CHAPTER V

Imaging and Singing the Urban: Representations of Calcutta
in Billboards and Urban Folk Music

Indian cities offer a cornucopia of samples of popular art: from brilliant billboards along the streets and facades, to brightly coloured Bollywood posters on the bodies of taxis, buses, restaurants and shops, the new omnipresence of the TV screen to FM channels airing film songs, and pubs giving a chance to a local band. In this chapter, I shall be concentrating on the representations of the city of Calcutta in some specimens of popular art. However, owing to the limited scope of my research, it is not possible for me to sample every available popular art form which has an urban connection. Hence, I have selected two varied and unique forms, the visual form of hoardings/billboards that dot the length and breadth of the city and the auditory form of “urban folk” music based on Calcutta and produced by some of the Calcutta musicians. My purpose is of course to see, sift and search the multiple images of Calcutta represented, visualised and imagined in these cultural, and (in the case of hoardings and billboards) consumerist artifacts. These constructed images show that they cannot be “static but are always embedded in social and cultural practices of representation, often contested and never complete” (Balshaw and Kennedy7) and this chapter will extend my attempt to look at the various cultural representations of the urban space of Calcutta/Kolkata, and how the urban experience has been objectified in pieces of art and artifacts. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section looks at the representations of the city as found in hoardings or billboards on the streets of the city. This study is based on photographs taken by me and presented within the chapter.
The second section analyses, in some detail, three singers who are considered to be the major proponents of “urban folk” in Calcutta since the 1990s.

It is necessary to comment briefly on the problems of “reading” the popular in India. Contemporary Indian academic studies are yet to fully grasp the potential of popular art. The popular is still “unreadable” because it is “uncanny” and obscene. Institutional pedagogy makes the classical accessible, but the popular is yet to achieve serious stature. Pop and high art require distinct treatments, and the academia is yet to develop affective modalities needed for reading pop-art. There are of course some notable scholars working on popular culture in India. But by and large, the emotional response of the academia towards the disciplines of the popular and the aesthetics of the popular is still inadequate. Documenting the popular in India is also problematic. William Wordsworth, in the Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, had criticised big cities, newspapers and popular fiction, but these three were to become inseparable from the modern, urban consciousness. Disciplinary shifts are therefore needed in order to tackle the undeniable pressure that the popular exerts on culture in general. This is one of my reasons to include forms like “billboards” and “urban folk songs” in my dissertation, which otherwise focuses on literature and “parallel” or art cinema.

**Hoardings/Billboards**

To live in any culture whatsoever is to live in a visual culture. (W.J.T. Mitchell 94)

In this section I focus on visual representations of the city through advertisement hoardings or billboards put up in the city. Billboards or hoardings are essentially urban in nature. Making
the optimum use of available spaces, advertisements (painted or otherwise) are usually put up on elevated structures and placed on the sides of busy urban roads (or even highways) for greatest visibility. Posters serve the same purpose, but are generally hand-pasted on city building surfaces and walls, and they cater to a smaller audience. As I have already mentioned in the section on visual culture preceding my analysis of the cinematic representations of the city, the static images presented in these hoardings focus on the centrality of vision and the visual world for arriving at certain meanings. In a cityscape, advertisements put up on elevated structures determine more than consumption practices and patterns. They circulate several layers of meanings. For example, as I will show in my analysis, they often privilege certain elements over others in the scopic regime. This might lead through repeated reinforcement, to some aspects of the historical past gaining more currency than others. These meanings are “seen” and assimilated in different ways by the “seeing public”.

At the very outset, I should chart out a practical problem that I had faced while collecting primary material for this part of the chapter. Unlike in countries like the United States of America, where there is an excellent public archiving system well in place in museums like the National Museum of American History, in India, archives offer very little scope for research into cultural artifacts like advertisements and hoardings. My first problem was that, though my thesis traces a time span of roughly sixty-three years, I have had almost no access to the old billboards and hoardings that were put up in the city through these decades. Hence, I have to limit myself to the ones that have come up since I began this work, in 2007. The second problem was that if I could not photograph a billboard (due to reasons as banal as not carrying my camera on that particular day) on the day I saw it, that meant, in some cases, that I would never be able to
photograph it again. It would be taken off the next day and I would have no access to that advertisement again. It would also be lost from public memory within a short time.

I will now turn to my primary texts. Fig 1 and Fig 2 are part of an advertisement campaign launched by a mobile service provider company called Aircel. These hoardings were put up just before the company launched its operations in Calcutta, and hence the accompanying text is “Namaskar Calcutta” (“Greetings to Calcutta”). They reflect different vignettes of the city. Fig 1 shows a speeding tram in front of the Metropolitan building on Chowringhee, Calcutta. This is the same building which once housed the famous English department store Whiteway Laidlaw and Co. Ltd., second only to Harrod’s. It was later conferred the status of a heritage building by the Calcutta Municipal Corporation. Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) owns the building and until the ground floor and first floor were converted into a shopping mall, hardly any worthwhile repair work had been done to the decrepit façade. Both the tram and the Metropolitan building represented in the hoarding are signs that take us back in time. They are both archaic and neglected symbols of the city. Though the tram still runs through the city, debates ensue every year on whether it should be abolished. But both symbols have somehow resisted the ravages of time and still mark the face of Calcutta. This sentiment is brilliantly captured in the Bengali poet Nabarun Bhattacharya’s poem “The Tram”:

