

Building Postcards: Rössler's Calcutta 1896

Omar Khan

Fig. 9: This colorized photograph of the Kali temple in Calcutta (now Kolkata) shows a street scene around 1890.



One can reasonably argue that the best postcards were the first postcards. Wafer-thin rectangles that fell out from multiple stone pressings, court-sized lithographic postcards are today considered among the finest exemplars of the craft for their rarity, rich colors and elaborate designs. They appeared in Alpine hamlets and mountain villages in Germany, Austria and Switzerland in the early 1890s, became popular in those countries by 1895, and then spread through the world like an “infesting microbe.”¹

1 Perry, Katharine, “Tirade à La Carte,” *Putnam's*, 3:336, reprinted in Postcardy.com.

It is the relationships between images suggested by these multi-view “Greetings from” cards that make them most interesting, the dynamics on a tiny space intentionally designed to be iconic, a loaded object calling attention to itself. Competitive cost and price pressures grew with the product’s sudden popularity. International treaties, ships and trains, the need to be brief as time seemed to speed up, all combined to make the postcard the first global image communications platform by 1900. Market pressures led publishers to reach for less expensive production alternatives like the collotype, halftone, and real photograph postcard. The cost of the “poor man’s phantasm”² became critical once they started to flood the market. The colored lithographic multi-view card was driven underground almost as soon as it emerged. Something was lost in the transition. The quick switch from lithographs to collotypes and halftones accompanied the move of written messages from front to the back of postcards in Europe around 1902. It simplified the press, facilitating the quick-to-print single view card. One picture became one postcard. These were usually made from photographs, similar to the pretty little boxed views in lithographic cards had sprung from. But early lithographic postcards left about a third or quarter of the space on the front blank for the sender to write on by hand, add a personal mark or stamp, setting up another relationship between image and text, visual meaning and inky materiality. If no message or mark was added, images wrapped in designs with shimmering borders stood out against the creamy emptiness.

The Calcutta series by W. Rössler

W. Rössler’s six “Calcutta” postcard set from 1896 is probably the very first of its kind in British India. They appeared just as similar cards had become common in cities like Vienna, Frankfurt, Budapest and Berlin.

2 Alloula, Malek, *The Colonial Harem*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986; p. 4.

Rössler's cards offer a novel way to explore the myths and physical structures of the Raj. For the problem of the building architect was the same as that of the postcard artist and publisher: how to fill a space, whether two or three dimensional. Rössler's Calcutta series shows how buildings, people and icons fit into the battle for space between East and West in early lithographic cards.

Fig. 10: W. Rössler's six "Calcutta" postcard set from 1896. Collection Omar Khan.



What Christopher Pinney calls a “common epistemological space”³ is formed on these dramatic little stages that branded the capital of the Empire’s richest province, Bengal. One sender of a card below (*Nautch Girl*) called it “My dears, a little picture [*Bildchen*] of Calcutta.”⁴ Perhaps these cards are like proto-movies (the dancing girl aside), moving from scene to scene, except that it is the eye of the viewer not the cut of the director that decides when.

Fig. 11: “Nautch Girl”, Omar Khan Collection.



William Rössler was an Austrian photographer, probably born in what is now Czech Bohemia, in 1864. He came to India in 1888.⁵ He is said to have joined the old and leading photography studio in the city, Johnston & Hoffmann at 22 Chowringhee road, in the heart of

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- 3 Pinney, Christopher, *The Coming of Photography to India*, London, The British Library, 2008; p. 114.
 - 4 Mathur Collection, *Nautch Girl*, postally used in Calcutta Dec. 8, 1900. The German “Ihr Lieben, ein Bildchen von Calcutta.”
 - 5 W. Rössler first appears in *Thacker's Indian Directory* entries for Calcutta in 1900, and in most subsequent years until 1915 with premises at 30 Creek Row. He does not appear in earlier *Thacker's* as an independent operator.

the colonial shopping area in 1890.⁶ His profession is given as artist in the Certificate of Marriage from October 31st, 1894 between William and Priscilla Louise Wintgens (“Louisa”), under the heading “British Subject.” She was a widow, the daughter of a deceased Superintendent of Police, he a bachelor. She was previously married to Adolphus Edward Wintgens, then himself a widower in 1888 (cemeteries were busy for colonists in old Calcutta).⁷ In *Thacker's Indian Directory 1897* Rössler is listed as an assistant at Bourne & Shepherd's studio at 8 Chowringhee road.⁸ This is interesting because *Thacker's* entries refer to the year before they were published, when the information was collected.

Given that the first Rössler Calcutta postcard is postmarked in 1896⁹ (Fig. 1, *Native Ayah*), their publication may have been an entrepreneurial effort preceding the setting up of his very own studio. In the 1900 edition “W. Roessler, Photographer, 30, Creek Row,” is listed for the first time in *Thacker's*, among a dozen or so major city photographers, which would make his independent business as a photographer having started

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- 6 Letter to the India Office dated 6 Oct. 1914 by W Rössler. IOR-L-PJ-6-1343.
 - 7 Certificate of Marriage between between William Rössler and Priscilla Louise Wintgens, Oct. 31, 1894, Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Bengal. Louise Wintgens (then Strettell) was also listed as a widow when she married Gustave Adolph Wintgens June 1, 1888, Register of Marriages at St. James Church, Calcutta. All these records were seen at FindMyPast.com, (02.02.2023). Archive references Z/N/11/8/304 and N-1-204/149 respectively.
 - 8 *Thacker's Indian Directory 1897*, Calcutta, Thacker, Spink & Co.; p. 3526. He is also listed as a Resident living at 29 Convent Road, Entally [Calcutta]. Bourne & Shepherd had nine named European assistants at studios in Calcutta, Bombay and Simla that year, and for photographic assistants to bounce from firm to firm was common.
 - 9 Mathur Collection dated Dec. 1, 1896 and postmarked in Calcutta, December 2, 1896.

