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Ghosts of Calcutta past

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Esplanade Mansion. Photo Courtesy: Prabir C. Purkayastha

Special Arrangement



Prabir C. Purkayastha's B&W shots of mansions and palaces in Calcutta.

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Raj Bari, a Bengali aristocrat's mansion. Photo: Prabir C. Purkayastha

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The Reformatory. Photos: Courtesy Prabir Purkayastha.

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Prabir C. Purkayastha tells a compelling story of a city's history through his lens.

Calcutta was once known as 'City of Palaces' and in the days of the British Raj, there were opulent buildings built by the rulers as well as the Bengal elite. Today, many of these grand structures are in decay and a passionate chronicler of these disappearing stories is Prabir C. Purkayastha, award-winning photojournalist, who tells evocative tales through his camera of a Calcutta past. (www.prabirpurkayastha.com)

One of his ongoing projects is 'Calcutta: Vanishing Spirits' in which he is documenting five communities which are fading away - the Jews, Armenians, Chinese, Parsis, and the Anglo Indians. He has been capturing images for the past seven years. Of the Colonial edifices, he writes, "The new architecture reflected the city's diversity, incorporating both Western and Eastern influences and merging European with traditional Hindu, Moorish and Islamic architectural details." Purkayastha was recently in New York where the Sundaram Tagore Gallery showcased **Stories in Stone: Colonial Calcutta**, images which tell the story of grand edifices in decline, all in black and white.

The show is open till May 31.

Tell me about your growing up years?

My father was in the Infantry Garhwal Rifles and I had the most magical childhood along with my sisters, growing up in Army cantonments. These are Army colonies spread across various cities in India, and they are, to this day, quite identical to what they were when the British were in India. So it was easier for me to step across the threshold of reality and slip into the corridor of days gone by.

Your first memory of seeing the old mansions...

I still remember the first time my grandfather took me to Victoria Memorial. I was in absolute awe - I thought the king and queen lived there! For me, these monuments were still buried there in my psyche and to go back and revisit them now, I was superimposing a perspective which was born out of my interest for travelling back in time. I could now look at them in a different context altogether -- in the context of these vanishing communities. So going back in time can be full of pleasure if the memories are good - or it can be very painful if you are searching for ghosts.

Has it been painful or a pleasure?

For me, it was both. I was literally haunted by these old mansions, because unlike Delhi, Mumbai, or even Chennai, the mansions in Calcutta still somehow seem to be rooted in the past. I have visited raj bars and bagan bars and in every one of them, I have found something almost supernatural. You feel a vibration, you suddenly sense the presence of people who lived in these places but are no longer there. At least that is how I felt... Being a photographer, I am a storyteller in my head. I like to romanticise an image, I like to bring to it a sense of solitude, a sense of serenity, a sense of detachment. The person who sees my pictures - even in a crowded room - should feel that he or she is alone in that room and connect with the visual in front.

There is a huge marble bust of Alexander the Great at the entrance of the Belgachia Rajbari. Can you comment on that timeless reminder of the Colonial period?

It was obtained by the owner's great grandfather over a century ago and it's actually so symbolic of the British Raj and the Colonial magnificence of the building that in this dimly lit quiet corridor is this proud figure of a king who strode through the pages of history. To me, it was very symbolic of colonial Calcutta that a Bengali aristocracy was not just politically or religiously advanced and strong, but also into the aesthetics and had the desire to be seen as equal of the rulers.

What is the back-story to each of your images? How do you see yourself and your work in this realm of the past?

Oh, I have never seen myself as playing any pivotal role in doing anything - I am just passing through. I just want, at the end of the day, to feel that it is a life well-lived, that in my own small way, I have been able to contribute something that hopefully generations after me might find useful. My ancestors from my mother's side were storytellers and so I see myself as a storyteller, just a storyteller.

(The writer is a New York-based journalist who blogs at www.lassiwithlavina.com. Follow [@lassiwithlavina](https://www.instagram.com/lassiwithlavina) [Google](https://www.facebook.com/lassiwithlavina) [±](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...))

Keywords: [Prabir C. Purkayastha](#), [Calcutta](#), [photography](#)