

Walls That Endure: Colonial Continuities and Hidden Lives in Calcutta's Segregated Spaces

Lixin Chen

*School of Faculty of Innovation and Design, City University of Macau, Macau, China
U22090102626@cityu.edu.mo*

Abstract. Focusing on Calcutta, India, this study reveals how the spatial segregation left over from colonial rule continues in a hidden form to this day, profoundly shaping urban structures and social inequalities. Combining photographic interpretation, historical archive analysis and urban spatial investigation, this paper analyzes how the physical separation between the "White Town" and the "Black Town" in the colonial period evolved into the "implicit segregation" in the postcolonial era. The key findings show that infrastructure differences, media discourse construction, and institutional exclusion jointly maintain spatial oppression based on class and caste, resulting in the continuous squeeze of the living space of the bottom groups. The unique value of this study lies in the demonstration that "development" itself may create a new type of poverty, and points out that colonial logic forms a hierarchical "other" production mechanism through the internalization and replication of the local elite. The conclusion emphasizes that colonial violence is far from over, and its ghosts are embedded in the narrative of urban governance and development in the form of institutionalized genes, continuing to produce poverty and inequality.

Keywords: colonialism, segregation, inequality, Calcutta, subaltern

1. Introduction

Colonial violence persists in modern societies, shaping urban infrastructure as if coded into its DNA. In today's Kolkata, this violence appears as "invisible segregation." Colonial-era "White Town" featured enclosed waterways, while "Black Town" still suffers from open gutters. Sewage remains trapped in slum alleyways, causing cholera outbreaks. These leftovers from colonial rule now fuel deep-rooted inequality.

Dockworkers lug heavy cargo for daily wages that barely cover half a loaf of bread. Middlemen pocket most of their meager earnings. Cultural stories add to this harm, framing poverty as "dirty" or "backward." During Durga Puja, wealthier locals use slum river silt to craft clay idols. Meanwhile, Dalit craftsmen face exclusion, banned from sacred ritual areas due to caste labels like "untouchable." Fenced off, they can only gaze at the deities they themselves crafted. This systematic erasure epitomizes the localized perpetuation of colonial logic from a century ago.

We should be willing to bend down and gaze at the figures beneath these wall foundations. They are not remnants of history, but a "present continuous tense" being institutionally squeezed. To dismantle the high walls of spatial segregation, we must first tear down the "high walls" in our

cognition and recognize a history that has never truly come to an end. For true liberation begins with acknowledging that the specter of colonialism still lingers in the cracks of the walls.

2. Street woman with dogs - starting from the street scene photos of Calcutta in 1978

As I first saw this photo(fig.1) in an online exhibition at Akar Prakar, a modern and contemporary art gallery. This photographic series forms part of Pablo Bartholomew's personal archive. Created during his years in Calcutta (1975–1985), it examines identity formation and socioeconomic dynamics through his immersive street photography. The images immerse viewers in Calcutta's street-level realities. They document daily life across diverse communities. Through grainy black-and-white compositions, Bartholomew preserves the city's fading cultural tapestry, capturing its complex social history.



Figure 1. The Calcutta Diaries: Pablo Bartholomew | Street woman with dogs, Calcutta | Archival Pigment Print | 11.5 x 17.5 in | c. 1978. Retrieved August 13, 2025, from Akar Prakar [1]

Bartholomew's 1978 black-and-white street photograph captures an unnamed alley in Calcutta, where decaying infrastructure and human vulnerability converge to criticize the contradictory nature of postcolonial development. The dilapidated walls, marked by fragmented paint layers and residual oil stains, embody urban neglect and it's a metaphor for systemic underinvestment. Dirty water stains remaining on the ground, their origins ambiguous between recent rainfall and chronic pollution, mirror the ambiguity of "development" in marginalized communities. At the scene's core, a woman huddled against the wall, her sari faded to near-invisibility and her disheveled hair matted with dust, epitomizes poverty. With a fetal posture and vacant gaze, she is encircled by three dogs: two keep a vigilant eye on her meager bundle, and one curls up casually, as if resigned to the situation. This contrast between her and the dogs symbolizes the precarity that both humans and animals face. This visual narrative deconstructs developmental rhetoric by foregrounding entrenched inequality: the woman's immobilized presence, framed by cracked walls and predatory stray dogs, underscores how top-down development initiatives often perpetuate cycles of marginalization rather than alleviating poverty. Her "numb look," as Bartholomew frames it, becomes an indictment of bureaucratic invisibility, capturing populations relegated to temporal stasis while development agendas prioritize infrastructural modernization over human dignity.

