

SPOTLIGHT

Europe in Emerging Asia
Edited by Fredrik Erixon and
Krishnan Srinivasan
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Tale of two Continents

This book covers much new ground even as it presents illuminating insights into perspectives discussed elsewhere. Its value lies in the concise manner in which it covers ties between two continents; it should thus interest both scholars and laypersons with an interest in this field of study... A review by ravindra kumar

CONSIDERING the length of their ties and a historical landscape pock-marked by the blight of conquest, colonisation and occasional strife, you might imagine that Europe and Asia would today have a relationship more evolved than they seem to. But even as the two continents engage, as they have for centuries, political and economic encounters seem to run into obstacles. An analysis of those obstacles from various perspectives ~ European and Asian ~ forms the underpinning of this important collection of writings.

As the editors note in their introduction, "Any speculation on whether the EU is a world power is not useful. Nor is the debate on whether certain economies in Asia are emerging or re-emerging. We are content to state that the EU and emerging Asia are important actors in world affairs... It is prudent to postpone any declaration of the 'Asian century', as also of the diminishing global strength of the United States and Europe, despite the current EU crisis in self-confidence. As for emerging Asia, predictions of the implosion of China and the descent of India into dystopia have proved wrong, and there is growing optimism in the capitals of the Asian big economies."

The importance of the engagement is underscored variously by the dozen contributors. As co-editor Srinivasan notes in the first chapter ~ on Europe-India ties, a dialogue he notes is

marked by an absence of intimacy ~ "Eurocentricity must be replaced by a growing receptivity to cooperation with Asian emerging economies like Asia." While Europe's ability to influence the global marketplace is "waning", India he feels must in its own interest maximise its connections with the continent. Presciently Srinivasan notes that "India enjoys brand recognition in Europe and holds considerable appeal due to its spirituality, soft power and economic potential."

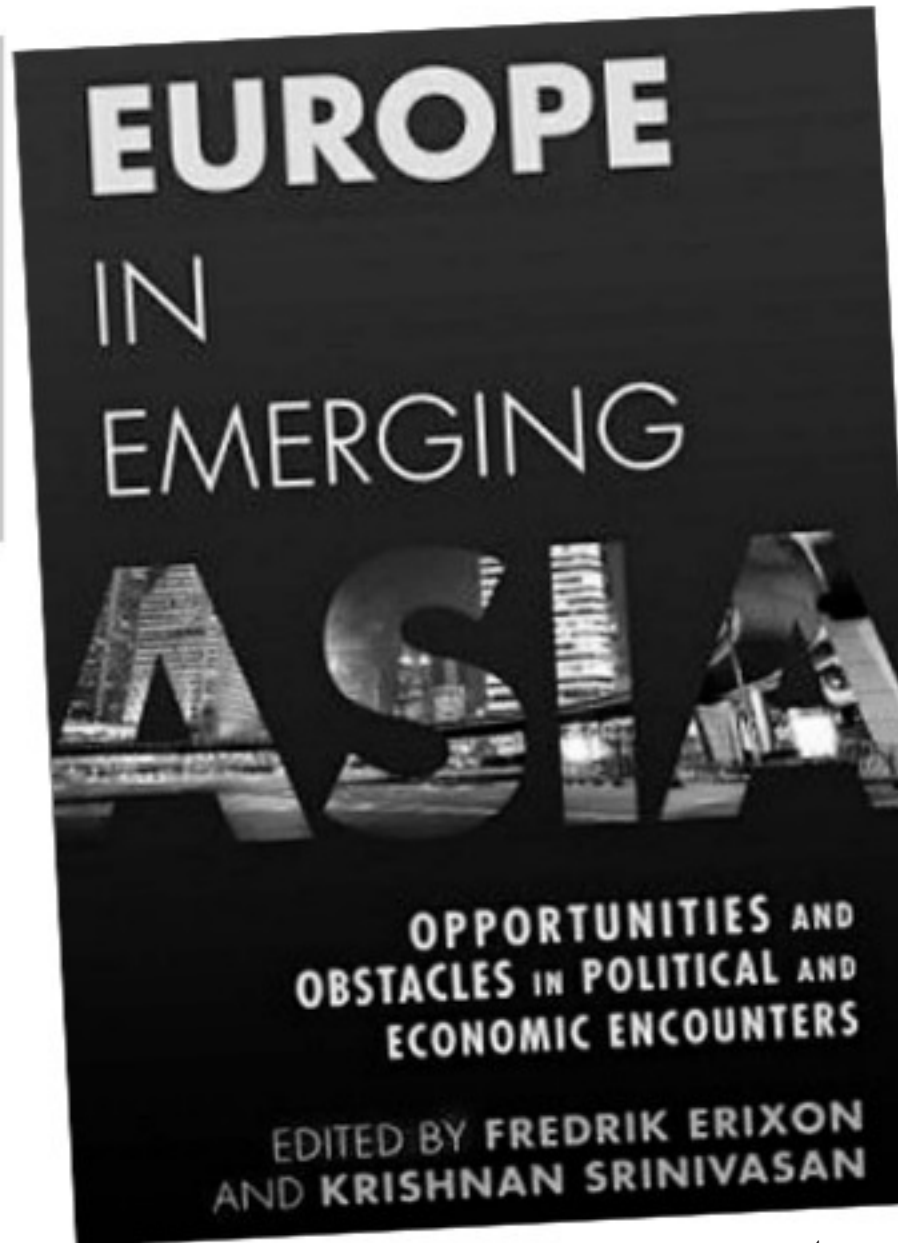
Europe, says Srinivasan, is not threatening and does not feel threatened by India; and while it can be "clumsy and preachy", it is "fundamentally non-intrusive" and can therefore assist in enhancing India's status in the world.

