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Oh! not Calcutta

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Mother Teresa's impact on Calcutta has always been frowned upon by some Calcuttans in the west, who intensified their attacks after her death – six years ago yesterday – seeing her as the main culprit for their city's bad image. In his recent book *Mother Teresa: The Final Verdict*, Aroup Chatterjee holds her responsible for harming Calcutta's reputation irreparably.

Many, however, are grateful to her for challenging taboos. The renowned academic and novelist Bharati Mukherjee, for example, has been familiar with Mother Teresa's work since 1951, and, 50 years later, she still recalls how the tiny Albanian Catholic nun's leprosarium first puzzled, then led her and other non-Christians to marvel.

I understand why some Calcuttans resent Mother Teresa. I also come from Albania, a country long identified in the western psyche as Europe's poorest place, and one that rarely receives realistic treatment in the western media. Journalists often write about it mainly to dish the dirt. Poster-size photos of bunkers and rubbish accompany their articles. This kind of journalism explains

why our perception of the Balkans is that of a poverty-stricken region, teeming with abandoned orphans, a wasteland where banditry and human trafficking are rife.

Nor are these places the only victims of media misrepresentation. ‘Every time one mentions Bangladesh in Britain,’ a Bangladeshi intellectual told me recently, ‘the first thing that comes to the people’s mind is famine and poverty. As if no one in Bangladesh lives a normal life.’ Is it surprising that we are hostile to refugees and asylum seekers?

Places like the Balkans, Calcutta and Bangladesh are stigmatised in the west because we tend to pigeonhole, demean and patronise the Other. Mother Teresa did not victimise Calcutta; the real culprit is our culture of selective and biased information.

When Malcolm Muggeridge ‘discovered’ Mother Teresa in 1968, only the seamy side of Calcutta was deemed as newsworthy. Her charitable work was – still is – often hijacked by religious, political and media circles for their own purposes.

But Mother Teresa did not invent the poverty of Calcutta. Nor did she hold the hands of the sick and dying to promote a book or an album. She never saw Calcutta as the epitome of poverty. Whenever she spoke about her work there, she also mentioned similar work carried out by her followers elsewhere. She helped the destitute of Calcutta as much as those of Rome, London and New York.

It is in no one’s interest to belittle or deny Mother Teresa’s legacy. National pride should not stop us acknowledging the truth, even when it hurts. We may not agree with the unfair picture of our countries of origin in the west, but nor should we deny the efforts of those well-meaning people, who help their

unfortunate fellow human beings, even when such benefactors come from the west. Mother Teresa was not part of any conspiracy against Calcutta; nor did she see herself as a tool of the west to purge its guilty conscience.

Her legacy will stand the test of time because it is that of a devoted Christian and remarkable humanist who served the needy to the best of her ability and with the best of intentions. The Pope will soon declare her a saint, but to millions of non-Christians and secular-minded people like myself, she is already a saint of mankind.

The 20th century was one of the most violent in modern times, but also one enlightened by preachers of common sense like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela – and Mother Teresa. The people of Calcutta were privileged to share their lives with her for almost 70 years.

I only wish the peoples of the Balkans, the Middle East and other troubled regions had the same luck. Everyone, especially us in the west, should remember what she preached: ‘We are all children of God’.

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