

Twin Cities

This book of photographs captures the essence of life in Calcutta and Dhaka, the twin cities. Calcutta has become provincial while Dhaka has become a throbbing city. It was the opposite during the Raj. Yet, they remain twins. The people of the two cities are connected through families, religion and language. They are, in many ways, inseparable.

Sree Kumar, 2009



Twin Cities - Calcutta and Dhaka

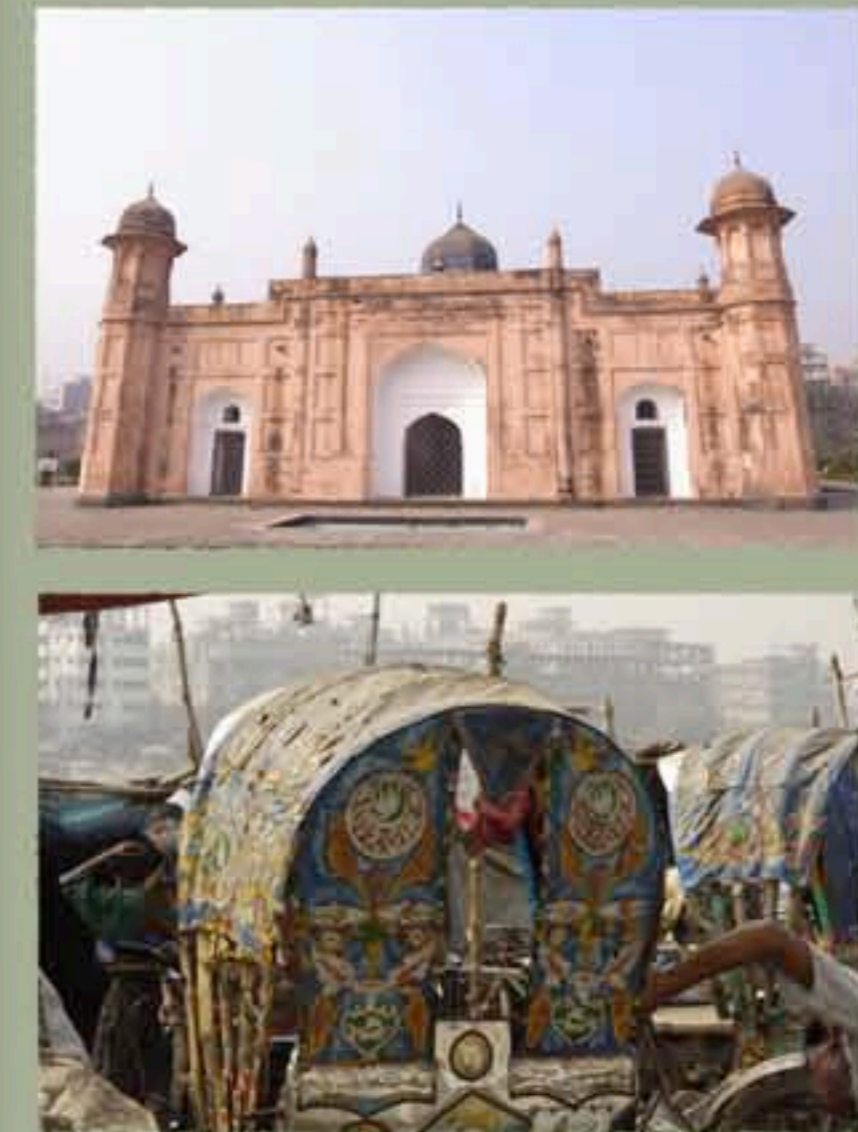
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Twin Cities - Calcutta and Dhaka

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Twin Cities

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Photographs of Calcutta taken in 1999 and 2005, of Dhaka in 2009.

