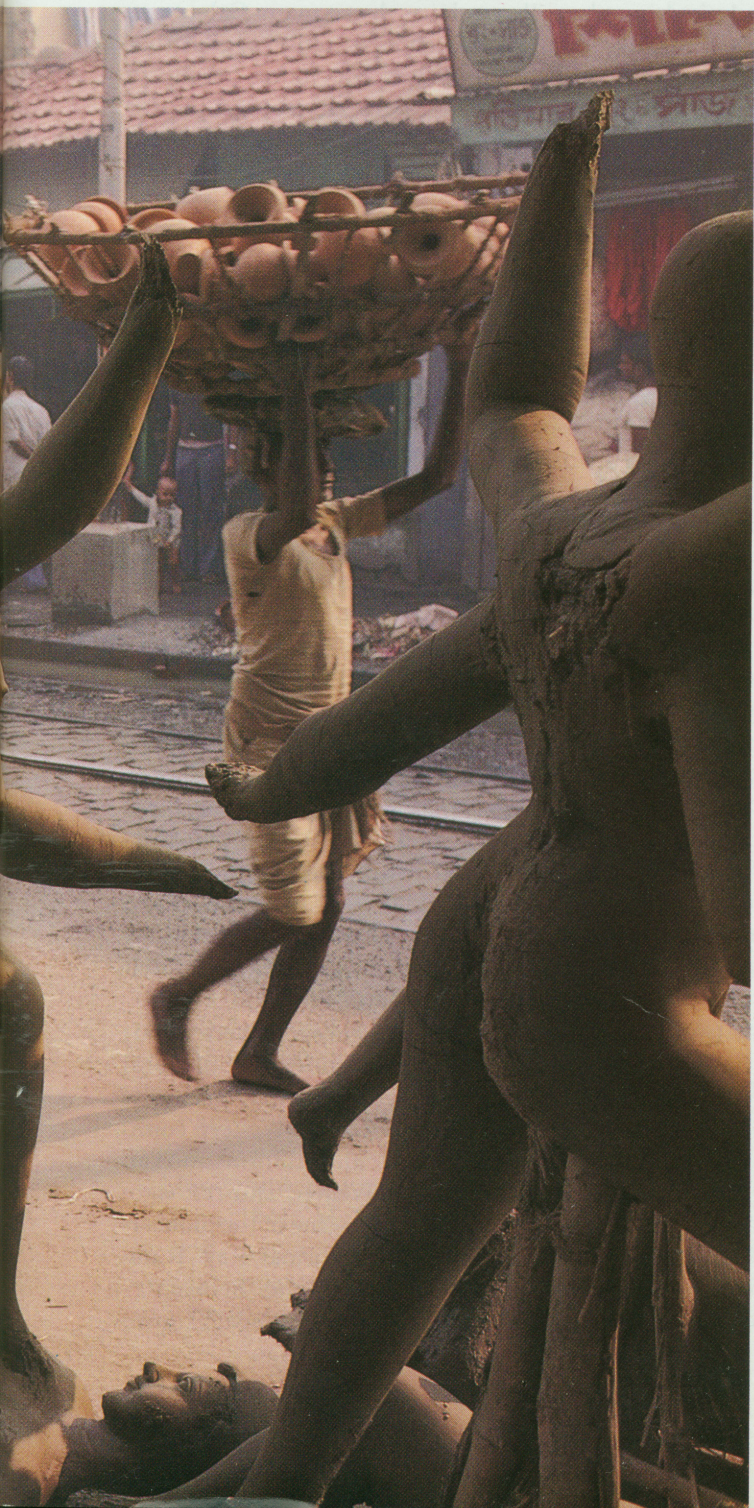


By Julian Crandall Hollick

Amid Calcutta's poverty, there's no dearth of cultural wealth



Founded 300 years ago by a British trading company, the city passionately blends Western arts and letters with Bengal's ancient heritage



Rabindranagar is a bustee, or slum, in Calcutta, unloved and unrecognized, home to 600 men, women and children. It consists of 80 one-room thatched huts, squeezed between a stagnant pond and the main road that leads from the downtown heart of Calcutta past Salt Lake, a suburb of gray apartment blocks built just 25 years ago but prematurely aged and yellowing, victims of the constant humidity.

It was dusk, a soft smoky haze punctuated by the wan smiles of underpowered street lamps. In this entire slum, there was just one light bulb, jury-rigged illegally from the nearest telephone pole. My friend Raja Chatterjee and I held flashlights while 10-year-old Samra Bhaja, sitting cross-legged on a rug thrown over the bare earth, accompanied herself on the harmonium.

