Gazing the City, Writing Belonging: Urban Space, Festivity, and Representation in Contemporary English Travel Narratives of Calcutta

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***Abstract*—The article examines the discursive construction of Calcutta in two contemporary English travel narratives—Amit Chaudhuri's Calcutta: Two Years in the City (2016) and Bishwanath Ghosh's Longing Belonging: An Outsider at Home in Calcutta (2014). Situating these texts within the relatively limited corpus of English travel writing devoted exclusively to Calcutta, the study draws upon Stuart Hall's theory of representation and John Urry and Jonas Larsen's concept of the tourist gaze to analyses how meaning, value, and urban identity are produced through narrative selection and emphasis. Focusing on two interrelated axes—urban spaces and festive temporalities—the paper explores the representation of Park Street and North Calcutta alongside key cultural moments such as Christmas, New Year's celebrations, and Durga Puja. It argues that these spatial and temporal sites function as charged signifiers through which questions of class, memory, consumption, and belonging are negotiated. While both authors construct deeply personal engagements with the city, their narratives simultaneously mediate the reader's gaze, revealing how Calcutta is imagined as a layered, unequal, and affectively dense urban space. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that travel writing on Calcutta operates not merely as descriptive reportage but as a culturally productive discourse shaping how the city is seen, remembered, and inhabited.**

***Index Terms*—Calcutta, Travel Writing, Representation, Tourist Gaze.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Despite Calcutta's enduring prominence as one of India's most historically and culturally significant cities since its establishment in the seventeenth century—and its status as the capital of British India until 1911—English travel writings devoted exclusively to the city remain comparatively scarce. While the city has attracted extensive socio-historical and cultural scholarship, such as H. E. Busteed's Echoes from Old Calcutta (1888), P. Thankappan Nair's monumental three-volume historiography of the city across the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, and Sukanta Chaudhuri's edited collection Calcutta: The Living City (1990), a sustained engagement with Calcutta through the genre of travel writing has been noticeably limited.

A handful of English travel narratives do address the city, though often in partial or fragmentary ways. Works such as Days and Nights in Calcutta (1986) by Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee, Abdul's Taxi to Kalighat (2000) by Joe Roberts, and Kushanava Choudhury's The Epic City: The World on the Streets of Calcutta (2017) offer selective insights into particular social, emotional, or experiential facets of urban life. Similarly, Calcutta appears episodically in broader travel narratives on India, including V. S. Naipaul's India: A Million Mutinies Now (1990), Dom Moraes and Sarayu Srivatsa's Out of God's Oven: Travels in a Fractured Land (2002), and James Cameron's An Indian Summer, excerpts of which appear in The Penguin Book of Indian Journeys (2001). An important exception to this pattern is Geoffrey Moorhouse's Calcutta (1971), one of the earliest full-length English travel narratives to offer a sustained and immersive representation of the city as a whole.

It is within this lineage that Amit Chaudhuri's Calcutta: Two Years in the City (2016) and Bishwanath Ghosh's Longing Belonging: An Outsider at Home in Calcutta (2014) are situated. Both texts

extend the tradition inaugurated by Moorhouse while simultaneously reconfiguring the representation of Calcutta through deeply personal yet critically self-aware modes of observation. However, representation in these narratives is far from a neutral or descriptive exercise. Rather, it operates as a discursive practice marked by processes of selection, emphasis, and omission—foregrounding certain spatial, cultural, and affective dimensions of the city while marginalizing others.

This understanding of representation is informed by Stuart Hall's theorization in Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices (1997), which conceptualizes representation as a central mechanism through which meaning is produced and circulated within culture. Hall underscores the role of language as a representational system, arguing that meaning emerges through the deployment of signs and symbols within specific discursive formations. In travel narratives, such linguistic and symbolic choices become particularly significant, as they reveal the narrator's positionality and ideological orientation within broader socio-cultural matrices.

Viewed through this lens, travel writing transcends its conventional function as a descriptive record of unfamiliar places and peoples, emerging instead as a value-laden and interpretative discourse shaped by the traveler's subjective gaze. The notion of the 'gaze' itself is crucial to this analysis. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's concept of the 'medical gaze' articulated in The Birth of the Clinic (1976), John Urry and Jonas Larsen introduce the concept of the 'tourist gaze' in The Tourist Gaze 3.0 (2011). They argue that gazing is a socially constructed practice, conditioned by factors such as class, nationality, education, and cultural expectation, rather than a purely individual or objective act of seeing.