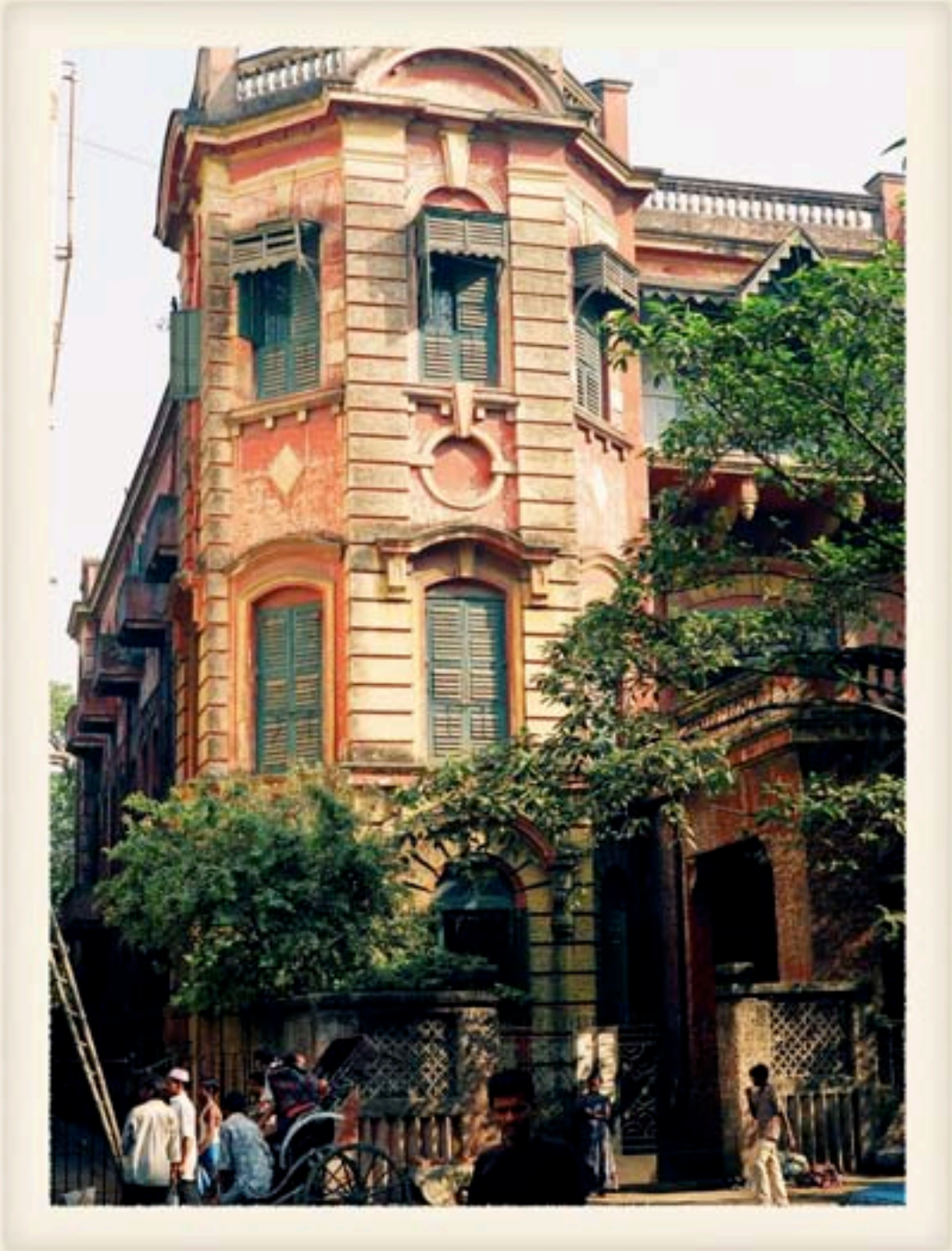
Dedicated to Syed Manzur Elahi, a man of the two cities.

