

OLD CALCUTTA VIGNETTES: 1757-1815

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Abstract

This article would look at life as it existed in old Calcutta from 1757-1815 when the city starts to emerge as the nucleus of the East India Company's activities in Bengal.

Keyword: Calcutta, Colonial Period, Social Life

1. INTRODUCTION

"Dear _____ down I'm set,
Here to discharge my scribbling debt.
How shall I paint the plagues I bore,
To reach this so-much-talked-of shore ...Well thank my
stars! those plagues are past,
A social air I breathe at last...
dear Girl! this place has charms.
Such as my sprightly bosom warms!"

- A letter from a Lady in Calcutta to her Friend
in England,

(Seton-Karr 1864: 23, Vol. 1).

Towards the end of the seventeenth century coastal cities burgeoned in India as a direct result of European trade within the country. These coastal cities were different from the urban centres which had existed prior to the seventeenth century because of the fact that they did not depend upon the hinterland for administrative or military functioning but were self-reliant breaking the earlier trend of reciprocity between the hinterland and the port cities (Om Prakash 2000: 146). Located in an alien and hostile atmosphere these cities were almost always fortified. Calcutta along with Bombay and Madras was one such coastal city that came into existence towards the end of the seventeenth century but flourished only after 1757, following the battle of Plassey when the English East India Company emerged as the sovereign authority in Bengal. This article would look at life as it existed in old Calcutta from 1757-1815

when the city starts to emerge as the nucleus of the East India Company's activities in Bengal.

Regarding the origin of the city of Calcutta, the *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, a Persian chronicle for the eighteenth century, mentions that during the time of the *Nawab* Murshid Quli Khan the English factory at Hughli collapsed whereupon the English purchased a new plot of land in Lakhoghat and started building a factory there. But the 'nobility and gentry of the Sayyid and the Mughal tribes' of the place opposed the scheme of building a factory there. They petitioned to Mir Nasir the *faujdar* of Hughli that the construction of the said factory should be stopped as the Europeans from the terraces of the yet unconstructed factory would interfere with the privacy and sanctity of their females. The *faujdar* communicated the matter to Murshid Quli and the latter gave orders to the *faujdar* 'prohibiting absolutely the English from placing a brick over a brick and from laying a timber over a timber...' (Salim 1902: 31). The English decided to oppose the order whereupon hostilities broke out between the *Nawab* and the English. The *Riyaz* mentions, 'Charnock decided upon a fight but the authority of the *Nawab* being overpowering he 'raised the anchor of the ship.' The English then started for the *Dakhin*. At this time the Marathas with whom the Emperor Aurangzeb was engaged in a protracted fight had cut off the supplies of the Emperor. The English at this juncture provided the *Nawab* and his troops with the necessary supplies and won back the Emperor's favour. As a result they obtained permission from the Emperor to build a factory in Bengal and a remittance from all customs duty upon an annual payment of rupees three thousand to the royal customs house. Thus was born the city of Calcutta.

2. EARLY DESCRIPTIONS OF THE CITY

The *Riyaz-us-Salatin* provides us with detailed descriptions of the old city of Calcutta. 'Calcutta', writes the author of the *Riyaz*, 'is a large city on the banks of

the river Bhagirati. It is a large port, and the commercial emporium of the English Company, and is subject to them. Small ships, called sloops, always every year come to that port from China, England, and other parts, and many remain there. At present, this city is the place of residence of the English Chiefs and officers and employees.' About Calcutta, Grandpre, the eighteenth century French traveler mentions that Calcutta was the only European settlement of any importance on the right bank of the Ganges while the rest were all fixed on the left side. But the location is of great inconvenience as the ground was not sufficiently above the water-level. The air of Calcutta was not healthy the place being marshy and the port being located 'exactly at the turn of two points, which augment the violence of the current in every state of the tide.' Calcutta was situated so as to receive the whole force of the bar, which sometimes and especially in the spring tides was very great. As the place was located near to the sea the *Riyaz* mentions that it was damp and the houses though commodious and well ventilated were made of two or three stories where the ground floor was unfit for dwelling due to dampness of the climate and the soil. He also mentions that water of the wells of this city was very salty and brackish and therefore unfit for drinking. The climate of Calcutta was not unhealthy during the four months of winter but during the rest of the eight months of the year especially during the monsoons the climate of the place was very unhealthy. But the town was impressive and the author of the *Riyaz* had verses dedicated to it. The English also had a fort at Calcutta. The town of Calcutta was on an octagonal citadel. The city itself was built into two parts- the white town which was the settlement of the Europeans and the Black town which was populated by the natives.