in 1899.¹⁰ He will continue to appear at 30 Creek Row through the 1915 edition of *Thacker's*.¹¹

Interferences and cultural transfers between India and Europe around 1900

Germans and Austrians were welcomed by Indians. There were many such photographers working in India at the time, including Thomas Paar, another Austrian who had a studio in Darjeeling, the Himalayan hill station frequented by Calcutta's elite and tourists in the summer (Paar was also an early postcard publisher).¹² The freedom movement was beginning to get traction (the Congress Party had been formed in 1885). Bengal would soon be rocked by the Swadeshi ("self-rule") movement among educated and middle-class Bengalis undergoing an intellectual and political renaissance that would bring the city's Rabindranath Tagore the first Nobel Prize awarded to an Indian in 1913. In the words of the fine chronicler of the city, Krishna Dutta, "during the second half of the nineteenth century...beneath the surface there was a gradual deterioration of the relationship between the rulers and the ruled."¹³

We know from Fritz Schleicher, the German entrepreneur and manager of the pioneering Ravi Varma Press in Bombay, the first publisher of postcards printed in India in 1898, who told a German paper magazine

10 He is listed in *Thacker's Indian Directory*, Calcutta, Thacker, Spink & Co., 1900; p. 375, and the 1899 date is also mentioned in a letter from W. Rössler to the India Office, 6th October 1914, IOR-L-PJ-6-1343.

11 Rössler is shown in *Thacker's* intermittently in 1903, 1906, 1910, 1912, 1914 and 1915, in all cases at 30 Creek Row, this after a non-exhaustive search of *Thacker's* over this period.

12 Many thanks to Clare Harris for this fact and reference, which was disclosed in a suit against him in the *Times of India*, September 1, 1916. Paar was a prolific publisher of court-sized cards of Darjeeling.

13 Dutta, Krishna, *Calcutta A Cultural and Literary History*, Oxford, Singal Books, 2003; p. 11.

in 1906 that “in recent years natives have more strongly than ever felt that colonialism was impossible to endure” and that they prefer “to purchase as little from English businesses and favor unfamiliar merchants.”¹⁴ I point this out here because what may have given Rössler an initial advantage in his business would later prove fateful—he was both an outsider to India, and an outsider within the British colonial apparatus that governed it.

Rössler was not one of Calcutta's major photographers. Few of his photographs seem to survive in the albums of British residents who returned home with them. Calcutta was home to great photography firms such as Bourne & Shepherd (founded 1864) and Johnston and Hoffmann (1880). One wonders if his clients were not mainly continental Europeans—for there were quite a few central European merchants, photographers, artists, archaeologists, and scholars that came out to serve as co-colonists. Many were genuinely interested in this distant civilization. Most of Rössler's postcards in fact were sent by Central Europeans (Germans, Austrians, Hungarians, Czechs and Italians). William Rössler may or may not have been related to the family of Arthur Rössler (1871–1955), the renowned Secession art critic and theorist, or Rudolf Rössler, a lithographer listed as active in Vienna in 1907.¹⁵ He certainly was educated, as one would guess from his meticulous handwriting in later letters and the postcards he himself mailed, one to Dr. Leo Bouchal, the head of the Austrian Geographer's Society.¹⁶ In any case, he may also have been pursuing other, less visible businesses

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- 14 Schleicher elaborated was later quoted in the article as saying that “the hate against the British goes so far, that a Victoria driver did not want to take a fare further because he was smoking an English cigarette, and a shopkeeper declined another customer because he wore American boots (American because of language being taken for English).” *Papier Zeitung* No. 57 (19 July) 1906. Many thanks to Helmfried Luers, editor of *The Postcard Collector*, for this information.
- 15 Khan, Omar, *Paper Jewels Postcards from the Raj*, Ahmedabad, Mapin Publishing/Alkazi Foundation for the Arts; p. 52. Rudolf Rössler is listed in the records of the Albertina, Vienna.
- 16 Personal communication from Ratnesh Mathur, Dec. 19, 2018, referring to a postcard sent by Rössler on October 21, 1897 from a Calcutta address (8,

in Calcutta: he sent one of his own postcards to Karl Hatta in Bohemia, Austria, in English, “A merry Xmas and a happy New Year to you” and signed it as the representative of another firm.¹⁷

The postcard: a European invention and its introduction in India

The concept of the postcard was invented by an Austrian in 1869, and it is no accident that Rössler had his Calcutta series printed there, most likely in Vienna's 6th district. There, lithographic presses weighing hundreds of kilos were fit into the basement rooms of five storied Hapsburg apartment buildings with large courtyards, small business at its best. Printers vied to bring out the most colorful and resonant examples of lithographic printing; sunsets were a competitive battlefield. The more colors, crayons and paper could dazzle the eye like fine pastries the better. Vienna was the cutting-edge of European postcard manufacture around 1895. In 1897, the tri-language (English, German, French) journal *The Illustrated Post-card*, the “Official Organ of the ‘International Association of Collectors of Illustrated Postcards’, Vienna” heralded this new illustrated mass communications medium. It focused on printing processes and examples of fine art. The Czech (Roessler's Bohemia is now part of the Czech Republic) Art Nouveau painter Alphonse Mucha designed postcards and flagship 6th district printer Philipp & Kramer's exquisitely designed works for the medium today command the highest praise and prices. “Postcard printing is one of the most beautiful branches of lithographic art,” wrote Oscar Meta, a master printer in a trade journal in Vienna in 1898.¹⁸ High technical aptitude

Chowringhee road). As discussed above, this was the address of Bourne & Shepherd, where he was apparently still employed as an assistant.

