

Visualizing Black Town Calcutta Through Lens of Balthazar Solvyns

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***Abstract:** This paper mainly aims to argue that though Balthazar Solvyns was extremely influenced by the colonial attitudes and also showed racial and cultural stereotypes, his illustrations do demonstrate an impactful ethnographic interest in the daily life of the inhabitants of the black town, Calcutta. Like the several other colonial artists who mainly focused on the landscapes or monumental architecture, Solvyns did not do that but paid considerable heed to the social groups, festivals, occupations, traditions, and identities of the natives of Calcutta. Solvyns' illustrations reveal not only the presence of some sort of colonial bias, but an impactful and genuine effort to actually record the black town Calcutta society. The central research question of this particular article is to understand that to what extent did Balthazar Solvyns, through his illustrations, try to reproduce colonial stereotypes about the Indian society, and also to what extent did these illustrations offer a more detailed and ethnographic representation of the daily life of the native inhabitants of the town of Calcutta. In order to analyze the illustrations of Balthazar Solvyns which were produced during the time of his stay in Calcutta between the years 1791 and 1803, this paper adopts the visual-historical as well as interpretative methodology. It studies the selected paintings and etchings from *Les Hindus* along with the written descriptions by Solvyns.,*

***Keywords:** Balthazar Solvyns, Black Town, Calcutta, European, Hindus etc.*

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Introduction

Before delving into the artistic representation, it is important to understand the dual city model of White town and the Black Town of colonial Calcutta. To offer a brief understanding of the two terms- Black Town and White town, the Black Town as perceived by the British were the areas which were inhabited by the Indians. White towns on the contrary were the areas inhabited by the Europeans- "the whites".

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It was in 1794 that the Governor General of Calcutta had issued a proclamation fixing the limits of the town of Calcutta between the Hooghly River(west) and the inner side of the Mahratta Ditch (east) and between the Dihee Birjee (south) and the Chitpur nullah (north).¹ According to Swati Chattopadhyay, as the administrative activities along with the commercial prosperity in Calcutta witnessed a rising graph the city attracted approximately 200000 inhabitants by 1820. During this time, landed property was a lucrative business and it is not a fact of denial that building costs were high as the materials like that of stone, wood, brick had to be imported from outside the city of Calcutta. Therefore, rental business and pukka buildings were considered to be fruitful investments.² It was by 1830s that the 19th century Calcutta town planning, better to state as Calcutta's morphology was established. Ghats along the edge of Hooghly River also came into existence. These Ghats or steps for landing indeed indicated the significance of the commercial activities. Along with these the network of bazaars and the administrative centers were also established between Esplanade Row and the Old fort. The older South arteries like the Chitpur road and Chowringhee Road were enforced by new ones like the Strand road and Wood-Wellesley-College-Cornwalis Street. The location of administrative units of the city of Calcutta like the Mint, the Customs house and the warehouses were along the river's edge, the Writers Building on the north and the Supreme Court and Government House on the South i.e. the 'Maidan' side. As a result of the location in the vicinity of the ports and administrative offices, this region became a common locale for the European entrepreneurs.³ This is how, with the gradual passage of time, the English visitors in the late 18th century and 19th century Calcutta remarked about the existence of White Town and Black Town. The White town was indicated by the rows of the houses which were surrounding the Maidan area and the Black Town was somewhere far beyond, centered along the Burra Bazaar region. It was between the 18th and the 19th centuries that we see the different ethnic groups and their population distribution shifting from region to region and gingerly this white town region formed a sort of homogeneous space for the Europeans in India. The most striking difference between these two towns was the urban fabric. If you look to the white town region, the area had sparsely distributed buildings whereas Black Town represented an extremely close knit fabric. However this distinctive feature depending on the urban fabric was not at all a rule.⁴ As Swati Chattopadhyaya points out, in the 1830 Chowringhee was considered to be a Suburb and the Tank Square was considered a fashionable European district. She says, Chowringhee was preferred by the wealthy ones who actually desired to live within the ambience of country yet

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be close to the heart of European markets administrative units. But interestingly, from the Bengali point of view, the city was not actually based on White town and Black Town but was divided into a series of Paras, Tolas and Tulis. The area between the Chowringhee road, Park Street, Theatre Road and Wood Street was 'SAHIB PARA' as per the Bengalis.⁵