About the city Grandpre mentions that it had a ship-building industry where vessels were made. However Grandpre complains of the unhealthy atmosphere of the city in terms of the lack of adequate methods of waste disposal and other municipal functions. Often the corpses of animals and sometimes even humans were dumped on canals that ran along two sides of the street along which also carry the entire municipal waste. This inconvenience was caused by the high water table in Calcutta where it is impossible to dig 'without finding water' (Grandpre 1996: 6, Vol. 2). Grandpre lamented that the filth of the Calcutta city also attracted a lot of flies and mosquitoes. From

Grandpre's account it seems that the jackals and the ravens, the natural scavengers, took the duty of keeping the city clean and protecting the city and its inhabitants from the clutches of plague and other diseases. Grandpre writes, 'these animals co-habit with the inhabitants of the city, roam about with impunity in the streets of Calcutta and often land in the middle of the crowd to take their prey (Grandpre 1996: 8).

3. THE CITY EVOLVES: ENGLISH LIFE IN CALCUTTA

These early descriptions of the city of Calcutta show that in its nascent years the city, which later emerged as the most populous and grand capital of the British empire, was in fact a quite unhealthy and unsuitable place. But over the years the city evolved. The grand days of Calcutta ensued from 1757 when the East India Company became the paramount authority in Bengal after the defeat of *Nawab* Siraj-ud-daulah in the battle of Plassey. In the hey days of the Nizamat, Murshidabad, rather than Calcutta was the epicenter of commerce and culture. However with the rise of English power in Bengal Calcutta took the mantle from Murshidabad and became the grand capital of the British Empire. In 1757, the English court in Calcutta lamented about the 'luxurious, expensive and idle manner of life' which largely prevailed in the city. The Court disallowed all 'expenses about cook-rooms, gardens lately observed on the face of the bills.' The servants of the Company were recommended to observe a more frugal manner of living. James James Long writes that 'an early ride at day-break, breakfast at 8, office from 9 to 12, dinner at 2, sleep, tea, ride, visiting and supper, filled up the day' of an English gentleman in Calcutta. At sunset many took a leisurely stroll around the great tank in *Lal Dighi* under orange trees. Some others drove in "buggeys" and the rich on "chariots" imported from England (Busteed 1882 : 111). Another form of 'sporty open carriage' on the roads of eighteenth and nineteenth century Calcutta was the phaeton which drawn by one or two horses, had a 'minimal very lightly sprung body atop four extravagantly large wheels.' In 1784, a phaeton drawn by a 'very fine pair' of Turkey horses cost 1,200 Sicca Rupees (Seton-Karr 1864: 44, vol. 1). It was also fashionable to sail down the river in a private *bajra* (many oared pleasure-boats) some of which even carried bands of music. Occasional public breakfasts, balls and masquerades enlivened the lives of English

ladies in the city. In 1784 an English lady very evocatively described her life in old Calcutta in a letter to her friend in England thus:

After a sultry restless night,
Tormented with the hum and bite
Of poisonous insects out of number,
That here infest one's midnight slumber,
Yet suddenly when breakfast's ended,
Away we hurry with our fops
To rummage o'er the Europe shops:
And when of Caps and Gauze we hear.
Oh! how we scramble for a share !...
At table, next, you'd see us seated.
In liberal style with plenty treated.
Near me a gentle swain, with leave
To rank himself my humble slave...
A Chief, my Strephon was before.
At some strange place that ends with *pore*.
Where dexterously he swelled his store
Of Lacks, and yet is adding more
(Seton Karr 1864: 23-24, Vol. 1).

The letter written cleverly in verses by this anonymous English lady very aptly described the trials and tribulations of life in old Calcutta.

The theatre and the lottery were other significant aspects of social life in old Calcutta. On October 21st, 1784 Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* was performed in Calcutta in 'a very full theatre' where 'Shylock never appeared to greater advantage, and the other characters were, in general, well supported.' On November 11th, 1784, the tragedy of *Hamlet* was to be performed. Here it was proposed that 'for the better accommodation of the Ladies and Gentlemen of the settlement, the gallery is to be converted into boxes.' A plan of Calcutta executed in 1784 by Colonel Wood, shows the theatre as behind Writers' Buildings and the street to the east of the theatre was known as "Theatre Street." (Busteed 1882: 108). So far as the lottery was concerned the demand for tickets in the Calcutta Lottery was great. A 'society of gentlemen' in 1784 had subscribed for as many as 500 tickets. On the progress of the socio-cultural life of the Calcutta city and on the steps to make it even more refined an English reader of the *Calcutta Gazette* on October 21st, 1784, wrote to its editor thus:

