INAUGURAL ADDRESS

Dr. S. N. Sen, Vice-Chancellor, Calcutta University

This Seminar is being held on the occasion of the 69th birthday of Professor Nirmal Kumar Bosc. I had the good fortune of being his colleague in the University of Calcutta for a number of years and I know him also as a student of the University. We always looked forward to listening to many of his lectures, as you know he is one of the best speakers on the subjects in which he has specialized. We have always admired him for his scholarship, for his broad humanity and I am really very glad to be present on this occasion. He has completed sixty-nine years and let us hope that he will live long and will be in our midst to give us the benefit of his knowledge and wisdom and provide a shining example to the generations of scholars to show them how a scholar should be.

The second reason for my interest to be present on this occasion is, of course, my association with the study of the problems of this city. I shall remember with great wonder my first day of visit to the city of Calcutta. I passed my Matriculation examination from a village school and then migrated to Calcutta to seek admission to a college and I still retain that sense of wonder and it has been replaced by a feeling of love for this city where I have lived since 1925 as a student and as a teacher. I am not an original resident of this city, as everyone of us knows, very few people of its residents are original residents in the sense that they have been born in the city.

The city of Calcutta has a great charm and it has attracted people from all over India and indeed from other parts of the world as well and they still retain their sense of affection for this great city. My special association with this city apart from my living in this city amidst all its problems, all its processions and all its disturbances, started in the year 1954-55. In that year, under the guidance of my teacher late Prof. J. P. Neogi, I had an occasion of directing a socio-economic survey of the city. The survey went on for 5 years
and we all know the report of that survey which has been published. Apart from the points mentioned in the report, I came to know a lot of many other things about the city which we did not know before, at least I, who have lived in the city for such a long period of time, did not know. So my interest in this city is rather a long term affair and it has grown intimate as a result of my connection with the socio-economic survey. As you know Prof. Bose has written a lot of things on Calcutta and it is only appropriate that a seminar on the problems of this great city should be held in honour of his birthday. This is I think a fitting birthday gift to a great scholar whose interest in the city of Calcutta has been very well known. He has stimulated a large number of scholars by his scholarship and particularly by his unique method of handling the problems of sociological survey of the city.

The city has often been described as a city of violent disturbances. There is no doubt about the fact that we are very fond of disturbances, specially we, who live in College Square area. As you know, whenever there is any disturbance in Calcutta, it will at once be reflected in College Square, just in front of the University building—that is always the case. But it gives one a very false idea of what is happening in the city. We all know the classical definition of news that when a dog bites a man, that is not news but when a man bites a dog, that is news. That is, unfortunately, the case in respect to the city of Calcutta as well. Whenever there is any disturbance it flashes in the newspapers and people who live outside Calcutta, they come to feel that Calcutta is always full of disturbances. In fact, when I was in Delhi, I have often been asked whether it was safe to stay in Calcutta and why I did not leave Calcutta and go somewhere else. But I feel no reason why such a feeling should go abroad about our great city.

When, for example, only the other day we were conducting a Seminar in Darbhanga Hall in the University on "Gandhian Philosophy and its Importance in the Current World"—well, I was just told in the midst of the Seminar by one of the reporters that some of the students had just set fire to a tram car in front of the University. These things go on, we were discussing Gandhism just as tram
cars were burning in front of the University. Unfortunately the news of the burning of the tram car got into the newspapers and nothing was published about the discussion on the relevance of Gandhism to the contemporary world where a number of people were busy in discussing various aspects of this important subject. Even when tram cars and buses were burning in front of the University, I have seen many students reading seriously in the University Library, unfortunately, now housed in a very monstrous building, but still a very great Library. And this is how the life of Calcutta goes on more or less steadily and not in a disorganized way. There is no doubt about it that there are occasional disturbances and there are processions everyday in the afternoon and so on, which may upset our nerves. But still the life goes on as usual and there is something charming about life in the city which is housing such a large number of people belonging to so many different groups and speaking so many dialects.