Thus, to ease out the image of White town and Black Town, Northern part of Calcutta basically was referred to as the Black Town whereas the southern part was the White Town. Hence, on one hand we have the Black Town region which was primarily the religious and cultural heart of the Bengali community and on the other hand, there was the White Town- the administrative hub. It cannot be denied that, in comparison to the White town region, Black Town was devoid of a proper urban planning but was congested with poor quarters, markets encroaching upon the road and residential areas, houses piling onto each other, narrow passageways and lanes between houses. Initially, that is after the attack of Siraj on Calcutta, the Europeans tried to settle around Gobindapur. However, it was not very suitable due to the lack of space and the growing number of European residents in the region. This is when, Farruksiyar permitted the British to buy around 38 more villages around Calcutta and this led to the establishment of the European dominated locality around the region where the old Fort William was constructed. By the end of the 19th century, due to the rise of the Western Educated intellectuals, professionals and entrepreneurs from Bengal, this demarcation - White Town and Black Town began to gradually disappear. Gradually, we see the rise of South Calcutta that indirectly indicated a new community of Upper class Bengalis who were rooted in their own culture but at the same time did not turn away from Western influence.⁶ However, the landscape of the colonial Calcutta was a complex one and hence to describe it in terms of the duality of black and white towns is a bit difficult and the city consisted of overlapping territories. According to my opinion, this desire for terming the regions as White town Calcutta and Black town Calcutta was somewhat rooted in the British obsession with discrimination on the basis of race and the way they always kept themselves in the higher pedestals.

Balthazar Solvyns Artistic Representation

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The Flemish artist, Francois Balthazar Solvyns lived in Calcutta from the year 1791 to 1803 and during his stay he grasped the opportunity to represent Calcutta, its people and its culture through his paintings.⁷ The Orientalist-Sir William Jones and the British interest in the lifestyle of the Indians basically encouraged Balthazar Solvyns to produce a record of Indian festivals, occupations, caste, musical instruments, ascetics and transport. When Solvyns had arrived in Calcutta, the population of the city was said to be as high as 500000 but according to several Scholars it has been probably over estimated. The population however fluctuated in the 18th century because of the several wars, epidemics and ofcourse famines.⁸ In regard to the European buildings at Calcutta, Solvyns mentioned that the houses were always at some distance from one another and were of very respectable appearance. He further adds and praises the structure of the houses saying, the house had grand pedestals and the doors and the windows were large and the rooms were lofty to resist the extensive heat. He described the houses of the white town and said that the walls were painted white, paper or tapestry was never used. Chimnies were hardly seen and the residential place was generally on the first story and the ground floor comprised the dining space. He goes on to add mentioning about the flat roofs and the baked brick walls.⁹ He mentioned about the existence of the different quarters respectively for the different European communities like the English quarter, the Portuguese quarter etc.

Regarding the Black Town, Solvyns writes, the area which was inhabited by the natives who were originally the "Hindoos" or "Mussulmans" was the Black Town. He further described the appearance of the natives through a discriminating lens and writes that the natives "differed from all others by their complexion which is as dark as the Caffreys". He writes that no European is seen in the Black town area and the construction of the houses was "entirely different from OURS". He describes the road leading to Chitpore where men are seen on horseback, on foot and in palanquins. We find the mention of Burra Bazaar to be the Largest and most Significant of all bazaars of Calcutta.¹⁰



Balthazar writes, " a view of Calcutta seems best calculated to convey and idea of the architecture of Hindoos" and refers to Calcutta to be one of the largest and most magnificent town of India that was increasing everyday by the several sumptuous buildings which were erected in the White Town. He described the several scenes of the Black Town buildings with the native people. Unlike the buildings of the Europeans, the buildings of the

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natives in the Black Town included conical form of all the pagodas or mundars (mandirs) amidst the Mussalman mosques with spherical domes. Irrespective of being rich or poor, the private houses of the native people were surrounded at the first story by large protruding balconies with designed railings. He writes, the balcony not only solved the purpose of keeping out the scorching rays of the sun from the interior of the house but at the same time it was " a place of repose to the indolent Hindoo where he enjoys a cooler air and sleeps away the heat of the day, while his servants give a gentle motion to the air around them with large fans called "pankas" (punkah). Here he also indulges in the pleasure of smoking the "hookah" and frequently receives his visits."¹¹

It is a well know fact that Calcutta was a Cosmopolitan city with natives from different regions of India and along with that Europeans from a number of countries like that of Britain, France, Portugal and in addition to that other country men like the Armenians, Persians, Chinese and others also the inhabitants of this legendary city. In order to offer to the public an idea of such diversity, Solvyns had presented his work with people in different costumes meeting each other. The pictured depicts a Hindoo with his wife, Musallman, a Mogul, a person of upper Hindustan, a Persian, an Arabian, a Chinese, a man of Malay, an



Armenian, some Europeans, Englishman, Dutchman, a Mug (applied for the natives of Arkan especially on the Bengal border) and others.