- 17 Postmarked Calcutta December 3, 1898, Author's Collection. He signs it [*Recto*] “W. Rössler Representierung [Representing] J.C.d.A. [sp?].”
- 18 Meta, Oscar, *Freie Künste Fachblatt für die Lithografie, Steindruckerei und Buchdruckerei [Journal of Lithography, Stone Printing and Book Printing]*, Vienna, Leipzig, No.1, 1898/1; p. 34.

was demanded. The design had to be inscribed finely with a burin on limestone, on separate twenty-five kilo blocks for each major color. The choice of dyes and chalks (Oscar Meta recommended “Bologna chalk”¹⁹) was critical.²⁰ The registration of stone vs. paper had to be perfect each time to not look even slightly mis-printed, which many early cards do, including Rössler’s Calcutta cards as close examination bears witness—image titles can be a little misaligned, colors bleed beyond the outlines (see below).²¹ The size of the printing “bow” or unit on many of these presses allowed for 20–24 postcard sized images to be sent through at one time. Bows were worked on for days, as paper had to dry properly before the next of a dozen or more colors was applied. The type of paper and how it absorbed inks mattered. Titles and any inscriptions on the back (“electrotype”) had to be run separately.²² Every choice was costly and consequential. Many firsts in postcard publishing were celebrated in *The Illustrated Post-Card*. These included the first artist-signed postcards of India in July 1898 by the Viennese landscape painter Josef Hoffman (1831–1904).²³ The same issue advertised a series of eighteen postcards “in finest display” of “Calcutta, Himalaya” by Hugo Bolke at 12 Government Lane, Calcutta (only one of which I have ever seen).²⁴ This was at least eighteen months *after* the first Rössler card was postmarked December 2, 1896 in Calcutta.

Yet it hardly came too soon: local competitors like Johnston & Hoffmann and retailer Thacker, Spink & Co. released similar lithographic

19 Ibid., No. 3, 1 Feb 1898; p. 33.

20 Ibid., No. 12; p. 183.

21 Rössler’s *Greetings from India* cards often have the elephant grossly misaligned, which makes me think it might have been printed earlier than some of the Calcutta cards.

22 Ibid., No. 3, 1 Feb 1898; p. 33.

23 Die Illustrierte Postkarte. The Illustrated Post-Card. La Carte Postale Illustrée. Vienna, No. 7, July 1, 1898; p. 15.

24 Ibid.; p. 14. The single Bolke card known to me thus far is *Greetings from Darjeeling*, a three-panel court-sized lithograph dated March 18, 1898, Mathur Collection.

multi-view “Greetings from” Calcutta postcards by the end of 1897.²⁵ (Incidentally, the first cards of India published in Britain are from 1902,²⁶ the colonial metropolis more advanced than the motherland.) A large part of the initial regional and global market, as *The Illustrated Post-Card* articles and notes from correspondents makes clear, was driven by collectors. Many of these were women: postcard albums were usually put together by women, most cards from India and even these very early Calcutta cards by W. Rössler & Co. were sent to women. Female aesthetic tastes and portraits were integral to the postcard’s rise.²⁷

Fig. 12: “Snake Charmers”, Omar Khan Collection.



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- 25 Examples in the Mathur Collection (*Greetings from Calcutta*, Thacker, Spink & Co., postmarked December 1897), and Author’s Collection (*Greetings from Calcutta*, Johnston & Hoffmann, postmarked Calcutta, December 2, 1898).
- 26 The first British-published postcards from India I have found thus far were from F. Hartmann & Co., 45 Farringdon Street, London, and were announced in *The Picture Postcard and Collector’s Chronicle*, London, Dec. 1902 and advertised in the February 1903 issue. Hartmann, an indigo merchant with business in India, helped push the British postal authorities to accept the divided back postcard in 1902.
- 27 See Khan, *Paper Jewels*, *op.cit.*; p. 72.

International orchestration on many levels brought the product to market. Rössler would ship photographs from Calcutta to Vienna, the scenes in these six cards seem mainly to be from his photographs. He may or may not have worked with a design template, and/or given suggestions to the printer. In Europe proofs were often exchanged between printer and publisher before the final order was made, and it is hard to see how Rössler would not have been part of their design. Once settled, it took a month or two for cards to be shipped back for sale in retail outlets like Rössler's studio on Creek Row, just off Chowringhee road. Each print run was one or two thousand postcards, but in those early days a few hundred might comprise a reasonable order as well.

The Calcutta series: a visual approach

Let us turn to the cards and their performance of the city. All six cards feature views of Calcutta and two primary subjects or objects, people, and buildings. There are three or four major images per card aside from design and vegetal elements and identifying titles. About a quarter of each postcard, sometimes up to a third, is left blank for a message. This space sets off the rich color and design of the lithographed area. Each card has a significant image of Indian "types," which we will use to refer to them: *Indian Beauty*, *Native Ayah* [Nanny], *Nautch* [Dancing] *Girl*, *Fakir* [Holy Man], *Snake Charmers*, and *Bengalee Babos* [Babu or Clerk]. Five cards are pedestalled with Hindu gods and goddesses. One, *Fakir*, seems to balance the old East and the new West. A single card, *Nautch Girl*, has only Indian themes on all panels. The cards are of varying quality. *Fakir* shows the most blotchiness of color compared, say, to *Snake Charmers* (one sender of *Fakir* in 1898 claimed it was "not particularly beautiful"²⁸).

28 *Calcutta Fakir* postally used April 14, 1898, Mathur Collection. "Den 14. April 1898. Mein liebes Maronitti, hiermit haltest du die letzte der Ansichtskarten, die hier herausgekommen sind. Wenn sie auch nicht besonders schön ist, so illustrierte sie doch gut, das ganze indische Leben u. Treiben. Mit besten Grüßen an Onkel, Tante u. Dieter [sp?]. Dein Cousin, Adolf." ["April 14, 1898. My dear Maronitti, Here you have the last of the postcards that were published here even if it is not

One electrotpe font is used on one card, another on three, one does not have “Made in Austria for W. Rössler, Calcutta” in the corner. The master-title “Calcutta” is lettered differently on each, and the little image titles vary in font too. While they may have been intended as a series of six—the standard for a set—the cards could have been printed at different times, even one printer changing methods along the way. The back is identical across all six cards. From what we can tell, Rössler only made one order of this set of Calcutta cards, either separately or together. The argument for separate printings is strengthened by the fact that around this time he also published single *Greetings from Darjeeling* and *Greetings from India* lithographic postcards in a similar style, with identical backs, maybe in smaller volumes than the Calcutta set.²⁹ These were, after all, start-up days for printers in Austria. Rössler was just emerging on his own, the medium was certainly brand new to India.

