Introduction

There are two sections in my introductory chapter. The first section deals with the history and the geography of the city Calcutta/Kolkata. Though my thesis looks at the cultural representations of post-Independence Calcutta/Kolkata, it is necessary, I feel, at the start, to sketch a brief history of the city as available to us. This will be done by indicating some of the important moments in the history of the city. I will also trace the changes that have come about in the physical geography of the city. The second section of the chapter deals with the methodology of this research, with a detailed discussion of the reasons and the logic behind my selection of texts and the theories that I have used. My analysis uses a wide range of theories and critical approaches, and adapts several theoretical strands from the social sciences, and especially from urban and space theories. I feel it is important therefore, that I establish a critical awareness regarding these theories, especially since my study tries to marry the disciplines of social sciences and humanities, because the existing social science or humanities scholarship in the field of “urban” studies in India, is relatively thin and theoretically underdeveloped.

The City in History

Calcutta has always been central to the imagination of West Bengal for people both inside and outside the state. It is a one-city state, a fact which is at the root of many of Calcutta’s urban problems. Calcutta is not an ancient city in the way Benaras is. It has a little more than three hundred years of history. But even before the city of Calcutta was founded, the province of
Bengal was an important one in India. “Towards the latter part of Mughal rule in India, i.e. in the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century, Bengal was ruled by nawabs who acknowledged the suzerainty of the Mughal emperor” (Bose 1). With the diminishing power of the Mughals at the centre, Bengal became vulnerable to Maratha marauders. In such a state of political and economic insecurity, Bengal fell prey to Arakanese and Portuguese pirates. “It was in this disturbed condition of the country that the Portuguese first, and then the Dutch and the English established commercial relations with Bengal and thus indirectly initiated a course of far-reaching changes in the economic and social life of the Province” (Bose 1). Of these, for obvious reasons, we shall concentrate on the relations between the English and the city.

The city of Calcutta had its origin in a group of villages, and their names have been recorded in some early examples of Bengali literature, as early as the 16th century. But “the origin of this city might be traced, symbolically, to August 24, 1690, when Job Charnock, the Agent of the English company, decided finally to set up a factory at Sootalooty, in preference of the Nawab’s invitation to settle further downstream at Hooghli” (Satyendra Nath Sen 1). Sutanuti (a variation of Sootalooty) and Gobindapur were trading centres for muslin, chintz and other wares. And it is in Job Charnock’s official communications, after 1689, that we first find mention of “Calcutta”. The British had set up their trading centre first in Surat in Gujarat in 1650 and Charnock came to India soon after, as a junior member of the Council of the Bay of Bengal at an annual salary of £20, in 1657. He was governor of the Bay of Bengal area by 1686. It was in 1689, after much negotiation with emperor Aurangzeb, that “Charnock succeeded in obtaining the emperor’s firman or trading license” (Dutta 9). The three fishing villages of Sutanuti, Kalikata and Gobindapore were bought formally by the East India Company for Rs 1300 on November 10, 1698, by Charnock’s successor and son-in-law Charles Eyre, from their Bengali
landlord. “Eyre’s deed of purchase is dated November 10, 1698, a time when Aurangzeb’s
grandson Azim-us-San was the ruler of Bengal. This second date, rather than August 24, 1690,
should really be regarded as the beginning of Calcutta” (Dutta 12). Charnock issued a
proclamation inviting people to settle in these villages. And it was in 1700 that “the Directors
agreed to create a separate Presidency of Bengal with its headquarters at Calcutta. This was the
humble beginning of the city which was then just a collection of mud-walled and thatched hovels
set on marshy and swampy soil” (Satyendra Nath Sen 1).

Calcutta soon became a home away from home for its British founders. And though they
came as traders to the country and according to the Mughal firman were only talukdars or rent-
collectors and not zamindars or landholders, in effect they became more than that. By the middle
of the 18th century, “the land occupied by the British in Calcutta was about three miles in length
and about a mile in breadth. They called it the White Town, in contrast with the native Black
Town beyond” (Dutta 15). Fort William, the Company’s military base, provided protection to the
White Town from possible attacks, and the British settlement grew around it, while the Black
Town grew around the village of Sutanuti. Bengalis started business liaisons with the British,
they became moneylenders, clerks, interpreters and contract suppliers for the British. And it was
these Bengalis who inhabited the Black Town. The development of the White Town was very
different from that of the Black Town, it being neat and ordered and tree-lined unlike the
crowded chaos of the Black Town. The architecture of the buildings in the White Town showed
the neoclassical influences brought in by the colonisers. Swati Chattopadhyay, in her essay
in the nineteenth century, in the Bengali parlance, the clear distinction between a White Town
and a Black Town did not exist. Instead the city was, and still is, divided into paras, tolas or
tulis, all of which roughly denote the sense of a locality. “Although these localities did not have fixed boundaries or legal bearing, they formed a block that residents could identify with. The area between Chowringhee Road, Park Street, Theatre Road, and Wood Street, with its preponderance of well-off European residents, was known popularly as sahib-para, one among the approximately eighteen paras that constituted nineteenth-century Bengal” (Chattopadhyay 157). The reason behind the distinct division of the city into such halves is very succinctly put forward by Chattopadhyay:

The desire for strict boundaries was rooted in an eighteenth-century British obsession with classification, division, and separation, exaggerated in the colonial context. . . . In their zeal to protect islands of sociability and symbols of imperialism, the colonizers resorted to building elaborate artifices of delimitation—wrought-iron railings, masonry walls, and gates—often designed after European pattern books. . . . As territorial markers, these protective devices that secluded the world of British inhabitants also worked to create a fractured public space that could never be gathered within a single imperial gesture. (157)

It was also around eighteenth century, that the countryside around the city began to be dotted with garden houses or bagaan bars. The city grew at a more rapid pace after the battle of Plassey in 1757, where Robert Clive defeated Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula’s much larger army.

“The neighbourhood of what is now Calcutta formed part of the zamindari of the Sabarna Chaudhuris of Kalighat. . . . In the days of the Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556-1605), Bengal was divided into 582 Parganas or revenue units or districts, ruled by indigenous zamindars” (Bose 2). Land was owned mainly by Hindu subjects, and this continued even after the responsibility of
collecting land revenue or the *Dewani* was vested in the East India Company through a charter granted by the Mughal Emperor in 1756. This charter vested more power on the British and the zamindars gradually lost control. “After the Permanent Settlement of 1793, a more extensive change began to affect the above class of rulers” (Bose 3). By the terms of the Permanent Settlement promulgated by Lord Cornwallis, a peasant was supposed to pay a fixed annual rent to the zamindar, who in turn paid his due to the Company. Failure to pay the said rent would mean a forfeiture of the peasant’s land.