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury picks up the thread of the preachy European while examining the relationship through a South Asian prism. He criticises Europe's tendency to hold that its values are universal and says this is sometimes not "an

easy sell" to some Asians who stress the importance of their own values. "There is little doubt that despite noble intentions and ideals, the EU has often been maladroit in its dealing with many South Asian countries."

Chowdhury concludes that "while Europe-South Asia relations have many features that are enduring and durable, an obvious critique of these connections is that they cannot be fully and mutually rewarding without the involvement of America, which is really the elephant in the room, whether seen or unseen. Historically, the fact that the United States was not a colonial power gives it an advantage..."

If America might be called the elephant in the room as far as the future of Europe-Asia ties are concerned, Britain lumbers into that role in any analysis of the past, as brought out by James Mayall in his "tale of opportunity and frustration". While noting that Britain's historic engagement with much of the Asian region should create



Mayall notes: "The EU, Britain very much included, sees itself as the latest avatar of Western civilisation. The assumptions of Western hegemony are so deeply rooted that they are mostly taken for granted, but if Britain and Europe are to remain relevant in a rapidly de-Westernising world, there is an urgent need to rethink and reform the international order to make it more genuinely unipolar."

In his chapter on Europe's eastward expansion, Hari Vasudevan notes that there is "potential for competition between Europe and emerging Asia for Caspian-Central Asian resources, competition that has dimensions that are understated but likely to assume new importance." He concludes, "The lines that have distinguished Asian political behaviour from that of the EU may be likely to blur in such circumstances, as the EU itself becomes embroiled in the complexities of the borderlands of emerging Asia and expanding Europe."

Overall, this book covers much new ground even as it presents illuminating insights into perspectives discussed elsewhere. Its value lies in the concise manner in which it covers ties between two continents; it should thus interest both scholars and laypersons with an interest in this field of study.

the reviewer is Editor, *The Statesman*

LIFE & LETTERS

Kalkata ~ abject, object, romance

Kunal Basu's depiction of Kolkata, bourgeois under the Marxists, embodies the irony of destitution's power to suddenly transform itself into revolutionary nihilism, writes debasish lahiri. Such energy, however, cannot be allowed to succeed in reaching its goal. It has to be controlled and contained in the realms of the illegal and the criminal world

NOW comfortably dead and beatified, hours and a night after the moonlight had lain wet with his blood on the road, like his body that he had left by then, Jamshed Alam, soars above Howrah Bridge and finds a city of "a thousand mirrors" spread below him: the city of Kalkatta.

The apotheosis of Kunal Basu's novel *Kalkatta* and its narrator Jamshed (aka Jami) in this post-mortem dream finds him exploring the visual possibilities of complex, multi-layered narrative. "From my height all was within reach", but not probably within Jami's grasp: or else what was heaven, (this sojourn gratis), for?

In a city that would not take him in and one he would not let go of, the sheer act of naming — "Burrabazaar and Bowbazaar, Lalbazaar, Esplanade, our very mosque on Zakaria Street" — gives Jami's love for the city its final and true resting place. Jami's Kalkatta grants him the right to name, to christen by love and longing's longue durée, only after he has shuffled off this mortal coil. The final pages of the novel are a rendition in words of the visionary, yet abject colours of legendary Indian painter Gulam Mohammed Sheikh's triptych, *Passing Angel, A Life and Summer Diary*.