Four postcards are dominated by Western buildings, and they seem to take up the most visual space, about a quarter to a third across the cards, maybe just a bit more than the people. Postcards are an extension of architecture—if you cannot visit the place, it visits you. “Historical monuments, one can argue, live their modern lives primarily as images,” writes Tapati Guha-Thakurta.³⁰ We should also note how sharply buildings and people are separated in these cards. Thomas R. Metcalf describes how “Indian decorative motifs,” among which we can include the people and deities sprinkled throughout the cards, “one might say,

particularly beautiful, it does illustrate Indian life and drive. With best wishes to Uncle, Auntie and Dieter [sp?]. Your cousin Adolf.”

- 29 The *Greetings from India* cards (postmarks go back to Jan. 7, 1897) seem affected by a registration problem alluded to above (fn. 21). Rössler’s *Greetings from Darjeeling* postcard (postmarked Calcutta 2 January 1900, Author’s Collection) uses what may be an image of Sherap Gyatso, the much-photographed lama identified by Clare Harris in *Photography in Tibet*; p. 41–42. He is a bit indistinct and is holding his prayer wheel in his left hand, suggesting that if the basis was a photograph, it was reversed along the way.
- 30 Guha-Thakurta, Tapati, “The Compulsions of Visual Representation in Colonial India,” in: Pelizzari, Maria Antonella (ed.), *Traces of India*, Montreal/New Haven, Canadian Centre for Architecture/Yale Center for British Art, 2003; p. 110.

had much in common with a classically styled architecture in India. The one announced a fascination with India, the other an assertion of control over it, but neither constructed a vision that incorporated these people and their buildings in an architecture of empire.³¹ The most different card of the six and interesting for its dialectic is *Indian Beauty*. The sprawling Roman Government House that symbolized British Calcutta pours outwards to a seated woman who visually stops it cold. Beneath her feet, people are being cremated. Whether or not the composer was evoking the city's chief patron, the goddess Kali, is not known. Nicely woven atop a Grecian column on the woman's right sits another god, Ganesha, overlooking the city and also silently confronting the thrust of Government House. The contrast of Western buildings and Indian people and powers is a theme across all the cards. No Europeans are shown on any of the six cards.

"Architecture represented the authority of Britain's Raj in the colonial city from the outset," writes Metcalf. "By its very nature, indeed, the colonial city embodied an assertion of conquest. Two buildings, placed strategically at its very heart, made visible its essential character: a massive fort and an imposing Government House."³² The many photographs in albums of Calcutta's premiere building in albums of former British residents, other postcards like a popular interior shot in Government House of a huge Grecian-columned room with chandeliers³³ make the building's iconic status for Europeans clear. "Isolated at the head of the Calcutta *maidan*," writes Metcalf, "in its own extensive compound, marked by neo-classical gates crowned by lions, without even trees to obscure the view, the Government House loomed over the city, so that all might see, and appreciate, the power of the Raj."³⁴ In the message area of this card, sent on November 24, 1898 from Calcutta to a Miss Jane P.

31 Metcalf, Thomas R., *An Imperial Vision Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj*, London, Faber & Faber, 1989; p. 18.

32 Ibid.; p. 8.

33 *Calcutta. Government House Throne Room* was a popular view, both in black and white and hand-tinted collotype versions published by D. Macropolo & Co.

34 Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision*; p. 14.

Barnes at the Hotel Britannique in Naples, Italy,³⁵ a sender who goes by “Restless Spirit” offers choice verses in German,³⁶ tossing the card into yet another dimension:

Summer takes with it the flower's bloom
 Which allowed us such brief laughter
 A cold wind growls through forest and floors
 And rolls life's lint at our feet
 What leaves, what leaves
 Best wishes from Restless Spirit.

Most of Rössler's Calcutta cards that have survived have messages on them. While these remain particular and at times deeply meaningful to the people involved in a way that we cannot fathom today, they remind us that the visual terrain of a postcard can be no less significant than the words that are threaded through it.

Back to postcards *sans* messages. Western classical buildings dominate the horizontal space on five of the six cards. They are on top in four of them. About thirty percent of the combined visual spaces, the largest proportion on the six cards, consists of these modernizing structures: besides Government House, we see the General Post Office, the Writer's Buildings, the High Court (standing firmly against Durga and Pagoda, taking just a bit more space), and the Great Eastern Hotel and the Telegraph Office. The latter two flank *Snake Charmers*, The two buildings can barely be contained by their frames with the menacing, protective

35 In 2018 I wrote (*Paper Jewels*; p. 35): “The postcard seems to have the year stamp of 1895 on it, but because I have found no cards clearly postmarked from 1896, and the fact that the earliest cards from a number of series start in 1897, I am inclined to think the 5 is an 8, and it was 1898.” (*Paper Jewels*; p. 32) That, the new evidence that Rössler card in the Mathur Collection is from 1896, and a closer look at one cancellation which could be from 1896, make dating this card very difficult, but the Naples 189X cancellation seems most likely to be 1898, but 1895 cannot be ruled out.