The tremble in my fingertips as I navigated the webpage abruptly recalled another record of Pablo Bartholomew in Mumbai in 1980. Crumbling infrastructure and spatial segregation manifest

in the documentary's stark imagery: scavengers huddled on unpaved streets, tattered garments clinging to emaciated bodies, and a child anchored by his bundled possessions stares vacantly. And this visual imagery is recreated in the downward gaze of a female subject. These frozen postures of resignation, juxtaposed against their squalid environment, unveil a profound detachment between human capacity for self-determination and structural reality. The dirty and knotted hair, frayed textiles, and improvised bedding made from woven sacks become metaphors for systemic neglect, where survival supersedes dignity.

Therefore, these photos further expose us to the contradictions of development: urban expansion in developed nations relegates poverty to peripheral enclaves through commuter-centric zoning, while India's "public interest" redevelopment projects displace marginalized communities into new slums. Such spatial strategies, which are underpinned by capitalist exploitation rather than social equity, perpetuate what I term "invisible poverty," a state where basic needs remain perpetually unmet through institutionalized exclusion. The documentary ultimately reveals how development frameworks commodify human existence, transforming living spaces into commodities while marginalizing the impoverished through engineered invisibility.



Figure 2. Ragpickers asleep, Bombay. Location: India, Maharashtra, Mumbai. Paper: 14 x 11 in. (35.6 x 27.9 cm) Image: 12 x 8 1/8 in. (30.5 x 20.6 cm) [Online Image]. In International Center of Photography [2]

It's really hard for us to imagine what it would be like for people living in cities to lose their own living environment and live in public spaces or share living Spaces with other creatures. It's very difficult for us to understand how they perceive the world. These pictures, through their stunning visual effects, do not merely record the street scenes at that time, but reveal the marginalization of the lower social groups at the socio-economic level and these unseen and unrecognized states in the daily life stories. I suddenly realized that I was so distant and unfamiliar with this land. The India I know is a South Asian country with a large population and diverse cultures. It is one of the oldest

civilizations in the world and also the largest democratic country in the world, with a vast information technology and service industry. The 2009 film "Slumdog Millionaire" brought the Dharavi slum into the view of people all over the world. Mukesh Ambani, the richest man in India who now lives in the heart of Mumbai's affluent area, has built a 27-story private villa in the city center, which is claimed to be the world's most luxurious. However, this is in sharp contrast to the Dharavi slum, which is also located in the city center and is separated by only a wall. In a slum of less than two square kilometers, millions of people are crammed together. Roads that have not been well planned, open sewers on the streets, and uncleared household garbage are everywhere, piled up to form small garbage mountains, and the stench shrouds the entire slum.



Figure 3. In Sina. Retrieved from https://k.sina.com.cn/article_6698077443_18f3c8d03001012884.html [3]

But when I faced these photos, I suddenly became a "stranger in time and space": I was neither the woman struggling to survive at the base of the walls in the alleys of the colonized city in the photos, nor the wanderer living on the open-air streets, nor the person who lived in this city before. But when I looked at the photos, the scenes overlapped with those in the media and on the Internet, yet I clearly felt a certain kind of uncut "continuation". That "wall" built during the colonial period still divides the space. Those who have been marginalized are still seeking a place to live at the base of the wall. The wall separating a private luxury villa from a slum seems like a replica across time and space. Its emergence is not accidental but a direct result of development. It reveals how social development is exploited by real estate developers to serve vested interests, while the lack of systematic reforms leads to uneven resource distribution. This complexity requires researchers to analyze the interplay of multiple factors such as development, poverty, colonial legacies, capitalism, and policy failures.

