



Calcutta: Two Years in the City

Amit Chaudhuri

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The award-winning author Amit Chaudhuri has been widely praised for the beauty and subtle power of his writing and for the ways in which he makes “place” as complex a character as his men and women. Now he brings these gifts to a spellbinding amalgam of memoir, reportage, and history in this intimate, luminous portrait of Calcutta.

Chaudhuri guides us through the city where he was born, the home he loved as a child, the setting of his acclaimed novels—a place he now finds captivating for all the ways it has, and, perhaps more powerfully, has not, changed. He shows us a city relatively untouched by the currents of globalization but possessed of a “self-renewing way of seeing, of inhabiting space, of apprehending life.” He takes us along vibrant avenues and derelict alleyways; introduces us to intellectuals, Marxists, members of the declining haute bourgeoisie, street vendors, domestic workers; brings to life the city’s sounds and smells, its architecture, its traditional shops and restaurants, new malls and hotels. And, using the historic elections of 2011 as a fulcrum, Chaudhuri looks back to the nineteenth century, when the city burst with a new vitality, and toward the politics of the present, finding a city “still not recovered from history” yet possessed of a singular modernity. Chaudhuri observes and writes about Calcutta with rare candor and clarity, making graspable the complex, ultimately ineluctable reasons for his passionate attachment to the place and its people.

Calcutta: Two Years in the City Details

Date : Published 2013 by Union Books

ISBN :

Author : Amit Chaudhuri

Format : Hardcover 307 pages

Genre : Cultural, India, Nonfiction, Travel, Biography Memoir, Autobiography, Memoir, History

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From Reader Review *Calcutta: Two Years in the City* for online ebook

Aloke says

A bit of a frustrating experience at first as you try to figure out what Chaudhuri's up to and wait in vain for him to come to the point. And yet as you read on you find yourself getting comfortable with those digressions, bits of dialogue, name dropping and nostalgia about his cousin's puja annuals (he mentions them three times!). As Blue says so well he is a mood-setter and not a plot-mover. Keep that in mind and you'll be fine.

Before reading this I'd been to Italy and had been reading a few novels in translation. I had thought it was finally time to read about something else but it was not so easy to move on since *Calcutta* includes many references to Italian literature (Bassani, Levi) as well as a whole chapter devoted to interviewing a transplanted Italian chef! On the topic of similarities between Italians and Bengalis there's this: "Family oriented, cost oriented— they are not into spending too much." Another similarity he mentions in passing, both languages have formal second person pronouns: *aapni* in Bengali and *lei* in Italian.

Blue says

I have never read Amit Chaudhuri's novels, but I can see that he is not a plot-mover; he is rather a mood-setter. Even in his essays about *Calcutta*, or *Kalkota*, there is a strong sense of moods shifting, memories languidly slipping through time, objects standing still, and people observing; not much happens other than conversations. Chaudhuri is at times an eager journalist, doggedly questioning everyone from Italian chefs (not to be confused with executive chefs!) to the very poor people who live on the streets. What I liked about most of his discourse is that he is not apologetic. He talks about "the help" and the difficulties of maintaining good help, the rocky relationship households have with the help, and never is he apologetic about having help, nor is he unaware of the thousand and one ethical and moral issues that surround the facts of belonging to a class that employs such help. He tries endlessly to understand the classes, and the history of *Calcutta* that he dissects is very much the history of classes. Very much aware of his own class, he is fixated on the middle class, its past, its present, and its image. At times very funny, at times very insightful, and sometimes a bit bitter, he recounts his memories of *Calcutta* as well as his interviews and experiences living in the city between 2009 and 2011.

Chaudhuri writes very much like an academic, and as a result, some discourses are a bit too "academic" for a casual book of essays, especially his long discourses about modernity and modern *Calcutta*. However, his essays "Universal Suffrage," "High Tea," "Italians Abroad," and "Study Leave" capture a very good balance, and manage to almost entirely escape the lofty academic discourse in favor of the hilarious, curious, melancholic, and the present.

Recommended for those who like history, cosmopolitan cities, and the mysteries of the middle class.

N Kalyan says

Globalisation has changed, and is changing, our cities beyond recognition. Because of our still colonial education, which downplays our past, most of us are not even aware of what is being lost. This finely wrought book is a kind of personal history of Calcutta, its people and its epiphanies. Amit Chaudhuri is clear that Calcutta, the grand city of Bengal Renaissance, colonial splendour and Marxist yearnings, is quite dead or only lives on in the memory of those from that time who are still among the living. While what is taking its place is not yet clear, it may yet turn into the hustlers' haven that it was in the early 19th century, with grand passions and striving thoughtlessly undone in quick time. An elegy in elegant prose, sung not through abstractions but in the narratives of the city's geography and architecture, and through the lives lived here, both past and present.

