

**The City as Colonial Mnemonic: Memorials, Monuments and Histories
in Calcutta's Urban Spaces, 1848-1921**

Sujaan Mukherjee

Department of English, Jadavpur University

ABSTRACT

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 the monument acquired layers of meaning, and turned into an object of contestation between two divergent views of history.

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 fourth chapter looks at gendered memory, botany and gardening, while the final chapter analyzes the construction of the Victoria Memorial Hall, as the ultimate imperial memorial project undertaken by Lord Curzon. 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.

Keywords: memory, urban history, Kolkata, colonial, decolonization