You will soon have a discussion about the large number of dialects spoken in the city and the social problems of so many migrants coming from so many places to this city. These are reports of field study and I am sure that this Seminar will prove helpful in extending our knowledge on this subject. What I was just thinking this morning is that actually do this city possess any utility for the emerging social structure and economic structure of the country? About the economic importance of Calcutta, there is hardly any doubt. It is one of the leading ports of the country and it was until recently one of the leading centres of jobs available, at least in the eastern part of the country. That is one of the reasons why there is so much migrations to the city in search of new jobs. The economic importance is quite obvious but what is disturbing is that in the eastern part of India there is virtually one city; the Durgapur and Asansol urban-industrial complex is yet to attain metropolitan eminence.

The impact of Calcutta on our social structure has got to be studied. I have also no doubt about the impact of Calcutta on our culture. Calcutta has been the leading centre, cultural and intellectual, and it has taken the lead just like all other urban areas in being a centre propagating recent and advanced ideas on various subjects among
the population living in the hinterland of this great city. But the
question that was raised by Tagore—what we actually gain by
having such a metropolitan city like Calcutta in our country? There
was a time, and I think this is still true, that Calcutta absorbed a large
part of our energy. Though it produces a large part of our wealth
it also uses up a large part of the amenities of life that are available.
For example, you are aware that until recently advanced medical
facilities which were available to the people of West Bengal were
virtually limited to the city of Calcutta, though the tax payers living
throughout West Bengal have to pay for those medical facilities.
Educational facilities were more or less concentrated in the city of
Calcutta though the tax payers living throughout West Bengal have
to pay for these educational facilities. These are questions naturally
which are to be raised whether further expansion of such metropolitan
areas should be encouraged or not—or whether we should not go
for greater decentralization just after providing for cities of an opti-
mum size, and then deliberately plan for the setting up of other urban
areas in other places so that the benefits and amenities available from
the existence of a city may be made available to all parts of the
country.

In Calcutta the problem has grown immense and we are all familiar
with the studies made under the auspices of the C.M.P.O. in this
city about the different aspects of our problem ridden society. This
is quite worthwhile but I feel that many of our problems look almost
insoluble and they are being made worse almost every year through
the influx of more and more people into the city. The problems
appear to be going beyond our resources. So the time has come for
us to think about the optimum size of metropolitan areas according
to the resources available in our country according to our organizing
and managing abilities. These are the factors to be taken into con-
sideration while deliberately planning for a dispersal of cities into other
parts of the country. Calcutta is a big problem and let us not make
it bigger by allowing an unrestricted migration to this city. The
major attraction for migration has been always of course, the avail-
ability of jobs in this city. Whatever the reasons, this is slowly
changing and you know that unemployment is more or less at the
worst phase in the present moment. I do not know whether this
trend would persist. This may be due to a temporary recession or
may not be due to that. But there is a plan for the dispersal of
industries to different areas and I think this will all be for the good
of the country. And with the dispersal of industries to other parts
of the country, there will be more decentralization of job opportuni-
ties, which is also a very good symptom and there should be more
dispersal of job opportunities so that we should be in a position to
plan the growth of more cities in other parts of the country. In this
way this will enable us to provide more and more amenities for all
classes of people. And at the same time this would be within our
competence to manage the affairs of such comparatively smaller
metropolitan areas. This is a problem, of course, which is not before
us in this Seminar. In this Seminar we are going to discuss the
social and cultural profile of this city. I think in planning the
growth of a metropolitan areas, one must pay more attention to the
social and cultural aspects of the people who live in the city or who
are expected to live in the city because without such a knowledge,
it would not be possible to provide for a good metropolitan centre.
This is essential that those who plan such centres, they should have
wide knowledge of the social and cultural background of the people
who live in the city and who are likely to come to the city in the
future, so that when they come to the city, they do not feel lonely
or distracted or discontented. We can plan their location, their
community centres in such a manner, in different parts of the metropo-
litan area, so that they would feel more or less at home in the city
atmosphere as they use to feel in their village homes. Of course, it
is not possible to reproduce the village in the city but we can make
it socially and culturally as comfortable as is possible for them to
live in the city while they become more or less completely urbanized
in the atmosphere of this city.

From this point of view, I am really glad to welcome this Seminar
on the social and cultural profile of this city. And from the number
of papers which have been prepared, I am really very pleased that
so much interest is being taken in this aspect of the city's life. This
is likely to increase our knowledge of the social background of the
people of this city and this would be extremely helpful to all future planners not only for this city but for the other city areas which are to be planned in different parts of West Bengal.

