

An Urban Utopia for an Ethnic Minority: Calcutta in Baghdadi Jewish Fiction

Riman Rakshit

Abstract

Transforming from a colonial trading centre to a postcolonial metropolis, Calcutta has been re-invented and represented through myriads of images, often contradictory, by its majority Bengali population as well as by its ethnic minorities. Ranging from the pristine streets of European white town to the dirt and squalor of native black town, the urban space of Calcutta contains various antithetical spaces within itself. As British administrators would emphasise- Calcutta is a city where the ideal utopian spaces co-exist with the morbid dystopian ones. Yet, the idea of urban utopia is different for colonizer and colonized, and for majority and ethnic minorities. This paper reflects on the fundamental question of what constitutes as a utopian space for a minority community living in an adopted land. It further reflects on whether a utopian state would be advantageous to every individual living within it. For utopian spaces are defined by their authoritarian impulses. The Baghdadi Jewish community of Calcutta had flourished in the complex sociopolitical milieu of the 19th century colonial capital and had aligned themselves with the British. In the postcolonial city, their communal numbers have dwindled, and the last Jews preserve the nostalgic signifiers of a bygone era. Jewish author Jael Silliman, one of the last Jews of the city, reflects on the urban spaces of Jewish Calcutta in her oeuvre. This paper shall analyse her novel *The Teak Almirah* (2016) to examine the nature and the production of utopian and dystopian spaces for an urban ethnic minority. It explores the importance of utopia in Judaism and critiques the controversial Zionist ambition of creating Israel as a utopia for global Jewry, thus eliminating any difference within the Jewish population.

Keywords: Urban utopia, Indo-Judaic fiction, Jewish Calcutta, Zionism, Ethnic minority.