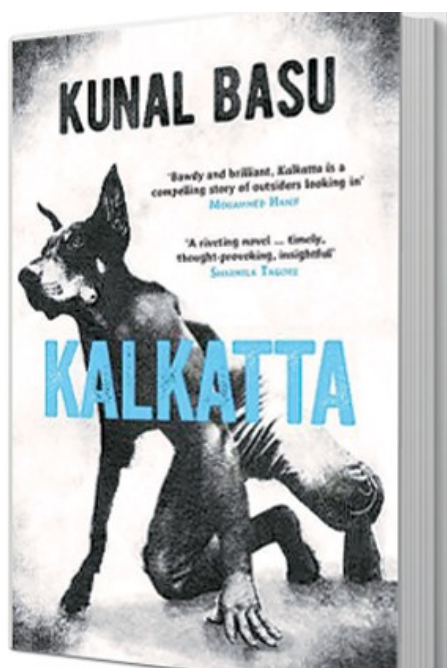


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This, Here, Is My City

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Kunal Basu moves out of his comfort zone in this novel about life in the underbelly of Kolkata.

Title: Kalkatta

*Author: **Kunal Basu***

*Publisher: **Picador India***

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*Price: **599***

By Samantak Das

“...pushed to the limit, every woman – and every man — is a willing

prostitute. Everything, everyone, every value has its price.” Thus Kunal Basu in “Beyond Selfishness”, an academic article, co-authored with Harry Mintzberg and Robert Simons and published in the MIT Sloan Management Review in 2002. Disputing the quoted contention, the article ends by invoking “one crucial choice facing each of us as individuals. We can live our lives... obsessed with getting ever more, with keeping score, with constantly calculating and scheming. Or, we can open ourselves to another way, by engaging ourselves to engage others so as to restore our sense of balance.”

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The story of Jamshed Alam (Jami), narrator-protagonist of Basu’s latest offering, Kalkatta, is one of trying, and ultimately failing, to make the right, the human, the humane, the crucial, choice — for what chance does a poor, “illegal” Bihari Muslim have of making it in a city where he belongs to the half that is paved with dirt, not gold? How can he ever hope to restore a sense of balance in a life that had none to begin with?

Yet, it is this desire to become a pucca Kalkatta-wallah that drives

almost every move that Jami makes, that articulates virtually every breath he takes but no matter what he does, Kalkatta is always watching, weighing, scheming and calculating to thwart him and his desires.

This is Kalkatta, meri jaan, not the anglicised Calcutta of The Shadow Lines, nor even the Kolkata of Shankar's Chowringhee or, for that matter, KR Meera's Hangwoman, whose protagonists are, for the most part, Bengalis to the last woman (or man). This is that slice of the underbelly of the city populated by the majority of the city's 56 per cent non-Bengali inhabitants, a dank, dismal, petty, selfish world where most individuals embody Thomas Hobbes's characterisation of human life as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short".


It is this world that takes a Jamshed and flings him from failure (in school) to mediocrity (in a travel-agent's office) to success (as a male prostitute), which, even as it dehumanises his nobler instincts, nevertheless tantalises him with the possibility of a richer, purer, higher, way of being and doing. The three Ms in Jami's life — his sister Miriam; his first client, or, in his lingo, "party", Monica; and the tragic, cultured, yet indigent, Mandira from the leafy south of the city — each embodies aspects of this possibility of a higher, spiritually richer existence, and each, in her own way, serves to depict just how far Jamshed is from realising this possibility.

Basu recently spoke of his need to move out of his "comfort zone" (upper-middle class, cultured, south Calcutta, Bengali, Hindu) as the motive force behind this novel and to the extent that he is able to capture the sounds and sights of a part of the city (central-north Kolkata's Zakaria Street) and of individuals who dwell there (the Party neta, the attar-seller, the rising thug, the butcher, all of them

lower/lower-middle class, none a Bengali, most of them Muslim) he has succeeded magnificently.

If this reviewer has a bone to pick with Basu, it has to do with his tendency to reduce individuals to types — a magnificent exception being Rani, the hijra — who then become pegs to hang his polemics, and to the all-too-typical depiction of the relationship between state power, represented by the police chief, and the poor Muslim victims, exemplified by Jami's crippled sister and brother-in-law to be.

Despite these caveats, Kalkatta illuminates a city that is very far removed from the experience or comfort zone of its likely reader. And that should be reason enough to give this novel the chance to speak directly to you, instead of depending on a review like this.

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