On the whole, I highly recommend this book because it provides a sweeping and accurate vista that an expert can find informative. I also appreciate the opportunity it affords us to discuss such an important historical question.

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Swati Chattopadhyay’s study of Calcutta is published as a volume of a Routledge series called ‘Asia’s Great Cities’. This series is meant to ‘capture the heartbeat of the contemporary city from multiple perspectives’. As it highlights Asian mega cities like Hong Kong, Singapore, Bangkok and Shanghai, it is only appropriate that Calcutta is also represented. The author is herself a Bengali well-acquainted with the city. She is an architect and architectural historian, specializing in British colonialism and post-colonial theory. Especially the latter is quite noticeable in this book.

Why would one select Calcutta for study? Some obvious facts need be repeated: Calcutta—as no other city in India—bears the stamp of the imperial past of British India. In the last decade of the seventeenth century Job Charnock of the British East India Company used the village Kalikata on the bank of the river Hooghly (a tributary of the Ganges) as a trade settlement. Within a century Kalikata grew into the most important town of what was gradually to become the British Indian empire. In the nineteenth century Calcutta was the capital of British India and the second city (after London) in the whole of the British Empire. Calcutta thus became the site par excellence of the British imperial project and the indigenous reactions to it. In other words, Calcutta not only housed the governmental apparatus of colonialism (ruling an area stretching from Afghanistan in the West to Siam and Thailand in the East) but also set the stage for (militant) anti-colonial nationalism. It is against this historical backdrop that Chattopadhyay tries to sketch the urban development of the town.

She emphasises right from the start that the urban history of Calcutta is flawed, as it is exclusively based on the official documents prepared by the colonial administrators and therefore reflects the colonial viewpoint. To quote her, ‘urban historians of Calcutta have relied heavily upon European sources, particularly on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century accounts of British administrators’ (pp. 6-7). Chattopadhyay rectifies this bias by including much nineteenth-century Bengali materials in her discussion of, for instance, the self-image of the Bengali merchants who built their mansions in Central- and North-Calcutta (vide Chapter 3, Locating mythic selves). She describes in great detail the architectural features of the planning of these ‘native’ mansions, using in many instances the extant building-plans ‘excavated’ from among others the Calcutta Municipal Corporation. She gives many interesting details about the Calcutta housing-market in the early nineteenth century. Large mansions were apparently built for ‘the speculative market in which needs changed frequently’ (p. 97). A mansion could serve different purposes. The rooms were spacious but not designed for any specific purpose, unlike the rooms in English or Continental houses in the same period. Chattopadhyay argues that the Calcutta mansions were not bad copies of European models as is often thought, but consciously adapted to the Indian concept of a house. The main difference between colonial Indian and European concepts of designing and building was the privacy. In the Indian mansions there was no spatial separation between servants and the served, and thus by extension between colonizers and the colonized. Chattopadhyay illustrates...
this significant difference in her analysis of Government House in Calcutta—designed by Charles Wyatt in 1803 and modelled after Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire—and Kedleston Hall itself. Government House is accommodating the ‘Indian model of the urban courtyard house’ (pp. 112-120).

Chapter 4 Telling Stories, and chapter 5 Death in public are perhaps the most engaging of the whole book. Chapter 4 gives from the point of view of city-planning and interior design some interesting details about a typically Calcuttan phenomenon: the adda, an informal gathering of male Bengali intellectuals discussing social, cultural and political affairs in a way that is not quite dissimilar to the nineteenth century European salon. Addas were semi-public events. Initially they were held in special architectural spaces within a mansion, in the so-called baithak-khana (literally something like ‘sitting-hall’). Later in the nineteenth century the adda moved to café’s and teashops (p. 183 ff). In the same chapter Chattopadhyay talks about the way Bengali theatre originated and developed in the courtyards of large Bengali-owned mansions and how professional theatre gradually grew out of these predominantly private performances. Professional theatre required different types of public buildings. Thus the theatre moved from being a semi-private affair to a fully public one (pp. 211-216).

The chapter Death in Public is woven around the spatial and social limitations imposed on respectable Bengali women, bhadramahila, vis-à-vis the public women, in other words prostitutes (professional or forced by circumstance). The latter had to cater to the desires mainly of British soldiers and the red light districts had to be under strict municipal scrutiny (pp. 254-8). The chapter devotes much attention to the concept of ‘being in public’ in connection with women. The connotations of ‘public’ as regards Bengali women were painful and associated with social (mainly sexual) transgression. A young married girl feeling homesick and leaving the house of her in-laws often incurred the wrath of both her in-laws and her own family and consequently was abandoned. Chattopadhyay opens her chapter with such a case which she heard from her mother (pp. 225 ff). Such deviant behaviour was considered socially undesirable and could even lead to death. But even Bengali women living in the seclusion of the household would not always be immune from the dangers of the world outside the house. Chattopadhyay illustrates this social fact through the well-known case of a mohant (abbot of a Hindu monastery) who seduced a woman called Elokeshi. Elokeshi later admitted to her husband the advances made by the mohant and the husband killed Elokeshi. In the ensuing court case, the dead body of Elokeshi became a publicly visible object (pp. 229-237). The Elokeshi incident which happened in 1873 even inspired a series of Kalighat paintings, four of which Chattopadhyay reproduces on pages 231-234.

Towards the end of chapter 5, Chattopadhyay shifts attention to the spaces of autonomy available to Bengali women in the latter half of the nineteenth century. She cites the moving example of Rabindranath Tagore’s short story “Strir Patra” (The Wife’s Letter). In the story a woman abandons her in-laws’ house when a girl that had been under her protection is married off by her in-laws to an insane man. The girl commits suicide, and the wife decides to leave the house and become a sort of Vaishnava world-renouncer in Puri in Orissa. Tagore could give this twist to the story as—according to Chattopadhyay—Vaishnavism (mainly of the egalitarian ecstatic Shri Chaitanya type) offered to women a way of gaining personal autonomy (pp. 253, 302).

Chattopadhyay’s book discusses the architectural developments of nineteenth century Calcutta with great insight and depth. The book is also a remarkable contribution to the social history of the city during a crucial and formative era. Chattopadhyay weaves her knowledge of colonial sources to her in-depth knowledge of Bengali sources, and above all, she offers a lot of illustrations that support her discussions. And yet, my praise is not wholly unqualified. There are some (unnecessary) flaws in this book. The first has to do with the illustrations. Especially in the first two chapters reproductions of crucial paintings and drawings are so atrocious as not to allow the reader to recognise the details on them that are analysed in the text. This criticism is more directed against the publisher than the author.