The "separation wall" of the colonial period has turned into the "living wall" of today, and the "servant's residential area" of the colonial period has become the "gathering place for the homeless" of today. What has changed is the label of The Times, but what remains unchanged is the squeezed living space of the lower classes. Suddenly, I realized that the power of a photograph is never to record the "past", but to reveal the "continuation". Just as Hartman traced the traces of the Atlantic slave trade and found that the shadow of slavery still looms over the present [4], the colonial continuity of Calcutta is also hidden in this mottled wall, this curled-up posture, and this fragility of people and their environment. The wall that the Indian people were required to build according to British standards during the colonial period still exists today. It's just that the residents have changed

batch after batch, but what remains unchanged is that there are always people huddled under the wall and by the roadside, waiting for everyone willing to bend down and gaze to see them.

I was scrolling through the media about Calcutta, Mumbai and the current situation in India. The wide streets were bustling with traffic. The golden dome of the Victoria Memorial was shining in the sunlight. It was a "monument" built with India's wealth during the colonial period. In those invisible alleys, there are countless "colonial walls" standing tall. At the base of these walls, there are innumerable "Homeless Women" and "Scavengers Sleeping on the Street", continuing a history that has never truly ended.

3. Spatial isolation during the colonial period

Spatial isolation created unequal development. British ruled India from 1772 to 1911. Calcutta was their capital. It became a center for education, science, and politics. This history still shapes the city's structure today. Victorian buildings in old areas show the colonial past. They stand as symbols of that history. But the city's memory and stories don't fully connect. This creates a complex picture. Unlike many countries that have also experienced colonial rule, some Indian societies have associated colonial history with the identity labels of "democracy" and "freedom". English has maintained its status as an official language to this day, as if it were a gift of "civilization" left behind.

However, a deeper exploration of historical archives and urban reality reveals another hidden truth. During the colonial period, Calcutta was by no means an equal space, but was strictly and systematically divided into two distinct worlds (fig.4). On one side is the "White Town", which has a well-developed drainage system, wide boulevards and luxurious mansions, enjoying the cleanliness and order brought by modern municipal facilities. On the other side is the Indian settlement known as "Black Town", where dirtiness, disorder and confusion have become the norm. It is synonymous with a crowded and filthy bustee. This spatial isolation is by no means accidental; it is a meticulously designed product of colonial power [5]. Through the differentiated allocation of infrastructure, stigmatizing narratives, and the fact that debt slavery from the colonial period still exists in a modern form, the racial hierarchy is solidified in the physical space of the city and social cognition.

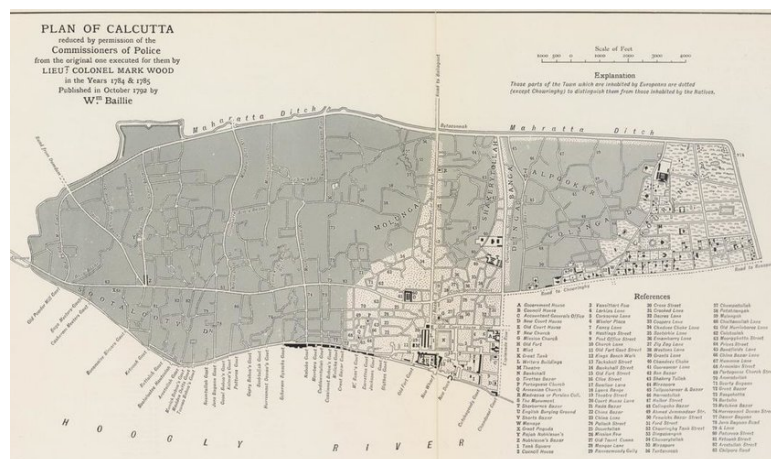


Figure 4. Plan of Calcutta, depicting the White Town and Black Town. Retrieved from <https://mavink.com/post/1690FB4D11A315BC7E875A55251BFE6239AME7A4BF/calcutta-planning-black-and-white> [6]

The design of the underground drainage system in White Town epitomized the colonial authorities' deliberate emphasis on "civilized sanitation." The road network of White Town centered on broad arterial roads arranged in a grid pattern, with designated spaces for subterranean drainage pipes flanking the streets. Constructed to European standards, these drainage systems ensured efficient discharge of sewage to rivers or septic tanks outside the city. Colonial officials even touted this infrastructural superiority as the defining feature distinguishing White Town from Black Town, claiming it "prevented the threat of indigenous Indian diseases to European settlers."

