

## Some selected Ghost stories as Urban Legends of Calcutta

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### Introduction

Urban legends are stories that have been fabricated and interwoven into the history and essence of a city (Young, 2016). An urban legend usually lies in part truth, an incident or the ambience of a place is given prime importance and a tale builds up. They have their origins in folklore (Ashcroft et al. 2000). Urban legends have a strong historical and cultural setting (Biswas, 2010) even though they are mostly fictional in character. Hence, some of them have been documented in books, others remain in the oral form while many are slowly lost with time and a change in the city's character (Bird, 2002).

Popularity of urban legends maybe attributed to the fact that these give charm and character to a place. However the very nature of their origin gives a distorted view and is more embroiled in the psychology of the residents (Harding, 2005). A historical view on urban legends can form a very basic interesting surmise for establishing the nature and character of a city.

### Review of Literature:

Calcutta, the erstwhile British capital of the Raj, has its fair share of urban legends and ghost stories. It is one favourite occupation of the Bengali, to fabricate oral narratives, sometimes passed from one generation to the other, spoken, ornamented and listened to on rainy afternoons. Such tales had their humble origins in the rural regions of Bengal, where 'Ashaare Golpo' (simply 'cock and bull story'). Ashaar is the month of June and July, when the incessant monsoon rain prevents people to go out to work, so they curl up on the bed and exchange stories, sometimes true, mostly fabricated. Hence the term 'golpo' or story (Day, 1883). This term is mainly associated with fictional accounts was a brilliant form of entertainment on the days spent indoors. Bengalis also have a wide plethora of ghost, ghouls and demons, each having distinctive characters as well as belonging to different sections of the society, maintaining the hierarchy even after death (Day, 1883). However if Calcutta is taken into consideration we find a number of such bizarre urban legends, some popular, the others now lost in oblivion. The British seem to have carved a special niche in Calcutta's history of urban legends (Samajdar, 1963; Ortiz, 2015). The number of Sahib and Memsahib Ghosts who haunt the different villas and mansions in Calcutta are many; still holding on to the grand British era. Carriages and Palquains carrying British Lords, Ball dances and dinner parties and headless British horsemen form the very common urban legends that have been passed on from one generation of Calcuttans to the next. So Calcutta has an ethno-centric history of myths

(Brunvand, 2001) that can be categorically divided into region specific hauntings. Most interestingly these hauntings have an associated history that has been passed on as oral accounts and this forms the very basis of this paper.

**Objectives:**

- a) Classifying the various urban legends of the city (ghost stories and hauntings) and understanding their spatial spread over the city.
- b) Trying to look into the reasons behind the segregation of these legends in respect of the city's history and social setup.

**Methodology:**

The ghost stories that have been documented in some written format as a narrative have been taken into consideration. Their spatial location is considered based on the map to understand their distribution over the map.

**Classification of Urban Legends**

This paper will mainly focus on the urban legends that are associated with hauntings. Serial killings that once had created sensations have been left out.

Attempts to classify Urban Legends have not been done by many because of their fabricated and ever changing nature (Harding, 2005). However Brunvand (2001) classifies urban legends under the following major categories:

1. Legends about Automobiles
2. Legends about Animals
3. Horror Legends
4. Accident Legends
5. Sex and Scandal Legends
6. Crime Legends
7. Business and Professional Legends
8. Legends about Governments
9. Celebrity Rumours and legends
10. Academic legends

The focus on Calcutta's urban legends in this paper are based on the horror stories. Horror stories can be divided into subclasses (Brunvand, 2001) according to the American popular urban legends. But since urban legends are place specific, the horror legends have been reclassified to meet the needs of Calcutta's urban fabric.

Stories of ghosts can be broadly classified on the type of spectre/ ghost. Based on this, the houses and streets of Calcutta with popular urban legends can be clubbed together. The classification has been done on the basis of popular stories by the author as there is a marked absence of any classification which will fit the scenario of Calcutta's diverse tales.