After Clive, Warren Hastings (1732-1818) took over as the most important British ruler in the city of Calcutta. He was appointed the first governor-general in 1774, and it was he who was instrumental in inviting William Jones to Bengal. William Jones (1746 -94), a lawyer by profession, was interested in the scholarly study of the Orient. Under his supervision, the Asiatic Society of Bengal was founded, with its premises at Park Street (then called Burial Ground Road) in 1808. The arrival of printing in Calcutta was also an important event. Initially the press printed administrative documents and the books written/compiled by Jones. But the idea was well taken, and very soon presses in both English and Bengali started operating. Newspapers started circulating, the most famous being William Hickey’s weekly the *Bengal Gazette*, which started in 1780. Hindu College was founded in 1817 by a group of wealthy Bengalis including Dwarakanath Tagore (1794–1846). The purpose of the college was to educate young Indian men in the English language, and in European thought and ideas. Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-31) was a teacher of English literature in this college, and taught his devoted students to be iconoclastic. They spoke and wrote only in English, wore European attire, drank wine and ate beef and some even converted to Christianity. Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73) was perhaps the most well known of this group, which was called Young Bengal. At this stage, it is only
imperative to mention the two great reformists who played key roles in the Bengal Renaissance: Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891). Roy was a rich, well-educated Calcutta gentleman, but he was also a tireless reformer. He published books and journals denouncing idolatry and set up schools and societies for the promotion of liberal education, something he thought was significant for the social development of Bengalis. Later, in 1828, he founded the Brahmo Sabha or Brahmo Samaj with Dwarkanath Tagore. The main idea was to reform *Kulin* Brahminical practices and inject into them liberal humanistic ideals from the Vedanta, Islam and Unitarianism. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar continued the legacy of reform work initiated by Roy. Vidyasagar was a great scholar, academician and reformer who took active interest in initiating widow-remarriage and raised concern over the evils of child marriage and polygamy. He also opened the doors of colleges and educational institutions for lower caste students, something unthinkable in older times.

After the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, the East India Company was supplanted, and the British had to reorganise the army, the financial system, and the administration in India (Stein 229). India was thereafter governed by the Crown. The governor-general was appointed as the Viceroy, and he was the personal representative of Queen Victoria in India. Viceroys ruled from Calcutta until the seat of power shifted to Delhi. Lord Canning, the last governor-general of India became the first Viceroy (1856-62). The political changes heralded changes in the economic life of the city as well:

Calcutta—and the Bengal Chamber of Commerce—began to prosper as never before from the late 1850s. Trains carried coal to the capital from neighboring Raniganj, power-driven factories beside the river turned raw jute into gunny sacks, auction
houses busily traded in tea from Darjeeling and Assam. . . . But there was hardly any notion of town planning. The rapid commercial expansion took its toll on the physical appearance of the city and its environs. (Dutta 115)

Underneath this calm exterior of a prosperous economic life, frustration and anger were seething, in the political cauldron of Bengal. The ties between the ruler and the ruled were loosening under the influence of the repressive laws brought in by the British to suppress the “natives”. Lord Lytton’s Vernacular Press Act (1878) was an example. It was directed against newspapers in Bengali. The Suez Canal was opened in 1869, and that resulted in better communication links with Europe, but the improvement in trade did not benefit Indians directly. As a result, the relationship between the British and the Bengalis deteriorated further. Lord Curzon, who was the Viceroy from 1899 to 1905, decisively altered the urban landscape of Calcutta. It was he who modelled the Government House (Raj Bhavan) on his ancestral house Kedleston Hall and resurrected the Black Hole monument. Curzon also played an instrumental role in the opening of the Imperial Library at Metcalfe Hall in 1903 (Augustine 200). The library remained there until 1953, when it was moved to its present building at Belvedere Estate, Alipore, and renamed as the National Library. Curzon also gave the cityscape its most loved monument, the Victoria Memorial Hall. It has achieved iconic status in the city. The monument was built after the death of Queen Victoria in January 1901.

Though Curzon vehemently protested against the shifting of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi in 1912, it was he who devised the plan to divide Bengal as a way to “divide and rule” the Hindus and the Muslims. Before this partition, Bengal had enjoyed a unique state of communal harmony. But the move on Curzon’s part was not just Machiavellian, but Mephistophelian. From
the time it was announced in 1903 till partition became a political reality in 1905, communal riots began to erupt in various regions of Bengal. The sense of indignation and betrayal among the Bengalis was also unprecedented, and they came out in protest on the streets, their agitation often transgressing the limits of law. The British were forced to revoke the partition in 1911.

Lord Minto, who succeeded Curzon, tried to bring in peace, but by then, the unrest among Bengalis had led them to form underground groups to fight the colonial rulers. They taught themselves how to use explosives and fire arms, and some even went to Paris to learn terrorist techniques and tactics. In 1912, the British capital in India was moved from Calcutta to Delhi. Political power left the city, and the Viceroy was replaced by a mere Governor as the ruler of the city. Little did the people of the city understand, that this event had begun a process of slow decline for the city, a decline which would last longer than they could ever imagine: “With the loss of capital status the city’s long decline begins” (Fruzzetti and Ostor 11).

The partition of 1905 left a deep chasm between the city’s Hindu and Muslim populations. The problem was aggravated by the reforms brought in by Lord Minto. The two communities fought fiercely for official posts, and this resulted in a divide between the educated elite members of both the communities. In a parallel development, clubs or secret societies, known as *akharas*, began to mushroom all over the city, readying rebellious youngsters for a battle against colonialism. The most prominent of them was the Anushilan Samiti led by the famous Jatin Banerjee, popularly known as *Bagha Jatin*. A neighbourhood in the southern fringes of the city is now named after *Bagha Jatin*. On the other hand, during the economic turmoil of the First World War, the Marwaris of Calcutta made a fortune in speculative buying and selling, and they still continue to be the most economically dominant community in the city. Himadri Banerjee, in *Calcutta Mosaic: Essays and Interviews on the Minority Communities of Calcutta*, has mapped
the dramatic rise of the community in terms of economic and social might. Soon after it was founded in 1911, the Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) began to clear the slums of the city inhabited mostly by poor Muslims. This land was sold to prosperous Marwari businessmen who built their mansions on streets like the Central Avenue and Zakaria Street. The resultant tension took the form of a violent backlash from the Muslim community. In 1918, for three days, the Muslim mob raged against Marwari businesses and damaged and destroyed Marwari houses, the public transport systems and the Jain temple. However, the Hindu and Muslim populations of the city did come together for common purposes. Protesting against the Rowlatt Act, they took to the streets in 1919, shouting in unison, “Bande Mataram!” and “Ali Ali!” under the joint banner of Gandhi’s Satyagraha and the Muslim Khilafat Movement.

