

Why, This Is (Not Quite) London!:

The Spectre of Kipling in Contemporary Kolkata

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Mamata Banerjee, the present Chief Minister of West Bengal, has repeatedly expressed her desire to transform Calcutta into London. In 2011, speaking at the launch of a pilot project to beautify the Hoogly's banks, she is reported to have said that "Londoners could build such a beautiful city through proper planning . . . Although our government does not have huge amounts of funds like that in London, I believe money will start pouring in from private players once the government takes a positive step."¹ Thinking about her comments with the teachings of Homi Bhabha in mind, it is of course tempting to read the Chief Minister's statements as a lurid instance of postcolonial irony.² However, if we approach her comments through the lens of British colonialism in South Asia instead—especially her reference to the lack of "proper planning" and not having "huge amounts of funds"—we are presented with a somewhat different situation. Her comments seem to articulate a complete *disavowal of colonial history* while at the same time *positing a relationship of un/likeness* between Calcutta and London.

The relationship of un/likeness between Calcutta and London is a key element in the majority of colonial depictions of the South Asian city from the eighteenth century until the decolonisation of the Indian sub-continent. These depictions, in their most extreme forms, posit either a relationship of *similitude* between the two cities, or argue for their absolute and essential *difference*.