However, this sanitation narrative functioned as a veil for racism. Because the drainage system in Black Town has long relied on open ditches or seepage wells, sewage stagnates in narrow streets and alleys, becoming a breeding ground for outbreaks of infectious diseases such as cholera. For instance, in Madras's Black Town, the absence of integrated drainage planning caused rainwater to mix with excrement during monsoons, exacerbating public health crises. Yet colonial authorities used these conditions to further restrict Black Town residents' access to clean water.

The spatial isolation system during the British Indian period (1772-1911) did not dissipate with the political break of the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 [7]. Instead, through the "path dependence" of material infrastructure such as drainage systems, the logic of colonial oppression was engraved into the urban governance fabric after independence. The "sanitation gap" formed by the closed ceramic drainage pipe network laid by the colonial authorities for the white areas and the open ditches in the Black Town essentially transformed racial hierarchy into a tangible spatial isolation order. The former monopolizes resources under the guise of "civilized and hygienic", while the latter rationalizes the deprivation of resources with the stigma of "dirty and backward". This material oppressive structure has given rise to a new form of violence in the urban refugee wave triggered by the partition: a large number of refugees from East Bengal have been forced to settle in the tidal flats and swamps on the edge of the former black community, while the drainage system that existed during the colonial period has not extended to the new slums but has instead become an invisible boundary dividing the "legal" and "illegal" residential areas. Meanwhile, the municipal department refused to provide basic sanitation facilities for the refugee area on the grounds of "insufficient drainage capacity", but instead invested a huge amount of money in upgrading the drainage network in the white area. This white neighborhood later evolved into elite communities such as Salt Lake City.

Nabaparna Ghosh (2020)'s research on Calcutta's infrastructure reveals the "institutionalized control" inherent in spatial oppression. Her investigation of the Hooghly River drainage system demonstrated that colonial-era pipeline layouts were not merely technical choices but power tools "defining social positions through water flow control": White Town's sewers directly discharged into the Hooghly River's main channel to protect European residences from contamination, while Black Town's gutters were deliberately channeled toward low-lying refugee settlements, creating a governance technique of disciplining marginalized groups through filth [8].

After Partition, this control logic persisted beyond colonial rule. The post-independence government continued prioritizing elite area infrastructure development. During the 1950s Salt Lake City expansion, enclosed circular sewer networks were installed for affluent zones, while 80% of households in contemporary Jheta slums still relied on rainwater barrels and open gutters. That is to say, when municipal officials cut drainage investment in poor communities on the grounds of "financial strain", they are actually replacing the "racial hierarchy" of the colonial period with "class hierarchy", making spatial isolation a physical measure of social exclusion.

This institutionalized spatial oppression manifests today as a vicious cycle of resource allocation in Calcutta: inadequate drainage systems cause routine monsoon flooding in slums, which

authorities then exploit as "proof" of these areas' "unfitness for habitation" to justify further infrastructure neglect.

4. The real issue "hidden segregation"

What is particularly crucial is that this spatial segregation based on race and class did not disappear with India's political independence in 1947; instead, it persisted and "institutionalized" in a more covert and stubborn way.

Implicit isolation is first manifested as a construction of discourse and cognition. Colonial rule gave rise to the earliest batch of native middle classes in India. Especially the "bhadralok". By receiving English education, they became partial supporters of colonial culture, emulating and internalizing the British way of life and values. After independence, the elite class that held the power of discourse and municipal management, such as the Swaraj Party members and the subsequent municipal managers, to some extent inherited the spatial logic and hygiene discourse of the colonists. Thus, if race was crucial in the British discourse of hygiene, caste and class gained currency in bhadralok discourse [8]. They imitated the colonial authorities' construction of "Black Town" and referred to the settlement areas of the newly influx of lower-class laborers from different religions, castes and regions (such as the pullers of Bihar and the workers of Madras) into the city as bustee. And the spaces that are also depicted as "filthy", "disorderly" and "uncivilized" are the objects that need to be "spatial shuddhi" and disciplined. This stigmatization is concretized in the kerosene lice control behavior of slum women. The health department denounced it as a "foolish custom" but ignored the hypocrisy of the national health policy exposed by the 73% medical failure rate [8]. Bustees emerged as the 'other' of the para in this imagination. This understanding of bustees and their residents shaped the interventions of the bhadraloks in these spaces. And under their leadership, the "para" has been meticulously shaped into a model of a "city-nation" that meets the standards of "modernity" and "civilization", emphasizing "Hindu spatial hygiene", cultural purity and community self-discipline. Promote a concept of "health" that integrates nationalism and the norms of the upper caste through health associations, club activities, Durga Festival celebrations and other means. However, on the other hand, this kind of "purification" and improvement of its own community is to view the adjacent "Basi", which accommodates non-elite groups, as a new "Black Town" that needs to be "educated", "disciplined", or even "cleared". For instance, when propagandists delve into bustee, their work ostensibly aims to improve hygiene, but in reality, it often involves the mandatory implementation of cultural norms such as vegetarianism and alcohol prohibition, once again transforming the issue of poverty into a matter of morality and habit. This "dirtying" story justifies unfair treatment. It labels certain groups as "unclean" and ties this label to their identity. Over time, these beliefs spread beyond physical spaces. They become mental barriers separating "us" (seen as clean, civilized, and controllable) from "them" (viewed as dirty, dangerous, and needing control).