During the Second World War, in 1943-44, Bengal was struck by a man-made catastrophe, the great famine which drastically wiped out three to five million lives (the estimates vary). The Bengal Famine has been studied by many sociologists, historians and economists, and several factors have been identified as causing this tragedy. Burma was, at that point, a major exporter of rice, and since the Japanese had captured Burma, rice exports suffered badly; and since Bengal shared the border with Burma, it suffered the most. The “war boom” in Calcutta wiped out stocks and food prices went up, so much so that the poor could not afford a meal. The British military, fearing a Japanese attack, stocked foodgrain, and this led to a shortage. Also, foodgrain was shipped out of India to supply British forces in the Middle East. All these factors added up to create a famine. In short, as Stevenson puts it, “A hyperinflation was created in Bengal . . . as a result of the war and as a result of the government policies” (viii). A section of the population connected with the war industries was protected from the hyperinflation and they were not even aware of the famine, while the inflation affected the countryside and the common people. “The
The economy of rural Bengal was too simple and impoverished to withstand the profound and prolonged disruptions applied to it by the government, a British government, in pursuit of its war goals” (Stevenson viii). Villagers walked to Calcutta in search of scraps of food, and died by the roadside:

During the summer months of 1943, the residents of Calcutta were distressed to notice an ever-growing number of destitute people on the streets. The destitute were mainly women and children, dressed in rags, some apparently in an advanced stage of starvation. Inquiry revealed that these people had walked into the city from the adjoining districts of the countryside – from the mofussil. (Stevenson 1)

The response of the authorities was grossly inadequate, and when local officials appealed to the colonial administrators in England for aid, the response was feeble. The British were more concerned about the war than about people dying from starvation and epidemics. Interestingly, though the famine-afflicted died in front of shops and warehouses, they never raided any place in Calcutta. They were mostly villagers, who did not know how to fight for their own rights.

As the country was nearing its Independence, the tensions between the Congress Party, the main Indian nationalist party, and the Muslim League, who claimed to represent the Muslim minority in India, peaked. The British Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, had announced a transfer of power in March 1946, without fixing a specific date, and tensions mounted over this transfer of power. The situation in Bengal was more complex. The province had a Muslim majority (54% Muslims as opposed to 44% Hindus) and most of the Muslim population was concentrated in the eastern part of Bengal (present-day Bangladesh). As a result of such demographics, Bengal was the only province which had a Muslim League government (Dutta 160). The leader of the
Muslim League and the Chief Minister of Bengal was Hussain Suhrawardy, a man whose key role in the Bengal Famine has been established by historians (Dutta 163). In Calcutta, the Hindu population was a clear majority and both the Hindu and the Muslim communities had their ghettos in the city. The Muslims mainly inhabited the northern parts of the city, while the central and the southern parts were mostly Hindu, with some European pockets. Again, the Muslims of the city were largely poor, belonging to the artisan classes, while many worked as factory hands and rickshaw-pullers. In such a situation, the British Cabinet Mission proposed a plan for the formation of an interim government with representatives from the Congress, the League and other significant forces. This plan gave the Congress one seat more than the League. At the prompting of their leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the Muslim League called on Muslims throughout India to observe a “Direct Action Day” in protest, on August 16, 1946. It called a mass meeting at the Ochterlony Monument (Shahid Minar) on the Maidan (Dutta 166). At the end of the meeting, an uncontrollable and outraged Muslim mob began looting, killing and burning whatever came their way. Maulana Azad recounted the events of the day in his memoirs: “Processions were taken out by the league which began to loot and commit acts of arson. Soon the whole city was in the grips of goondas of both communities”. He went on to observe, “Throughout Calcutta, the military and police were standing by but remained inactive while innocent men and women were being killed” (qtd. in Fraser 17). Slum dwellers in Kalabagan and Rajabazar were burnt alive or hacked to death. A curfew had to be imposed by the evening. The mindless killing of members of both the communities went on for three days, and it took the police and the army almost a week to restore order in the city. Rotting dead bodies were floating on the river and the city sewers were blocked by bloated bodies. As Habibuz Zaman, a witness to the carnage as a student at the Calcutta Medical College, noted, the victims, families and
individuals, were “marooned” in various parts of the “hostile” city. The death toll on both sides of the communal divide was huge. When the press corps van went to Bhawanipur to fetch Syed Waliullah, “dead bodies of the Muslim victims were still lying on the streets below, and fresh blood covered the stair cases” (Zaman 114). The events of this large-scale manslaughter are known as the “Great Calcutta Killing” and they had far-reaching political ramifications. This episode changed the city forever: “Calcutta was never the same again”, the young medical student signs off (Zaman 115).

The second partition of Bengal, as part of the partition of India, was put in place according to what is known as the Mountbatten Plan or the 3 June Plan. On 20 June 1947, the notionally divided Bengal Legislative Assembly voted to divide the province, setting the stage for the creation of West Bengal as a province within the Union of India and East Bengal as a province of the Dominion of Pakistan. On 3 June, 1947, Viscount Louis Mountbatten, the last British Governor General of India, announced the partition of the British Indian Empire into India and Pakistan. On 14 August, 1947, Pakistan was declared a separate nation. At midnight on 15 August, 1947, India became independent. Partition seemed like an effective tool to minimise the impact of communal violence. The partition of the British Indian Empire followed the precedents set by the territorial partition of Germany, Korea and Vietnam. The advocates of partition argued that a physical separation of warring groups was the only solution to avoid a civil war. However, Partition heralded a new set of problems. When India and Pakistan became sovereign nations, one of the largest mass migrations in the history of mankind began. Hindus and Sikhs from the Pakistani side moved to India, and Muslims on the Indian side migrated to Pakistan. This movement was both voluntary and forced. Each side attacked the other in a frenzy of violence, and Mahatma Gandhi vowed to fast until death. On the Indian-West Pakistan border, some 7.5
million Hindus and Sikhs entered India, and some 7 million Muslims crossed the other way. However, the number of refugees on the eastern side was never determined with any certainty. As Joya Chatterji notes, “No one knows precisely how many refugees went to India from East Bengal during this phase” (Chatterji 105). But she roughly estimates that between 1947 and 1964, some 5 million Hindus left East Pakistan. Most of the refugee migrants from East Bengal settled in the newly formed state of West Bengal, though some moved into the Barak Valley of Assam, the princely state of Tripura (which joined India in 1949), and some other parts of India like the East Pakistan Displaced Persons’ Colony (EPDP) in Delhi (which was later renamed Chittaranjan Park) and Orissa. These political upheavals left their mark on the cityscape of Calcutta.

After 1947, Calcutta increasingly grew into a city of migrants—mainly coming into the city, but also leaving it. The Chinese and the Jewish populations of the city were heavily depleted after the Independence (Dutta 169-170). Although there are no authentic statistics on the number of refugees who entered West Bengal from East Pakistan,

By the time of the 1951 census a mere one-third (33.2 per cent) of the inhabitants of Calcutta were recorded as having been born in the city, with everyone else being an immigrant: 12.3 per cent were from neighbouring villages, 26.6 per cent from other Indian states, and 26.9 per cent—more than a quarter of the population—were from East Pakistan, as a result of the communal troubles that had raged since 1907 and the 1947 partition. (Dutta 171)
Calcutta undoubtedly faced a crisis following the Partition. The city was entered by successive waves of refugees, and this took a drastic toll on the city’s civic amenities. Calcutta was bursting at its seams, with an unprecedented population pressure.

