



Milk Strainer/Jug, Silver, Calcutta, Crafted by Girish Chunder Dutt, ca. 1890 - 1920.

Indian silver usually refers to the silverware made during the colonial period. Calcutta silversmiths responded with their own identity: village scenes of Bengali huts, palm trees, and daily life, all hammered into silver surfaces, influenced by Chinese export silver. This distinctive style was notably associated with workshops in Bhowanipore, where firms like Dass & Dutt thrived.¹

This milk strainer belongs to that era. Although it formed part of a larger colonial tea set, it holds its own as an independent piece. The British passion for tea had begun in China, and silver tea services had long been part of English domestic culture. When the British came to India, where both tea and silver were plentiful, the blending of these resources into elegant teaware was almost inevitable.²

The strainer boasts a round, shallow design that combines functionality with elegance, featuring a delicately curved spout crafted for effortless pouring of milk. Its handle is not only aesthetically pleasing but also thoughtfully designed for comfort; it is adorned with five intricately crafted protruding sprout-like embellishments, strategically spaced to enhance grip and style. Beneath the handle lies a circular decorative rim, expertly designed with a textured grip to ensure stability while pouring.

Encircling the entire strainer is a beautifully detailed band that captures the essence of village life. This intricate decoration showcases quintessential Bengali huts with their thatched roofs, tall palm trees swaying gently in the breeze, and scenes of villagers engaged in their daily activities, bringing the strainer to life with a vibrant narrative. Each element illustrates a moment in rural existence, making this functional piece not just a kitchen accessory but a work of art that celebrates culture and craftsmanship. As Vidya Dehejia notes, while many of these pieces were made for European

¹Indian Silver—History & Silversmiths, *Pushkin Antiques*, accessed September 9, 2025, <https://pushkins.com/indian-silver-full-article>.

²Christine Cariati, "Gods, Serpents, Leaves and Flowers: Indian Silver for the Raj," *Venetian Red Art Blog*, accessed September 9, 2025, <https://venetianred.wordpress.com/2010/01/26/gods-serpents-leaves-and-flowers-indian-silver-of-the-ra>.

patrons, the decoration celebrated local life, often in almost cartoon-like representations. The result is a curious mix: objects for the colonial table, but adorned with distinctly Bengali imagery.³

These scenes, produced with repoussé technique, glow with contrast: polished, raised figures catch the light, while the darker background gives depth, turning the strainer into a story told in metal.

Girish Chunder Dutt, whose workshop in Bhowanipore (active 1872–1947) produced tea services, claret jugs, bowls, cups, and boxes. (An image has been attached for reference.)⁴ His work often depicted farming, women fetching water, processions, or episodes from folklore.⁵ The firm gained international recognition, winning a gold medal at the Calcutta Industrial Exhibition in 1906 and the highest award at the C.P. & Berar Exhibition in Nagpur in 1908.⁶ Girish Chunder Dutt's success demonstrates how Calcutta silver was elevated from a local craft to an internationally admired art form.



The style was widely recognised. Even the *Delhi Durbar Exhibition* catalogue of 1903 described Bhowanipore silver—a style so influential that it was imitated across India.⁷ Wynyard Wilkinson later suggested that Calcutta's rural motifs may have developed in direct response to such international exhibitions. Other regions, like Madras and Kutch, already had distinctive silver traditions that won acclaim abroad, but Bengal did not. To present Calcutta silver at the 1883 International Exhibition in its own city, artisans needed a unique identity—and the village scene became its hallmark.⁸ Thus, this small milk strainer carries with it a layered history: of colonial rituals of tea, of global exhibitions shaping local aesthetics, and of the creative responses of Bhowanipore's craftsmen, who transformed everyday vessels into miniature landscapes of Bengal in silver.

³Michael Backman Ltd, "Indian Colonial Silver Calcutta," *Michael Backman Ltd*, accessed September 9, 2025, https://www.michaelbackmanltd.com/archived_objects/indian-colonial-silver-calcutta/.

⁴Harish Patel, "Calcutta – Silver Art," *Behance*, accessed September 9, 2025, <https://www.behance.net/gallery/17490529/Calcutta-Silver-Art?>

⁵Charles Moore Fine Arts, "Silver in the City of Palaces, Grish Chunder Dutt," *Charles Moore Fine Arts*, accessed September 9, 2025, <https://cmfinearts.wordpress.com/2014/05/31/silver-in-the-city-of-palaces-grish-chunder-dutt/>

⁶Lyon & Turnbull, *Calcutta – An Indian Presentation Beaker, Grish Chunder Dutt of Calcutta, Late 19th Century*, auction listing, accessed September 9, 2025, <https://www.the-saleroom.com/en-gb/auction-catalogues/lyon-and-turnbull/catalogue-id-srly10509/lot-ff26d968-69bb-46fd-ad37-b28301669cc2>

⁷George Watt, ed., *Indian Art at Delhi, 1903: Being the Official Catalogue of the Delhi Exhibition, 1902–1903* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1903)

⁸Vidya Dehejia, *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008).