Colonial-era policies created these divisions. Today, they still widen the wealth gap between cities and rural areas. The system uses modern ideas like "progress," "public health," and "tradition" to hide discrimination. These ideas make marginalized groups seem less important. This separation works without physical barriers. Instead, it uses social rules, unequal resource distribution, and cultural stigma. These methods are harder to remove than physical walls. Today, many homeless people in Calcutta still live on the streets. Most come from poor families and have faced years of unfair treatment. Therefore, the identity labels of "democracy" and "freedom" that Many Indians now take pride in often seem empty and distant to these underprivileged groups trapped in a structure of spatial isolation and social exclusion. The division and solidification of urban space, as

well as the resulting huge gap between the rich and the poor, have become one of the most stubborn legacies left by colonial rule, constantly challenging the vision of equality and democracy claimed by independent India.

Furthermore, implicit isolation is manifested as the normalization of institutional exclusion and resource deprivation. Physical separation changes with city growth or policy changes. Hidden separation is built into basic systems like land rules, housing plans, public services, and money flows. During colonial times, the Land Acquisition Act used "public interest" rules to take land by force. After independence, similar methods continue under new names. For example, urban projects claim to help communities but push poor groups to worse areas. These projects rarely offer fair alternatives or let locals help decide. Wealthy areas get better public services. Poor neighborhoods like bustees lack basic resources. This unfair treatment keeps poverty alive. Living close doesn't mean fair chances. Close proximity can cause fights over scarce resources and shame for marginalized groups.

Money mainly flows to safe, controlled areas. This makes poor areas like bustees even poorer. Strict legal systems help maintain this separation.

Thus, hidden separation works through built-in systems that keep people poor. And the tenacity of implicit segregation lies in its internalization within social psychology and cultural identity as a deeper, more virulent virus. Long-lasting harmful ideas and unfair rules don't just shape how outsiders see bustees (poor neighborhoods). They also change how bustee residents see themselves and their future. These harmful ideas push bustees and their people outside the "normal" group. Muslim neighborhoods get labeled as "dangerous areas" or "cultural threats." [9] Low-caste workers' settlements are called "backward places [8]." This mental distance based on cultural bias becomes the hardest part of hidden separation. Even when physical walls disappear, true social mixing and fairness remain out of reach. This keeps cities divided and deepens inequality.

5. Development itself produces its own poverty

Development alone can't end poverty. Its success depends on how systems are built and community rules. In some cases, development actually causes more poverty. But no one discussed these. Perhaps most people would directly conclude based on the photos provided in the previous text or the information they browse on the Internet that more detailed and advanced developments might be able to change all these problems. Or perhaps, they truly believe all the media narratives, thinking that this is the whole truth. These people's thoughts are the same as mine in the past. We always think that if there is a problem, we should solve it. When the living conditions of these underprivileged people are fraught with difficulties and some of the developments proposed at that time fail to solve the problems, we generally believe that these developments have not been carried out to the end. Perhaps implementing large-scale development, or carrying out land reform, providing social welfare, and directly offering various guarantees to those in need can solve most of the problems. This is really a very one-sided idea.

While we are eager for solutions, we place too much hope on development. So we haven't thought about the problems brought about by development itself at all. That is to say, when confronted with these issues of poverty and isolation, attributing these situations to stereotypes.

