INTRODUCTION

The re-printing of a book like A. K. Ray’s *A Short History of Calcutta* does not perhaps need many words by way of justification. The book was originally brought out as a sequence to the *Census Report* of 1901. Incidentally, the decennial census surveys have brought in more than one exclusive publications on Calcutta. But from this limited point, as an appanage to census study, no book brought out so far exceeds the merit of Ray’s work. Apart from it, the book has a stronger claim to attention. It is a pioneer venture in Calcutta study. Since Beverley published his *Report on the Census of Calcutta* in 1876, several Indian and foreign authors have come out with dissertations on the city and its history. It is indeed a long distance from Beverley to Pradip Sinha. No other city in India has perhaps evoked more curiosity and yielded more harvest in historical literature than Calcutta. The story of the city has been told over long years. But, on the whole, barring a few exceptions, the process is generally repetitive. They tell the story of how Charnock “a block of rough British manhood” bodily, as if, lifted a city from out of a marshy unhealthy place on the river, how the Settlement grew to be the centre of a mighty empire and a city of palaces, how successive British rulers adorned the city with splendid edifices, on models imported from their homeland, how the city grew to be the busiest trade emporium, east of the Suez, how streets and squares were laid, and above all, how it grew to be the nerve-centre of cultural activities. Behind the entire facade built by the British writers, and following them the Indian authors, there lurks, dim and distant, the shadow of the Indian town in
Calcutta and its inhabitants. Not only authors, but artists too, treated the Indian town as out of bounds. The picture which thus emerges is largely that of a colonial city par excellence—exotic and even bizarre.

But there are exceptions too. Leaving apart latest studies on Calcutta by S. N. Mukherji (Calcutta Myths and History) and Pradip Sinha (Calcutta in Urban History), one or two earlier works have to their credit historical competence, by any standard. Among these exceptional works Ray's A Short History of Calcutta deserves the first place. He is, in a real sense, a pioneer in his field. He does not remain content with beginning the story with Charnocks' anchorage at Sutanuti instead he starts the story from the days of antiquity of the site from which the city grew. In doing so he relies on finds made by geologists and archaeologists. Nor does he neglect the legends, and what is more important, the traditions recorded in literature of pre-Charnock days. Ray is the first among the writers of Calcutta's history to make a serious attempt to reconstruct the story from a point of time, separated at least by nearly two centuries from that of Charnock, if we lay aside the antiquity of the site and early traditions. Ray's other merit lies in his preference for data and statistics carefully culled from factory and municipal records, periodical surveys and assessments, judicial papers and maps and plans to travel accounts and memoirs of European visitors to or residents in the Settlement. The third factor which distinguishes Ray's treatment from the writings of others, contemporary as well as later, is the largeness of the canvas on which he seeks to present the story. He weaves it on the basis of materials, indigenous and official, available in his days and cites documents in support of his statements. The sweep is broad enough to cover not only the much-talked of white town but also its brown and black counterparts. The canvas is thus not only large, it is also well-filled. With the result that not a few among the later entrants to the field have largely drawn on the materials made use of by the pioneer among the histo-
rians of Calcutta. Not all of them, however, have acknowledged the debt they owe him.

The book was long out of print. One could not obtain a copy by merely asking for it. Messrs. Riddhi India have done a good job by making it available to the general readers after a long lapse. It hardly needs to be stressed that a book does not deserve to be re-printed simply because it has gone out of stock. The proper criterion is its utility. Judged by this standard 'A Short History of Calcutta' deserves to be put on the shelves again.

A review of the books written on Calcutta so far, will perhaps suggest that we should now look beyond mere narrative versions and general outlines. Calcutta to-day is an astoundingly different urban phenomenon from what it was nearly a century ago when Ray wrote his book. The city has not only grown in expanse, it has also assumed a new and somewhat unforeseen complex. This needs to be studied in depth. It is also necessary that the various communities, indigenous and foreign, which contributed to the making of the city not only outwardly viewed, as such, but also possessing an inner life of its own, should be ideal subjects for investigation. In other words, an ethno-centric study of Calcutta is long overdue. Similarly the stages in the physical growth of the city needs to be studied in depth with the aid of cartographic records which, though available, have not been taken much care of till now. Nor has the interesting subject of Calcutta's architecture, fast disappearing though, received much attention from our scholar-architects. Other dimensions, to name a few, such as element of continuous traditional urbanism, growth of distinctive segments, social institutions, the pattern of mercantile activities of the Indians as compared with that of the foreign competitors, the structural synthesis of 'bazar economy,' the life-style of the communities at all levels, the migrations of peoples in and from Calcutta and their reactions on the socio-economic life, the pulls and counter-pulls of
urban and rural demands and even the monuments and art-
treasures of the city still await the attention of the disciplines
concerned.

This brings us to the core of the problem. Since Ray came
out with his pioneering venture, new materials have been
located. One is aware of the rich materials to be found in
Supreme Court and High Court Records, in the record-room of
the Corporation of Calcutta or in the offices of the Registrar
and Magistrate-Collector of Calcutta and the District of 24-
Parganas, to cite only a few, so far as official or semi-official
sources are concerned. There are also equally precious mate-
rials locked up in private or familiy custody, exposed alike to
climate and human negligence. Unless these materials are
retrieved and made use of, our aspirant historians are hardly
expected to tread on new grounds and bring to light unexplored
regions, indispensable for a scientific and comprehensive
study of Calcutta. The historian's horizon still falls short in
catching up the rapidly expanding, multi-faced complex of the
metropolis. Many of its aspects yet remain to engage the
historian's attention.

A K. Ray in his painstaking task, presents an exhaustive
survey, dwelling on several aspects of Calcutta with empha-
sis on its growth as a city, as a port, as a municipality
—its health and sanitation, town and suburbs, population and
revenue, localities and buildings, streets, squares, tanks and
lanes. Naturally he brings in a plethora of statistics and ex-
tracts from Reports and Surveys, but he does not permit these
to dominate the study. His book is not an as-dry-as-a cata-
logue type. He imparts to his narration flesh and blood and
presents to his readers an excellent story, woven in a first-rate
literary style. The referénces at the end of each chapter are
both relevant and illuminating, indicative of wide range of his
study. The appendices are well-chosen and they help the rea-
ders to get a glimpse into some specimens of interesting but
not easily accessible source material. The book is so planned-
as to meet the needs of both average and more than average readers.

Calcutta of to-day is a subject likely to stimulate and perhaps intrigue alike students of anthropology and urban history and allied discipline. Work on these lines has commenced. But a look at the past and on general perspective is always a rewarding experience. And herein the relevance of A. K. Ray’s contribution.
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Town and Suburbs.

PART I.

A SHORT HISTORY OF CALCUTTA.

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