CHAPTER I

The City as a Physical Entity

"The Best Money that Ever was spent", wrote the Agents of the Company in Bengal in 1698, eight years after the "foundation" of British Calcutta. They were referring to the purchase of three villages, which were to constitute Calcutta, from their former proprietors (zamindars) for Rs. 1000, subsequently raised to Rs. 1500.

The Court of Directors wrote in 1710: "...What is laid out be done with good Husbandry not so much for our present benefit as for the sake of our successors..."

"You are in the right to have no thatched or matted houses within the fort [fort]... That whatever building you make of Brick it be done of Pucker [masonry] Work which though chargeable is cheapest on account of its duration."

The burden of the instructions from the Court of Directors in several letters was to make the settlement "flourishing [flourishing], sweet and wholesome", in early 18th century parlance.

Many years later, not long removed from our time, a lover of Calcutta—he did not specifically say "English Calcutta"—wrote of the "vague and tantalising charm" of the city. "The cool green foliage with which her tanks are fringed refresh the eyes in the fiercest sun. There are few sights which can challenge comparison with the maidan [the green] when it is ablaze with the scarlet splendour of blossoming gol mohur trees. In the gorgeous hues of her sunsets, Calcutta is wholly

---

3 Ibid.
beautiful, and never livelier than in the chill of some misty winter's evening, or at the close of a sullen monsoon day, when the crimson clouds are piled over Hastings [a European suburb of old Calcutta] like the reflection from some giant conflagration, and the silent river rushes along, black and unfathomable.... Another witching mood is hers when she lies sleeping in the white enchantment of the Indian moonlight, which turns her stucco to rubies, her plaster to pearls.' ..."

II

The territory which Job Charnock selected for the site of the British settlement in 1690 was a pestilential region like so many other cities in their origin. It can be presumed to have been a relatively "empty" region, where settlement was in the form of straggling hamlets in the neighbourhood of or within jungles or marshes, while the older settled area, a ribbon of high caste settlement, stretched in a thin line along the old course of the river for four to five miles to the south of the core of the British settlement. This relatively empty space, however, stood on an ideal communication line. On the west the space had been right on a busy channel of international commerce since the 16th century.\(^{6}\) Combining fragmentary evidence with some direct experience of this riparian deltaic complex, we can in a somewhat halting way talk about periodic markets of which the Sutanuti hat, the market for cotton and yarn, appearing prominently on Upjohn's late 18th century map of Calcutta, obviously as a traditional zone, might have been one of the beads on a string. But to the east of the main channel of commerce, almost clandestinely, existed a passage right up to the Sunderbans and the sea,\(^{7}\) a passage near whose commence-

---

\(^{4}\) Ibid., pp. 241-42. The excerpt from Cotton's book contains a quotation whose source is not indicated by Cotton.

\(^{6}\) See Introductory Map.

\(^{7}\) There is in Bolts' Considerations on Indian Affairs, p. 41, a map which
The City as a Physical Entity

ment stood the Tree, passing almost into a legend and losing much of its reality because of its supposed hooka-smoking association with the founder of British Calcutta. The Tree, grandchild or great-grandchild of what might have been the original Tree, also appears prominently on Upjohn’s map, almost indicating a point of convergence between land and river routes on the opposite side of the great commercial channel of the Hooghly. The narrower channel suited smaller boats.

Situated between these two channels and crisscrossed with watercourses, Calcutta, or what was to be Calcutta, was a narrow, thin slice of territory, ideal for seasonal business and barter transactions, or at some places suitable for amphibian autochthons, but hardly offering an environment for anything more than elementary community formations on the relatively high ground amidst swamps.

shows the “Bellegot Passage through the Woods”, indicating the navigable channel through the forest of Tarda, an extension of the Sunderban type of deltaic forest, according to early 19th century topographical reports. The forest commenced from about 16 miles from the city. “Bellegot” stands for an important nodal point linked with one of the main arteries of the city—the Bowbazar Street which is described in mid-18th century maps as “Avenue to the Eastward”. Near the intersection of the land route and the waterway stood the fabulous “Bytakhkhan Tree”, located in Upjohn’s map of Calcutta (1794).

In the Report of the General Committee of the Fever Hospital and Municipal Improvement (1837-40), vol. 5, p. 151, a part of the peripheral region is thus described: “Not more than forty years ago the Salt Lake was much nearer to Calcutta than at present. At a village called Ramkrishnapore, a mile from the high road leading to Dum Dum, is a mound or tumulus of about thirty feet in height, surrounded by two venerable peepul trees, from either of which, if ascended by help of a ladder, a magnificent view of the surrounding country and of the Lake’s whole expanse may be had. This mound which retains its native name of Dum Dumma, not forty years ago, was on the edge of the Lake; it is said to have been raised by the Burmese or Mug traders who frequented the port and used to anchor their boats at this place. The lake has now receded nearly a mile from its foot, and the whole circumference has been gradually contracting in a similar way for many years. The present area of the lake comprises a surface of about 17,000 acres, or about 26 square miles.” The presence of “wild buffaloes” in the Tarda region near Calcutta is indicated in Claude Martin’s Survey Map, 1767.

* * Chitthas or land measurement records of 1793 in the Alipur Collectorate,
Calcutta in Urban History

The English selected for the site of their first settlement in Calcutta the highest level of ground on the riverside. But the swamps did not readily yield ground. The salt water lake about “three miles to the south-eastward” overflowed “in September and October and then a prodigious number of fish resort but in November and December, when the floods are dissipated, the fishes are left high and dry and with their putrefaction affect the air with thick stinking vapours which the north-east winds bring with them to Fort William that there cause a yearly mortality.”

The precise extent of this mortality cannot be ascertained but it must have been shocking enough in the early years of the settlement to leave a kind of haunting memory reinforced almost till the mid-19th century by the miasma paying an occasional visit to the nervously protected English homes.\(^9\) The English passion for drainage and against all spontaneous vegetation had by the mid-18th century led to the growth of a cluster round the fort that had a powerful element of planning in it. Visually, however, it might have looked peculiarly irregular to a European observer as it did to Alexander Hamilton, who remarked that it resembled the growth around a baronial castle of mediaeval Europe.\(^11\)

In basic design the settlement was in line with European urban transplants on the maritime belt of Asia, arising out of the needs of defence, hygiene and exclusiveness, growing round the semblance of a mediaeval baronial castle. The technique of utilisation of highly limited space proceeded from pragmatic considerations rather than from preconceived Calcutta, relating to Panchannagram, or 55 villages close to the city proper, give an impression of the nature of cultivation and settlement in marshy low land. Also, an idea of traditional habitation in the area can be formed from a view of some of the fringes of the present city. See also Chapter II, section I of this book and Extracts from the Topography and Vital Statistics of Calcutta (1840) by F. B. Strong, pp. 1-11.


\(^10\) F. B. Strong, op. cit., Letter from F. B. Strong, August 29, 1837, to Mr. Smith Esquire.

notions of planning that can be related to contemporary urban development programmes in Europe. The town planner was the merchant, acting in corporate capacity and contemplating the available space in terms of relative advantages and disadvantages. The European urban transplant is a highly interesting historical phenomenon but strikingly free from complexity. It was an interesting form, but even at the height of its elegance, its soul lay in the vaults of a commercial house.

By the middle of the 18th century the settlement around the fort (the old fort was shortly to be replaced by a new one to be built almost half a mile to the south of the old site) had taken the form of a commercial, administrative, residential and military complex within an area of roughly two hundred and fifty acres on the banks of the Hooghly. A plan of this part of the town was prepared by Lieutenant Wills of the Royal Artillery. The area looks densely packed but the houses nevertheless have wide compounds mostly utilised for gardens, as Hamilton observed.

A plan of the territory of Calcutta in 1742 from an MS. drawing by Forresti and Ollifres in the British Museum shows the area as a kind of “fenced city”. The plan bears a note: “within the Compass of the Pallisades lived the Europeans and Christians.” The Christians were obviously the Armenians and the Portuguese whose churches are marked on the northern fringe of the area shown on the map and who are clearly mentioned as having been brought within the defensive arrangement of the area called the white town. Another plan of the same period, Scrafton’s Plan of Calcutta, shows scattered masonry (pucca) buildings in the “native quarter” and the Maratha Ditch which surrounds the black town. The settlement extended along the curve of the river about three and a half miles and inland probably up to a maximum breadth of one and a half miles. “Where they

---

13 C. R. Wilson, Old Fort William in Bengal, 1906, vol. 2, plate VI.
14 Ibid., plate XII.
[the houses in the white town] ended, began the habitations of the most considerable part of the natives with their markets or bazars. All the good buildings of the quarter are comprised within the same distance from the river as that which contains the English town, behind which as well as behind the whole of this northern quarter is a suburb of mud houses extending still further eastward half a mile and inhabited by great multitudes of the common people. Where the English town ends to the southward begins another continuation of houses which extends to the southern extremity of the Company's territory. Very few considerable families of the natives resided in the quarter."

The earliest documentary evidence for a reasonably comprehensive physical picture of the territory destined to grow as the city of Calcutta is the account of a survey conducted by the Company in 1707. The great Bazar about half a mile to the north of the old fort was already the most populous built-up area, having 400 bighas built over out of its entire area of 488 bighas. Houses with grounds account for 248 bighas out of 1,717 in Town Calcutta and 134 bighas out of 1,692 in Sutanuti and 51 out of 1,178 in Gobindapur. The extent of jungle was 263 bighas in Town Calcutta, 487 in Sutanuti, and 510 bighas in Gobindapur, no reference being made to jungle in the Bazar. The Bazar had a fairly high proportion of gardens and property granted rent-free to Brahmans but apparently no land under paddy cultivation, which accounted for a very high proportion of land in Town Calcutta (484 bighas), Sutanuti (515 bighas) and Gobindapur (510 bighas). If the figures—there are many other items like "plant[a]ins", "Green trade", "Tobacco", etc. —are even rough approximations, they tend to strengthen the impression about jungle hamlets emerging into agricultural and business-oriented areas. The impression is further strengthened by Holwell's (Holwell was the Collector of

16 C. R. Wilson, Early Annals of the English in Bengal, vol. 1, pp. 284-86. The unit of land measurement used in the survey is bigha, which is roughly one-third of an acre or 1600 square yards.
Calcutta from 1752 to 1756) zestful comments on the steady growth of Calcutta's markets and the increase of revenue from them."

III

In the embryonic state of its development, that is, by the beginning of the 18th century, Calcutta, or what was to become Calcutta later in the century, consisted of European Calcutta (a part of the old revenue unit or dihi of Kalikata), a residential village with some sacred traits (Gobindapur), a traditional Indian bazar settlement (Bazar Calcutta, later on called Burrabazar) and a riverine mart specialising traditionally in cloth trade (Sutanuti). These were surrounded by peripheral hamlets (dihis), forming a varied range of agricultural and fishing settlements, sacred spots, trading halts or nodal points and jungles of various densities.

