

BYPASS

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I became seriously aware of the existence of the Bypass in 1984, but I don't know how long it had been around at that point. I Googled the question for this essay, but like much else about our city, it's a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. It hadn't been in existence for too many years I suspect, because when my friends found out that I was using the Bypass as late as eleven at night they were foreboding and solicitous. Be careful, they said, there be dacoits. My brother-in-law (who was not my brother-in-law yet) a big, dark fellow who could be mistaken for a dacoit in most civil company, was the most insistent. As an officer of the electric supply company, he knew the city well. Don't be foolish, he said, you ignorant boy from the mofussil.

Now, of course, the idea of dacoits on the Bypass is as ludicrous as dragons. Rapists—yes—especially now that that the moral fibre of society has apparently broken down with the election of Ms Banerjee. Drunk, reckless teenagers with big, expensive cars—no question. A thoughtful Anandamargi out for a soul-searching stroll—perhaps. But no dacoits.

Back then, I was not the only person from South Calcutta who had little knowledge about the Bypass. Its only utility was to drive to the airport, but only in daylight, or, if it couldn't be avoided, dusk. If one did have to go to the airport late at night—the only possible reasons would be to drop off or receive an international flyer or get a drink at the airport hotel—everyone took CIT Road, around Sealdah station, through Phoolbagan and Kankurgachhi, on to VIP Road. The Bypass was off-limits after dark.

But I had no choice. I was dating a slim, beautiful girl (the sister of the aforementioned dacoit-like brother-in-law) who lived in Selimpur. My

father had moved to Calcutta with a new job after spending his entire working life in Durgapur, and ignoring my vociferous objections had picked Salt Lake as the new home base. I had just returned from my first job in Vizag and needed a place to stay. So I was sleeping in Salt Lake, working in BBD Bagh, and spending my early evenings at my old haunts between Golpark and Jadavpur and my late evenings in Selimpur.

The last bus from South Calcutta to Salt Lake was the S-14 with a stop at Jodhpur Park at 10:10 p.m. The Jadavpur-Salt Lake mini stopped running long before then. For good reason too; the S-14 used to be as empty as my wallet and I could take any seat I wanted. My few co-passengers avoided eye contact and, in winter, shrank further into their shawls and monkey-caps when I boarded. There were no cellphones or laptops. It was impossible to read because of the furious rattle of the bus; the windows jittered like a tasha band on bhashan duty. All you had were your thoughts—for an hour and a half. It was wonderful.

The S-14 did not run on the Bypass. But sometimes I missed the last bus (or maybe they simply didn't run it; who knows), and I was forced to find something to get to Park Circus, from there a taxi to Ultadanga and then, with some luck, a bus (sometimes the S-14 I had missed) into Salt Lake. Those taxi rides had to be on the Bypass because if I took the city route I'd never catch a bus at Ultadanga. It was a big hit on my budget—if undertaken too frequently, I had to shift from Filter Wills to Capstan at the end of the month—but those twenty minutes on the Bypass were to savour.

The Bypass began from (or, depending on your perspective, ended at) the Park Circus Connector in those days. There was no Ruby Hospital or Kasba Connector. The Santoshpur and Anwar Shah Connectors were years away. The road itself was a two-lane ribbon with absolutely nothing on either side. No Sonar Bangla hotel, no Science City, no billboards, no housing complexes. Just darkness.

What made those rides so savoury? It couldn't have been the extraordinary olfactory delights of Dhapa, which was a fully functioning (in a manner of speaking) landfill then. Maybe it was the slight tremor of danger; all that dacoit-talk might have had some effect. More likely it was the feeling of a short-lived jailbreak—between the city and its relentless urgencies and Salt Lake and its lobotomic monotony. You knew you were going home, but you could imagine you were going

anywhere. The Bypass was like the GT Road running through the wilds of Singhbhum; the only difference was you knew that five minutes away, a hop behind the humpbacked blackness to your left, was a throbbing metropolis of millions.

During the day the Bypass felt no less like a country road. Middle-aged men ambled along on bicycles, one hand on the bar, the other holding a Mahendra Dutta umbrella (the China makes were years from hitting the market). Peasant women sold cauliflowers close to the lane leading into Dhapa. My father, an inveterate shopper of produce, often bought several. All that organic waste in Dhapa must be good for vegetables, he said, because these cauliflowers are as good as those I ate in my village in Comilla. My mother thought they were disgusting.

Things began to change pretty soon. The Bypass was widened to four lanes. What for, asked Mustaque, my father's driver, there are no cars on this road as it is. The only time we faced traffic jams was when Jyotibabu and his convoy were on the move from his fortified house in Salt Lake to his office in Lal Dighi; all traffic on the Bypass had to stop for his flashing and sirening Very Important Passage. Bloody banana republic, I used to think, big chief in big hurry. That was before I got a doctorate and learned things about symbolic power and the postcolonial state. Now I've come full circle. When I see Ms Banerjee beamingly inaugurate a public urinal or pompously direct traffic at Netaji Indoor Stadium, I think: bloody banana republic. I also have confirmed what I intuitively knew then: there are no dacoits on the Bypass; they are and have always been in Writers' Building.