I too am disappearing from Calcutta, tram.
Written off because I’m too slow, obstinate, unprofitmaking…
Now it’s all fast food, debentures, shares, smart money….
Yet, tram with you
    the protest march held step;
And sitting in your second-class carriage
the poet of rallies

Sang untunefully

songs of revolt and freedom. (in Manabendra Bandyopadhyay et al 115-6)

Perhaps, by using these symbols, Aircel is trying to capture some essentialist notion of purity and old world values which survive the onslaught of time. The message being conveyed is this: Just like Calcutta, a curious mix of elements from both the colonial past and the progressive present, Aircel combines modern technology with the solid ethics from the past. What in effect happens is a reiteration of the idea that any story of modern city is as much about the rebirth of its margins and the decline of grand plazas and residential areas as it is about upcoming skyscrapers and master plans. Fig 2 shows a hoarding which has two sections. On the left is a Durga Puja scene, where two women distribute the prasad amongst the crowd of devotees. The other section shows a man drawing a cycle-rickshaw carrying an idol of Saraswati through a street of the city. Slightly decrepit looking high-rise apartment buildings line the two sides of the street. The man may be going to the river for the immersion ceremony, since the face of the idol would have been covered if he had been bringing the idol to the pandal. Both these photographs were taken by me from the Dhakuria flyover, in the south of the city.

These images are interesting in the context of my discussion, since they illustrate how a city may be reduced to these limited frames, in a contingent, subjective and constant process. What is chosen (over what else) to represent “The City” is significant and the choice is hardly an innocuous act. What results is an illusion of “transparent space”, as if these images, to be seen by the citizens, encompass the whole of Calcutta, notwithstanding its heterogeneity. In Fig 1, the icons representing the city are largely neglected ones, and they represent elements that are considered things of the past. It was only in 2008 that Big Bazaar came to be housed in the
Metropolitan building, bringing it once again into the public eye, and the photograph I use here was taken in 2007. In Fig 2, Durga Puja and the idol of Saraswati achieve iconic stature in the urban space of Calcutta. And though Durga Puja is celebrated with carnivalesque fervour in Calcutta, far exceeding its scale in other parts of Bengal and the country (for any other festival), the image is not inclusive and it pushes the people of many other religious denominations out of the frame, negating the heterogeneity that characterizes a cosmopolitan city like Calcutta. The city has considerable populations of Muslims, Marwaris, Parsis, Armenians, Chinese and Jews, constituting separate ethnic and religious groups. Such manipulations of the external images of a city stamp themselves on the minds of the viewers, and for citizens and outsiders Calcutta becomes a Hindu—Bengali city. Thus there is a direct relationship between the cultural icons of the city chosen to “represent” it and the identity of its citizens. Durga Puja becomes a cultural icon for all the people of Calcutta, whether it is their festival or not.

Cities are valuable sites for tracing historical developments that change the sociopolitical formations in a nation-state and beyond. Serving as intersections for a wide range of new patterns, cities provide revealing evidence for understanding a civilization, especially as it modernizes. (Freitag 234)

Any enquiry into Calcutta is useless if it does not take into consideration the colonial past of the city. Calcutta, long before it had become the Calcutta of today, was the second city of the British Empire. The identity of Calcutta was forged by the Empire and the resistance of the local people to it. The buildings in the city and the people’s attitude towards those buildings are shaped by this duality. Thus, while there has been a political and ideological rejection of the physical relics
of empire, these elements of the city’s built space cannot be so easily rejected by its residents. Anjan Dutt, talking about his association with Park Street after the Stephen Court fire, said:

The government has replaced the statues of Lord Curzon and others from the Maidan, which were priceless pieces of art, from a terribly lopsided sense of patriotism. We don’t need to destroy our colonial heritage to show our patriotism just because the British had ruled and oppressed us. Calcutta’s colonial heritage is a part of its spirit and the entire Dalhousie square is a priceless part of my city. I don’t know if the CMC respects its colonial past or not, but it would make a big difference to me if the Corporation’s red building is not there anymore tomorrow….I love my city because I can live with history all the time. (Anjan Dutt The Telegraph March 30, 2010)

There are some symbols of the Raj at the heart of the city and these remnants of the colonial past are accepted by the citizens of the city, with grace and some times with pride. The most conspicuous one among these is the Victoria Memorial. Built in 1921 by the erstwhile Viceroy Lord Curzon, it is dedicated to Victoria, Queen of Great Britain and Empress of India. The memorial was designed by Sir William Emerson, using the Indo-Saracenic style, incorporating Mughal elements in the structure. The foundation stone of the memorial was laid in the year 1906. Though the monument was intended to serve as a tribute to the success of the British Empire in India, the funds for building it came from within the subcontinent. Curzon appealed for funds for his dream project, and they were provided by the upcoming mercantile class in India and also by a number of princely states. Another structure of historical importance that calls attention to itself at this point is the Howrah bridge, a cantilever bridge on the river
Hooghly. It was built between 1937 and 1943 and serves as the gateway to the city of Calcutta. Though its original purpose was military in nature, it is now connected to the Howrah railway station and bears the weight of the traffic coming into the city. I mention these two structures specifically, since they appear in Fig 3 and many more other advertisements using the panoramic form. Fig 3 is an advertisement promoting an engineering firm, and has a visual depiction of these two well-known structures of Calcutta just below the name of the firm. The rather perfunctory panoramic sketch provides the firm with a concrete geographical location, Calcutta. Interestingly, a panorama is generally an unbroken view of an entire linked area, but here the two structures that are accommodated in a continuous linear cityscape, are not so located in the physical geography of the city. The physical realities of the urban fabric are overruled here to reduce the city to its two most popular icons. The advertisement taps the potential of the stereotypes, suggesting that any reproduction of the chief features of the two landmark monuments will convey the idea of Calcutta. Interestingly, the signifiers that still serve to project the city for both insiders and outsiders are both colonial markers, in a country and city that gained Independence in 1947.