As the urban area began to grow and spread, the component units tended to coalesce and interpenetrate, retaining at the same time elements of segregation or developing new ones. The process worked in an overall setting of dualism, basically a feature of all colonial cities, between the white and the black town. The phenomenon of dualism, in its origin derived from the pre-colonial trading settlement pattern, reflected the concern of the Europeans with defence and security, manifested in the fort and the fence, and the concern of the "natives" about maintaining their own mode of social and economic organisation. In the colonial setting the fort progressively became an embellishment, retaining an accommodational function, and the fence fell down. The black town shed some of its aloofness and drove wedges into the white town, especially into the intermediate zone—the grey town, so to speak, of the Portuguese, Greeks and Armenians of the pre-colonial period—which was considered a ritually impure zone by the dominant social groups of the...

"Holwell, *India Tracts*, 1774, section III, "Important Facts regarding East India Company's Affairs in Bengal from 1752 to 1760"."
black town as is suggested by the original names of the localities of the area.

The areas of interpenetration between the white and the black town—the European and the Indian town—represented much denser formations than areas which tended towards European exclusiveness. But the areas of European exclusiveness were distinct and articulate expressions of the principles underlying the organisation of the European town—principles which sharply underscored the dualism of urban space in a colonial city.

The European town, at the economic level, tended to specialise in a relatively narrow sector of the total economic activity of the region of Calcutta—narrow but highly capital-intensive and part of a vast global network or system—reducing shopkeeping to a minimum and tending to eliminate the marginal operator, thus creating a business area populous by day and deserted by night in the Tank Square. At the level of physical planning the European could look to the baroque and the early Victorian city of Europe as representing a life style, oblivious of the congestion and decay behind the impressive façade, and apply his notions of real estate development and capital investment in potentially high-value residential or business area. The European was threatened by the “native” squatters but he could not do

---

18 See section VI of this chapter for references to the work of the Lottery Committee for the Improvement of Calcutta.

19 “But with all its advantages, do not imagine that Chowringhee is a paradise, one of those localities that every person desires to live in. Bishop Hrber, in a cursory notice of Moscow, informs us that in that city the palace and the hut are often close to each other. This may be said to be the case, though most probably not so often, in Chowringhee. The road has on its eastern side many colonnaded mansions in the Grecian style and which have indeed a fine effect when viewed from the river, but it has also in the very front of it a cluster of miserable native huts, tenanted by some two hundred natives. This incongruous neighbourhood of huts and lowest Soodras to palaces and European magnates speedily banishes from the mind of the near spectator the paradiacal notions he may entertain about Chowringhee. The splendid mansion loses half of its architectural attraction when it is beside a collection of mud and bamboo huts. For the good of the fair name and for the sake of the fair ladies of Chowringhee, it would be desirable that a north-western would one of these days blow down every hut in this
without his milkmen, washermen and domestic servants, who had to live very close. The miasma from the Crooked Lane or Janbazar, in close proximity to the areas of European exclusiveness, had to be tolerated, and the congestion of China Bazar or Cossitola (areas of both wholesale and retail business attached to the European town) was a necessary evil. Even so the formal municipal procedures had to be applied along with western notions of formal institutional development. The Asiatic Society, the Town Hall, the Public Library (the Metcalf Hall) and the exclusive clubs had been taking shape from the late 18th to mid-19th century.

The spurs of road-building activity, accompanied by plans for drainage, represented sincere professional efforts to isolate zones which could develop on the basis of econ-

and in other parts of the district, and if this sweeping away can be done by a north-western without injury to the persons and goods and chattels of the natives who settle down in these places, it will be a consummation most earnestly to be wished by every white face in Chowringhee.” Griffin (pseud.), Sketches of Calcutta, Edinburgh, 1843, p. 315.

“...The Commissioners [Municipal] have in their last Annual Report, adverted to the inconvenience to the European residents which might result by the removal of domestic servants occupying similar Bustees and forced to migrate to other localities.” Judicial Proceedings, October 13, 1859.

“Crooked Lane was only a few yards from the Governor-General’s mansion... On the east of the Crooked Lane, there is a regular Bustee [hutments or slum] all clotted together, and the place altogether is always in a most filthy state occasioning most abominable stench, whenever the wind blows from the south-east.” (General Committee of the Fever Hospital and Municipal Improvement, evidence taken by the sub-committee, 1836-1838, April 1837) References to the filthy state of Janbazar occur several times in the Lottery Committee Proceedings, vols. 1, 2 and 3. The vulnerability of Chowringhee to the miasma from the surrounding country is thus reported: “Dr. Stewart has no doubt that the miasma generated by the state of the suburbs, extends to affect the salubrity of Calcutta and Chowringhee.” Report of the General Committee of the Fever Hospital, 1840, pp. 51-52.

mic and social class, bringing out the full logic of ground rent and land value. Some of the earliest road-building activities had been in the mixed zones bordering on the original nucleus of the European town and extending in suburb-like formation along a narrow section of the eastern limit of the city. But the land was mostly purchased by men of very modest resources, who invested their meagre savings in minuscule urban properties,\textsuperscript{23} tending to create an overwhelming slum condition, not so much on the main roads as on areas close to them. By the early 19th century the slums and the accompanying jungle had engulfed the better class mixed European and Indian residential area on the upper south-eastern fringe of the city.\textsuperscript{24} In the northern part of the city with its relatively superior resources, the second main artery of the Indian town—the Cornwallis-College Street axis—partially fulfilled the expectations of its European planners.\textsuperscript{25} Along this axis would tend to develop in the late 19th century some of the cherished institutions of the Bengali middle class and more specialised residential neighbourhoods than could be seen on the older axis—the Chitpur Road.\textsuperscript{26} The slums, however, were physically very close and would tend to encircle better class housing at many points.

Urban growth along the Cornwallis Street-College Street axis was, at least in the initial stage, a direct result of the intervention of European planning. The older axis of Chitpur Road and the whole complex of roads (lanes, by-lanes) connected with it were far removed from any such intervention.

\textsuperscript{23} Some of the earliest purchasers of land on one of the main thoroughfares in the intermediate zone were Jungoo Calassy (sailor), Ramjahn Peon (messenger), Janoda Chobdar (stick-bearer to Anglo-Indian officials of rank), Nocoo Khidmutgar (table-servant), Saheer Scrang (boatswain of a small ship). (Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee of Revenue, Fort William, June 1, 1778.) The customary breadth of the passage to the highway, three cubits (about 54\textdegree), was maintained, according to the Amin or revenue surveyor. This might be the origin of the lanes and alleys of the city.

\textsuperscript{24} “There are to be observed remnants of several old roads made by the late John Elliot, but most of them are covered with jangal, their ditches filled up, their bridges broken.... ” F. B. Strong, Extracts from the Topography and Vital Statistics of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1840, p. 28.

\textsuperscript{25} See Map I and section VI of this chapter.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
MAP OF CALCUTTA (II)
1850
(SHOWING THREE
DIVISIONS OF THE
CITY)

MAP II
The City as a Physical Entity

and represented both a historical relic and a base for urban expansion. The original nucleus of this area was the Bazar—the central wholesale market with its ramifications where the “Black Merchants” used to live in the early 18th century. By the beginning of the 18th century the Bazar had become, for all practical purposes, much more important than the original residential village—Gobindapur, the village of ancestors, the “sacred” village heavy with memories and legends,—to which all the old families of Calcutta—the Dattas, the Setts and Basaks, the Tagores and the Debs, among others—trace back their origin. The “infamy” of the Bazar settlement was being slowly removed when the dismantling of the whole Gobindapur village by British imperial fiat to make way for the new fort perforce added an altogether new dimension to the great Bazar. The “sacred” ancestral village disappeared as if swallowed by a river inundation and the villagers had to seek new spots for their residences and family deities. The Setts, the merchant-weavers of Calcutta—the suppliers of cotton goods to the Company—removed their family deity, Gobindaji, to a spot in Burrabazar (the temple still exists in a dilapidated form).

IV

With the rapid development of Calcutta and the growth of its population—the Maratha scare was one of the major factors in the mid-18th century—and the continued decline

27 The great Bazar was the most populous built-up area in Calcutta in 1707, according to the survey conducted by the Company in 1707 Consultation, June 12, 1707 in C. R. Wilson, Early Annals, vol. 1, p. 284.

28 References to the dismantling of the village Govundapur occur in Letter to the Court, January 10, 1758, as printed in Rev. J. Long, Selections from Unpublished Records of Govt, Calcutta, 1869, p. 117; Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee of Revenue, Fort William, August 14, 1775, and in Lottery Committee Papers (1817-1821).

29 See A. K. Ray, op. cit., pp. 59-65. References to scarcity of provisions in Calcutta because of increased population due to Maratha raids occur in Mayor’s Court Records. At an “Extraordinary Meeting . . . in the Consultation Room of Fort Wm. His Majesty’s Justices [opined that] the Gentlemen of the Grand Jury have mistaken the causes of the grievances they present
of Hooghly and Murshidabad, the older cities, in the late 18th and early 19th century, the great Bazar was taking on an increasingly complex and cosmopolitan character. The intensity of specialisation in textiles of which the merchant-weavers of Bengal—the Setts and Basaks—had a monopoly tended to decrease. And with the undoubted gravitation of mixed merchant groups to Calcutta the barriers between the intermediate town and the original Bazar fell, leading to the development of Puggeya Putty, Monhor Das Chowk, Cotton Street, Armenian Street, Radha Bazar and China Bazar as distinct areas in a vast network of bazars.

The cosmopolitan bazar network of the late 18th century had features of both positive and negative significance for the urban development of Calcutta. India, for centuries, had coastal port towns and cosmopolitan bazar towns, whose heterogeneity at one point had been a source of the weakness of her urban tradition. The organisational set-up in such urban centres had stopped short of crystallising at a point where the tradition of the cosmopolitan port or bazar town could meet the less diffuse local or regional tradition.

In the second half of the 18th century a point of crystallisation was achieved in Calcutta. The Bazar had become the focus for a large part of the urban area. A rapid succession of stages of development had transformed the whole northern part of the city, forcing the hamlets on the nearer

[on 22nd November, 1750]. . . . The increase of inhabitants of this settlement and the suburbs thereof since the invasion of the Marathas in the kingdom has been the natural cause of dearness and scarcity of provisions . . . . therefore to strike . . . . at the root of the evil we recommend to the Gentlemen of the Jury . . . . and European inhabitants to retrench the superfluities of their own tables. . . . The Gentlemen of the Grand Jury are equally mistaken in the causes they assign for the dearness of firewood which has [arisen] solely from the great increase of buildings in the settlement and as a consequence the very unusual consumption in the burning of bricks. . . .”
Fort William, Tuesday, August 15, 1755, MCSCR.

periphery into the traditional mould of tola, tuli and para, creating new bazars and developing old ones. The impulse of the bazar combined with comprador economic and social activity. The compradors, that is, the dewans and banians representing the upper echelons of a large body of intermediaries, lifted a basically bazar town to a further stage of development. The hectic building activity and land purchase in Calcutta from the mid-18th to the early 19th century must have stemmed from a relatively new notion of real property.\(^{31}\) The prized possessions were bazars and tenanted land (bustee).