I must thank Dr. Surajit Sinha, organizer of the Seminar, for inviting me to come on this occasion so that I have been able to associate myself with this Seminar which is being conducted to celebrate the 69th birthday of Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose, whom I have been admiring from my student days.

Thank you gentlemen.
INTRODUCING THE SEMINAR

Dr. Surajit Sinha, President, The Indian Anthropological Society.

With a population of nearly 4.6 million* Calcutta has earned national and international notoriety in recent years as a 'Problem City'. People complain about overcrowded slums, poor municipal amenities, general disorderliness, and lack of civic sense of the citizen, student unrest, volatile political climate and so on.

Calcutta also carries an image of a city of furious creative energy which sustained a substantial burden of intellectual and social confrontation with the West for nearly two hundred years through a series of creative responses represented by a galaxy of geniuses in religious and social thinking, politics, creative arts and the sciences.

It is generally assumed that Permanent Settlement, growth of British commercial enterprise and selection of this city as the capital of British India for many decades, gave rise to a group of professionals and white collar job holders in the Government and commercial firms and also to a landed aristocracy as patrons of culture. The indigenous trading castes were diverted from going in for industrial enterprise to concentrate on land holding and transactions in real estate. The local Hindu caste system adjusted to these developments by crystallizing the social category of middle and upper classes, the Bhadralok and the Babu who are typically disinclined to be directly involved in any productive enterprise. They excelled in the pursuit of conspicuous consumption and placed high value on education and intellecction.

Upto the middle of the 1930's the Bengali middle and upper class citizens of Calcutta were accustomed to look upon Calcutta as the cultural capital of India. When the first two decades of Independence

* Calcutta's population has crossed the 6 million mark according to the latest census (1971).
made the Bengali population of the city painfully aware that Calcutta-based Bengalis no longer played a decisive role in the affairs of the nation, they felt shaky and defensive. Added to this was the growing control of the finances of the city by 'outsiders' or 'aliens'.

There are stereotyped claims and counter-claims about the relative 'urbanity' and 'cosmopolitanism' of Bombay and Calcutta and some consider Calcutta to be more of an overgrown cluster of villages than Bombay.

CALCUTTA SOCIAL SCIENTISTS HAVE VIRTUALLY IGNORED THEIR CITY

While some of these stereotypes and general historical notions hang on our mind social scientists in Calcutta have virtually ignored the existence of this city as a social and cultural fact.

There are, of course, a few notable exceptions. We may mention here Dr. S. N. Sen's pioneering socio-economic survey of the city (Sen 1960), and Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose's recent survey of the social profile of Calcutta (Bose 1965). One may also come across scattered articles on various aspects of social life of Calcutta in historical journals and other periodicals. But all these do not add upto a substantial coverage in depth.

One may wonder about the reasons for this persistent intellectual apathy. Anthropologists may, perhaps, come out with a ready excuse that their orthodox research habits and procedures constrain them from going in for a study of Calcutta on many counts. First of all, they would prefer to study a community which is substantially different from their own in order to gain a genuine cross-cultural perspective. Then, they would also like to study communities of such size and level as can be covered thoroughly and holistically by intimate personal observation. Calcutta is too large, complex and heterogeneous to be amenable to the standard cannons of anthropological research.

This, of course, does not answer why the major university in the city failed to take the initiative to develop a Sociology Department which could immerse itself in the varied socio-cultural problems
of the city. Urban sociologists are not supposed to be inhibited by the size of the city.

I think the answer would perhaps lie in the lack of concern for improving the social conditions on the basis of sustained objective study.

It is out of an awareness of the tremendous inadequacy of our present state of knowledge of the social and cultural facts of Calcutta that we have ventured, on behalf of the Indian Anthropological Society, to initiate an experimental two-day seminar to discuss some of the social and cultural characteristics of this city.