Urry and Larsen further contend that the tourist gaze is shaped and mediated by a network of representational technologies and cultural intermediaries, including travel writers, photographers, tourism professionals, and media industries. As such, travel narratives play a vital role in structuring the relationship between the observer and the observed, producing patterned ways of seeing that influence both tourists and readers.

Against this theoretical backdrop, the present paper examines how Amit Chaudhuri and Bishwanath Ghosh construct and mediate the reader's gaze towards Calcutta through their respective narratives. Focusing on two interrelated aspects—urban spaces and cultural festivals—the study analyses the representation of specific spatial zones, namely Park Street and North Calcutta, alongside key festive moments such as Christmas, New Year's Eve/New Year's Day, and Durga Puja. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to demonstrate how these narratives negotiate belonging, memory, and urban identity, while simultaneously participating in the discursive construction of Calcutta as a lived, imagined, and gazed-upon city.

II. SPACES OF CONVERGENCE AND CONSUMPTION: PARK STREET

In both Amit Chaudhuri's Calcutta: Two Years in the City (2016) and Bishwanath Ghosh's Longing Belonging: An Outsider at Home in Calcutta (2014), Park Street—and particularly its adjoining stretches such as Free School Street—emerges as a crucial spatial signifier through which the city of Calcutta is discursively constructed for the reader. Far from functioning as a mere geographical locale, Park Street operates as a symbolic urban zone where history, class, memory, and everyday practices intersect. In Chaudhuri's narrative, the representation of Park Street is structured around three interrelated aspects: its cartographic positioning within the city, the coexistence of marginal and affluent populations within the same spatial frame, and the evocative detailing of its iconic eateries and commercial establishments.

Chaudhuri identifies Park Street as one of the city's vital nerve centers, proposing 'Downtown' as an apt descriptor for its urban energy and centrality. He carefully maps the area for his readers, situating it between Free School Street and Middleton Row, and tracing its extension towards Park Circus and the once-imperial thoroughfare of Chowringhee. This act of spatial mapping not only orients the reader geographically but also foregrounds Park Street as a zone of intense urban movement. Chaudhuri further accentuates its vibrancy by juxtaposing it with global metropolitan spaces such as Oxford Street in London and the Champs-Élysées in Paris, while asserting its distinct and incomparable dynamism.

A second significant signifier in Chaudhuri's construction of Park Street is the visible coexistence

of social extremes within the same urban space. The area is populated by pavement dwellers, migrant workers from Bihar, beggars, and pimps, whose struggle for daily subsistence unfolds alongside the affluence of middle-class shoppers and diners frequenting elite establishments. By foregrounding figures such as Ramayan Shah, who runs a pavement eatery, or Baby Mishra, a beggar from Howrah, Chaudhuri humanizes the marginalized inhabitants of the area. Their presence, placed in close narrative proximity to the city's celebrated restaurants and shopping arcades, produces a stark yet lived-in contrast that becomes central to the reader's perception of Park Street as a site of negotiated coexistence rather than social segregation.

Equally instrumental in Chaudhuri's representation is his meticulous attention to Park Street's famed eateries and commercial landmarks. Establishments such as Flurys, Mocambo, and the Oxford Bookstore are not merely named but sensorially evoked, often through memories that collapse past and present. His recollection of encountering the Flurys menu as a child—replete with items such as sausage rolls, pineapple pudding cake, and the chicken croissant—imbues the space with personal nostalgia while simultaneously situating it within a lingering colonial culinary tradition. These detailed descriptions function as cultural signifiers, reinforcing Park Street's identity as a space of cosmopolitan consumption and historical continuity.

Bishwanath Ghosh similarly foregrounds Park Street in his narrative, constructing it as a deeply personal yet symbolically charged urban space. Describing it as his "second home" (Ghosh, 2014, p. 35), Ghosh presents Park Street as a living bridge between Calcutta's colonial past and its contemporary urban rhythms. He characterizes the area as an 'event', where the performance of city life unfolds from early morning onwards, beginning with the opening of Flurys and its English breakfast menu—an enduring reminder of the city's colonial inheritance.