At the cultural and social level, the compradors, however, were re-enacting a role expected of the “zamindar-rajás” in the little rajyas (chiefdoms) of the earlier period. These little rajyas accommodated centres where a kind of urbanism, at a level other than that of commercial cities or great politico-military centres, persisted through the centuries.\(^{32}\) It is in these centres that notions of Hindu cosmology could find some expression. In the new urban set-up in Calcutta, the banian, in his elaborate household, could very well elevate himself or be elevated to the pinnacle of local society, imagining himself or being imagined as a mythical king. He did not need to have any compunction about disregarding the caste ecology in Calcutta. The caste-based physical layout of the mid-18th century Calcutta was forcefully altered by comprador intervention, among other factors. The comprador purchased land and settled it with tenants. Rent was

\(^{31}\) See Appendix III—“Estates of Some Opulent Families of Calcutta”. References to property as sacred start occurring in revenue records from the late 18th century. See, for example, “The Humble Petition of William Swallow” in connection with the reorganisation of the English town involving the filling up of the ditch near the Council House and the removal of huts in the vicinity of European houses. (Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee of Revenue, August 29, 1775.) Appendix III of this book shows that rich “natives” owned extensive real estates in the English town which they rented out to Europeans.

his primary concern. He had, however, to distribute patronage on an elaborate scale—he had to acquire prestige and status. Comprador syncretism went further than the sphere within which the traditional zamindars and courtiers acted. The comprador played a key social role in the emergence of an urban society from the relatively fluid situation of the bazar.

A visual impression of comprador syncretism can be obtained from the building style of the late 18th and the early 19th century, reflecting Hindu, Muslim and British influences.\textsuperscript{33} While the blending was superficial, no artificiality was represented by the central courtyard which was for worship and for social and cultural gatherings such as dramatic performances and impromptu versification. At the level of adapting the great tradition this area played a key functional role. Cultural refinement was in many respects a legacy of upper Indian court tradition. Worship and rituals, however, were not matters of refinement but key elements in the adaptation of the great tradition.

The “comprador-rajahs”, acting at a socio-cultural level, emphasised an image of the city which was not far removed from the image of rival villages. The intensity of rivalry between different social factions tended to strengthen the image. In fact, the “villages” were getting steadily mixed up, though the image of the “village” often survived, reflecting a lag in the consciousness where the reality had changed.\textsuperscript{34}

At a more realistic and objective level, the Indian town was increasingly reflecting, in its physical set-up, those principles which distinguished it from the European town.

\textsuperscript{33} For a description of houses owned by relatively rich people, see Appendix IV—“Structural Pattern of Buildings in Old Calcutta” and illustrations on pp. 24, 25, 77 and 78 in this book.

\textsuperscript{34} See Map III for the distribution of some of the “villages” in the Indian town and also in the intermediate town. In the 18th and early 19th century testamentary documents in the Calcutta High Court the Bengali testators and witnesses invariably mention the old village names as their places of residence. This is also true of correspondents in early 19th century newspapers such as Samachar Darpan (1818-1840).
The bazar as an economic and spatial organisation tends to draw a huge and mixed crowd of people many of whom may be only marginally connected with the main channel of the economic activity of the bazar. In the context of a large city the bazar stands for the central wholesale market with its ramifications within the urban space and beyond it. It does not mean "that particular area of sheds and platforms, set apart in the centre of the town". It is a system "in which the total flow of commerce is fragmented into a great number of person to person transactions". It can employ vast numbers of people on a marginal or near-marginal level of living. The tremendous overcrowding of the market network by marginal operators goes some way to explain the confused tumult of the bazar.

The basic tendency in the economic organisation of the European town of Calcutta was to cut down the number of people in a transaction. The reverse tendency operated in the Indian town, a tendency reinforced and carried forward by the comprador-landlord who caused the development of a spatial organisation based on the idea of "peopling it". A petition from Dewan Kashinath, a Khatri (north-Indian) merchant, praying to the government for being allowed to farm a bazar in Calcutta is worded thus: "I am desirous of increasing its cultivation and peopling it with shop-keepers and others I will invite to settle in it."

Most of the old urban landlord families of Calcutta claim to be descended from the "jungle clearing inhabitants" of Calcutta. This is an expression of the reality of the "talukdari patta"—the rural landlord's title deed—repeated in an altogether different setting. The net effect of the extension of this reality was the crowding of urban space for the rent income of the urban landlord. Land was cleared so that it could yield immediate income. The landlord himself had no conception of the opulent or middle class residential area. The houses of the opulent "comprador-landlord-rajas" would be surrounded

---

56 Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee of Revenue, Fort William, October 24, 1774.
with huts or embedded in slums. There would be a tendency to maximise the rent income by appropriating available open space or former gardens (generally open plots with coconut, areca-nut and palmyra trees and thick or light low jungle with a pond or two) for the erection of huts. As regards ground rent and land value, their logic would operate subject to the strong pull of socio-cultural and socio-legal factors mainly associated with the joint family estates. Unoccupied and ruined houses would be a common feature of the localities of the Indian town and their number would tend to be independent of the operation of economic forces. A populous area in these circumstances might look deserted.

The urban landlords, as a social force behind urbanisation, could make the physical city reflect many of their own concerns, preoccupations and priorities. Though relatively rich to begin with, the landlord families could decay within one or two generations from the pressure of numbers. An imposing structure might look like a rabbit-warren or be covered with jungle because of the neglect of the co-sharers or the receivers appointed by the law-court. A house might be built on a grand scale with the firm conviction that seven generations would live there. It might have imposing pseudo-Corinthian pillars in the style of the public buildings in the European town, whose plaster might peel off in twenty years, the succeeding generations being too busy

---

37 See Appendix V—“Some Representative Bengali Neighbourhoods”,—Raja Nobkissen’s Street. The clusters of huts surrounding the residences of Maharaja Bahadurs of Sobhabazar—one of the most important complexes of opulent households—are clearly enumerated. The distribution and extent of clusters of huts can be ascertained from a variety of sources such as Plan of the City of Calcutta (1825) by J. A. Schall; Report on the Survey of Calcutta (1851) by F. W. Simms; City and Environ of Calcutta, 1852-1856; Plan of Calcutta from Actual Survey, 1847-1849, by F. W. Simms.

38 General Committee of the Fever Hospital and Municipal Improvements, Evidence before the Second Sub-Committee, 1836-1838, pp. 5-45.

39 “In the visits which the Magistrates are constantly making to various parts of the town...they are perpetually struck with the appearance of decayed premises either vacant or occupied by remnants of wealthy families.” H. D. Sandeman (ed.), Selections from the Calcutta Gazette, vol. 5, pp. 473-75.
quarrelling or making ends meet. In this setting the sublime could not be long segregated from the awful. And in this setting urban property would tend to be a counterpart of rural agricultural holding under the overall pull of subsistence orientation.

V

The physical proximity of bare subsistence does not, however, reduce the significance of opulent households in the transformation of Calcutta from its earlier mould of tolas, tulis or paras—all meaning localities—dominated generally by particular castes or occupational groups. The opulent households or prominent family residences tended to draw clusters of people around them. These people were needed for service. The relationship between masonry houses (kothabari) and hutments (slum) is partly a modern variant of this development.

The earliest of such clusters tended to develop in the Burrabazar area where the Sett-Basak families, who were suppliers of cotton goods to the Company up to the mid-eighteenth century and were also independent merchants, had their residences. The possession by the Sett-Basak families of extensive landed and house property in that area can be copiously documented from judicial records and a lively perspective on the records can be gained by visually observing the “archaeological” traces in the area. A visual impression can be obtained of one of the clusters from the original site of the house of Sobharam Basak, the most successful Bengali merchant in Calcutta around mid-18th century. With a temple in the background and a Brahmin’s house in close vicinity, Sobharam Basak’s residence commanded what is now an extensive area in Burrabazar.

The most striking evidence of such a cluster is still visible around the residence of what was till recently called the

40 See Appendix III—“Estates of Some Opulent Families of Calcutta” and also Chapter III, section I of this book.
A section of the European town in Calcutta after Lottery Committee improvements. It illustrates European residences with compounds. Squares and rectangles marked grey are ponds excavated from old irregular pools of water. From the Plan by J. A. Schalch (1825).
A section of the Indian town in Calcutta. The grey markings stand for ponds, the darker ones for masonry buildings and the white patches for empty spaces or huts. From the Plan by J. A. Schalch (1825).
A section of the Indian town. The residences of the Debs are prominently marked. From Schalch’s Plan (1825).
House types in the Indian and European town in the late 18th and the early
19th century. Hamlets and marshes surrounding the city are in the foreground.

*From contemporary pictorial material*
Sobhabazar Raj family. Founded on the wealth accumulated by Nabakrishna, who was the Political Banyan to the East India Company, becoming Raja and Maharaja in due course, the family attracted artisans, servants, scholars and dependants of all kinds.\footnote{See Chapter III, section II of this book. See also N. N. Ghose, \textit{Memoirs of Maharaja Nubkissen Bahadur}, Calcutta, 1911, for a detailed account of the social activities of Nabakrishna and Appendix III—"Estates of Some Opulent Families of Calcutta", serial no. VI.} The site of Nabakrishna's house is marked with unusual prominence on Upjohn's map and also on Schalch's Plan of Calcutta dated 1825. The contiguity of Sobhabazar, one of the largest regular markets in early Calcutta, and of extensive tenanted land owned by the family, can still be clearly observed. The Sobhabazar cluster was the earliest of such family clusters beyond the immemorial pilgrim road (Chitpur Road), which tended to confine the movement of opulent households further to the east of the sites of original settlements like Burrabazar, Hathkhola, Kumartuli, etc. While Nabakrishna sought to rival older families in attracting to his area a virtual community of people, he himself in his later years and his immediate successors had to reckon with the rivalry of more recently successful people like Ramdulal De, the Bengali millionaire (died 1825), who built his family residence in Simla below Sobhabazar.\footnote{See Map III.}

The rivalry between dominant families and the resultant formation of factions (\textit{dal}) might thus have a fair degree of influence on the growth of settlements, presenting at one stage, maybe in the late 18th and early 19th century, a pattern of rival villages in what was developing as an urban region. The clusters, both of the caste groups and of opulent households, had a tendency to approximate to the physical type of a large village, but the tendency was checked or complicated by factors alien to traditional rural communities, such as the migration of diverse regional groups, making for more than usual heterogeneous condition.