The next series of advertisements that I will examine belong to a series put up by the radio station Red FM 93.5 in 2007. They conduct a satiric campaign against civic offenders in the city. Each of these bright red hoardings displays a larger-than-life portrait of a fictional person, collectively described as “The Red FM Calcutta Super Heroes”. Red 93.5 unveiled this innovative idea in an effort to keep the city clean. The launch was graced by the Honourable Mayor of Calcutta, Shri Bikash Ranjan Bhattacharya. All the characters shown in these advertisements are stereotypes of civic offenders and the names that have been coined for them
are imbued with sarcasm and ridicule. The series includes PK Lal who paints the city walls red with his spit, stained by red betel-juice; Muttu Rajan who waters the walls with his urine, Roomal Das who uses his handkerchiefs to reserve seats, Shopno Dhar who sleeps and snores at work, Dharna di who is ever so willing to lie down and block any street in the city, Khora Tapan who digs potholes in the city streets and Nana Shaw, a taxi-driver who frequently refuses to carry passengers. Jimmy Tangree, Station Head, Red FM, said on the occasion of unveiling the campaign:

    Red FM is promoting social awareness among citizens about causes that Calcutta has been grappling with forever now. Dirtying the walls and doing nuisance on the roads, sleeping in offices and regular bandhs are some chronic problems of Calcutta. We are trying to embarrass the culprits sweetly with music. At Red FM, we are trying to create more awareness among the people of Calcutta and ensure that these characters think several times before they indulge in such acts in the future. (Sinha Exchange for Media)

The Calcutta that gets reflected through this series is one that is stuck in time. Modernisation has given the city a miss. Its work culture is affected by laziness and frequent strikes (“bandhs”, “hartals” or “dharnas”). The traditional Protestant work ethic demanded devotion and diligence. But, as most Calcuttans know, very little is done in government offices. And though the campaign tries to bring people of all classes under the lens, with characters such as Nana Shaw and Khora Tapan (Fig 7), the majority of the characters satirised in the advertisements belong to the middle class. It is essentially a middle-class bhadralok (gentry) idea that a salaried government job is much more respectable than trade or business of any kind. Among the Bengali
*bhadralok*, business is regarded with moral suspicion, and a sigh of relief greets the getting of a government job. The advertisements ignore the private sector and the new work ethic linked to the capitalist economy with its faithful friend consumerism. Most of the characters portrayed in the billboards typify government-office clerks. Roomal Das is one of the million aggressive commuters who are always in a tearing hurry to reach the workplace, where they hardly work. The local and suburban trains and buses, as well as the underground Calcutta Metro railway, are usually packed during office hours, and the practice of “reserving” public seats by daily passengers is widespread. This “reservation” is most often done by placing handkerchiefs (*roomal*) or newspapers on the seats. Shopno Dhar (Fig 5) is an extension of Roomal Das. He arrives at the workplace only to start taking his many tea-breaks and cat-naps. PK Lal, Muttu Rajan and Dharna di embody the behaviour of these same office clerks outside their offices. The city is known for its robust political culture and urban protests. Often the agitation oriented tactics of political parties bring parts of the city to a complete halt. And though Dharna di (Fig 4) would consider it her civic right to agitate for just about any cause, in her other avatars as PK Lal and Muttu Rajan (Fig 6), she would also uphold her right to be a civic offender. I will present a larger analysis of these representations in relation to the next set of advertisements under discussion.

The next set of advertising billboards that I shall be analysing may be linked in some ways to the Red FM 93.5 set. These are the advertisements put up by Star Ananda (Fig 8 to Fig 10). Star Ananda is a 24-hour Bengali news channel, produced through a collaboration between STAR TV and Anandabazar Patrika. It not only airs regional or national news programmes, but covers lifestyle and cinema as well. The viewership is mainly made up of middle-class, cultured elite Bengalis, the same kind of people who would sympathise with the “Red FM Calcutta
Superheroes” campaign. Collectively, these advertisements demonstrate the extent to which “visuality” mediates power relations in today’s world. We must therefore ask: 1. Whose fantasies do these images feed? 2. What are these fantasies that they focus on?