Samra had never attended school. She probably never would. Most days she helped her mother roll bidis, cheap Indian cigarettes—cut tobacco rolled in leaves and held together with thread. Samra's voice was pure, untrained, with perfect pitch, full of pale melancholy as she unfolded her song: "This necklace bruises me; it strangles me when I try to take it off. It chokes my singing. Take it from me! I'm ashamed to wear it. Give me a simple garland in its place."

"Who wrote this song?" I asked. Samra was too shy to answer. Raja was astonished: "Tagore! Rabindranath Tagore! Surely you've heard of him?" I hadn't then. But over the past few years, Raja has almost single-handedly educated me, not only about Tagore but also about all of Calcutta's myriad cultures.

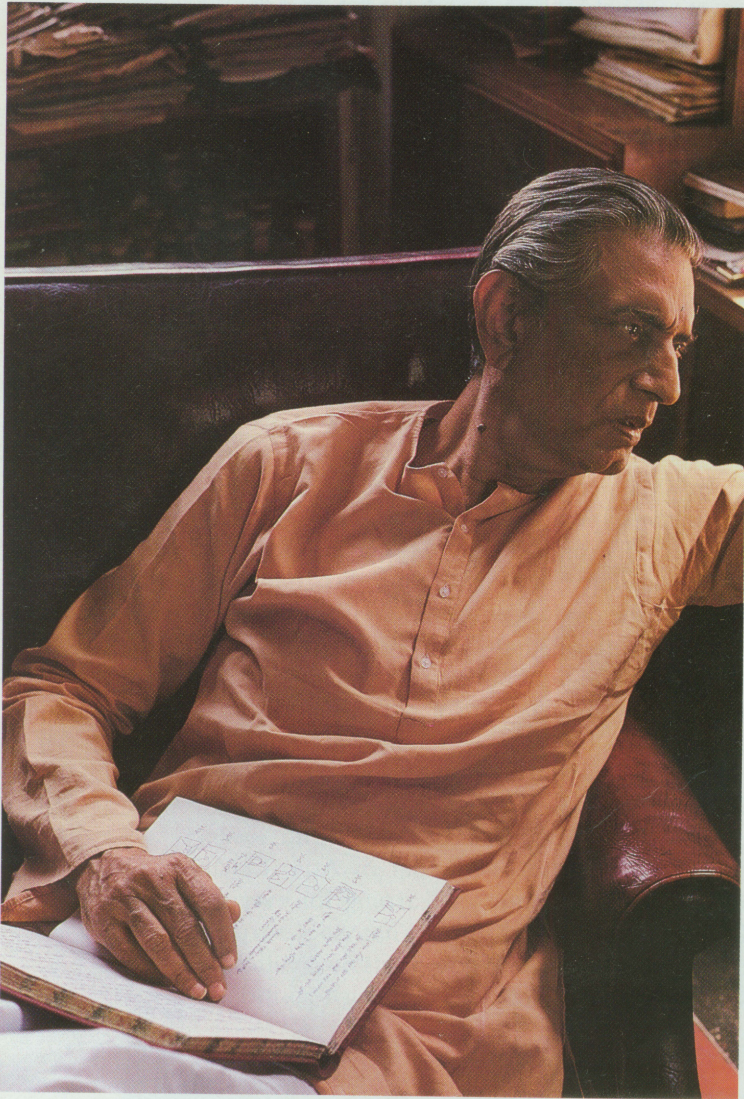
Calcutta. The name conjures up an image of poverty and human suffering: the Black Hole, starvation, barefoot beggars. It is a city of somewhere around 11 million people, about 5 million of whom live in slums, perhaps another quarter-million living on the streets. Yet, ironically, something else is going on in Calcutta, something that doesn't recognize the boundaries of caste or class, education or illiteracy. For if there is any one thing that binds Brahman and Untouchable, babu and domestic worker, slum dweller and rich socialite, it is a passion for culture. Indeed, Calcutta as a city proudly defines itself through this passion.

At the height of its glory in the 19th century, Calcutta was called the second city of the British Empire, rivaling London in its riches and social refinement. No surprise, then, that in Asia, Calcutta was regarded as the center of learning for everyone from Peshawar to Hong Kong. What does surprise many people outside India is that, in its own collective mind, Calcutta undoubtedly still holds this position.

In potters' quarter of Calcutta, clay images of the ferocious goddess Kali await festival celebrating her.

Photographs by Raghubir Singh

Calcutta: cultural wealth amid poverty



Satyajit Ray, famous worldwide as a filmmaker, also edits a children's magazine started by his grandfather.