THE ANTHROPOLOGISTS’ APPROACH

I have already mentioned that anthropologists are habitually wedded to studying simple and relatively homogeneous communities which may be closely observed in total social and cultural context. When they venture to stretch their interest to more complex and massive social aggregates like the city of Calcutta, anthropologists make an effort to organize their research endeavours in terms of a series of observable capsules of social interaction. While some of them are particularly concerned with the systems of social interaction others are primarily interested in the patterns of conventions and symbols of these interacting communities. In spite of their common commitment to scientific objectivity anthropologists differ among themselves in their methodological emphasis. Some would like to observe behaviours only as natural systems, while there are others who would like to combine the tool of controlled comparison with empathic insight. The latter kind often consider the specialists in humanistic disciplines as well as the creative artists as fellow travellers in the common endeavour of unravelling the inner nature of man, his society and culture. It will be clear from the organization of this Seminar that it represents a fair combination of both the approaches.

Anthropologists of both the kinds would first of all like to identify the isolable natural communities in the city such as language and dialect groups, religious and sectarian communities, castes, tribes, neighbourhoods and so on. They will also look at the city as a
characteristically complex pattern of social stratification in the distribution of prestige, economic privilege and power. A city carries forward the latent creative potentialities of the rural hinterland. This is achieved through organization of specialists and professions in all fields. It is generally expected that the city's dynamic demand for efficient specialization will cut across the stable lines of kinship, caste and regional loyalty. In order to regulate an ever growing anonymous population and its diverse activities the city gives rise to a plethora of voluntary associations. While the city harbours specialists in the pursuit of excellence it also accommodates the millions with average creative abilities and interests who sustained the 'mass-culture' thriving on the various mass media such as the radio, cinema and so on.

Thus for completing their description of the culture of the city anthropologists would have to collect data through appropriate observable capsules on significant social segments and strata, specialists and professionals and associations. They will have to track down the social organization of the pursuit of excellence as also the organization of the 'mass culture'.

It would be obvious that an adequate anthropological picture of the city of Calcutta can emerge only out of the endeavour of a large team of devoted field scientists who would be prepared to observe the diverse segments and strata of Calcutta's population in depth in the multiple social contexts of home, workshop, office, club, political rally and so on.

Let us make it clear that we are not meeting here to discuss the results of a co-ordinated series of research projects. Ours is mainly an effort to make the social scientists, in general, and anthropologists in particular, aware about some of the problems involved in systematic understanding of the complex social and cultural reality of this city.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE SEMINAR

If we had started on the basis of substantial research, we could have taken up comparison at several levels. How does Calcutta compare with cities of her size internationally, with the other Asian
cities and with cities of comparable population in India? We could have also asked how Calcutta has emergent urban features which are lacking in mofussil towns, and in the rural hinterland and how Calcutta cannot be adequately described as an agglomeration of villages and small towns.

In this Seminar, however, we will avoid the comparative approach and will limit ourselves to a set of specific problems connected with adequately describing the social and cultural pattern of this city. Here we shall be concerned with four major sets of problems:

a) How does the city shelter diversity on the linguistic, communal (religious) and caste levels?

b) What is the pattern of the core culture of the Bengali? How do the dominant Bengali interact with the other groups?

c) How does the city handle her vast problem of poverty and economic disparity? How does poverty affect the social and cultural pattern of the slum dwellers? How do the affluent citizens use their affluence? What is the impact of grinding poverty and economic disparity on the political profile of the city and in many elements of disorganization such as goondaism, prostitution and mental disorder?

d) How does the city carry forward creative expressive life in the fields of science, literature and the arts? What are incentives in the cultural milieu and what are the constraints?

In all the above topics we are also concerned with describing and assessing what has been happening to the city since Independence. To what extent she is offering greater opportunity for economic uplift and basic amenities of life to the masses? How effectively the city is welding together diverse social and cultural segments? How well she is carrying the task of effective involvement of an increasingly greater number in genuine and confident pursuit of excellence?

We will not expect definitive answers to these general queries in this preliminary endeavour, but will certainly aim at raising a series of significant detailed questions for subsequent intensive research.
OUR PARTICIPANTS ACROSS THE DISCIPLINE OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Many of the contributors in this Seminar are not anthropologists. It has been deliberately planned that way so that anthropologists may expand their horizon by trying to meet academicians and specialists from other disciplines who have their own ideas about aspects of the social and cultural milieu of Calcutta from their special vantage points.

Thus the Seminars will offer a feast of supplementary (and complementary) perspectives from linguists, psychologists, psychiatrists, historians, economists, political scientists, physicists, police officers, artists, dancers, movie makers and critics of art, literature and Music.