36 [Verso] *Der Sommer entflieht mit ihm die Blütenpracht / Die uns so tröst so wonnung-zugelacht / Ein Kalter Wind durch Wald und Flurengrollt / Des Lebens Lenz uns vor die Fusserollt / Welche Blaetter, Welche Blaetter / Herzliche Grüße vom Restless Spirit.*

goddess Durga between them. Adjacent to the message space a snake charmer offers a melody to a cobra. The tension and color in *Snake Charmers* rewards looking more closely and unpacking the tiny titles. As one's eye travels along its contours and the palm fronds, noticing the pink and blue alterations in block-shadowed letters that proclaim "CALCUTTA," and the careful arrangement of people and carriages on the roads it seems as if a moving picture has been spun out of nothing. The Telegraph Office and Great Eastern Hotel were portals of communication with the homeland for colonists, the primary customer for Rössler, evoking the people and news going in and out of the city. It is hard to overestimate the importance of the telegraph to European residents. Introduced to India in 1840, the Telegraph Office was built in the 1870s. As Megan Easton Ellis writes: "A brief recital of communication timings demonstrates the irruptive powers of the telegraph ... In 1868, a telegraph sent from Calcutta to Karachi took 17 hours and 48 minutes to transmit. By 1870, the same message transmitted in a blistering speed of 4 hours and 43 minutes. In 1875, a telegraph was transmitted from London to Bombay in five minutes."³⁷ The acre-sized Great Eastern Hotel (1851) in the top left of *Snake Charmers* was described "one of the largest and best appointed hotels in India," whose "average stock of wines and spirits kept for the hotel's requirements is of a value of £20,000, while the assortments of preserved food dainties of every description in its storage sections represents the choicest comestibles that the world can supply."³⁸

We should add that hotels were frequent subjects of early postcards, often commissioned by them to advertise their availability, a viral invite from sender to receiver, just as each of Rössler's six cards was silently prefacing "Greetings from" to "Calcutta." The crudest of the six cards, discussed earlier, is Fakir.

37 Robb Eaton, Megan, *Print and the Urdu Public*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2021; p. 64. Éléonore Muhidine's India collection has an analogous postcard of a modern telephone exchange.

38 Macmillan, Allister, *Seaports of India Ceylon*, London, W H & L Collingridge, 1928; p. 108.

Fig. 13: Kolkata, The “Black Hole” Memorial, symbol of British colonial system in India.



Amazingly, although it is virtually impossible to find an example of a publisher or photographer expressing their perspective or intentions on a postcard, we have an example of *Fakir* which was sent by Rössler in his own handwriting! It is one of at least four signed and sent by him, suggesting an enthusiastic proponent of his own product. On a copy of *Fakir* sent from Calcutta to S. Gouthier, Esq. Turkenstrasse 95 [Turk’s Street], Munich, Germany, Rössler writes: “30. December 1897. When one looks more closely at certain inhabitants of these lands, one starts to comprehend Darwin’s theory. W Rössler.”³⁹ Rössler’s text reminds us that while meaning could or could not be resident in a postcard, or its maker’s intentions, the perceptual apparatus the viewer brought to bear was part of the story, nudged or not by words. Rössler is connecting his set of beliefs to the scientific theory of evolution, as racism so often is and was. Many participants in colonial postcard exchange wore similar filters and would have seen in the arrangement of figures and spaces their own sentiments about Indians and superior Western culture. For them, Rössler’s Indians arranged in frames in each of the postcards are strange and inferior,

39 Original German: “Wenn man gewisse Bewohner dieser Breiten näher betrachtet, fängt man an die Darwinische Theorie zu begreifen. W. Rössler.” See also: Khan, *Paper Jewels*; p. 42.

while the buildings are familiar and inviting, symbols of their beneficial presence. Another sender of *Fakir*, one Adolf claimed on April 14, 1898 that “it does illustrate Indian life and drive.” The fakir is contrasted with the defining Hooghly Bridge cutting across the middle of the postcard, over the river that bisects Calcutta (for a very popular, more crowded single view, see Éléonore Muhidine’s *The Pontoon Bridge on the Hooghly*, 1902). Once our eyes cross the bridge, a factory tower spews smoke in the distance.⁴⁰ To the right of this diagonal axis of the modern, a bathing ghat juts awkwardly against the frame of the Hooghly Bridge, described by a postcard sender as “the largest pontoon bridge in the world.”⁴¹ Built in 1874, and only meant to last 25 years, the center was “movable so as to admit of the passage of vessels up and down the river,”⁴² and was only replaced in the 1940s. Each of these postcards is negotiation between modern European and ancient—or, to Rössler and much of his community, primitive—Indian forms and practice.

Fig. 14: Kolkata, *The old pontoon bridge* (1874).



40 Ibid., p. 43.

41 CALCUTTA *The Hooghly Bridge*, G. Valsecchi & Co., Calcutta, postally used May 7, 1907 sent to Mrs. W.J. Hamlin in New Jersey, USA, Mathur Collection.

42 *A Handbook for Travellers in India Burma and Ceylon*, London, John Murray, 1938; p. 106.

Postcards and architectural views in the colonial context

Rössler's cards were part of a shared visual vocabulary. Another very early popular card of the city, *Calcutta*, a single-image lithograph by Budapest-based Cosmos-Publishing also emphasized the modern part of the city, neo-classical buildings with inset columns and billowing red-and-white Parisian-style blinds. Thacker, Spink & Co. offered its own multi-view, court-sized black and white halftones as early as 1898, featuring harbour scenes where European ships dominated.⁴³ They also published a three-panelled *Hindoo Temple, Jain Temple Manicktola* with a *Hindoo Fakir* in the same left pole position as in Rössler's *Fakir* postcard. D. Macropolo & Co., the Raj's largest tobacco retailer, offered multi-view lithographic postcards by 1900, including a *Greetings from India* that was strikingly similar to Rössler's in lettering and colors, three identical images arranged slightly differently.⁴⁴ Johnston & Hoffman, Rössler's former employer, would also opt for the multi-view lithograph *Greetings from Calcutta*, with two panels intertwined among palm fronds and curling around the Telegraph Office and a tram rolling into the distance while native boats crowd on the riverbank between scores of fuzzy black bodies like those in the right pane of Rössler's *Fakir*. Still, prejudice wrapped in beauty need not be the only part of the story in these cards.

