



# The Phantasmal City and Its Others: Kolkata, Gender, and the Urban Imaginary in the 1960s

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**Abstract:** *This article examines the construction of Kolkata as a gendered urban imaginary in the literary and cultural productions of the 1960s and 1970s. Drawing on the concept of the city as both a physical and phantasmal space — what Shibaji Bandyopadhyay terms the *kayik* and *mayik* dimensions of urban existence — the article argues that the multiple, contradictory representations of Kolkata in the literature of this period constitute a site of contested gender perceptions. The city, figured simultaneously as a space of revolutionary possibility and moral degeneration, was also a space in which the norms governing gender relations were both challenged and reaffirmed. The article traces these negotiations across literary texts, memoirs, and cultural commentary of the period.*

**Key Words:** *Gender relations, gendered city, 1960s Bengal, social history, literary geography, postcolonial modernity, spatial heterogeneity, cultural memory.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE CITY AS DISCURSIVE FORMATION

Any account of gender perception in 1960s Bengali literature must begin with Kolkata. The city was not merely the setting for the literary and political movements of this turbulent decade; it was their constitutive condition. The physical and the imaginary dimensions of the city — what Shibaji Bandyopadhyay has called its *kayik* and *mayik* axes — shaped not only where writers lived and worked but how they conceived of social relations, moral possibility, and the self.<sup>1</sup>

The Kolkata of the 1960s was a city under multiple stresses. The aftermath of Partition had brought a continuous influx of refugees from East Pakistan, fundamentally altering the city's demography and spatial character. The failure of Nehruvian developmentalism, visible in food shortages, unemployment, and political instability, had generated a pervasive atmosphere of crisis. A demographic peculiarity of the mid-1960s was that approximately sixty per cent of the city's population was aged around twenty to twenty-one — a concentration of dispossessed youth with few prospects and abundant grievances.<sup>2</sup>

It was in this context that Immanuel Wallerstein's 'world revolution of 1968' found its Calcutta expression: student movements, Naxalite insurgency, the Hungry literary uprising, the proliferation of little magazines. But within these multiple discourses of rupture, the city itself remained a contested and multivalent space — what Supriya Chaudhury has described as 'a time of intense frustration and anger, of an urban despair that could produce radical violence as well as middle-class fear, anxiety and degradation.'<sup>3</sup>

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This article employs an interdisciplinary methodology that brings together urban cultural history, feminist literary criticism, and postcolonial spatial theory to analyse the construction of Kolkata as a gendered imaginary in the literary and cultural productions of the 1960s and 1970s. The primary sources include novels, autobiographical writings, film texts, memoirs, and critical essays, which are treated as an intertextual whole rather than as discrete generic categories.



This approach is theoretically grounded in Linda Hutcheon's proposition that the past is always already textualised and that historical meaning is produced through representation rather than recovered from a pre-existing reality. The concept of the city as simultaneously a physical and phantasmal space — drawing on Shibaji Bandyopadhyay's distinction between the *kayik* and *mayik* dimensions of Kolkata — provides the spatial framework within which gender perceptions are analysed. Rather than tracing a linear narrative of social change, the methodology is deliberately attentive to contradiction, co-existence, and unevenness: the same urban space is shown to harbour radically different gender norms across its class, caste, and community formations. Close readings of selected literary texts by Sunil Gangopadhyay and Samaresh Basu are placed alongside Satyajit Ray's Calcutta trilogy and the autobiographical writings of figures such as Minakshi Dutta and Raghav Bandyopadhyay, creating a multi-perspectival account of the gendered city. The methodology thus refuses the privileging of any single textual genre or social location, insisting instead that a full account of gender in the urban imaginary requires the juxtaposition of multiple, often contradictory, representational modes.