In fact, we should trace back from the outcome of development to the pre-development and ongoing development phases. This inevitably brings up the trap of aid for development. The Soviet Union provided industrial aid to India in the 1950s and 1970s, ostensibly to help this former colonial country achieve modernization, but in reality, it sowed the seeds of systemic poverty. The aid

projects centered on the Pocaro Steel Plant and the Singh Rauli Power Plant eventually evolved into structural traps in India's industrialization process.

Technically speaking, the "turnkey project" model led by Soviet experts seemed efficient, but in fact, it cut off the possibility of localizing the technology [10]. Workers at Pocaro Steel only learned to run machines. They couldn't fix or upgrade them. When Soviet experts left, key steel mill parts broke down more often. Indian engineers didn't have basic industrial skills. They had to buy costly Soviet spare parts. This "teach to fish but give the fish" approach trapped India's machine industry. It relied on imports, lacked tech, and shrank. Sadly, Soviet equipment had hidden flaws. Indian companies had to keep buying new parts. This kept them dependent on foreign tech.

In terms of the market, Soviet-built projects didn't meet India's real needs. Pocaro Steel made special steel for the Soviet military. India's own factories couldn't use this high-end steel—they lacked tech support. So the factory sent steel abroad. But changing global prices made them lose money for years. In the 1990s, old equipment forced the factory to close for upgrades. This slowed down privatization. At the same time, government subsidies to keep it running just wasted money. Producing things no one buys showed the planned economy's fatal flaw: supply didn't fit demand.

The most serious problem is the top-down industrial chain strangling caused by corruption. The Soviet Union controlled key industries to maintain India's technological dependence on the Soviet Union, but this technology was of no help to itself, and the deliberate error of the Soviet Union forced enterprises to continuously import upgraded components from the Soviet Union. This institutional exploitation has plunged India's manufacturing industry into the trap of "pseudo-industrialization". On the surface, India's industrial output value has grown, but poverty has intensified and been concealed. Moreover, the aid funds have not been transformed into productive forces. Indian officials used the budget for purchasing industrial equipment provided by the Soviet Union for the construction of luxury office buildings. This predatory distribution has led to the absence of key industrial supporting facilities. Although the Singulli Power Plant was designed to generate 2.1 million kilowatts of electricity annually at that time, due to the lag in power grid construction, the actual output power was less than 30% of the designed value [10]. The shortage of electricity, in turn, has suppressed industrial development, creating a cycle of poverty. Even more astonishingly, some of the aid funds were used to build separation walls around the slums, under the guise of "urban planning", but in reality, they physically separated the workers' settlements from the industrial areas and solidified the social strata. So Amartya Sen, the Nobel laureate in economics, pointed out: "Development without democratic participation is nothing but the robbing of the poor to enrich the rich by the elite class." This point can be well summarized.

Then such aid projects can be said to have created a new type of poor class. The steel mill workers who were the first to lose their jobs as a result lack their own technical skills. The scarce job training is of no help to their lives and they have become the new permanent residents of urban slums. However, officials and their families who embezzle by falsely reporting the purchase prices of equipment occupy the top of social wealth but are disconnected from the real economy. This "poverty trap" corroborates that if external aid fails to restructure social production relations, it will instead strengthen the existing power structure. From this perspective, when development becomes the development of a minority, the basic survival guarantee of the majority will be challenged. The failure of Soviet aid projects precisely reveals how "elitist development" divorced from local reality has been distorted into a machine for creating systemic poverty.

6. Hierarchy of the other and sub-altern

Gayatri Spivak's concept of the "sub-altern" materializes here as a dynamic exclusionary mechanism. Explicitly, British colonial rule constructed Indian elites as the "Other" opposing white rulers; more insidiously, these native elites subsequently created even more marginalized "subalterns" within their own communities. Thus, colonialism's core legacy lies in systematically manufacturing hierarchical Others. While the British framed all Indians as the "Other", colonial administration relied on local intermediaries (e.g., compradors, English-educated elites) who became the "sub-altern". To consolidate their status, these elites further divided the masses into new "subaltern" categories: Muslim poor people, low-caste immigrants, female workers [11], etc. In other words, a hierarchy where "the Other" perpetually begets "another Other."