I left Calcutta in 1987 but have returned to the city for one to three months (sometimes longer) every year since. My parents are gone and I have my own place in Jodhpur Park; so I don't need to go to Salt Lake. But I fly frequently and have friends and relatives in those once unmentionable parts across the badlands. So once or twice a week I am back on the Bypass—cursing while sitting in traffic (yes, there are regular jams now) and observing the changes. It is without doubt the most dynamic axis of the metropolis. The road is lined with new hospitals, shopping centres, residential complexes of various heights, large public institutions, five-star hotels, and parks and recreation venues. The road that was meant to delineate a boundary, the edge of the city, is now a major thoroughfare. The Bypass has become an artery.

This is how it often is. The last boundary/ring road/bypass in the city was Circular Road. Starting in 1799, after the British were completely secure in their city, the marshes were drained and the Maratha Ditch filled in to create the first long stretch of Circular Road. Governor General Wellesley was in charge then. For over a hundred years the city stayed largely within that boundary. A detailed map of the city in 1858 from the David Rumsey collection¹⁵ shows that from the north till Sealdah station, Calcutta remained well within the Circular Road line. South of the station there was some built-up area beyond Circular Road, but not much. Park Circus did not exist. Ballygunge had the cantonment, but little else. Bhabanipur was beginning to develop, but was sparse and ended at the Chakraberia/Girish Mukherjee Road area. A map from 1893 in Constable's Hand Atlas¹⁶ shows almost no change, except for some large estates in Alipur, Belvedere and Khidirpur. The Imperial Gazetteer of India from 1908 shows a virtually identical map¹⁷.

But Circular Road did not remain a boundary for long after. The city's population was under a million in 1900. It's around four-and-a-half million now. The metropolitan area's population is around fourteen million. The built-up area began expanding rapidly after the 1920s. Rural-to-urban migration from the rest of region, including the surrounding states of contemporary Bihar and Orissa, was a major source of population growth. The Bengal famine and the Hindu-Muslim conflicts of 1943–47 brought very large numbers of new residents, my mother's family among them; having left Comilla with the clothes on their backs in 1946, they settled in Bagmari, in a slum immediately beyond Circular Road, near Maniktola. The liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 brought another large influx of new residents.

Now Circular Road is not even the halfway point between the Hooghly and the Bypass. Up north it momentarily is, but the further south we go the larger is the distance between the two roads. Circular Road at Hatibagan is about two kilometres east of the river and west of the Bypass. At Garia, where the Bypass ends (more or less), the closest

¹⁵A lovely overlay of that map with contemporary Kolkata can be seen at <http://rumsey.geogarage.com/maps/gct001429a.html>

¹⁶See <http://pradoshmitter.files.wordpress.com/2010/01/calcutta1893.jp>

¹⁷See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presidencies_and_provinces_of_British_India#mediaviewer/File:IGI1908CalcuttaTown2.jpg

point on Circular Road is about ten kilometres to the north-west. The metropolis is increasingly taking the shape of a long tear drop...or a plastic bag with two potatoes at the bottom.

Can we expect that the Bypass, like Circular Road before it, will eventually change from a border to a central road? Maybe. The early signs do hint at that possibility. But there are hurdles. First: the wetlands to the east will have to be dealt with. Either they should be left alone, or drained, like much of the original city and Salt Lake were. The Hamletian dithering—to drain or not to drain—doesn't accomplish much other than to raise the cost of land for everyone. Second: Rajarhat-New Town and the Bypass are competitors for the same high-end land users. Therefore, they will cannibalise the same market and slow each other's growth. I am not even going to get into the third point, the big question of jobless growth, which is largely what is happening in the city now, and how long the city can be sustained by the real estate market and the housing finance industry.

Just as important (and unanswerable) are some basic aesthetic questions. Is the Bypass a Calcutta Road? Does this essay even belong in this collection? The answer hinges on whether there is an essential Calcutta. Is there a look, a visual mode, an arrangement of people and things, that is distinct, that says 'this is Calcutta'? If there is, is this essential Calcutta being replicated along the Bypass? If the answer to the first question is 'no', then the second question is immaterial. If the answer is 'yes', we must ask: What is it? This is not a question that can have a definitive answer, so I will offer my own in the spirit of a healthy *adda*. The essential Calcutta is its pavements or footpaths.