Each of the hoardings in the Star Ananda series has a catch-phrase: “Dekhun. Bhabun. Egiye chalun” (“See. Think. Work towards progress.”). There is an urgent message in this scheme of mixed-media, but the meaning that the spectator arrives at is not unmediated. The conspicuously visible logo of Star Ananda and the ubiquitous catch-phrase on these hoardings tell them that Star Ananda is the only channel which can help them see, think and thereby work towards progress. The issues which require discussion and debate, according to the channel, and which find visual expression, relate to the physical infrastructure of the city, in an obvious and iconic way. Fig 8 and Fig 9 show the hand-pulled rickshaw and the tram, modes of transport unique to Calcutta, which have been in the eye of debate for some time now. Fig 10 and Fig 11 show the city’s threatened civic amenities, the potholed roads and waterlogged streets. The municipal authorities want to ban the “inhumane” hand-pulled rickshaws, but owing to the lack of rehabilitation options for the rickshaw pullers, the ban is not yet fully enforced. The hand-pulled rickshaws are the city’s only hope when the monsoons flood the streets, as we see in Fig 9. The rickshaw-puller, described in the advertisement as “Tradition? Shame? Monsoon Recourse?” epitomises the idea of middle-class charity, the tokenism that comes through in the debates and discussions shown in elite TV channels. The streets of the city get water-logged because the city’s basic urban infrastructure has not kept pace with time. Factors such as an ever-growing population, lack of planning, poor execution of work schedules, ethics and accountability lead to such crises. And the rickshaw puller is a subaltern figure, deprived of education and opportunities, without the benefits of the industrial revolution or of capitalism. It
is this figure who will be discussed by the city’s elite intelligentsia on a TV channel which has a middle-class viewership. The rickshaw-puller himself is not a participant in the debate.

I argue that there are two complementary discourses and patterns of signification at work here. At one level these visual metaphors of the city deplore the state of subaltern life in Calcutta, and on another level they reinforce the image of the subaltern. The middle-class discourse of social awareness and philanthropy, evident in the Red FM and Star Ananda campaigns and the scores of news channel discussions that we encounter every evening, feeds on the image of the subaltern, reinforcing and celebrating stereotypes of subaltern existence to feed its own narcissistic belief in its enlightened civic sense. These two narrative strands freeze the image of the subaltern city, as an object to be consumed through visual representations. We may therefore re-read the catch-phrase presented by the Star Ananda advertisement: “Egiye chalun” also, literally, means ‘walk ahead’. This literal reading, perhaps, brings out the irony that characterises the city’s representation in the middle-class narrative of philanthropy. The catch-phrase now reads, “See. Think. Just walk ahead”!

The next image (Fig 12) I shall be discussing is not a billboard but a painting I found on the walls of a coffee-shop in City Centre mall at Salt Lake, Calcutta. It is again a panorama with the usual second Howrah bridge, Shahid Minar, Victoria Memorial and the Metro rail, while the typical Calcutta public (including city-celebrities like Mother Teresa, Mamata Banerjee, Usha Uthup and Saurav Ganguly) is fore-grounded. There are snippets of everyday conversations in dialogue bubbles. In an increasingly image-saturated society, visual representation is a process through which we construct our world around us, even through simple everyday scenes of the city such as these. Any given culture has implicit conventions and systems of representation.
While many artists defy those conventions, the commercial artists behind paintings such as these thrive on these conventions, prodding, pulling and pushing the viewer through typical images and expressions of the city the she or he lives in. Their purpose, naturally, is to surreptitiously implant the name of the advertised product into the viewer's subconscious. In this case, since the representation is painted on the wall of a particular coffee-shop, the idea is either that the whole of Calcutta eats there, or that they offer the best food in Calcutta. And since a coffee-shop is an urban phenomenon altogether, the image of the whole city looming large, over the coffee-drinkers on its premises allows the city itself to be translated into an unthreatening visual presence, in a sanitised environment where the actual dust, heat and noise of Calcutta are rigorously excluded. It should be noted that the City Centre Mall is one of Calcutta’s most exclusive locations, offering visitors an opportunity to escape from the crowds and dirt captured through this painting.

Though the next two hoardings are not part of any series and advertise two entirely different products, biscuits and a radio-station, I shall be looking at them together. There is a reason for putting these two advertisements at the end of the section. In a way they tie up with the second section of this chapter which is on urban folk songs. Fig 13 shows an advertisement of Parle Marie biscuits, showing a deserted Coffee House. The written text says that the adda will be now be shifted to the Puja pandal, where Parle Marie biscuits will facilitate the adda. The Coffee House, especially the College Street (Bankim Chatterjee Street) branch, is an iconic place for adda in Calcutta. The Albert Hall building was founded in 1876 and the Coffee Board started vending coffee there in 1942. Since that time, it has been a meeting-place for college and university students and intellectuals, middle-class white collar customers who would engage in long sessions of adda over coffee and snacks. The Coffee House is thus the symbol of
intellectual discussion in the city, and shifting the *adda* from the Coffee House to hundreds of Puja pandals in the city, where a TV channel will cover the sessions live is symbolic. The qualitative value of the *adda* changes, as through a democratising process the *adda* is brought to every neighbourhood pandal, during the Durga Puja, the great leveller of class divisions. But the advertisement also brings to mind a song from the past, Manna De’s “Coffee House er shei adda taa aaj aar nei” (1983). The song (lyrics by Gauriprasanna Majumdar and music by Suparna Kanti Ghosh) laments the loss of the very pluralistic, intellectually stimulating *adda* of a particular group of people at the Coffee House in the past. The group has scattered, some people are dead, some are locked in mad-houses and some are struggling to live. It is a song imbued with a bitter-sweet, romantic nostalgia. I would suggest that the Parle Marie advertisement is almost a playful post-modern citation, quoting and simulating the history of Coffee House *adda*. It works by dislocating the sentiment expressed in Manna De’s song.