Ghosh adopts the stance of an urban guide, directing the reader's gaze through the temporal shifts of Park Street—from its lunchtime bustle to its late-night scenes marked by fashionable crowds emerging from Park Hotel and dispersing into the city. Much like Chaudhuri, Ghosh emphasizes the area's food culture as the primary source of its energy, describing its eateries as legendary and its queues as markers of culinary prestige. Restaurants such as Mocambo thus become spatial signifiers through which Park Street's cultural centrality is reinforced.

Ultimately, Ghosh encapsulates his emotional and mnemonic relationship with Calcutta through the visual lexicon of Park Street's signboards. By listing establishments such as Oxford Bookstore, Flurys, Peter Cat, Trincas, and Olypub, he transforms commercial signage into symbols of belonging and return. In doing so, Ghosh not only constructs the reader's gaze but also inscribes Park Street as a repository of personal memory and urban identity. In both narratives, therefore, Park Street functions as a charged urban space where the social, historical, and affective dimensions of Calcutta converge, shaping how the city is seen, experienced, and remembered.

III. ORIGINS, MEMORY, AND THE URBAN PALIMPSEST: NORTH CALCUTTA

In both Amit Chaudhuri's and Bishwanath Ghosh's narratives, North Calcutta functions as a foundational spatial zone through which the reader's 'gaze' towards the city is carefully constructed. Rather than presenting the metropolis as a homogenous contemporary entity, both writers return to North Calcutta as the site of origin, memory, and historical layering, thereby positioning it as a crucial repository of the city's past that continues to shape its present.

Bishwanath Ghosh constructs this gaze through a dual narrative strategy. First, adopting the role of an informed guide, he revisits and demystifies the popular myths surrounding the founding of Calcutta. By challenging the widely accepted attribution of the city's origins to Job Charnock, Ghosh redirects attention to later East India Company officials such as Goldsborough and Charles Eyre, who played a more decisive role in laying the city's foundations. He then spatially maps early Calcutta for the reader, identifying its original triadic formation—Sutanuti in the north, Gobindapur in the south, and Kalikata between them—and explains that the city derived its name from Kalikata, where Fort William, the Company's administrative centre, was located.

The second strategy involves a carefully curated virtual tour through these historically charged spaces as they exist in contemporary Calcutta. Beginning at Sobhabazar in North Calcutta, Ghosh traces a route that traverses the full length of what once constituted

'old Calcutta'. Moving along the banks of the Hooghly through Ahiritola and the Nimtala crematorium, the journey culminates at Dalhousie Square, effectively retracing a historical trajectory from the village of Sutanuti to Kalikata. This retrospective movement allows the reader to experience the city as a palimpsest, where layers of history remain visible beneath modern urban forms. Ghosh further completes this historical reconstruction by narrating the establishment of the present Fort William by Robert Clive on the site of the erstwhile village of Gobindapur, an act that irrevocably altered the city's topography. The erasure of Gobindapur and the transformation of its surrounding forests into the Maidan exemplify the colonial reconfiguration of urban space that underpins modern Calcutta.

A similar process of gaze construction is evident in Ghosh's discussion of Chitpur Road, now known as Rabindra Sarani, a route that predates the formal emergence of the city itself. Extending nearly eight miles, this ancient road once connected the Chitteswari temple in Chitpur, north of Sutanuti, to the Kali temple at Kalighat in the south, running parallel to the Hooghly. As the villages of Sutanuti, Kalikata, and Gobindapur gradually coalesced into the city of Calcutta, this road evolved into one of its principal arteries, fragments of which survive today under names such as Russa Road, Chowringhee Road, and Bentinck Street. Through this narrative, Ghosh foregrounds continuity amid transformation, encouraging readers to view North Calcutta as a living archive of the city's spatial history.