It's commonly claimed (although I don't know how these things can be measured) that Calcutta has more poets than Paris and Rome combined; more literary magazines than either New York or London; more theater companies and art galleries than anywhere else in Asia; and undoubtedly more publishers, however small. It's the only city in India where movie theaters have "House Full" signs outside their doors from lunch-time onward. Poetry readings are major events, sometimes drawing more than a thousand people.

Why this hunger for culture? One prominent poet thinks many of the audience at poetry readings are there just to be seen. Filmmaker Satyajit Ray, who admits he can't really explain why so many Calcuttans pack theaters, cinemas and concert halls, suggests that cultural events are a great way for young people to meet and have a chance "to be alone together for some time, maybe holding hands while the lights are down." Bob Wright, who runs the Tollygunge Club, one of Calcutta's leading social and athletic gathering places, offers a more convincing explanation. "The Bengali," he says, "has always set himself up to think that God put him on this Earth to be a poet or a writer, and other races to do the dirty work."

The city is a mere 300 years old

"Always" is a word that goes back a long way in India. In the Calcutta area, there have been village settlements of fishermen, weavers and priests for at least a thousand years, while Calcutta itself is a mere 300 years old—young by Indian standards. Established by the British East India Company in 1690 to serve as a trading post, the city is attached like a human ear to the banks of the Hooghly River. The inner ear is the "White Town," the former European city of spacious homes and broad avenues, built around a vast green core of field and wood—the Maidan—Calcutta's answer to Central Park. Beyond that, encompassing the three villages that predate the British settlement, lies the native section, or "Black Town," of narrow lanes, innumerable slums, bazaars, temples, mansions and godowns (warehouses). The oldest part of the Black Town is the top of the ear: North Calcutta. This is where Rabindranath Tagore's family lived.

Into this city flowed the influence of Western art forms—the novel, the short story, painting, popular and classical music, theater and, later, cinema—primarily from Great Britain, but also from other Western countries. Calcuttans took these alien cultural forms and ran with them. In so doing they reinvented and reinvigorated Sanskritic and Bengali culture. One of the pioneers was the early 19th-century social reformer Raja Ram-mohun Roy, usually called the father of the "Bengal Renaissance." Roy believed fervently that Bengal's future

lay in producing a synthesis of the best of East and West.

The Tagore family was in the vanguard of this movement. The family included brilliant artists and writers, but all their talents were recombined in Rabindranath. In 1913 he became the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. The effect in Calcutta was electrifying, confirming for Calcuttans their self-appointed role as the intellectuals of India. It's hard to escape Tagore's influence in Calcutta, especially that of his songs. He wrote more than 2,000, many in the minor key, most of them about God, nature and love. You hear them on the radio, in homes, on the train, in schools and in slums like Rabindranagar.

A monthlong festival for Tagore

Every year, Calcuttans celebrate Tagore's birthday with a monthlong festival of his poetry, plays, music and dance dramas, which usually deal with Indian mythology. They also show films made by Satyajit Ray of Tagore's short stories and novels.

Satyajit Ray grew up in a Calcutta family that was close to the Tagores. He studied at the university established by Tagore, although he found the great man intimidating. "You could never really get very close to him because he was a remote kind of figure," says the 69-year-old filmmaker today. "His looks and everything, his beard and his enormous height, even his speech was very florid. He never used a wrong word. Everything was so incredibly perfect. That's off-putting."

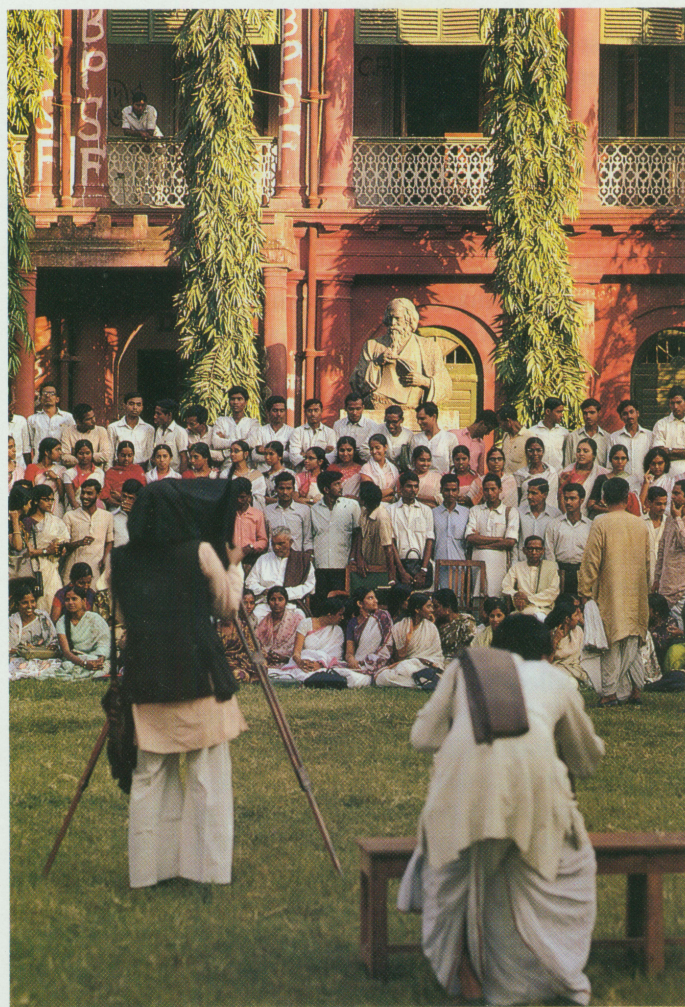
Ironically, Ray grew up to be as tall and imposing a figure as Tagore himself. On the set at the ramshackle film studios in Tollygunge, an area of South Calcutta jokingly dubbed "Tollywood," every take is preceded by the stentorian imperative "Silence!" boomed out by Ray himself. Filmhands stop playing cards in the gloom at the far end of the studio; fans are switched off as Ray's son takes the camera in close for a reaction shot of Soumitra Chatterjee, one of Ray's favorite actors, sitting in an armchair listening to Beethoven.

