

An Enquiry into the Process and Pattern of Small-Town Formation in Eighteenth-Century Bengal

Dr. Subrata Roy

Assistant Professor of History, Santipur College, Nadia

E-mail: subratasntc@gmail.com

***Abstract:** This paper is a study of urban characteristics of the small towns of Bengal, a process that started in the transitional period of the eighteenth century and continued till colonial rule. It enquires into the causes of the growth and development of the towns. An analysis of the functions of small towns and the theoretical formulations of urbanization has been highlighted. How the dichotomy of the forces of continuity and change in the life of small towns move on economically and culturally is a key issue of this study.*

Key Words: urbanization, small town, Bengal, eighteenth century, colonial rule.

The history of urbanization in Bengal dates back to the remote past, cities, and towns developed as well as declined. This 'rise and fall' process occurred due to the climate and riverine character of the province. The headquarters of Bengal province was transferred from time to time owing to the vagaries of the shifting channels or due to the strategic need of the region under control.¹ We know, India had witnessed the rearing up of several important urban centres and port towns mainly at the inspiration and under the impact, if not at the initiative, of cultures that were of foreign origin.....the dominant Indo-Muslim culture, was essentially urban in nature and character; indeed, the Muslim rulers, particularly the Mughals, were responsible for rearing up a long series of *sehrais, kasbas, shahrs, abads*, etc. throughout 'Hindustan'.² The birth of the three metropolises city of Dhaka, Murshidabad, and Calcutta during the eighteenth century have been identified and a comparative study of the historical roots of urbanization and metropolitan growth in Bengal has been discussed by the scholars. In Weber's account, what gives the city its special character is principally the existence of commerce and trade, together with all the activities associated with it such as the establishment of markets and exchange.³ This article examines the different aspects of urbanization across Bengal with special attention to the causes of the birth, growth, and development of small towns and finds out some of the theoretical formulations of the urbanisation process in Bengal during the period under study.

Area of the Study:

During the eighteenth century the bay of Bengal, extending to the north and the northwest from the coastline, runs from the River Naf on the east side of the bay to the Chilka Lake on the west side. The province was situated partly within and partly outside the tropics, and was, roughly speaking, divided into two halves by the Tropic of Cancer, and was situated between 19° 28' and 28° 9' north latitude, and 81° 37' and 93° 18' east longitude. It was bounded on the north by Nepal, Tibet, and Bhutan; on the east by the British provinces of Assam and Burma; on the south by the Bay of Bengal and the Madras Presidency; on the west by the Central Provinces, the states of the Central India Agency, and the North-West provinces.

Bengal was divided into four sub-provinces: Bengal proper, Bihar, Orissa, and Chota Nagpur. This division of the country has no political significance. It is rather a historical division, and as it happens, it corresponds very fairly with a division of the country according to its natural character.⁴ The present study will cover the geographical boundary of Bengal proper as mentioned above excluding the native states of Kuch Bihar, Sikkim, Hill Tippera, and the District Tippera, South Lushai Hill, and included the District of Malda which was then in the Bhagalpur Division. In short, our study will comprise the geographical boundary of present West Bengal and Bangladesh. Besides, James Rennell also divided the then Bengal and Bihar into eight divisions and thirty-five revenue collection units.⁵ Eventually out of the thirty-five revenue collection units, eight were identified as a small towns in the geographical boundary of our study.

Objectives:

The main objectives of this article are: (a) to trace the various nature of the birth and growth of the towns; (a) to identify and evaluate the economic as well as professional activity of the urbanites; (b) to examine the religion, caste, and class-based settlement pattern in the towns; (c) to assess and explore the socio-cultural interactions between the urban and rural dwellers.

Some of the important findings are the following: (1) most of the emerging towns had an administrative or commercial background; (2) almost all the towns and cities of eighteenth-century Bengal had a growing economic activity amidst political instability; (3) the demographic settlement of the city and towns appeared in the form of inter-religious and to some extent inter-caste based.

