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**SITUATING THE ZAMINDARI AND BUSINESS HOUSES OF
COLONIAL HOOGHLY AND HOWRAH (MID 19TH CENTURY TO
EARLY 20TH CENTURY)**

**THESIS SUBMITTED TO JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ARTS**

SUBMITTED BY

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It is my great pleasure to express my gratitude to

all those who made this work possible, though I may inadvertently miss mentioning some names

First and foremost, I express my deepest sense of gratitude and indebtedness to my supervisor

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I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my respected

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Preface

Given India's immense scale, historical narratives have often been shaped by a selective emphasis on certain regions, events, and prominent individuals. However, to comprehend the history of such a diverse and intricate nation, it is necessary to examine regional histories and the local dynamics that contributed to shaping its multifaceted past. The influx of European powers into India profoundly altered the conventional course of its history, particularly in Bengal, which was one of the most significant provinces for both commercial and agricultural sectors during the colonial era. The first phase of European expansion in India saw colonial powers attempting to extend their control over the subcontinent; however, they faced significant challenges due to the unfamiliar conditions and administrative systems of the region. The initial years were marked by experimentation because colonial powers tried to transplant their institutions and Western economic and social philosophies into the Indian context. These efforts were fraught with failures as they struggled to adjust their systems to local realities.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the British, in particular, succeeded in consolidating their rule by introducing a more structured bureaucratic system. This allowed them to establish a more efficient and centralised administration, which had far-reaching implications for the local social and economic history. This century witnessed the rise of diverse regional polities; some were rooted in historical traditions of state formation, while others emphasized ethnic and community-based identities. The redistribution of resources to regional powers, such as zamindars and local merchants, became a defining characteristic of this era. As the Mughal central authority weakened, these regional states appropriated resources to solidify their governance structures and assert autonomy. The European powers attempted to dismantle all the traditional systems of the nation and replace them with an exploitative economic structure. The decline of the

Mughal Empire as a central authority created a vacuum, which was repeatedly filled by local powers at the **regional or micro level** (families such as Roquitte, Seal, and Roy) and by European powers (French, Dutch, and British) on a **larger scale or macro level**. This transformation inevitably reshaped the socio-political and cultural fabric of Bengal and the whole nation at large.

The term '**Transformation**' itself carries a vast and complex connotation, particularly in a historical context. No transformation occurs through a single process or medium; therefore, to understand the *transformations* and *shifts* of history, each must be examined in its distinct dimensions. In exploring the transformation of colonial Bengal, it is essential to study its various colonial establishments, their structures, and their roles through the lens of diverse regional and contemporary perspectives to present a more inclusive picture of the period. Among the regions that played a pivotal role in this process, **Hooghly** and **Howrah** stand out prominently. The Hooghly River had long served as the principal waterway for trade and commerce in Bengal since the pre-colonial era. However, the decline of the Hooghly Port and the establishment of Calcutta Port in 1870 dramatically altered the economic and political dynamics of Bengal—a shift that this thesis will examine in detail.

The historical significance of the Hooghly District and its surroundings was closely intertwined with the prominence of the Hooghly Port until the emergence of Calcutta Port. The establishment of Calcutta Port, particularly by 1870, marked a pivotal shift that elevated the strategic and economic significance of Calcutta and its vicinity. This transition, actively promoted by colonial authorities, contributed to the gradual decline of the Hooghly Port. Consequently, Calcutta and its neighbouring areas emerged as the focal point of the subsequent decades of political, economic, and historical developments in Bengal. In the early 19th century, the strategic location of the Hooghly port and its

prosperous surroundings impelled the rise of several prestigious zamindari and merchant families around the district. These families played a decisive role in shaping the socio-economic history of their region and Bengal at large. Around the late 19th century, especially after the establishment of Calcutta port in 1870, the Howrah district portrayed the same trend by witnessing the emergence of many prominent elite families.

During the colonial period, Bengal underwent a **profound transformation**, encompassing socio-economic, political, and cultural dimensions. As colonial rule penetrated the roots of Bengal's economy, the **zamindars** and **merchant communities** gradually emerged as crucial actors, navigating both the challenges and opportunities of the new order. European powers, on their part, skillfully forged alliances with influential Bengal zamindars and traders, using the fluidity of the times to secure their own interests. This mutually beneficial partnership facilitated the rise of **new elites**, zamindars and merchants who gained power and prominence. They vastly reshaped Bengal's economic structure and, in turn, transformed the socio-economic layers of society. The shift from the precolonial to the colonial era thus witnessed both the **decline of older hierarchies** and the **emergence of new elite communities**.

Within this larger framework, regions such as **Chandannagar** and **Chinsurah** stand out for their distinct trajectories. Unlike the British-dominated territories of India and Bengal, these enclaves experienced unique forms of colonial subjugation under the **French** and the **Dutch**. Their political, socio-economic, and cultural conditions diverged from those of the British-controlled zones, yet remained intrinsically connected to the broader currents of Indian history. These pockets of non-British influence add a compelling dimension to Bengal's regional history, preserving a legacy that enriches the mainstream narrative of colonial transformation.

Despite their significance, such regional economic transformations and their socio-cultural implications have often remained on the margins of mainstream historical discourse. This dissertation seeks to foreground the importance of regional history in understanding the diverse issues, themes, and conceptual frameworks of Bengal's past by engaging with a wealth of regional and vernacular sources, which emphasizes the need to integrate these local histories into the broader national narrative. To illustrate this, the study will focus on three case studies examining the emergence, role, and impact of prominent zamindar and merchant families: **Roquitte's** of Chandannagar, **Seal's** of Chinsurah, and **Roy's** of Howrah. Through an analysis of their extensive influence across socio-economic, cultural, and political spheres, this research aims to unravel their pivotal contributions to the transformation of colonial Bengal.

Glossary

<i>Abwab</i>	- Extra-legal charges or illegal taxes exacted by landlords
<i>Aurungs</i>	- Warehouse or workshop
<i>Bakhshis</i>	- Paymasters
<i>Bata</i>	- Commission
<i>Beniagiri</i>	- Moneylending
<i>Bonedi</i>	- Elite families of Bengal
<i>British East Indiamen</i>	- Merchant ships of the British East India Company
<i>Cottahs and Chattaks</i>	- A type of land measurement
<i>Dadani</i>	- Merchants who procured goods by paying advances to primary producers
<i>Darbar</i>	- Nawab's court
<i>Decree</i>	- Imperial <i>Sanad</i>
<i>Dewan</i>	- Chief Revenue Officer or Treasurer
<i>Dhuti</i>	- Traditional Bengali garment
<i>Diwani</i>	- Revenue-collecting right
<i>Foujdar</i>	- Military commander
<i>Garhkhai</i>	- Moat
<i>Ghar Chankar</i>	- Architectural grandeur of its time
<i>Gohlahs</i>	- Milkman
<i>Gomustah</i>	- Indian agent of the East India Company
<i>Hundi</i>	- Bill of exchange
<i>Ijara</i>	- Revenue farming
<i>Jagir</i>	- land grants
<i>Jagirdars</i>	- Owners of Jagir lands

<i>Jotedars</i>	- Intermediary tenure holders.
<i>Kayastha Community</i>	- A high-caste Hindu community,
<i>Kedara</i>	- Luxurious carpeted seating
<i>Khalisa</i>	- Royal land
<i>Kulin</i>	- Some castes among the Brahmans and Kayasthas of Bengal, who are considered to be the purest
<i>Kuthi</i>	- Trading Post
<i>Kuthials</i>	- Agents
<i>Madaad-i-maash</i>	- Revenue-free lands
<i>Mahanagar</i>	- Great city
<i>Maharajdhani</i>	- Great capital
<i>Malek</i>	- Landowner
<i>Mansabdar</i>	- An officer in the Mughal Empire
<i>Mansabs</i>	- ranks
<i>Milkiat</i>	- Proprietorship over land
<i>Nankar</i>	- Revenue-free land
<i>Nawabs</i>	- Provincial governors of the Mughal Empire
<i>Parganas</i>	- An administrative district
<i>Patanidar</i>	- Middleman between Zamindar and Peasant
<i>Patni</i>	- Subinfeudatory tenures
<i>Patta</i>	- Written agreement between the peasant and the landowner
<i>Pirs</i>	- Islamic preachers
<i>Rarh</i>	- Southern Bengal
<i>Sanad</i>	- A formal document or warrant, often sealed, that authorises the holder to certain rights, privileges or positions.
<i>Saiyar</i>	- It was particularly the port's customs and duties, which traders had to pay to the Hooghly port around the 18 th century.

<i>Seth</i>	- Merchant leader
<i>Sharaḥī Banik</i>	- Gold coin trader
<i>Shastra</i>	- Hindu religious text
<i>Shurfa</i>	- Elite
<i>Sir</i>	- Landowner's land
<i>Sirkār</i>	- A highly respectable administrative position.
<i>Subahdars</i>	- Provincial governors of the Mughal Empire
<i>Swarajya</i>	- Self-rule
<i>Taluka</i>	- Subdivision of districts
<i>Tamili</i>	- Betel leaf traders
<i>Tantubai</i> community	- Traditional Cotton Weavers.
<i>Thakur Dalan</i>	- Puja edifice
<i>Thana</i>	- Police Station
<i>Tili</i>	- Oil merchant
<i>Umara</i>	- Nobility
<i>Vatan jagirs</i>	- Hereditary land rights
<i>VOC</i>	- United East India Company or Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie.
<i>Vrat</i>	- Fasting
<i>Zabt</i>	- Mughal system of land measurement. It was a land revenue arrangement through which taxes were collected from cultivators in monetary form.
<i>Zamindari</i>	- The land or territory of a Zamindar
<i>Zamindars</i>	- Landlords

Introduction

As Eric Hobsbawm marked the 19th century as ‘the long nineteenth century’¹ globally, it was also known as an era of reconstruction, conversion, and evolution for India. This epoch has a special allure due to its profound transformations and contradictions, which range from political turmoil to social upheaval. In examining the transformation of colonial Bengal, it is crucial to explore its diverse colonial establishments, their institutional structures, and their roles through both regional and contemporary perspectives. Such an approach provides a more inclusive picture of the period. Among the regions that significantly shaped this transformation, **Hooghly and Howrah** stand out prominently. The Hooghly River, which had long served as the principal artery of Bengal’s trade and commerce since the pre-colonial era, became the stage upon which these shifts unfolded.

The decline of the Hooghly Port and the subsequent establishment of the **Calcutta Port in 1870** dramatically redefined the economic and political dynamics of Bengal—a turning point that this thesis seeks to investigate in detail. The historical significance of the Hooghly district and its surroundings had long been tied to the prominence of Hooghly Port, but the colonial state’s strategic decision to elevate Calcutta Port gradually displaced Hooghly from its central position. By 1870, Calcutta’s growing maritime infrastructure and favourable location secured its ascendancy, firmly promoted by colonial authorities. This shift not only accelerated the decline of Hooghly Port but also concentrated political, economic, and administrative developments around Calcutta and its hinterlands in the decades that followed. In the early nineteenth century, the prosperity of Hooghly Port and its strategic location encouraged the rise of several prestigious zamindari and merchant families, who played a decisive role in shaping the socio-economic history of both their district and Bengal more broadly. By the late nineteenth century, especially in the wake of

Calcutta Port's rise, the **Howrah district** began to follow a similar trajectory, witnessing the emergence of a number of influential elite families whose presence reshaped the socio-economic fabric of the region.

Historiography

This thesis will engage with both regional history and family history, two interrelated yet distinct historiographical approaches. By engaging with both regional and family history, this thesis aims to contribute to the broader historiographical discourse, shedding light on Bengal's historical evolution through localized narratives while situating them within the larger historical framework. While regional history as an academic discipline has gained prominence in recent years, its significance extends to the global forum. Nonetheless, regional history and world history share a profound connection and impact; hence, it is being called '*Glocal*' nowadays. The interplay between global and regional events underscores the importance of studying local histories, as they often provide unique perspectives on broader historical processes. However, not all regional histories gain global recognition despite their inherent connections to wider historical narratives.

Globally, scholars such as Philip Riden², Carol Kammen³, Erica Hunt⁴, M. Williams⁵, Francis Celoria⁶, Mark Bever⁷, and David Hey⁸ have enriched regional history by offering diverse perspectives and methodologies. In India, historians like V. D. Ghatge⁹ highlighted its role in connecting individuals to their cultural environment, while E. H. Carr¹⁰ emphasized studying and writing history "*at our doors.*" Bhairabi Prasad Sahu further traced the evolution of regional history in India from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial era¹¹. In Bengal, regional history has been comparatively underexplored, though it gained momentum in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Eminent scholars—Satish Chandra Mitra, Rajnikant Gupta, Tarapada Santra, Chandicharan Sen, Ambikacharan

Gupta, and Sudhir Kumar Mitra—documented the region’s socio-cultural and political developments. James Long, in his article *On the Banks of Bhagirathi*, published in the *Calcutta Review*¹², exemplified how personal engagement with place can yield rich narratives. Satish Chandra Mitra’s *Jessore-Khulnar Itihas*¹³ and Sudhir Kumar Mitra’s *Hooghly Jelar Itihas*¹⁴ combined archival research with folklore and oral traditions. Other significant works, such as *Social History of Kamarupa* (Vol. I & II) by Nagendra Nath Vasu¹⁵, *Kolikatar Itibritto* by Prankrishna Dutta¹⁶, *Maharaja Krishnachandra o Tatkalin Bangasamaj* by Dr. Alok Kumar Chakrabarty¹⁷ and *Kolikatar Kotha* by Pramath Nath Mallick¹⁸. Further shaped the methodological framework of regional history writing in Bengal by detailing social structures, cultural change, and local identity.

In the field of Family history, while it has traditionally been viewed as a subset of social and economic history, recent scholars have demonstrated its broader significance in understanding historical transformations. It has gained increasing recognition in mainstream historical studies, particularly as an interdisciplinary subject. Several notable works have contributed to this field, offering in-depth studies of influential families and their roles in shaping Bengal’s colonial economy and society. From global to home, scholars discuss the methods of writing regional to global history. Historian Blair B. Kling’s *Partner in Empire: Dwarkanath Tagore and the Age of Enterprise in Eastern India*¹⁹ exemplifies this approach, focusing on the life and economic influence of Dwarkanath Tagore, a key business figure in colonial Bengal. Through extensive research, Kling presents a comprehensive account of Tagore’s rise, his engagement with British enterprise and his impact on Bengal’s emerging capitalist economy.

Similarly, Prof. Nilmoni Mukherjee’s *A Bengal Zamindar: Jaykrishna Mukherjee of Uttarpara and His Times (1808-1888)*²⁰ explores the life and influence of a prominent zamindar, shedding light on the intricate relationship between landed elites and colonial

administration. Other significant contributions to family history include *Life and Times of Cantoo Baboo - The Banian of Warren Hastings* (Vol. I & II) by Soumendra Chandra Nandy²¹, *Maharaja Nava Krishna Deva Bahadoor* by Beepin Beharry Mittra²², and *Memoirs of Nubkissen Bahadur* by N.N. Ghosh²³. These works collectively emphasize the role of key economic and political figures—*zamindars* and *banians*—who played pivotal roles in Bengal’s transformation under British rule. They also explore how family histories are deeply intertwined with larger political, economic, and social forces, making them crucial to understanding Bengal’s colonial experience.

Recently, Prof. Amerigo Caruso dedicated an insightful examination of the post-revolutionary political landscape, emphasizing the role of reform-oriented aristocratic clans and their alliances with the bourgeoisie. By focusing on the Balbo family, a prominent aristocratic lineage in Sardinia-Piedmont, the study argues that stability and pragmatism were key drivers in the political and ideological shifts within the noble-bourgeois elites during the first age of global revolutions. Using family history as a methodological lens, the article reinterprets this period of profound social transformation, state expansion, and political modernization. It traces the Balbo family’s evolution across multiple generations and genders, analyzing their role not only in the revolutionary and Napoleonic era but also in the decades following the Congress of Vienna. The study provides fresh perspectives on state-building, constitutional reforms, and the emergence of a new, composite elite that would shape European politics well into the late nineteenth century. This writing shows the benefit of family history writing and reveals how local aristocratic families like the *Balbos* adapted to changing political realities, balancing tradition with reform to maintain their influence. By examining their interactions with the expanding state and the evolving political order, the article contributes to a broader understanding of elite adaptation and continuity in an era of significant upheaval²⁴.

Tracing Bengal's transformation from the pre-colonial to the colonial era reveals patterns of socio-economic and political reconfiguration similar to those across India and beyond. *The Cambridge Economic History of India* (Vols. I & II)²⁵ offers critical analyses of this transition, focusing on agrarian structures, land revenue systems, and their impact on indigenous elites. Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*²⁶ provides a broader framework, situating Bengal within global capitalist expansion and European imperialism. By integrating regional and family histories with economic transitions, this study highlights the interplay between local agency and global forces, underscoring the central role of economic structures in shaping Bengal's colonial past.

The transition from pre-colonial to colonial India and Bengal has been subject to various historiographical interpretations. Traditional historians like **Irfan Habib**²⁷ and **M. Athar Ali**²⁸ have often portrayed the transition of India from pre-colonial to colonial era as a time of decline and disorder. This view is grounded in the notion that India, especially Bengal, faced a breakdown of political and economic structures following the collapse of the Mughal Empire, which led to increasing instability and vulnerability to external forces since the 18th century. The rise of regional powers, combined with British imperialism, further exacerbated the region's disorder. However, several scholars have challenged this narrative, arguing that the 18th century should not be seen purely in terms of collapse and decline²⁹. Instead, historians like **C. A. Bayley** and **Muzaffar Alam** have emphasized continuity and adaptation within the broader framework of colonialism. They argue that new forms of governance and power emerged even amid apparent disorder. These new local powers, whether new *zamindars*, merchant elites, or regional leaders, adapted to the changing political realities and engaged with the colonial system in ways that were not necessarily destructive³⁰. For example, the rise of decentralized power structures in Bengal

during the 18th century, after the weakening of the Mughal Empire, was seen as a response to colonial and regional challenges. Local elites—such as the *zamindars* and merchants played an epoch-making role in maintaining economic activities, collecting taxes, and managing local governance, even as they adapted to British monetary policies and the shifting balance of power. Instead of being swept aside by British colonialism, these local powers often found ways to coexist with or benefit from the new system.

Thus, this perspective challenges the idea that the colonial period represented a purely disruptive transformation of Indian society. Instead, it highlights how different sections of society, while experiencing upheavals, engaged in processes of adaptation and restructuring. These new power dynamics helped shape the evolving political and social fabric of Bengal and, more broadly, India, during the colonial era. Therefore, as India underwent significant political and social changes during the transition from pre-colonial to colonial times, revisionist historians argue that it was also a period of adaptation and transformation, where continuity and innovation coexisted with the disruptions brought about by colonialism. The interplay between colonial structures and local powers during this period was complex, and understanding it requires recognising both the disruptions and the continuities that characterised this era.