Though the major wave of migration was an immediate aftermath of the partition, in 1950, another one million refugees crossed over to West Bengal, and in the 1960s migration was associated with events of communal unrest like the 1964 riots and the 1965 India-Pakistan war. Another major influx came during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War (Dutta 169-172). Relief camps were set up, which were known as “colonies”. “In 1949, there were more than 40 colonies in southeast Calcutta and some 65 in the north. Their ‘housing’ consisted of temporarily built thatched huts, water drawn from a standpipe, and sanitation arrangements that were insufficient” (Dutta 171). Not content with the minimal facilities that these relief camps provided, many industrious refugees started to squat in empty houses in and around the city. By 1955, the squatter colonies were mushrooming in and around Calcutta at a tremendous pace. The concept of “suburb” went through a shift, with refugees settling at random on the fringes of the city. A CMDA (Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority) report of 1975 suggests that West Bengal had 1104 colonies in all of which an astonishing 510 were in Calcutta Metropolitan District. West Bengal’s Ministry of Rehabilitation opened up empty warehouses and steamers on the river for refugees. The platforms of the two city stations, Sealdah and Howrah, were full of displaced persons. Calcutta’s infrastructure became squalid and crowded, and the government of both the state and the centre extended very little help to this bewildered but growing mass of refugees:
Unlike the refugees from the west, moreover, Bengal’s refugees were to be given no compensation. Long after the number of refugees in West Bengal had outstripped those in the East Punjab, such funds for their relief and rehabilitation as the central government was persuaded to sanction remained hopelessly inadequate and far too belated to resolve, or even to alleviate on the margins, one of the most intractable problems which partition had created. (Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition* 130)

The newly formed West Bengal government saw the teeming refugees filling up the city and the state as a threat of sorts to their own stability. In January 1948, Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy took over the reins of the government, and his policy was mainly to disperse the refugee population from West Bengal, and more significantly, from Calcutta. In order to discourage them from settling down in West Bengal, the government offered them as little relief as they could, and when they did, they made sure that the refugees had to listen to the government authorities, mainly with regard to moving and settling outside Calcutta and West Bengal. The government tried to send them to the barren and depopulated areas of Bankura, Birbhum and Midnapore districts in West Bengal, not sparing a thought as to how these displaced people without any social connections would survive in such dire straits. There were of course a large number of Hindu refugees, who had relatively modest means, some transportable assets and were educated. Some had kin in Calcutta or in one of the bigger towns of Bengal and some social connections they could count on. Most of East Bengal’s *bhadralok* population could find viable shelter in West Bengal. The government officials were the most favoured. They were given the option of working either in India or in Pakistan. Most of them moved to India, fearing insecurity in Pakistan. But the poorer sections of these refugees had no identity cards or ration cards. They were visible all over the city, but in official records, they were invisible. The central government
in Delhi was too busy with the complex mechanisms of running a newly independent nation to care about the refugee influx in Bengal in any serious and effective way. The educated, middle-class refugees resented the government’s idea of dispersing the displaced population, and they considered it their political right to be gainfully resettled in the city itself.

Contemporary literature, films and theatre seemed to grasp the reality of this violent uprooting and the compulsive need for survival much better than the government or the policy makers and city planners. I would argue that it is perhaps at this point – with a rapidly changing landscape of Calcutta in the background – that the city as a living space and the realities of an urban citizen began to be of central importance to the imagination of creative artists and to other representational practices. Left movements were burgeoning in the city, articulating the rights of the refugees. The “Tebhaga” movement of 1946 was mainly organised by communist leadership and under them many Kisan Sabhas were founded. At this time, the “Tebhaga” movement became the focus of Left activism (Majumdar). The intelligentsia of the city supported the Left. Many of them became part of IPTA, which produced, and toured the state with, plays about the plight of the homeless destitute. Poets like Buddhadev Bose, Samar Sen and Bishnu Dey and novelists like Tarashankar Bandopadhyay and Manik Bandopadhyay wrote extensively about the refugees. Artists like Zainul Abedin, Chittaprasad and Adinath Mukherjee painted them, Sunil Janah photographed them. Ritwik Ghatak made poignant films about the crisis.

In the beginning of 1967, as droughts ravaged the agriculture sector, India faced a major food shortage. There was also an economic depression which led in Calcutta industrial lay-offs, and unemployment ruled the city. One of the political fallouts of this crisis was the fall of the Congress government. A coalition of breakaway Congress groups and the two communist
parties, one pro-Soviet (CPI) and another pro-China (CPI-M), took over. These changes in the mainstream political arena were soon offset by troubles in rural hinterlands, as a new proletarian movement took over and spread its message into the city. It began as a small peasant uprising in Naxalbari (near Darjeeling in north Bengal) in 1967, and had its roots in the conflicts over land reforms, the prolonged drought conditions and the food shortfall. The reverberation could soon be heard in Calcutta. The term “Naxalite” took over the imagination of a generation of city intellectuals and intelligentsia. Although the revolt at Naxalbari was crushed by June 1967, it left a lasting impact on Calcutta, and it inspired the young and the intelligent, and the educated of the city, the same forces which had led the Swadeshi movement some decades ago. The leadership of the uprising comprised Charu Mazumdar, “the clever son of a Naxalbari landlord” (Dutta 189), Kanu Sanyal and Jangal Santhal. Charu Mazumdar provided ideological leadership to the movement, preaching that peasants and lower class tribals should overthrow the government and the upper classes by forces. The aim was to eliminate the feudal order and bring about an alternative system based on land reforms. A large number of the urban elite in Calcutta were attracted to these ideas, spread through Mazumdar’s writings. The radical sections of Calcutta’s student population were deeply influenced by these thoughts, and in the beginning of the 1970s they left schools and colleges to be part of the revolution. Young cadres of the CPI (M-L) targeted police personnel and political rivals. Throughout Calcutta, educational institutions were shut down. The Naxals, as they were called, took over Jadavpur University, and used the machine shop facilities to make pipe-guns. Presidency College became the headquarters of the urban stream of the movement. The city had become a stage for guerilla warfare, with grave repercussions:
Almost every day there were massive disturbances on the streets. Bomb blasts were a constant background to ordinary lives. . . . Cinema halls and theatres were torched by hooligans, who wrecked the race course and began attacking the foreigners. . . . As robbery and mugging reached a peak, many left the city. (Dutta 189)

Instead of implementing land reforms or paying heed to the demands of the revolutionaries, the government chose to crush both urban and peasant resistance by using force. It unleashed a reign of terror in the city as well as the countryside. The Chief Minister, Siddhartha Shankar Ray, instituted strict measures against the Naxalites, and the West Bengal police was asked to fight back using violence. The Governor of West Bengal suspended the state’s Constituent Assembly, and the army was called in:

During “combing operations” the army would often kill Naxalite suspects on the spot; others were beaten to death in prison. Between March 1970 and August 1971, the official death toll of Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) members was 1,783, but historians think this figure should be at least doubled. After the movement had died down in Calcutta in late 1971, many of the Naxalites in prison were granted amnesty and in some cases inducements for rehabilitation. . . . Today, Naxalbari itself is quiet again, languishing in neglect along with its busts of Lenin, Stalin and Charu Majumdar. (Dutta 190)

The year 1977 marked another change in the city’s/state’s political scene – the Left Front (a coalition lead by CPI-M and comprising Left-wing organizations) took over. Their political domination remained unchallenged and unvanquished till the Assembly Elections of 2011, when the coalition of Trinamool Congress and the Congress Party stormed into power. However, when
the Left had come to power in 1977, the city’s intelligentsia as well as its common people had great expectations from the new government. But one could argue that most of those expectations remained unfulfilled. Calcutta is yet to provide its citizens a stable and comfortable life, and the city can only lament the flight of both material and intellectual capital:

The Left Front claimed to have intellectual and cultural aspirations, but their policies delivered little. . . . In the 1950s, the state government had supported some good work in the arts, such as funding Satyajit Ray’s first film *Pather Panchali* and giving land for the Academy of Fine Arts building in Cathedral Road. But apart from building a major cinematheque, known as Nandan, in central Calcutta, the Rupayan film technology studio at Salt Lake in the 1980s, and the sports complex in Salt Lake in the 1990s, the Left Front government did little else to promote the city’s culture . . . .

(Dutta 191)

The ruling party also, at times forcibly, changed the power equations within the cityscape, as party offices became the power centres of the neighbourhoods, or *paras*. The state government also faced problems, as has been evidenced by the results of the elections of 2011, in successfully blending open economy and orthodox Marxist ideology. However, they did implement the Calcutta Metro plan, a long-pending plan for an underground rail network mooted by the British, which would define the city’s developmental landscape. After Independence, the burgeoning transport problems made the construction of an underground mass rapid transit system imperative. The project was finally sanctioned on June 1, 1972, but the construction work could begin only in 1978. The construction would be time and again impeded by unavailability of funds, relocation of underground utilities, court injunctions and irregular supply of material.
Most residents of Calcutta were pessimistic about the project, with all the endless digging on the city’s main thoroughfares like Ashutosh Mukherjee Road in the south and Chittaranjan Avenue in the north for over ten years. Finally, the first section of the Metro began operating between Esplanade and Bhowanipore. Another eleven years later, in 1995, the line from Dum Dum to Tollygunj was completed.

Calcutta’s physical geography differs from that of the planned Western cities, where we see the “urban doughnut” effect in place. In the cases of almost all Anglo-American cities, the centre of the city is characterized as the CBD (Central Business District), while domestic habitation is restricted to the peripheries, or the “suburbs” (Morrissey 165). Motorised traffic links the centre to the periphery, and people make use of it for their convenience. In the case of Calcutta, though the idea of a “suburb” was in place from colonial times, the concept has remained an unfinished project. Hence, we can see an urban sprawl in BBD Bagh, or mansions of the rich on Park Street or Shakespeare Sarani. Yet the Anglo-American model remains a source of inspiration for the city, and the authorities have tried to recreate the “suburban” structure time and again.

The state government’s idea has always been to develop satellite towns to share the burden of the population pressure faced by Calcutta, but this project remains largely unfinished. Kalyani in the north of the city and Haldia in the south were part of this plan, but they have not been very successful. In 1958, the idea of a “New Calcutta” was proposed in the lines of New Delhi, but as an industrial city akin to Chandigarh. The location chosen was south of New Alipore and Garden Reach along the Diamond Harbour Road. In 1962, B.C. Roy (the then Chief Minister) launched the Salt Lake City project. The plan was to build a satellite residential area on the swampy
stretch of land on the eastern fringes of the city. The erstwhile Yugoslav firm Invest Import was 
entrusted with the reclamation of these low lying swamps. The area was filled with silt dredged 
from the Hooghly River (Dutta 192). The development of the area was done in “sectors” and the 
land use pattern makes room for residential, small-industrial and recreational buildings and areas. 
The state government has also moved many of its administrative offices to this “new” city. But 
of course, all this meant that from the 1980s, the land prices soared in the area and only the 
higher income group (HIG) could afford to build houses there. Rajarhat New Town is the most 
recent example of state sponsored development in the north-eastern fringes of the city, which has 
contributed to major changes in the physical geography of Calcutta. It began as a residential area, 
but has now turned into Calcutta’s second IT hub. The infrastructural development of the area 
was taken up under the aegis of Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, the then Chief Minister of the state. 
Swati Chattopadhyay notes in her essay “‘Bourgeois Utopias? The Rhetoric of Globality in the 
Contemporary Suburban Landscape of Calcutta” (2009), “Vast fishing and agricultural land to 
the east of Salt Lake City has been acquired, with more land acquisitions under way. . . . An 
expected removal of 1000 persons from their land was considered negligible” (14). She points 
out the interesting fact that the existing villages, surrounded on all sides by high-rise building 
complexes, residential and commercial, serve as the source of the service population needed for 
the upper classes around. And this availability of a menial labour force is projected as “one of the 
infrastructural highlights of the project” (15).

This long train of events, in the political, social, demographical and economic landscapes of 
the city, I argue, should be closely analysed to arrive at a fair understanding of the city’s present. 
That present can be seen as symbolically split between Calcutta and Kolkata. While the city’s 
name was always pronounced as “Kolkata” or “Kolikata” in the Bengali language, in 2001, the
English name of the city was changed from “Calcutta” to “Kolkata”, reflecting the Bengali pronunciation. The argument behind the move was to erase the burdensome legacy of a colonial past. The move also had its detractors, filmmaker Mrinal Sen and littérateur Annada Shankar Ray being prominent among them. The title of my study therefore is “Narrating a City: Calcutta/Kolkata in Literature, Cinema and Popular Arts”, and the either-or equation here, in terms of the city’s name, sets up the dualism reflected in the act of renaming the city. But, I would argue that this act of renaming remains an insufficient and feeble attempt at re-imagining the city, especially since “post-independent” is never coterminous with “post-imperial” and since independence is never a complete break from colonialism. For this ideological reason/reality and also for reasons of convenience, my analysis will, from here on, continue to call this cityscape “Calcutta”. This preference also reflects the fact that the texts that I analyse here represent a city in a historical, political and ideological continuum.

Industrial growth in the city has suffered a sharp decline after Independence. Traditional industries like tea and jute have languished, but they have not been effectively replaced by new ventures. This may be blamed on the lack of inflow of capital and the lack of the right kind of policy implementation by the central government (Standing 21). As the Students’ Britannica India’s entry on Calcutta states, “Calcutta’s industries have suffered a general decline since Indian independence in 1947, the major reasons being the loss of eastern Bengal at the time of the independence, the overall decline in Calcutta’s industrial productivity and the lack of industrial diversification within the city” (286).