Calcuttans are proud of Ray's fame in the West, although some have resented his refusal to espouse the fashionable Marxism of many of the city's intellectuals. But Ray, like Tagore the product of a creative family, follows his own instincts. His grandfather started a children's magazine, *Sandesh*, to which Ray's father contributed wonderful nonsense verse before his early death. In 1961 Satyajit Ray revived *Sandesh*. He still edits and writes for it; he also writes novellas featuring a Bengali version of Sherlock Holmes called Feluda.

Many think of Ray as the successor of Tagore, who died in 1941. Multitalented like Tagore, he writes, directs, composes. He is also sensitive to the dilemmas of ordinary men and women torn between the contradictory pressures of change and tradition, and he uses a



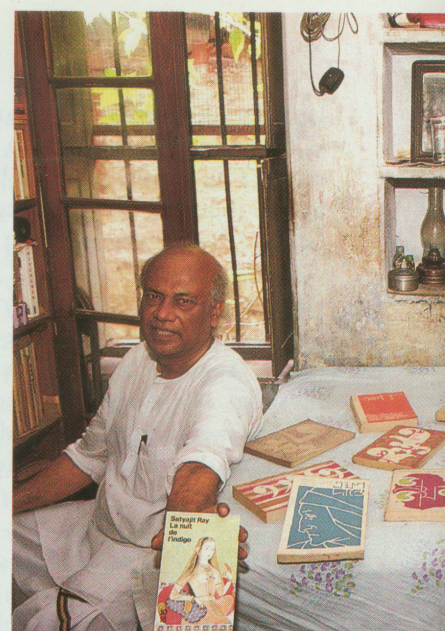
City elder R. P. Gupta chats with young poet at a bar where ricksha-wallahs and intellectuals rub shoulders.



Statue of Rabindranath Tagore, who won Nobel Prize in 1913, presides over class picture at local university.



Culture is the common coin in Calcutta. At left, daughter, Sonali. Nirmalya Acharya (center) edits one of the city's prominent literary magazines, *Ekshan*.



daughter, Sonali. Nirmalya Acharya (center) edits one of the city's prominent literary magazines, *Ekshan*.

Western art form to convey essentially Bengali themes.

One former Calcutta writer, Nirad Chaudhuri, carried his love of Western culture to an extreme. Now living in Oxford and writing vigorously at age 93, Chaudhuri has been called "the last true Englishman" because of his unshakable devotion to the English culture he and his generation grew up with in Calcutta.

Chaudhuri's wedding 60 years ago presented a crisis for him. His marriage was arranged by his parents, and the first time he and his wife saw each other was on their wedding day. Chaudhuri had just discovered Western classical music through 78-rpm records. "So when I met my wife for the first time after the wedding I was extremely uneasy about that point; not so much about meeting a wholly strange girl as wife, as about that. So when we lay down on the bed side by side, first thing she did was to raise my hand and tell me: 'You are very thin. I shall take good care of you.'" In return, Chaudhuri asked her: "Have you heard any European music?" She nodded. "Have you heard the name of a man called Beethoven?" Again, she nodded. "Can you spell it?" She spelled it correctly. "I felt very reassured," he says today. Chaudhuri remains thin, but he and his wife are still married.