I

Transformation of India from Pre-Colonial to Colonial Era

The nineteenth century marked a crucial transitional phase in Indian history, as the decline of the Mughal Empire gave way to regional powers and, ultimately, British colonial dominance. This period was defined by socio-economic and political upheavals, but also by the ability of local rulers, merchant houses, and zamindars to adapt, forge alliances, and secure their fortunes within the emerging colonial order. Karl Marx

elucidated colonial India as playing a **dual role** in the British capitalist system: a supplier of raw materials and a market for industrial goods. Cotton, indigo, and opium were extracted to fuel Britain's Industrial Revolution, while India's agrarian economy was reshaped by exploitative land revenue systems such as the zamindari arrangement. Simultaneously, British imports devastated India's traditional industries, most notably textiles, creating a dependent colonial economy. Infrastructure like railways, though framed as modernization, primarily served to transport raw materials to ports and distribute British goods across India. Marx highlighted the contradictory nature of colonialism—both destructive, in its impoverishment of peasants and artisans, and regenerative, in fostering a new class of commercial elites³¹. Building on this view, Irfan Habib emphasized that colonialism was not only domination but also a driver of structural change in India's economy and society. Similarly, **R.C. Dutta** traced how zamindars and merchant groups were integrated into colonial systems, shifting from semi-autonomous local powers to intermediaries of British authority³².

In Bengal, these transformations were especially visible after these events: **The Battle of Plassey (1757)**, **the Battle of Buxar (1764)**, and **the Grant of Diwani (1765)**, which established British control over revenue and administration by marking the transition from mercantilist exploitation to systematic colonial governance³³. Zamindars became revenue collectors for the British, while merchant communities like the Banians were both beneficiaries and victims of colonial trade policies. Thus, India's passage from pre-colonial to colonial rule was not uniform but a **layered and regionally varied process**, shaped by global capitalism and local negotiations. The eighteenth century laid the foundation for this order, and the nineteenth century consolidated it, leaving a lasting imprint on Bengal and India's broader socio-economic landscape.

Transformation of Bengal from Pre-Colonial to Colonial Epoch

The advent of European powers fundamentally altered Bengal's trajectory, reshaping its commercial, agrarian, and socio-political structures. As Prof. **Sabyasachi Bhattacharya** explicates, colonial rule sought to dismantle traditional systems and replace them with an exploitative economy, with two central transformations: the agrarian shift under the Permanent Settlement (1793) and the reconfiguration of trade³⁴. On the other side, historians like **Ranajit Guha** suggest³⁵ the implications of Permanent Settlement that redefined land ownership by recognizing zamindars as proprietors while binding them to fixed revenue obligations. This settlement reduced zamindars to hereditary revenue farmers, forced to remit payments regardless of agricultural conditions. Many were unable to meet these demands and lost estates to auctions, leading to the rise of new landholders, often merchants, bankers, or commercial elites, who made a partnership with the new colonial rulers³⁶. Scholars like **N. K. Sinha**³⁷ and **Brij Narain**³⁸ highlight how this system deepened rural distress, while Prof. **Ratnalekha Ray** points to the emergence of *Jotedars*³⁹, smaller landholders who became pivotal in agrarian resistance⁴⁰. This transition marked a shift from a status-based Mughal order to a contract-based colonial system, fueling unrest that later culminated in revolts, including the 1857 uprising.

Unlike the Mughal era, when zamindars functioned as intermediaries⁴¹ under state authority, the colonial system entrenched rigid contractual ties and revenue farming, prioritizing extraction over agricultural improvement. The result was both economic dislocation and social transformation, as peasants faced higher rents and growing exploitation. However, in Bengal, Nawab Murshid Quli Khan was quite aware of the growing power of zamindars and tried to keep them subordinate to the state, ensuring they

remained controlled by the central authority. Nevertheless, British administrators, such as **Alexander Dow**, articulated the British approach to land ownership, which was perceived as ineffective due to royal control. Dow believed that fixing land revenue through a permanent system would provide security regarding property rights and economic stability. He argued that permanent land ownership would lead to agricultural prosperity. However, this vision overlooked the nuances of the Mughal land system, in which zamindars were more like revenue farmers than true landowners⁴². Thus, Prof. **Sabyasachi Bhattacharya** concludes that, as the impact of permanent settlement, colonial Bengal witnessed: while many old zamindars declined, others adapted or expanded, such as the Burdwan Raj⁴³. The rise of new zamindars from commercial backgrounds in regions like Dinajpur, Nadia, Midnapur, and Birbhum reflects the fluidity of this period.

These developments facilitated the integration of powerful families into the colonial economy. Elite houses such as the Tagores, Shovabazar Raj, Kandi Raj, Kashimbazar, Nasipur, Ghosal, and Panchaudhuri forged close ties with the British. The Kashimbazar family, enriched through the silk trade and links with Warren Hastings, acquired estates like Baharband Pargana, while the Shovabazar family leveraged connections with Clive and Verelst to secure influence in revenue administration. Such partnerships consolidated both British control and elite dominance, reshaping Bengal's economic and social order. Thus, the Permanent Settlement⁴⁴ not only restructured agrarian relations but also enabled the rise of new colonial intermediaries, whose fortunes were deeply intertwined with British policies. Bengal's transformation was marked by the decline of traditional elites, the emergence of new social classes, and the entrenchment of an exploitative revenue system that left lasting consequences on its economy and society.

II

The Transition in the Trading Sector of Bengal During the 19th Century

Bengal had long been a thriving centre of trade since the Mughal period, but its commercial landscape underwent profound transformations under colonial rule. The 19th century, in particular, witnessed a complex interplay of internal and external factors that reshaped its trading dynamics. Its strategic position along the Bay of Bengal and extensive river systems, particularly the Ganges, made it a vital link between the Indian subcontinent and global markets in **Southeast Asia**, the **Middle East**, and **Europe**⁴⁵. The region produced highly valued goods⁴⁶—**textiles, silk, indigo, saltpetre, spices, and rice**—while its muslin fabrics commanded strong demand in Europe. Indigenous merchants, with extensive domestic and international networks, cooperated and competed with European traders, including the British, French, Dutch, and Portuguese⁴⁷, making Bengal a vibrant hub of exchange.

The Nawabs of Bengal, notably Murshid Quli Khan and Alivardi Khan, recognized the importance of commerce for the region's prosperity. Their policies, though geared toward revenue consolidation, generally encouraged trade and supported port development in Calcutta and Chittagong. These ports became key nodes for both inland distribution and overseas trade. European rivalry, especially between the British and the French, further stimulated Bengal's commercial growth through the establishment of factories and warehouses. By the 18th century, Bengal's prosperity rested on its geographical advantages, rich production base, dynamic indigenous trading networks, and the interplay between local and European powers⁴⁸. Yet by the 19th century, shifting internal dynamics—such as the decline of Hooghly Port and the rise of Calcutta Port—reshaped its trading patterns, reflecting the broader transformations of colonial rule.

The Phenomena of Global History and Regional History: With the Transformation of Colonial Bengal

In tracing Bengal's transformation from the pre-colonial to the colonial era, it becomes evident that the decline of the 'old township' and the rise of the 'new township' under colonial rule were neither a novel nor an isolated phenomenon. Similar patterns of urban reconfiguration were visible across India and, indeed, in various parts of the world. To contextualize these shifts, classic texts such as *The Cambridge Economic History of India* (Vol. I & II) provide critical analyses of the economic transition from pre-colonial agrarian structures to colonial capitalism⁴⁹. These volumes illuminate the intricacies of economic policies, land revenue systems, and their impact on indigenous elites. Likewise, Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* offers a broader theoretical framework for understanding Bengal's integration into the global capitalist economy⁵⁰. His work presents an innovative and panoramic reinterpretation of global economic history, situating Bengal within the wider forces of capitalist expansion and European imperialism.

Similarly, the intersection of family history with mainstream historical narratives is not unique to Bengal but resonates globally. For instance, Professor Amerigo Caruso provides an insightful examination of the post-revolutionary political landscape of Europe by focusing on the Balbo family, a prominent aristocratic lineage in Sardinia-Piedmont. His study highlights how reform-oriented aristocratic clans forged alliances with the bourgeoisie, demonstrating that stability and pragmatism were key drivers of political and ideological change during the first age of global revolutions. By tracing the Balbo family's evolution across multiple generations and genders, Caruso explores their role not only in the revolutionary and Napoleonic eras but also in the decades following the Congress of

Vienna. Through this lens, the study offers fresh perspectives on state-building, constitutional reforms, and the emergence of a new composite elite that shaped European politics well into the late nineteenth century. This approach underscores how local aristocratic families such as the Balbos adapted to changing political realities, balancing tradition with reform to preserve their influence⁵¹.

Viewed in this comparative and global context, the transformation of Bengal cannot be regarded as an isolated historical episode. While certain sources reveal elements of regional distinctiveness that may challenge the overarching '**colonial structural theory**', these localities were neither untouched by global transformations nor passive bystanders. Rather, they actively participated in and bore witness to Bengal's metamorphosis. The region's historical trajectory thus reflects a dynamic coexistence of **regional uniqueness** and **global interconnections**, demonstrating how local histories can simultaneously embody distinctiveness and universal relevance.

III

The Focus of the Thesis

This dissertation will focus on the complex dynamics of colonial rule in India during the 19th century, particularly the interaction between European powers (such as the British, French, and Dutch) and the indigenous elites. The first phase of European expansion in India saw these powers attempting to extend their control over the subcontinent. However, they faced significant challenges due to the unfamiliar conditions and administrative systems of the region. The initial years were marked by experimentation as colonial powers tried to transplant their institutions and Western economic and social philosophies into the Indian context. However, these efforts were fraught with failures as they struggled to adjust their systems to local realities.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the British, in particular, succeeded in consolidating their rule by introducing a more structured bureaucratic system, often referred to as the 'imperial leviathan'. This allowed them to establish a more efficient and centralized administration, which had far-reaching implications for the local social and economic landscape. The focus of the research now shifts to the effects of these administrative and political transformations on specific regions of Bengal, looking at how local elites navigated and adapted to these changes under different colonial regimes.

Chapter I- *Merchant Communities of Bengal on the Eve of the 19th Century: An*

Overview- This chapter examines the socio-economic and political shifts in Bengal during the decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of European colonial powers. It highlights how changing structures of authority reshaped the fortunes of merchant groups and zamindars, with some adapting to new regimes while others lost influence. Focusing on the French in Chandannagar, the Dutch in Chinsurah, and the British in Howrah, the chapter explores how local elites engaged with competing colonial powers, negotiating between collaboration, adaptation, and resistance. By situating these developments within broader regional and global transformations, it establishes the foundations for understanding Bengal's transition from a pre-colonial to a colonial order.

Chapter II- *Roquitte Family of Chandannagar under the French Colonial Setup-*

This chapter explores the Roquitte family, a prominent member of the *Tantubai* community⁵² in Chandannagar, under French colonial administration. Especially, by focusing on Dourga Chorone Roquitte's commercial ventures and philanthropic initiatives, highlighting how indigenous elites leveraged opportunities within the French system to maintain economic influence and social standing. Their experience sheds light on local strategies of adaptation, negotiation, and contribution under a distinct European colonial model.

Chapter III - *The Seal Family of Chinsurah: Their Economic Enterprising and Dominance Under the Dutch Colonial Setup*- Chinsurah was under Dutch control, and the Seal family was an influential business family in this region. The Seal family, belonging to the *Subarnabanik* community⁵³ (traditional traders of gold), rose to prominence within this framework. This chapter explores their commercial dominance, economic strategies, and interactions with Dutch authorities. This case study focuses on the Dutch regime's influence in Bengal and provides a unique case study for understanding the role of local elites in a context where Dutch colonial power was not as long-lasting as British or French rule but still played a significant role in shaping the local economy and social structure.

Chapter IV: *The Roy Family of Andul, Howrah: Their Emergence and Influence under the British Colonial Setup*- By the 19th century, Howrah was firmly under British control and vastly shaped the trajectory of its landed elites. The Roy family of Andul, particularly Ram Charan Roy and his descendants, emerged as influential *zamindars* in the region and within their community (Kayastha community)⁵⁴. This chapter investigates their engagement with British administrative policies, their role in local governance, and their influence over rural communities. By analyzing their interactions with colonial authorities and their strategies for retaining power, this chapter provides a broader understanding of how British rule reshaped traditional *zamindari* structures in Bengal. Their experience under British rule offers a perspective on how the British system of governance affected local power structures, especially in terms of the relationship between zamindars, the British administration, and their local communities.

Chapter V- *Business Families of Chandannagar, Chinsurah and Andul under Different Colonial Setups: A Comparative Study*- This chapter bridges the individual histories of the Roquitte, Seal, and Roy families with Bengal's broader cultural and

historical transformation. It examines how their social positions and strategies under French, Dutch, and British rule reflect the region's transition from pre-colonial to colonial structures. By comparing their economic practices, social roles, and adaptive mechanisms, the chapter highlights how these families balanced traditional values with colonial modernity, contributing to the cultural, political, and socio-economic evolution of their communities.

This dissertation examines the transformation and evolution of colonial Bengal through three case studies: the **Roquitte (Chandannagar)**, **Seal (Chinsurah)**, and **Roy (Howrah)** families, focusing on key figures—Dourga Chorone Roquitte, Nilambar Seal, and Ram Charone Roy. It highlights their economic emergence, social influence, and cultural impact, emphasizing the centrality of commerce in shaping society. Each chapter explores the history, role, and local and regional influence of these families within distinct colonial contexts. The final chapter offers a comparative analysis, examining similarities and differences across the three colonial setups, and interpreting how their histories, cultures, and legacies are both distinct and interconnected.

Thus, focusing on three different colonial regimes—French, Dutch, and British—and their interactions with regional elites, the thesis aims to provide a comprehensive and inclusive view of Bengal's transformation during the colonial period. It will also examine how these changes restructured the social hierarchy, impacting not only the elites but also other classes within society, especially with the natives of their respective regions. By focusing on the following key questions: **First**, how did these families navigate the political, economic, and social changes imposed by the colonial powers? What role did they play in local governance and commerce? **Second**, how did the colonial powers interact with and adjust to the power structures of local elites? What kind of cooperation or tension existed between these regional powers and the colonial authorities? **Third**, how

did the economic and political reshuffling affect the social structure of Bengal? How did it transform both local and regional power dynamics and the broader social fabric of the region? To address this question, the dissertation will emphasize how local powers adapted to shifting colonial ambitions and how these encounters reshaped Bengal's socio-political and economic landscape. Through the experiences of the Roquitte, Seal, and Roy families, the study offers a nuanced view of how colonial engagement influenced indigenous business communities and governance. By analyzing these dynamics through multiple contemporary perspectives, the research seeks to uncover the complex and multifaceted nature of Bengal's colonial metamorphosis.

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- ⁴⁴ **Permanent Settlement** - The Permanent Settlement, introduced by Lord Cornwallis in 1793, was a land revenue system in British India that granted zamindars hereditary ownership of land in return for a fixed, permanent tax paid to the British East India Company. Implemented in regions such as Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, it sought to ensure a steady revenue for the Company and incentivize zamindars to enhance agricultural productivity. However, it frequently resulted in the exploitation of peasants, who faced the burden of high rents.
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- ⁵² **Tantubai Community** - The *Tantubai* community, also called Tanti, is a traditional Hindu and Muslim group of weavers and cloth traders, mainly concentrated in West Bengal, Gujarat, Jharkhand and Bihar. The name '*Tantubai*' originates from "Tanti," a term in Hindi and Bengali meaning "weaver."
- ⁵³ **Subarnabanik Community** - The *Subarna Banik* community of Bengal, also called Suvarna Banik or Bene, is a traditional mercantile caste historically engaged in gold and silver trading, money-lending, and commerce. Although of lower ritual rank, they attained considerable wealth and social standing through their business skills,

particularly in the late 18th century and under British rule, becoming prominent figures in finance and trade.

⁵⁴ ***Kayastha Community***- In Bengal, *Kayasthas* are traditionally recognized as a high-caste Hindu community, alongside Brahmins and Baidyas, forming the upper echelon of society and the Bhadrakalok class. Historically, they served as scribes, administrators, and zamindars, and are renowned for their contributions to fields such as science, literature, and education.

Chapter I

Merchant and Zamindari Communities of Bengal on the Eve of the 19th Century: An Overview

The closing decades of the 18th century and the early years of the 19th century marked a crucial transitional phase in the history of the Merchant and zamindari communities. Situated at the crossroads of political upheaval, shifting economic structures, and changing regional networks, these communities found themselves negotiating new realities shaped by the decline of older regimes and the gradual assertion of colonial authority. The socio-political landscape of the period was characterized by change; local polities were redefined, patterns of landholding altered, and trade routes reoriented. Within this dynamic environment, the Merchants and zamindars long associated with mobility, commerce, and frontier adaptation responded to both opportunity and constraint in ways that reveal much about the resilience and transformation of sub-regional societies in early modern Bengal.

On the eve of the 19th century, therefore, the landownership and Merchant world represented a mosaic of continuities and disruptions. Traditional modes of livelihood, kinship ties, and customary rights persisted, yet they were increasingly tested by the pressures of expanding market forces, revenue policies, and administrative reorganization under emerging colonial structures. The everyday life of these communities, marked by migration, local trade, and intricate social hierarchies, offers a valuable window into understanding how marginal and mobile groups negotiated power, identity, and survival at a time when older socio-economic orders were giving way to new forms of control.

India's colonial exposure began in the 18th century, eventually becoming the world's largest colony. However, Indian colonialism was a complex and multifaceted

process, as noted by Professor Irfan Habib¹. Karl Marx was deeply interested in this phenomenon, emphasizing India's role as a source of capital accumulation and as a market for British industrial goods. Marx analysed both the destructive impacts and regenerative effects of British rule on the Indian economy². In his monographs, Professor R.C. Dutta also explored various regions and aspects of the economy and administration in colonial India, offering valuable insights into this transformation³. This chapter seeks to provide an overview of these processes, situating the Marchant communities within the broader historical transformations that shaped the transition from the late pre-colonial to the early colonial period in Bengal. The chapter also examines the socio-economic and political transformations in Bengal from the pre-colonial to the colonial era in the late 18th to 19th century and will provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex changes Bengal and other regions experienced at that time and help us understand the overall scenario.