Solvyns very devotedly represented the various caste and occupations of the Black Town Hindus of Calcutta. His art showing the Weaver caste or "Tanti" of Calcutta snatches the sight of interest. As known, cloth trade primarily brought plethora of wealth to Calcutta. The Setts and Bysacks (basak) were trading families who significantly contributed to the prosperity of Calcutta and they belonged to this community.¹² Solvyns depicted the "Tantys" working at their loom. The picture shows the one who is weaving, is seated upon a mat with his Hookah and a pot of water "to quench his thirst or wash his hands and feet". He beautifully illustrated the weaving device used for weaving. The man is shown with bare body. Another person standing beside wearing a dhoti with no upper garments.¹³

Solvyns did not leave the finance zone untouched. He very skillfully laid the

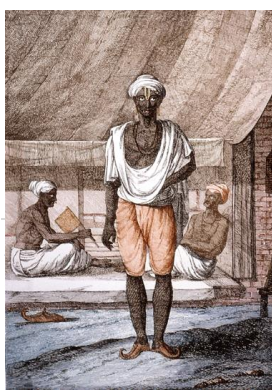


illustration of the "Suvarna Baniks". The Hindu Bankers and Money-changers of the prosperous city of Calcutta were referred to as "Sonar Baniya" or "Suvarna Baniks". Solvyns does not fail to mention that the

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money changers were also known as Shroffs and that they also acted as bankers. He penned down that these bankers were indeed good calculators and at the same time charged high interests and possessed ostentatious luxury and that is reflected in the appearance of their wives and children who were often seen adorned with golden silver jewels. He further mentioned the role of these Suvarna Baniks as the head of several trading houses. His shorts notes along with the paintings suggest that he too was acquainted with the widespread use of Hundi in Calcutta.

“Byce” or Vaishyas i.e. the merchant class was so depicted by Balthazar. He sportingly writes about the domination of these wealthy merchants in the Black Town region. He says, the Byces of Bengal confidently dealt with Europeans and had gathered large fortunes. He describes them to be some sort of commissioned traders who used to also send their brokers for the sale and purchase of cotton stuffs or other industrial produces which were then probably forwarded to the warehouses or were shipped to some other region via ships and boats. One of his paintings shows a vaishya man standing and two others sitting in leisure positions at the back under some shed. The one standing wears a lower garment like that of a dhoti of knee length and a cloth wrapped around the arms and chest. He also wears a turban and a Tilak. The footwear worn by him looks quite like that of a footwear usually worn by zamindars, indicating their possession of wealth (no less than zamindars). Some other paintings and notes of Solvyns says, the Byces are seated carelessly on the mat or carpet, often smoking the Hookah or chewing the betel and a waving fan (these fans don't move on its pivot) and wait for the customers. Even the image of the two merchants sitting behind the one who is standing depicts a similar scenario. Not only does he mention but his art also shows that the wealth of these merchants allowed them to build magnificent mansions in the BLACK TOWN that often surpassed the beauty of the European quarters and mansions.¹⁴ Example: Jorasanko Thakurbari and the Marble Palace.

The illustration of K'huttry (Kshtriya) too finds its place in the compilation of the works of Solvyns. Solvyns writes about them stating that they were comparatively much less



superstitious than the other Hindoos and they had cordial ties with the Mahometans (Mohammedans) and this is something that many Hindoos of the several castes could accept or tolerate. His painting shows a Kshtriya man sitting on a chair probably

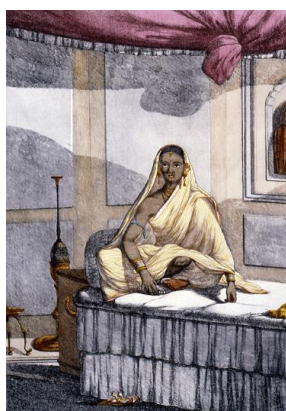


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in his balcony. His attire reflects the wealth. He wears a white long upper garment with a white cloth with red border around the arm and chest. The lower garments resemble an ankle length pyjama type pant. He wears a red turban as well. The background architecture shows the existence of a wealthy mansion in the Black town area. The pillars are quite similar to that of a British architecture.