What is so powerfully evident at the end is something that runs like a spine in Basu's novel. Jami's eye is painterly but not in a literal sense. Like Sheikh, who learnt his craft from encounters with the work of early Sieneese painters Duccio di Buoninsegna, Ambrogio Lorenzetti and Sassetta, Basu's narrator and protagonist, belying his head-in-the-gutter existence, makes us see the power of colour to create mood and atmosphere. Half-dirt, half-gold, the paving of a Kolkata street, as Jami's mother had let him know, with another half hidden in the whole, the half in blood. The first line of the novel sets the idiom of painting, word-painting, securely, "Blood tastes bitter, mixed with dirt." It is as if a painter were mixing colours on his palette. Blood and dirt caked together with the golden spittle of his imagination and a rare quality to give are Jami's tools as painter-narrator.

"The night was chequered with shadows when they caught me, trapped me, rather, with a call from the roadside. The call of a friend." The call is itself an apparition, standing in for the rites of friendship; it welcomes Jami, however, to a brutal, and equally ritualistic beating, where the sense of his unbelonging is driven, quite literally, into his gut. To society he becomes a pariah, a stray dog, someone who should never be pleased about others and especially not about himself.

This stark opening exchange between Kalkatta, its gangs, led by its Rakibs, and Jami is untainted by cast shadows. Dramatic effects of light and dark are strictly abjured, which lend an incredible sensuous seduction to the surface. The eye is invited to caress every form. It is Sieneese virtuosity in Kalkatta. Colour here seems derived

from light and air, aromas and sounds, rather than complexions and surface tints of objects.

After such destitution and denial there can only be resurrection. The more Jami loses the battle for his breathing life, on all fronts, the closer he is to rising out of its morass: a wish fulfilled in the final pages of the novel. Jami is caught, between the mystique of his birth — a Muslim from Bihar born in Bangladesh in a camp called Geneva — which confuses more than it reveals, and the certainty of death that he carries like an oft-repeated, idiosyncratic gesture in Communist-run Kolkata where the shuttle of Marxist rhetoric moves across the city, much like the shuttles and looms at the zari factory that his mother now owns.

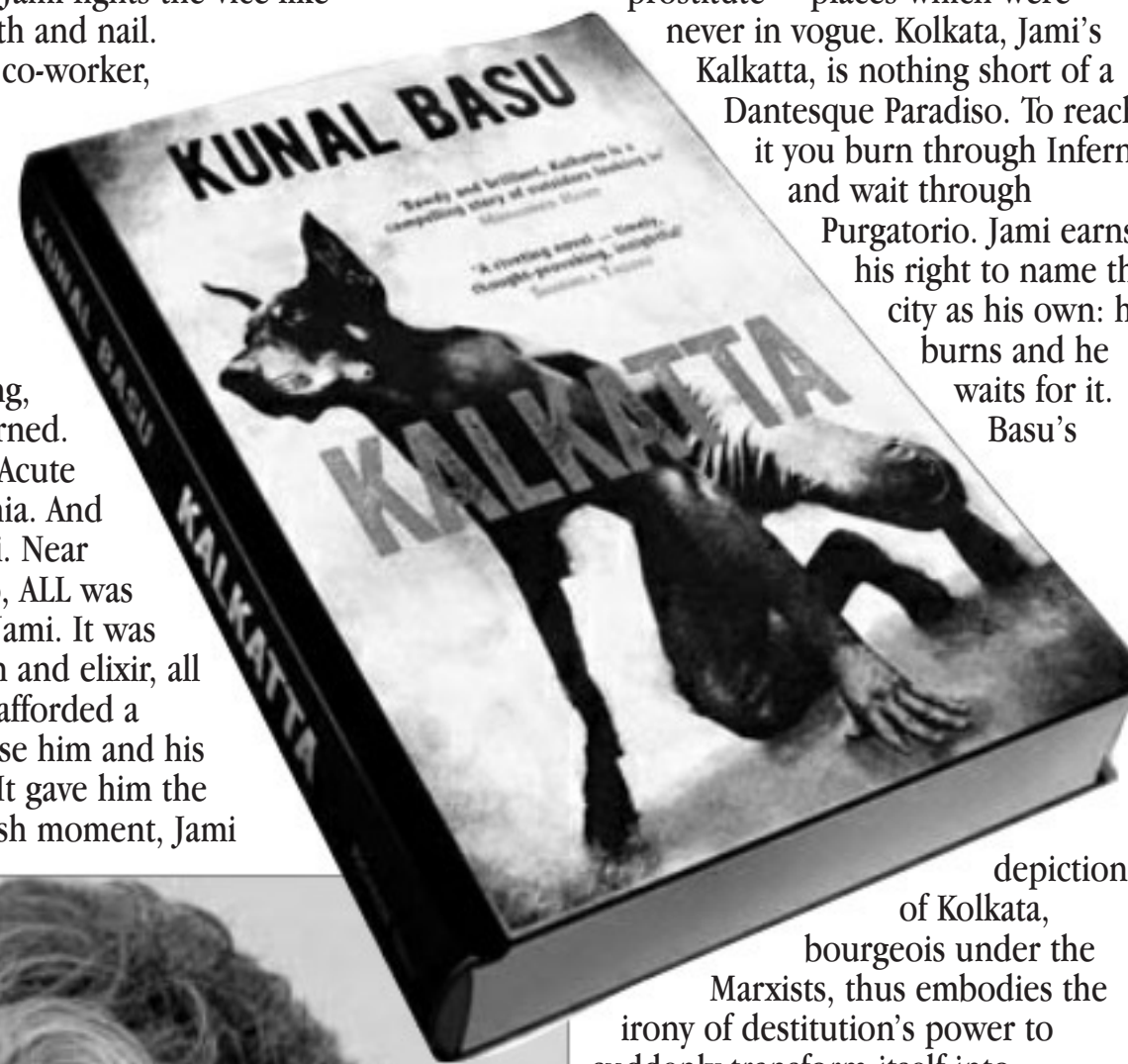
Basu's brilliant rendition of these webs of colourful and contrary experiences, the pestilence, the pell-mell, the exfoliating detail of the glory and capitulation of the proletariat, is never penwork that cramps his hand. Basu and Jami embrace this porcine reality with untempered gusto.