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Part One - Calcutta



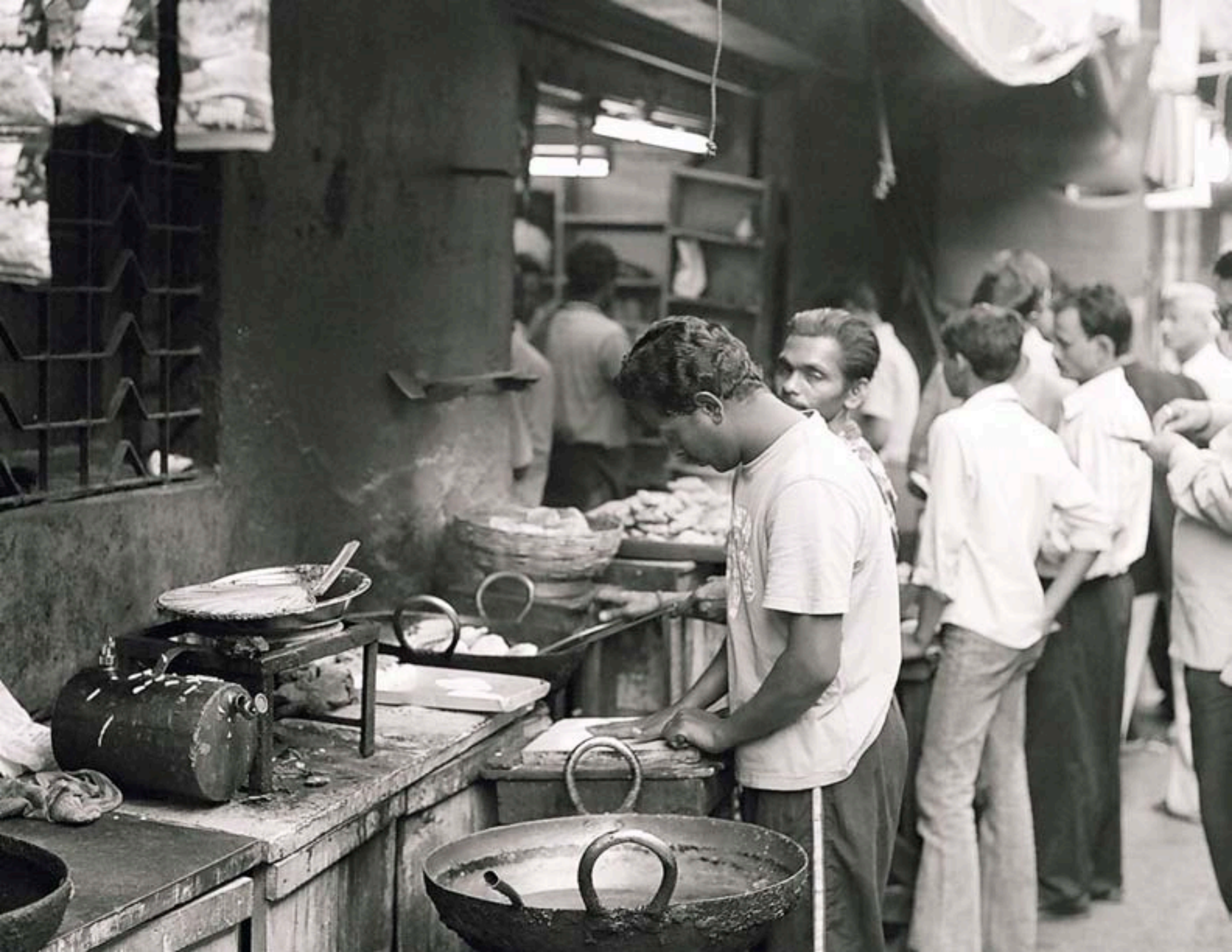








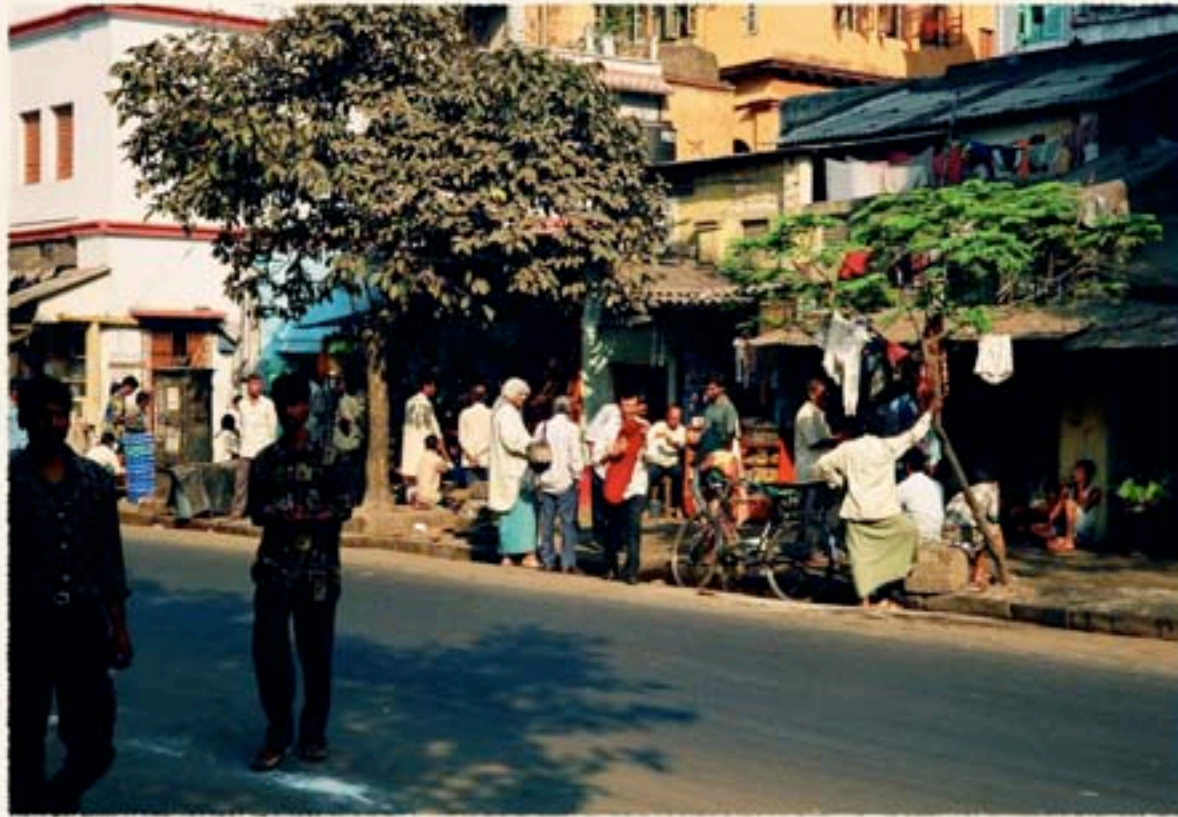














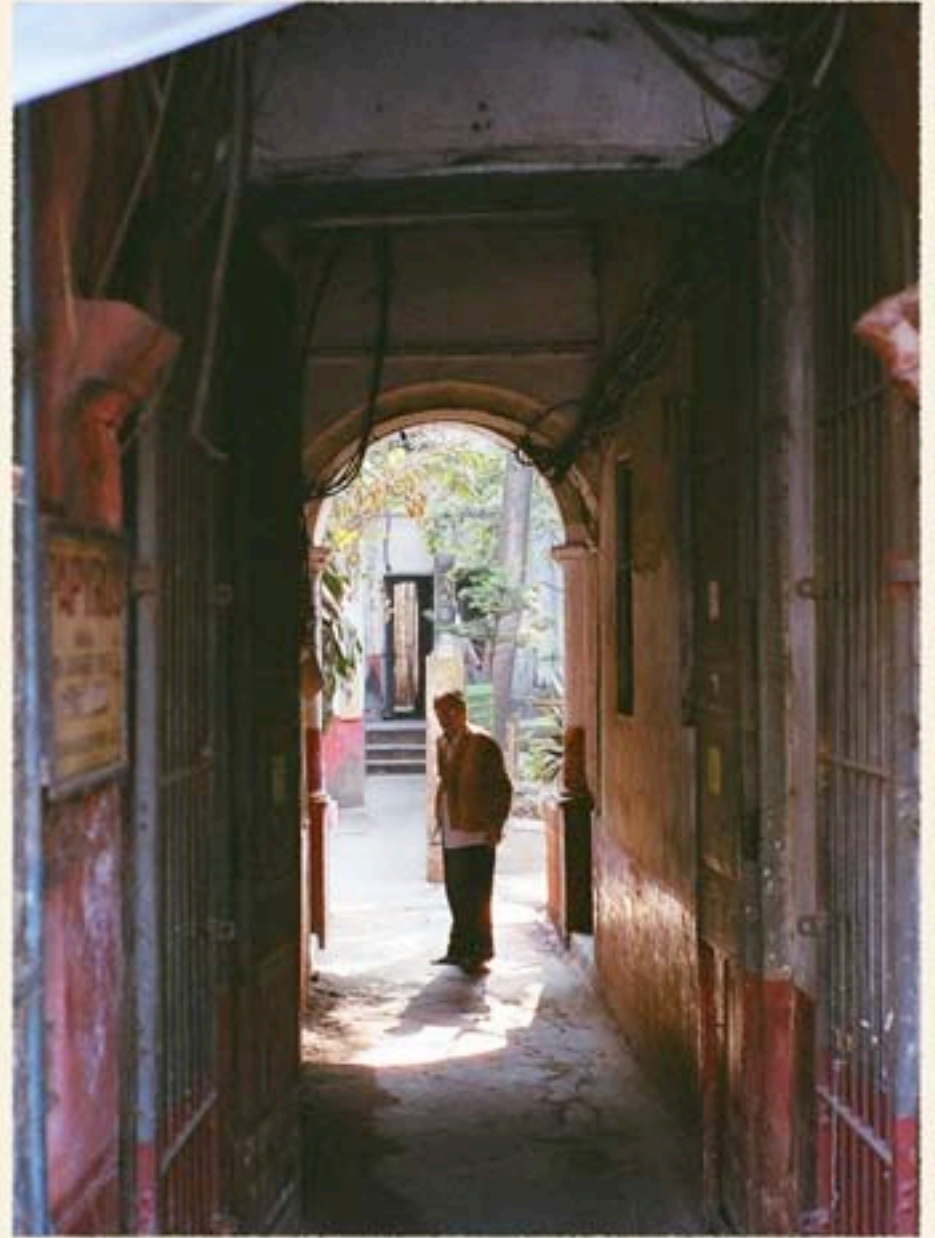
















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Part Two - Dhaka



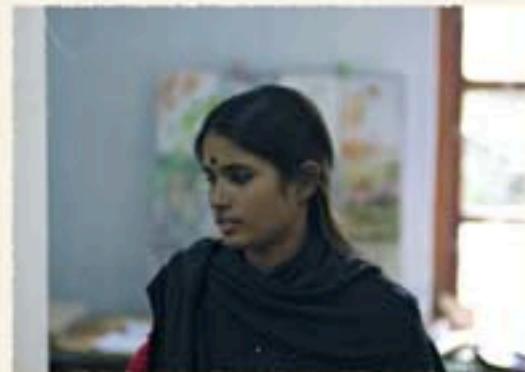






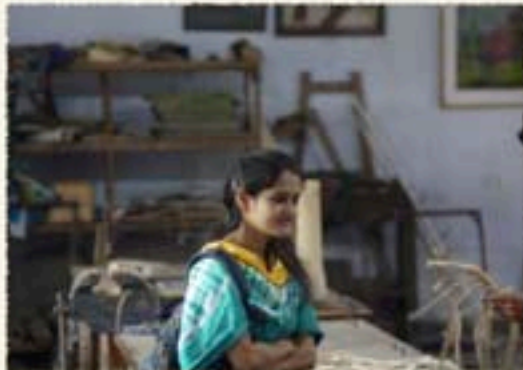




