It is essential to recognize that colonial rule did not commence simultaneously across all regions of India, and its impacts varied greatly depending on the time and place. The 19th century in Indian history marked a profound transformation from chaos to metamorphosis. This century, with its dynamic nature and complex elements, is crucial to understanding the shift from pre-colonial structures to colonial rule and the subsequent reconfiguration. Globally, the 18th century was a period of significant change: England was entering the Industrial Revolution, and France was experiencing a prolonged crisis of the monarchy. However, 'mercantilist colonialism' in India took shape uniquely, beginning in the mid-18th century. We will further explore in the chapters how the small regions of Bengal reacted to the new colonial setup under the different foreign powers, such as the French, Dutch and British and contributed to the transformation of Bengal at large. Here, it is important to mention that the time frame of this chapter may seem to predate the full consolidation of British colonial dominance in Bengal. Still, it is important to understand

that the transformation of Bengal and all its socioeconomic and political changes were part of a continuous process of transformation rather than a sudden shift; therefore, examining this era provides crucial context for understanding Bengal's transformation, overlapping under the late Mughal and early colonial influences.

I

Decline of Mughal Central Authority: Its Impact on Bengal Subah

The process of decline of the Mughal Empire after Aurangzeb's death (1707) was a complex occurrence shaped by interlinked political, administrative, and economic factors. Pertaining to this issue, we first examine those causes that played a crucial role in the decline of the Mughal empire, to explore the decline of the Mughal central authority and its impact on Bengal Subha. This event by itself has been examined through multiple lenses, rather than attributing it to a single cause. Scholars have generally focused on three intertwined aspects: political fragmentation, economic crisis, and administrative weaknesses; each of these factors contributed to the Empire's downfall. Ergo, to explore the decline of Mughal central power and how it is impacted by transforming the societal structure, especially for Bengal Subha, we must ruminate over all of them.

Administratively, the Mughal empire functioned as a 'War-State'⁴; it was heavily reliant on the *Mansabdari* system⁵. Its patron–client structure ensured loyalty to the emperor rather than to an enduring imperial ideology. The diversification of the nobility under Aurangzeb introduced latent tensions, fragmenting cohesion. This instability was compounded by the destructive invasions of Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali, which **Prof. C.A. Bayly** distinguishes from prolonged internal conflicts that had more lasting economic impact⁶. However, Historians have debated whether this was primarily a crisis of leadership or of structural contradictions within the empire. While **J.N. Sarkar**

emphasized weak rulers and inept commanders⁷, **T.G.P. Spear** highlighted how capable leaders pursued personal ambitions over imperial unity⁸, which fuelled the factionalism. On the other side, scholars like Frank Perlin underscore that even plunder-based invasions disrupted economic stability, though some regions adapted through shifts in trade and investment⁹. This “*patron-client relationship*”¹⁰ structure, dependent on personal loyalty to the emperor, hindered the development of a cohesive Mughal identity, contributing to a fragmented political environment. Although recruiting peasants into 18th-century armies could inject wealth into many towns and villages. This recruitment served as a source of investment, particularly in producing goods such as cloth and weapons, which contributed to the broader ‘urban’ demand structure¹¹. Rather than a purely negative impact, this form of military financing might have stimulated local economies by increasing demand and investment in certain sectors.

The economic decline was rooted in the Mughal state’s voracious revenue system. As **Irfan Habib**¹², **Shireen Moosvi**¹³ and **M. Athar Ali**¹⁴ argue, relentless revenue extraction drained agrarian wealth, distressing peasants and eroding productivity. The Mughal authority ‘squeezed blood out of stone’ highlights the oppressive nature of revenue demands, exacerbated during economic shortfalls by calling the Mughal state an insatiable Leviathan¹⁵. This fiscal strain, worsened by military expenditure and elite luxury, weakened the empire’s administrative and military apparatus. Political fragmentation further destabilized trade networks and revenue collection, creating a feedback loop of economic and political deterioration¹⁶. Regarding this, historians like **B.B. Chaudhuri** shifted focus from central collapse to regional dynamics, highlighting how local elites, merchants, and zamindars forged regionally oriented identities and political orders¹⁷. The weakening of Mughal centrality, therefore, created a vacuum increasingly filled by both regional powers, such as the Marathas, Sikhs, Bengal nawab and European companies¹⁸.

However, we also found that the conflicts between regional powers had more sustained effects but led to economic adjustments in other areas, suggesting a complex interaction between conflict and economic resilience¹⁹.

Another significant development during this period was the **emergence of regional identities** among zamindars, merchants, and other groups. Their motivations went beyond traditional feudal loyalties; increasingly, they sought to safeguard local autonomy and resources in the face of external threats, especially from the growing influence of the East India Company. From the Mughal period onward, zamindars and merchants functioned as crucial intermediaries²⁰ between the state and the rural peasantry. They managed land, collected revenue, and often wielded semi-autonomous authority comparable to local rajas. Positioned between imperial demands and peasant grievances, they imposed an additional economic burden but also maintained deep community ties that enabled them to mobilize local support when imperial authority weakened. By the late 17th and 18th centuries, tensions between the Mughal centre and local intermediaries intensified²¹. Many zamindars withheld revenue, resisted imperial policies, and aligned themselves with peasant discontent. Although their engagement with peasants was often strategic and self-serving, these alliances allowed for sustained resistance to central authority. Peasant uprisings, frequently infused with regional and religious identities, such as the Maratha, Jat, and Rajput revolts. The growing resentment among zamindars often aligned with peasant uprisings, especially in regions like the Deccan²². It shows how community-based mobilization could undermine imperial cohesion.

The redistribution of resources into the hands of regional powers and new economic elites not only weakened the empire's fiscal base but also fostered new polities rooted in older traditions of governance or community identities²³. The 18th century, therefore, should be viewed less as a simple decline and more as a period of transformation,

where local powers appropriated surplus resources and consolidated authority. This rising sense of regional identity, however, often conflicted with the Nawabs' conception of Bengal as an integral part of the Mughal imperial framework.

This raises the question: did the Bengal Nawabs ally with zamindars, merchants, and bankers by sharing an awareness of regional political culture? Addressing this issue, Prof. Philip B. Calkins²⁴ argued that the Nawabs of Bengal from Murshid Quli Khan onwards increasingly depended on local elites to sustain their rule. Zamindars controlled land and military resources, while merchants and bankers, especially those tied to **textiles**, **salt**, and **opium**, ensured the financial vitality of the regime. The Nawabs' survival hinged on maintaining these alliances, particularly as Mughal central authority waned. Yet this dependence was never uniform. Zamindars often supported the Nawabs to secure autonomy in their estates, rather than out of a sense of regional unity. Merchants and bankers aligned themselves for economic security and profit. Their loyalties were pragmatic and class-specific, shaped more by immediate interests than by a collective political identity. Still, such alliances created an embryonic regional political culture, even if fragmented and uneven.

Regarding this, it is important to mention that, despite the growing regional autonomy, the **Bengal** Nawabs did not seek outright independence from the Mughal Empire. Murshid Quli Khan's revenue reorganization, for example, was explicitly geared towards mobilizing resources for the imperial treasury, underscoring Bengal's continued integration with the Mughal system. Even after disruptions such as Maratha raids, remittances to Delhi resumed, reinforcing Bengal's role as the empire's financial backbone. Nevertheless, the weakening of imperial control encouraged recurrent local revolts. As **Prof. Aniruddha Ray** notes, this period witnessed the rise of a temporary parallel authority through peasant uprisings and zamindari resistance. Drawing on Eric

Hobsbawm's concept of *social banditry*²⁵. Prof. Ray interprets these movements as both a protest against distant imperial authority and an assertion of local rights. Such acts of defiance, though not aimed at formal independence, destabilized the region and revealed the contradictions between a declining Mughal state and rising local powers. Bengal in the 18th century stood at the crossroads of imperial integration and regional assertion.

The most prominent ruler of Bengal was **Murshid Quli Khan**, whose administration marked a decisive phase in the region's socio-economic and political history. Murshid Quli Khan's policies did not aim at creating new economic resources; rather, they focused on redistributing existing ones. His revenue reforms rationalized administration, curtailed wasteful expenditure, and ensured higher remittances to the imperial treasury. The central strategy involved transferring *jagirs*²⁶ from fertile tracts of Bengal to the relatively less productive lands of Orissa, thereby reserving Bengal's rich agrarian resources for direct state control. His reforms consolidated revenues but intensified socio-economic pressures. Trade and artisan mobility offered new opportunities, even as agricultural resources were heavily taxed. Local elites aligned with the Nawabs out of necessity, but their interests often diverged from any larger vision of Bengal's unity²⁷. While full-fledged independence was not yet envisioned, the interplay of Mughal decline, Nawabi reforms, and local resistance laid the foundation for Bengal's eventual transformation under colonial rule.

This strengthened state revenue but increased pressure on zamindars, intermediate landholders, and indirectly on the peasantry. While some efforts were made to reclaim wastelands through land grants under zamindari tenure, such initiatives remained exceptions rather than systematic attempts at agricultural expansion. If the agrarian domain remained relatively static in terms of resource creation, trade, and artisanal production displayed greater dynamism. Political stability in certain pockets encouraged the migration

of merchants and artisans from insecure zones to safer regions²⁸, stimulating economic activity where conditions permitted. Thus, while revenue reforms redistributed wealth within the agrarian economy, trade and artisanal mobility fostered new patterns of growth. The tension between agriculture and non-agriculture, and between resource redistribution and economic migration, reveals the complex economic dynamics of 19th-century Bengal.

Considering the facts, we must understand that the decline of the Mughal central authority did not immediately lead to independence, but rather reshaped Bengal's socio-political fabric. It created an immense vacuum, which was repeatedly filled by local powers at the **regional elites or micro level** and by European powers (French, Dutch, and British) on a **larger scale or macro level**. This transformation inevitably reshaped the socio-political and cultural fabric of Bengal and the whole nation at large. On this, Bengal's experience, especially, illustrates how the erosion of central control fostered both instability and adaptation, laying the groundwork for the colonial transformation of the 18th century²⁹.

The emergence of regional states in Bengal led to a fragmented political order that ultimately paved the way for colonial expansion. European powers consolidated their dominance not merely through military conquest, but by exploiting existing political fissures and forming strategic alliances with local elites whose defiance had already weakened Mughal central authority. In this process, intermediaries such as zamindars, merchants, and regional chiefs played a decisive role. Their pursuit of autonomy and material gain contributed to both the disintegration of the Mughal Empire and the establishment of a new colonial order. Thus, the rise of colonial rule in Bengal was not an abrupt imposition from abroad but a gradual transformation shaped by collaboration between European interests and indigenous power structures, a complex interplay of

accommodation, ambition, and opportunism that redefined the region's political landscape.

Agricultural Surplus and Bengal's Prosperity

Agricultural surplus formed the economic backbone of imperial systems, and in Mughal India, its extraction underpinned both the empire's strength and eventual decline. The Mughal land revenue system, characterized by relentless surplus appropriation, impoverished the peasantry and stifled agrarian productivity. The *Jagirdari system*³⁰ further aggravated this condition by discouraging long-term investment through short-term revenue assignments, leading to stagnation and resource depletion. As multiple intermediaries extracted their shares, cultivators were trapped in cycles of debt and subsistence.

Irfan Habib, in his work, quantifies this burden, estimating that the state appropriated one-third to one-half of the total produce³¹. He argues that the economy lacked capitalistic potential, relying overwhelmingly on agricultural surplus with limited industrial or commercial diversification³². Shireen Moosvi, using data from the *A'in-i-Akbari* and 19th-century records, refines this estimate—showing state claims as high as 56.7%, leaving peasants with only 43.3% for subsistence³³. A.J. Qaisar similarly highlights the concentration of wealth among a small elite, with 445 of roughly 8,000 *mansabdars*³⁴ controlling 61% of total revenue³⁵. These studies portray the *zabt* system³⁶ as one of extraction rather than development, linking rural impoverishment to urban decline³⁷. Yet, this narrative of uniform economic decay is contested: while imperial control weakened, regions such as **Awadh, Benaras, Bengal, Moradabad** and **Bareilly** retained or even enhanced prosperity through localized resource management. Thus, the Mughal decline

was not a simple story of economic collapse but of uneven transformation, where regional vitality coexisted with imperial decay.

Within the broader late Mughal framework, Bengal emerged as a key economic and political centre. Long recognized as one of the empire's principal surplus regions, it was marked by agrarian expansion, vibrant trade networks, and adaptive revenue administration. The reclamation of forested eastern tracts spurred agricultural growth, as settlers and emerging agrarian elites collaborated with officials to create new revenue units, reflecting both local initiative and administrative adaptability. Despite the disruptions caused by the Maratha raids (1742–1751), Bengal under the Nawabs maintained relative stability, consolidating resources and safeguarding revenue flows³⁸. Yet, this stability reflected equilibrium rather than sustained growth, revealing the structural limits of Bengal's internal economy. Om Prakash emphasizes Bengal's favourable trade balance and its central role in the global circulation of bullion. The "bullion-for-goods" exchange with European powers, particularly the Dutch, generated a significant inflow of silver that monetized the economy, stimulated banking, and encouraged output and employment. Crucially, this external trade did not erode indigenous production; Bengal continued to supply high-value goods such as textiles and opium to global markets³⁹. However, the benefits of this trade-driven prosperity were unevenly distributed, largely enriching merchants, bankers, and regional elites while bypassing the peasantry. Thus, Bengal's eighteenth-century trajectory complicates the narrative of Mughal decline: agrarian exploitation and elite enrichment reflected the extractive nature of the imperial economy, yet regional dynamism, trade expansion, and monetization revealed considerable vitality. This duality underscores that Bengal's internal transformations, while sustaining late Mughal prosperity, simultaneously laid the

groundwork for new political and economic alignments under the emerging dominance of European colonial powers.

System of Revenue Farming: *Ijara* and *Jagirdari*

The distinction between *Jagirdars*⁴⁰ and **zamindars** is particularly crucial in understanding Bengal's agrarian and political evolution. While jagirdars held transferable and temporary rights, Bengal's zamindars enjoyed hereditary and quasi-proprietary authority, which gave them a durable stake in rural society. This institutional stability explains their resilience through both the Mughal and colonial regimes⁴¹. By the mid-18th century, Bengal's zamindars had evolved into autonomous power-brokers, skillfully leveraging their ties with peasants, financiers, and occasionally the Nawabs themselves. The weakening of central authority and the disintegration of the imperial agrarian system accelerated the decay of Mughal power. The tension between stagnant agricultural productivity and the expansion of merchant capital applies particularly well to Bengal. Under the Nawabs, Bengal's fertile agrarian base remained the empire's fiscal lifeline, yet the ***jagirdari* system** and extractive revenue mechanisms, notably *ijara* (revenue farming), imposed crushing burdens on both peasants and zamindars. The influx of speculative capital into revenue administration, where merchants and bankers purchased tax rights, further destabilized the system. The absentee *ijaradars* prioritized short-term extraction over long-term agrarian sustainability⁴².

Pertaining to the issue, **Tapan Raychaudhuri's** notion of "*administrative anarchy*" captures this turbulence vividly. In Bengal, revenue-farming became the hallmark of Nawabi finance, attracting wealthy Marwari bankers, Bengali zamindars, and urban financiers who speculated heavily in revenue auctions. Inflated bids led to ruthless recovery practices, as cultivators were squeezed to meet impossible targets. This

speculative mode of governance, while momentarily profitable, eroded agrarian stability. Raychaudhuri's insights into the disruption of artisan networks are equally relevant: Bengal's famed textile centres, such as **Dhaka, Santipur, and Kasimbazar**, suffered from insecurity, fluctuating demand, and predatory fiscal policies, prompting artisans and traders to migrate amid **Maratha raids** and shifting Nawabi fiscal pressures⁴³.

The political economy of Bengal also exemplifies **Satish Chandra's 'Jagirdari crisis'**⁴⁴. Competition for jagirs coincided with the rise of entrenched zamindars whose hereditary rights provided greater continuity than the transient jagirdars. These zamindars emerged as intermediary elites, balancing imperial and local interests. Their embeddedness in rural society, manifested through *malikana* dues, control over sir lands, and authority over peasant communities, helped sustain agrarian production despite Mughal administrative decay⁴⁵. Yet, the persistence of illegal cesses (*abwabs*) deepened peasant distress, fueling localized revolts that further destabilized the countryside⁴⁶.

The interpretation of *ijara* as both a symptom and accelerator of Mughal decline is particularly applicable to Bengal. The province's revenue system became an arena for new elites, like Marwari financiers, upstart zamindars, and ambitious officials, who used fiscal farming to consolidate wealth and political influence⁴⁷. This process undermined traditional nobility, weakened Nawabi control, and intensified rural exploitation. At the same time, Bengal's expanding commercial economy, sustained by European trade and bullion inflows, created new opportunities for these actors, illustrating the dual forces of decentralization and commercialization that reshaped its economy⁴⁸.

The transition to colonial rule revealed the culmination of these long-term dynamics. The East India Company's revenue practices perpetuated and intensified the speculative tendencies of the Mughal and Nawabi systems. Outsider *ijaradars* overbid for

revenue contracts, enforced excessive taxation on zamindars and peasants, and accelerated agrarian collapse. The Bengal famine of 1769–70, in which millions perished, exposed the structural fragility of Bengal’s agrarian economy under such extractive regimes⁴⁹. The continuity between late Mughal fiscal exploitation and Company mismanagement highlights Bengal’s pivotal role in the transition from imperial decline to colonial domination. Ultimately, Bengal emerges as both a victim and agent of transformation, a region where fragmentation, speculation, and commercialization converged to produce new forms of power. The hereditary strength of its zamindars, the financial prowess of its merchant classes, and the intervention of colonial capital together shaped a distinctive trajectory from Mughal provincialism to British colonial hegemony.

Urban Centres and Prominent Trading Hubs

In the following section, we turn to an examination of the level and pattern of urbanisation in Bengal on the eve of the Battle of Palashi (1757), the event that marked a decisive turning point in the region’s political and economic history. This discussion offers a concise overview of the four major urban centres of late Mughal Bengal—**Murshidabad, Dhaka, Hooghly, and Chittagong**. These cities encapsulated the diverse and dynamic character of Bengal’s urban economy, reflecting its integration into imperial, regional, and riverine trading networks. Their distinctive roles, as centres of administration, trade, industry, and finance. It illustrates the vibrant yet uneven process of urbanisation that defined Bengal in the mid-eighteenth century. On the eve of the Battle of Palashi (1757), Bengal was dotted with numerous urban centres, of which **Murshidabad, Dhaka, Hooghly, and Chittagong** stood out as the four major cities. Two of these, Murshidabad and Dhaka, were built under **Mughal patronage**, while **Hooghly and Chittagong** owed their origins to the **Portuguese**. Yet, regardless of their founding circumstances, the economic base of all four cities rested on the textile trade. This

commerce had flourished for nearly two centuries and was largely dominated by European powers.