The "intermittent existence" as described by Gayatri Spivak precisely points to this contradictory state of visible hierarchical flow. As seen in the earlier case of bustee residents reduced to statistical symbols in municipal "slum clearance" plans while stripped of decision-making power, colonialism's "national culture" exacerbated such hierarchies. Bhadraklok, while promoting "sanitary discipline" to cleanse communities, simultaneously stigmatized bustees as "uncivilized filth." This cultural hybridization is essentially a conspiracy between colonial power and "bhadraklok", maintaining the legitimacy of governance by ceaselessly redefining "subaltern" boundaries.

This stratification is also obvious in literary works. In Mahasweta Devi's "Breast Giver", the experience of the wet nurse Jashoda reveals the hierarchical structure of the "Other" in colonial society. In fact, although the residence is physically isolated, residents of bhadraklok and bustee can be present in the same space. Because access to advanced space is permitted through service labor. As a high-caste Brahmin woman, Jashoda should have been at the top of her native social class and as the "other", but due to poverty, she became a servant and a tool for breastfeeding in colonial elite families. When the Haldar estate, which was already a "sub-altern" in the colonial system, hired her as a full-time wet nurse, her body was transformed into a "milk-producing machine". The breast has transformed from a personal organ into a "public resource" that sustains the survival of two families. Her milk simultaneously fed thirty children of the Harda family and twenty of her own children [12]. The cruelty of this exploitation is reflected in the fact that the "advantage" she gained due to her caste has become a shackle that deepens exploitation. The employer maintained her dignity by consuming her caste but confined her to endless childbearing and breastfeeding. Jashoda, on the other hand, slid down to the lower level "sub-altern": she was both deprived by the colonial economy and instrumented by the "bhadraklok" through the caste system. The so-called "advantage" is actually the coexistence of privilege and suffering.

When the Haldar family abandoned their traditional breastfeeding needs due to changes in the colonial economy and the influence of Western modernity, the "value" of Jashoda instantly dropped to zero. She attempted to survive as a cook, but the former maid, taking advantage of the new order, gained meager power and instead made things difficult for her. At this moment, she has completely become the "sub-altern of sub-altern". Not only was it abandoned by the local elite class, but it was also excluded by the "competitors" who also belong to the exploited class. Her caste aura completely vanished before the economy, confirming the extreme fragility of the "sub-altern" status in the colonial system: advantages could be stripped away at any time without any guarantee, and could be easily abandoned for no reason. So, once they fall ill, they may lose their lives because there are not enough resources. When they are no longer needed, the living environment they are in will also disappear, and the risk of life is extremely high. The process of Jashoda's cancerous breasts and death not only demonstrated the caste prejudice that "cancer is a disease of the lower class" but also reflected the patriarchal family's abandonment of women who have lost their reproductive value, as

well as Jashoda's fear of hospitals and resistance to oppressive systems due to the tangible exclusion of the lower class by the colonial medical system. The "Hindu female" on the hospital label is the bureaucratic system's final definition of her, erasing all traces of her as an individual. As a Brahmin, after her death, Jashoda's body was handled by the "untouchable" and carried by the pariah at the crematorium. All parties collectively remained silent about her death and systematically erased it. From Jashoda's transformation from a "breast giver" to an "unknown corpse", in this story, you can see how a person suddenly becomes "invisible". Her "invisibility" does not mean physical disappearance but rather being excluded from the social narrative by multiple power structures (colonial economy, caste system, gender oppression), becoming a disposable victim in the discourse of development.

The tragedy of Breast Giver in Mahasweta Devi's work transcends individual misfortune. It manifests as a Other structuring in the colonial hierarchy. By systematically creating stratified "sub-altern" groups. From the high-caste Dalits to over-fertile women and abandoned patients, colonialism has exploited and abandoned their physical values to maintain the symbiotic power structure between the "bhadralok" and the colonists. Jashoda's death shows the lies in all "progress" stories. Colonizers and "bhadralok" make development rules. This hides "sub-alterns". It is not a system error. It is their way.

7. Conclusion

The walls in Calcutta have never truly collapsed. They have transformed from brick and stone structures into institutional genes, from physical isolation into cognitive gaps, and constantly replicate themselves in the narrative of "development". The people under these developments collectively constitute the "continuous tense" of colonial violence in contemporary times.