Chaudhuri's rage to live the life of the intellect is seen today throughout Calcutta, which is, above all, a city of scribblers. It seems that all Calcuttans feel that they have a right to see their opinions and prejudices in print. "There are two things you will find in the middle-class Bengali character," claims Nirmalya Acharya above the din of ceiling fans and animated conversation in his favorite haunt, the coffeehouse on Bankim Chatterjee Street just off College Street. "They

try to write poetry—every Bengali considers himself a poet—and they try to bring out one little magazine."

Nirmalya should know. Along with some other university friends he started a literary magazine in 1961 here in the coffeehouse. "We used to have interminable conversations—we call them *addas*. We'd spend the whole day chatting, exchanging ideas with like-minded people. We would talk about everything and anything, from cricket to politics, from films to hippies. We used to sit at one particular table here. I wanted to become a poet. At that time the leading literary magazine was *Parichay*. (It's still published today.) But they had their pet authors and they wouldn't publish any of our stuff. So, Soumitra [Chatterjee, the actor] and I said, Why don't we start our own magazine?" With Satyajit Ray's help, they came up with the name *Ekshan*, which means "Now" or "Present Day." "We never thought the magazine would last more than a few issues," says Nirmalya. "It's 30 years now. I think the time was right!"

For the first ten years *Ekshan* was published six times a year, gradually finding its own voice. It published Satyajit Ray's film scripts, and Ray himself contributed articles and designed the covers. In the '70s, the magazine examined some literary sacred cows, producing special issues on Marxism and Dante. "We've also published the memoirs of many Bengali women," Nirmalya tells me as we walk from the coffeehouse to the tiny room that serves as the business office and storeroom of the magazine. "I think that the best-known are

The author is the regular India correspondent for National Public Radio and is the producer of the forthcoming radio series Passages to India.



The Little Magazine Library (right) is maintained by schoolteacher Sandip Dutt (in plaid shirt). The most



complete collection of Bengali periodicals anywhere, its 12,000 volumes fill the ground floor of his house.

the memoirs of Binodini Dasi, a stage actress in the 19th century. Our magazine is now much sought after by students of women's studies."

Nirmalya takes me to the office of a fellow publisher, down a narrow side alley off Mahatma Gandhi Road. In one room, a man in a dhoti and a rag of an undershirt is cranking brightly colored magazine covers through an ancient and blackened handpress, something more appropriate to Dickensian London than to the era of desktop publishing. Isn't it perhaps a myth that Calcutta is still the midwife of the small literary magazine?

"There are probably 2,000 small magazines published here," Nirmalya says. "But it is becoming very difficult these days. Paper costs 15 times as much as it did when we started *Ekshan*, and printing costs have increased tenfold. My friend here is thinking of winding up this press. It's just not viable anymore."

What about the future of *Ekshan*, I ask? "Soumitra left as editor many years ago because his acting career took off. This is now a one-man show. And for the last few years our publication has become irregular. I can now manage only one issue a year, although I hope to bring it back out as a quarterly soon. Normally, we print two, maybe three thousand copies. Advertising covers my costs and Mr. Ray still designs the covers. But we have a growing readership so I have to make the effort." He pauses thoughtfully. "Somehow, I always wanted to be a writer. But I came out an editor, which was not my intention at all!"

Only a short distance from Nirmalya's home, up Mahatma Gandhi Road and down Tamer Lane, is the home of Sandip Dutt. Sandip is a schoolteacher, but

he's also the proprietor of the Little Magazine Library and Research Centre, 12,000 volumes stacked right up to the ceiling, occupying every inch of wall space on the first floor of his home.

"I started this in 1978 because no one looks after the small and obscure magazines," Sandip tells me. "It is my love and duty to look after these little magazines and make them available to the people." Four afternoons a week, after he returns from work, Sandip opens his doors and allows students and researchers for an annual fee of 50 cents to come and ferret through his treasures. Sandip shows me magazines printed on banana leaves, rolled in cigarettes and stuffed into matchboxes. With real pride he brings out a rare first edition of *Bangadarshan* from 1872, and a copy of a short-lived magazine published and edited by a domestic worker in the late 1960s.

"Have you ever published a magazine?" I ask, somewhat naively. "Oh yes! I publish three magazines for my public." Sandip continues the tour. "I started this collection with 1,500 magazines. Now I receive 4 or 5 new ones every day. The problem is space. There's some left in that room," he says, leading me into a third room, christened Poetry Books Library. "What happens when that's full?" I ask. Sandip rolls his eyes upward. "It's going to move up to the next floor, isn't it?" Another roll of the eyes. "I have a duty to these magazines."

As I leave the Little Magazine Library, Sandip takes my arm. "Remember," he tells me earnestly, "Bengalis want to express their ideas. They're not so much interested in material things. They're much happier pursuing intellectual ideas."

