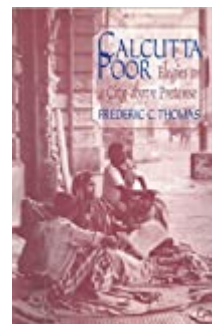




**Frederic C. Thomas.** *Calcutta Poor: Elegies on a City above Pretense.* Armonk, N.Y. and London: M.E. Sharpe, 1997. ix + 189 pp. \$31.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56324-981-5.



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## A Good Rebuttal But

Over the past three centuries Calcutta, the “City of Joy,” the “City of Poor,” the “Dead City,” the “Living City,” has elicited a rich and growing body of literature from a variety of scholars, amateurs, journalists, artists, photographers and travel writers. Accordingly, there is no dearth of epithets that Calcutta earned as one of the oldest, though not the only city in the subcontinent of India. Frederic C. Thomas’s *Calcutta Poor: Elegies on a City Above Pretense* is an addition to the already existing field of knowledge. Sukanta Chaudhuri, the editor of the major two volume work on Calcutta that came out on the occasion of its celebration of three hundred years in 1990, notes in his introduction that “[F]ew major cities have bred so many myths as Calcutta.” He further points out that the “chief Calcutta myths are depressing ones, relating to poverty, over-population and urban blight.”[1] Citing those negative and depressing myths about Calcutta from the journals and works of Westerners, starting from Robert Clive—the British general—to poets and writers such as Rudyard Kipling and Mark Twain, Thomas proceeds with the objective of debunking the dismal stereotypes. His study focusing on the Calcutta poor is a rebuttal of the lingering image of poverty that persists in West-

ern writings through centuries. He argues that conditions in Calcutta “are no worse than in many other Third World cities” (p. 7). Borrowing from Kipling’s description of Calcutta as a city “above pretense,” Thomas sets about to explore the “intense love-hate relationship” of the Calcuttans with their city. For him, Calcutta is worth studying in order to understand how the city’s residents deal with its problems. His book is about the extent to which poverty in Calcutta is intractable in spite of the efforts undertaken to deal with it (p. 6).

But the question is, what difference does another monograph on Calcutta make in the field of sociological literature? What is its significance? Thomas’s work does, however, make a difference, not for specialists, but for lay readers. He tries to fathom the roots of urban poverty and present it with all its complexity. For him the urban poor are not an “undifferentiated mass.” He captures their plight with its multifaceted dynamics and upholds the intractable nature of poverty.

Trained as an anthropologist and equipped with years of experience in international development projects in the cities of Third World countries, Frederic

Thomas presents us with a sympathetic assessment of the poor in Calcutta. His attempt is modest, combining anthropological perspective with sufficient historical information, he “describes the living and working conditions of Calcutta’s poor in an effort to get beyond generalities and better understand the practical realities of impoverishment” (p. viii). Anthropological data richly blend with historical evidence as Thomas conveys his own experiences of the city and his acquaintance with the diverse members of its population against a carefully constructed historical backdrop drawing mainly from preexisting literary sources. Far from being primary research, as Thomas himself admits, his work “stems more from a pleasurable and spontaneous process of confirming and supplementing the oral and written observations of others” (p. vii-ix). His aim is neither to put forward an urban development project nor offer an in-depth study of a particular slum. His study remains fairly open-ended and attempts to draw a holistic picture of the city, particularly of the city’s poor. At the end, however, he does offer a few suggestions for improving the condition of the Calcutta poor.

To elucidate his thesis on the intractability of urban poverty, Thomas delves deep into the historical origins of urban settlers, outlines the birth of the “Black Town and the City of Palaces,” “Bhadralok and the Genteel Poor,” and traces the inflow of the “Refugees and Migrants” into the city. His excursion into the colonial past of the imperial capital, the hub of British business and administration, reveals the adjacency of poverty and affluence in Calcutta since days long gone by. Thomas’s work makes the connection between the city of palaces and the black town and demonstrates how they gave birth to and nurtured pockets of slums and squatters, popularly called Bustees, for which Calcutta is much known in the contemporary world. Through his study of the housing and living conditions, listing of different skills and vocations, inter-personal relationships among members of different ethnic and religious groups of the slum populations, explaining the role played by local politics and community leaders, Thomas captures the complexity of the situation and provides rich insights into the lives of urban poor.

Thomas’s significant contribution is to disaggregate the population of urban poor by parading us through a variety of reasons and conditions under which urban poverty and slum dwellers evolved and thrived. He makes careful distinctions among each and every section of the less affluent urban population, from the less visible “genteel poor” comprised of the “erstwhile bhadralok families who survive from hand to mouth,” to the street

and the bustee dwellers, each of whom resides in his/her specific locations owing to a multitude of factors and conscious decisions (pp. 153-154). Through a selective presentation of secondary sources, he demonstrates the different gradations and degrees of poverty that exist among the Calcutta poor. He also explores the different reasons and conditions which account for such diversity. Refuting the claim that slum improvements will encourage more in-migration into the city, he argues that the principal determinant for influx of migrants is the means of livelihood that the city promises and not their place of stay (p. 156). He dispels the myth that all migrants who come to the city first occupy pavements and then move on to slums. On the contrary, we witness the complex rationale of the poor migrant workers for choosing the sidewalks as their preferred locations to stay. So the street-dwellers are not always the classic homeless driven by poverty. By presenting representative interviews and profiles, Thomas documents how the urban poor reasonably organized a life around the street (pp. 46-47). Therefore, homelessness, although a problem plaguing the city, is partly a choice of the residents who occupy the streets, made for very specific strategic considerations. Accordingly, he reveals that living in slums does not mean unqualified squalor. Contrary to popular understanding, he points out that slums are not just an undifferentiated homogeneous habitation for the poor. By paying close attention to the lived experiences and motivations of the urban poor, Thomas restores them as thoughtful, autonomous subjects and not as mere victims of declining economic circumstances.