The true legacy of colonialism lies in the fact that it invented a sophisticated mechanism of poverty-stricken production that has persisted and undergone transformation. Technological reliance is packaged as development aid, corruption devours the nutrients of the industrial chain, and overcapacity becomes an incubator for new types of poverty. Development itself brings about poverty.

The paradox of development lies in its self-devouring nature. The more it claims to eradicate poverty, the more it needs to create new outcasts. At the Durga Festival, the elite (bhadralok) use the silt from the slum river to create deities but prohibit the Dalit artisans who make the deities from entering the core area of the ceremony. Municipal officials, on the one hand, misappropriated industrial matching funds to build luxurious office buildings, and on the other hand, refused to lay drainage pipes for the slums on the grounds of "financial strain". These behaviors are not due to system failure but rather inevitable logic. Just as the "hygiene gap" during the colonial period evolved into "class segregation" in the post-colonial era, Development has transformed the isolation of spatial structure into an individual's moral defect.

The power of photographic testimony lies precisely here. The numb faces in Calcutta alleyways and trash collectors under sacks in Mumbai streets are not "old problems" – they're "ongoing proof" of unfair systems. Luxury homes tower over Dharavi slums. Victorian-style mansions block sunlight from dirty gutters. These visible divides show harsh truths: Colonial thinking still exists. It now hides behind words like "democracy", "growth", and "culture".

The core predicament is that we are still living in the crevices of colonial architecture. The mental barriers seeing slums as "city problems" are stronger than physical walls. This way of thinking blames technology delays on "lack of will" and praises old colonial buildings as "democracy costs". Power figures of different eras share the same logic. They rely on manufacturing technology, spatial

isolation and cognitive changes to deeply embed exploitative behaviors within the urban planning system. The reason why the figures huddled on the streets are so terrifying is precisely because they reflect the conspiracy we are reluctant to admit: while sickening poverty, we have long become the contemporary hosts of colonial ghosts. The end of history is nothing but a beautiful dream of the privileged. Those figures beneath the walls still await a gaze, and their very existence is a colonial epic that has never signed an armistice agreement.

References

- [1] Bartholomew, P. (2014, November 22). The Calcutta Diaries: Pablo Batholomew | Street woman with dogs, Calcutta | Archival Pigment Print | 11.5 x 17.5 in | c. 1978. Retrieved August 13, 2025, from Akar Prakar website: <https://www.akarprakar.com/exhibitions/calcutta-diaries>
- [2] Batholomew, P. (1980). Ragpickers asleep, Bombay. Location: India, Maharashtra, Mumbai. Paper: 14 x 11 in. (35.6 x 27.9 cm) Image: 12 x 8 1/8 in. (30.5 x 20.6 cm) [Online Image]. In International Center of Photography: <https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/objects/ragpickers-asleep-bombay>
- [3] Dharavi slum [Online Image]. (2021). In Sina. Retrieved from https://k.sina.com.cn/article_6698077443_18f3c8d03001012884.html
- [4] Saidiya Hartman. (2007). *LOSE YOUR MOTHER: a journey along the atlantic slave route*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- [5] Beattie, M. (2008). Hybrid Bazaar Space: Colonialization, Globalization, and Traditional Space in Barabazaar, Calcutta, India. *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984), 61(3), 45–55. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1531-314X.2007.00168.x>
- [6] Plan of Calcutta, depicting the White Town and Black Town. Retrieved from <https://mavink.com/post/1690FB4D11A315BC7E875A55251BFE6239AME7A4BF/calcutta-planning-black-and-white>
- [7] Virdee, P. (2013). Remembering partition: women, oral histories and the Partition of 1947. *Oral History* (Colchester), 41(2), 49–62.
- [8] Nabaparna Ghosh. (2020). *A hygienic city-nation : Space, community, and everyday life in colonial Calcutta*. Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- [9] Sengoopta, C. (2011). “The fruits of independence”: Satyajit Ray, Indian nationhood and the spectre of empire. *South Asian History and Culture*, 2(3), 374–396. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2011.577569>
- [10] Trecker, M. (2024). Forging the Indian Steel Industry: How Soviet Designs Won the Day. *Cold War History*, 24(4), 517–536. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2023.2239709>
- [11] Mahasweta Devi, & Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. (1995). *Imaginary maps : Three stories*. New York: Routledge.
- [12] Mahasweta Devi. (1997). *Breast stories*. Seagull Books.