Partition which attended Independence, saw an unchecked migration of population into the city of Calcutta. The city also attracts vast numbers of migrants from the rural hinterland of
Bengal, as well as from neighbouring states such as Bihar. All of this has had disastrous consequences for its built infrastructure. The CMDA (Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority), the CSTC (Calcutta State Transport Corporation), the CESC (Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation) and other such bodies were unable to cope with the new urban demands. The city is therefore host to an overcrowded surface transit system, choking traffic jams, shortage of electricity, the growth of encroachments and slums and acute lack of housing. However, after 2000, Calcutta did see some economic rejuvenation. Calcutta boasts of eastern India’s only IT hub, with the software sector emerging most prominently. But sadly, the growth is limited mostly to the IT sector, whereas the other sectors still show poor to average development. Another recent development in the cityscape (as in most other Indian cities) is the boom in real estate investments. Land prices have soared, and old houses at prime locations are bought and razed to the ground by developers/promoters, who then build multi-storey apartment buildings. Most of these initiatives are illegal, and they pressurise the already stretched urban fabric of the city. The state government has enacted legislation to control building activities of the “wrong” kind, but in practice they are yet to take concrete steps. And such half-hearted measures do little for the civic development of the city. Socio-economic upliftment remains a mirage for the urban poor or the lower middle classes. Urban planning has never been Calcutta’s strength. It developed as an unplanned city, mainly because of its colonial history. But recent urban planners are constantly looking for solutions. As has already been discussed, a cluster of satellite townships have been built around the city, to act as counter-magnets, and a series of flyovers are now being built to augment the transportation system.

It is necessary to provide a rough estimate of the population of Calcutta, since it is an important factor, in more ways than one, in my thesis. Here, I would like to refer to an incident
that happened in 2005. A friend from Denmark was visiting Calcutta, and this writer was requested to show her around the city. She constantly complained about the lack of infrastructural facilities in the city, and mentioned the case of Denmark where citizens enjoy numerous state-funded amenities. Yet she appeared to be unaware of the single most important reason for Calcutta’s “backwardness” in this regard, a fact clearly mentioned in her travel brochure. The population of this city, the brochure said, was estimated at 13 million, while we found out that the population of the whole of Denmark is 5.1 million. In the course of my thesis, I would cite numerous representations of Calcutta where the city is defined by its teeming crowds:

Tentative estimates placed the total population of the city at about 10,000 in 1701 and by the end of the 18th century, the total population was estimated to have risen to 1,40,000. In 1837, Captain F.W. Birch, the then Superintendent of Police, took a census which estimated the population at 2,29,714, and by 1850, another census placed the total population of the city at 4,13,182. (Satyendra Nath Sen 2)

With its rapid growth, much like other coastal centres such as Bombay (Mumbai) and Madras (Chennai), the city grew to be a commercial, administrative, residential and military complex.

The emergence of an industrial infrastructure along with the proliferation of commercial activities, gave Calcutta an air of importance which no other town or city in the whole eastern region experienced. Even after independence, the disparity between this city and others of this region, has further broadened. . . . The British colonizers developed this city into a satellite of metropolitan London, so as to extract the wealth of this country. This transformed it into an administrative-cum-
commercial centre, which furthered the constant inflow of livelihood seekers into Calcutta. (Manimanjari Mitra 1)

These developments made the population of Calcutta largely heterogeneous by the 20th century.
The absolute importance of Calcutta in the Bengal topography resulted in constant migration from the hinterlands. “Throughout the 19th century, the city area expanded in conformity with its rapidly increasing population, but in the first half of the 20th century, it witnessed an unprecedented growth in both size and population. This can be clearly understood from the following table.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Area of the City</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1701</td>
<td>1682 Acres</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1801</td>
<td>4997 „„</td>
<td>140,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>„„ „„</td>
<td>949,144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>32.32 „„</td>
<td>2,548,677</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>36.32 „„</td>
<td>2,927,289</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census Reports of Calcutta

This shows that between 1801 and 1901, the population increased by only 809,144 while in the next 60 years it shot up to as much as 1,978,145. This 60 year period, the decade between 1931 and 1941, saw the greatest increase in inhabitants” (Manimanjari Mitra 1-2). Political disturbances resulted in more and more refugees coming into the city.
Apart from this general inflow of immigrants from different parts of the state, the bulk came from East Bengal in the ’30s and ’40s, i.e., during and after the communal riots and Partition. . . . In fact an official survey of 1951 stated that roughly 1/3 of the total refugees in West Bengal settled in Calcutta or in its immediate surroundings and that about 110 refugee colonies came into existence east of the Hooghly. (*Census of India*, 1951, Vol. VI, Pt. III. qtd. in Manimanjari Mitra 8)

Due to the population pressure exerted by the homeless refugees, the government stipulated in 1957 that migrants from East Bengal would not be provided relief and rehabilitation from the government’s side, but this policy had to be revised in 1962, and “the Union Government decided to suitably rehabilitate them in the numerous districts of West Bengal” (*The Statesman*, May 6, 1962. qtd. in Manimanjari Mitra 8). It should be pointed out that the Union Government never provided adequate rehabilitation for East Bengal refugees (Nehru himself estimated that less than Re 1 per head was spent) and they were left to struggle on their own.

The historical, political, social, economic and the geographical changes that have been recounted in this section have implications for the analysis that follows in the various chapters of my work. The literary, cinematic and cultural texts that have been analysed here constantly look back to these moments in the history of the city, in their myriad representations of the city, and these texts are steeped in their perceptions of these changes. And it is impossible, I argue, to make sense of these representations without harking back to these moments that have shaped the realities of Calcutta.
Theorising Space

The second section of this chapter deals with two vital issues in my thesis: the selection of texts, and the theoretical paradigms used for analysis.

Calcutta, in its three hundred years of history, has given birth to innumerable representations of itself in various media. When I decided to work on this subject, I had naturally to be selective about my primary texts. The factor of the constraints of space may seem a minor, trivial one, but it really is not, especially if we consider the sheer volume of material available. This factor, I must confess, has informed a lot of my understanding on what I should include, and what I should exclude, in my selection of primary material. I would situate my work as an attempt to analyse the representations of the city of Calcutta in Bengali and Indian English cultural formations during the post-Independence era. I have primarily read three kinds of “texts” here – the literary, the cinematic, and the popular. Within the third kind of texts – a vast cultural formation that may include almost all kinds of “texts” – I have restricted myself to advertisement hoardings and urban folk music. Although my work has been primarily prepared for submission to an English department, I believe it is imperative that I look at at least a brief sample of Bengali texts, especially since Calcutta has found its most concrete forms in the “Bengali” imagination. I would like to, at the very outset, assert the limited nature of my study and its limited scope that will be reflected in the number and nature of texts that have been analysed here.