Bengali Babos [Babu] includes two more buildings key to representing the Raj. The Post Office was another temple to communication, opened

43 Court-sized collotype versions of *Shipping on the Hooghly*, Thacker, Spink & Co., Calcutta, c. 1898 and 1900 are good examples. An earlier version (1898?) has elaborate palms around ship sails spilling out of the vignette image covering about a third of the court-sized card. A little later (1900?) the same space was occupied by the sailboats in a rectangular frame without the design fussiness and a printed title in the front, illustrating how quickly styles and maybe costs changed in the postcard market.

44 An example of the Macropolo version was postally used September 10, 1899, Author's Collection. This was said to be printed in Italy, which suggests that design elements could belong to the publisher or be sent from one printer to the other, or perhaps most likely held in some form by the publisher, e.g. Rössler.

in 1865, the largest in India, said to have been constructed on the “Black Hole” where many Europeans died during an Indian uprising.

Fig. 15: Bengali Babos, Collection Omar Khan.



The Writer's Buildings is where all the men who came out to India to make their fortunes in the East India Company began their work (they “wrote” an exam for the privilege) and by now housed the Bengal state government. The horizontal spread—“expressing the expanding power of the British Raj as it grew to encompass all of India,” in Metcalf’s words⁴⁵—is the cleanest looking. So as is the deft splicing together two corners of the maidan into one visual line with a palm tree. The neatly clad babu is welcoming you to the city, with an umbrella that shields and separates him from the buildings. He conveys a certain authority over his space including the long white writing surface spread in front of him.⁴⁶ The Palladian columns of the Post Office in the panel above extend his halo. He is not the same type as the fakir, perhaps a step up the species ladder, Herr Rössler? It is hard to tell of course. “Properly a

45 Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision*; p. 12.

46 The Indian painter M.V. Dhurandhar’s signed postcard *Bengalee Babu*, Unknown Publisher, Bombay, c. 1904 is a more complex portrait of this oft-maligned type. See Khan, *Paper Jewels*; p. 37.

term of respect attached to a name, like *Master* or *Mr.*, and formerly in some parts of Hindustan applied to certain persons of distinction,” went Hobson-Jobson, the bible of Raj terminology (1903) when explaining that *babu*, “in Bengal and elsewhere, among Anglo-Indians, it is often used with a slight savour of disparagement, as characterizing a superficially cultivated, but too often effeminate, Bengali.”⁴⁷

Maybe. The *babu* also represented a certain balance between the European and the Indian. The Maharashtrian postcard artist M.V. Dhurandhar had a much more sympathetic *Bengalee Babu* with the umbrella on his side in dhoti and waist jacket. In short, people read the *babu* many ways, and Rössler’s card lets you do that. The owner of the card seems to appreciate his, and simply marked it with initials in the bottom right corner, something like *G.E.D. 1/7 97*, in careful (but careless!) pen strokes next to “W. Rössler Calcutta.” While postcards can and do engage people’s prejudices and assumptions, they can also deflect and recast them, as the *Babu* might to those who have the receptivity to see him in other ways. The very putting of things, people and place into play is what made these early lithographic cards appealing. Not to say that postcards do not embody a maker’s—photographer’s, designer’s, lithographer’s—biases, which may be unambiguous to them and contradictory, but that those intentions can be moderated, intensified, contradicted by their juxtaposition in the early lithographic multi-view postcard. Whether or not Rössler’s six Calcutta lithographs were successful commercially is hard to tell. They are postmarked well into the early 1900s. Rössler put out black and white single image court-sized collotypes around the time he opened his store in 1899, including of images that he had used in the lithographic cards like *CALCUTTA. Nautch Girl*.⁴⁸

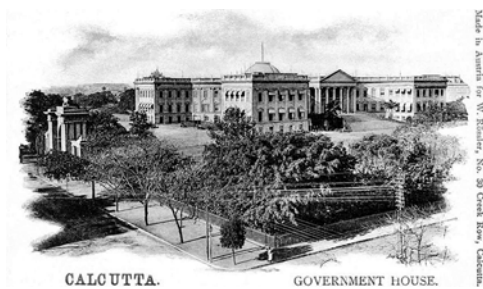
One of Rössler’s early collotypes, *Government House—Calcutta*, showed the building’s other side and was made likely from a photo-

47 Yule, Henry; Burnell, A.C., *Hobson-Jobson*, London, John Murray, 1903; p. 44. The definition of *Babu* continues: “And from the extensive employment of the class, to which the term was applied as a title, in the capacity of clerks in English offices, the word has come often to signify ‘a native clerk who writes English.’”

48 See: Khan, *Paper Jewels*; p. 40.

graph that was also used by Thacker, Spink & Co. in a hand-tinted colour version,⁴⁹ suggesting that Rössler licensed some of his images. From this angle, the building seems to spread its wings.

Fig. 16: Government House—Calcutta, Rössler, Omar Khan Collection.



Note the telephone wires not airbrushed out by either publisher. Barely twenty years old, they were fresh as daisies to Calcutta's residents. Rössler's collotypes are rich in tone, with compelling portraits like *Bengali Girl* and *Bengal Village Scene*.⁵⁰ Many of the collotypes like *Government House—Calcutta* were of course of buildings already discussed, some in multiple views. This “colonial adaptation of the Palladian style” as Lord Curzon described it, was still strong and desirable in Curzon's opinion for the Victoria Memorial he was about to help design, more than a century after Government House, but needed adjustments for its “severity,” an index perhaps of what (little) had changed.⁵¹ Even with

49 *Government House—CALCUTTA.*, coloured collotype, Thacker, Spink & Co., Calcutta, c. 1902, p.u. Lahore 25.8.04, Author's Collection.

50 *Bengali Girl*, W. Rössler, court-sized collotype, sent to a Mrs. Agnes Rössler in Bohemia, Austria, and signed from “W & L,” postmarked Calcutta Dec. 13, 1908 [?], Author's Collection. For *Bengal Village Scene*, W. Rössler, court-sized collotype, see Khan, *Paper Jewels*; p. 36.

