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# Hooghly: A river, a book, an exhibition and a sonic experiment




For several years at the Calcutta Research Group, we have engaged with the idea of Calcutta as a migrant city—a city shaped by migration flows, a city of refuge, of travel. These migrations became possible through an estuary of the mighty Ganges: the Hooghly. Considered holy to practicing Hindus, carrying on both sides factories, warehouses, temples, palaces and settlements, part of the fertile Bengal delta, the site of the riverine Calcutta port—Hooghly carries within its changing contours multiple meanings, metaphors and materialities. In this short piece Samata Biswas explores a 2020 book on the river, and a 2021 sonic installation by Goethe-Institut/ MoMAuseller Bhavan, Kolkata in 2021.




In *Hooghly: The Defiant History of a River*, Robert Ivermee (Hurst Publishers) tracks the different empires, waves of colonialism, migration and industry that enabled the fertile land across the banks of the river contribute to the creation of the second city of the British empire, Calcutta. Through subsequent chapters the author travels through 3000 years of settlements along its banks, locating specific riverside settlements important to the Dutch, the Portuguese, the French, the Danish and the British, as well as the Nawabs and rulers of Bengal. A chapter is dedicated to Calcutta and its attempts at the conquest of nature through navigating the Hooghly, establishment of zoological and horticultural gardens, digging of canals, setting up railways, excavating sewers, laying buildings leading to an industrial and migration boom.

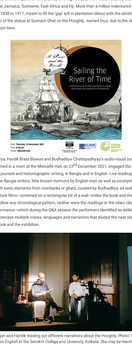
Ivermee ends this handy account of the Hooghly at the island of Sagar, the direction its global future is supposed to take. This oft-submerged pilgrimage spot of the Hindus at the junction of the Ganges and the sea, is soon to be developed into a port—buttressing the overwhelmed Calcutta and India ports. Ivermee nevertheless sounds a note of caution, one fit for our times—of rapidly increasing sea levels that threaten to engulf the island itself.

> *Calcutta attracted migrants from across India, ranging from prosperous Marwari merchants seeking commercial opportunities to impoverished Bihari labourers desperate for the promise of better pay than at home. Moreover, it was a truly global city. In addition to its European residents, immigrants arrived from the Middle East, North East Asia, traveling from as far away as China and from Africa, Australia, and the United States. Just a third of the city's population in 1901 was estimated to have been born there; of the remainder, half were from other parts of Bengal and the rest from further afield.*
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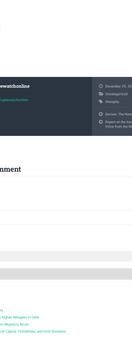
*Hooghly: The Global History of a River* pulls together an impressive amount of existing research in maritime histories, colonialism, empire, urban studies focussed on Calcutta, histories of Indian industries and environment. While much of this work might be familiar to the academic enthusiast, this may be the first time it is pulled together into one volume, aimed at the novice and the expert reader alike.




Tall panels set up between the corinthian pillars at Metcalfe Hall, bearing the name of the exhibition. Photo: Samata An exhibition titled "A River and the World: The Story of the Hooghly", curated by Nazes Ahnaf, designed by Sukanya Ghosh, has been on display at the Metcalfe Hall on Strand Road in Calcutta, since late November 2021. Standing with 30 Corinthian pillars on four sides, newly refurbished Metcalfe Hall (named after British Governor General of Jamaica, North Western Province and India, respectively), bears testimony to the connected histories of empires, global flows, commerce and colonialism that the exhibition presents. The museum is situated on Strand Road, in stark contrast to the shanties that dot the pavements of this office district. Strand Road is apparently built on the soil dredged out from England, so that the ships carrying cotton, spices and textile from India, do not return empty. Although India did not see formal colonization by the Germans, the eminent Orientalist Max Muller, whose name the funding institution bears, was instrumental in canonization of Hindu religious scripture—that sought to construct Hinduism into a religion of the book. Incidentally, the exhibition did not comment on the complex lineages to location and funding sources straddle—leaving the onlooker reach to the story by herself.

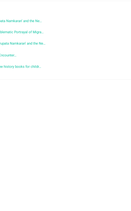



A panel at the exhibition documenting the migrant history of Calcutta, with photos by Nazes Ahnaf. Photo: Samata The 1st exhibition follows the structures of viceroy's rank, with tall panels narrating the history the Portuguese settlement in Hooghly, the rise and fall of the Dutch East India company, the French colony of Chandernagore, the Danish town of Serampore, the British east India company, the traffic in indentured labourers across the ocean, of the telegraph cable between England and India, the jute mills on both sides of the river, the rule of Queen Victoria, etc. The judicious use of objects like bales of the golden fiber Jute, culinary objects specific to Bengal, like ghee (clarified butter) and pan (betel leaf), the import and now ubiquitous presence of vegetables like chilies and potatoes —imports from the new world, make the exhibition something more than the re-presentation of the book through images and panels. Nazes Ahnaf's excellent black and white photographs of Calcutta, of Calcuttans and the different sites across Hooghly merit more space of their own. Another aspect of the exhibition is the highlighting of the cultural transmission that produces the peculiar Bengali cuisine and culinary habits that now London and Paris lay rage. The underbelly of this amalgamation of cultures is the ban on import of Indian fabrics by the British and Colonial governments, as well as the slow destruction of Indian muslin.



A panel at the exhibition, containing photos of Jute mills and brief description of their history. The pile of fiber in front of the panel is jute. Photo: Samata

Ivermee's book does not deal with the journey of the indentured workers down the river, to distant plantations across the seas. Africa created an entire panel on the journey of the coolies, from Indian country sides to Mauritius, British Guiana, Trinidad, Natal, Jamaica, Suriname, East Africa and Fiji. More than a million indentured workers were shipped out between 1838 to 1917, meant to fill the gap in labour left by the abolition of slavery. The panel includes a photo of the statue at Sunken Ghat on the Hooghly, named thus, due to the destination of the workers who sailed from here.




Neelanjan Bhattacharya, Hardik Brata Biswas and Budhaditya Chattopadhyay's audio-visual assemblage "Sailing the *River of Time*", performed in a room at the Metcalfe Hall, on 27th December 2021, engaged the audience through readings from fiction, journals and historiographic writing, in Bangla and in English. Live readings (by Neelanjan and Hardik) from well-know Bangla writers, little known memoirs by English men as well as excerpts from reports(?) were interspersed with sonic documents from riverbanks or ghats, curated by Budhaditya, as well short videos from documentary and feature films—screened on a rectangular bit of a wall. Unlike the book and the exhibition—this assemblage did not follow any chronological pattern, neither were the readings or the video clips glossed by their origin during the performance—which during the Q&A session the performers identified as deliberate. The exciting assemblage could showcase multiple voices, languages and narratives that eluded the neat classification-cum periodisation of the book and the exhibition.



Neelanjan and Hardik reading out different narratives about the Hooghly. Photo: Samata *Samata Biswas teaches English at the Sanskrit College and University, Kolkata. She may be reached at* bsamata@gmail.com.

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