The net result of this complex interplay of factors was the continuous physical growth of the Indian town and a steady
residential orientation of what was once a collection of fishing hamlets, agricultural areas and riverine marts. The inventories of house and landed property in the custody of the Calcutta High Court reveal what must have been a process of hectic building activity and purchase of real estate within the city proper. Sobharam Basak, the successful mid-18th century merchant, had thirty-seven houses mainly in Burrabazar, besides ponds and gardens in central and north Calcutta. When Ramdulal De died in 1825 he left houses and landed properties worth about five lakhs in Calcutta, yielding an annual rent of about twenty-five thousand rupees. The Sinha family of Jorasanko had land and houses worth more than eight lakhs in 1820. Dwarkanath Tagore, the successful early 19th century Bengali businessman, had made substantial investment in houses and land in Calcutta and the neighbourhood. The opulent families had open plots of land, gardens and tanks on or just beyond the fringes of the city proper. In the late 18th and the early 19th century the areas attached to the dwelling houses of relatively well-to-do families were five to six bighas, in general, within the city proper.

A comparison of Upjohn’s map completed in 1793, and Schalch’s Plan of Calcutta, dated 1825, confirms the impression gained from the study of judicial records. The value of Upjohn’s map for the “native” part of Calcutta may be overestimated, for it is obviously very incomplete for that part of the city, but the visual impression from the two maps underscores a sharp transformation in the physical mould of the city. The tiny squares, representing masonry constructions in Upjohn’s map, have been replaced by large dark blotches on Schalch’s Plan of Calcutta. The more irregular gray markings on Schalch’s Plan stand for innumerable pools mostly excavated to raise the level of land for masonry

---

43 See Appendix III—“Estates of Some Opulent Families of Calcutta”, serial no. IV.
44 Ibid., serial No. VII.
45 Ibid., serial No. V.
47 See Appendix III—“Estates of Some Opulent Families of Calcutta”.
constructions. The proceedings of the Lottery Committee, formed for the improvement of Calcutta in 1817, refer to huge blocks of property, particularly in the north and central parts of Calcutta, hampering efforts for construction of roads. The reports and proceedings of the Fever Hospital for Calcutta from 1837 to 1840, particularly testimony before the Committee by individuals from the localities of central and north Calcutta, confirm the complete disappearance of agricultural land from the city proper and the dense state of habitation in the old city core outside the English town. A considerable portion of city surface, to the south-east of the city core, north of Manicktolla Street, and some areas even in northern dense city areas still consisted of open plots of land in 1825 and even in mid-century, but they were mostly held by rich families as sources of future profit and left covered with undergrowth interspersed with coconut, betelnut or palmyra trees.

VI

Despite the phenomenal increase in masonry constructions in the first half of the 19th century, the city of Calcutta was still predominantly a city of hutments, the thatched huts being replaced by tiled ones in 1837 by legislation. The trend towards neighbourhood formation on the basis of economic and social status met with constant obstacles from a basic apathy or perhaps tolerance on the part of middle class and opulent groups regarding the presence of the poor and destitute in close proximity to what might have developed into better class residential areas.

"Minute by Dr. Gordon, February 13, 1820, Lottery Committee Papers. Dr. Gordon refers to the area between Chitpur and Circular Road.

"A European view of this aspect of the so-called "native" character is expressed in the following words: "In all other respects, a most intelligent native doctor who had been in my service for nearly twenty years, could not be made to understand that his continuance in his family house [which had possibilities of development as a middle class suburb of the then Calcutta (see Appendix V—"Some Representative Bengali Neighbourhoods")]) at Bhowaniapore surrounded by malaria would be the death of him. I often so assured him, and took the greatest pains for a year or two,
The City as a Physical Entity

An obvious objective of the Lottery Committee for the Improvement of Calcutta was to furnish an impetus to the formation of better class neighbourhoods on the basis of planned layouts on both sides of a systematically developed highway. The most conspicuous work of the Lottery Committee in the Indian town was the construction of a north to south highway from a point near the northern extremity of the city to its south-eastern edge (Cornwallis Street, Wellington Street, Wellesley Street), affording a visual contrast on the map to the traditional Chitpur Road. The northern and central parts of the new highway passed through areas which tended to develop as more specialised functional zones, like the College Street, again affording a contrast to the highly mixed character of the zones closer to the Chitpur Road. The Lottery Committee ceased to function in 1836, the morality of holding lotteries for urban development having been questioned for some time in England. An unfortunate element in the Lottery Committee’s work for Calcutta, the most systematic work in the 19th century, was the net effect of its planning, which was the further accentuation of the physical differences of the European and Indian parts of a colonial city. The planned development of a European residential zone to the south of the old European city area was no doubt one of the motivations behind the work of the Committee, but this did not pervade the entire planning programme which was motivated by genuine and admirable professional considerations.

but all without effect; an old jangal piggery inhabited by chumars and pigs was the place of his residence, and his diseases were first intermittent and remittent fever, dysentery, spleen, and he died dropsical.” F. B. Strong, Topography and Vital Statistics of Calcutta, 1840.

48 “I have already stated that the value of ground in Calcutta generally rises in proportion to its contiguity to a great thoroughfare and that upon this circumstance rested the possibility of effecting the improvement I proposed.” Lottery Committee Proceedings, February 3, 1820.

51 See p. 10, Map I.

52 “Adverting to the increasing European population of this Town we cannot doubt but the greatest part would be purchased in its improved state for the erection of Dwelling Houses at rates which would more than repay previous expenditure.” Lottery Committee Proceedings, May 4, 1820;
Throughout the nineteenth century huge blocks of property tended to mass together in the space between the riverfront and the Cornwallis Street-College Street axis. The blocks were huge meshes characterised by virtual streetlessness. The absence of a system of diagonals is evident from Schalch’s Plan of Calcutta (1825) and from later maps and reports. Mechua bazar Street merged into the congested and narrow Cotton Street while approaching the riverfront and lost much of its usefulness as an east-west connection. Manicktolla Street was perhaps too unusual in its sinuosity but was a forceful illustration of the illogical end of a natural tendency towards an east-west link. This aspect of the road system is illustrative of the completely undeveloped state of Calcutta’s immediate suburbs. While “Dihi” Calcutta became Town Calcutta and later City Calcutta, the suburbs on the east remained absolutely undeveloped, the system of dumping city garbage in one of the eastern “dhis” in the late 19th century serving as a means of living through rummaging in the garbage.

The city itself, extending over seven square miles in 1850, was basically a city of hutments. The hutments formed the great slums of Calcutta. The urban landlords, acting with a frame of mind influenced by both traditional and new notions, created in the slums of Calcutta a powerful trend towards urban heterogeneity. The composition of slum population, so far as it can be ascertained from two samples of hutment owners, was extremely diverse. In these samples the owners of hutments, who had the positions of tenants vis-à-vis the landlords, represent a varied range of castes, occupations and linguistic background.

Prominent in both the samples are the retired courtesans;

also letter dated April 20, to John Trotter, Esq., Secretary to the Lottery Committee.


** See p. 10, Map I.

** F. W. Simms, op. cit., p. 43. Pucca (masonry) houses according to the Survey were 13,130 and huts were 49,445.

The City as a Physical Entity

Hindusthani and Oriya names occur and a variety of occupations are mentioned such as thatchers of huts, sweepers, barbers, tailors, etc. Obviously the proprietors of tenanted lands were not concerned about maintaining a proper distribution of castes in a given space.

The slums, like the bazars, created a condition of urban heterogeneity representing a distinct socio-cultural world, very much urban but not crystallising at a point of organic development. In such a situation the slightest opportunity would lead to island-like or shell-like formations, representing a defensive attitude. Such an attitude would tend to be most intensive in the zones of interpenetration. A graphic example in mid-19th century was the area along the Bowbazar or the Dharamtala Street in the intermediate town of the city. In the Bowbazar area the traditional street names—probably of 18th century origin—indicated Hindu holy association or purely Bengali rural association. By the mid-19th century that area came to have a high concentration of Eurasians and Europeans of lower economic status, and some of the street names indicated ownership of land by a motley group of people not remotely connected with Hindu holiness.\(^{47}\) (Down below Bowbazar Street, in the Dharamtala-Janbazar area the condition was equally, if less dramatically, fluid.) A curious letter in a contemporary Bengali journal by a number of people from this area highlights the need for a firmer social organisation for the high caste Bengali Hindus of the area.\(^{48}\) In contemporary parlance certain parts of this area were still literally the old “hamlets” or “villages” where the old family houses were situated. A physical setting of undoubted fluidity tended to heighten psychological resistance to the melting-pot—a resistance offered by the low-rank

\(^{47}\) Street names indicated on Schalch’s Plan of the City of Calcutta (1825) are significant in this connection. *The New Calcutta Directory* (1859), pt. IX, pp. 7-201, gives the names and occupations of residents or indicates types or groups as in “Huts occupied by the Portuguese” (undoubtedly poor Catholic “Christians of Colour”).

Calcutta in Urban History

European or Eurasian\(^9\) as much as the high or middle caste Bengali. This apparently mental phenomenon tended in its turn to influence the physical setting in creating island-like or shell-like formations.

In the north of Calcutta the forces of coalescence and segregation were working towards the steady growth of the bazar and the steady Bengali withdrawal under a vague impulse to live within a physical framework with some recognisable features—a zone for riverine trade or grain merchants, zones for braziers, potters and Muslim tailors, residential clusters interspersed with spice shops, mustard oil and coconut oil manufactories, temples, jungles, ruined houses and huts.\(^{40}\)

---

\(^{40}\) Griffin (pseud.), Sketches of Calcutta, 1841, pp. 69-71, 110-14. See also Chapter II, section III.

\(^{41}\) See Appendix V—“Some Representative Bengali Neighbourhoods”. 
CHAPTER II

The City as a Mosaic—Ethnicity and Occupations in Calcutta

The autochthons of the swamps of Calcutta have left little documentary evidence. From the land measurement records (chithas) of 1793 relating to the 55 villages immediately outside the town limit of Calcutta in the late 18th century, we may get a vague picture of an agricultural and fishing population composed predominantly of local fishing and agricultural castes (Bagdis, Pods, Tiors) and Muhammadans (tending to have a Bengali first name followed by the suffix Mochalman, [phonetic Bengali spelling of Mussulman, an indication of lower economic and social status]).¹ Both in the land measurement records and in the revenue records of the 1770s and 1780s Muslim and Hindu names ending with Mondols (headmen, owner-cultivators, etc.) occur, indicating a higher economic status among those communities.