Aparajita Sengupta says

This book came to me very serendipitously. I had walked into the Oxford book store on Park Street looking for a book on Kolkata, not a detached historical narrative but more of a novel of manners. Kolkata is where I was born and has played a large role in my childhood memories. After some 16 odd years I had reconnected with the city and was ready to take off my rose tinted, foggy with nostalgia glasses and rediscover it as an adult.

Amit Chaudhuri moves to Calcutta in 1999 and 'Calcutta - 2 years in the city' is a bricolage of a novel with essays created through a series of intense conversations had with citizens from diverse walks of life to understand the irreparable change to his beloved city of childhood memories.

The essays oscillate between bewitching details (a whole chapter on the ubiquitous slatted windows!) to unraveling how present day Calcutta (he refuses to call it Kolkata) "a hazy provincial metropolis" is still living under the shadow of the great Bengal Renaissance without really being bothered to continue the legacy and is in the throes of finding a new brash identity. His voice as a harsh critic comes across as jarring as it is too far removed from the sensitive and nuanced voice which is an absolute pleasure to read.

I had read an excerpt from his novel 'A Strange and Sublime Address' which was one the most enchanting narratives I had read about spending your childhood vacays in the city. He is absolutely right when (speaking on a childhood in Kolkata) "It's a city that lends itself to make-believe, if you are open to make-believe and to the kind of illusions precious to children" and goes on to say that it has "ample space for day dreaming".

The biggest let downs were a) his perspective of the socio-economic landscape and the effects of globalisation on the city. He strives to understand the aspirations of the people of the street and of modern Kolkata but there is a dissonance and those chapters get too pedantic. b) He packs too much information in a chapter making the read a bit ponderous.

I am glad I read the book though, there are some incredible bits on the "Ingabanga" (Blue blooded Bengali Elite families), the fabulous 19th century satirical poet Ishwar Gupta, the siren call of Park Street on Christmas, the chant for 'Paribartan' (change) which defeated the Left Front and brought in Trinamool Congress, the allure of North Calcutta and many more vignettes from this city of myth and mystery.

Sairam Krishnan says

My first Amit Chaudhuri novel was 'A New World', a novel I didn't enjoy at all. But the author's reputation persuaded me to give him a second chance, as every reader should give a writer he isn't entirely convinced

with the first time.

And I wasn't disappointed. Not at all.

The book starts slowly, slowly gathers pace, becomes terrific reading in the middle parts, and slows down again at the end. When I say slow down, I mean that the author deftly makes you, the reader pause to think and take it all in. It's very nicely done.

The ideas, landscapes and history he conjures up of this city aren't entirely describable, but it might suffice to say that Bengal's history is given ample space, and so is its literary tradition and legacy, of which the author himself is a part. I expected this, since the author is a highly acclaimed critic and teacher.

And Calcutta, well, what a city! I've always been enamored by it, and with my leftist leanings, have found cause to lament the decline and eventual fall of the last great bastion of the Reds. Amit Chaudhuri sets out to describe and explain the fallen city, and in doing so, gives us a kind of slow, meandering history lesson, which, I must say, are the best kind.

Arun Divakar says

In the course of many an idle day dream, I have wondered how it would be to write about Trivandrum from a different point of view. The term different here needs to be qualified as : One tempered by extended time of living in a different part of the world and coming back to stare with wonderment, consternation and nostalgia at the place of one's early years. The tone of this book is along these lines but the backdrop is not Kerala, it is a place that has attracted and irritated me in equal measure : Calcutta. I have written in quite a bit of detail about this wonderful place in my review for Dan Simmon's *Song of Kali* and I do not intend to repeat it here. But while Simmon's captures Kolkata in cinematic ambience, Chaudhuri does so in the stark shades of a documentary.