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(বাংলা একাডেমী প্রাঙ্গণের বিপরীতে)

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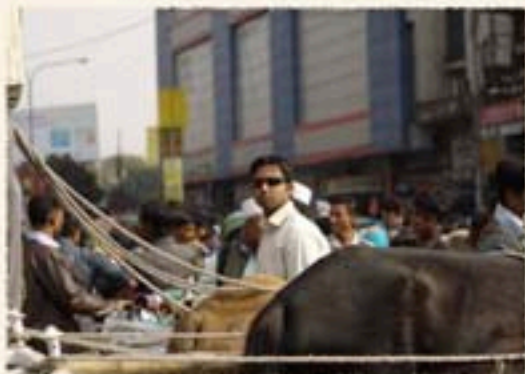
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The Twin Cities - Calcutta and Dhaka

It may seem otherwise but Calcutta (or Kolkata as it is now known) and Dhaka (or Dacca as it was once known) are really cities that belong to each other. During the Raj Calcutta became the pre-eminent centre with commerce and administration at its heart. Dhaka became a provincial backwater for the British administrators. Yet in the Mughal period Dhaka was an important, and eastern most, extremity of the empire, for here, the Mughals recreated the wonders of Delhi and Lahore in the Lalbagh Gardens, parts of which remain.