...It is with infinite delight I have observed the rapid progress we are daily making in all those polite and refined entertainments, which have so strong a tendency to humanize the mind, and render life pleasing and agreeable. Calcutta, in the elegance of its amusements, and the fashionable style in which they are carried on, will shortly vie with most of the cities...in Europe. If they boast of their plays, masquerades, assemblies, and concerts, we can pride ourselves in the same with equal propriety and justice. (Seton-Karr 1864: 27-28, vol. 1).

Further on in the letter the writer suggests the opening up of public gardens in Calcutta 'on a similar plan with those of Ranelagh or Vauxhall', which, 'by being beautified and adorned with fountains and cascades, interspersed with shady groves and arbours, would at the same time be pleasing to the view, and, in this hot climate, conducive to the health also.' The writer suggests also the opening up of a *Coffee House* 'modeled after the manner of the *Chapter Coffee-house* in London, by having in it a proper assortment of books, in the manner of a library' so that 'when your spirits were depressed, or your imagination grew dull, so as not to be in a humour to join in conversation, you might indulge yourself in reading either for instruction or amusement' (Seton -Karr 1864: 28, vol. 1). The English therefore tried to build 'a home away from home' in Calcutta as they modeled the city largely after London. The English quarter was located in the southern end of the city with its stately houses having 'white walls, broad open verandahs and green Venetian shutters' from which Calcutta derived its epithet of being the 'City of Palaces.' The High Court, the Town Hall and the treasury faced the 'plain on the north.'

4.NATIVE SOCIETY

The native town occupied nearly six square miles of the city and 'in appearance' had 'little to boast of.' The houses were in bad repair and the markets extremely crowded. Nevertheless Burrabazar 'apparently ready to fall to pieces and crush buyers and sellers in the ruins' was 'stored with the most precious fabrics' from Upper India. The native society consisted of both Hindus and Muslims. The city had 167 Hindu temples of which the great temple of Kalighat was the most frequented. The *Durga Puja* was the chief festival of the Hindu Bengalis and was celebrated with much pomp and fervor. Hindus

were generally exempted for 5 days from office on the occasion of *Durga Puja*. The festival of Muharram observed by the Muslims and the Hindu *Dussehra* or *Durga Puja* generally occurred at the same time. Generally the Hindus and Muslims of Calcutta under British governance lived in peace and harmony though occasional clashes were nevertheless reported. On October 25th, 1787, such a dispute between the two communities was reported in the Calcutta Gazette (Seton-Karr: 212, vol. 1).

5.CALCUTTA: A MELTING POT OF CULTURES

Nevertheless, in eighteenth-nineteenth century Bengal, the most remarkable feature of the city of Calcutta was its cosmopolitanism. Coastal societies are remarkable for their cosmopolitan character as through the seas the coastal societies receive and imbibe outside influence and the coastal society of Bengal was no exception to this principle. Calcutta, the capital of Bengal was a cosmopolitan city- a melting pot of people and cultures. Grandpre mentions that in Calcutta there were two churches of the English settlement and another Catholic church belonging to the Portuguese Mission, an Armenian conventicle, a synagogue, several mosques, and a great number of pagodas: so that 'nearly all the religions in the world are assembled in this capital' (Grandpre 1995: 5). Another contemporary author Joseph Mullens, writes that although the English were quite prominent in Calcutta, but the French, German and American merchants were also very common and 'the Greeks and the Russians are not wanting.' The 'enterprising and generous' Parsees were 'represented by a hundred families from Bombay.' The Arab, the Armenian, the Jew, the Chinese, the Burmese and the Abyssinian also thrived in old Calcutta. Calcutta being a coastal city and a trading centre of significance attracted traders from all over Europe and Asia which gave birth to the city's cosmopolitanism.

6.CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to provide the reader with a sketch of life in old Calcutta from hitherto unutilized or underutilized sources. The article has attempted to resurrect a bygone era of stateliness and grandeur, resplendence and gloriousness. Yet beneath the façade of glory lay the trials and tribulations of the inhabitants

of a newly burgeoning city. This article has attempted to look at the evolution of the old city of Calcutta from an unhealthy, swampy pestilential settlement to the grand capital of the British Empire in the East. It remains for the reader to resolve how far the author has succeeded in her attempts.

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