The other advertisement (Fig 14) of a new FM channel shows a suave, metrosexual, urbane man in the foreground and Chowringhee at night, with bright halogen lamps and the Metropolitan building in the background. The text on the billboard “Ek cup chaa-ey ami tomake chai” is a line from a Suman Chattopadhyay (Kabir Suman) song with cult following. The song was part of his first solo album *Tomake Chai* (1992). Suman has often been credited with creating a new genre of music in Bengal, called “jeebanmukhi gaan” (songs of life), with lyrics that reflect common life experiences in the city. He is sometimes referred to as the “nagarik kabil” (city troubadour) who sings for and of Calcutta. Though this new musical tradition was in fact initiated by the band Moheener Ghoraguli in the 70s, it was Suman who took the scene of modern Bengali songs by storm. He was the first one to bring urban conditions and city-life to the fore in his songs, the lyrics of which he wrote himself. He inspired a generation of singers
like Anjan Dutt, Nachiketa and the band members of Chandrabindoo to experiment with contemporary themes and music. The presence of the line from Suman’s iconic song on the hoarding is aimed at advertising a radio channel that plays a lot of popular Bengali songs. It depicts on another level, perhaps the “urban” companionship symbolised by meeting over a late-night cup of tea. The lone man and the deserted street of Chowringhee underline the condition of urban loneliness. The streets that are thronged by crowds during the day look surreal, emptied out and lit brightly with halogen lights.

As the preceding analysis shows, these hoardings and billboards tap into the multifarious images of the city and their potential to signify certain values and meanings to the spectators. The images of the Victoria Memorial or the Coffee House constitute cultural representations that are heavily coded in themselves. The patterns of decoding are controlled and predetermined by the repeated use and ubiquity of these images. The repeated use of the image of the Metropolitan building, for example, leaves the landmark with a certain representational value. The consumerist culture taps into these codes and in the process reinforces the stereotypes. But in these iconic representations of the city, everyday life is marginalised, or converted to another set of stereotypes, like Dharna Di. Calcutta may indeed be unique among Indian metropolises in thus generating, in an act of collective narcissism, a set of representations of itself that are then streamed back to its citizens through large-scale advertising campaigns. The consumerist culture that feeds on such representations appears to be celebrating the city’s vibrancy and diversity, but in effect it cancels out heterogeneity and reduces it to a set of stereotypes.
Figure 2
Figure 4
Figure 5
Figure 6
Figure 7
Figure 8
Figure 9
Figure 10
Figure 11
Figure 12
figure 14
Urban Folk Songs by Suman, Anjan Dutt and Nachiketa

I give you the freshness of rain showers

On the sun scorched streets of the warmest day in the city

I can give you little more than old trams stuck in old processions

I give you as my gift of love the red and white balloons on the sidewalk,

The rhododendrons of the city. (lines from the song *Tomay Dilam* [For You, My Love], by Moheener Ghoraguli) [my translation]

The second section of this chapter focuses exclusively on a particular genre of Bengali music, one that I term “urban folk”. Though there is no formal definition, one can roughly formulate “urban folk” as a kind of music that deals with the immediacies of urban life and living. They use sound that is typically urban in nature. Various strains of popular music have been associated with certain cities, like hip-hop with New York or tango with Buenos Aires, and such associations can be traced to the cultural history of the place. The significant point to be remembered here, when we try to analyse the relationship between a city and its music, is that a place almost always shapes a singer or band’s distinctive sound. For example, typical city-sounds and noises or use of local idiom and local accents can characterise the “urban folk” style. Also, the landscape of the city finds expression in the singer or band’s visual material (such as CD/audio cassette covers, posters, stage-designs, videos and photo-shoots). Media circulation of these elements reinforces the connections forged between the place and the songs. The places mentioned in the songs gain a mythical status in the minds of the listeners. My analysis will look at how Calcutta is represented through its “urban folk”, sung by individual singers or bands, and
using a particular kind of language and music. This genre of music was extremely popular in Bengal (especially in and around Calcutta) during the seventies. It was revived in the nineties and finds a loyal audience among the younger generation today. The singers often hold gigs and live performances, both in college and university campuses and at other urban venues.

As Giacomo Botta says, “… popular music increasingly addresses questions of identity and representation, and seems to reinforce urbanity in the global flow of people, goods and information” (Botta 285). The “urban folk” music in Calcutta draws inspiration from the folk traditions of both the West and India. One can clearly discern the influence of country, western, jazz and *baul*. Most of these ballads are sung with only a guitar as a musical accompaniment, reminiscent of the minimalist style of country singers or *baul* singers who only have their *ektara*. However, I shall be concentrating exclusively on the textuality of the songs, and not so much on the performative aspect, while accepting that “representation also involves material, visual and psychic forms and practices that cannot be reduced to textuality” (Balshaw and Kennedy 4). While presenting my readings of the texts of these songs, I do acknowledge that these songs thrive on live performances and that they gain from their interactions with the audience. In not taking this aspect into serious consideration, I shall be losing out on important insights, but hope that the texts too may have some insights to offer.