This is also why the casual traveller is struck by how similar old Dhaka is to old Delhi with its warrens of narrow lanes and buildings standing cheek by jowl. Calcutta has a slightly different feel, as the British laid out a planned city with broad streets for horse drawn carriages and, in a later time, motorised vehicles. But at the heart of both Dhaka and Calcutta is the love of Bengal and of its poets, writers and its language. Religion may have split Bengal but the knitting that holds them together is far stronger. The weaves of family relationships and familiarity are deeper than can be imagined.

The Muslim neighbourhoods of Calcutta are just as vibrant and colourful as the Hindu neighbourhoods of Dhaka. There seems to be a symmetry of sorts in how the religious divide plays itself out in the two cities. In both cities there is teeming humanity but it seems much more dense in Dhaka. This can be easily explained. Calcutta is a gentrified city on a slow path to decay while Dhaka, as the capital of a country, is forced to look forward to a better life. There is an underlying dynamism to how Dhaka, with all its traffic jams, cycle rickshaws, and pedestrians, copes with life in the knowledge that it will somehow get better: the dream of a developing world. Calcutta has a more sedate pace in which the dreams have come to an end. Marxism, after all, is a special dream, if not a religion, especially so in Calcutta, the home of its Indian variant.

But there is a similarity and it lies submerged in the Bengali way of life. In both Dhaka and Calcutta there is a love affair with all things Bengali. There is a refined interest in the arts, culture and literary endeavour in both places. The discourse at parties is lively and drawn to more than just shallow talk. There seems to be an honest fervour to dig into the wider meaning of a cultural literati and all that it entails. It is part of the Bengali psyche: to understand the human spirit. Perhaps the most telling feature of this societal impetus is the focus on education. It is this singular stamp of a person's background that animates the Bengali mind most: a literate man (or woman) is worth a lot more than a wealthy one.

So it is not surprising that the people of Dhaka see Tagore as one of them although he was from Calcutta or Amartya Sen as one of their own because he was born there. The universities of Calcutta and Dhaka, in their time, were both institutions of repute, producing an intellectual class that could rival any in the western world. Today, Bengalis from both cities stride the best institutions in the world and return to add to their respective gene pools. It comes as no surprise then that the West Bengal state assembly supports the motion by the Bangladesh Government to make Bengali an official language of the UN. Can there be a more unusual market for a united front in chauvinism?

Perhaps the importance of food, in both cities, pervades the wider concerns of life and, as every traveller knows, even poverty can have its own benchmarks. The search for daily sustenance continues in the large transient populations that make up the cities and there are as many street stalls as there are good restaurants. Where the poor make do with the most basic elements for a decent meal, the well-to-do have the finest on offer. There is no shortage in either class. So it is no surprise that some of the best Mughal, and peasant, cuisine is readily available in both cities but more so in Dhaka, the final extremity of the Mughal world.

There is then the fine craftsmanship that defines Dhaka. Industrial growth has dissipated whatever craftsmanship existed in the Calcutta of old. Dhaka, however, continues to keep alive these dwindling traditions and has made them a trademark of its reputation, for even in Calcutta the fine cotton weaves and designs from Bangladesh continue to be sought after.

The real difference between the two cities lies in the water. In Dhaka the rivers and blocked canals are part of the cityscape. There is life on these waters. People live on the riverbanks and depend on the ebb and flow of the river for their daily rituals. The Buriganga, along which Dhaka stands, is more than a river of life despite the heavy pollution. In Calcutta, on the other hand, the Hooghly is less dominant on the city although it has its own significance: a mechanical quality with its port and waterborne traffic. The relative importance of the rivers to the two cities can be perceived through different canvases. In one there is a rural imprint, in the other an industrial mosaic. So the holiest of Hindu rivers provides its final salvation as a giver of life to a predominantly Muslim, and thankful, population in the delta that is a greater part of Bangladesh.

Now, some fifty-two years after partition and almost three decades after the creation of Bangladesh, the two cities are finding a natural rhythm of life, unified by language and culture. While Calcutta has become a gentrified old soul, Dhaka has become the place for the young at heart. The cycle of life, as ever, continues and only time can tell whether the twins will grow closer.

Sree Kumar

31 December 2009

About the photographer

Sree Kumar is an amateur photographer and essayist. He studied in Oxford, London and Singapore, where he now lives.