The **process of De-urbanization** that followed the European takeover. With the imposition of colonial control, the East India Company pursued a systematic policy of decimating the indigenous textile industry and reversing the flow of bullion that had previously enriched Bengal. These measures virtually first destroyed the once-great Mughal cities of **Dhaka and Murshidabad**, forcing traders and artisans, particularly those connected to textile production, to abandon their professions and fall back on land for livelihood. The subsequent **phase of Re-urbanization** under colonial rule was a process driven entirely by British economic interests. The colonial administration fostered the growth of administrative towns, European trading posts (*kuthis*), jute-processing centres, railway towns, and settlements serving mines and plantations, all designed to facilitate resource extraction and the export of raw materials⁵⁰. At the heart of this re-urbanisation was the deliberate construction of **Calcutta** as a major metropolis and port city, strategically linked to its hinterland through railways and roads. However, the emergence of Calcutta and its vicinity occurred much later in the decade; thus, we will discuss it later.

As the primary hub for exporting raw materials and importing finished goods, Calcutta benefited from concentrated colonial patronage, drawing towards itself capital, labour, and resources from the surrounding region. This produced a **'primary city' image**, where Calcutta grew disproportionately larger and more prosperous than other urban centres, reducing them to minor settlements and draining the hinterland of resources. In Bengal's case, this dynamic was further reinforced by the **Permanent Settlement of 1793**, which encouraged parasitic, absentee landlords to migrate to the city with their entourages. This mechanism facilitated the transfer of rural surplus to the primate city, consolidating Calcutta's dominance while deepening the economic stagnation of the countryside. The

impact of permanent settlement on the transformation of Bengal will be discussed later in detail.

The Europeans had arrived in India and in Bengal in particular, three decades before the Mughals, securing a decisive advantage in overseas trade. The high-quality textiles of Bengal, prized in European markets, became the cornerstone of this lucrative enterprise. The expansion of water transport and the discovery of new maritime routes reduced costs, further integrating Bengal into the global economy. Control of this trade lay almost exclusively in the hands of the European ‘joint-stock’ companies, which operated out of centres such as Hooghly and, later, Calcutta. These companies represented a novel economic model: modern firms with vast pools of capital, conducting transactions across nations, operating under **joint ownership**, navigating open seas with advanced instruments, and warding off pirates with formidable naval power⁵¹.

Indian merchants, by contrast, while not insignificant in wealth, operated within a very different framework. Though some Indian enterprises controlled and invested large amounts of capital, their operations retained what contemporaries described as a “peddler’s mentality”—business conducted on a small-scale, personalized basis, lacking the institutional structures and global reach of their European counterparts. Strikingly, not a single ship carrying Indian merchandise, owned and commanded by an Indian trader, ever reached European shores for direct trade, even as a steady stream of European vessels regularly sailed in the reverse direction. This stark asymmetry underscored the structural advantages enjoyed by European trading companies and foreshadowed the economic dominance they would consolidate in Bengal after the fall of Mughal power.

The **textile trade** brought great prosperity and an influx of bullion to Bengal during the final years of Mughal rule. Still, this wealth came at a high cost to indigenous political

power, subtly undermining the state from within. European trading companies not only dominated overseas commerce but also gradually extended their control over internal trade networks and the large army of intermediaries who operated between European commercial interests and local producers⁵². Long before the Battle of Palashi (1757), the foundations for British ascendancy were being laid; the event was not the sudden rupture that many historians have portrayed, but rather the culmination of structural transformation.

The histories of **Dhaka** and **Murshidabad**, the two great Mughal capitals of Bengal, illustrate this interplay of political and economic forces. Dhaka was chosen as the provincial capital in the early seventeenth century, partly to suppress the rebels of the eastern marshes who exploited the intricate river networks of this rich alluvial region. Yet, beyond this military rationale lay a powerful economic logic. Dhaka's proximity to the sea made it an ideal centre for the burgeoning overseas textile trade. Nearby **Sonargaon**, famed for the unmatched quality of its textiles, had long been celebrated across Asia and Europe. The decision to shift the capital from the interior crossroads of the Ganges-Brahmaputra system to a location closer to maritime routes reflected not only strategic considerations but also the growing primacy of export-oriented production. A similar economic undercurrent shaped the rise of **Murshidabad**. According to contemporary accounts, Murshid Quli Khan, while serving as **Dewan of Bengal**, relocated his administrative headquarters from **Dhaka to Murshidabad** (then a small village known as Maksudabad) to escape the threat of assassination by the Mughal prince who served as Nawab. Yet this explanation tells only part of the story. Nearby **Kasim Bazar** was already a major centre of **silk production** by the mid-seventeenth century, attracting Dutch traders since the 1650s, while another renowned silk-producing region, **Malda**, lay close at hand. Murshid Quli Khan's decision was likely driven as much by these thriving centres of

textile production and their lucrative European connections as by the immediate danger of political intrigue⁵³.

However, the Portuguese preferred **Chattogram**, which was situated on the banks of the river Karnafuli on the coast, as their principal port (*porto grande*); they held Hooghly, their own creation, in special affection, calling it their *porto piqueno* or “little port.” However, their reckless military confrontation with the Mughals in 1632, at a time when the Mughal Empire was at the height of its power, led to their downfall and opened the way for other European powers who had long feared Portuguese naval dominance in the Bay of Bengal⁵⁴. Within just 2 years of this encounter, these rival European traders began to establish a foothold in Hooghly, setting up factories and trading posts. Gradually, they built their own distinct settlements along the river: **Chandannagar** by the French, **Chinsurah** by the Dutch, and **Serampore** by the Danes. Despite their different colonial styles, these towns shared a common economic heartbeat, the thriving textile trade that had drawn Europeans to Bengal in the first place⁵⁵.

In both cases, the geography of trade shaped the geography of power. The relocation of capitals- first to Dhaka to capitalise on maritime access, and later to Murshidabad to exploit the silk trade- demonstrates how Bengal’s political decisions were increasingly influenced, and ultimately constrained, by the logic of European-controlled commerce. These shifts reveal that the Battle of Palashi was not merely a military turning point but the outcome of a long process in which economic forces gradually eroded Mughal sovereignty, preparing the ground for colonial domination. The third major city, **Hooghly**, lay concealed for long beneath the thick growth of *Hogla* reeds that covered the landscape, until Portuguese traders, seeking a replacement for the declining port of Saptagram, discovered it. Before the rise of Calcutta, Hooghly emerged as Bengal’s most important trading centre. The history of Hooghly revolved mostly around the **Hooghly**

port, and in this matter, the emergence of **Calcutta port** (1870) also played a crucial role in it; thus, this affair requires special attention to ponder and will be illuminated in our upcoming discussion section.

These were the major centres; nonetheless, a large number of smaller settlements also sprang up in the localities surrounding **Hooghly**. Among them were Bator, a minor halt for ships bound for **Hooghly**- and Thana, a nearby fort, which together formed the nucleus around which the modern city of Howrah eventually developed, directly across the river from Calcutta. The 16th-century traveller Cesar Frederick offers a fascinating glimpse of Bator, now part of Howrah, in his travelogue. He describes it as a temporary port and settlement that appeared and disappeared with the arrival and departure of ships. This vivid account reveals two important aspects of early European trade in Bengal. First, it shows how the commercial influence of Hooghly extended well beyond the city itself, fostering satellite settlements that profited from maritime trade. Second, it suggests that local authorities were initially reluctant to permit the Portuguese to construct permanent buildings, forcing them to rely on these ephemeral, makeshift villages. For example, Baranagar, now a suburban stretch of Kolkata, was another such site, which was once home to a Dutch *baraha* (pig) factory that supplied provisions to European traders navigating the Hooghly⁵⁶.

Permanent Settlement and Its Impact on the Zamindari System of Bengal

By the mid-19th century, the British, having secured political dominance in Bengal, recognized that the true source of wealth lay not in commerce but in inland revenue. This conviction culminated in the **Permanent Settlement of 1793**, a cornerstone of colonial economic policy. The British presumed that fixing a high land revenue would guarantee stable profits, but in practice, the system had profound consequences for Bengal's agrarian

order. Among the numerous diversities and fluctuations that occurred during the 19th century, the two most notable phenomena of that age were, the first, the changes in the land-based system, where many old zamindars and their families were flushed out and a new zamindar class was born by dint of permanent settlement, and as its outcome⁵⁷, and the second, appeared in the form of commercial modification, where the inrush of foreign powers also led many Indigenous traders to seek their fortune⁵⁸ and got the perquisite of transformation that occurred in Bengal at that time.

Although British officials such as **John Shore** and **Lord Cornwallis** described zamindars as ‘proprietors’⁵⁹. They were, in practice, reduced to hereditary revenue farmers operating under fixed leases. Their authority as landholders was largely nominal, constrained by rigid fiscal demands imposed by the colonial state. This arrangement precipitated the decline of the zamindari class⁶⁰. They were unable to extract sufficient rent from cultivators at customary rates; many zamindars defaulted on payments and were consequently forced into foreclosure, mortgage, or auction⁶¹. Estates thus passed increasingly into the hands of urban merchants and bankers, initiating a process of agrarian restructuring that eroded traditional authority and destabilized Bengal’s rural economy.

The rigidity of the Permanent Settlement imposed crushing burdens on peasants, who bore the ultimate weight of revenue shortfalls. The **Revolt of 1857**, in part, reflected the accumulated grievances of both dispossessed zamindars and exploited peasants, whose interests briefly converged against colonial exactions⁶². This feature made a distinction between **zamindars** and **Jotedars**⁶³, the latter emerging as influential rural intermediaries who gradually supplanted the old landed elites⁶⁴. The **rise of Jotdars** marked the transition from a status-based to a contract-based agrarian order, reshaping Bengal’s rural hierarchy throughout the nineteenth century and positioning them at the forefront of later peasant resistance movements. In contrast, under the Mughal regime, zamindars were not

landowners but intermediaries in revenue collection, their power limited by a hierarchical system that upheld imperial supremacy. Even as new zamindari families emerged, their role remained administrative rather than proprietary. Under **Murshid Quli Khan**, this continuity persisted; while acknowledging the growing socio-economic influence of zamindars, he firmly subordinated them to the state, ensuring that revenue control remained a prerogative of the Nawabi administration⁶⁵.

The Britishers, however, redefined this relationship. Thinkers such as **Alexander Dow** advocated the **Permanent Settlement** on the premise that secure property rights would promote agricultural improvement and public prosperity. Yet this represented a radical departure from Mughal principles, which had emphasized state-directed agrarian development through irrigation, embankments, and resource management. The colonial regime's focus on maximizing revenue extraction narrowed the fiscal imagination, aligning the state with zamindars and merchants in a system that disciplined peasants and dismantled communal safeguards that once sustained rural balance. The **Permanent Settlement**, therefore, was not merely a fiscal innovation but a mechanism of colonial social engineering. By institutionalizing zamindars as fixed-revenue intermediaries, it fractured pre-colonial agrarian relations, intensified social inequality, and entrenched a landed elite loyal to the colonial state. Far from stimulating agricultural growth, it diverted resources into speculation and remittance, transforming Bengal's countryside into a space of chronic conflict and resistance.

The interplay between revenue security and socio-economic control thus defined Bengal's colonial transformation. Whereas the Mughal and Nawabi regimes had regarded zamindars as functional agents of governance, the British reconfigured them into dependent fiscal instruments. This shift entrenched colonial authority, undermined traditional rural structures, and permanently altered the balance of power within Bengal's

agrarian society. The **Permanent Settlement** stands, therefore, as both an **economic strategy** and a **project of social domination**, embedding exploitation into the structural logic of colonial rule.

Merchant Communities and Groups in Bengal: Historical Roots

The commercial classes of Mughal India formed one of the most vibrant and indispensable pillars of the subcontinent's early modern economy. From the 16th to 18th centuries, merchants in India were not merely passive carriers of goods but active architects of a complex commercial world that connected village granaries to the courts of Europe and Southeast Asia. Their story is one of extraordinary wealth and global connections, but also of social ambivalence and political negotiation. An examination of their economic role, social diversity, lifestyles, and political strategies reveals how these merchants operated within, and subtly reshaped, the Mughal imperial order.

The first striking feature of Mughal India's commercial classes was their sheer scale and professionalism. Merchants were organized along two broad axes of operation. Long-distance traders—variously called *Seth*, *Bohra*, or *Modi*—specialized in inter-regional and overseas trade, moving high-value commodities across the Indian Ocean and into Central Asia. At the other end of the spectrum were local traders—*beoparis* or *baniks*—who handled retail distribution and village-town exchanges. The *bania* or *baqqal*, often synonymous with the rural moneylender, combined trade in foodgrains with the provision of capital to peasants. Although these financiers frequently acquired a reputation for being grasping and extortionate, their role was fundamentally productive. By advancing credit and moving grain from villages to mandis and towns, they lubricated the wheels of agrarian production and urban consumption. In short, the merchant network provided the connective tissue that integrated India's vast agrarian economy into regional

and global markets. Far from being confined to a single caste or faith, India's merchant communities reflected the pluralism of the subcontinent itself. Overland trade to Central Asia was dominated by Multanis, Afghans, and Khattris, while Bengal's indigenous *Gandha-banik* traders were eventually supplemented and partly displaced by Afghan and Muslim merchants. Inland centres such as Agra, Delhi, Balasore, and Bengal also supported wealthy merchant families capable of financing entire European cargoes or underwriting the annual investments of the East India Companies. Wealth, however, did not translate uniformly into display⁶⁶.

The lifestyles of Indian and Bengal merchants varied widely, shaped by local custom and political circumstance. European travellers noted the commodious and well-built houses of merchants in Agra and Delhi, some double-storeyed with terraced roofs. Yet many merchants chose discretion over display. Bernier observed that traders often faced poverty, fearing that the state might treat them as "filled sponges," to be squeezed dry in times of fiscal crisis. Social practices reinforced a culture of disciplined accumulation. Tavernier remarked on the parsimony of Indian shroffs (money-changers) and the early training of merchant children in the arts of thrift and wealth acquisition. The contrast between the ostentatious few and cautious many underscores the tension between wealth and insecurity in a polity where official exactions were a perennial risk. Despite these anxieties, merchants operated within a legal environment that offered notable protections. Unlike nobles, they were exempt from the law of escheat, which allowed the state to confiscate property upon death. From Sher Shah Suri to Jahangir, Mughal rulers promulgated regulations to safeguard the inheritance rights of merchants, ensuring that their property passed to heirs without interference. Overland travel, a critical prerequisite for trade, was relatively safe. Insurance rates—between one-half and one per cent on major routes—testify to the low risk of long-distance transport. The **network of sarais**

(caravanserais) at regular intervals along principal highways provided further infrastructure that compared favourably with contemporary Europe⁶⁷.

Although merchants lacked the formal political status of the landed aristocracy, they were far from powerless. Each community elected a leader, or *nagarseth*, who mediated with local officials and represented collective interests. Merchants occasionally used strikes (*hartals*) to defend their rights. Several incidents reveal that while native merchants did not seek to dominate politics, they could mobilize effectively to protect economic autonomy. The uneven regional impacts of Mughal decline were vast and versatile. Addressing the issue, **Prof. Ashin Das Gupta's** focus on mercantile fragility⁶⁸ and **C. A. Bayley's** stress on rural patronage reveal the complexity of post-Mughal transitions⁶⁹.

Considering this diversity, we can underscore that the empire's downfall produced no uniform economic outcome but regionally specific disruptions. In spite of their wealth and strategic leverage, merchants occupied an ambiguous position in the social hierarchy. The ideology of *varna* continued to privilege the landed and priestly classes over those engaged in trade, relegating merchants to a status lower than their economic importance might suggest. Yet their actions—financing European companies, underwriting inter-regional trade, and sustaining long-distance credit networks—were critical to the Mughal economy and to India's integration into the early modern world. Indeed, the commercial capital accumulated by these groups later became an essential foundation for the European colonial enterprises that supplanted Mughal authority.

Through these historical traces of the merchant community across India from the pre-colonial era, we can come to the conclusion that the commercial classes of Mughal India demonstrate how economic dynamism can coexist with social ambivalence and

political constraint. Merchants connected Indian villages to global markets, amassed fortunes rivalling those of European contemporaries, and occasionally wielded collective power against state interference. Yet they operated within a society that valued their wealth but denied them high ritual status, compelling a careful balance between conspicuous prosperity and prudent discretion. In the long view, their networks of trade, credit, and capital formed the sinews of an economy that would eventually attract, and succumb to, the forces of European imperialism. The story of these merchants is thus not only a chapter in India's economic history but also a key to understanding the subcontinent's transition from Mughal sovereignty to colonial modernity.

Impact of Diwani Rights on Bengal Merchant Communities

The **Grant of Diwani in 1765** marked a watershed in Bengal's economic history, reshaping both the zamindari order and the fortunes of indigenous merchants. The East India Company's control over revenue collection redirected capital flows and created a dual economy where European and Indian commercial interests occupied unequal positions. The consequence of Diwani was the decline of the traditional mercantile class of Bengal, particularly in Calcutta. The foreign capital and monopolistic trade practices displaced local merchants from profitable sectors such as banking, shipping, and export trade. In Bengal, however, the drain of wealth and the redirection of investment towards zamindari holdings—encouraged by the Permanent Settlement—diverted capital away from trade. As Prof. N. K. Singh explains, the legal frameworks like Bengal's partition law further discouraged entrepreneurial risk-taking, hastening the decline of mercantile families. While old zamindars lost estates through auction and foreclosure, new zamindars emerged from commercial backgrounds, investing profits from trade and moneylending into land⁷⁰.

In districts such as Nadia, Dinajpur, and Midnapur, this transition was evident⁷¹. Some estates, such as the Burdwan Raj, successfully adapted, demonstrating that mobility and consolidation were possible for elites who aligned with the colonial order. Yet, once dispossessed, most zamindars could not recover their former status, especially as rent-free lands were increasingly appropriated by purchasers or absorbed by the colonial state (particularly between 1828 and 1850). This transformation created a two-tiered colonial economy. At the 'upper floor', Europeans dominated high-value trade, finance, and infrastructure, monopolizing commodities like silk, cotton, and opium. At the "bottom floor," indigenous merchants acted as subordinate intermediaries: facilitating agricultural marketing, providing seasonal credit, and handling local cash crops⁷². The rise of mahajans and moneylenders as intermediaries entrenched dependency rather than productive investment, locking Bengal's economy into exploitative cycles of debt and stagnation.