Among these Mondols were people who could probably take particular advantage of the expansion of the rice and fish market in the early stages of the growth of Calcutta.² The improved economic position of a section of the original population might have been a factor in the split within the caste of Pods at a later stage of social development.³ While

¹ Old Revenue Records in the Collectorate of Alipur, Calcutta, e.g. Chithas of Mouza Bagmari and Mouza Kankurgacha in dūhi Ultadingi, 1793.
² Among the earliest settlers in Calcutta were the Mondols from Banipur, historically a flourishing mart near Calcutta. See A. K. Ray, A Short History of Calcutta, Census of India, 1901, p. 14. In some southern localities in Calcutta, including my own, the Mondols are the earliest settlers.
³ B. Solvyns, Les Hindous, 1808, vol. I, Twelfth no., plate 2. Even in the late 18th century Solvyns, the Flemish artist-observer of the society in and around Calcutta, noticed a tendency towards upward social mobility.
some fragments of evidence are available on the agricultural and fishing population, none can be expected on the falconers, snake-catchers and similar groups still hanging on to the remaining wild fringes of Calcutta.

The city, however, bore hard on its original population, squeezing them out to the fringes where the city’s garbage provided some kind of sustenance to the descendents of autochthons. On the whole, the city’s economy tended to reject them. In the most prominent labouring group in Calcutta in the 18th century, the palanquin-bearers—the local carriers of the Bagdi caste—were rated to be the least acceptable and therefore least significant. Rare references may be found to the occupations of the original population in 18th century court documents. A court document of 1778 runs thus: “there being no business ready but some bills for misdemeanours, that is four indictments for perjury and about twenty for nuisances in burning shells within the town for making lime, called here chunum and in keeping shells with the stinking fish in them.”

Some original street names such as Chunapukur and Chuna Guly probably indicate the location of lime industries. Evidence of salt works at least on the fringes of the late 18th and early 19th century Calcutta is available from different sources. The salt workers, one of the most oppressed occupational groups of the late 18th century, have probably left their stamp on the name of an area in the heart of old Calcutta, namely Malanga (the salt workers were called malangis).

Situated at a relatively high level of ground on the river
bank and near what was probably the old channel of the river were villages with local administrative, market and sacred functions, having no recorded history. Family histories and traditions converge to accord a central importance to the historically hazy process of the organisation of a new order following the end of the Afghan rule and the defeat of the zamindar hero of the Bengal delta, Raja Pratapaditya, at the hands of the Mughal General, Man Singh. The Brahmin family of the Sabarna Choudhuris, whose founder had been, according to family history, a revenue officer under Pratapaditya, switched its support to the Mughals and acquired a large part of the territory of Calcutta and was supposed to have patronised the priestly family of the Kali temple and other Brahmins who got rent-free land in what was to develop as Calcutta proper in the early 18th century.\(^7\) Close to the zamindaries of the Sabarna Choudhuris were the holdings of one of the greatest landed families of Bengal—the Nadia Rajas.\(^8\) Extensive references to rent-free holdings of land for Brahmins (brahmottar) occur in 18th-century documents on Calcutta and the contiguous southern villages.\(^9\) But despite Brahminical and high-caste land holding and its situation within the legendary sacred triangle, the region of Calcutta was relatively isolated from the principal cultural zones of Bengal. Even the “ancient” village of Gobindapur was a riparian settlement oriented to trade and could not have high respectability for the more orthodox. The temple of Kali could inspire all the greater awe if

\(^7\) For a summary of traditions and stories about the Sabarna Choudhuris, see A. K. Ray, op. cit. pp. 9-11. The genealogical works from which Ray summarises the materials (Sambandhanirnaya and Kalikhetradwipika) indicate perhaps a substratum of truth or a certain direction of history rather than facts in the orthodox sense. The prominence of the family in the Calcutta region is indicated by revenue documents cited in Ray’s work and also by scattered references in the records of the Calcutta Committee of Revenue, e.g. “Ancient Choudhries and Talookdars”, Fort William, October 3, 1777.

\(^8\) Reference to two Parganas, Shapur and Ekdalia, in Calendar of Persian Correspondence, 1785-1788, vol. 7, p. 285.

\(^9\) “Survey of Company Lands” in C. R. Wilson, Early Annals, vol. 1, pp. 284-86. The Chithas of 1793 also indicate Brahmin-held plots of land very likely to have been obtained from earlier zamindars.
situated on a deserted spot or ideally in the midst of a jungle. Even in the land of swamps that was Bengal, the region of Calcutta could well have been known as Buruniyar Desh or the low country.

The earliest group of adventurers in the region were, by tradition and story, those people who made a profession of "catching a captain", which has passed into a Bengali proverb meaning that one has got hold of the right person for personal advancement. This could well have been the earliest occupation in Calcutta, next to fishing and tilling the soil. Even the Setts and Basaks—the leading merchants in early 18th century Calcutta—had to do some kind of "captain catching", though they might increasingly have developed a monopoly in the supply of textiles. The profession of the ship captains' banian proliferated into the complex network of baniandom during the late 18th and early 19th century with the expansion of European interests. This "ancient" profession could still be at the root of the largest self-made fortunes at the end of the 18th century. And in the New Calcutta Directory of 1856, the ship captains' banian still holds a prominent place.

In the second half of the 18th century, baniandom reached its most complex level of development. The typical banian was no doubt a kind of broker or agent, a species which became as thick as locusts on a lush pasture as is evident from the judicial records of the late 18th century. Some men of ability could, however, rise above the level of mere intermediaries, though they maintained for its advantage a link with powerful Englishmen as agents. As the 19th century

10 Grish Ghosh, Ramdoollol De—the Bengali Millionaire, Calcutta, 1869, p. 28. Also MCSCR, Ramnarain Ghose vs. James Calder, Ramdhone Ghose and others, October 19, 1829. Ramdulal's business is described in one of the depositions as consisting "in managing the concerns of captains and supercargoes of vessels which resorted to Calcutta and of disposing of their cargoes and in procuring for them...." The Account Current attached to the inventory of his properties (O.W. 10402) mentions premium on 60 chests of opium shipped to Singapore, charges on landing gold and silver, etc.


advanced and the great patriarchal European merchants like John Palmer made way before the crash, the great patriarchal banians, too, began to disappear.\textsuperscript{13}

In comparison with the banians, who were basically intermediaries in trade, the \textit{dewans}, intermediaries in judicial and revenue administration, were a smaller and a much less complex group, though the two words were often used interchangeably, some individuals combining the functions of both the banian and the \textit{dewan}. Generally, however, the phenomenon of the \textit{dewan} was less urban than that of the \textit{banian}. In the early days of the Company's administration when the company specially needed native expertise in revenue and judicial matters, quite a number of such "experts" were recruited at a local level, though some found their way into Calcutta like the redoubtable Dewan Ganga Gobinda Singh (Sinha).\textsuperscript{14} The days of the great \textit{dewans} passed much earlier than those of the great banians. By the end of the 18th century, however, the banians and \textit{dewans} had combined to give a definite shape to Calcutta's comprador elite as the topmost layer in the "native" economic community in the city and as a more or less homogeneous group, consisting predominantly of families of fortune-makers.

\textbf{II}

The distribution of the opulent comprador groups over the physical space of the city was a significant element in what may be called the social ecology of the city for want of a better term. These comprador families, exclusively Hindu, and almost entirely Bengali (except for one north-Indian Khatri family) tended to be concentrated in the northern

\textsuperscript{13} "John Palmer", obituary notice in \textit{Samachar Darpan}; B. N. Bando-

\textsuperscript{14} See Chapter III, section VI, of this book.
division of the city. The distribution of these families abruptly stops at the second main axis of the intermediate town—the Dharamtala Street—starting from which, through the rear of the European town, there is a high degree of concentration of Muslim occupational groups, *khansamas* or table servants, *ostagars* or tailors, with a sprinkling of *vakils* (lawyers) or *munsis* (learned scribes). The two sectors contrast sharply on the economic scale. The poverty of the south-eastern part of the intermediate town is perhaps expressed in the variation in the usage of the term zamindar or landowner. The zamindar in the northern division was primarily an urban and rural real estate owner on a scale set by the comprador elite while in the south the scale would tend to be set by the table servants, tailors, boatswains, book-binders, butchers and other kinds of servitors to the European community. Muslim landownership was indeed a strikingly noticeable feature in the intermediate zone of the city and the city’s immediate suburbs. Even in the northern zone, the comprador-dominated Indian town, Muslims owned significant blocks of real estate, mainly on the eastern fringes, in the mid-19th century. The pattern of ownership is very similar to the pattern in the intermediate zone, except that people from the learned professions are fewer than in the south.

Spatially, the upper and middle levels of the Muslim community tended to be dispersed over two sectors of the intermediate town, the north-west and the south-east, and the outlying parts of the Indian town. Muslim aristocracy, so far as it existed in Calcutta, lacked a spatial cohesion

---

13 A list of such families with associated localities occurs in L. N. Ghose, *The Modern History of Indian Chiefs, Rajas and Zamindars*, pt II. Also see B N Bandopadhyay (ed.), op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 753-56

14 See Appendix VI—“Some Predominantly Muslim Areas” for some representative Muslim occupations and distribution of some Muslim groups. Abdullah in *Tarikh-i-Kalkata* (1930)—an Urdu book on the history of Calcutta from the Muslim point of view—cites a dictum current among the Muslims of Calcutta, referring, ironically, to the “aristocracy of butchers and table servants”. In Simm’s Survey Map of Calcutta (1847-1849) the vast slum complex—the largest such concentration in the map—has been traditionally a Muslim inhabited area (Kalabagan Bustee around Basak Dighes).
similar to that possessed by the rising Bengali Hindu landed aristocracy in the north. The Nawab of Chitpore and the exiled descendants of Tipu Sultan, the ruler of Mysore, were located at the two opposite ends of the city. The Muslim mercantile aristocracy did have a focus but that was in the highly mixed and extremely cosmopolitan north-western sector of the city—a sector which stood for certain distinct functions and cultural traits much removed from the functional and cultural character of the other Muslim areas in the city.