Methodology:

In this study, analytical, critical, and comparative methods will be used. The conceptual and theoretical framework of this paper falls within the ambit of demographic and morphological studies. Both primary and secondary sources as well as field studies are to be supplemented by the nature of the birth and growth of the towns. The primary sources include contemporary Persian chronicles and Bengali vernacular literature. The secondary sources

include published books, articles, dissertations, journals, and magazines. Due care has been taken to make interpretations rational and scientific.

Discussion:

Almost a century back Rabindranath Tagore wrote "with the growth of villages evolved the town."⁶ But, unfortunately, little attention has been paid to the question of urban variation in eighteenth-century Bengal. The historian's attention has been largely restricted to the port cities and the large inland centres. However, while the great cities dominated the political, economic, and cultural life of the regions which formed their hinterlands, many small towns had their role as "hinge" centers, helping to articulate local traditions with national ones. Many of these smaller centers were dignified with their histories, but the question is how far we came to know such histories scientifically. Probably for this reason a few decades back K. N. Chaudhuri regretted that "there can be few aspects of Indian studies more neglected than that of historical geography. Within this large area of neglect, urban history occupies a special place."⁷ According to one of the leading modern urban historians of the west, "Small towns that never grew big or got stuck in amber as a neighbour did tend to remain unseen."⁸ Very recently Sabyasachi Bhattacharya commented, "Unlike urban politics of the metropolitan cities the dynamics of public life in *mofussil* towns remain unexplored."⁹ Now the question is how long the study of small towns will remain in the dark. Although we know the emergence of towns or cities creates new structures of opportunity politically, socio-economically, and culturally. In this context, we may refer to the arguments of S. N. Mukherjee, according to him, "Urban history is a neglected subject in India for several reasons; partly because the vast majority of the people of India live in villages and historians have recently directed their interest to rural India, to the agrarian system, to the peasants' revolts and other related topics and partly because the present-day official ideology is committed to the villages."¹⁰ He also commented that "urban history has not yet evolved as a subject in its own right in India."¹¹ Fortunately, in the last few decades, we noticed that historians' attention to urban history get special attention.

How a village gets included within a town is usually a long-drawn process. But theoretically, we see almost all the big as well as small towns, hosting all kinds of manufactures, like the textile industry, carpet-making, jewellery, production of dyes, oils, sugar, scents, soap, paper, ink, glass, weaponry, tools, household utensils, all kinds of metal, wood, stone and leather works, minting, construction, shipbuilding, etc. – all of them were urban occupations, though not in all cases predominantly so. Moreover, the *bazaar* was a nerve centre of every town, although Kingsley Davis points out that, "there is as yet no general science of cities. Without such a general science, one cannot get far in analyzing and documenting the inter-relationships between urbanization and economic development".¹² A few years after Davis, the great Swedish sociologist Gideon Sjöberg specifically mentioned that

“technology and social power, though not alone in stimulating urbanization, are the most crucial variables in accounting for the origin and proliferation of city life throughout the world.”¹³ Referring to the culture of cities Lewis Mumford pointed out that, “the city, as one finds it in history, is the point of maximum concentration for the power and culture of a community.”¹⁴ He also commented that “the city is the form and symbol of an integrated social relationship: it is the seat of the temple, the market, the hall of justice, the academy of learning.”¹⁵ Historically, in the first half of the eighteenth century, Bengal produces a large number of towns that accumulates and embodies the heritage of the region and combines in some measures and kinds with the cultural heritage of large units, national, racial, religious, and human. But in the second half of the century, we see the British influence on the Indian areas, especially in the towns that often appeared to be completely separate from one another.