Although less extensive in historical exposition, Amit Chaudhuri's narrative also foregrounds North Calcutta as a key signifier in constructing the reader's gaze. Chaudhuri evokes areas such as Shobhabazar as spaces marked by the decaying grandeur of aristocratic mansions belonging to former rajas and landlords. He draws attention to landmark sites including the Tagore residence at Jorasanko, the Mallickbari, the Marble Palace, and the Mahajati Sadan, thereby situating North Calcutta within a dense cultural and architectural genealogy. For Chaudhuri, North Calcutta transcends its status as a mere geographical zone; it represents 'the other Calcutta', a counterpoint to the city's modern and commercialized spaces.

Crucially, Chaudhuri links North Calcutta to the cultural ferment of the Bengal Renaissance, identifying it as the erstwhile 'black town' that provided the milieu for significant intellectual and artistic transformations. This emphasis on cultural evolution complements Ghosh's focus on historical origins, together constructing North Calcutta as a potent urban signifier. By anchoring the city's identity in both its formative beginnings and its cultural awakening, Chaudhuri and Ghosh collectively frame North Calcutta as a space where history, memory, and meaning converge, shaping the reader's gaze towards Calcutta as a city defined as much by its past as by its present.

IV. FESTIVE TEMPORALITIES AND THE URBAN GAZE: CHRISTMAS, NEW YEAR'S EVE, AND NEW YEAR'S DAY

Another significant strategy through which Amit Chaudhuri and Bishwanath Ghosh construct the reader's 'gaze' towards Calcutta is their representation of the city's major festive moments—most notably Christmas, along with New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. These celebrations, while ostensibly secular and convivial, become in both narratives' sites where class, consumption, cultural memory, and urban belonging are vividly enacted.

In Calcutta: Two Years in the City, Chaudhuri situates Christmas and New Year celebrations primarily within the Park Street area, historically associated with the city's Christian population and colonial legacy. What is particularly striking in Chaudhuri's account is his decision to foreground the reactions of a friend from London encountering Christmas in Calcutta for the first time. Through this external perspective, Chaudhuri highlights the conspicuous absence of overt Christian symbolism in the city's Christmas celebrations. The crucifix is largely invisible, and the "awful mournfulness of Christianity" is replaced by a festive atmosphere dominated by Santa Claus figures and decorative spectacle. Nativity scenes, Chaudhuri notes, are largely confined to churches, rendering the theological core of Christmas relatively muted in the public sphere.

Instead, Christmas in Calcutta is presented as an exercise in collective make-believe rather than spiritual introspection. The city's festive mood, Chaudhuri observes, has rarely been one of solemn reflection or divine return, but rather of cheerful performance and consumption. Christmas trees proliferate in middle-class homes, showrooms, cafés,

and shopping malls, while oversized Santa Claus effigies preside over commercial spaces. This festive aesthetic, Chaudhuri suggests, reflects the emergence of a "cheery provincialism" characteristic of a pleasure-seeking, aspirational middle class. Christmas afternoon, in particular, is imbued with what he calls a "special aimless anticipation," an experience he presents as uniquely Calcuttan.

At the centre of this anticipation lies the practice of 'eating out', whether in elite institutions such as the Bengal Club or in iconic Park Street restaurants like Flurys and Mocambo. Chaudhuri's detailed description of an elaborate Christmas lunch at the Bengal Club—its menu, rituals, and dress codes—functions as a powerful signifier of exclusivity and class privilege. Through food and etiquette, Christmas is transformed into a marker of social distinction.

Crucially, Chaudhuri constructs Christmas in Calcutta through three distinct perspectives: his own position as an upper-middle-class insider with access to elite spaces; the experiences of pavement dwellers; and the aspirations of the broader urban populace. On Christmas Day, he observes an unusual stillness near Ramayan Shah's pavement eatery, a "strange cessation" brought about by reduced earnings, as the festive crowd migrates elsewhere. This temporary economic lull foregrounds the precarious existence of the city's informal workers, even during moments of collective celebration.

Representing the 'ordinary' celebrant, Chaudhuri introduces a woman from Salt Lake who has come with her family to spend Christmas afternoon on Park Street. Sitting on a ledge outside Flurys while waiting for her husband to return from a nearby KFC, she becomes emblematic of a new provincial middle class—globally attuned yet geographically rooted, participating in consumer culture without full access to its elite spaces. Through her, Chaudhuri subtly directs the reader's gaze towards the invisible thresholds of class that regulate entry into establishments like Flurys and institutions such as the Bengal Club.