51 Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision*; p. 235.

colotype postcards (“Made in Austria”), commercial success seems to have been elusive for Rössler. Their quality was high, but it is hard to find examples today, suggesting that the batches were small. He did make it into regular-sized colotype postcards around 1901–02, but these too are uncommon compared to those of competitors previously cited, all of whom published postcards in much larger volumes in the first years after 1900.

Rössler’s impossible return to India

By 1905, Rössler seems to have abandoned the postcard business altogether. The first but minor player, just like lithographic cards were to colotypes and all that followed. Unforeseen for him, William Rössler’s adventures were only beginning. Whatever he might have thought or intended to illustrate with his postcards about East and West, the colonial coalition was to fracture, severely jolting his own relationship to the city. On April 17, 1913 Louisa Rössler died of “vascular disease of the heart and edema of the lungs.”⁵² In November that year he would marry again the widow Margaret S. (“Carrie”) Greiff from a Bengal civil family of modest means and of German origin. Her former husband was a stationmaster, her brother a pensioner in England.⁵³ Five months later, the newly-weds appear in the *Times of India* on the “list of passengers proceeding to Trieste and Venice via intermediate ports, per Austrian Lloyd’s steamer Gablonz on the 1st May from the Alexandra Dock No.

52 Burials at the Military Cemetery of Fort William Bengal Archdiocese of Calcutta entry for April 13, 1913; p. 204, N-1-389, seen on FindmyPast.com, February 2023.

53 See letter dated 6 October 1914 from J.C. Greiff to the India Office, IOR-L-PJ-6-1343. Margaret S. gave birth to a daughter, Margaret Beryl, on Dec. 4, 1893 in Khagole, Bengal, where her husband, Julius A. S. Greiff, is described in the record as a Stationmaster, Parish register transcripts from the Presidency of Bengal, N-1-286. In another record, her father, Julius Greiff is described as a “Guard, E.I.R. [East Indian Railways],” Birth record for Lionel Walter Kirkpatrick, May 17, 1885 in: Asanol Bengal, Parish Record Transcripts from Bengal, Record N-1-202 both seen on FindmyPast.com February 2023.

4 [Bombay]. The medical inspection of the saloon passengers with take place at the Alexandra Dock Shed No. 4 on the same day at 1–30 a.m. Deck passengers and Native servants must be present at the port *Health Disinfecting Station, Frere Road*, near Prince's Dock, with all their luggage and kit, at 9 a.m. sharp.”⁵⁴ Three months later, in August 1914, World War I broke out. Two months later this letter was received by the Chief Secretary to the Govt. of India, Bengal, and then apparently copied to the Secretary to the Govt. of India, Home Department, Delhi:

“To the India Office.

Sir,

The undersigned, an Austrian Subject of over 50 years of age, who has been living in Calcutta since 1898 and has a photographic business there since 1899 left Calcutta at the end of April last year with his wife to pay a visit to his people in Bohemia.

Now he finds himself unable to return to India and therefore addresses the India Office if they could furnish him with the necessary papers for a safe return...

A line in reply at an early date will much oblige.

Yours etc.

W. Rössler

c/o Mrs. Lydia Sebald, Internazional Traktsgesellschaft, 23 Nonnenweg, Basel, Switzerland.”⁵⁵

His request was not granted. Later that month he wrote again to the Home Department in Delhi:

“He is anxious to become a British subject, because all his interests are in India. It may be mentioned here that he is over 50 years of age. His wife was born in India and has passed all her life there. Four of her children 2 sons and 2 daughters are in India and the younger of the latter is

54 *The Times of India*, Bombay, April 29, 1914; p. 10.

55 Letter to the India Office from W. Rössler, dated October 6, 1914, IOR-L-PJ-6-1343.

depending on him for support. The undersigned has tried every possible means for obtaining the necessary papers for a safe return to India but has failed up to now. Having been advised by the British Consul in Geneva to apply to India for a permit to return he applied, through lack of information, to the Foreign Office. Please address. W. Rössler.”⁵⁶

The second letter was filled with a list of references including “the official Trustee of Bengal, whose tenant he has been for over 17 years” [this would put Rössler’s going into business in 1897, within a year of the first postcards] and other senior civil officials. On December 11th, a letter in Rössler’s neat handwriting, each word slowly pressed into paper, was sent to the Secretary of State for India in London: “The undersigned is in great distress and begs the India Office to grant him a conditional permit for a return to India ... his distress increases with each single day of delay, he most earnestly prays the India Office for help, by granting him such a permit ...”⁵⁷ Six days later he is again referred to the authorities in India by an Assistant Secretary. The British government could not see him as an ally, even after so many years supporting the colonial enterprise and marrying a British woman. Government House now condemned him.

The prejudice against Indians that had in part driven the British community in Calcutta was quickly directed against Germans and Austrians. In the crisis leading up to the break out of war, the a European Association of Calcutta’s request called “attention to the strong public feeling that exists in India in favour of taking drastic steps for the immediate internment of all German and Austrian aliens who are now residing at large in that country;” it was discussed in the House of Commons.⁵⁸ Indeed, originally Austrian photographers like Thomas Paar and German

56 Letter to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Dept. Delhi from W. Rössler, received Dec. 18, 1914. The original letter was received by the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal on October 22, 1914. IOR-L-PJ-6-1343.