As anthropologists we cannot claim competence about the contents of the arts and the natural sciences like physics and chemistry, but we can certainly join the specialists in these fields in facing some basic social problems. What are the incentives to creativity in the various fields in the city and what are the constraints? Anthropologists may try to bring into relief the class, community, kinship, caste and regional contexts of the various professions and relate the general process of modernization in social life with the particular process of modernization in the pursuit of the arts and the sciences. We are accustomed to match the 'conscious models' of society against the 'unconscious' and 'operational' models. In this mode of analysis it is not unlikely that while artists and intellectuals in Calcutta may consciously claim that they are alienated, we may find them firmly embedded in the general social matrix. Similarly, when the artists claim universal commodity of their creative forms, it may be possible to find out to what extent some of them are choosing the passive role of quick adoption of the Western road to modernity avoiding the energy demanding path of seeking universal modernity from a strong home base.

SPECIAL NOTE

Finally, it is our proud privilege to record that we are offering this Seminar on behalf of the Indian Anthropological Society to felicitate the sixtyninth birthday of Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose,
This is not the occasion to recount all the contributions of Professor Bose in the diverse fields of Social Sciences and specially in anthropology. His focal intellectual interest has been to understand the process of transformation of Indian civilization. As a life-long student of the Indian caste system he has consistently maintained that the system persisted through the millenia mainly on the basis of non-competetive localized mode of production and a social philosophy of interethnic cultural tolerance and that it is irreversibly doomed to disintegrate under the massive impact of industrialization. Yet, when he undertook a sociological survey of Calcutta in 1963-64, he found that reliance on primordial group identities persisted in Calcutta even after nearly two hundred years of urbanization.

"It can be said, therefore, that the diverse ethnic groups in the population of the City have come to bear the same relation to one another as castes do in India as a whole.... Actually the superstructure that coheres the castes under the old order seems instead to be re-establishing itself in a new form.... In Calcutta the economy is an economy of scarcity. Because there are not enough jobs to go around everyone clings as closely as possible to the occupation with which his ethnic group is identified and relies for economic support on those who speak his language, or his co-religionists, on members of his own caste and on fellow immigrants from the village or districts from which he has come. By a backwash reliance on earlier modes of group identification re-inforces and perpetuates differences between ethnic groups" (Bose 1965: 102).

Professor Bose's pioneering survey raises fundamental issues and also provides clear guidelines for a major area of investigation, namely, we should study the voluntary associations in the city and find out the extent to which recruitment and activities of these organizations are limited to particular groups and communities and to bring into relief the spheres of organized life of the city which are opening upto broad based participation over-riding the barriers of languages, religious denominations, sects and castes.

Unfortunately, it has not yet been possible to carry forward some of the germane ideas of Professor Bose through intensive field studies.
We hope that this Seminar will stimulate our interest in that direction. I firmly believe that a genuine social science tradition can grow in our country only out of intense and competent involvement in understanding and solving some of the urgent human problems that surround us. I do hope that this hurriedly organized experimental Seminar will enthuse a sizeable band of social scientists and other relevant specialists to know the city in great depth and to discuss among themselves the results of their findings.

I take this opportunity to mention that our professional colleagues in Bombay and Delhi have shown great interest in this Seminar and we do hope that by placing the proceedings of this endeavour at their disposal we may enthuse some of them to organize a series of discussion groups in the different cities of India in the coming years.

I must put on record our gratitude to the eminent participants from the diverse fields who have responded to our short-notice call so generously. My colleagues in the Council of the Indian Anthropological Society have borne the main brunt of organizing the Seminar. I am particularly grateful to Dr. D. K. Sen, Director, Anthropological Survey of India, for not only permitting us to hold the Seminar in the Survey's Lecture Hall but also for placing the various resources of the organization at our disposal. We are thankful to the entire staff of the Anthropological Survey for their unfailing co-operation. Shri S. K. Sanyal has been responsible for the photographs on the Moslem groups exhibited here. Finally, I must mention my deep appreciation of the fact that Dr. S. N. Sen, Vice-Chancellor, Calcutta University has agreed to inaugurate the Seminar in the midst of his many urgent preoccupations.

References


