

A Voyage to the Past

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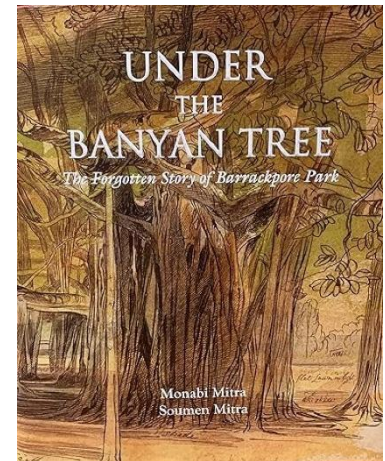
Book Name: *Under the Banyan Tree: The Forgotten Story of Barrackpore Park*

Author: Monabi Mitra and Soumen Mitra

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The book 'Under the Banyan Tree. The Forgotten Story of Barrackpore Park' written by academician Monabi Mitra and police officer Soumen Mitra documents the forgotten social history of the Government House and Barrackpore Park. The pages of the book unfurled me to an era when technology had not crept in our everyday social existence. The book makes the nineteenth and twentieth century's come alive in our imagination. In this bare brown earth, marshy lands dotted with mud huts built on the banks of meandering rivers, our colonial masters-the British, engaged in their "civilizing mission". Even though there were no motor, electric lights, lanterns lit the bungalows, the moon casts its magical spell on Government House and the Barrackpore Park. The picturesque landscape, cool breeze of the river made it a romantic place, in spite of the afternoon heat.

In the book, the authors mention Emily Eden pointing out, 'there was a lonely moon and the Hooghly, is a handsome bit of river and we floated about an hour and then went to bed'. The place emerged as a retreat for the British lords even before Shimla, Darjeeling. As the lords engaged in the issue of governing the brown natives, try to stall disturbances to establish their regimes, the lady sahibs engaged in drawings, sketching, gardening, trying to keep 'alive' their memories of the English county...the rolling gardens, manor houses, where they spent their childhood and adolescence. They try to replicate their English lifestyle in Barrackpore. They went for picnics, organized lunches in the garden under the banyan trees. The personal diaries, letters, memoirs are testimonies of their lives in Barrackpore. The Barrackpore menagerie was developed during this period and consisted of innumerable animals, some of which were taken home in England or gifted to aristocratic families. The book documents the cultural acculturation that took place among few Englishmen as they carried the Indian architectural heritage back home in England. The authors have mentioned in their book that Warren Hastings had created a villa at Daylesford, near Adlestrop, using Indian design templates complete with onion dome. Hasting's house was neo-classical with a large number of Indian features including



a dome and Indian figures carved around the fireplace. Later Colonel Robert Smith of the East India Company built Redcliffe House in Devon, also using a mixture of Indian and Italian styles.

However with the passage of time and events, the popularity of this place waned. Not only is the book written in lucid languages, but the photographs, paintings in the book give the reader a visual pleasure. In the end the book documents a comparative photographic voyage from ruination to conservation...finally being declared as a heritage zone. Our present is built on our past. The book makes an effort to trace the history, the 'lived' experiences of the by-gone era, but is 'sensitive' in not glorifying the gory deeds which might hurt the nationalist sentiments. It is a fair representation of our past. As the book cover aptly mentions there is a need to look back in order to move forward. It is a must read for anyone interested in history, local history, cultural studies, art history, architecture, conservation. The readers will not only learn about the socio-cultural evolution of Barrackpore but will also experience ethereal peace and happiness of the by-gone era.