To a considerable extent, the character of the north-western sector of the intermediate town was determined by a cosmopolitan merchant community—Persian, Arab, Parsi, Armenian, Jewish, Greek and Gujarati—most of them traditionally living in close proximity in many other cities of Asia and of the old Mediterranean world (except for Gujaratis in the latter case) and moving away from old centres and converging on the new. The ethnicity of this area might have, to a significant extent, been a repetition of the pattern of a segment of Surat and Hooghly and to some extent of Dacca and Murshidabad. The net of Asian trade periodically shifted a little and readjusted itself but the people who held the net together changed very little in terms of ethnic groups.**

A striking feature of this cosmopolitan sector of Calcutta is a high degree of development of Portuguese, Armenian, Jewish, Greek and Parsi religious and philanthropic institutions. The Portuguese and Armenian churches were the oldest, but by the mid-19th century the Portuguese community was not easily distinguishable from the Catholic community in general. The presence of an identifiable Portuguese element in the earliest stage of the city’s growth is linked with many stories and traditions about old Calcutta. The ancestor of the famous early 19th century improviser of Bengali verse (kabiwal)—Anthony Feringhee—was said to have been a Portuguese employee of the “an-

* **See Introduction for the argument about the continuity of the cosmopolitan business sector.
cient” zamindar of Calcutta. And the English, when they arrived, found a Portuguese Mass House beside the office (cutchery) of the zamindar.18

The origin of the Grand Mosque of the Muslims close to the cosmopolitan sector is obscure, but tradition claims for its site a pre-18th century origin, and it came significantly to be called the Naquda Mosque—the mosque for whose construction the western Indian and Arab ship captains and merchants probably made a substantial contribution. Such a striking sector in the city from the point of view of concentration of ethnic groups and of a certain type of institutional development suggests the historical continuity of a forceful urban tradition. A number of peripatetic groups of merchants had found a place for a sojourn, albeit a very long one.

The Armenian testamentary documents19 of the late 18th and the early 19th century refer to the continuing movement from New Julpha in Ispahan (Persia) to Calcutta, though the Armenian population never exceeded 700 during the period. The movement of the Armenians between Bombay and Calcutta (and possibly Madras) cannot be adequately documented but a considerable degree of mobility from port to port up to the late 18th century appears quite likely, especially from the nature of their business transactions.

Long residence in the inland commercial towns of Bengal—Dacca and Murshidabad—imparted to this peripatetic merchant group a local colour. The Pogose family of Armanitola (Armenian quarter) in Dacca was reputed as zamindars.20 This local colour was shared to some extent by the Greeks of Dacca. Pertrus Aratoon, an Armenian merchant and money-lender, in late 18th century Calcutta, also held landed properties in interior Bengal.21 Some Armenians

18 Stories about Anthony Feringhee still have a wide circulation and are partly recorded in near contemporary sources. See Bhabotosh Datta (ed.), Kabi Jibani and S. K. De, History of Bengali Literature in the Nineteenth Century, Calcutta, 1919.
19 See Appendix VII—“A Peddling Community—the Armenians”
20 See Appendix VII—serial no VII.
21 Petition from Coja Petrus Aratoon, Calcutta Committée of Revenue, Fort William, June 15, 1775.
definitely became familiar with the Bengali language and people like Mirza Pogose would appear as translators of the Bengali language into English in the late 18th century Calcutta court documents. Yet an Armenian testator could instruct his children to leave Calcutta and go anywhere outside India. References to auction of properties in Armenian testamentary documents are very frequent in contrast with comparable Bengali documents. In the late 18th century Calcutta Armenians worked in close cooperation with Persian merchants—perhaps a continuation of the tradition of Surat and Hooghly. The link of the Persian-Armenian merchant community with Surat and Bombay and through these port cities with Bussrah on the Persian Gulf must have kept these communities close together at least in the 18th century.

Unlike the Armenians the Jews arrived quite late in the eastern part of India, and in Calcutta the first Jewish settler did not probably arrive from Aleppo (via Surat) before 1798. By 1816 there were perhaps fifty Jews in the city with two synagogues. The first Hebrew printing press in Calcutta was set up in 1841. The Jews of Calcutta were generally of Bagdadi origin and their migration was prompted by a series of revolutions in Bagdad which had weakened the position of Jewish financiers. These refugees arriving in Calcutta from the late 18th century onwards formed part of a string of trading posts stretching from Shanghai to London. The earliest immigrants continued the traditional trade in horses and precious stones with the various Persian Gulf ports and also started trading with the British in commodities such as wool and opium. In 1841, the Bengal and Agra Guide noted that the Jews of the upper class in Calcutta were not particularly rich, that the wealthiest lived in the Armenian Street area and that the retail dealers among them traded in rose water, horses, and Persian wares. The Arab (Iraqi) Jews of that class travelled all over India in the capacity of box-wallahs or peddlars. The Guide further noted that by the end of the 19th century the Jews had moved into a

---

22 See Appendix VII—serial no. VIII.
range of other enterprises. Several were active on the stock exchange and many others as large urban landowners. The larger firms were essentially parallel to the European firms and similarly engaged in shipping jute for export and cloth for import. The Jews of Calcutta took a somewhat longer time than the Armenians and the Parsis in developing sophisticated company-type organisations.\(^23\)

The ethnic character of the cosmopolitan zone of the intermediate town was to a large extent derived from the intense concentration of very small groups of people of diverse ethnic origins in an extremely limited area. These merchant groups continued the peddling tradition of maritime trade, though, by the mid-19th century, a number of Armenian, Greek, Jewish and Parsi families had moved towards the formation of a new firm-type of organisation such as the Greek firm of Ralli Brothers, the Armenian firm of Apcear & Co. and the Parsi marine insurance companies.

The Persians, the premier merchant community in traditional Asian trade (as they sometimes saw themselves), however, held on to the peddling tradition and the aristocratic merchant status it conferred on some of them with their distinctive linguistic and cultural background. No testamentary document from any other group in the cosmopolitan sector exudes the confidence inherent in the Persian documents.\(^24\) To some extent this may follow from the genius of the language. But the Persian merchant group, even as late as the mid-19th century, could well feel confident within a cosmopolitan Asiatic and semi-Asiatic community of merchants and a cultural administrative set-up dominated by the Persian language. For the greater part of the period from the mid-18th to the mid-19th century the cosmopolitanism of the intermediate town and of the contiguous segment of the Indian town was dominated at the

\(^23\) Thomas Timberg, "The Jewish Community in Calcutta", Bengal, Past and Present, January-April, 1974. The Police census in 1837 puts the number of Jews in Calcutta at 360. For a recent work on the subject, see F. E. Cooper, and J. E. Cooper, Jews of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1974.

\(^24\) See Appendix VIII—"The Mughal Community in Calcutta". The Police census in 1837 puts the number of Mughals (Turko-Persians) at 527.
### Calcutta: Police Census


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. English</td>
<td>3,138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. East Indians</td>
<td>4,746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Eurasians]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Portuguese</td>
<td>3,181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Possibly Roman Catholics attached to the Portuguese Church]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. French</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Chinese</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[mostly Cantonese]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Armenians</td>
<td>636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Jews</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>307 (a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Upcountry Muhammedans</td>
<td>16,677</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>59,622 (b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Bengali Muhammedans</td>
<td>4,567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Upcountry Hindus</td>
<td>17,333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,56,735 (c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Bengali Hindus</td>
<td>1,23,318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Mughals</td>
<td>527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Parsees</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Arabs</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Maghs [Burmese]</td>
<td>683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Madrassi [South Indians]</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Indian Christians</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Unspecified Lower orders</td>
<td>19,084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,29,714</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Items marked (a), (b) and (c) have been revised from A. K. Ray, *A Short History of Calcutta*, Census of India, 1901, vol. 7, p. 67. Ray, however, does not reproduce the break-up figures from the original but only gives the total number of Hindus and Muhammedans. He includes items 12 and 14 in the category 'Muhammedans'. Item 16 does not occur in his enumeration. Item 18 is likely to form part of the category 'Hindus'.

---

*Note: The document text is transcribed from a scanned image and may contain errors in formatting or content.*
higher level by the Persian language and culture, while at the lower level, especially in the late 18th century, a kind of paria or pidgin Portuguese might have had general currency. The process of Anglicisation of the Armenians, Greeks, Jews and Parsis in terms of the adoption of the English language and style of life was a slow process till the mid-19th century. The inventories of the personal effects of the Armenians and the Parsis from the late 18th century constitute evidence on the use of household objects, indicating a trend towards a European life style. It was not till the late 19th century that Anglicism became an established cultural phenomenon among the Armenians, Jews, Greeks and Parsis.

III

Outside the small cosmopolitan sector of the intermediate town, the ethnic composition (taking the late 18th century as the starting-point) changed along with the economic and cultural preoccupations of the groups distributed over the space of the intermediate town. Numerically Muslim-dominated, the greater part of the intermediate town outside the cosmopolitan sector demonstrated from the late 18th century a complex ethnicity associated with various groups of the so-called Eurasians. The complexity of this ethnic phenomenon in the late 18th century is graphically described in the case notes of a Supreme Court Judge of Calcutta. The term he seeks to define is "Callah Feringhee" — a term which was no doubt widely current in 18th century Calcutta and came to be replaced in the early 19th century by "East Indian", "Eurasian" and still later by "Anglo-Indian".

Mr. Justice Hyde notes in connection with a lawsuit in 1777, which involved Eurasians: "The general term Portuguese was used [for] those who were rich, the descendants of proper Portuguese, natives of Portugal, who

were settled at Chittagong and on a conquest of them, many who were not killed nor could hide themselves at Chittagong were brought by the conqueror [the Mughals] and settled at Hooghly long before the English were settled in Bengal; for men descended from English and other European fathers and black mothers, even some who are Protestants; for men and women who ceased to be considered as Hindoos and Muhamedans because they live amongst Christians and eat and drink as they do and the women kept as concubines by Englishmen of which there are many, are most frequently called Portuguese especially if they conform to Christianity; Muslims, even though they are not Christians but many of them concubines of Englishmen, remain Muhamedans and Hindoos as they have been educated; the slaves employed by the English, the Portuguese and other Europeans are usually called Portuguese and considered as Christian, though not often Christianised but are called Christian mainly because they are made to eat all kinds of meat and to do such kind of business as neither Muhamedans nor Hindoos will do.”

The elements which Mr. Justice Hyde identified in the composition of the so-called Callah (Black) Feringhee were probably also the bases of stratification within the Eurasian community. The levelling force of Catholicism brought together a motley community accommodating the lightest as well as the darkest of skin pigments and, combined with the casual Luso-Indian attitude towards race, tended to force diverse categories, “even some Protestants”, within one community. The tradition persisted but the search for the relative purity of blood and respectability of descent grew stronger with the years. A spokesman of the Anglo-Indian community, early in the present century, deeply regretted the fact that the children of former slaves, many of them Caffries or Africans, had found their way into the Anglo-Indian community. The kintalis, as they were called, lived

24 Myde Notes, vol. 7, 1777. [This reference could not be rechecked because of the brittle condition of the volume.—Author]
in miserable poverty and promiscuity in slums, probably with a characteristic physical lay-out, from which the term *kintal* might have been derived.