The construction of New Year's Eve in Chaudhuri's narrative follows a similar tripartite perspective. At the Bengal Club's garden party, the arrival of the New Year is marked by the strains of classic English songs such as Scarborough Fair and Blowin' in the Wind, reinforcing the club's colonial inheritance and cultural insularity. In sharp contrast, Park Street outside pulsates with youthful excitement. Chaudhuri vividly describes young men in imitation leather jackets crowding the pavements, moving in tight-knit groups before the famed middle-class restaurants. Their presence, marked by both exhilaration and an underlying sense of exclusion, transforms Park Street into a contested festive terrain. For pavement dwellers, however, New Year's Eve brings no rupture in routine; ironing clothes and selling inexpensive snacks to revelers continues unabated, underscoring the uneven distribution of festivity itself.

In Longing Belonging, Bishwanath Ghosh also foregrounds Christmas celebrations in the Park Street area, though his narrative stance is notably more detached. He summarizes the Calcuttan relationship with Christmas in pragmatic terms: fruit cake consumption, an evening visit to Park Street for the adventurous, and dining out for those with sufficient money and fortune. Unlike Chaudhuri's intimate, memory-laden account, Ghosh adopts the gaze of a flâneur-observer. This distance is evident in his affectionate description of eating alu-kabli from a roadside vendor outside Vardaan Market on Camac Street, suggesting that such everyday pleasures are as meaningful as dining in Park Street's legendary restaurants.

Ghosh's construction of New Year's Eve shifts away from Park Street to the Princeton Club on Prince Anwar Shah Road, a space emblematic of the new, middle-class-friendly clubs of South Calcutta. He explicitly contrasts this club with the city's older elite institutions, where "aristocratic Bengalis still ape their erstwhile British masters." In doing so, Ghosh maps a transition in Calcutta's social geography, from rigidly exclusive colonial clubs to more accessible, contemporary spaces of celebration.

New Year's Day in Ghosh's narrative is anchored in the annual races at the Royal Calcutta Turf Club. Here, the festive gaze expands into a sociological catalogue. Ghosh identifies distinct groups among the attendees—the 'British' Bengali, the 'Indian' Bengali, affluent non-Bengalis, and a fourth category of commoners seeking quick financial gain. The Turf Club thus emerges as a living archive of Calcutta's class and community configurations, offering readers a panoramic view of the city's social stratification.

Taken together, Chaudhuri's and Ghosh's representations of Christmas and the New Year foreground festivals as temporal spaces where

Calcutta's inequalities, aspirations, and cultural continuities are performed with particular intensity. Through food, music, leisure, and ritualized movement across urban spaces, these festive moments become powerful discursive sites through which the reader's gaze towards the city is structured and sustained.

V. RITUAL, SPECTACLE, AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY: DURGA PUJA

In both Calcutta: Two Years in the City and Longing Belonging: An Outsider at Home in Calcutta, Durga Puja occupies a central position in the representation of the city, functioning as one of the most potent cultural signifiers through which the reader's 'gaze' is directed towards Calcutta. As the largest and most emotionally charged festival of the Bengalis, Durga Puja becomes in these narratives not merely a religious event but a complex urban phenomenon encompassing history, craft, spectacle, and collective identity. While both writers foreground similar elements, Bishwanath Ghosh offers a more expansive, layered account, whereas Amit Chaudhuri's treatment is marked by reflective introspection and cultural critique.

Bishwanath Ghosh constructs Durga Puja through three interrelated perspectives: the historical emergence of the barowari or community Puja, the artisanal world of idol-making in Kumartuli, and the lived experience of Puja in contemporary Calcutta. Tracing the origins of the community Puja to Bengal, Ghosh recounts how the first barowari Durga Puja was organized in 1790 at Guptipara, north of Calcutta, by twelve young men who had been socially excommunicated. This act of collective defiance laid the foundation for a form of celebration that would later become central to urban Bengali identity. During the nationalist movement, Ghosh notes, Durga Puja proliferated across Calcutta and the wider region as a symbolic assertion of indigenous identity, eventually evolving into a means through which neighborhoods in the modern megacity assert their communal presence.