Bengal under the Nawabs

The 18th century in India has generally been considered to be a century of stagnation and arrested progress. But in Europe during the second half of this century, the mental ferment among some of the European peoples and the culmination of centuries of oppression of the helpless masses in France and elsewhere gave rise to the world-shaking episode of the French Revolution. Compared with these great happening in Europe, the 18th century which slowly witnessed the establishment of European domination in India was looked upon as a “barren century” in India. But, despite a great many setbacks and a general drawback in the life of the people, this century was not as barren as it has been thought to be. We see some notable manifestations of life bringing process which was silently at work even amid an apparent absence of vitality. According to C. A. Bayly, the ‘decentralization’ of political power during the eighteenth century encouraged the further growth of a rooted service gentry and a homogeneous merchant class operating around small town centres. The history of these urban, mercantile, and service people was moulded by three broad influences. In Bengal there was, growth of commercial productions and speeded external trade; urban and mercantile society responded to the deeper trends in the peasant economy which surrounded it, and finally, the political order created patterns of consumption, protection, and revenue extraction which bounded together townsmen and rural bazaars.¹⁶ Hence the study of small-town formation in Bengal will also substantiate how the social life of the people of the land moves on gradually amidst continuity and change.

Bengal was originally a province of the Mughal Empire and was governed by a Subahdar who represented the imperial authority. In 1701 a Brahman named Murshid Quli Khan was converted to Islam and was appointed the *Dewan* of Bengal. He was a powerful man and his growing influence enabled him to exact from the English a sum of Rs. 25,000 in place of the permission that he granted them to establish a factory at Qasimbazar. In 1713 he became

the Governor of the Province and repeated his exactions. Murshid Quli Khan's rise to power, however impressive, was not unique, but its timing was significant. With the death of Emperor Aurangzeb in 1707, the era of the great Mughals had ended, and the central government began to lose its authority. This was sensed by ambitious men who had worked for the Mughals. Murshid Quli Khan was one of them. Murshid Quli Khan began to collect the land revenue through *ijaradars* or contractors, like the *fermiers generals* of France, by taking security bonds from them. This was his *mal zamini* system. Many of the older zamindars survived, but under the thumbs of these new *ijaradars*, with time, many of them were crushed out of existence. In the second or third generation, these contractors came to be called zamindars and many of them were dignified with the title of Rajas and Maharajas, though not of princely birth, but merely glorified civil servants paid by a percentage on their collections.¹⁷ The seat of residence of such zamindars or rajas became the centre of administration, and the zamindari of such raja denominated with the place of its existence. Gradually the seat of such zamindars grew up as a town and they also looked up to its development. Besides several European-settled towns grew up on the bank of the river Hooghly and across Bengal. The entry of the large, multinational trading companies of European origin brought about a qualitative change in the pattern of the textile trade, by creating a market for quality textile products, and at the same time brought profound changes in the urban scenario too. Textile trade, under their umbrella, reached a new height and led to the emergence of many new towns. Finally, we may also refer to some of the religious centres like Bandel, Nabadwip, etc.¹⁸ which grew up due to the establishment of the Church or as a center of the Vaishnava faith.

It is also argued that it was primarily the plunging spiral of imperial administrative disintegration during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century that brought about profound changes in the established patterns of Indian urban life. Moreover, we see about the latter half of eighteenth-century history was slowly but surely taking a new turn, because of the introduction of several new crafts and industries, a new and active spurt in trade and commerce with Central and Western Asia, and at a later stage, with Europe through the Portuguese, and the Dutch. Hence to find out the theoretical framework of Indian urbanization, especially in the Bengal case we have to seek out the continuity and changes of both the political, socio-economic, and cultural movement of the land and the people. In the second half of the eighteenth century, British military and administrative control over India and economic penetration into its vast territory grew at a differential rate in different regions of India. British rule killed traditional urban-industrial centres and gave birth to new centres of service and commerce. It is an extremely complex history that has left its mark on the nature of urbanization in different parts of India. These birthmarks of urbanization can be identified particularly in the variable mixture of western and Indian values and modes of behaviour.

Sitting: The Dominant Role of the *Zamindars* and Foreign Traders

One of the most important contributions to the growth of the city and towns was made by the landed and commercial interest during the period of our study. The zamindars used to maintain in the capital an establishment of *naibs*, *wakils*, messengers, peons, and other servants required for their purposes; so did the big merchants and the traders. All the foreign companies had separate factories and besides their officials and servants, hundreds were employed as agents, brokers, and workers. The city served as a manufacturing center, a marketplace, and an entrepot. It received goods from the interior and forwarded them to various places both in and outside Bengal.