Testamentary documents relating to the Eurasian community are much more frequently available than similar records for any other Indian community. Many of these documents are left by women with landed and house properties of modest proportions in Calcutta and its immediate neighbourhood. These properties are likely to have been derived from their long and often sincere association with European sojourners in Calcutta, ranging from a governor of Bengal to a humble private in the army of the East India Company. Many of these women retained till their death their association with their original castes or communities while their children had English or European names and entered firmly into the institution of wedlock, the irrelevance of which for the 18th and early 19th century was not always understood in the more respectable late 19th or early 20th century. The force of Anglo-Saxon Protestant ethics probably proved stronger than Latin laxity or ecumenical openness. A description of the Anglo-Indian community in the early forties of the 19th century indicates a degree of exclusiveness in the upper strata of the community.

"The East Indian Sahibs", comments a European observer, "do not, rather will not, form matrimonial alliances among the native sisterhood, the very idea of such an event occurring is utterly repugnant to them, hence from being almost completely deprived of opportunities for forming conjugal relationships with European young ladies, and from their irreparable aversion to form them with the natives, the members of the East Indian community will remain but slightly connected by marriage ties with Europeans. And, therefore, they will for many years occupy an isolated position as to domestic circumstances, not able in general to rise higher in society, and absolutely determined that as far as marriage is a cause, they will not sink lower in social respectability."

---

28 See Appendix IX—"Eurasians as an Ethnic Group in Calcutta".
29 Griffin (pseud.), *Sketches of Calcutta*, Glasgow, 1843, p. 113.
The above comments of the social observer will naturally apply to the Eurasian or East Indian elite. Its search for social respectability was hampered by the circumstances described by the European observer. "If a European lady were to marry an East Indian, she would lose caste among her acquaintances and be discarded by them, though his wealth would enable her to sparkle with diamonds. . . . European bachelors are not always as inflexible as European ladies towards the East Indians, some of them have condescended to marry East Indian females who had heavy purses and a few have condescended to marry those who have light ones but in both cases these alliances may be regarded as marriages of convenience."30

In summing up the racial situation the commentator observes, "The European and native populations are, as is well known, the antipodes to each other in many important circumstances and the East Indians may be considered as occupying an intermediate, some may say, a central position between them, the latter are joined to Europeans and natives by ties of consanguinity and again, they are connected by personal interests much closer to the former than to the latter and also by a greater similarity in tastes, complexion and prospects."31

In the field of occupations, the Eurasian youths probably tended to have a strong preference for the clerical profession. As our social observer notes, "their fathers were clerks or 'writers' as they styled themselves, and they must be 'writers' also. Rather than acquire a practical knowledge of a trade the great majority of East Indian youths in the city prefer being clerks, they will rather toil for a small emolument as section writers in Government offices [copying clerks who transcribe government documents at so much per thousand words] . . . ."32

The Eurasian clerks appear to have had a distinct advantage over Bengali clerks till the early forties. While the wages

---

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., pp. 110-11.
32 Ibid., p. 114.
A mixed area bordering on the European town. The two riders in the foreground are a European and a Mughal (?). From "View in Clive Street" by Sir Charles D'Oyly (1848).
of the Bengali clerks varied between four and twenty rupees a month, those of the East Indians ranged from sixty to one hundred rupees in commercial houses. The situation was likely to have changed rapidly since the early forties as English-educated Bengalis began to come out of Anglo-Bengali schools and colleges in increasing numbers. Certain other occupations, especially related to the railways and new types of workshops, became almost earmarked for Anglo-Indians. *The New Calcutta Directory* of 1856 produces substantial evidence on the occupational pattern in Eurasian or Anglo-Indian localities. A shift away from white collar jobs on the part of residents of Anglo-Indian neighbourhoods was already noticeable in the middle of the 19th century. This was probably at the cost of the intellectual and literary promise of a section of the Eurasian community in the early 19th century. The greatest teacher of the Bengali youth in the late twenties was a Eurasian—the neo-Kantian poet H. L. V. Derozio. Some of the earliest English seminaries in Calcutta were dominated by Eurasian teachers who imparted elementary English instruction to a number of budding personalities of the so-called Bengal renaissance.

Living in close neighbourhood to Eurasians of higher and middle status were Europeans of lower economic status. A ready job that awaited the destitute Britisher was that of a preventive officer of the Calcutta customs—a job to which the Anglo-Indians too were increasingly recruited.

A European observer other than the one quoted in connection with the Eurasians or Anglo-Indians thus writes about what he considers to be an average poorer European.

"Mr. Harrison, or as his familiars call him, and as he prefers being called, Tom Harrison, is an Englishman bred and born, a circumstance in which he glories—moreover he is a cockney—a circumstance of which he is by no means ashamed. His father, according to Tom’s own account, was and as Tom hopes is, a highly respectable tradesman, an iron monger in the city who managed to obtain for his son a

"Ibid., p. 45."
better education than he himself was blest withal. At a suitable age, Tom was bound prentice to the genteel profession of a silk mercer and haberdasher; his father giving with him, as Tom proudly declares, a 'prentice-fee of ninety pounds. Having, however, a soul above buttons and not liking confinement, Tom, when half his term was run, cut the counter and went to sea 'before the mast'. Here he was likely to do well enough but his ship was lost on one of the Cannibal Islands, most of his ship-mates killed and eaten by the natives and Tom, after many dangers and suffering, found himself penniless and piceless in Calcutta. Here that omnium gatherum, that Refuge for the Destitute—the preventive service, opened its friendly arms to receive him. Tom without friends or money, was fain to throw himself into them; and therein he will remain till some more attractive offer lures him from their embrace. He is now in the third grade, and on the receipt of Co's Rs. 150/- per mensem, better off in a pecuniary way than ever he was in his life; pretty comfortable in other respectst, too, but rather inclined to grumble at the confinement. He is in the third grade, as I observed before. It has taken him four years, unexceptionable officer as he is, to attain that elevation; four years more, if he is steady and has luck, may bring him to the first grade."34

Despite the prominence of Eurasians and poorer Europeans in the central sector of the intermediate town along the Bowbazar Street axis,35 the ethnicity of the zone is rendered highly complex by the presence of the organisational and occupational patterns of the Indian town. The presence of a Chinese community close to the axis represented an interesting ethnic twist because of the highly insulated nature of the China town.36

35 See Maps I and II, on pp. 10 and 12.
36 The Chinese formed a highly insulated community in Calcutta as far back as 1780. "A number of Chinese having settled in Calcutta, who, tho' in general sober and industrious, yet when intoxicated commit violent outrages, particularly against each other and as thro' the difficulty of procuring an interpreter it is almost impossible to ascertain who are the
A striking feature of the ethnicity of the Eurasian-dominated central zone of the intermediate town is the capability of the Eurasian ethnic group in the late 18th and the early 19th century to drive wedges into the neighbouring Indian town. The eastern part of the Bowbazar Street had the peculiar position of belonging to the eastern fringes of Sutanuti—Bazar Calcutta area, the Indian town proper, and commanding a vital nodal point which was part of the organisational set-up of the Indian town. The expansion of the European and Eurasian ethnic groups along the main line of force of the intermediate town—the avenue to the eastward of the mid-18th century—impinged forcefully on the vitally important fringe of the Indian town, leading to the establishment of a Catholic church and growth of localities with Christian-European names, close to the great Bengali mart for provisions—the Bytakkhana Bazar of the early 19th century. By mid-19th century European and Eurasian street names are oddly mixed up with Bengali names such as Chootarpura (area for carpenters), Syakrapara (area for goldsmiths), Jaloopara (probably an area for Muslim weavers), Bostompara (not actually indicated as such in maps and directories but probably implicit in the occupational and cultural pursuit of its inhabitants—the casteless Baisnabs).³⁷

delinquents... we humbly propose that one of the most respectable among them be appointed chief or captain, who shall have certain authority over the rest.... A man named Amu who superintends the run works of Mr. Somber—and who speaks English appears to be the most proper person. ..." Police Office, April 7, 1788. Public Dept. Records, Government of India. For a description of the Chinese community in Calcutta, especially shoe-makers and leather merchants from Canton, see "The Chinese Colony in Calcutta", Calcutta Review, December, 1858, pp. 368-84.

³⁷ The New Calcutta Directory, pt. IX, p. 82. For Bostompara we may depend on a still prevalent tradition of the locality and a High Court document that substantiates the tradition for the mid-19th century—"Will of Luckey Priya Bustomy of Arpooley in Calcutta". She had a house in Harurcatth Lane in Arpooly. The recipients of her property were some Baisnabis of Arpooly, some Bairagis of the area and a Baisnab priest of Simla in Calcutta. Will Register, 1827, HCOS, p. 126.
A small-scale manufacturing and industrial bias is noticeable in the names of the Bengali localities and the occupations of the people. Comb-making, brush-making, watch-repairing are described as some of the occupations of the people in the streets close to the Bowbazar Street axis.\textsuperscript{18} The bazar, on the other hand, had a relatively transient effect on the ethnic and community composition of the people of the area which still retained in the mid-19th century some of the features of the periphery of the Indian town. The transient element might be a reflection of a bazar organisation with a heavy retail and local bias.

An entrenched bazar community is, however, the primary feature of the great Bazar—the central wholesale market—the historic nucleus of the Indian town from which the “Black Merchants”, especially the Setts and Basaks, the merchant-weavers of Calcutta, and the Bengali gold merchants, operated from the early 18th century. The Burrabazar proper, or the Chowk, was called after the name of an Agarwal banker from Benaras, Monhor Das, whose name occurs in connection with money-lending transactions with the Company’s government.\textsuperscript{19} Scattered references to north-Indian Khatri and Agarwals and Marwari Oswals occur in the late 18th and early 19th century records of Calcutta. Both Oswals and Khatri had long been prominent in the mercantile population of the two premier cities of Bengal before Calcutta overshadowed them. The Khatri are substantially represented among the merchant groups enumerated in early 19th century Dacca.\textsuperscript{20} And at least one of the 18th century family founders in Calcutta was a Khatri—a resident of Burra-bazar.\textsuperscript{21} The great 18th century banking house of the Jagat

\textsuperscript{18} The New Calcutta Directory, pt. IX, Okhil Mistry’s Lane, p. 124.

\textsuperscript{19} Letter dated May 9, 1797; Copal Doss Monhor Doss, bankers, to supply money to Bombay Govt., Fort William India House Correspondence, vol. 13 (1796-1800). Monhor Das chowk is marked prominently on Schalch’s Map of Calcutta (1825) Also see N. K. Sinha, The Economic History of Bengal, vol. III, pp. 79-81, for further information on Monhor Das.


\textsuperscript{21} L. N. Ghose, op. cit., p. 41. Dewan Kasinath made extensive land purchases from Hoozoorimal. His descendants were known as Burmans.
Ethnicity and Occupations in Calcutta

Seths was based on Murshidabad and had a kuthi or office in Calcutta.\textsuperscript{42} So had the Dugars, another Oswal house of bankers.