The author looks at the city through various lenses : politics, the impact of globalization, the fall from grace of the intellectual class, the Indian renaissance, plight of the working class to name a few. To know about the history of politics in Kolkata and Kerala is to know about the history of the Communist Party in India. The rise and fall of this ideology can be captured by looking at the way these states have been built and unbuilt over the decades. The adeptness and control that Chaudhuri displays in his writing is captured well here when he looks at the transition of power from the Communist party to the Trinamool Congress in Benagal through the eyes of the working class. From politics we move to the mark that globalization has made in this sprawling city. I saw this first hand when to one side of the road was a deteriorating shamble of ramshackle slums while the other side sported a swanky, glittering shopping mall. Yes, it is a city of contradictions and has every ingredient to surprise a first time entrant. The Bengali's love for food, music and literature are touched upon in quite vivid detail and peppered by personal anecdotes. What touched me most was the story of the couple Anita Roy and Samir Mukherjee who hail from a high borne family (think *Boston Brahmins*) and who with the passage of time deteriorate slowly to a middle class life with admirable dignity. Chaudhuri captures this change in life extremely well and to me it constituted some of the best written passages in the book.

All considered, it is a thoughtful, playful and at times scathing book about India's first metropolis. I would recommend this strongly if you have been to Kolkata at least once !

umberto says

In my opinion, we could have enjoyed reading this nine-topic book more if we had been familiar with some key political, social and linguistic contexts in which Calcutta was the focal point of the author's narration with interesting viewpoints and sense of humor. Notably, this hardcover's format presentation is finely designed due to its generous blanks between each subtopic marked by three rhombus-like shapes, thus, it was a bit relieving when I could pause for a while after, say, a lengthy debate of the mentioned issues there. In other words, it was all right to read and know some episodes related to the people living in the city provided that they were satisfactorily concise and inspiring to those having not been or visited Calcutta before as well.

Impressed by his fearlessly newly-coined adjectives, I found these excerpts wittily amusing:

In April 1999, almost as soon as my fellowship in Cambridge in England came to an end, I transferred what worldly possessions I couldn't ship back to India – mainly studenty things, plates from a Latin American shop, posters, a CD player – into the damp New Court cellars at St John's College. (p. 147)

Reviewing is often a form of thuggery in Anglophone India, territorial, threatening, a way of roughing somebody up; and the Books pages are a bit like a lawless part of a town, from which you have to be thankful to slip away with your writerly life – not to mention your dignity – intact. (pp. 147-148)

Or a few unthinkable adverbs, for instance:

The women come wearing saris meant for the journeys workward and then homeward later in the evening ... (p. 256)

Incidentally, I would like to share some ideas and information on Bengali which is Greek to me. However, each Bengali word/phrase/line was clearly italicized so that I could compare it to some Thai words in which many words have adopted/adapted from Sanskrit (Their evolution in the Thai language is possibly worth writing an academic article or a dissertation). For instance, whenever I come across this word, "mrityu" (p. 227) and "danta" (p. 227), instantly I recall each of its Thai equivalent, "?????" (death), and "?????" (teeth) respectively. Furthermore, these Bengali words "manush" and "amanush" (p. 87) are the equivalents of "???????" and "???????" in Thai.

Arti says

Just after this book was released, I heard Amit Chaudhury talk about his years in Calcutta, first when he used to spend his childhood vacations and then when he stayed there for two years. I got fascinated and bought the book. He beautifully describes his two years (2009-2011) in the city, after living in Bombay and London, in first person.

Not only has he mentioned about the famous places of Calcutta like the Park Street, Flurys, New Market, Mocambo, Oxford Book Store, the clubs and Melody, he has also touched on various topics like the homeless, the migrants from adjoining states, the domestic helps, watchmen and people who run small establishments like Ramayan Shah of Chandan Hotel on Free School Street. He talks about the lengths at

which he went to purchase a Green French Window (karkharis) from a derelict house. In one of the chapters, he has mentioned about the political scenario in the city. In High Tea, he talks about the lives of Samir and Anita Mukherjee and the exquisite sandwiches they serve at high tea. In Italians Abroad, a chef tells him, "The Indians want things prepared in their way. It was too much for the Italians to take. It drove them mad", which is an exact description of a chef at a restaurant being told how to cook a particular thing.

I particularly liked Study Leave possibly because it had described Durga Puja and its preparations in the paras, and the stories that surround the Puja. He even mentions about his family, how he wants his daughter to have a Calcutta childhood. He has very beautifully described the bond between the grandfather and the granddaughter.

The green French windows are so Calcutta. His description of Park Street, Flurys, New Market made me feel very nostalgic. I remembered Flury's (famous confectionery on Park Street) pastries, the Chinese shoe shops in New Market and bookstores on College Street.

The simple language that he has used in the book has made it more interesting. His use of words like Ingabanga (Anglo-Bengalis), Marwaris, bhadrak, conti (continental), makes the book more interesting. Using suffixes like da and di, in the traditional way, makes us relate to the characters more. Bengali terms like keu ache, mojar chehra, have made it more enjoyable.