One of the chief characteristics of the pre-modern towns of Bengal was their instability. The establishment of several foreign factories along the Hooghly River aroused the attention of the Mughal governors. To keep a watch over the growing activities of the European Settlement like Qasimbazar, Malda, Angrezabad (English Bazar), etc., Murshidabad with its superb commanding position provided a better strategic site in comparison to Dacca. The refractory *Dewan* built his palace and mint and improved the town and shifted the capital from Dacca to Murshidabad in 1704. The transplacing of the *dewani* office from Dacca (Dhaka) to Murshidabad is an event in the history of urbanization in eighteenth-century Bengal. With the shifting of the capital, Dhaka was immensely affected and Murshidabad became the capital town of the province. So, the temporary nature of the cities and towns of Bengal is also reflected in the frequent changes in their capital. As a result of these two most notable developments paved the way for urban growth. Moreover, during this time, we find that the trade and commerce of the province began to develop. As Murshidabad became the capital of the subah on the bank of the river Bhagirathi, gradually the river network and existing roads began to develop. Eventually, the capital city of Murshidabad expanded economically as well as demographically. Similarly, the seats of the Zamindars like Burdwan, Krishnagar, Dinajpur, Midnapur, Birbhum, and Bishnupur, etc. also developed. Likewise, Hooghly, Chandernagore, Chinsura, Srirampur, Bandel, Baranagar, Chittagong, Buckergunj, Jiaganj, Azimganj, Bhagowngola, Haripal, Kalna, Katwa, Santipur, etc. began to develop as a result of European settlement, fortification of military stations, religious centre, or as a centre of commercial and economic activities. The demographic settlements of the emerging towns were very much religion, caste, class, and profession-based. The European settled part of the towns was very much planned in comparison to the indigenous one. Moreover, most of the wards or *mohalla* of the towns were denominated by the profession of the people living there.

Settlement Pattern and Town Formation

In the introductory comment of his book Eliel Saarinen wrote, "The primary purpose of the city is to provide adequate living and working accommodations for its population."¹⁹ According to him, the character of town

formation depends mainly on two factors: on the tempo at which towns grew, and on changing conditions of life.²⁰ Now to find out the settlement pattern and town formation of Bengal we can take the help of contemporary *Mangalkavya* to know about several cities and towns of Bengal in the eighteenth century. We find most of the geographical descriptions of the *Mangalkavya* come into being of practical experience. Now the question may rise how was this experience gathered then? In those days it was customary to travel long distances for other reasons than trade, and pilgrimage. Long before the 18th century, along with establishing the capital of the rulers in the towns on the banks of the Bhagirathi, people from different parts of Bengal started to build settlements and increase the population density of this region. For example, we may refer to the autobiography of the poet Krittivas the first Bengali translator of Valmiki's *Ramayana* mentioning that people from different regions were establishing settlements on the banks of the river Bhagirathi.²¹ Moreover in the Vaishnava literature, we find time and again that cities and towns were built on the banks of the Bhagirathi during the time of Chaitanya.²² According to Gangaram's *Maharashtra Purana*, the Maratha leader Bhaskar Pandit, on his way to collect the *Chauth* [tax] from the Nawab Alivardi of Bengal, reached Nagpur and found out that the Nawab was encamped on the banks of Rani's Dighi in the town of Burdwan. After correspondence with the Nawab regarding the collection of *Chauth*, Bhaskar besieged the town of Burdwan for seven days. Both Gangaram and Bharatchandra give a detailed account of the condition of the people of the town during this siege.²³ Referring to the town of Burdwan the contemporary poet Bharatchandra in his *Annodamongolkavya* mentions that inside the town there were traders from different regions including Iraq, Turkey, Arabia, and peoples of various professions like Brahmins, Vaidyas, Kayasthas, Kansaris, Shakharis, Goalas, Tili, Tantis, Malakars, Barbers, Aguris, Cultivators, Kaivartas, Chandals, Doms, Cobblers, Chandis, etc. was there. It is also said that the growing activity of the town was crowded with the presence of people of various castes and professions.²⁴ Vijayaram Sen in his *Tirthamangala*²⁵ describes the cities and towns on both banks of the Bhagirathi from Khidirpur [Kolkata] to Benares. He said that the market economy is an essential feature of every town at that time. It is clear from the contemporary literary narratives that after the shifting of the capital of Bengal from Dhaka to Murshidabad the growth of indigenous industries and external trade in the bank of Bhagirathi continued the migration of artisans to the emerging towns. Most of the contemporary literature mainly focused on the towns and cities along the banks of the Bhagirathi. But the poets of *Dharmamangal kavya* have described various places along the route from Mayana (Midnapur district) to Gaur (Malda district). Ghanaram wrote about the city of Mayana, which was built around the *zamindari* of Lau Sen,