### **3.THE DIVIDED CITY: CLASS, SPACE, AND GENDER**

One of the most significant features of Kolkata in this period was its spatial and cultural heterogeneity. The city was not one but many. Sunil Gangopadhyay's semi-autobiographical novel *Atmaprakash* captures this multiplicity through the eyes of Sunil, a young man from rural Bengal navigating the urban labyrinths of Calcutta. Observing the differential norms governing gender behaviour in north and south Calcutta, Sunil notes with astonishment that in south Calcutta, young women could call out to male friends by name without arousing neighbourhood censure — something inconceivable in the more conservative north.<sup>4</sup>

This geographical differentiation of gender norms is not merely an incidental observation. It points to a fundamental feature of Kolkata's cultural life: the co-existence of radically different social formations within a single urban space. The Basu household of Ballygunge, where the poet Buddhadev Basu's daughters engaged in open mixed-gender socialising, inhabited a different cultural universe from the north Calcutta localities where women's public presence was strictly regulated. These differences were class-inflected but not reducible to class — they reflected different histories of colonial modernity, different relationships to the nationalist movement, and different negotiations with the forces of social change.<sup>5</sup>

The refugee communities that had flooded into the city from East Pakistan after 1947 occupied yet another social location. The Hungry Writers, many of whom came from refugee backgrounds, brought with them an experience of dispossession and marginality that the established literary culture of Calcutta could not accommodate. Their relationship to the city's *mayik* or phantasmal space was one of exclusion and longing — they could not fit themselves into the imagined city of bourgeois literary culture, and the city could not accommodate them.<sup>6</sup>

### **4.THE REVOLUTIONARY CITY AND THE ERASURE OF WOMEN**

The Naxalbari movement produced its own distinctive construction of the city. For the CPI (ML) activists, Calcutta was a 'ghost-city' — a space drained of historical agency, whose fate depended on the peasant uprising in the countryside. The revolutionary imagination was oriented towards the village as the epicentre of cataclysmic change; the city was merely a staging ground, a space of waiting.<sup>7</sup>

This construction of the city had specific gendered consequences. Women activists who remained in Calcutta while their male comrades went to the villages found themselves doubly marginalised: excluded from the central theatre of revolutionary action on the presumption of their unsuitability for rural political work, and confined to the city that the movement's own ideology had rendered peripheral. They were assigned to hospitals and safe houses — roles that reproduced the domestic within the revolutionary formation. 'The fate of these women depended along with the fate of the ghost-city on the countryside.'<sup>8</sup>

Against the grain of this revolutionary construction of the city, the literature of the so-called mainstream — writers like Sunil Gangopadhyay, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay and Samaresh Basu — offered a different urban narrative. Satyajit Ray's Calcutta trilogy — *Simabaddha*, *Pratiddwandi*, *Janaaranya* — gave cinematic form to a Calcutta of



alienation, moral compromise and uncertain masculinity that coexisted with the revolutionary city without being reducible to it.<sup>9</sup>

## 5. THE CITY AS ARCHIVE: READING GENDER IN THE URBAN TEXT

The historian's task, confronted with the multiple Kolkatas of the 1960s, is necessarily one of construction rather than recovery. As Linda Hutcheon has observed, 'past events existed empirically, but in epistemological terms we can only know them today through texts. Past events are given meaning, not existence, by their representation in history.'<sup>10</sup> The Kolkata of the 1960s exists for us only through the layered, contradictory, partial representations that survive in literature, memoir, film, and other cultural forms.

What those representations reveal, when read for gender, is a city in which the norms governing women's lives were being contested and renegotiated across multiple fronts — simultaneously becoming more open in some social locations and more restrictive in others. The revolutionary formations that claimed to speak for total liberation were, in many respects, among the most conservative in their gender imagination. The so-called bourgeois literature, which made no claims to revolutionary rupture, was often more attentive to the actual complexity of gender relations.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Kolkata in the 1960s and 1970s was, in the fullest sense, a gendered space — a space whose physical dimensions, cultural norms, and literary representations were all structured by the differential positioning of men and women within its social order. The literature of this period, read against the grain, offers not a simple narrative of liberation or constraint but a complex, contradictory picture of a city in which gender was being continuously contested, partially transformed, and persistently reproduced.<sup>11</sup>

The phantasmal city — the mayik Kolkata of desire, memory, and imagined futures — was never gender-neutral. It was constituted by the same patriarchal imaginaries that structured the political movements and literary formations of the time. To read it as such is to recover a dimension of the 1960s that the dominant revolutionary discourse consistently suppressed: the question of women's place not merely in the revolution but in the city, in language, and in the literary imagination itself.

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