By the 19th century the names of the pattis as distinguished from the paras with purely Bengali association had begun to acquire prominence in the Burrabazar area. Burrabazar, however, was hardly confined to the chowk. Among the pattis that were forming outside the chowk was Pagyapatty where a conference of Marwari bankers was reported in 1827.\textsuperscript{43} It appears from a report in the Calcutta Gazette of that year that north Indian bankers were a highly organised community in Calcutta.\textsuperscript{44} Though all of them could not be Marwaris (a generic term for people from present Rajasthan and a specific term for people from Jodhpur-Marwar region), they are very likely to have been predominant in view of their background and future prominence. A Bengali journal of the same period also refers to Marwari Mahajans (bankers) as a distinct community.\textsuperscript{45} There was likely to have been some confusion between the north Indian (Hindustani shroff) bankers and their Marwari counterparts in the Bengali mind. However, the unmistakable prominence of the turbaned type as distinguished from the bare-headed type is borne out by the early 19th century drawings of Burrabazar by a British artist.\textsuperscript{46} The Rev. James Long, the most perci-

The Calcutta Gazette reports that when Kasinath Babu died in 1792, he was worth upwards of sixty lakhs Selections from the Calcutta Gazette, vol. 2, p 27.

\textsuperscript{42} In the goods of Moolchaund Arorah (1828), Will no. O.W. 11181 both in Bengal and Nagree “I am residing in quarters in the Bazar on the south Poostah in Mur Bahur’s ghat in the town of Calcutta and I have one shop on the land of Srijoot Juggut Sait Saheb inhabitant of Burrah Bazar wherein I deal in Gotah and Pattah and Benares Zaree Staffs, etc. of various descriptions and Europe cloth and so forth…” Witnesses: Gungra-ram Daroka Doss, Kissensing Jaatadar (inhabitants of Posta)


\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{46} “Head study in Burrabazar”, in Colesworthy Grant, An Anglo-Indian Domestic Sketch, 1850. Also “A Street in Burrabazar” in R. Jump, Views in Calcutta, 1837. See sketch-reproductions in this book.
A street in the Burrabazar area. A dwarf is in the foreground. Behind him traders are conferring with one another. A prostitute is smoking a hookah.

From Jump's *Views in Calcutta* (1897).
pienct sociologist of Calcutta, described Burrabazar of the mid-century as distinguished by the presence of the Marwaris. Speaking in 1872 at a literary society in Burrabazar, he specifically drew attention to the study of the Marwari and Mughal (Persian) part of Calcutta.

Actually, Burrabazar was a vast and interlocking series of business zones having some features distinct from the Chinabazar or the Cossitola business area of the intermediate town which tended to lean towards the European town. The cosmopolitan sector of the intermediate town which interpenetrated with these bazars and business areas had a maritime bias which clearly distinguished it from Burrabazar. Logically, the Gujaratis would tend to live in the cosmopolitan sector while Marwaris would tend to gravitate across the line, which was almost actually the case.

Among the links between the two groups of interlocking bazars the Bengali trading castes were particularly significant. Both in the Chinabazar zone and in the Chowk and some other parts of Burrabazar the number and variety of gold-merchant and other Bengali trading caste establishments testify to the persistence of the business tradition of the local community continuing apparently as an obscure stream by the side of the cascade of Bengali comprador activity. The Bengali mercantile community had, however, lost by 1830 its main prop, namely specialisation in cotton piecegoods. In the new specialisations the Bengali trading communities were losing ground, especially in the distribution of Manchester goods and later on, in the stock and


See Introduction

*The New Calcutta Directory*, pt. IX. Aga Kurbala Mahomed’s St., p. 7; Amratolla St., pp. 8, 9; Armenian St., p. 10 are examples in the mid-19th century of concentration of merchants connected with coastal and Persian Gulf trade. Cotton St would be primarily associated with internal trade, the Marwari lodgings were quite prominently concentrated there (pp. 48-49).

* The New Calcutta Directory, pt. IX, sections on New Chinabazar (pp. 120-21), and Burrabazar (pp. 24-26).
speculative jute market.\textsuperscript{51} The new Marwari arrivals were increasingly forming their own island worlds in Calcutta. The Oswals and Khatris of the earlier period—especially the Oswals of Murshidabad and the Khatris of Dacca—had almost been assimilated into Bengali culture, though not wholly in the Bengali social set-up. But Burrabazar offered the new arrivals an island world where they could insulate themselves from the local society and culture, accentuating the plurality of the urban society and the ethnic variety of the city. As early as 1830 a Bengali journal focuses attention on the conflict of economic interests of the Bengali and Marwari bankers.\textsuperscript{52} Yet a significant number of Bengali commercial castes continued to trace their origins to north or western Indian sources in their caste histories reflecting their self-image.\textsuperscript{53}

The obscurity of the Marwari presence in early 19th century Calcutta contrasts sharply with the resonant activity of the Bengali comprador families in the city and the flourishing style of some of the Bengali gold-merchant families right within or on the periphery of Burrabazar. Actually, the Bengali comprador and merchant families were increasingly investing in urban and rural real estate, a trend shared to some extent by groups of Oswals and Khatris with deeper roots in the Bengali soil than the comparatively new arrivals from Rajasthan and north India. In the macro-Indian bazar zone the Marwaris, living by themselves in obscure lodgings far away from Jodhpur, Jaipur or Jaisalmer, or operating

\textsuperscript{51} Thomas Timberg, “A Note on the Arrival of Marwaris”, \textit{Bengal, Past and Present}, January-June, 1971. From about the mid-19th century documents of the High Court would tend to have scattered information about Marwari business operations covering a wide area of Bengal from Burrabazar Cf. Suit no. 423, of 1862: \textit{Sikurchund of Moorshidabad and Gourangpurseul of Rangpur, merchants trading under the name and style of Sikurchund Gourangpurseul at No. 14 Kansaraputty in Burrabazar, vs. Soorujmull Mookunchunde, merchants of No. 25 Pugguppyty in Burrabazar... Breach of contract: delivery of ten bales of grey long cloth [imported] to the plaintiff. See also Postscript II.

\textsuperscript{52} See fn. 45 above, excerpt from \textit{Samachar Chandrika}.

\textsuperscript{53} One significant example is that of the Setts and Basaks; see Dilip Basu, “The Banians and the British”, in \textit{Bengal, Past and Present}, January-June, 1971, pp. 30-45.
through their trusted munims (clerks), were retaining a sound hold on inter-regional money circulation and the flow of imported cloth and spices. Such a long-distance interlocking network provided a cushioning system in an overall situation of highly constricted supply of capital to which the Bengalis never seriously addressed themselves except in a strictly local setting.

V

The partial withdrawal of the Bengalis from the macro-Indian bazar zone—a very slow process in any case—was a manifestation of weakness in the long run, but from another angle as a socio-historical process related to more immediate realities, it might be regarded as a withdrawal in favour of a more immediately meaningful urban framework.

The growth of caste-based localities was probably the first step towards the evolution of such a framework. The traditional nomenclature of localities in the early 19th century is exclusively Bengali including Armanitola which is reminiscent of a locality bearing the same name in the older city of Dacca. Most of the caste-based localities had by the mid-19th century yielded to urban diversity. But the original base was, nevertheless, an element in the complex organisation of the Bengali localities.

The growth of an urban framework based primarily on the local tradition is evidenced by such names as Charakadanga (ground for hook-swinging and the associated fair), Rathatala (a place where the divine chariot was kept and a fair held), Gosainpara (a locality for Baisnab-Brahmin priests), Kansarpura (a locality for braziers), Darjipara (a locality for Muslim tailors) and so on. The transformation of compradors into urban and rural rentiers provided the chief motive force behind the organisation of Bengali localities in the early 19th century. The rentiers-turned-aristocrats provided localities

---

(paras) such as Simla, Shambazar, Bagbazar, Jorabagan, Pathuriaghat, with their big houses—the opulent households functioning for a considerable period as a socio-cultural nucleus. At the next stage, at an increasing rate, there would be the growth of kothabaris or masonry (pucca) houses of middle class people—office assistants, subordinate officials, pleaders, physicians, small landowners—forming a complex hierarchy reflected in the size of the houses. Alongside these, there would be the thatched or tiled huts bearing close links in terms of services with the big houses and the masonry houses.\(^5\)

On the river front the Bengali town, if it may be so called, exhibited marks of strong traditionalism in economic activity carried on by Bengali trading castes in commodities from the depths of the countryside. Trade in split bamboos was once perhaps a major activity along the elongated axis on the river front called Darmahata (mart for split bamboos, later on mats). The area fell within the revenue jurisdiction of the village Sutanuti over which the Sobhabazar Raj family had acquired the right to collect ground rent and tolls.\(^6\) It is clear from the papers in connection with a lawsuit that the area was gaining increasing complexity with the growth of settlements and yielding tolls on mat, straw and timber—all basic to the economy of a Bengali river-front town. In the mid-19th century the area had acquired the character of an emporium. Close to Darmahata Street was Baniatola, probably a late 18th century formation, since it is marked prominently on an early 19th century plan of Calcutta used here as a basic cartographic reference material. In the mid-19th

---

\(^5\) The growing number of masonry constructions along with concentrations of huts (slums) can be traced from J. A. Schalch’s Plan of the City of Calcutta and its Environs etc. (1825); F. W. Simms, Plan of Calcutta from Actual Survey (1847-1849); City and Environs of Calcutta, Surveyor General’s Office, 1861; Calcutta Surveyed during the years 1887-1894, Surveyor General’s Office, 1895. For a summary of data on the number of houses, etc. see A. K. Ray, A Short History of Calcutta, Census of India, 1901, p. 58. Also see Appendix V—“Some Representative Bengali Neighbourhoods”.

\(^6\) See Appendix X—“Some Materials on the Local History of Sutanuti—Papers mainly relating to Sobhabazar Raj Family”.
century it was dominated by Bengali spice merchants. Other business areas close to Darmahata and the river front were Ahiritola and Sobhabazar, dominated by grain, linseed and gunny bag dealers overwhelmingly from the Bengali trading castes.\textsuperscript{57}

In the complex interaction of forces which lay behind the growth of the so-called Bengali town, the comparatively new force represented by the white collar occupations was not so markedly visible in the mid-19th century. Certain areas may be singled out as representing the new tendency in urban concentration. But the weight of the earlier forces of urban growth still lay heavy on the growing structure of the town. Till possibly the early 20th century the cumulative effect of a succession of urban development schemes had not made itself felt on the growth of neighbourhoods partially free from more than a century-old urban landlord tradition. People with little capital but with reasonably paying jobs succeeded in creating a genuine suburb of their own only after an almost heroic measure of municipal organisation had been taken in the second decade of this century. This might be regarded as the belated fulfilment of a social logic derived from a long continued pattern of migration of gentlefolk from the rural areas of Bengal.\textsuperscript{58}


\textsuperscript{58} See Postscript I—"Some Calcutta Neighbourhoods—Past and Present", especially the section on Ballygunge.