**White Town Urban Legends:** The White Town is that part of the city which was inhabited by the British. This part of the town can be spatially demarcated as Park Street-BBD Bag and its environs as well as Alipore and its surroundings. This part of the city has many British mansions which are associated with ghost stories. Some of the most common legends are the ghost of Hastings House, National Library, Grand Post Office, Garstin Place (All India Radio Office) and so on to name a few. The Sir Stuart Hogg Market and buildings surrounding it have also their own stories of haunted Britishers out on a nightly vigil. Accounts of ghosts, phantom carriages, duels, Memsahibs form a myriad platter of urban legends that have become the very essence of Calcutta's interesting history and myth.

**Black Town Urban Legends:** The 'Black Town' is originally named to the native occupied part of the city, i.e. the Northern part of the city. The haunted houses of North Calcutta are numerous, but most of the residents have either forgotten the urban legends associated with them as with time they are being razed to the ground.

**Metiabruz:** The Metiabruz area with the legends of the Nawab of Oudh, Wajid Ali Shah has left behind stories of ghosts, hauntings, murders, dead bodies which have been documented by Samajdar in his book. The history, its fabrications and mystery creates a beautiful setting for the weaving of such tales. Again this area is a classic case of the 'Other' (in this case the exiled Nawab) who lives an unhappy life in a make-belief world of Lucknow right in the heart of the city. The locals may have fabricated and romanticised the life of the Nawab which was a new alien external feeling for the people of the city.

**Other Ghost Stories:** The other ghost stories are scattered across different parts of the city, some of them having found favour with the internet revolution. These urban legends are as well popular and find an important niche amongst the other older haunting stories.

### **Urban legends: looking at the realities behind the legends**

Calcutta's urban legends may be segregated on the basis of their distribution in relation to the exotic and the relationships existing between the colonisers and the native residents (Fig.1). The spatial distribution of the haunting incidents maybe very closely linked with the socio-economic setup of the city historically. It is the British, the rulers and colonisers caused fear amongst their native subjects. The stories of their oppression would create fear that lived on in the form of urban legends of the city (Kumar, 2013). These marginalised people (the locals) had little contact with the Europeans and were segregated and declared as the 'Other' (Young, 2016). Such differences made the 'Other' fearful of their masters when they lived and even beyond their powers when they died and became feared ghosts. The most popular urban legends are associated with the British or White Town region of Calcutta. A cluster of haunted mansions are seen in the BBD Bag region (former Dalhousie Square), which have been mentioned in a number of books and oral accounts of spectral visions and strange occurring. It's

interesting to note how Ortiz (2015) in his book 'Ghosts of Calcutta' has spoken about a lady who tortures her native servants and her ghost is seen to haunt and punish them. This clearly portrays the negative relationships that were established then. Maybe this negativity can be accounted for the popular ghost stories about numerous British men and women. Similarly, the 'exotic' flavour is attached to all things that are beyond the common man's reach. Such fables revolved around the exiled nawab and his 'mini Lucknow'. The Nawab and his entourage also belonged exclusively to the 'Other' community: speaking a different language, having definitive styles of dress and food which was very different from the residents of the Lower Ganga plains. This exclusion lead to rumours which persisted and became fabricated and slowly became legends (Lomba, 1998). The legends in North Calcutta find their origins from the rural folk tales and many such stories of headless ghosts and fish eating banshees can be traced back to them.