The Diwani settlement and subsequent land policies thus reordered Bengal's socio-economic structure. They weakened the indigenous business class, redirected capital into unproductive landholding, and entrenched European commercial supremacy. The shift not only undermined Bengal's long tradition of mercantile vitality but also laid the foundation for long-term economic dependency and social stratification. The transformation of the zamindari order through the sale of old estates, the rise of new commercial elites, and the loss of rent-free lands illustrates how colonial policies fundamentally reconfigured Bengal's agrarian and mercantile fabric. Nevertheless, 19th-century Bengal still witnessed the rise of several influential zamindari and merchant families, deeply intertwined with the colonial economic structure and the British imperial government. These families, such as the **Tagore family**, the **Kandi family**, the **Kashimbazar family of Murshidabad**, the **Nasipur Raj family**, the **Shovabazar family of Calcutta**, the **Ghosal family of Bhukailash**, and the **Panchaudhuri family of Ranaghat**, played a significant role not

only in the economic sphere but also in shaping the social and political landscape under British rule⁷³.

The **Kashimbazar family**, for example, became involved in the silk trade and expanded their wealth during the time of **Kanta Babu**, the key figure in the family's rise. **Kanta Babu's** ties with Warren Hastings gave him access to opportunities that allowed the family to prosper. One notable acquisition was the Baharband pargana of Rangpur, the first estate in Bengal to be permanently settled with a low revenue demand, which brought the family substantial benefits. Similarly, **Raja Nabakrishna** of the **Shovabazar family** had strong connections with the British administration, especially with figures like Clive and Verelst. Their involvement in the aftermath of the Battle of Plassey, including their share in the plunder, and their role in the '*Diwani*' (the revenue settlement), enabled them to secure a prominent position in Bengal's revenue administration under the British. His closeness to the British allowed him to shape his family's position in the new social and political order.

In addition to these families, the concept of '*Patanidar*' (Middleman between Zamindar and Peasant) emerged as a unique feature of the diffusion of landed property during this period. The term *Patni* comes from the idea of subinfeudatory tenures, and the '*Patanidar*' system involved the distribution of land through inheritance or legal arrangements, distinct from the auction or private sales of zamindari estates. This diffusion allowed for a more flexible structure of landholding and the integration of different families into the burgeoning colonial economy⁷⁴. The rise of regional elite families was facilitated by the British policies of revised land and trading systems, which reshaped Bengal's economy and land ownership. The interaction between elite families and European powers helped both to gain economic and social power, which will be discussed in the next segment.

Financial Change and Mercantile Communities in 19th Century Bengal

The development of landed estates and the trading sector in Bengal after the Permanent Settlement remains inconclusive due to the limited availability of sources. The relationship between the Nawab and the merchants and bankers was complex and varied ever since. In the commercial sector of 19th-century Bengal, while most merchants and bankers did not have a direct resonance with the emperor or the Nawab, **the house of Jagat Seth** stood out as an exception since the 18th century. Jagat Seth, a prominent banking family, maintained a significant influence over both the Nawab's administration and the socio-economic fabric of Bengal during this period.

As Prof. **Sushil Chaudhury** highlights, the **Jagat Seth** family became permanent members of the Nawab's *darbar* (court) from the early 18th century, exerting unparalleled influence on the Nawab and his administration. Their influence was not just political but also deeply economic⁷⁵. The Jagat Seth family controlled the **mints** in **Murshidabad** and **Dacca**, two key centres of Bengal's economy, which accounted for nearly two-thirds of the province's revenue collection, through their *Hundi*⁷⁶. This massive control over revenue and resources gave them significant power, not only in revenue matters but also in the manipulation of financial markets, such as the exchange rates and interest rates. They had a central role in providing credit, further solidifying their dominance in the financial sector. Despite their extensive influence, Nawab Murshid Quli did not actively seek the support of the **Jagat Seth** family, though he maintained a cordial relationship with them due to their established power and position in Bengal's commercial landscape⁷⁷. This relationship, however, was not unique to the Jagat Seths.

However, in general, the merchant communities did not exercise such a high degree of control over the economy or administration. The Jagat Seth's influence was exceptional

and tied to their strategic positioning within the economic structures of Bengal. Interestingly, despite their extensive economic control, the Nawabs' policies did not seem to focus on forming a specific alliance with the commercial elite or reconstructing their pre-existing relationships. No significant development during this time led to a shift in this dynamic. However, the Bengal government did have a vested interest in ensuring commercial prosperity, particularly in safeguarding indigenous traders from exploitation by foreign merchants. This protectionist stance reflected the Nawab's broader concern with regulating trade and maintaining economic stability, even as the Jagat Seths and other commercial elites enjoyed substantial wealth and influence.

Prof. **Sabyasachi Bhattacharya** identified key factors behind this trend but emphasized its complexity⁷⁸. He noted that the purchasers of estates were often merchant and trading families, though their entry into landholding cannot be explained simply by the existence of trade, the permanent fixation of revenue, or the inherent appeal of land. In fact, the first decades after 1793 saw many leading merchant families absent from auction lists, suggesting that land acquisition was neither automatic nor universal. Families such as the **Mulicks** and **Seals** acquired estates not through direct purchase but via foreclosure of mortgages on indebted zamindars, underscoring the role of financial mechanisms rather than straightforward investment. Over time, land emerged as both a secure and prestigious asset. The shift of mercantile capital into landed estates was neither uniform nor immediate but reflected varied strategies shaped by financial opportunities, regional dynamics, and broader economic change. **Prof. Bhattacharya**, thus, stressed that the relationship between commerce and landholding was never linear.

Another significant factor was the insecurity of business ventures. The collapse of European Agency Houses in the 1830's eroded Indian merchants' confidence in European-style commerce, pushing many toward safer investments in land⁷⁹. **Legislative changes**,

like the **Charter Acts of 1793, 1813, 1833, and 1853**, which curtailed the Company's trade monopoly, expanded British state oversight, and reshaped administrative structures, further destabilized traditional commerce⁸⁰. This instability led many to question the reliability of traditional trading enterprises as a means of sustaining and growing wealth.

For instance, the **Mukherjee family** of Uttarpara in the **Hooghly district** illustrates this trend. Known for their trade in European goods, they suffered significant financial losses when the '**Agency Houses**' they dealt with failed. This loss eroded a large portion of their wealth, prompting them to seek more stable and reliable avenues for investment. As historian **Arnold J. Toynbee** noted, the Mukherjees leveraged the opportunity to purchase distressed landed estates at low prices, laying the foundation for their emergence as one of the largest landholding families in the district⁸¹. This shift exemplifies how the landed property was treated as a safer and more predictable investment compared to the volatile commercial sector.

The diversion of '**mercantile capital**' into land acquisitions became increasingly common during this period. As absentee zamindars were unable to maintain their estates, these properties were frequently sold at auctions. Newcomers, often from mercantile or trading backgrounds, stepped in to fill the void. The acquisition of landed estates offered these families not only economic stability but also social prestige and political influence, further incentivizing their interest in such investments. The shift in land ownership also marked a change in social hierarchies. In regions like **Chittagong**, mercantile families initially played a minor role in estate purchases. However, over time, they asserted themselves, replacing older clerical families—such as those from the Baidya caste—with newer trading communities like the **Tili (oil merchants) and Tamili (betel leaf traders)**.

By the late 19th century, these new entrants had consolidated their position, signalling a significant reconfiguration of Bengal's social and economic order. The transition from commerce to landholding thus reflected both necessity and opportunity: commercial volatility undermined traditional avenues of wealth accumulation, while landed estates offered stability and upward mobility. **Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's** analysis⁸², supported by these examples which underscores how economic pragmatism intertwined with the pursuit of social advancement in shaping this critical transformation of nineteenth-century Bengal.

Credit Banking and Indigenous Financial Institutions in Bengal

The socio-economic transformation of the trading sector in 19th-century Bengal was marked by the rise of new zamindars, the introduction of Credit Banking and the growing dominance of usury. Moneylending, long present in rural India, became central under colonial rule as small peasant cultivation declined and indebtedness deepened. The moneylender and usury emerged as a powerful intermediary, often appropriating agrarian surplus and competing with landlords themselves⁸³. The roots of this transformation can also be traced back to Plassey (1757), which **R.C. Dutta** and **Holden Furber** identified as the starting point of the "**Drain of Wealth.**" The East India Company's victory enabled the large-scale transfer of resources to Britain through taxation, tribute, and military expenditure. By the mid-nineteenth century, this drain was intensified by the opium trade with China and by heavier tax burdens on Indian peasants. The imposition of money rents in place of payments in kind further entrenched the power of zamindars, merchants, and moneylenders, making peasants increasingly dependent on credit⁸⁴. **Bipan Chandra** describes those colonial officials who frequently blamed rural indebtedness for peasant misery, while in reality, it was the structural expansion of **usury** that underpinned colonial agrarian transformation⁸⁵. **Irfan Habib** similarly explicates how this period saw the

consolidation of modern Indian zamindars and a new alliance between landholding elites and the colonial state, reinforcing exploitation and dependency⁸⁶.

By the early 19th century, the dominance of English companies and their monopolistic practices heavily constrained the influence of Indian merchants in the global market. Bengali merchants were involved in shipping; their share in the registered ships at Calcutta port was minimal. Many Indian merchants, particularly Bengali merchants like Ramdulal Dey and Motilal Seal, remained involved in foreign trade; their role in the larger picture was much more secondary than that of their European counterparts. Between 1805 and 1826, Indian merchants collectively owned between 5 and 10 per cent of the total shipping tonnage, with Bengali Hindu merchants accounting for less than 40 per cent of this fraction.

In contrast, English **agency houses** controlled the vast majority of the shipping. By 1830, government reports indicated that six English agency houses owned 65 per cent of the ships registered at Calcutta port, consolidating the English monopoly even in shipping⁸⁷. Regarding this development, Amiya Kumar Bagchi emphasises the emergence of the **State Bank of India**, which was first established in the name of the **Bank of Calcutta** (1806) and highlights a significant shift in the role of Indian merchants in the **banking system**⁸⁸. With the founding of the **Bank of Bengal** in **1808**, Indian merchants found themselves increasingly excluded from the formal banking system. Indian names became rare among the recipients of loans, and Bengali merchants suffered greatly during the recession of agency houses in the 1830s⁸⁹. This marked a period of withdrawal from English-run businesses, as Indian merchants faced difficulties accessing capital and financing.

This process raises a key historical question: to what extent did colonial rulers reshape the zamindari and merchantile sector, particularly in the regulation of rent and the balance of power between landholders, moneylenders, and cultivators? Though the evidence suggests that the colonial state did not simply reinforce traditional structures but reshaped them to serve imperial extraction. This transformation was shaped by colonial policies, commercial instability, and changing agrarian relations. However, Prof. **Sabyasachi Bhattacharya** cautions against overstating the early diversion of mercantile capital into land, observing that while merchants increasingly acquired estates, this was a gradual process. The Permanent Settlement (1793) and subsequent land auctions functioned as a “rationalizing process,” not simply transferring land among old zamindars but redistributing it more widely within the class, allowing new entrants—especially merchants to secure a foothold in the colonial agrarian economy⁹⁰.

The Permanent Settlement and subsequent financial mechanisms thus created new landholding classes, expanded usury, and altered patterns of rural authority, laying the foundations for Bengal’s nineteenth-century socio-economic transformation. This combination of colonial extraction, peasant indebtedness, and the transfer of mercantile capital into land gave rise to new ruling classes. Wealthy landowners consolidated into a **rural bourgeoisie**,⁹¹ while workers displaced from agriculture increasingly formed an industrial proletariat. In Bengal, traditional elites were gradually displaced by **merchant families** and **moneylenders** who secured social prestige and political influence through land. Ultimately, zamindari property derived its value from rent, making control over rent collection central to land management. While colonial law vested zamindars with formal authority, their control remained constrained by patterns of cultivation and their relationships with peasants.

Structure of Trade and Commerce of Colonial Bengal: Internal and External Trading Networks

During the early years of colonial rule (1760-1840), the paramount industries and manufactures of the district were carried on either under direct European supervision or with advances made by European capitalists. The East India Company traded in **cotton**, **silk**, and **jute fabrics**, besides **sugar** and **indigo**, and had factories or commercial residents in the mofussil for their manufacture and purchase. They endeavoured to retain a monopoly of this trade, and ‘interlopers’, the non-officials, were allowed to trade in all articles except piece-goods and military and naval stores. Although in the year 1833 Parliament deprived the Company of all their commercial privileges, however, around 1836 the commercial residencies of the Government were abolished by opening up the district to private enterprise⁹². For that, the rival non-official Europeans could not settle in the mofussil without the special permission of the Governor-General and with the help of political supremacy and power. Since most of the Bengal regions were already under the control of the British and the restrictions of the British parliament were gradually relaxed from 1793⁹³, as its consequence, the British won half of the battle to establish their supremacy. However, places like **Chandannagar** remained under the control of the French, which made the place a bit distinct, irrespective of other areas of Bengal, yet it holds its special connection with mainstream history.

In this regard, the reputation of the Bengal **textiles** industry reached its crest in the early modern era, especially in the sphere of finer varieties, which had received massive appreciation from various countries throughout the century. A variety of Bengal textiles were exported to different parts of the world more than 2,000 years ago. Since the medieval period, the richness of Bengal has been legendary and it was appreciated by most foreign travellers, the chief of the French factory at Cassimbazar at that time called as ‘the paradise

of India'⁹⁴ and described it as the most fruitful country in the world, where the products like, rice, sugar and cotton cloths of various regions of Bengal brought up here and exported worldwide, especially, the cotton cloths, silk and embroidery crafts were left its special mark for the long haul⁹⁵ and many historians are eloquently describing the prosperity of Bengal for that. James Taylor⁹⁶ noted that the famous muslins of Dhaka were appreciated very much in Europe since the first century AD, and it is quite evident that Bengal had several advantages over other centres of textile production in India for a long time. Prof. **D.B. Mitra**⁹⁷, **N. N Banerjee**⁹⁸, and Sushil Chaudhury⁹⁹, all elaborated on the causes behind its primacy in the trading sector by interpreting some of the key factors, such as its profusion of highly skilled workers and artisans, availability of raw material, surprisingly low cost of production, royal patronage, cheap and highly flexible transport facilities and trading network through riverine trade.

The British conquest of India occurred simultaneously with the Industrial Revolution, which drastically changed the entire financial structure of India, Great Britain dominated the world on the hold of industrialization and the application of modern technology, but the Indian peasants and artisans worked with tools that had been unchanged since a long decade, due to the huge technological differences of the two countries, the British conquest brought up an unmanageable economic pressures and turmoil for India. British factory-made textiles replaced Indigenous products in local bazaars and made them bound to pay for these new imports. In this process, India became both a **supplier of raw materials** for the Europeans and a **new market** for their exported products as well, and in this way, India became an integral part of the world economy and lost all its previous legacy¹⁰⁰.

The main centres of the industry were **Dhaniakhali, Tantibazar** and Khanyan, which came under the Sardar subdivision, in the Serampore district. Places like Serampore,

Haripal, Dwarhata, Kaikala, Jaynagar, Kharsarai, Antpore and Eajbalh, etc, fall within their territory and under the **Arambagh** subdivision, like Kalme, Khanakul, Erishtanagar, Mayapur and French **Chandannagar** were included. O, Malley accented that **Chandannagar** was an essential centre for the cotton textile industry, where the weavers mainly prepared *dhotis, sarees, chadars, ghamcha*, etc, etc. However, fine cloths were only made at very few places in Bengal, such as **Serampore, Haripal, Dhaniakhali, Kalme** and in French Chandannagar, and this place was especially known since **Farasdanga** was the first and last towns of the district, where these cloths were made¹⁰¹. Additionally, **Sushil Chaudhury** also mentioned that although Malda was an important centre of textile production in Bengal, it was not the major one; in this regard, the honour goes to areas around **Kasimbazar, Dhaka, Hooghly**, etc¹⁰².

The sources show that the export of textiles from Bengal by Asian merchants, though it was not exhaustive, yet they made a definite edge over the Europeans, even in the sector of Bengal's overseas trade¹⁰³. Several Bengali Merchant families of the Hooghly region engaged in overseas trading and extensive export goods, including agricultural products like **rice, pulses, sesame, and mustard**, alongside textiles like **silk sarees** and handkerchiefs. Other notable exports included **opium, indigo, and ghee**, showcasing the diversity of India's produce. These goods reached internal markets of India, like **Deccan, Northern India** and overseas markets of other parts of **Europe, Colombo, Rangoon, Saigon, Hong Kong, Mauritius**, and even across the **Atlantic to destinations like Trinidad, Jamaica, and Barbados**¹⁰⁴.

European Trading Companies: Their Impact on India and Bengal's Merchant Community

The collaboration between foreign and Indian business communities began as early as the 17th century with the establishment of British trading posts in **Madras, Calcutta**,

and **Bombay** by the East India Company. These coastal cities became vibrant commercial centres where Indian merchants could engage in trade with Europeans. Indian traders were attracted to these British-controlled ports for the security and stability they offered. British rule brought with it property rights and contracts, which were respected and enforced, providing Indian merchants a relatively safe environment in which to operate. Indian merchants played a variety of roles within the British-controlled economy. Some acted as agents and brokers, while others partnered with European traders in joint ventures. Still, others established their own successful merchant houses. This interaction allowed certain Indian communities to rise to prominence and wealth under British rule. Prof. Blair B. Kling's analysis delves into this dilemma, exploring the possible outcomes of British involvement in India's economic transformation. His argument hinges on the dual paths that British rule could have taken—either fostering growth and development or exploiting the country's resources for imperial benefit¹⁰⁵.

He pointed out that the communities such as the **Parsis, Jains, and Bohras (Bombay)**, and **Subranabanik and Kayasthas (Bengal)**, benefited from the opportunities created by British colonial governance. These groups flourished in the British port cities, enjoying new economic opportunities and social mobility¹⁰⁶. However, the economic impact of British rule varied across time and regions. The development of industries in India was closely linked to the involvement of local entrepreneurs, both Indian and European. In regions where industrial development did take place, the vitality and commitment of local businesspeople played a crucial role. This suggests that Indian entrepreneurs were not passive recipients of colonial policies but active participants in shaping the country's economic trajectory.

In 18th-century Bengal, traditional merchant groups such as the **Gandhabonik** and **Subarnabanik** held long-standing dominance in trade. However, the rise of European

companies, especially after Plassey (1757), transformed the commercial landscape of Bengal. Trade shifted from a competitive model, where Indian merchants mediated between artisans and European companies, to one of monopolistic control under the English East India Company. Initially, rivalry among European powers (**Dutch, French, English**) had created opportunities for Indian merchants, but the Company's eventual dominance curtailed this role. Systems such as the *Gomustah* (1753), which replaced the older *Dadni* practice, placed weavers under Company agents, restricting their freedom. Later, experiments like the *contract system* (1771–78) offered only brief liberalization before the *Agency system* reinstated Company control under Cornwallis in 1788. Although not a monopoly in the strict sense, collusion among European buyers effectively excluded Indian merchants from foreign trade¹⁰⁷.