Solvyns mentioned that the Rajahs were generally from Brahmin caste and his art shows a Rajah sitting on a tiger skin underneath a Bel tree. Before him was place a tripod on which there were palm leaves (used for writing purpose) carved with sacred book texts. The Rajah of Kisnagur who was a Srotriya Brahman (a division of the Rarhi sub caste of Brahmins in Bengal).¹⁵

Solvyns though had illustrated few women; he at the same time did mention that women were in general behind the doors of their apartments. The hindoo women were sometimes



seen with their nearest relations and whenever they arrived in public, it was never without the veil covering their face. But he further opines that, this must have been prevalent among the high caste hindoos as the women from the inferior castes often appeared in public and in assemblies without restrictions as conservative the upper castes. However, the painting of Solvyns illustrates a woman, probably a concubine or mistress of some wealthy merchant or zamindar as suggested by Solvyns. The richness displayed by the lady's dress is striking indeed. She is seen to be overloaded with gold ornaments and she is seated on an elevated place that is richly adorned with a Hookah right beside her. According the note of Solvyns, the dress worn by her was not worn in reality by the Hindoo women who followed the law of Manu. Solvyns mentions that, these women used to spend their days eating, drinking, smoking and sleeping and sometimes performed some music or dance to find a break from the monotony.¹⁶



Solvyns very appropriately demonstrated the entertainment genres of Black Town Calcutta. His illustration of the performance of Nautch: a dance performed by three female dancers called Ramjannys (who are mainly courtesans). The dance is performed live with musical instruments like Been, Sitar, Tabla, Dhol and Sarinda. The

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painting of Balthazar depicting this Nautch is a pleasure to the eyes.

The most interesting illustrations of his are the painting of men with vivid musical instruments like: Painting depicting a man playing "Jaltarang" with the help of Ceramic bowls of various sizes. Fig.1; Man playing Dhaak with Kaash phul tucked behind. Fig.2; A brahmin man playing flute Fig.3; A man playing Jhanjari (two hollow copper rings filled with tiny copper balls) Fig.4; A Vaishnav playing Kartal Fig.5; A Vaishnav playing a Khol (widely used in Bengal, Assam and Manupur) Fig.6 ¹⁷

Another interesting illustration of Balthazar Solvyns is the Charruck Puja which is also known as the Neel puja. He writes that it was one such festival that fascinated the Europeans and he was no exception to this. However, later this Puja was restricted by the Government. The painting shows the presence of Europeans in the celebration and the presence of Royal elephants is the proof of the magnificence of this festival. A man is seen hanging from a rope which is attached to a lever poised on the top of a pole. Actually, the flesh of the man is bored under the backbone by two iron hooks fastened by the rope to the lever. Solvyns refers this ritual to be a "strange and cruel ceremony" and says that this ritual was performed in the several public places of the Black Town Calcutta and also in the interior villages. This cruel ceremony was accompanied by instruments and music with great pomp and show. He not only says but his illustrations also displays the presence of spectators from different nations along with the presence of carriages, Palanquins, elephants etc. portraying of the excitement and magnificence of the feast.



Another illustration shows the scene of "Visharjan" or Immersion of the Idol that was very prevalent in Calcutta especially during Durga Puja and Kaali puja. Balthazar in the



description however talks about Durga puja but his art in ¹⁸real depicts the Image of Maa Kaali on boat, ready to be immersed in the holy water of the Ganges. So it must have been a mistake on his part. His illustration displays how the Brahmins are surrounding the idol of Maa Kaali on the boat. One playing Dhaak, one playing a copper plate called Kashor, one using a Pankha, some sitting with folded hands. Besides the picture in the centre, the image displays another boat behind, thereby depicting the largeness of the festival. ¹⁹

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It was in 1799 that Solvyns depicted suttee (Sati) in his illustrations. Besides his illustrations, he also described the process and the rituals of this ceremony performed in the different regions of Calcutta. His depictions clearly displayed how women were compelled to vow of burning herself with the body of the dead husband. One of the paintings shows pit being created that would be lit and then the woman would jump into that pit. The image shows the male Brahmin figures all around- some in saffron attire and some in white. He mentioned how the woman was first bathed and then was worn two clean garments. She had to hold "cusa" grass and sip,

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