Chaudike Pahar Beri Bari Gorh
Durgom Gohon Kati
Koria Chottor Bosalo Nagor

*Rajar Bosot Bati*²⁶

(Translation: There are buildings around the hill, cut in accessible jungle. The city was built square, King's residence.)

Referring to the detailed description of the settlements of different castes, religions, races, and professions within the city, Ghanaram wrote,

Purir Prontore Beshyathorethore
*Antojatiopar*²⁷

(Translation: Prostitutes in the desert of the palace, Lower caste is immeasurable.)

The co-existence of different races in social life can be seen in the establishment of Mayana Nagar by Lau Sen. Moreover most of the *Mangal Kabyas*²⁸, and some of the native and foreign travel narratives²⁹ depicted the morphology of the towns very well.

We have already noted that James Rennell mentioned eight revenue collection units of Bengal as small towns. Besides in his expedition for the discovery of the nearest passage from the Ganges to Calcutta in the dry season of May 1764, Rennell mentioned that he visited the ruins of the fort and town of Chandernagore, after that he passed Chinsura. He also mentioned the towns namely, Kalna, Katwa, and Cossimbazar.³⁰ Although, unfortunately, he did not mention the name of the town of Bandel which lay in between the places. In his *Bengal Atlas*³¹ he also demarcated the small towns like Midnapore, Bishnupur, Burdwan, Krishnagar, Hooghly, Malda, English Bazar, etc. almost all the medieval towns of our study is a direct ancestor of the present-day city or town. Rennell also observed that "Maulda is a pretty, neat, city".³² So it is very clear that the settlement pattern and formation of the towns during the period under review move on in a multi-dimensional way.

By the above discussion, we may conclude that Bengal during the eighteenth century witnessed a significant change in the formation of new social groups amidst military conflicts and disruptive politics. These developments were themselves the culmination of the slow process of commercialization. Hence we may argue that the process of town formation during the period under review was mobilized due to the emergence of the successor state in Bengal led by the zamindari settlement, a new commercialized society followed by a market economy and to some extent with the appearance of any European and religious centre. Eventually, we observed the emerging towns of Bengal became a sociological laboratory, where traditional ethos mixed with liberal ideas and practices imported from abroad. And finally, with time, the town household modernized and adduced social conduct that combined both religion and commerce, as a result, the social formation and settlement pattern of the towns became more complex irrespective of caste, creed, and religion.