My thesis will adapt insights from human geography. Thus, it will be only proper for me to begin with a definition of human geography, and a survey of the theories of space that will help me read my texts. Human geography is defined as the “study of people and their activities from spatial and ecological perspective” (Husain 520). Within human geography my work will largely
draw upon urban geography, which deals with “urban settlements, urban hierarchy, urban fringe, urban agglomerations, conurbations, urban morphology, urban slums and shanty colonies” (Husain 13). Henri Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space* (1991) builds on ideas in human geography to generate a theory of space, which I shall be using extensively throughout my dissertation.

Lefebvre envisages “social space” as “produced” by social structures and relations. The idea of “produced” space is central to my arguments and so this concept needs some elaboration. Following Lefebvre, I have taken space as “actualized through practice” (Lefebvre 118). I am not completely negating the idea of a “real” space here, which exists as an *a priori* condition. But it is important to understand what happens to that already existing space: a space is rearranged and reorganised according to the requirements of people, and hence it gets “produced”. The raw material needed for the production is nature itself. Lefebvre sees the relationship between human beings and social space slightly differently: human beings do not “stand before, or amidst, social space; they do not relate to the space of the society as they might to a picture, a show, or a mirror. They know that they have a space and that they are in this space . . . they act and situate themselves in space as active participants” (Lefebvre 294) (emphasis added). Social space, however, is not singular in nature as it seems to be. It is actually “an unlimited multiplicity or unaccountable set of social spaces which we refer to generically as ‘social space’” (Lefebvre 86). Urban space for instance, is multilayered, reminiscent of “flaky mille-feuille pastry” (a rich cake consisting of thin layers of puff pastry filled with jam and cream) (Lefebvre 86). The question that needs to be posed here is whether this “production” of space is an innocent or transparent act. The answer obviously is “no”, the reason being that there cannot be a simplistic and one-to-one correspondence between “social actions and social locations, between spatial functions and
spatial forms” (Lefebvre 34). Lefebvre’s idea is that space serves “in the establishment, on the
basis of an underlying logic and with the help of knowledge and technical expertise of a
‘system’” and hegemony makes use of it (11). He elaborates:

What is an ideology without a space to which it refers, a space which it describes,
whose vocabulary and links it makes use of, and whose code it embodies? … More
generally speaking, what we call ideology only achieves consistency by intervening
in social space and in its production, and by thus taking on body therein. Ideology
per se might well be said to consist primarily in a discourse upon social space. (44)

Different power relations take an active part in the process of the production of space, and the
interaction between unequal power groups gets inscribed in space. Lefebvre puts all these
notions into perspective by dividing space into its three components: spatial practices,
representations of space, representational space. Spatial practices are connected to the production
of space by social relations. They produce social space “slowly and surely as it masters and
appropriates it” (Lefebvre 38). Spatial practices embody a link between daily life and urban
reality, the routes connecting spaces of habitation, work and leisure. Lefebvre gives the example
of “the daily life of a tenant in a government-subsidized high-rise housing project” (Lefebvre
38). Representations of space are ideological representations associated with the space that is
produced. They are conceptualised by scientists, engineers, urban planners and others. This is the
“dominant space” (Lefebvre 39) in any society. The representations are related to the “order”
which the production relations impose and they disguise the oppressive social relations that
produce that space. Representational spaces are the spaces of inhabitants and users, and also of
some artists. They are linked to the “clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art”
(Lefebvre 33), and also include resistance to the dominant oppressive social relations. A resistant body thus “inaugurates the project of a different space” which can be the space of a counterculture or a “utopian alternative to actually existing ‘real’ space” (Lefebvre 349). Through my dissertation, I shall try to prove the existence of representations of space and representational spaces as “immediate practical ‘reality’”, and not myths, in the representations of Calcutta in all my texts, literary, cinematic or of other kinds. In a very interesting and revealing analysis of the urban growth of Bangalore, Janaki Nair builds on a similar platform:

City space is always produced by human action, and often under conditions that are not always acceptable to one or another section of society. The monuments and symbolic spaces of a city commemorate only the triumphs, but are silent on the processes and negotiation, or even the battles, that have led to its present form. (qtd. in Vagale 50)

Nair cites the changes in the names of localities or streets, changes in the position of a statue or public symbol or the language used in street signs as examples where the consensus was never easy and is still contested. The consensus of a city on a particular urban issue is never a transparent and universal consensus but one that has been arrived at by a few people who are the major policy makers of the city. She exemplifies the point saying,

As the city swallows up whole villages, earlier uses and meanings of space are transformed overnight, and become intractable problems for planners. A community based graveyard at the heart of a new locality (HRBR Layout/Kalyanagar) is squeezed out of existence as the area thickens with middle class housing. (qtd. in Vagale 54)
Basing my analysis on these three components of space, I shall examine the space of the represented city and its houses to derive insights into the variables of class, caste, gender, deviance, minority rights, home and security, and the power relations involved. It is important to remember here, that while some “textual” characters discover for themselves safety and security in the city, the same city can be a landscape of abject oppression and defeat for some others. These latter characters are “out of place” (incidentally and interestingly, a spatial metaphor that invokes an emotional, psychological and political situation) and segregated. In any city, Calcutta included, the mainstream and the minority are separated through invisible but “in place” (again a spatial metaphor) barriers. The more habitable topographies are monopolised by the mainstream, while the minorities are relegated to spaces with less desirable environments. Any city planning develops in this manner, as Nair claims.

A main constituent of social space is private space. Private space is reciprocally bound to the social space, and an analysis based on any one of these is incomplete. The home has long been considered as a safe place, replete with memories, comfortable to dream in. It is where life begins “enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house” (Bachelard 7). In my analyses of the home space of the represented city, I also use this same premise to begin with. For this kind of analysis, I will be using the concepts of Gaston Bachelard and Malcolm Andrews. Bachelard conceives of the house as a vital space, where the dwellers “take root, day after day” (4). According to him, a house is our first universe, where all our queries about the cosmos truly begin. The house, as he says, “shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” (6). Since the house has the power to integrate human thoughts and memories, without it a man is a “dispersed being” (7). This is why any other space becomes habitable when it bears “the essence of the notion of home” (5). Bachelard, in his book *The*
*Poetics of Space*, hence emphasises the importance of the first home in the life of an individual, which serves as a model of sorts against which the later homes are always compared and categorised qualitatively. Whenever a human being has found even the merest of shelters, his imagination “build[s] walls of improbable shadows, comfort[s] itself with the illusion of protection—or, just the contrary, tremble[s] behind thick walls, mistrust[s] the staunchest ramparts” (Bachelard 5). Since Bachelard believes the chief function of a house is to provide space to the inhabitants for day-dreaming, the more elaborate the house, the better. If it is a house with a cellar and a garret, nooks and corners, many corridors, it can serve as a better refuge for the memories and dreams of its inhabitants. Using Bachelard’s phenomenological conception of space as a platform, I shall slowly progress to the Marxist, Situationist views of space, as proposed by Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja and others of the same school of thought. I shall also make use of a single concept of Malcolm Andrews. Though Andrews did not use the concept of “locus amoenus” with reference to urban spaces, I have adapted the concept and will use it for my purposes. This concept, however, can be used at different levels, even for social relationships. Andrews defines a “locus amoenus” as a “pleasant place”, where the word “amoenus” is a Latin adjective meaning “pleasant”. This phrase was used in “classical and Renaissance times to designate distinctively beautiful rural or garden retreats” (Andrews 53). He lists the characteristics of such a place, which has to have a “therapeutic power”, has to be “safe”, a domesticated environment “insulated from the world of public affairs” (53).