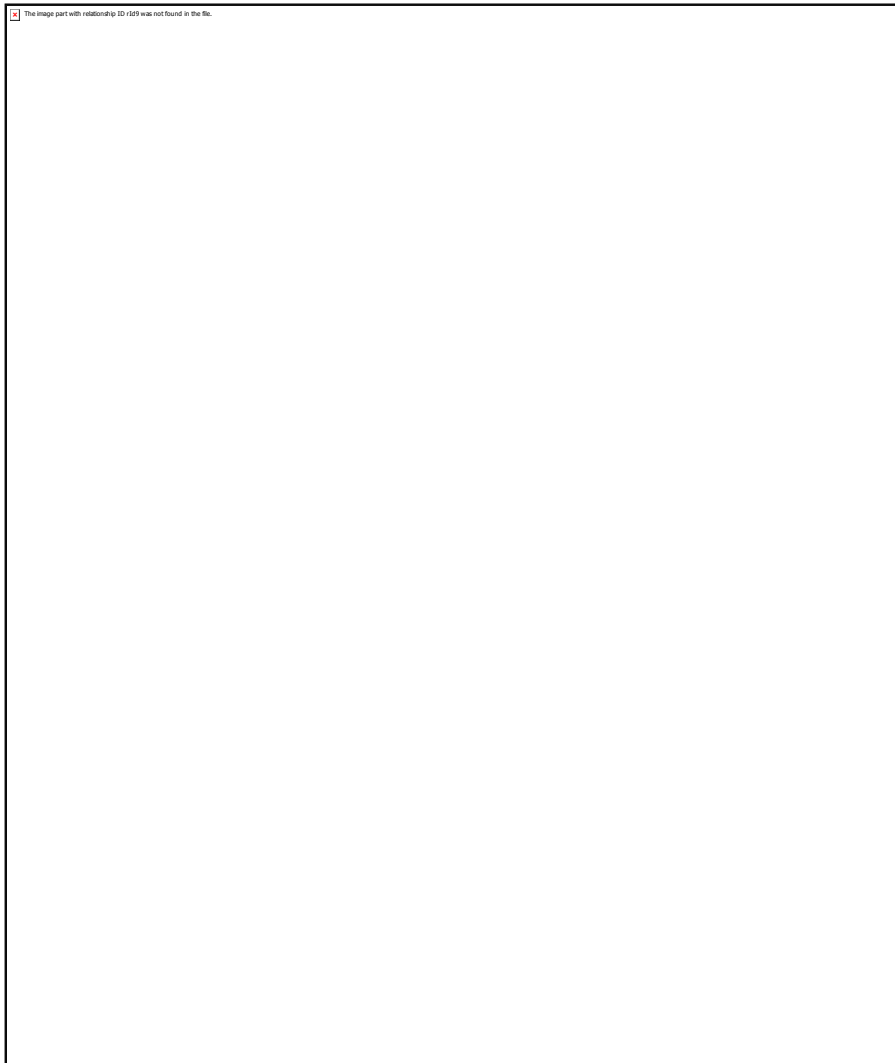


Fig.1: Urban Legend Map of Calcutta

### Urban legends of Post-independence period:

Most of the urban legends cited here belong to a pre independence era with fewer ghost stories finding favour amongst the citizens. However it is seen that the internet has revolutionised these myths as countdowns of hauntings and ghost walks have become quite popular in the city (Biswas, 2010; Sen, 2015). It can mostly be cited as a product of the colonial structure whose weakening has led to the dissolution of such stories (Kumar, 2013).

### Conclusion

The attempt at mapping lost narratives and urban legends of Calcutta shows a new aspect of the city: that of its rich oral history in the form of legends and myths that are dynamic and has an important historical and cultural dimension. Their spatial distribution is in accordance with the socio-cultural dimensions of the city. Such urban legends should be documented as they can be important themes to explore into the psychological growth of the city.

### Note

Calcutta city has been renamed as Kolkata. However the older name has been used in the article. The author holds no claim to the authenticity of the narratives as most of them are personal experiences and perceptions of interviews given in some books. Since legends are fabricated in nature, certain popular legends have been documented which forms the basis of choosing locations on the map. It is notable that a number of 'ghost walks' in the city are also a reference point for this article. The author takes no responsibility for the authenticity of these stories.

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