The three singers I shall concentrate on are Suman Chattopadhyay (Kabir Suman), Anjan Dutta and Nachiketa Chakraborty. Of course, much before Suman, in 1976, the first Bengali rock-band, *Moheener Ghoraguli* (*Moheen’s Horses*) was formed, and any discussion on “urban folk” in Bengali would be incomplete without a mention of these iconoclastic youths. The distinctive feature of the songs of this band was that they projected an urban consciousness
through an evocation of the known, familiar spaces of the metropolis of Calcutta. The lyrics echoed a sense of both attachment to and alienation from the city the singers inhabited. The city was their Muse. With the wounds of the Naxalite movement and the Emergency still fresh in the psyche of the Bengalis, “Moheen’s horses” felt that the music of the times was not representing their pain and angst. Their bandleader and creative genius, Gautam Chattopadhyay, commented:

With full respect for all that had been accomplished in Bangla music till then, we realised that those songs did not articulate our thoughts and emotions. We felt intellectually deprived and underrepresented. It was from such a consciousness of intellectual marginalisation that we had spontaneously embarked on our musical odyssey. (qtd. in Abhishek Ganguly 52)

Suman, Anjan Dutt and Nachiketa started their solo singing careers in the nineties and they are still active as musicians. The textscapes of all these singers are full of images of Calcutta. It is not just the “built environment” of the city that finds mention in their songs, but the subjective psychological dimensions of being part of Calcutta’s urban fabric. Some of their themes are the nature of love in an urban setting, the erosion of political and moral values under the assault of unrestrained capitalism with its attendant consumerism, urban loneliness and the fear of isolation even in a crowd. They also attempt to deconstruct the existing representations of the city projected by the previous generations of singers. Their colloquial Bengali and the use of English and sometimes Hindi words claim for them a language far removed from “Rabindrik” Bengali (as influenced by Tagore). The fragmented, broken syntax echoes the turbulent mindscapes of urban citizens, following the rhythms of the city’s streets. The experimental musical arrangements accompanying these songs reflect a city tired of its old icons and looking
for new ones. These songs constantly question the mutual exclusivity of the city’s elitist and populist tastes. The singers (who also write their own songs) constitute the new wave in Bengali music with its rebellious redefinition of what it means to be a singer or song-writer in Calcutta, West Bengal. They can be seen as the products of their times. The decade that marked the beginning and rise of their careers also marked unprecedented and tumultuous changes in the city. The economy of the country was slowly opening up and the chasm between the city’s rich and poor grew exponentially. The built environment of the city went through massive transformations when post-modern structures of shopping malls began to rise above the squalid landscape of a neglected city. The official narrative of the city was full of promises of change and hope, promises of change in the stagnant work ethics and decaying industry. Together with Coke and other global brands, western music also made a great comeback to the Bengali middle classes. The ground was prepared for a new kind of music that addressed these changes and the new audience found itself, just like Gautam Chattopadhyay in the seventies, “underrepresented”. This marked the reemergence of the urban folk in Calcutta.

Kabir Suman (Suman Chattopadhyay) was born on March 16, 1949 to musically inclined parents. He was trained in classical music in his childhood, under the tutelage of this father. He graduated from Jadavpur University and worked for some time at the All India Radio and the United Bank of India. He left for Europe in the mid seventies, and worked as a radio journalist. He then went on to stay in the United States, working for the Bengali language Department of the Voice of America at Washington D.C. Here, Suman came into contact with musical legends like Pete Seeger. It is while living abroad that he picked up Western folk and protest music. He came back to Calcutta in 1989. In the beginning, he was attached to a band
called *Nagorik* (Citizen; *Nagar* being the Bengali word for the city) and he released his first solo album, *Tomake Chai*, only in 1992.