The notions of Bachelard and Andrews help an analysis of Calcutta (or any other burgeoning Indian city) attain topical relevance. The city has undergone a major transformation in recent years. The notion of “private space” has gone through a major overhaul, as more and more apartment buildings are replacing individual houses, changing the urban landscape forever.
Whereas luxury apartment buildings with their very own swimming pools and children’s parks bring in major lifestyle changes, the labouring classes of Calcutta coolly defy middle class zoning laws, and bathe and perform ablutions on the streets, using the water of the River Ganga. Again, interestingly, the interiors of these new apartments have rearranged the old notions of domestic space, merging the kitchen with the dining room, relegating the deities to the kitchen and ensuring a more private bedroom space. I would take up several such issues in my thesis, with these theorists/theories as my aids in analysis.

David Sibley’s idea of “geographies of exclusion” will also inform my analyses to a great extent. Though he uses the conceptual framework of exclusion and inclusion largely to explore western societies, I believe it can be adapted to Indian contexts very aptly. The main idea that I draw from Sibley is that exclusion of minority groups by the majority is a regular and yet unnoticed practice in urban life. Exclusionary practices like the tendency to reject differences and value order to the utmost are reinforced everyday by urban planning, architecture of houses and land-use policies and they are “important because they are less noticed and so the ways in which control is exercised in society are concealed” (Sibley ix). Such practices are informed by ideas of the “self” and the “other”, where, in spatial conflicts, one “community represents itself as normal, a part of the mainstream, and feels threatened by the presence of others who are perceived to be different and ‘other’” (Sibley 28-9). Dominant space discourse defines members of the subordinate groups as dirty, defiled or diseased. Boundaries are set up and “violated” through border-crossings, which are a punishable offence. Boundaries “provide security and comfort” to some people, while they are the cause of deprivation to others (Sibley 32). Boundaries enforce separation, which is “a part of the process of purification—it is the means by
which defilement or pollution is avoided” (Sibley 37). Sibley explains the relationship between the dominant and minority groups thus:

‘Family’, ‘suburb’ and ‘society’ all have the particular connotation of stability and order for the relatively affluent, and attachment to the system which depends for its continued success on the belief in core values is reinforced by the manufacture of folk-devils, which are negative stereotypes of various ‘others’. (43)

Constraints on the use of space and social interaction contribute to “social control”, which is “attempted regulation of behaviour of individual and groups by other individuals or groups in dominant positions” (Sibley 81). Sibley’s concepts are important for my analyses as they open up possibilities of dissecting various texts that narrate the imagined urban space, which have hidden agendas against the weaker sections of the urban population, thus favouring the more powerful. Again, I would also invoke another theorist, who also discusses the power relations played out in the landscape of urban space. Michel De Certeau, in his essay “Walking in the City”, connects power relations with the “gaze”. Due to the variedness of the urban population and the very pronounced unequal power relations, the scopic practices of the powerful serve to classify the city on the basis of who can be gazed upon and by whom. More than the other sense organs, it is the eye that objectifies and hence controls. And in the “surveillance society” of cities, the object of the gaze becomes the victim. The observer, on the other hand, who is at a distance and sometimes at a height, “leaves behind the masses” and is transformed into a voyeur (De Certeau 102). The city becomes a “text” in front of his eyes, and this transforms “the city’s complexity into readability” (De Certeau 102). Technological aids, as Certeau sees them, have
given these chosen few an “omnivisual power” (De Certeau 102) which can be used to look at the raw materials of this experiment, “the city’s common practitioners” (De Certeau 102).

John Urry develops the concept of “sensuous geography” in his essay “City Life and the Senses”. Here, he elaborates on the “social character” of the senses, by deriving from other theorists:

Rodaway shows that the senses are also spatial. Each sense contributes to people’s orientation in space; to their awareness of spatial relationships; and to the appreciation of the qualities of particular micro- and macro-spatial environments.

(Urry 388)

And in western societies, he confesses, the visual sense is placed at the top of the hierarchy, and thus gazing at others becomes a highly political act. Upper classes could gaze at the people on the streets, from a higher “balcony”, “but not be touched, could participate in the crowd yet be separate from it” (Urry 392). Urry elaborate how people in more recent urban developments like skyscrapers and tourist buses gaze “down on the crowd in safety, without the heat, the smells, and the touch” (392). The image that emerges is that of a voyeur. Interestingly, a voyeur is definitively someone who is always invisible to the objects of his gaze, which is actually where his power lies. The mall and supermarket culture, which has taken almost all the major Indian cities (including Calcutta) by storm, in the post-globalisation era, uses such practices to ensure higher security, and in the process, records slices of lives of its customers.

Apart from the theoretical strands discussed above, I have used several others – like Jack Stewart on soundscapes, Christensen on children and the city, Hagan on urban arson, etc., to
name a few – that have helped me comprehend the various facets of the city I have encountered in my analysis of the primary texts.

I will conclude this introductory chapter with a brief outline of how this dissertation has been structured. The first chapter reads seven Bengali novels – Santosh Kumar Ghosh’s *Kinu Goalar Gali* (Kinu the Milkman’s Alley, 1950), Gour Kishore Ghosh’s *Ei Kolkatai* (In This Kolkata, 1952), Ramapada Chaudhuri’s *Lajja* (The Shame, 1975) and *Bari Bodle Jay* (Shifting Homes, 1986), Narendranath Mitra’s *Chenamahal* (The Known Milieu, 1978), and Dibyendu Palit’s *Ghar Bari* (Houses, 1984) and *Sahojoddha* (Comrade-in-Arms, 1984). The second chapter looks at four Indian writers in English – Amitav Ghosh, Raj Kamal Jha, Indrajit Hazra and Amit Chaudhuri – and reads some of their fictional narratives to analyse their textual negotiations with the city. The third chapter explores the city films of the three great auteurs of Bengali cinema – Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen – while the fourth is a reading of some of the contemporary film makers, Aparna Sen, Anjan Dutt, and the director duo Moinak Biswas and Arjun Gourisaria. The fifth chapter deals exclusively with popular art forms. However, my ultimate text will be the city itself, and these selected texts, I hope, will help me read at least a small part of the city, and narrate at least a moment in that experiential aspect of the cityscape.