None more so than my friend Raja Chatterjee. Raja

never seems to have held a steady job. But he has a profession—being a Bengali intellectual. Raja looks the part, clad in a white dhoti and top, and carrying a cloth shoulder bag jammed with books, notebooks and pencils. Somehow he finds work, at the film studios, or helping to mount an experimental translation of Anouilh or Brecht or Dürrenmatt at one of the city's innumerable small theaters. He's just finished helping his friend Malay produce a series of half-hour television programs of Bengali short stories. Each episode cost \$3,000 to make, impossibly cheap for any Western producer but a fortune for Malay and his wife, who have put all their savings into the series.

Raja lives in South Calcutta, near the famous Kali Temple, with his wife, Runu, and daughter, Sonali, and Runu's widowed mother, who spent several years in the Soviet Union as an interpreter. She speaks and reads Russian, Bengali, Hindi and English. The house is full of books—Tagore, of course, Maxim Gorky, Byron and Shelley, lots of Shakespeare—and an upright piano. Runu has been going blind for several years now but still teaches piano at a private school. "Come round to dinner tonight. We will prepare a special Bengali fish curry for you," she tells me. "My daughter also wants you to hear her play the piano."

That evening, 12-year-old Sonali plays short pieces by Mozart and Grieg. Then Runu plays the first movement of Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" and a Strauss waltz. Runu apologizes profusely for the sound of the piano: "It must be tuned. But when is the tuner coming?" Raja promises to get the tuner tomorrow. But I doubt he can make much of a difference now. The constant humidity has badly altered the sound. Imagine Beethoven played on a barroom piano in the Wild West. The effect is surreal and very Calcutta.

A half-mile of bookshops and bookstalls

After supper, Raja wants me to meet his friends Dakoo and Kumar at the coffeehouse off College Street, a half-mile of bookshops and bookstalls spilling over onto the pavement, carrying first editions, pamphlets, paperbacks in every Indian language, with more than a fair smattering of books in and out of print from France, Germany, Russia and England.

Dakoo is a cartoonist. He's drawn a small book of cartoons on Calcutta's 300th birthday for me. Sometimes, one of the daily papers publishes his work. The rest of the time he just draws and waits. Kumar works in one of the city's luxury hotels, supervising room service. But every morning he writes a poem. Kumar and Raja both write naturally in English. English is as much a language of Calcutta as Bengali. Kumar has never sought a publisher; he wants to know my reactions to his poems. Raja also writes poetry and has



Kumar and Dakoo, believers in the intellectual life, hang out at a tea shop, where they debate endlessly.

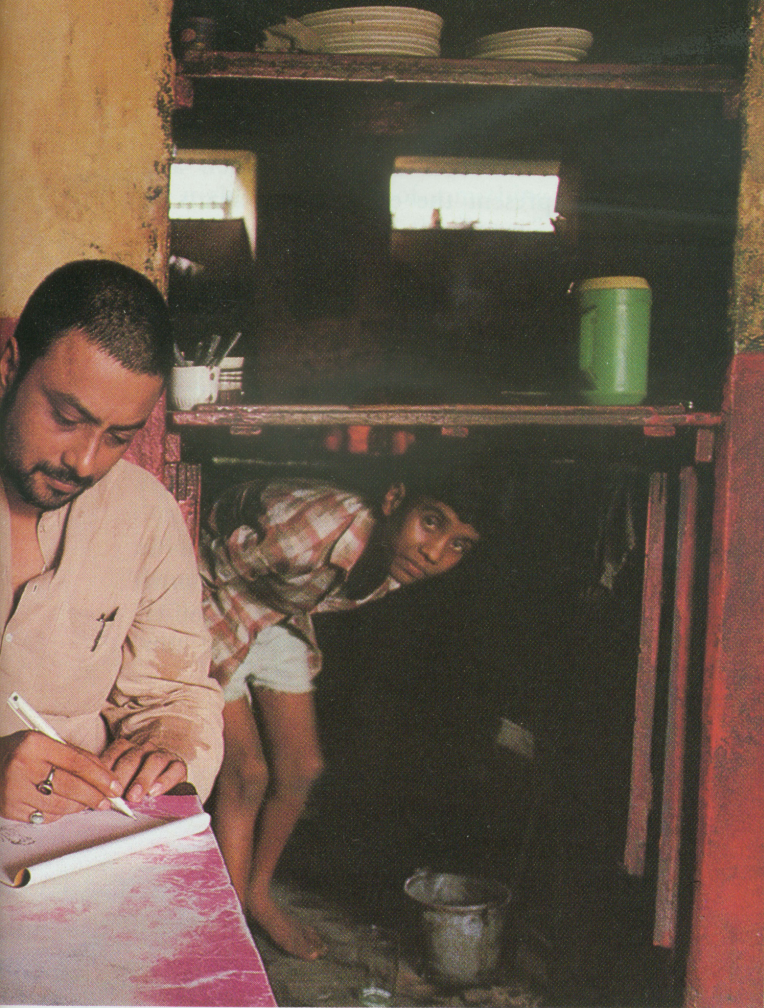
had no problem finding someone to publish 500 copies of 60-odd pages of his poetry in hardback.