57 Letter to the Secretary of State for India from W. Rössler, December 11, 1914, to the India Office IOR-L-PJ-6-1343.

58 Copy Questions discussed in the House of Commons on Thursday, 16 September 1915 referring to two letters from June 12 and August 15, 1915 from the European Association of Calcutta IOR-L-PJ-6-1400 3602.

ones would see their businesses destroyed.⁵⁹ Many were sent to camps like Ahmednagar, admittedly a rather open camp where some German-speaking lithographers could pass the time making amateur postcards showing themselves suffering in the sun and send them to relatives in Germany.⁶⁰ The treatment of Rössler's many petitions to the India Office over the years was not exceptional: American citizens of Swiss origin were restricted in travel,⁶¹ German wives of inmates at Ahmednagar were sent back home despite protesting medical conditions,⁶² neutral citizens like those from Switzerland who were suspected of pro-German sympathies were prevented from returning to employment in Bombay,⁶³ and more.⁶⁴

Longstanding relationships that had been formed among colonists were dissolved, whether on the basis of their citizenship, national origin, or stated or private opinions. Anyone had the privilege of becoming

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- 59 Thomas Paar's photography business was listed under the heading "Winding Up Hostile Firms," August 5, 1916 in *The Times of India*, Simla, Aug. 7, 1907, as was the business of Fritz Capp, photographer of Calcutta and Dacca.
- 60 *Fröhliche Weihnacht*, for example, is a crude, hand-made lithographic card showing a European seating in the sun and sent from "H. Pome, "Prisoners of war Camp Ahmednagar 19.11.19" to Fräulein M. Pome in Austria, Author's Collection. This camp held over 1,100 prisoners by August 1915, per Communique from the Home Dept. August 13, 1915, IOR-L-PJ-6-1399 (3517).
- 61 See the case of an American citizen, O. Nussman, whose travel was restricted leading to protests by the American authorities in 1915, IOR-L-PJ-6-1399 (3517).
- 62 See the case of Frau Rosenthal, "German lady in India," wife of an inmate at Ahmednagar, and mother of a young child who apparently was sent back to Germany in 1916 despite a request from the American government to treat her case with sympathy, IOR-PJ-6-1427 (573).
- 63 See the case of the exclusion of Mr. Oscar Bruderer "on account of strong pro-German sympathies," as communicated by the India Office to the Foreign Office on October 26, 1915, IOR-L-PJ-6-1403 (4024-4028).
- 64 See for example the voluminous file and discussion of this subject as it applied to citizens of the US, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Switzerland undergoing special scrutiny, IOR-L-PJ-6-1411 (4487) and the examination of letters and other material to solicit their true sympathies, IOR-L-PJ-6-1444 (2503).

an alien. On June 1st, 1915 *The Times of India* carried this story under the headline *Calcutta German Killed*:

“At least one citizen of Calcutta, who has been killed on the German side fighting against his will, too, was Mr. W. Rössler, a photographer... When the war broke out he was swept, despite his protestations of ill-health and age (he was over 50), into the army and was killed at Neuve Chapelle [France] after being at the front only two days. A pathetic letter from his death and her arrival in London whither she has been sent by the German Government.”⁶⁵

Only nothing of the sort happened. His wife, Carrie Rössler was actually with him in Basel, Switzerland, appealing to the Under Secretary of State for India:

“For in our distress we are at a loss what to do, unless we appeal to your goodness... We are informed that during the continuance of the war a permit cannot be granted us to return to India. Under these circumstance we are simply left to face misery, ruin & starvation, for all the time we are away from our home in Calcutta, we have no sort of income, & our home & property may all be destroyed. We have had only one letter from our children in India...”⁶⁶

Like Rössler's, her neat script suggests someone of education and literacy. Around the time Rössler was reported killed, her brother was writing similar pleading letters, recounting her four children in Calcutta, all British subjects, three young, one “working as an engineer on a government steamer.”⁶⁷ The bureaucracy remained unmoved. In July 1918, “after finally turning his back on his native land (3rd January 1916) and living over one year and a half in Switzerland,” and receiving “a formal discharge from Austrian citizenship,” from Zurich he “most earnestly begs

65 *The Times of India*, Bombay June 1, 1915; p. 8.

66 Letter to the Under Secretary of State for India, Public Department, London, from Carrie Rössler, December 28, 1914, IOR-L-PJ-6-1343.

67 Letter to the Under Secretary of State for India, India Office, London from J. C. Greiff, April 17, 1915. IOR-L-PJ-6-1343.

that the plea of a perishing victim of circumstance may be acceded to and has the honour to be Sir Most Respectfully Yours W. Rössler.”⁶⁸ But this is impossible, for now it has come out that he may have served with the German army, another flag for Government who also know about the (false) report that he was killed. It is hard to know how and why the report of his demise may have been manufactured, but it is possible that there is a grain of truth in it, that he was conscripted to the front – though why the German front in France and not the Austrian in the Balkans? Maybe he was in Germany, trying to flee the Austrian authorities, and staged his death by newspaper to flee to Switzerland, a neutral country from where petitions, however, started coming in October 1914. We likely will never know. Finally, when the war was over, Lord Curzon, who served as Viceroy in Calcutta (1899–1905) during Rössler’s time interceded on his behalf.

In August 1919 the official in charge cautions Curzon that:

“Mr. Rössler does not always appear to have been strictly accurate in the statements which he has made relative to his movements since the beginning of the war: thus he informed the Passport Office here that he had not been to Germany since 1914 when he and his wife were travelling in German and Austria from 1914 up to and including 1916. In 1914 the Indian Government refused him permission to return to India on the ground of his being an enemy alien.”⁶⁹

The sticking point, and opportunity as outlined by Government now was that he had to get the new Czecho-Slovak authorities ruling Bohemia to acknowledge him as their citizen before he would be granted the permit to go back. He was now the subject of a new nation. The paper trail in a voluminous file goes cold later in the month, but Rössler seems to have made his way back to Calcutta soon thereafter. Rössler spent another decade in the city. He is listed in *Thacker's 1925* with a store at 56

68 Letter to the Secretary of State for India, London from W. Rössler, July 1, 1918, IOR-L-PJ-6-1343.

69 Letter to Earl Curzon of Kedleston from Horace Rumbold, August 23, 1919, IOR-L-PJ-6-1343.

Bentnick Street, though not as “Photographer.” He died on November 3, 1929 and was buried with Seventh Day Adventist rites in the Military Cemetery, Calcutta, perhaps a final ignominy to his body. Like postcards, human beings wove their flags above a network of impermanent connections and shifting allegiances.

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