Notes and References

1. S. M. Karimi, 'Changing Capitals of Late Medieval Bengal', *Journal of Bihar Research Society*, LIV, 1968, pp. 277-293.
2. Niharranjan Ray, 'Rural – Urban Dichotomy in Indian Tradition and History', *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, LVIII & LIX, 1977 and 1978, pp. 863-892.
3. Max Weber (1958), *The City*, The Free Press, U. S. A, pp. 80-83.
4. W. H. Ardenwood, *A Short Geography of Bengal*, London, 1895, pp. 1-3. See also Gulam Hussain Salim, *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, translated into English by Maulavi Abdus Salam (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1904), p. 30.
5. James Rennell, *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan or the Mughal Empire, 1764-78*, B. P Ambashthya, ed. (Patna: N. V. Publication, 1975); see also his *A Bengal Atlas* (in two Volume), Vol. I, Kalyan Rudra, ed. (Kolkata: Sahitya Samsad, 2016), pp. xxviii-xxix.
6. Rabindranath Tagore, 'City and Village', *Visva-Bharati Bulletin*, 10, 1928, pp. 1-10.
7. K. N. Chaudhuri, 'Some Reflections on the Towns and Country of Mughal India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 12, 1, 1978, p. 77.
8. H. J. Doys, ed., *The Study of Urban History*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), p. 38.
9. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal, 1920-1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 24.
10. S. N. Mukherjee, *Calcutta: Myths and History* (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1977), p. 88.
11. Ibid.
12. Kingsley Davis, 'The Origin and Growth of Urbanization in the World', *American Journal of Sociology*, 60, 5, 1955, pp. 429-437.
13. Gideon Sjoberg, *The Preindustrial City: Past and Present* (U.S.A: The Free Press, 1960), p. 64.
14. Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1938), p. 3.
15. Ibid.
16. C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 8-9.
17. Sunil Kumar Munsri, *Dynamics of Urban Growth in Eastern India* (Kolkata: Thema, 2011); see also Ishwari Prasad, *India in the Eighteenth Century* (Allahabad: Chugh Publications, 1973); and V. P. S. Raghuvanshi, *Indian Society in the Eighteenth Century*, (New Delhi: Associated Publishing House, 1969).
18. For details of the small towns see Subrata Roy, *Urbanization of Bengal: Growth of Small Towns (1704-1800 A. D.)*, Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Kalyani University; and his other article, 'The Growth and Decline of a Pre-colonial Town in Bengal in the Age of Transition', *Summerhill IIAS Review*, XXVI, 2, 2020, pp. 86-93; 'Bandel an almost unknown Portuguese settled the town of Bengal under the Mughals', *Journal of Indian History and Culture*, 28, 2021, pp. 278-297.
19. Eliel Saarinen, *The City: Its Growth, Its Decay, Its Future* (Calcutta: Scientific Book Agency, 1943), p. 2.
20. Ibid, p. 37.

21. Biswanath Chowdhury, ed., *Krittibasi Soptokando Ramayan* (Calcutta, 1347 B. S.), pp. 19-20.
22. For details see Sukanta Pal and Subrata Roy, ed., *Nabajagoroner Prothom Alo Srichaitanya*, (Kolkata: GranthoMitro, 2014).
23. The details of *Maharashtrapuran Phunthi* of Kabi Gangaram are first known to us through the efforts of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad and the Manuscripts were published in the *Sahitya-Parishat-Patrika*, 3rd issue, 1313, under the title 'Kabi Gangaram and Maharashtrapuran', with an introduction by Sri Bomkyesh Mustafi. p. 220-221.
24. Brojendranath Bandopadhyay and Sajanikanta Das, ed., *Bharatchandra-Granthabali* (in Bengali) (Calcutta: Bangiyo Sahityo Parishat, 1350 B. S.) p. 134-135.
25. Bijayram Sen, (composed in 1769), *Tirtha-Mongal*, Baridbaran Ghosh, ed., (Kolkata: Parashpathar Prakashan, 2009).
26. Ghonaram Chakraborty, *Shreedhormomangal*, Pijush Kanti Mahapatra, ed., (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1962), p.33.
27. Ibid, pp. 34-35.
28. Bandopadhyay and Das, ed., *Bharatchandra-Granthabali*; Satyanarayan Bhattacharya, ed., *Ramprasad Jibani O Rachana Samagra* (in Bengali) (Calcutta: Granthamela, 1975).
29. For details of the travel narratives see, Sen, *Tirtha-Monga*; Bholanath Chunder, *The Travels of a Hindu to Various Parts of Bengal and Upper India*, Vol. I, (London: Turbner & Co., 1869); see also Alexander Hamilton, (1727), *A New Account of the East Indies* (in two Volumes), edited with introduction and notes by Sir William Foster, Argonaut Press, London, 1930.
30. Rennell, *A Bengal Atlas*, Vol. II, pp. 13-15.
31. Rennell, *A Bengal Atlas*, Vol. I, Map. I.
32. Rennell, *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan*, p. 60.