After a rather early exit from school, Jami became an assistant to a questionable passport agent. A chance encounter with a lonely, high-society woman during the understaffed Durga Puja holidays at the travel agency run by Rajesh Sharma opens the door to a world of luxury and risqué encounters which become more regular, a job, after she introduces him to a friend who runs a massage saloon with "other benefits". Jami becomes a gigolo: the "gigolo king of Calcutta", as he keeps reminding readers and himself in moments of intense self-flagellation that intersperse the novel. "When people think of a gigolo, they don't expect to find a good man but someone who lives by cheating. Given half a chance he'll steal, they think. Lie, gossip, blackmail. Isn't it true that only a bad man comes into a bad line? They expect to find a Gurung not a Jamshed Alam." Rani the eunuch, who manages the massage parlour, tells Jami.

In one of the many moments that grip you in this novel — set deliberately in the oeuvre of the revolting, to test us, to tell us that one does not receive a heart in legacy, one has to grow a heart — Rani testifies to the inexhaustible timbre of Jami's existence, the inextinguishable spiritual presence of Jami, the cause of both his tragedy and transcendence, "No one will expect you to suffer, no matter how badly you've been hurt."

The good never suffer and the beautiful always inherit heaven: Basu's Jami fights the vice-like grip of this maxim tooth and nail. He befriends a former co-worker, Mandira, a single mother with a sick boy, Pablo, who has it ALL. Basu's brilliant play on words reveals how Pablo's disease is both the harbinger of death and death-defying, where Jami was concerned. ALL is an acronym for Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia. And yet it was "all" for Jami. Near certain death for Pablo, ALL was life-giving therapy for Jami. It was his pharmakon: poison and elixir, all in one. Pablo's illness afforded a chance for Jami to nurse him and his inner self into health. It gave him the reason to be. In a selfish moment, Jami

nouveau décor, the alleys that accost, pimp and prostitute — places which were never in vogue. Kolkata, Jami's Kalkatta, is nothing short of a Dantesque Paradiso. To reach it you burn through Inferno and wait through Purgatorio. Jami earns his right to name the city as his own: he burns and he waits for it. Basu's



depiction of Kolkata, bourgeois under the Marxists, thus embodies the irony of destitution's power to suddenly transform itself into revolutionary nihilism. Such energy, however, cannot be allowed to succeed in reaching its goal. It has to be controlled and contained in the realms of the illegal and the criminal world. So much for egalitarianism in a left-handed city. "Now Kalkatta made me mad. How can you call a place your 'final destination' when it drives you out of your home? When it forces you to fail even before you've had a chance to pass?"