Thomas is, however, careful enough not to disassociate the poor from the roles played by the state, particularly, of the ruling Leftist Party in present-day West Bengal, and other volunteer groups, associations or individuals. Tracing the history of the ruling parties and the transfer of power from Congress to CPI(M), his work registers the corrupt role played by party leaders and organized politics in perpetuating urban poverty. Just as Thomas disaggregates the urban poor, so does he refrain from any generalization of the elite politicians and other powerful groups. Insisting on the differences within the political parties and other associations, he notes the general apathy of the party or business or community leaders in bringing about any changes or improving the conditions of the city’s poor. Equally important are the roles of the *dadas* (the local bosses, who control slum politics and wield enormous authority over the poor) and their henchmen. Thomas’s delineation of the power hierarchy, from political leaders to local bosses, and its influence on

the lives of those in the poorer groups, renders a complex and heterogeneous picture of an urban metropolis that defies any generalization.

While Thomas's elegies on Calcutta's poor point out the intractability of urban poverty, its redeeming feature is the offering of solutions for coping with the problems. If it is the indifferent attitude of the upper level policy- and decision makers that renders urban poverty intractable, the vitality and dynamism of Calcutta poor are further complicated by the general apathy and vested interests of private and public sectors. Thomas suggests that radical redistribution of resources that entails political measures can remedy the ills. He urges that the needs of the poor should occupy a central place in urban policy agenda and should not be shunted off to some remote sectors or specific departments. More importantly, he calls for empowering the poor themselves by creating conditions that help to work out their own solutions (pp. 160-166). The strength of his work lies in strengthening the poor themselves and not making them hapless actors at the mercy of others, be it NGOs, political parties or charitable individuals.

Nonetheless, the book stimulates curiosities and evokes questions that it fails to satisfy or answer. A searching reader may want to find out more about the lives of the city's poor, their different occupations, the choices they make, their response to their present situation, and their reflections on their own conditions. Thomas's work provides a broad overview but lacks in-depth treatment of any such issues. His book is best for lay readers, not for experts or specialists. It is mainly a narrative account garnered from other sources. It does not pose any probing question nor follows through a critical analysis. Although the construction of the city's past adds special value to his work, time appears rather fluid, lacking exactitude and precision. The adjacency of events posited one against the other may confuse some readers.

In the early 1970s, when urban history was gaining much importance, urban historian Leo F. Schnore argued that new urban history has three related traits: "first, an interest in linking sociological theory to historical data, moving back and forth across the boundaries separating the traditional disciplines; second, an understanding of the uses of quantitative materials; and third an eagerness to broaden the scope of urban studies to embrace the social experience of ordinary unexceptional people." [2] Frederic C. Thomas succeeds in attaining the first and the third traits in his work, but falters on the second, as we see no use of statistical evidence to support his argument.

He relies mainly on literary records and surveys. However, his use of real-life photographs gives the readers a closer perception of the Calcutta poor.

Although the book uses a fairly exhaustive bibliography of English language sources, it suffers from some misinformation and spelling errors that can delude readers. For example, while describing the caste composition of the Bengali upper and middle class, the *bhadralok*, Thomas describes the Kayasthas as "warrior landowners" and the Baidyas as "businessmen" (p. 26). While some members of Kayasthas might have been warrior landowners and some of Baidyas might have engaged in trade in colonial Calcutta where caste prejudice was increasingly becoming less rigid, it is erroneous to attribute to them these generic categories. The Kayasthas represented the scribes and Baidyas represented those who practised traditional (ayurvedic) medicine. [3] The trading community, however, comes from Vaishya castes. The first name of Sukanta Chaudhuri, the editor of *Calcutta The Living City: Vols. I & II* whom I mentioned in the beginning paragraphs, and from whose collection the author draws extensively, is consistently misspelled in both the "Notes" and "Bibliography" with a "d" instead of "t". So is the first name of Amitav Ghosh, an eminent author and anthropologist whose name appears as "Amitar." As most names of Indian origin have special meanings, misspelling of them may result in difficulties in identifying them.

There is no doubt that what Thomas presents before us does not entail fundamental research. To any Calcuttan, these are known facts that they learn to live with. But Thomas's contribution is primarily for Western readers and for outsiders who, devoid of a sense of history, view Third World cities such as Calcutta as repositories of urban poverty and squalor. Thomas's retrieval of the many faces of urban poverty, and more importantly his identification of the different gradations among the urban poor, reveals his nuanced understanding of an age-old urban scenario. His book is not a dismal picture. Neither is it a romantic portrayal. Nor does it focus on any particular area or slum population, such as La Pierre's *City of Joy*. It makes a significant difference by reflecting on the nature of poverty, its intractability, tracing its historical origins, and offering solutions. His work may serve as a good example of how a researcher can use secondary sources effectively to develop deep insights into the conditions of other Third World cities.

#### Notes

- [1]. Sukanta Chaudhuri, ed. *Calcutta The Living City*

*Vol. II: The Present and the Future* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[2]. Leo F. Schnore, "Urban History and Social Sciences," *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 1, 1974.

[3]. See Haricharan Bandyopadhyay ed. *Bangiya*

*Sabdakosh* for etymological origins of the caste groups mentioned.

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