Raja, Kumar and Dakoo may never be famous, but they are pursuing the right of every Calcuttan and every Bengali to be an intellectual or an artist. No one snickers.

Driving through Calcutta one day, Raja suddenly blurts out: "Chief! What about this Jack Kerouac? You know him? I am very much liking this man." Raja has read Kerouac in Bengali. Romantic images of a foot-loose Kerouac obviously appeal to the Bengali psyche.

At times this obsession with culture seems so self-conscious that one wonders if it isn't really motivated by something else: a fear that Bengali culture will be diluted by the presence of so many non-Bengalis in Calcutta. And also by the Calcuttans' need to reassure themselves that their city still counts on the world cultural stage, when so many in the West and India have written it off as a provincial backwater and worse.

Supporting Calcutta's literary and artistic climate is the vitality of Calcutta's ordinary, everyday culture. Without this broad foundation, the city would indeed become a city only of intellectuals. But this everyday



Dakoo is a cartoonist who occasionally sells his work; Kumar, a hotel steward, pens one poem every morning.

culture is threatened as well. "Much of what the West calls folk culture is dead art, kept alive on life-support systems from the West. It has no social function anymore," says Radha Prasad Gupta, a retired public relations officer for Tata Iron and Steel, and now one of the city's unofficial historians.

Few visitors interested in Calcutta fail to visit R. P. Gupta. I first got to know him because he had written a small volume in Bengali called *The Cries of Calcutta Streets*. Naturally intrigued as a radio producer, I hoped to find an archive of tape recordings. No such luck. R. P. Gupta's catalog of sounds existed only on paper. But he offered me the services of his young assistant—Raja Chatterjee. So now, on every visit to the city, Raja and I make the pilgrimage to R. P.'s flat, which is full of old prints of the city in its glory days.

Gupta argues that what remains today of Calcutta's working-class culture exists precisely because it is utilitarian in nature. "The film director Jean Renoir took back several huge clay storage pots to Hollywood after he had finished filming *The River* here," he says. "He was fascinated by their sensuality, their curves, the belly where the grain is stored. But they are beautiful

precisely because they're household objects—because they are practical."

By that token, one of Calcutta's most famous indigenous folk forms is an endangered species. Kalighat, or "bazaar," paintings are usually watercolors—very colorful, often strongly satirical, sometimes bawdy. They were sold as cheap souvenirs to the pilgrims who came to the Kali Temple in South Calcutta. But the postcard and mass reproduction spelled their demise. "You want to see Kalighat paintings? No problem! There are some in the Metro. Let's go, Chief!" And Raja whisks me out the door of the apartment and down the stairs to the street. It's raining. Raja shouts a command in Bengali and two ricksha-wallahs at a nearby stand pick up their rickshas and wade through brown water two feet deep to the doorstep.

Riding Metro just to see the artwork

We cross Chowringhee to what looks like a small ventilation shaft, where we climb out of our rickshas. Raja leads me down some steps into the world of the Calcutta subway, known as Metro, the city's pride and joy, even though there's only one line and it's only a third complete. Each station is decorated with paintings and sculptures. When we reach the Kalighat station, sure enough, reproductions of Kalighat paintings hang on the walls. Other stations display reproductions of paintings by Tagore or early scenes of European Calcutta. Many Calcuttans, says Raja, ride Metro just to see the artwork. There's another attraction, too: each station has several color television sets, which show popular films or cricket matches.

Although Kalighat paintings may now mostly be seen in the Metro, there are still many forms of popular culture that retain vitality and an audience. The easiest way to find them is to spend a couple of hours on a Sunday afternoon on the Maidan. Here, under the shadow of an extraordinary tower built in memory of Sir David Ochterlony (an eccentric member of the East India Company who liked to parade his 14 Indian mistresses, each mounted on an elephant), street performers entertain the working men and women of Calcutta. Quack doctors draw eager crowds: "Miracle medicine to cure stomach pains and improve sexual energies!" claims a 70-year-old huckster. The medicine appears to be a cross between black licorice and tar. The old man dismisses my skepticism: "Look at me! I am 70. I have three daughters, three wives and 18 sons!" Raja is keen for me to buy some lumps for him.