Though most of Suman's songs as a “*nagarik kabial*” demonstrate radical shifts in the cultural production of Bengali modern songs, and pave the path for many to follow (bands like Chandrabindoo, Bhoomi, Paraspather, Cactus and Fossils, to name a few), I shall focus on only three of his songs. He covers the entire gamut of the city life in a single song, *Teen Shataker Shahar*, from the album *Upfront/Swamakkhey* (1996). *Teen Shataker Shahar* (A City Three Centuries Old) is a dystopic portrait of the three hundred year old city of Calcutta/Calcutta. The crumbling civic-structure of the city is repetitively referred to, with lines like “the city is floating on urine” and “Kolkata is swimming in the gutters”. The metropolis of Suman’s song is pollution-ridden, barely alive to the smell of diesel fumes. The fear of death by tuberculosis looms large over the citizens. “With a handkerchief pressed on my nostrils and mouth/I am struggling to survive/Death is sending me summons, Kolkata”. The colonial past of the city comes alive with “A city three centuries old/A puzzle three centuries old/The white man got down on the banks of Sutanuti”. But little has changed in the city between the “malik saheb” (white-man master) and the “golam saheb” (white-man servant). The colonial past of the city has given way to a post-colonial present, marked by the inefficient, indifferent bureaucracy of “golam sahebs”, while most of the city’s teeming humanity is engaged in a losing battle for life with dignity: “Some people wash their bodies in the afternoons in gutter-water”. The evocation of the conflicts and hypocrisy of a highly fragmented and stratified society—"underneath culture burns the body of a newly wed bride"— is scathing and shows us the seamy underside of the city. The poet-singer laments the state of the home of his songs, the city of Calcutta, but he also realises that he is trapped forever in the labyrinth and the puzzle that is Calcutta.
Shahare Bristi (Rain in the City) is a part of Suman’s 1997 album Jatiswar (The One who Remembers His Past Birth). The song, in a typically post-modern manner, quotes or refers to the tradition of Rabindrasangeet, connoting the lyrical “high style” associated with Rabindranath Tagore that the genre of “urban folk” questions and negates. On one level the song shows us how rain in the city has changed from what it was in the past. In Tagore’s time, the rains had a cleansing, purifying effect on the city, but Calcutta is no longer the romantic rain-drenched city of the past. The rains bring filth and disease today. According to the poet-singer, the way people enjoy the monsoon season in the city has also changed. People now flock to Nalban near Salt Lake and get drenched while enjoying boat rides on the lake, like actors in a TV soap opera. The comparison here perhaps indicates the artificiality associated with urban living. A distinctive modern urban flavour is found in Suman’s music when he talks about the green neighbourhood playground of the last monsoon transformed to become the site of a multistoried apartment complex by this monsoon. The archaic musical motifs of songs set in Malhar raag seem remote to this reality. This capitalistic transformation of cityscapes is not unique to Calcutta. It is a world wide phenomenon. Urban planners in developed countries have made conscious attempts to preserve the heritage and blend nature and open spaces with “development”. But in a city like Calcutta, where the struggle for existence is extreme, the lure of money is stronger, and any concept of sustainable development is close to being non-existent, as capitalist and materialist transformations of the urban landscape seem irreversible. In such a scenario, as Suman laments, “Rabindranath’s songs soak in rain in vain and they soak others in rain, in vain”.

Amader Janya (For Us) is included in Suman’s album Nagorik Kobiyal (City Troubadour, 2001). This song forms a bright, bitter, sarcastic and hopeful collage of city-life, comparable to the works of Georg Simmel. Simmel’s work speaks of the city as an overwhelming mass of
activities and impressions, literally bombarding the senses of the people. Suman’s song, listing the elements of the city, achieves the same effect. The rush of eclectic images baffles the listener, just as a city overwhelms its citizenry with a plethora of signs. The song also celebrates the contrast between high- and low-brow activities that Calcutta is (in)famous for. The teeming middle-class population’s struggles for finding a foothold on the footboards of the city buses or their attempts to haggle at the food market are juxtaposed against Sunil Ganguly’s volumes of poetry, Satyajit Ray’s films, Ganesh Pyne’s paintings and little magazine fairs or group theatre movements that characterise the high-brow culture of the city. Calcutta emerges as a city of contradictions, where the “drum beats of culture” co-exist with the potholes in the city. In a spirit of harsh mockery, Suman ridicules those in the city who repeatedly stage Rabindranath’s dance-dramas like Shyama and Chitrangada. The song ends on a note of hope as the poet pictures a beautiful morning in the city, where the song of the city belongs to the sweating factory-worker.

Anjan Dutt, introduced in a previous chapter, is a singer as well as a film-maker. His singing career was inspired by the songs of his contemporary and friend Suman Chattopadhyay (Kabir Suman). Dutt was moved by the way Suman’s songs were challenging the existing genres of Bengali music and he became part of the Jeebanmukhi movement. During his school years in St. Paul’s at Darjeeling, he was not as much exposed to Rabindrasangeet or Bengali adhunik or modern songs as other Bengali children. Instead, he grew up listening to western folk genres like country and blues. This shaped his musical sensibility for the future and he still acknowledges his debt to singers like John Denver and Don McLean. He began by translating English songs into Bengali and gained constant encouragement from Suman. It was when HMV showed an interest in bringing out an album of his songs, that his musical career began in earnest. His son, Neel Dutt is also a singer and music director for films.
Dutt’s songs are more like snapshots of city life seen through a single event or a single emotion of an individual. They can be read as stories of different urban beings. The mood of the songs may range from playful to serious, juvenile to sombre, but the recurrent theme is the city of Calcutta. His tonal quality has a wistfulness about it, which is well suited for the songs which have little or no didacticism or strong statements. A substantial portion of his songs capture stories of various urban individuals with names like Raja Roy, Samson, Haripada, Mala and Roma. 2441139 is part of Dutta’s first album, Shunte Ki Chao (Do You Want to Listen, 1994). This song focuses on the aspirations, trials and triumphs of an urban, middle class, young population, the dominant section of the city. Young, educated and often unemployed, they dream of finding a stable job, with yearly increments to their salaries and settling down in life. The song is in the form of a one-sided telephonic conversation. A young man who has got a new job calls up his beloved Bela Bose with the happy news. The obvious implication of the new job is that they can finally get married and live together somewhere in the city. The song is a touching commentary on the phenomenon of metropolitan love (a recurrent theme of Dutta’s work). The city allows little space to lovers, and like the lovers in this song, they are mostly “Caged in claustrophobic cabins of cheap street-side hotels/Waiting with bated breath”.