Ghosh further enriches this historical narrative by recalling the legendary household Pujas of Calcutta's babus, particularly the Durga Puja organized by Raja Nabakrishna Deb in 1757, where Robert Clive was famously hosted as the chief guest. Such episodes underscore the entanglement of ritual, power, and colonial history in the evolution of the festival.

A second major strand in Ghosh's representation focuses on Kumartuli in North Calcutta, the artisanal quarter where Durga idols are fashioned. Here, Ghosh foregrounds the figure of Debabrata Pal, a veteran idol-maker and workshop owner, whose voice becomes instrumental in mapping the cyclical rhythm of the artisans' lives. Through Pal's narration, the reader gains insight into the annual calendar of religious labour that structures the community's existence, with Durga Puja initiating a continuum of festivals culminating in Saraswati Puja before the cycle recommences. Kumartuli thus emerges as both a sacred and economic space, anchoring the festival in material craft and inherited skill.

The third aspect of Ghosh's construction of Durga Puja centres on its contemporary celebration in Calcutta, where religious devotion and urban festivity intersect. He foregrounds ritual moments such as the early morning broadcast of Mahishasura Mardini on Mahalaya, invoking a shared auditory memory that signals the commencement of the Puja season. A constellation of signifiers is employed to evoke the festival's atmosphere: shopping malls transformed into spaces of visual abundance, Puja-themed hoardings, exuberant radio jockeys, pandals erected in the narrowest of lanes, and a dense network of loudspeakers filling the city with sound. Ritual practices such as bhog and pushpanjali are highlighted alongside the increasingly popular practice of pandal-hopping, particularly at night. By recounting his visits to celebrated pandals in areas such as Park Circus, Mohammad Ali Park, and Maddox Square, Ghosh situates the reader within the embodied experience of the festival.

Amit Chaudhuri's representation of Durga Puja shares several points of convergence with Ghosh's account, particularly in acknowledging the festival's transition from elite household ritual to community-wide celebration. However, Chaudhuri's narrative diverges in its emphasis on the secularization and sensory saturation of the Puja. He suggests that the proliferation of community Pujas gradually diluted the festival's overtly religious character, transforming it into an occasion of collective merrymaking and urban spectacle. By the 1980s, Chaudhuri observes, Durga Puja had become an event of unparalleled scale, exercising an almost "tyrannical" hold over the city for

its duration. This intensification, he notes, eventually led segments of the middle class in the early 1990s to temporarily leave the city to escape the noise, crowds, and excesses of the celebrations. Central to Chaudhuri's construction of the reader's gaze is his attention to the pandals and elaborate lighting displays that began to flourish from the 1980s onwards. Often theme-based, these structures form the primary visual attractions for pandal-hoppers and underscore the festival's transformation into a spectacle-driven cultural event. Chaudhuri further deepens his analysis by foregrounding the dual myths that underpin Durga Puja: Durga as the mother who descends to vanquish evil, and Durga as the daughter who must return to her marital home once the festival concludes. This latter myth, grounded in the logic of transformation and transience, becomes a powerful metaphor for emotional maturation and loss.

In a poignant reflection, Chaudhuri suggests that the festival enacts a symbolic generational shift, in which participants move from the position of children to that of parents within the span of the Puja days. This narrative of inevitable departure, he argues, infuses Durga Puja with a uniquely Bengali emotional texture, one that blends joy with melancholy. Through such reflections, Chaudhuri constructs Durga Puja not merely as a festival but as an affective experience that mirrors the rhythms of life itself. Together, the representations offered by Ghosh and Chaudhuri frame Durga Puja as a multifaceted urban phenomenon—historical, artisanal, ritualistic, and spectacular. By foregrounding its evolution, practices, and myths, both writers shape the reader's gaze towards Calcutta as a city whose identity is inextricably bound to the temporal and emotional intensities of its most defining festival.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study has sought to demonstrate that English travel writing on Calcutta, as exemplified by Amit Chaudhuri's Calcutta: Two Years in the City and Bishwanath Ghosh's Longing Belonging: An Outsider at Home in Calcutta, functions as a complex discursive practice rather than a neutral mode of urban description. By examining the representation of specific spatial zones—Park Street and North Calcutta—and culturally charged festive moments such as Christmas, New Year's celebrations, and Durga Puja, the paper has shown how these narratives actively construct and mediate the reader's gaze towards the city. In doing so, they participate in the production of meaning, identity, and belonging within the urban imaginary of Calcutta.