We also encounter a fortune-teller, whose parrot steps out of a tiny cage and selects an envelope at random; and a family of acrobats, two members of which pound drums while, on a high wire six feet above the grass, three small children contort themselves

through a tiny metal hoop, then take a bow. It may not be high art, but only a monsoon downpour will keep away the thousands of people who come.

On Monday morning the Maidan is deserted again. Raja and I go back into North Calcutta, to Kumartuli, a former red-light district but also home to the image makers of Calcutta. The easiest way to get there is by taxi. Throughout all the years I've been coming to Calcutta I've been driven by Tivari, a Brahman from Uttar Pradesh, who lives here with his father and brother. I think my Western habits must have shocked Tivari when I first met him. Highly literate and a devoted follower of Rama, the legendary God-King of Ayodhya and hero of *The Ramayana*, Tivari determined to educate me. On my second visit he had acquired a tape deck in his taxi. He would endlessly play *bhajans*, popular devotional hymns to the greater glory of Rama and Krishna, sung by a popular "playback" singer.

In the end Tivari won. I needed a tape of *bhajans* for a radio program. Tivari promptly obliged. In return he asked for cassettes of my programs. Now his customers have a choice: *bhajans* or National Public Radio, although the speed is seriously off on his machine, and I can scarcely recognize my own voice.

Kumartuli is a rabbit warren of sheds, workshops and alleys where some 4,000 potters shape bamboo, straw and clay into life-size reproductions of gods and goddesses. Since Calcutta's unofficial patron is the Mother Goddess, major festivals, or pujas, are held each year to celebrate her various aspects. The potters make images for these festivals, including Durga, who rides a lion and destroys demons. She is worshiped for four days, usually in early October. Kali, a more terrifying form of the goddess, with her protruding tongue and garland of skulls, is celebrated a month later.

During our visit, many of the potters are preparing for the upcoming Durga Puja. We watch as one of them, hard at work, smooths gray clay onto a large straw-and-bamboo frame. He learned how to make images from his father; for most of the potters, image making is a caste profession going back several generations.

Others, such as Alope Sen, a former art student, use images as tools of social criticism. His images of Saraswati, goddess of learning, depict her in chains. "I want to show the slavery of today's education, where children are just stuffed with facts," he says.

Sen's Durga images have become famous because of their ambiguity. Sen refuses the crude depiction of the demons that Durga slays as the epitome of evil. He

sculpts them with the faces of ordinary men and women. "They represent the evils in the hearts of every man—lust, anger, vanity, infatuation, jealousy and greed," he asserts. His tableaux, which show Durga mounted on a lion and slaying a demon, will fetch him about \$20,000. They will grace four of the largest neighborhood stages set up by street committees. For four days and nights of the Durga Puja, people will flock to see these works of art. On the fourth night, each neighborhood committee will take down its Durga images, place them on bamboo stretchers and carry them to the banks of the Hooghly.

Five years ago, Raja decided I must experience my first Durga Puja from the vantage point of the ordinary Calcuttan. He instructed Tivari to drop us off en route to the river, right in the middle of several hun-



Satyajit Ray directs the 1987 filming of a documentary about his father, a master of Bengali nonsense verse.

dred Bengali musicians. Together we marched through the night to the tune of something I still believe was meant to be "Scotland the Brave," played by Bengali bagpipers clad only in dhotis. Once at the water's edge all hell broke loose. Each team bearing a Durga image maneuvered down the muddy embankment and then heaved it into the water, where it would dissolve back into clay, straw and bamboo on its way to the Ganges.

Durga Puja is Alope Sen's personal vindication as an artist. But it is also his nightmare: "These images are my creation. They are like my sons and daughters. Now the studio is full. But soon it will be empty, and the suffering will begin. It is unbearable for me to watch them putting my images, my children, into the Ganga!"

On the scale of human suffering, Alope Sen fares better than most Calcuttans. Yet perhaps, in the final

analysis, it's the struggle to survive amid decay and death that gives so many Calcutta artists and writers their subject matter. "With problems you have food for creation. You have your material," says Satyajit Ray. "If you're living in Stockholm all you can do is make films like Bergman does, about human beings and all the psychological this and that."

Raja and Dakoo agree. Their work is obsessed by their love-hate relationship with the city and its problems. This tension is best summed up by filmmaker and actress Aparna Sen, who also edits Calcutta's leading women's magazine. She freely admits she hates the city, then adds, "But I know what it looks like in the morning, in the evening. I know what the streets are like and how the shadows fall . . . even though I hate it I can't think of working anywhere else!"