The song, Masher Pratham Din (The First Day of the Month) is part of the album Bhalobashi Tomay (I love You, 1996). Like 2441139, this song has at its centre a single day of an ordinary person’s life in the city. On the first day of the month, when he receives his salary, the ordinary clerk turns extraordinary. He defies the accepted social behaviour prescribed for a person of his class, rebels against the monotony of the rest of the month, and turns a maverick. The struggle he goes through every day to provide for his family, leaves him drained of dignity (“the pain of being insignificant”) and life (“in the mortuary of the city I am a living corpse”).
Dutt articulates the desire of every common man in the city, as focused on the payday: a single joyous evening with a peg or two of whisky, the luxury of a taxi ride home, a toy for the son, and an unaccustomed romance with the wife. Alternative cultural modernity, imbued with a new realism thus arrives on the scene of Bengali music.

*Kolkata-16* is included in the album of the same title, released in 1999. Kolkata-16 is a postal district in the city, centred on Park Street and the song is a tribute to the singer’s favourite street. This is a song of growing up and looking back at the city across time and space. The character of Park Street comes alive with the neon lights and the shadows, the narrow lanes and the old houses. For Dutt, Park Street is invested with memories. Kolkata-16 is the address of absolute Calcutta for Dutta, with memories of lost love, a broken heart or the first swig of alcohol. Calcutta-16 is also the symbol of the painful process of growing up that inevitably entails withstanding hurt, “Learning how to forget pain/Learning how to swallow tears”. The subtext of, a chiaroscuro of light and shadow, turns Park Street into an enigmatic space, an area of contrasts, where the opulently bright facades meet rundown dereliction.

Nachiketa (born Nachiketa Chakraborty) started writing songs and singing when he was a student at Ashutosh College, Calcutta. He achieved instant fame and recognition with the release of his debut album *Ei Besh Bhalo Achhi* (*I am Fine the Way I am*) in 1993. Since then he has been an active part of the *Jeebanmukhi* music scenario with his rebelliously raw and dark romanticism. His lyrics which combine caustic social criticism with a romantic wistfulness gave Bengal a new cultural vocabulary. He has also successfully done playback singing in some Hindi films, and has been a music-director and actor in the Bengali film industry.
The song *Kolkata* is part of Nachiketa’s first album *Ei Besh Bhalo Achhi*. Quite like Suman’s *Amader Janya*, this song also bombards its listeners with the multiple images of the city of Calcutta. And many of the images are anything but pleasant. Despite the presence of a somewhat peppy background music, the tone of the song is gloomy and it speaks of urban angst. The achievements of famous city icons like Satyajit Ray or Mrinal Sen try in vain to compensate for the unsung genius of Ritwik Ghatak or Sukanta Bhattacharya. The built heritage of the city, like the Victoria Memorial or Shahid Minar, cannot hide the squatters, beggars or pavement dwellers of the city, who define the scarred face of the city for the singer.

*Chal jabo toke niye* (Come I Will Take You) is part of the album of the same title, released in 1996. The city is here seen as a space where different interests coexist, and most often than not the ignoble ones win. The song also highlights the isolation and loneliness of the individual in an urban environment. Modern society is in many ways an adverse environment for people to live in, producing isolation and estrangement and leaving man as lonely as an island unto himself. The singer attempts to save innocence from the evils of the city that ensnare and engulf, and the refrain is, “Come I will take you/Far away from this hell/Transcending the borders/Of this artificial city of lies”. Calcutta no longer has the human dimension it once used to boast of, Nachiketa feels. Sometimes it produces isolation, sometimes it compels segregation for its citizens—the populous city gradually gets segregated into a vast collection of islands and the boundaries of such islands separate the individual or the nuclear family residing in an apartment in a multistoried block of flats. The sense of belonging does not extend beyond the four walls of that apartment. The residents of the city forget how to “connect” with neighbours and become indifferent to their state, “I see happy couples residing in the mansions of the city/And this smiling city has brought me to its dusty streets”.
Achena ey Shahare (In this Strange City) is included in the album Daaybhar (Encumbrances) released in 2000. The sombre song brings out the shifting boundaries between the city and its suburbs. The eternal quest of common people to gain social recognition and currency, by acquiring a desirable address is referred to here, “Will I make a home/In the margins of this city/Is the question”. The doleful flute in the background emphasises the environment of gloom pervading this song. The lyrics also bring out the same issue of belonging and not belonging to a city. Millions of people leave the hinterlands and flock to the nearby city in search of a more secure future. But the strain imposed on these common people by the financial burden of living in the city or matching the lifestyle of the more fortunate residents is so severe that the dream of making a “home” in the city remains unfulfilled. “Home” is not just a physical place, and even if one manages to find a place to stay, the isolation, the disparity, or the struggle of “fitting in” makes one feel never “at home”. The overarching aura of pessimism present in all three of Nachiketa’s songs that I have chosen is linked to a lament for the death of love in an urban context.

The songs that have been discussed in this section, quite unlike the representations driven by the consumerist advertisements, uncover the issues that the hegemonic narratives of the city gloss over or turn into stereotypes. They sift through the jungle of signifiers the city projects, to focus on the individual stories of loss and loneliness. The stress here, as my analysis has shown, is on urban identity and the alienation of the individual self. Though romanticised to some extend, the images that these songs throw up are helpful in constructing the ‘other’ of the glossy, glitzy cityscape. In this sense, I argue, urban folk is an important cultural intervention in the representation of the city.