By the early 19th century, native merchants were largely reduced to moneylending (*Beniagiri*) and auxiliary roles like *salt diwani*, serving the Company's financial needs. Independent English "interlopers," often ex-company officials, further entrenched European dominance, using Indian capital to build fortunes. As Prof. **Amalesh Tripathi** observed, the '**Free trade**' era of 1813 merely replaced the Company's monopoly with wider English mercantile supremacy, sidelining Indian merchants. The decline of the indigenous merchants' capital was reinforced by Company-backed financial policies. The colonial state ensured that English traders could access revenue loans at low interest, while Indian merchants were confined to high-interest lending, weakening their competitiveness¹⁰⁸.

The collaboration between colonial authorities and English capital systematically marginalized Indian merchants, restricting them to peripheral economic roles. Hence, by the mid-19th century, the once-dominant Indian merchant class had lost its central position in trade and finance. The transformation of merchant capital into dependency and decline

highlights the destructive impact of colonial monopolies, which eroded indigenous economic sovereignty and restructured Bengal's commercial order in favour of European interests. This development strongly led to the emergence of the Bengal merchant community and paved the way for the establishment of the Bengal Bourgeoisie.

In the early stages of colonial rule, particularly in the 19th century in Bengal, European powers, including the **British, French, and Dutch**, sought to extend their control across the subcontinent. However, they encountered a range of unfamiliar administrative and social conditions, which made their task difficult. The British began to implement Western institutions and economic philosophies, but their initial efforts were largely experimental and met with significant failures. Despite these early struggles, the latter half of the 19th century saw the consolidation of British rule. The British successfully introduced a bureaucratic system and a more centralized form of governance, which allowed them to exert greater control over India's economy, resources, and social structures. This period marked the establishment of the '*imperial leviathan*', which stands as a powerful colonial state that helped secure British economic interests. The relationship between colonial rulers and Indian economic development was a complex and intricate process in itself. While some Indian communities and entrepreneurs were able to leverage British colonial rule for their benefit, the broader picture reveals a system where Indian resources were largely harnessed for British gain. The interplay between local entrepreneurs and British capital led to both opportunities and limitations, with the long-term consequences of British economic policies creating a mixed legacy of growth for some and stagnation for others. The development of India under colonial rule was neither a straightforward path to prosperity nor an inevitable descent into poverty—it was a complicated process influenced by a range of factors, including the vitality of local business communities and the shifting priorities of British imperialism.

Emergence of Bengal Merchant Families and Bourgeoisie Formation

The British East India Company's trade in Bengal relied heavily on Indian merchants and financiers whose capital and local expertise sustained the colonial economy during the early 19th century. However, by the century's end, a new English-educated upper-caste intelligentsia, known as '*Bhadralok*', had become Bengal's cultural and administrative elite. Tracing this transition from *Dadni* merchants to *Bhadralok* reveals how Indian agency, caste privilege, and colonial structures intertwined to shape distinctive patterns of economic and social power¹⁰⁹. **N. K. Sinha** describes the *Dadni* system as one in which the Company advances financed trade through Indian merchants who bore the real commercial risk. Because the Company's advances were often insufficient, these merchants were compelled to risk their own funds, underwriting trade and assuming the full hazards of fluctuating prices and delayed deliveries. Some went further, selling goods directly for cash in the so-called 'ready or liquid money' system, a practice that required significant liquidity and bargaining strength. These traders were not passive intermediaries but independent capitalists who managed credit, prices, and production networks¹¹⁰.

The commercial hierarchy of *Benyan*, *Dewan*, *Gomasta*, and *Dalal* reflected an intricate system in which Indian capitalists retained significant autonomy even under European dominance¹¹¹. Families such as the Seths and Basaks of Sutanuti exemplified this class of prosperous merchants, who, after the abolition of the *Dadni* system in 1753, converted their trading wealth into finance and landholding. These families exemplify the process, moving from high-risk commerce to more stable financial and social positions. Their trajectory foreshadowed the rise of the *Bhadralok*, a class defined less by mercantile risk than by education, cultural capital, and administrative employment¹¹². Among them, merchants such as **Gopinath Seth, Ramakrishna Seth, Laxmikant Seth, Shobaram**

Basak, Umichand, and Kotma were the most prominent Dadni financiers of the early 1750's¹¹³.

In early 19th-century Calcutta, the Company consolidated authority by adapting traditional land practices such as *pattas* (land grants) and repossessing undeveloped tracts as the *Company's Comar* lands¹¹⁴. Regular surveys and litigation strengthened property rights while ensuring a steady revenue flow. Lord Wellesley's administration (1801–1805) introduced systematic urban planning—sanitation, drainage, market regulation, and the construction of Government House¹¹⁵—transforming Calcutta into the *Mahanagar* or “great capital” of colonial India¹¹⁶. The expansion of agency houses, banks, and global trade networks generated a hybrid economy where European capital relied on Indian banians for credit and management¹¹⁷. By the mid-19th century, Calcutta's *Barabazar* had become the subcontinent's financial hub, with Marwaris gradually displacing old Bengali merchant groups. Scholars like Soumitra stressed¹¹⁸ that commerce functioned on trust and reputation amid chronic liquidity shortages, compelling Europeans to depend on Indian financiers. Figures such as Dwarkanath Tagore, Ramdulal Dey, and Motilal Seal rose through this comprador system, marking the fusion of indigenous initiative and colonial capitalism. Indian banians like Dwarka Nath Tagore, who pioneered India's first **Multinational company**. Ramdulal Dey developed business ties with the newly formed USA, bringing American ships to Calcutta despite British opposition.

By the late 19th century, the *Bhadralok*—predominantly Brahmin, Kayastha, and Baidya dominated administration and culture¹¹⁹. In this process, Institutions like Fort William College and Hindu College, alongside missionary schools, reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar acquired prominence by playing an epoch-making role in advocating for various social issues, such as women's education and their emancipation¹²⁰. Missionary education, vernacular journalism, and reformist

movements fostered a politically aware middle class. It evolved Calcutta into both an economic and intellectual metropolis. As **J. H. Broomfield** describes that they were distinguished by English education, urban living, aversion to manual labour, and pursuit of land ownership as a status symbol¹²¹. **Tithi Bhattacharya** further argues that education, property, and culture became central to *Bhadralok* identity between 1848 and 1885, embedding caste privilege within the colonial middle class¹²². Although separated by a century, the *Dadni* merchants and the *Bhadralok* were linked by a shared strategy: converting economic capital into social dominance.

The rise of Bengal's 19th-century elite reflects not mere colonial dominance but a process of local adaptation. The spread of English education accelerated the growth of a new middle class, as wealthy mercantile families such as the Seths and Basaks redirected their commercial capital into education, land, and culture. Their descendants, mostly upper-caste Hindus, used this transition to secure bureaucratic positions and form the *Bhadralok*—an English-educated, urban elite. This shift from merchant capitalism to intellectual authority demonstrates how indigenous agency reshaped colonial opportunities. Ultimately, colonial rule transformed but did not dismantle older structures of wealth, social privilege, and indigenous hierarchies, which allowed traditional elites to maintain dominance in new forms.

II

Riverine Geography of the Bengal Region: Hooghly and Its Port

The transformation of Bengal from pre-colonial to colonial era cannot be understood without examining the transformation of its riverine trading centres, especially its regions like Hooghly¹²³, which played a crucial role in this entire event. Until the establishment of the Calcutta port in 1870, the history of Hooghly and its surrounding

areas revolved around the fortunes of the Hooghly port, which emerged as Bengal's primary commercial artery after the decline of Saptagram (Satgaon). The shift from Satgaon to Hooghly depicts the larger economic transitions of early modern Bengal, where geography, imperial politics, and European rivalries intersected to create a vibrant commercial hub¹²⁴. For centuries, Satgaon was Bengal's premier port, which was situated on the loop of the river Saraswati before it joined the Ganges, and it allowed ocean-going vessels to penetrate deep into the interior.

Poet *Mukundaram* celebrated its cosmopolitan character, noting that merchants from across India and beyond flocked to its markets, often choosing this region and settling down forever¹²⁵. However, as the river silted and the Saraswati's navigability declined, Satgaon's primacy waned. Hooghly, strategically positioned on the main channel of the Ganges, rose as the new centre of maritime trade¹²⁶. By the late seventeenth century, observers such as Alexander Hamilton described Hooghly as "the sole centre for Bengal's trade," capable of accommodating the rich cargoes of 50 to 60 ships at a time¹²⁷. Hooghly's geographical advantages made it more favourable than Calcutta in the early phase of European expansion. Walter Hamilton emphasised that its territory stretched two miles along the river and one mile inland, offering both superior anchorage and a thriving hinterland for the collection of goods¹²⁸.

Even after the East India Company shifted its headquarters to Calcutta in the last half of the 18th and first half of the 19th century, the Company retained **agents in Hooghly**, underscoring the port's enduring economic significance. There was much evidence that delineated that, in the first half of the 18th century, the trade and commerce of the Hooghly district remarkably continued to bloom and contained a substantial number of settlements around the locality, a considerable number of purchases were also made and the Imperial custom house was still present there, for both, the sea-borne and the internal trade, which

still had to pass through from the Hooghly port and paid the customs duty or to get free passes¹²⁹.

Emphasizing the relevance of the Hooghly Port, **O'Malley** stated that even though the British East India Company had removed their headquarters from Hooghly to Calcutta around the second half of the 18th century, it still maintained their agents in Hooghly. Regarding this, the edition of **Indrani Ray's** writings sheds light on India's evolving engagement with the Indian Ocean during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Through the lens of the Indian merchant, as documented by French East India Company officials, these essays reveal the prosperity of Indian trade in the seventeenth century and its subsequent decline due to political instability and competition in the eighteenth century. The work also challenges existing perspectives on Mughal decline, maritime policies, and the impact of European trade, emphasizing the often-overlooked significance of French sources in maritime historiography¹³⁰.

The Hooghly riverfront was not merely a site of trade but also a theatre of imperial rivalry. Streynsham Master, sent to survey the Company's settlements in 1676, recommended that Hooghly serve as the chief factory of Bengal. Yet Job Charnock's landing at Sutanuti in 1690 laid the foundation for Calcutta, foreshadowing the gradual shift of British power downstream, and still, the Hooghly remained strategically contested¹³¹. On 23 March 1757, Admiral Watson and Colonel Clive captured the area, ensuring British dominance just months before the decisive Battle of Plassey¹³². The port continued to host imperial custom houses and served as an entry point for both sea-borne and internal trade, sustaining its importance even as Calcutta rose.

The prosperity of Hooghly and its satellite towns—**Chinsurah**, **Chandannagar**, and **Bhadreswar**—depended not only on foreign merchants but also on a dense hinterland

economy. Goods from the mofussil poured into Hooghly for export, while imported wares moved inland through a network of depots. Over time, this trade fostered the growth of local industries, making the district a manufacturing as well as a mercantile centre¹³³. The trajectory of the Hooghly port, from a successor to Satgaon to a contested node of European colonialism, highlights the interplay of geography, trade, and politics in Bengal's economic transformation. Even after Calcutta emerged as the colonial capital and primary port, Hooghly retained a distinct commercial vitality, linking inland Bengal to the global economy well into the nineteenth century. Its story reminds us that Bengal's integration into the world economy was not a sudden outcome of British dominance, but the product of centuries of riverine trade, competitive colonial ventures, and the enduring pull of its fertile hinterland.

The Causes Behind the Decline of Hooghly Port

Aiming to understand the financial shift of Bengal from the Hooghly region to the Howrah region, we first need to examine why and how the Hooghly Port declined, and what the root causes are behind the decline of the Hooghly Port. Was this purely a geographical occurrence, or was there a political inducement as well, and how did it facilitate the path of establishment of Calcutta port by bringing an extensive transformation to its vicinity? To analyze the economic transformation of the locality and Bengal, as well.

The administrator **Major Hirst**¹³⁴, explaining the evidence in his report and the contemporary newspapers and periodicals, such as 'Samachar Darpan'¹³⁵ and 'Dig Darshan',¹³⁶ also put forward a similar statement by highlighting the present condition of Hooghly port, its challenges, commercial difficulties and the concerns of the British administrators on the issue. Firstly, it is quite apparent that the changing course of the Hooghly River, resulting the decrease of the Hooghly Port and accelerated the quest for

other alternative ports by the foreign powers, in support of that statement, we found some financial records that described that, earlier, the European settlements of Satgaong area all together, levied the customs on various goods and paying the ‘grand emporium of foreign commerce’, which was in all around Rs. 343,708. Afterwards, it started deducting from the Hooghly area around Rs. 45,767, which was quite high and had already been included under the head of quarter of Calcutta and enhancing their net Rs. 297,941, from then onwards, within 50 years, river-borne trade of the Hooghly area had almost completely deserted in favour of Calcutta and the gross collection on account of port duties and customs decreased and left only Rs. 91,196 at Hooghly, which used to be around 890,604 Rs, earlier and it is also been marked that by the time, rest of areas, like, Murshidabad, Dacca and Patna all were able to enhance a larger amount of customs revenue more than Hooghly¹³⁷, however, the process of the declination of Hooghly port was indeed very fast, as we found in other references that only within 50 years later the ‘*Saiyar*’¹³⁸(customs and duty) realized at Hooghly port was Rs. 62,644¹³⁹.

Another riveting fact comes up regarding the decay of the Hooghly Port in government reports of that time. In a survey of Hooghly Port in 1876, the report says, there was clear evidence of poor management and inefficiency of government officials in dealing with port transportation. As the ship, ‘*Mahabaleshwar*’ had faced some difficulties regarding grounding in port, the survey report has stated that, ‘the committee fully recognize the hardship inflicted on the owners of that vessel in having so disbursement forced on them unnecessarily, that might have been avoided by the exercise of the simplest common sense on the part of the government officials. The committee also warned the government officials on that report by stating that, ‘such state things would not be tolerated in any other British port¹⁴⁰.

In the same year, 1876, in another government report, we found circumstantial difficulties in the Hooghly River. That report shows that most of the night-soil falls into the Hooghly River, around 3000 persons daily are flushed into the river, and the government admitted their inability to prevent the floating population from using the river. However, they also regretted that no nuisance from the banks should be washed into the stream. These manmade troubles also worsen the situation very fast¹⁴¹. There were some natural calamities, like cyclones on the bank of the Hooghly River, which concerned the British government officials and constantly affected the regular fare of the locality¹⁴².

There are some other interesting facts found in government reports of that time, which exhibit the difficulties in collecting land revenue due to unclear geographical boundaries and general laxity of supervision, which may create troubles in proving the actual land ownership of the area. The survey report of the Hooghly district, 1875, pointed out the presence of huge unmeasured land, which caused difficulties in proving that the land was service land, but not a zamindari land¹⁴³. The issue of ‘undefined and unclear geographical boundaries’ caused the Britishers so much unease that they constantly forced the authorities to resolve this matter.

There was a copy received by the judicial department and forwarded to the director of public instruction under the secretary to the government of Bengal, which shows the government about the issue¹⁴⁴. In that government, a deceleration letter notified that ‘it is hereby notified for general information that in modification of the boundaries defined by notification dated 28th May and 5th June 1880, published respectively in the Calcutta Gazetteers of the 2nd and 9th June 1880, the following shall be the revised western boundary of the district Hooghly, and the revised southern and western boundary of the district of Howrah¹⁴⁵, (Howrah was also becoming an important part of the changing financial discourses of Bengal, however, that is not the area of this article, hence we will not focusing

on the matter), The above notification had finally been drafted in December 1894, and titled as “Changes in district boundaries”¹⁴⁶, perhaps, these all causes made the British government push forward to find out a more safe, secure and serene place for long term investment.

The mid-19th century marked a crucial phase in Bengal’s economic and environmental transformation. The both geography and history were reshaped by major fluvial changes at the close of the 18th century, with the emergence of several new rivers redirecting Bengal’s economic trajectory¹⁴⁷. The Ganges abruptly altered its course, eroding long-established settlements while depositing fertile alluvial tracts that became new centres of cultivation¹⁴⁸. This shift pushed agricultural expansion eastward, while western Bengal experienced stagnation and decline¹⁴⁹. These geographical and agrarian changes reoriented riverine trade routes, rendering the western delta ‘moribund’ and the eastern delta ‘active,’ marking a decisive reconfiguration of Bengal’s economic landscape.

This process was continued in the second half of the 19th century; hence, the chief sufferer became the Hooghly, thus, all the main regions came under this delta, and all those places that had once enjoyed easy access to both trades, overseas and inland, now started losing their authority over that. Neither the *Bhagirathi* nor the *Jalangi*, the rivers that link the Hooghly to the Ganges, could provide sufficient depth of water to be more accessible for riverboats¹⁵⁰. In the year 1824, Bishop Heber regretted that only 50 years before a great warship had been able to get up to Chandannagar, which was located a bit far and above Calcutta; that was now inconceivable and seeking for the alternatives, which have now taken place in the branch of the Ganges as a city of ‘Calcutta’¹⁵¹.

In this controversy, many historians put forward a different view on that. Prof. **Nilmani Mukherjee**¹⁵² has argued that even after the establishment of the Calcutta port, initially, the Hooghly port was not fully closed; instead, it played a subsidiary and

auxiliary role to the Calcutta port. Prof. Mukherjee also elucidates¹⁵³ that, the overseas trade of Bengal which had been growing since 1833, now reached its peak in the second half of the nineteenth century and it became possible to introduce improved transportation and speedier methods in the trading sector and the initiation of steam navigation with the accomplishment of a general system of railways by 1871 which brought the change of trading pattern of Bengal, in both, the internal as well as port-hinterland trade, that was a truly revolutionary step towards a new beginning. At the beginning of 1865, the first telegraphic connection between Europe and India was established, and as its denouement, around 1871, India was connected with Europe by a cable, which was an extremely effective postal system with a cheap postage rate. This process was also assisted by the development of roads and canals¹⁵⁴.

Besides that, another two incidents that played a crucial role in the growth of Bengal trade and commerce were, first, the construction of the Howrah bridge over the Hooghly River in 1874, which also strengthened the trade-commerce of the Calcutta port and through that, the interior new markets were reachable and new sources of supply were tapped which had so far been outside of the pale of commerce and the second one, was the inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1869, which made long-term changes, both in terms of size and pattern of Bengal's overseas trading¹⁵⁵. All these events accelerated the new turnover in the growth of Bengal's overseas trade and commerce that it made bound to renovate the port administration of Calcutta and the port installations and facilities were immensely improved in the course of the next thirty years, which eventually made the Calcutta port, as a chief port of Bengal and in this process, on contrary, we can see why and how the Calcutta port replaced the Hooghly port and from 1870 onwards it took over the major commercial charges.