There are parts of the book that I liked much and at places felt that he was very cynical about certain things. More like a thesis. Overall, a nice book, but the icing on the cake is the cover, the pink colour is very attractive, it actually makes anyone pick the book off a shelf and read it.

Anurag says

I found this recently released book at a shop in Fulham, London. As I read the first chapters, I found myself on a nostalgic trip to Calcutta - a city that was British Empire's capital until 1911 - the metropolis now dilapidated that once shaped India's modern national identity. Without its artists, philosophers, scientists and social-reformers the modern India as we know today would have never existed.

This period of Renaissance however was neither complete nor strong enough to survive in modern India. The vast swathes of uncivilized Orient - the rural India that "Renaissance" thinkers represented have been excluded from "new" India and are reduced to extreme poverty, humiliated because of their funny tongues while Indian nationalists hypocritically embrace a history belonging to this wretched hinterland. Reading the book, it is unfortunate to see, as I had in my own trip to Calcutta, that the city which we know of in the books had somehow vanished. The dilapidation of its colonial buildings is not the kind you see in Italy or South America, probably a deeper decay and withdrawal from these colonial artifacts had taken place.

Mr Chaudhari's accounts are beautiful not for the social commentary, nor for the fluid economic history he tells us but for the character sketches of derelict Calcutta - its people (esp the Ingabanga community) and its colonial buildings. He talks repeatedly of the connection of a city with its rural outskirts that its life rested upon. However imperfectly, the paraphernalia of British Empire - its clerks, officials and colonial buildings - communicated with the world around Calcutta. This is the relationship celebrated in the best of Bengali

literature and was crucial in the making of Bengal's aristocracy - an elite that after much turmoil chose the communist ideals over the rest and was then crushed mercilessly by India's central government. Bengalis had no history, Mr Chaudhari quotes, they had built it all during the relationship with the British in the empire. With the departure of British and that of the industries they had built, all sorts of connections with the world around the city were severed.

However, politics is hardly the subject that the book concerns itself with. Mr Chaudhuri talks only of the aftermath of politics in Calcutta's culture, commenting on the heavy costs that Calcutta has paid in its battle to preserve the connection with its outer world - a battle which it has finally lost. The modern poverty of Calcutta is indeed the unfortunate unwinding of this disconnection. In a somewhat magical fashion he reminds us that none of us are living in a world too different from Calcutta. We've all witnessed a sort of aftermath of globalization - towns of great histories reduces to obsolescence, and merged into of a world flattened by supermarkets and chains connected only through highways and internet.

Chaudhuri finds that a sort of disconnection is what globalization is selling to all of us. He talks at length with Italian chefs - about Italy and failure of Italian food in Calcutta. Urban Indians don't appreciate fresh olives and tomatoes, a restaurant owner points out to him, because they want to spend on something further away from them. Would the property boom in Calcutta preserve the sense of colonial architecture? Would India's consumerism savor a local cheese? Is there a more serious aftermath of such a disconnection still waiting to occur? I was left with many such questions after reading the book.

The book is going to be divisive but it is the kind of book that modern India desperately needs. I myself found the book a bit devastating but was relieved to observe that Mr Chaudhuri's writings don't package the mysticism and Bollywood pomp that most Indian writing survives upon. For those reasons this may not be the ideal travel book on Calcutta but the poignant realism of Chaudhuri's writings seems a far better technique to understand India than what books on India generally seem to employ.

Hester says

I am grateful for this book's existence. My future sister-in-law is from Calcutta and I was to learn about the city's culture. This book introduced me to the bhadrolok and the Bengali Renaissance. I read about Durga Puja and I learned that lots of Bengali names come from the word for light. I learned a bit about the geography of the city, and about how people interact with their servants. The prevalence of disease among the poor broke my heart.

On the other hand, the author is a terrible snob who drips scorn on the people around him. He labels Oxford, England a redneck town. He makes odd pronouncements about large swathes of people. He declares a wealthy friend does not live in reality because he is confused by Chaudhuri's aversion to spending time in Europe. The author assumes his friend enjoyed Europe due to the local luxuries. He cannot see that his friend's approach to life is valid (and much more agreeable). The irony is that the author occasionally betrays his own ignorance, which he would mock in anyone else. He discusses "continental cuisine," which he insists is full of made-up dishes you can't find on any continent. The example he serves up is chicken tetrazzini. Turkey tetrazzini is a dish Americans commonly make to use up Thanksgiving leftovers.