Both Chaudhuri and Ghosh extend the tradition of sustained English travel writing on the city inaugurated by Geoffrey Moorhouse, yet they do so through modes that are markedly introspective and self-reflexive. Their narratives foreground the authorial self not as a detached observer but as a positioned subject whose class location, cultural memory, and affective attachments shape what is seen and how it is narrated. In this sense, their writing exemplifies Stuart Hall's conception of representation as a process embedded in language and discourse, marked by selection, emphasis, and omission. Calcutta emerges not as a totalizing or coherent entity but as a series of lived fragments—spaces, moments, encounters—that acquire meaning through narrative mediation.

The analysis of Park Street illustrates how urban space becomes a site of convergence where history, consumption, and social disparity coexist within a single spatial frame. In both narratives, Park Street functions as a symbolic 'downtown', simultaneously cosmopolitan and exclusionary. Through attention to eateries, signboards, crowds, and pavement dwellers, Chaudhuri and Ghosh expose the negotiated coexistence of privilege and precarity that structures everyday urban life. These representations complicate romanticized visions of cosmopolitanism by foregrounding the invisible thresholds of class that regulate access to spaces of consumption and leisure.

Similarly, the representation of North Calcutta underscores the importance of memory and historical layering in the construction of urban identity. By returning to sites associated with the city's origins, colonial transformations, and cultural awakening, both writers frame North Calcutta as a palimpsestic space where past and present remain in constant dialogue. Ghosh's historical mapping and Chaudhuri's cultural evocations together construct North Calcutta as a repository of collective memory that resists erasure, challenging narratives that privilege only the modern, commercial city. Through these spatial strategies, the reader's gaze is directed towards Calcutta as a city whose identity is inseparable from its historical sedimentation.

Festive temporalities further intensify this gaze by revealing how the city performs itself at moments of heightened social visibility. The representations of Christmas and the New Year foreground Calcutta's secularized, consumption-driven festive culture, shaped by colonial inheritance and contemporary middle-class aspiration. Chaudhuri's tripartite perspective—encompassing elite insiders, marginal workers, and aspirational consumers—exposes the uneven distribution of festivity itself, while Ghosh's detached observational stance maps shifting social geographies through newer, more accessible spaces of celebration. In both cases, festivals function as temporal lenses through which class, belonging, and exclusion are rendered particularly visible.

Durga Puja, however, emerges as the most comprehensive and emotionally resonant site of representation. Both narratives frame the festival as a collective urban phenomenon that transcends religious ritual to encompass history, craft, spectacle, and affect. Ghosh's expansive account situates Durga Puja within its historical evolution, artisanal labour, and contemporary performance, while Chaudhuri's introspective reflections foreground its secularization and emotional ambivalence. Together, these representations reveal how Durga Puja operates as a powerful mechanism of collective identification, one that binds the city through shared rhythms of anticipation, celebration, and departure.

Viewed through the conceptual lens of the tourist gaze, as articulated by Urry and Larsen, these narratives demonstrate that gazing is neither innocent nor purely individual. Rather, it is socially conditioned and mediated through cultural texts such as travel writing. Chaudhuri and Ghosh not only observe Calcutta but also teach readers how to see it, offering patterned ways of looking that privilege certain spaces, moments, and meanings. In this sense, their writing participates in the ongoing discursive construction of Calcutta as a lived, imagined, and gazed-upon city.

In conclusion, this paper argues that contemporary English travel writing on Calcutta serves as a vital cultural archive, capturing the city's spatial contradictions, temporal intensities, and affective textures. By foregrounding the interplay between space, festivity, and representation, the narratives examined here move beyond surface description to engage with deeper questions of belonging, memory, and urban identity. Calcutta, as it emerges from these texts, is neither a static object nor a singular reality, but a dynamic and contested urban formation—one that continues to be shaped through acts of gazing, writing, and remembering.

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