Jami's amused and disgusted look at the Kolkata "insider", to whom is given the right to be disgusted and amused with Jami's lot, is a seismic upending of categories. Lines like "Walking home that night, I knew Kalkatta was all about sex — all about grabbing your luck and doing your business", force us to defend ourselves, and thus see our fallacies and sense of superiority better, for what it is. And then as the ultimate tackle to the outsider anathema there is Charnock, good old Job, whose dust has shown the same fortitude as his fellow biblical forebear. Charnock's city was an outsider's city and Jami, quite accidentally, finds him and a city's origin, again. It was like finding himself. "But here I was standing before the founder, the great-great-great-grandfather of every Kalkatta-wallah, the man who'd seen it all from his tomb, if he could see, that is, to tell him the full story of the life of a failed Kalkatta-wallah. Only he would care to listen... Only Charnock will have the patience to listen. He'd have no place to go."

Charnock's silence draws out Jami's story from his niggardly tongue, always suspicious of chinks in a painted façade of interest and fellow-feeling from his audiences. It makes Jami ponder the patterns he may have overlooked. An uncommon gigolo, he mulls over the reasons for Allah's ordaining of his life as a gigolo. He mulls on Charnock's reasons for staying back after the demise of his Hindu wife. Could someone have

come all the way, from England or Dhaka, just to die in Kolkata? Only a jackass, new-age Job or a "chutiya Charnock" would be capable of such foolhardiness: only Jami.

Kalkatta pairs us with an interconnected narrative that sutures the city into shape. It guides us and leads us. But we are unable to get rid of it. It is insidious. It is always there. Curse or blessing, it is our lot.

The dogs of Kolkata figure powerfully in an ensemble of creaturely acts that spin the city for us in Basu's novel. Sleeping dogs, silent dogs, witness dogs, symbol of the downtrodden, the derelict, the debarred, dogs remind us of the disconcerting and dangerous abjection that surrounds sanitised life-stories in the city. This abjection is a sickness at one's own body, at the body beyond the clean and proper thing. The abject's body repeatedly violates its own borders and disrupts the wish for physical self-control and social propriety. Not far from the sepi sleep of the silt-heavy Ganga, the streets of Chitpur, Burabazaar and Colutolla are witness to a monstrous metamorphosis as the dog-star, far above, foams and howls in an interstellar wilderness. Jami is himself this transformed figure, only half-man, by virtue of what society merely allows him to be. Self-fashioning does not have a dog's chance in this city.

In savouring these evocations the contributions of Nabarun Bhattacharya especially come to mind. In his powerful yet brief novella, *Lubdhak* (The Dog Star), the surreal geography of the Kolkata night is serrated by a mad dog muzzling a mendicant moon. One runs amok with alliteration. Witness Jami's lurid, sleepless crossings and turnings along the patina of the city's dark-lit hours.

Interestingly, in a statement attributed to the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali (the fourth Caliph), "Happy is the one who leads the life of a dog!" For the dog has 10 characteristics that everyone should possess. First, the dog has no status among creatures; second, the dog is a pauper having no worldly goods; third, the entire earth is his resting place; fourth, the dog goes hungry most of the time; fifth, the dog will not leave his master's door even after receiving a hundred lashes; sixth, he protects his master and his friend, and when someone approaches he will attack the foe and let the friend pass; seventh, he guards his master by night, never sleeping; eighth, he performs most of his duties silently; ninth, he is content with whatever his master gives him; and tenth, when he dies, he leaves no inheritance. Jami, who is so worried about Allah's plan for him, certainly did not know this. He might even have been pleased.

Kalkatta is ultimately about those parts of Kolkata one passes fleetingly while getting to Howrah Station from the north, or is forced to enter as a detour around gridlocked thoroughfares further inshore from the river. It is about people whom one spots in the greasy corners of trams and eye as though they were particularly large beetles. The feeling engendered is something between fearful avoidance and violent squashing. Of course, we can always get off, and we do. There is no getting off Kunal Basu's novel, however. *Kalkatta* is stone honey. One may doubt the conflation of voices, Basu's with Jami, the learned, accomplished, masterly storyteller, with heightened imagination and the shy, semi-literate, halting, yet sensitive gigolo. But we are never in doubt about the milieu.

Even to die is somehow to invent for Jami. Death for Jami comes by recognition of a figure, very like his own Abbu, who draws him into the vortex of multitudinousness. Virgil says in his *Aeneid* that the descent into Avernus is easy. For Jami, it is an ascent.