Jamie says

A mere 87 pages in and I'm moving on, perhaps to be given a second chance when I travel to Calcutta. While I have never read Chaudhuri's fiction, based on the awards he's received this book may be proof that it's very difficult to write both fiction and nonfiction well.

I generally enjoy observations of cities, narratives that give on a sense of place. That sense can be of daily life, history, architecture, smells, impressions; 87 pages in I have no sense of Calcutta. Perhaps a fault of my own imagination.

I find the writing pompous, not in the sense that it's through the lens of an upper middle-class author who clearly fancies himself as an academic. I'm an upper middle-class academic, and think my perspective is as legitimate as anyones. The problem is, if this makes sense, the observations are SO CLEARLY simply what's happening in the author's brain.....a pure description of this.....prompted by his observations vs then translating those 'happenings' in a way that bring out the beauty and/or chaos and/or 'fill in the blank' of the city in a way that the reader feels it. Not to mention the plethora of references in the 3rd chapter greatly narrows the type of readers who have an inkling of understanding what he's getting at.

Disappointing.

Sumallya Mukhopadhyay says

Calcutta: Two Years in a City, Amit Chaudhuri

In 1903, Lord Curzon, the man who proposed to partition Bengal, wrote: "Calcutta is in reality a European city set down upon Asiatic soil, and that it is a monument – in my opinion one of the most striking extant monuments, for it is the second city to London in the entire British Empire – to the energy and achievements of our race." The British empire no longer exists and Curzon's Calcutta has metamorphosed itself into Kolkata-a city that has slowly embraced modernity with a strange longing for its past. The past, as Chaudhuri perceives, injects the necessary vitality and life in present day Kolkata. But the past is not the present. Perhaps this inspires the homeless woman in the opening section of the book to comment, "We may be beggars but we aren't mad". Chaudhuri more often than not goes begging and collects, in the process, the multifarious responses of citizens who have made Calcutta their home. The paths of Park Street, Mirza Galib Street, Esplanade, Gariahat and Ballygunj become his hunting ground from where he gathers memories of people who have conditioned themselves with the mixture of unpredictability and hopelessness of an urban city. On the one hand, Chaudhuri delineates the gradual fall of the Left Front government and on the other, focuses on the growing eccentricities of the shopping complexes and malls. He is seen spending time, interviewing people from the pavements of Calcutta; at the same time, he devotes a considerable part of the book to the quintessential Bengali bhadralok couple of Samir and Anita Mukherjee. To portray the self-renewing milieu of the city, Chaudhuri resorts to describing the restaurants of Calcutta. His exact detailing of the foods that he had tasted, and the breeding of new 'modern' restaurants where often he confronts disappointment in the dining table coalesce to qualify his argument that a city which changes continuously survives well.

Chaudhuri is a good writer but not a powerful one. At times, his episodes are too prosaic to leave an impression. One is left gnawing at the bits of brilliance presented suddenly in a paragraph.

After all, if you want to know Calcutta, you have to spend a little more than two years.

It is a city that you fall in love with. It is also the city that loves you back. Chaudhuri's romanticism seems

unrequited, otherwise.

Mark Staniforth says

From Aravind Adiga's raucous, Booker Prize-winning 'White Tiger', to the much-feted 'Narcopolis' by Jeet Thayil and the vibrant reportage of Katherine Boo's 'Behind The Beautiful Forevers', much of the recent, globally celebrated Indian writing has arrived from the point of view of those at the bottom looking up. While the western appetite for what one might glibly label slum-lit shows no sign of abating, it's evidently not the whole story from a nation seeking awkwardly to establish itself as an increasingly significant economic super-power.

Amit Chaudhuri's invigoratingly genre-defying 'Calcutta', then, stands out as a book about a city from an unapologetically upper-middle class perspective: its opinions evolved not by the daily scrabble for spare rupees and clean drinking water, but through meetings with government ministers; dinners at top-of-the-range new Italian restaurants; upheavals issuing from the unreliability of hired helps: 'Sometimes,' writes Chaudhuri with the merest hint of self-parody, 'when I'm in Norwich during the Pujas, I hear that some of the help have gone missing for more than a week, and the house is in disarray.'

Certainly, if you came to 'Calcutta' straight from Boo's gut-wrenchingly desperate account of daily life in a Mumbai slum, you might consider such an observation worthy of some contempt, though Chaudhuri later clarifies: 'it's the machinery – cheap labour – on which India, even the world, runs today. I say this not to exculpate myself, but to point out that I'm complicit not in a local mode of exploitation, but in a global arrangement.'