In the first half of the 18th century, European trade and industries took an epoch-making path, as the English East India Company had removed their headquarters to Calcutta; however, its trade with these districts did not fall off materially. Instead, the trade of the French increased considerably. Because of the geographical transfiguration, the economic transmutation had changed along with the long-drawn conflicts among the European powers had undergone, based on their commercial interests and the colonial expansion, which eminently changed the socio-political dynamics of colonial Bengal and subsequently paved the way for the decaying of regional industries, such as cotton textile which was a leading industry of the locality and major part of the people's livelihood, the fall of these regional industries led the tragedy of 'Deindustrialization' and decaying the commercial activity of Hooghly port and strengthen up the path of establishment of Calcutta port which declared the ultimate financial fate of Bengal.

Migration of Merchants' Family from Hooghly to Howrah: Rise of Howrah and Calcutta

The ironic event of the decline of the **Hooghly** region and the emergence of regions like the **Howrah** and **Calcutta** around the late 19th century marked the transformation of Bengal. The late 19th century of Bengal witnessed a crucial territorial and administrative revision. previously, the regions of Hooghly and Howrah were part of the Burdhaman district. These two areas were separated from Burdhaman and collectively known as the Hooghly district. However, in the year 1795, the Hooghly and Howrah regions were separated from the larger district of Burdwan as a part of the British administrative strategy, which aimed at improving administrative efficiency by managing the increasing population and industrialization, particularly in the Hooghly and Howrah regions. Both the regions were initially merged, and the temporary merging of Hooghly and Howrah was a reflection of administrative needs. Nevertheless, as Howrah experienced increasing

industrial growth, especially due to its proximity to Calcutta, the British government felt the necessity to divide these regions further to get better control over the economy. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th century, Howrah rapidly flourished as a major hub for industry, transportation and river traffic. As a result, Howrah district was officially established during 1937-38 and became a popular industrial and urban centre¹⁵⁶.

The establishment of the Calcutta port initiated the migration of a large number of local merchants, including Hindus, Muslims, and Armenians, who flocked to Calcutta to continue their trade under the protection of the British East India Company¹⁵⁷. Here, we must consider that, firstly, Britishers already led the race of colonial expansion in India by defeating the other European powers and the second factor, which played a determining role in making the city of Calcutta was, the massive and constant migration of the merchant families from the Hooghly region¹⁵⁸, particularly, the four families of **Bysacks** and one of the decedents of **Setts** (other remained settled in Chandannagar), **Tagore**, and **Subarnabanik** (one branch remained stay in Chinsurah under the Hooghly), along with many others influential families had started moving towards Calcutta by that time, which led the rapid decaying of Hooghly and made the foundation of Calcutta¹⁵⁹. This occurrence played a decisive role in changing the prior dynamics. Regarding this, Prof. Sushil Chaudhury analyzed¹⁶⁰, the decline of the Hugli port was accelerated after the battle of Plassey (1757), because this battle provided the Britishers a political suzerainty in Bengal and through that they reached at their disposal and utilize the entire resources of Bengal for their ultimate commercial authority and as we know, the actual conflict among the European powers was to achieve the financial hegemony.

This economic shift from **Hooghly** to **Howrah** also gave rise to a new class of urban elites tied to Company patronage. Merchants and zamindars such as **Nabakrishnadeb Bahadur** actively sought favour with the Company, but selective grants

of property provoked opposition. Petitions from landholders in Sutanuti and Bagbazar asserted long-standing ownership rights, underscoring growing tensions over property. To address these disputes, the Company institutionalized a judiciary to safeguard private rights. By the late 18th and 19th centuries, litigation had become a defining feature of Calcutta's social life, with prominent Bengali families engaged in protracted legal battles that shaped both urban property relations and the broader social order.

From the closing decades of the 19th century, Calcutta began attracting people from far and wide, many of whom became permanent residents. Large numbers of migrants arrived from northern India, seeking new opportunities. Among them were the Jagat Seths, a wealthy and influential business family that had once minted coins on behalf of the state and resided near Hooghly (Chinsurah). However, after 1757, **Murshidabad's decline** led to a shift in trading activities toward **Calcutta**¹⁶¹. Following this trend, many Marwari trading families also established themselves in the city, transitioning from semi-permanent settlers to integral members of its commercial landscape. By the 1820s, their presence had grown significantly. Even in the early nineteenth century, Calcutta was recognized as a metropolis¹⁶².

During the entire process, between the late 19th and early 20th century, the decline of Hooghly Port and the rapid emergence of Calcutta Port took place simultaneously, which paved the way for the transformation of all the neighbouring districts of Hooghly and Howrah. Political instability, newly developed commercial organizations, banking system, newly passed tariff policies of the government, international distribution of trade, changes of pattern and material in trade, the new transportation system¹⁶³, **renewal of charter act (1818, 1830, 1854)**¹⁶⁴, the swadeshi movement and **partition of Bengal (1905)**¹⁶⁵, all these crucial events played a major role in the economic life of Bengal. In

this scenario, as the economic importance of Calcutta port increased, the city of Calcutta gradually became the centre stage of all the ironic events of Bengal¹⁶⁶.

Thus, this transitional epoch encapsulates the reorientation of Bengal's socio-economic order through the interplay between indigenous elites and colonial rulers. The experiences of the merchant and zamindari classes demonstrate that colonial modernity in Bengal was not merely imposed from above but co-constructed through negotiation, adaptation, and selective collaboration. The Hooghly and Howrah region, with its unique fusion of European settlements and native elites, became an atelier for this transformation, where commerce, land, and culture intertwined in complex ways. The study of the *Roquitte*, *Seal*, and *Roy* families, therefore, offers more than biographical narratives; it reveals how regional elites mediated between tradition and modernity, local and global economies, and indigenous authority and colonial governance. Their trajectories underscore the resilience of sub-regional societies in reconfiguring their roles amid imperial transition. The following chapter focuses on the Roquitte family serves as an apt beginning to this exploration, illustrating how entrepreneurship, philanthropy, and cross-cultural engagement enabled local actors to assert prominence within a rapidly transforming colonial world.

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⁷³ *Ibid.*

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Chapter- II

The Roquitte Family of Chandannagar: Under the French

Colonial Setup

As discussed in our previous chapter, the colonial regime in India left a long-lasting impression due to its profuse transformation and contradictions. From political turmoil to social upheaval, this era presented numerous novel elements for introspection; it was a long and complex journey in itself. With that, we have also examined the fact that, in the first half of the 19th century, Bengal's trade and commerce, both inland and foreign, were thriving, especially in the trading process between indigenous traders and Europeans, which carried on briskly with other parts of India and abroad as well.

Most of the contemporary observers agree that the tyrannical nawabs of Bengal never discouraged the flourishing trade¹, hence, Bengal became the most exclusive trading hub by its geographical position, production and with the help of political incitement², as well. Thus, we need to consider all its elements and factors to understand the overall scenario. Aiming at that objective, we selected three important areas of Bengal, which were governed by three different colonial powers at the time, as we mentioned in the previous chapter. In this chapter, we will try to illustrate the emergence of the Roquitte family of Chandannagar under the French colonial setup, paying special attention to **Dourga Chorone Roquitte**³, the most renowned local business tycoon of Chandannagar.

I

The Roquitte Family in Colonial Chandannagar: Origin and Ancestry

During the late 19th century, the renowned business tycoons of Chandannagar, Dourga Chorone Roquitte and his family, left a lasting imprint on the Chandannagar region through their entrepreneurial ventures and philanthropic activities. Before examining their financial rise and commercial contributions, however, it is essential to trace the origins and ancestry of the Roquitte family. The family belonged to the *Tantubai* community⁴ of Chandannagar. The *Tantubais*, also known as Tantis, were a traditional group of Hindu and Muslim weavers and cloth traders, historically concentrated in Bengal, Gujarat, Jharkhand, and Bihar. The name '*Tantubai*' derives from the word *tanti*, meaning 'weaver' in both Hindi and Bengali⁵.

The precise circumstances of when and how the ancestors of the Roquitte family came to settle in Chandannagar remain uncertain. The contemporary documents and family testimonies⁶ affirm that their original residence was in the village of Bhandarhati near **Tarakeswar** in Hooghly district, and they were *Tantubai* by caste⁷. This information is mentioned by **Sri Bholanath Das**, the nephew and a business disciple of Dourga Chorone Roquitte, who recalled that, according to the descendants of **Jagannath Bhard**. Sources suggest that the first businessman in this field was **Jagannath Bhard**, who migrated from Saptagram in Hooghly during the Bargi invasions. However, other accounts credit Batakrishna Ghosh as the pioneer who revolutionized the local weaving industry by importing looms from Manchester, significantly boosting production and trade. Regardless of the exact origin, Lalbagan became a vibrant centre for the weaving industry, and the *Tantubai* community settled around Suksanatantola near Lalbagan, a locality that retains its heritage even today⁸.

Another notable elite, **Amol Kumar Mitra**, also mentioned regarding the origin of the Roquitte family that the family likely migrated to Chandannagar during the mid-18th century⁹, drawn by the thriving weaving industry. Thus, the Roquitte lineage traces back to this weaving community, yet, in the absence of corroborating records, the authenticity of such claims remains open to question. It is nonetheless reasonable to assume that their migration to Chandannagar was linked, directly or indirectly, with the town's weaving and textile trade. Still, there is no conclusive evidence that Durgacharan's forebears were themselves engaged in the local textile industry. What can be said with greater certainty is that the rise of the Roquitte family occurred alongside the growth of Chandannagar's cotton textile industry, making it essential to explore the development of this regional trade to better understand their emergence.

The Social Position and Connection of the Roquitte Family to the Tantubai Community of Chandannagar

In colonial Chandannagar, we found evidence of various industries; however, among them, the cotton textile industry created a huge demand and became one of the prime export items for the French Company and helped the company to collect a lot of revenue from it. It was not only the French patronage, but it also got support from its nearby district, Burdwan¹⁰. Emphasizing the commercial significance of Chandannagar to the French government, **Kanchana Mukhopadhyay** stated¹¹ that it was the nodal point of trading activities in the first quarter of the 18th century and was more developed than Calcutta. During that time, the French government showed a special interest in Pondicherry and Chandannagar, as they perceived that the commercial growth rate of this locality was still higher than that of Calcutta. By supporting this fact, **Prof. Ashok Kumar Chattopadhyay** has also explained¹² that the cotton industry was one of the most notable industries of Chandannagar. In fact, it is being mentioned that two communities

that played the most crucial role in the process of urbanization of Chandannagar from pre-colonial to colonial were: a) *Gomastha*, who were engaged in collecting Dadni from the local producers for the colonial rulers to secure the mercantile trading activities¹³. and b) *Cotton weavers*, since Chandannagar was a major trading hub of the Cotton textile industry in the Hooghly region¹⁴. This community mostly played an intermediary role between the local weavers and the French traders.

In this field, **Sri Batakrishna Ghosh**, who himself was a very renowned cotton weaver of the town, first initiated this business in the locality and greatly improved it by bringing a large number of looms from Manchester to India. It is also documented that there were about 3000 looms in Chandannagar more than 150 years ago, and its territory areas, like Lalbagaan, Baidhopota, etc., had an impressive prevalence of handlooms that can still be found in the area. Through these industries, Chandannagar already had a huge presence of old and prestigious business families from long ago, such as *Sett, Roquitte, Tagore, Choudhury*, etc., and they expanded their business substantially, not only within the country but abroad as well. Harihar Sett, (1878- 1972) the renowned businessman of that age illustrated the trade and commerce of Chandannagar in his book¹⁵ in detail, where he depicts that, not only in the 19th century but even in the 20th century, the presence of many sterling businessmen and Cotton weavers can be seen within the locality and perpetuated immense influence in all spheres and engaged in various cultural endeavours in the society¹⁶. Sudhir Kumar Mitra also illustrated some of the very prominent merchants and their family names of Chandannagar, in his book¹⁷, such as Roquitte, Das, Bhar, etc., who played a crucial role in the locality and the larger spectrum of the society and gained the power to transform the history of Bengal, through their economic emergence.

Here two points are notable, firstly the emergence of merchant (*bonedi*)¹⁸ families of Chandannagar or nearby areas of Hooghly district occurred much before Calcutta, secondly, although many merchant (*bonedi*) families of the region were well connected to Calcutta or outside of their locality and deeply impacted the larger society of Bengal, they still shared a strong link with the root and maintained their individuality. For example, zamindar like Darpo Narayan Tagore, who served as a *Diwan* under the French Company and was one of the Company's contractors¹⁹, the most eminent members of the junior branch of the Tagore family and owning massive landed property in Bengal and Orissa, who built the fundamentals for the legendary Tagore family²⁰, was a notorious businessman of Chandannagar, throughout his age. Instead of the above facts, one can assume the significance, influence and relevance of the city in colonial Bengal, which stands out with its distinct local identity. The Lalbagan area of Chandannagar had long been associated with the *Tantubai* community (cotton weavers), known for their expertise in weaving. The iconic Roquette's residency, 'Roquette Bhavan²¹,' which is now recognized as a heritage building, is situated in the Lalbagan area as a testament to the legacy.

Chandannagar under French Colonial Rule: Historical Background

The emergence of Chandannagar was a long and intricate process, deeply interwoven with the broader history of the Hooghly region. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to establish trading activities there, although they preferred Chattogram, as their principal port (*porto grande*), which was situated on the banks of the Karnafuli River along the southeastern coast. Although Hooghly, their own creation, was nevertheless held in high regard and affectionately referred to the port as *porto piqueno* or "little port." However, the reckless military confrontation of the Portuguese with the Mughal Empire in 1632, at a time when the empire was at the zenith of its power, resulted in their

expulsion and marked the decline of Portuguese influence in Bengal, opening the way for other European powers who had long feared Portuguese naval dominance in the Bay of Bengal²².

This episode, in turn, created a power vacuum that invited other European trading powers, long wary of Portuguese naval dominance in the Bay of Bengal, to extend their activities into the region. Within merely 2 years of this confrontation, rival European companies began establishing their footholds in Hooghly, setting up factories and trading posts. Over time, these efforts crystallized into distinct European enclaves along the river: Chandannagar under the French, Chinsurah under the Dutch, and Serampore under the Danes. Despite differences in their colonial administration and mercantile policies, these towns shared a common economic lifeline, the flourishing textile trade that had initially drawn Europeans to Bengal's shores²³.

Among these towns of Hooghly, Chandannagar emerged as a significant centre of trade and commerce, renowned far beyond Bengal's borders. Administrator Walter Hamilton underscored the city's exceptional geographical advantages. He noted that Chandannagar, the only French settlement in Bengal, was situated on the west bank of the Hooghly River at latitude 22°49' N and longitude 88°26' E, approximately twenty miles from Calcutta²⁴. Hamilton further emphasized that, in several respects, its location was superior to that of Calcutta. The settlement originally extended about two miles along the river and one mile inland, providing an ideal environment for both inland and overseas trade. These geographic and strategic advantages made Chandannagar one of Bengal's principal port towns during the early colonial period²⁵.

Historian **O' Mallay** assumed that the name Chandannagar is derived from Chandra, which means 'moon' or Chandan, which means sandalwood; *Nagar* is known

as a town²⁶. Since the medieval period, Bengal and its ports have played a vital role in the economy. Satgaon was considered the most important port in Bengal over a prolonged period and India as well, since it was situated on the loop formed by the river Saraswati before it fell into the Ganges, which made the port more effective for ocean-going ships of Bengal. In the words of poet Mukundaram, the port would attract foreign traders and merchants so much that merchants of Satgaon never left their hometown²⁷. Rather, it became a central point for merchant communities of different parts of India and other countries²⁸ and remained on the throne of the royal port of Bengal until the Hooghly Port emerged.

Until the establishment of Calcutta port in 1870, the history of Bengal revolved around Hooghly port and its vicinity, as mentioned by several historians²⁹. However, after the establishment of Calcutta port, the financial significance of Bengal shifted towards Howrah and the Calcutta region, which we have discussed in our previous chapter. The French established their first ‘small house’ at Hooghly in 1674³⁰, following which a royal *farman* by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb was also granted to them in the year 1688, which paved the way for the French to establish their first factory at Chandannagar. Seizing the opportunity, the French started to enlarge their settlement around the year 1690 and built the ‘*Fort d’Orleans*’ (fort) at Chandannagar in 1701.

In the year 1688 French East India Company pledged to Aurangzeb to purchase land and set up a *kuthi* and received permission to purchase 942 hectares of land for 40,000 *sikka taka* continuation of that event, the French East India Company received a decree in 1693 to trade freely from Aurangzeb. From 1690 onwards, their territory continued to grow, and gradually, a small port was established at Chandannagar. With the increase in trade, the French started buying land anonymously from the company's loyal employees in Chandannagar from 1695. In 1696, the French *Fort d’Orleans* was

built³¹. Gradually, European settlement around *Fort d'Orleans* grew, and as the new arrivals continued to grow in the city, they expanded the town and played an important role in the growth of the city. However, after that, no more cities grew towards the Saraswati River and started moving towards the Hooghly River. There were many reasons for this; the main reason was the inundation of the Saraswati River, and as a result, the trade volume decreased, and the port of Saptagram declined. There were difficulties in shipping. The merchants looked to the other course of the river. The potential for urban development was concentrated on the banks of the Hooghly River.

The main areas of Chandannagar were **Khalisani, Bodo** and **Gondolpara**; these areas have retained their rich significance since ancient times³². The French colony was about 4 miles long and 1 mile broad and extended along the river from *Telinipara* (now in the Barasat area) to British Chandannagar³³. Its southernmost ward was connected to the Hooghly-Chinsura Municipality (now destroyed). Yet the settlement was repeatedly contested by several European powers. However, the French constructed *Fort d'Orléans* at Chandannagar as a symbol of their growing power and commercial ambition in Bengal. The fort was square in shape, measuring about three-fourths of a mile in circumference, and was fortified with four bastions, each mounting sixteen guns. Additional artillery was placed along the curtain walls and on a battery of four cannons positioned atop the church. A dry fosse surrounded the landward sides, protected by a glacis approximately forty yards wide. To the north stood a ravelin armed with five guns, while a mud battery of six guns, strategically positioned to control riverine trade access, faced the river. Structurally and strategically, *Fort d'Orléans* was considerably stronger than the Portuguese fort at Hooghly, reflecting the superior military engineering of the French and their intent to consolidate authority in the region. However, despite its formidable defences, the fort was captured and razed by the English in 1757, during the

same year as the Battle of Plassey. It was a decisive moment in Bengal's colonial transformation. Since that event, Chandannagar has remained unfortified³⁴, marking the end of its brief but significant phase as a French stronghold in Bengal.