Calcutta's roads, lanes, and alleys, its cobblestoned tramlines, treeless avenues, and occasional flyovers, are important visual markers no doubt. But even more distinct and quintessentially Calcuttan are the city's pavements, mostly broken, many turned into open markets, pockmarked with tube wells, impromptu shrines, and random holes dug by the monsoon or men from the power, phone, or water department. This whole set piece is animated by people on foot, walking everywhere—to work, to school, to the train station or bus stop, to shops, to lovers, to imperious homeowners to do their cooking and cleaning, to friends on the same step of the social ladder to share a drink or smoke.

The one thing I do not see on the Bypass is people on foot. There

is no pavement. And even if there was one, where would people walk to? Nothing is within walking distance. People are in cars or buses, or on open trucks and vans when there is big match at Salt Lake stadium or a big rally on Brigade Parade ground. There are no street merchants because there are no street buyers. There are no shrines because there are no devotees.

If the 'essential' Calcutta is congested and slow and choking on its density, the Bypass is something new. It is not congested (yet) and it is not slow. It is for people with wheels, not for people who can only afford feet. Therefore, by my definition, it lacks the essence of Calcutta. The modernist me applauds this. Faster, higher, further, I say. Enough with the corrupt egalitarianism of poverty and sloth. If you remain on foot, you'll fall further behind everyone else who's using wheels and jets. The pragmatic me thinks of ways to blend the two—the car-travellers and foot-travellers; increase the pace, but find space for both. The alarmist me thinks the same old Bengali thoughts: this is unfair and unsustainable and someday the foot-travellers are justifiably going to say enough with the cars and the jets and the speed and smash it all to pieces.

So, like much else about our bizarrely adorable city, the Bypass evokes conflicting emotions. It is not like the Calcutta we know. Its aesthetics are alien. Most of us—unless compelled by a malfunction or breakdown—have never stepped outside our vehicles to walk on that road. It represents a new aesthetic, one that is driven by function. But isn't that true of what we assume is the essential Calcutta? The British designs for colonial functionality, overlaid with forced functionalities from the shocks of history—migrations, wars, partitions, famines. Don't we always adapt, both to the new arrivals (*'ektu side korey, dada'*) and the new aesthetics, till the new blends with the old and after some time no one can remember what was new and when? Hasn't Ruby Hospital always been there? No, it opened in 1995, but who cares. The past is a mash-up anyway. Most things happened at more or less the same time; 1970 or 1980, what's the difference now that we are in 2014?

For the ignorant boy from the mofussil, the Bypass is not alien at all. I didn't grow up playing cricket in Vivekananda Park or marking the dawn of Republic Day at the Dover Lane Music Conference. I'm an outsider. For all practical purposes I might as well be that strange creature—the non-Bengali. Inside the head of this mofussil-boy-semi-

non-Bengali-NRI-professor, the Bypass is an essential part of Calcutta. My fondest memories of the city are associated with it. My parents were alive then, and my wife and son and I stayed with them for months, and the Bypass was the way in and out of that cocoon. Memories of a time when things were perfect.

Nostalgia is another word for memory. Meanings and identities are constructed from fragments of what passes for individual and collective memory. Nothing is real, except inside your head. So, Park Street, move aside; Rashbehari, take a hike; my prince of roads is the one we never walk on, a sometimes two- and sometimes six-lane roiling mass of exhaust-belchers, the road not named by history but for what it is and what it does—the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass.

AQUAPOLIS FORGOTTEN: WE HAVE A RIVER TOO!

GAUTAM GUPTA



Cities have rivers; at least many do. And usually these cities make the most of it. London has the Thames, Paris has La Seine, Moscow has the Moskva, and Cairo, the Nile. Kolkata (or Calcutta, as it was called, when the river begat the city) has the Hooghly or as any Calcuttan will claim the Ganges. Though the Ganges begins in the Himalayas (in Gomukh, according to myth) and continues through Haridwar and Patna to Farakka, from where the main river (Ganges) travels eastwards and it is only a distributary, Hooghly, which travels southwards to Calcutta, Bengalis refuse to give up their titular right over the Ganges, and hence refer to the Hooghly as the Ganges. So much so, that when Ganges' water is required for the myriad Hindu festivals for purification, a bottle of polluted Hooghly water usually suffices. Be as that may, for most of us—the smart and rich Calcuttan, the educated Calcuttan, the genteel Calcuttan as well as the poor Calcuttan, the labouring Calcuttan and the downtrodden Calcuttan—the river does not exist, except as a barrier, an obstacle and a problem, to be negotiated and overcome—never to be admired and enjoyed.

Recall that the city is here because the Ganges was already here. It was not a *bend* in the Ganges but a straight stretch, dotted with villages adjoining fertile land when the British East India Company Agent Job Charnock came sailing down the river. The first English agent was located at Kasim Bazar (Cossimbazaar) near Murshidabad, the capital of Bengal in 1658. But that proximity itself made it vulnerable and Cossimbazaar became the first English post to be taken in 1775 by the then Nawab