In fact, Chaudhuri's different perspective is precisely what makes 'Calcutta' so engrossing, and so enrichingly unique. It's not a travelogue, as such, and it could certainly not be classed as a form of autobiography. Chaudhuri uses his own experiences as the framework to gauge the health of a modern city which rose to prominence on fiery left-wing politics and culture, yet now finds those same qualities a hindrance as it flounders in the wake of a thrusting Mumbai and the seat of political power in Delhi.

Chaudhuri was born in Calcutta but brought up in what was then Bombay. He was educated in England and currently divides his time between Norwich – where he is Professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of East Anglia – and Calcutta, a city to which he has returned in order to care for his ailing, ageing parents: an all-too-common occurrence in the city, according to Chaudhuri, who muses: 'Bombay's main preoccupation is money, and Delhi's is power.. Calcutta's preoccupation is, 'will you be eating at home tonight?''

Chaudhuri ruminates on the gradual crumble of the city's long-time leftist government, the influx of Italian eateries and chefs driven to make quick exits by what they see as the city's culinary intransigence, and the way big money and western razzmattazz is eroding its traditional values: on the introduction of the Kolkata Knight Riders cricket team, Chaudhuri observes: '[Its] cheerleaders were met with grave reproach by both cricket purists and common-or-garden puritans, and then – as is the case with so much in Indian public life – lazily accepted and secretly looked forward to.'

Perhaps it is precisely that kind of inertia which has seen Calcutta slowly cede its power base to thrusting cities elsewhere. Chaudhuri's story is very much one of a city whose best days have passed. And yet for all his evident concern for the direction in which the place he can no longer bring himself to love is heading, the gentle, evocative way in which Chaudhuri charts its slow decline makes the place, like the book itself, nothing short of beguiling.

Kobe Bryant says

It should have been either funnier or meaner

Vivek Tejuja says

It is not easy to write about a city. Any city for that matter. More so, the city you were born in and then left and then came back again to visit a couple of times, and then left behind almost permanently and then returned. For Amit Chaudhuri, I would like to believe that Calcutta has always been a part of his life (or so it seems from the books that he writes). Everything that he has to say has to revolve around the city or make an appearance some way or the other in his fiction. This time though, he has taken a step further and written a book completely on the city of his birth, vacations, dreams and of a city that is home: Calcutta.

Reading “Calcutta: Two Years in the City” by Amit Chaudhuri is like taking a roller-coaster ride. I was born and brought up in Bombay and somehow after reading this book, I yearn to visit Calcutta. I had visited it in 2011 to study there for a while, and after that I did not go back there. Maybe I will someday. For now, here is what I read and my thoughts on the book.

Amit Chaudhuri’s book is an account of two years (2009-2011) spent by him in the great metropolis. Amit’s Calcutta almost seems very different from the city that exists. He writes about the Calcutta of the nineteenth century and then compares it (almost) to the Calcutta of the twentieth century and how much has changed and what has remained. To me that was the most fascinating aspect of the book. I have always wondered the same about my city and tried putting things in perspective, however never been able to do so. While reading this book, I could try a little.

“Calcutta: Two Years in the City” is a book that almost takes your breath away, because it has been written from the heart and less using the mind. The characters that Mr. Chaudhuri encounters, their lives, the dichotomy that plays itself out on a daily basis in metros, the political agendas, the stench of the city that gets under your skin and its people and the warmth sometimes is all there in this book. The bygone era of the city has been beautifully described by Mr. Chaudhuri, this includes the language, the names, the visits that he made to the city and its exploration through them, and the yearning for the city for not there and the need to get away when there is what everyone feels when returning to a city.

For me this book was something quite special. It is nothing out of the ordinary. Everyone writes about cities they belong to and what has been their relationship with them. Having said that, the way this book is written is what took me by the horns. The simplicity of language, the socio-political angles described without taking sides, without the emotions getting complex or convoluted is superbly expressed in the book. Amit Chaudhuri captures the essence of the city so well that sometimes I forgot that the Calcutta I visited was very different from the way (or not) the writer writes about it. I feel that non-fiction has to have the extra something about it to engage you completely in it, almost to drag you in the content and “Calcutta: Two Years in the City” manages to do that. I highly recommend this jewel of a book. It will amaze you and make you see the city differently. I sure do want to visit it again and relive the moments.
