn to Curzon’s interpretation of the Delhi

¹⁹ *Cartoons from the Hindi Punch*, 51.

Durbar, which had been started by Lord Lyton in 1877.²⁰ The 1903 Durbar is testament to Curzon's ability to wield soft power to elicit allegiance from native rulers in order to legitimize British rule in India – and he did so through an insidious performance of assimilation. For the 1903 Durbar, which was supposed to be graced by the King himself, Curzon opted for an Indo-Saracenic style of architecture, which would be in-keeping with the cultural landscape of Delhi and function as a symbol of the gradual assimilation of the British period within the fabric of India's history. He also proclaimed that it was to be a participatory Durbar, where the Indian people would not simply observe as bystanders while the ceremony unfolded before them. Not only did the plans for the VMH echo the spatial configuration of power that was enacted at the Durbar, as the *Hindi Punch* speculated, the scale of contribution by Indian princes to the Curzon fund for the memorial was probably inversely proportionate to the distance at which they sat from the metonymic symbol of British rule at the Durbar, i.e. Curzon himself.

At the local level, Curzon had announced upon his arrival in India that he intended to oversee the beginning of a new chapter for Calcutta, which would look both to the future and to the past. On his way to India, he had been reading Busteed's *Echoes*, which inspired him to recover an authoritative history of the city of Calcutta from forgetfulness and Romantic uncertainties. His efforts to revive the Hasting's House, which was supposed to be haunted by the ghost of Warren Hastings, gave an early indication that a rationalist was at work: intolerant of oral histories and uncertain memories that constituted Calcutta's sense of the past, Curzon looked to tame these spectres and make them useful to the future. Informed by archival documents and personal letters, Curzon swiftly dismissed two of the legends surrounding the ghost of Hastings, purchased the

²⁰ Bernard S. Cohn, "Representing Authority in Victorian India," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983):163-209.

building in 1901, and converted it into a homestay for important guests of the government. (His re-erection of the replica of the Holwell monument, one of the highlights of his historical interventions, is covered in Chapter 2.)

Thus, for a man who was given to what Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger have called the “invention of tradition”²¹ (as illustrated by the Durbar), and to engendering history, the death of the Queen provided the perfect opportunity to create a grand narrative of Empire that would unfold spatially and architecturally, as a permanent structure. When his plans of establishing the “Valhalla for [British] Indian heroes” started to enter the public sphere, they sparked off debates as to whether the budget laid out for the project could be better utilised in charitable work. Unsurprisingly, he received support from upper caste Hindus, like Thakurdas Mukhopadhyay, who authored a series of articles in *Nabyabharat* defending Curzon’s decision and hailing him as a people-friendly viceroy with a hands-on approach to governance.²² As Tanika Sarkar has shown, there was an existing discourse which viewed the Queen as the European equivalent of a chaste, Hindu widow, and, at the same time, a mother goddess.²³ Mukhopadhyay would refer to her as *Bharateshwari* – the goddess of Bharat or India.

Curzon was not one to be dissuaded by public opinion and, as his plans gathered momentum, the VMH Board of Trustees settled on William Emerson as the architect who would be entrusted with the task of giving the viceroy’s vision a material form. In the third section of the chapter, we take a closer look at the debates around the style of the VMH within the larger context of architecture and power in the colonial period, drawing

²¹ Eric Hobsbawm & Terrence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

²² Thakurdas Mukhopadhyay, “Bharateshwarir smarak” [Memorial to Her Highness], *Nabyabharat* (June-July 1901):113-126, 118.

²³ Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 251.

on the work of Thomas Metcalf.²⁴ Although Emerson and Curzon were both admirers of the Taj Mahal (Curzon's efforts to restore its lost glory were instrumental) and proponents of Indo-Saracenic architecture in the subcontinent, Curzon insisted that any marble building constructed in the latter style would inevitably draw unfavourable comparison with the Taj. Unable to think of a single unifying "Indian style," Curzon concluded that like other museums in the western world, the VMH should also be built in a classical style.

In the final section, we trace the presence of two statues of Curzon within the premises of the Victoria Memorial, and the networks of loyalty that facilitated their construction. The one erected just outside the gates of VMH, sculpted by Hamo Thornycroft, was supposed to carry bronze relief plaques on four sides of the pedestal, representing Curzon's major achievements in India: his restoration of the Taj, building the VMH, the Delhi Durbar and his institution of the Imperial Cadets. The statue, however, would be removed post-independence and replaced by one of Aurobindo Ghosh, as Curzon's found refuge in the Flagstaff House in Barrackpore. In conclusion, I reflect on the colonial foundations of the public history of Calcutta's past and try to suggest possible theoretical solutions which can enable a re-writing through deconstructionist modes of historiographic engagement by re-contextualizing rather than discarding the colonial archives.

²⁴ Thomas R. Metcalf, "Architecture and the Representation of Empire: India, 1860-1910," *Representations*, no. 6 (Spring, 1984): 37-65.