The *Fort d'Orléans*, constructed by the French, was a quadrangular structure measuring approximately 120 yards in both length and breadth. It had two main entrances, located on the east and north sides. Each of the four turrets mounted four cannons, amounting to sixteen in total, while an additional eight cannons faced the Ganges, underscoring the fort's strategic orientation toward river defence. A wooden rampart was later added about four feet outside the original wall; the intervening space being filled with earth to reinforce the defences. The fort's main wall, though not very thick, rose between ten and fifteen feet high³⁵. Within its walls stood the staff quarters, barracks, director's residence, warehouses, temples, and workers' huts, which revealed its **dual** function as both a **military** and **administrative centre**. The entire fort's architecture was known for its unique **Franco-Indian structure**.

The Hooghly River bordered the fort to the east, while the French Company's commercial establishments lay to the west. The surrounding area, now known as **Laldighi**, was then adorned with moats and tree-lined gardens to the north, illustrating the settlement's organized urban planning. Following the fort's construction, the settlement around it underwent a significant transformation. In 1756, **Robert Clive** attacked and demolished the fort during the Anglo-French conflict in Bengal. Historical accounts, particularly those cited by **Paresh Chandra Banerjee**, reveal that the British breached the fort on three occasions: first in 1757, again in 1763 when Chandannagar was returned to the French, and finally in 1783. Although the British recaptured the town in 1778, remnants of the fort's foundations remained visible until the early 19th century. A revenue officer, **Mansiye Boxadar**, recorded that the ruins once occupied an area of about 81 acres; by

around 1825, however, almost all traces of the fort had disappeared³⁶. Despite its eventual destruction, the contribution of *Fort d'Orléans* to the evolution of Chandannagar was profound. It not only served as the nucleus of urban growth but also symbolized the city's transformation from a pre-colonial riverine settlement into a fortified colonial centre. The fort's history thus offers vital insights into the shifting dynamics of power, trade, and society in Chandannagar under early European influence.

European competition added a new layer to Hooghly's commercial dynamism since from 17th Century. However, the place held little significance as a trading centre until the advent of Dupleix as Governor in 1732³⁷. After his arrival, within a decade, the entire place was drastically transformed and ascended to a great commercial axis for Bengal, which placed the French maritime trade in a lucrative position³⁸. The French established a small trading house at Hooghly in 1674³⁹ and secured a royal farman from Aurangzeb in 1688 to build their first factory at Chandannagar. By 1701, they had fortified the settlement with *Fort Orleans*, but the town remained a modest station until the arrival of Governor Joseph François Dupleix in 1732. Dupleix transformed Chandannagar within a decade, linking it to Pondicherry and to wider Asian networks that stretched from China to Manila⁴⁰. Financial course invariably connected and controlled the drift of every aspect of the history, analysing the history of other places of India, which also provide us the same instance, the trading contacts of Pondicherry with China, Manila and the other foreign countries, converted the city into a nodal point for the import-export trade and changed the entire town of Pondicherry, similarly for Bengal, it was Chandannagar, where the hinterland of the city supplied the goods mainly to Pondicherry and mostly the commodity of export was cotton textiles, and in return they earned the bullion, which Paris sent through Pondicherry⁴¹. In this way, Cotton textiles from Bengal became the principal export, creating a lucrative triangular trade⁴². It has

been mentioned that Chandannagar was the most thriving trading centre among all the French settlements in Indian, due to its riverine trading position⁴³.

O'Malley describes the significance of the towns under the Hooghly region, such as **Chandannagar**, which acted as a dual city. The southern portion of the town came under French control, and the northern section under the British, separated only by a ditch dug under the 13th article of the **Treaty of Versailles (1783)**⁴⁴. The French colony was about 4 miles long and 1 mile broad and extended along the river from *Telinipara* (now in the Barasat area) to British Chandannagar. Its southernmost ward was connected to the Hooghly-Chinsura Municipality (now destroyed). Yet the settlement was repeatedly contested by several European powers. Even in the political domain, the city kept its special appearance, illuminating that Hamilton explained that, on the 23rd of March, 1757, the area was taken by the British forces which was then, led by Admiral Watson and Colonel Clive and created an obstinate resistance on trading board, since then, it was remained unfortified and has been taken possession of the British government, without any objection on the commencement of hostilities with France⁴⁵. Streyntsham Master, sent out from England to examine the Bengal Settlements, reached Hooghly on 13th September 1676. After surveying the place, he decided that Hooghly should be the chief factory in Bengal. After a while, incidentally, Job Charnock, the 13th agent of the company, landed at Sutanuti on August 24, 1690, and on that day, the city of Calcutta was founded⁴⁶.

Three foreign powers - the Danish, the Belgians and the Germans appeared in the Bhadeshwar region to grab the territory for their commercial development, and this place was adjacent to Chandannagar; however, the ownership of Chandannagar passed to the Britishers several times. During the **Anglo-French** wars, Chandannagar passed in and out of British hands (1757–65, 1778–83, 1793–1802, 1802–16)⁴⁷. In January 1760, in

the third Anglo-French war French were completely defeated, and Pondicherry finally surrendered in January 1761. In 1763, as per the Treaty of Paris, the French regained their old settlements in India, which had been restored since 1749. Although the **Treaty of Paris (1763)** restored French settlements⁴⁸, it prohibited further fortification of Chandannagar, so that the French could never again secure Chandannagar⁴⁹. It reveals the strategic anxiety the site generated among European powers. Nonetheless, eventually, the French government also took away all the rights of the French East India Company, and the occupied territory of the company came under the direct control of the French government⁵⁰. After 1816, the town remained under French administration until 2 May 1950, when it was formally integrated into the Republic of India⁵¹.

The French East India Company Activity and Impact

Between 1733 and 1778, French commercial activity in Bengal underwent a profound transformation from a state-controlled enterprise to a flexible, privately driven system. A 1733 report by the British Council in Calcutta noted five French ships sailing directly for Europe, with Port *L'Orient* exporting 387,820 pieces of calico and Cossimbazar handkerchiefs. It was an example of Bengal's growing centrality in French trade. Under Joseph François Dupleix, French commerce expanded through inter-Asian ventures linking Mocha, Manila, Achin, Pegu, Canton, and Persia, while Chandannagar, once without ships, by 1742 possessed 15–20 Company vessels. French investments, financed through *dadni* merchants (many tied to the English East India Company, or EIC), benefited from flexible credit systems. The war of 1756 disrupted this prosperity, and even after the 1763 peace, the Company remained “low and languishing.” In 1769, the French Crown suspended its monopoly, authorizing private trade through official passports. By 1778, private merchants had replaced the state monopoly, marking a decisive shift toward a resilient, adaptive model of French commerce⁵².

French traders thrived by using EIC servants' capital, discreetly remitted to Europe via legal French bills of exchange. By 1772, the EIC's Court of Directors lamented that the French, "without money or influence," still filled their ships with Bengal's finest textiles. After the 1783 peace, renewed fears of French and Dutch rivalry surfaced, especially regarding Bengal's *aurungs* (textile workshops). Post-war, the revived French East India Company sought to supply goods worth ₹40 lakhs annually but failed. Crucially, French merchants now imported silver bullion, ending dependence on English remittances and asserting financial independence. Their competitive prices lured weavers from EIC contracts, prompting official complaints about 'extravagant competition'⁵³.

The Anglo-French conflict became most visible in Bengal's textile hubs, Dacca, Malda, Khirpai, Santipur, and Hooghly. The 1786 "flag controversy," when the French attempted to hoist their national flag at former factory sites, symbolized deeper disputes over commercial jurisdiction. British regulations of 1782 and 1786 banned clandestine purchases, yet French *gomastas* openly offered ready cash, undermining EIC control. French protests demanded (a) restrictions on British private trade, and (b) free access to Indian artisans. Even the EIC's Board of Trade acknowledged the legitimacy of French grievances but defended private trade as a "fair privilege," vital to retaining Company servants. It argued that equal freedom for the French would shift Bengal's commercial dominance from Calcutta to Chandannagar, Chinsurah, and Serampore. This reasoning exposed contradictions within British policy; its "fair trade" rested on monopoly, coercion, and judicial control.

The final French East India Company (1785–1793), revived amid the American and French Revolutions, reflected France's last effort to rebuild a global trading network. Beyond its financial scandals, the Company envisioned reconnecting the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, engaging the new United States, and transforming Franco-British rivalry

into a commercial partnership. Yet revolutionary upheavals and Britain's naval dominance doomed the project. By 1794, the abolition of the Company marked the end of France's century-long struggle to sustain a viable imperial enterprise in Asia. Ultimately, the French experience in Bengal revealed a central truth of colonial commerce: economic success depended not on mercantile skill alone but on political power. Without territorial and military supremacy, the French, despite adaptability and enterprise, could not rival Britain's entrenched dominance in Bengal's trade⁵⁴.

French rule in India, particularly in Chandannagar, has often been viewed as relatively lenient compared to British domination. Contemporary observers attributed this perception to the fact that, unlike the British, whose imperial power allowed them to enforce a stricter colonial regime, the French presence in India remained limited in scope and influence. Yet, Chandannagar exemplified the essential features of colonial control and exploitation under a centralized French administration. Governance in Chandannagar was headed by a French-appointed governor and assisted by a few local representatives, though real power rested with French officials. Local autonomy was minimal, especially in fiscal matters, and the administration functioned primarily as a regulatory arm of French colonial authority rather than an autonomous system. This reflected the inherent tension between local aspirations and imperial control that defined French rule across its Indian possessions—Pondicherry, Mahé, Karikal, Yanaon, and Chandannagar⁵⁵.

The French colonial system operated through three councils⁵⁶:

1. **Municipal Council (12 Members):** Managed local affairs such as sanitation, infrastructure, and civic services, but with limited decision-making power as all major actions required higher approval.

2. **Local Council (8 Members):** Oversaw community-level issues, including markets, public health, and welfare, functioning largely under the supervision of French officials.
3. **General Council (Conseil, 4 Members):** The highest administrative body, headquartered in Pondicherry, determined budgets and taxation for all French settlements. Its authority was largely consultative, and final approval rested with the French government in Paris.

Although the General Council discussed taxation and expenditure, it lacked real fiscal control. Representation was unequal—Chandannagar, for instance, had only 4 out of 28 council members, leaving its interests overshadowed by larger settlements like Pondicherry⁵⁷. The early 20th century saw growing local demands for greater financial autonomy. In 1910, Bhola Nath Dash and Bonomali Pal, members of the General Council, petitioned for fiscal independence for Chandannagar. However, because Chandannagar had fewer than one-fifth of the total council members, the demand for financial autonomy did not bring immediate results. This lack of substantial representation continued to hinder any meaningful political or economic change in the region⁵⁸. While this effort led to the separation of income and expenditure accounts for the colonies, limited representation prevented any substantive political or economic reform. The history of Chandannagar's French settlement unfolded in three distinct phases⁵⁹:

4. **Foundation Phase:** Under André Bourreau-Deslandes, who established the base for French commerce in Bengal.
5. **Prosperity Phase (1741–1757):** Under Governor Joseph François Dupleix, Chandannagar emerged as a flourishing political and commercial centre rivalling the British and Dutch.

6. **Decline Phase (Post-1757):** Following the Battle of Plassey and the rise of British supremacy, French influence waned despite a brief revival under Jean-Baptiste Chevalier.

Consequently, the French colonies, including Chandannagar, had little real autonomy, with all vital decisions directed from Paris. Economically, the French were late entrants into Asian trade. Their ventures, unlike the privately driven enterprises of the Dutch and English, operated under strict state control. The French East India Company, established under King Louis XIV and Colbert, initially focused on China and Japan. It was only after the reports of travellers like Boullaye Le Gouz and François Bernier that Bengal's commercial potential was realized. By the late 18th century, French authorities were compelled to operate within the constraints of British dominance, marking the end of Chandannagar's independent colonial significance. A key distinction between French and British colonial systems lay in governance. Whereas British India developed multi-tiered councils with partial legislative powers, the French structure remained highly centralized and bureaucratic. By the end of the 18th century, the French authorities were compelled to acknowledge the new political reality to retain Chandannagar at all; they had to operate under the constraints imposed by British supremacy in Bengal⁶⁰.

II

Mercantile Activities of the Roquitte Family

As we have mentioned that French rule in India, particularly in Chandannagar, has often been perceived as relatively lenient when compared to British domination⁶¹. This distinction to the limited extent of French authority and influence in India, which prevented them from exercising the same degree of centralized and coercive control as the British. Nevertheless, Chandannagar remained a clear example of colonial governance, exhibiting

the essential features of administrative centralization and economic exploitation characteristic of European imperialism. Within this framework, the commercial success of the Roquitte family illustrates how mutual trust and cross-cultural partnerships could foster prosperity for both French and native traders in an evolving colonial economy.

Unlike the British-dominated regions, where colonial power often overshadowed indigenous agency, in Chandannagar, the balance tilted in favour of local merchants. The native trading elite wielded considerable influence, shaping the contours of French colonial commerce to their own advantage. The Roquitte family, as one of the most prominent business houses in Chandannagar, faced a few obstacles in establishing and expanding their ventures under French rule. On the contrary, they benefited from the patronage and cooperation of the French administration, which frequently adopted a conciliatory and pragmatic approach in its dealings with influential local families. Remarkably, in many instances, French officials appeared more accommodating than the Roquittes themselves, reflecting a colonial environment in which negotiation and compromise replaced the rigid hierarchies typical of British India. Thus, the Roquitte enterprise stands as a significant example of Franco-Bengali collaboration, where a Bengali mercantile family not only thrived but held a position of greater economic and social leverage than the colonial authority governing the region. Chandannagar's experience, therefore, underscores an alternative model of colonial interaction, one defined less by domination and more by negotiation and mutual benefit.

The journey of the Roquitte family in the colonial Mercantile world began with **Gobinda Chandra Roquitte**, father of **Dourga Chorone Roquitte**, who would later become the most prominent business magnate of Chandannagar. In the early phase of his career, when Chandannagar lacked rail connectivity with Calcutta, Govind Chandra had to reside in Calcutta for work, returning home only occasionally. In Calcutta, he initially

worked as a **ship steward** for French vessels and later advanced to become a shipwright or shipowner with **Cama Lamoru & Company**, a position demanding both skill and reputation. Although his finances were limited, Govind Chandra earned widespread respect in commercial circles and became a trusted associate of **Cama Sahib**, one of the company's French partners.

Under Cama's mentorship, he acquired valuable business acumen and developed a strong reputation for integrity and diligence. Cama, who was a resourceful French trader, had arrived in Calcutta with little capital but considerable enterprise. He traded in **rice, tobacco, ghee**, and other **goods** with **Bourbon Island**, supplying the French settlers there. During a financial crisis caused by delayed shipments, Cama received crucial assistance from Govind Chandra, who lent him seventy rupees monthly. This act of generosity created a lasting bond between them. Later, Cama partnered with another **Frenchman, Lamoru** and established a company named **Cama Lamoru & Company**. The company expanded their trade network across multiple regions. Out of gratitude and respect, Cama made Govind Chandra a guest in his household and took a keen interest in grooming his son, Dourga Chorone, whose later success marked the family's rise to prominence⁶².

Another very fascinating information we found about the initial days of the business venture of the Roquitte family was that, when **Govinda Chandra Roquitte** worked in Calcutta as a *ship government* or *mukshudigar* (a maritime supplier or ship steward) during that period, **very few residents of Chandannagar** sought employment in Calcutta. The absence of railway connectivity made regular travel between the two towns difficult and time-consuming. In contrast, with the later advent of the railway, Chandannagar became closely linked to Calcutta, enabling daily commuting for work—something unimaginable in Govindachandra's time. In the mid-19th century, **Chandannagar's** economy was largely self-sufficient, sustained by its local industries,

particularly the traditional **textile trade**, which we have already discussed. Hence, as a member of the *Tantavai* (weaver) community of Chandannagar, Govinda Chandra could have easily followed the hereditary occupation of weaving, as did most of his relatives and peers. However, he chose instead to break away from this conventional path, venturing into the uncertain world of maritime trade and foreign commercial engagement⁶³.

This decision reflects a remarkable degree of independence, ambition, and courage. At a time when social mobility was limited and occupational continuity was the norm, Govinda Chandra's choice to pursue a new and unfamiliar profession in Calcutta demonstrates both entrepreneurial foresight and a spirit of self-determination. His initiative laid the foundation for the Roquitte family's future prominence in Chandannagar's commercial history. Thus, the journey of Govind Chandra Roquitte exemplifies the collaboration between French and Bengali merchant communities in colonial Bengal. It highlights how mutual trust and cross-cultural partnerships enabled both European and native traders to gain power and prosperity in an evolving colonial economy.

Dourga Chorone Roquitte was only 10 years old when he lost his father, **Govind Chandra Roquitte**. With limited maternal guidance, his early life took a decisive turn through the intervention of **Cama Saheb**, his father's French associate. Upon learning of Govind Chandra's death, Cama visited the family and, noting Dourga Chorone's lack of French education, enrolled him in a local French school near **Laldighi Dhar** in Chandannagar, later the site of **Shambhu Chandra Sevashram**⁶⁴, founded by Harihar Sett, another industrialist of the town. Dissatisfied with the school's quality, Cama brought Dourga Chorone to Calcutta, where he personally supervised his education. He taught him French, trained him in business etiquette, and introduced him to commercial documentation, including the disciplined use of the quill pen.

Under Cama's supervision, the young Roquitte acquired linguistic fluency and practical administrative skills. By the age of 15, he joined *Cama Lamoru & Company* as an assistant treasurer⁶⁵. However, unjust treatment led him to resign, marking the beginning of his independent entrepreneurial career. At this stage, another European mentor, **Grady**, recognized Dourga Chorone's potential. Grady's mentorship extended beyond business instruction—teaching him to prepare shipping bills and understand *Muchuddi* (customs duties)—to shaping his worldview around self-reliance and economic freedom. His belief that Dourga Chorone should live “without slavery” reflects a deeper ethos of independence, both social and commercial.

The turning point of Roquitte's family business venture came when Cama returned from France and entrusted Dourga Chorone with **Rs. 500** as seed capital. Through determination and resourcefulness, Dourga Chorone raised an additional **Rs. 2,200**, demonstrating remarkable initiative and business acumen⁶⁶. Cama's gesture symbolized not merely financial assistance but the transfer of trust and agency, empowering his protégé to build his own enterprise. Dourga Chorone's early career thus embodies key themes of cross-cultural mentorship, colonial-era entrepreneurship, and social mobility. His transformation from apprentice to independent businessman mirrors the larger economic transitions of colonial Bengal, where native entrepreneurs began asserting autonomy within an evolving global trade network shaped by both dependency and opportunity.

The establishment of Roquitte & Company, at No. 7 Swallow Lane, Calcutta, signifies the beginning of the Roquitte family's formal business endeavours. The wholesale shop dealt with goods imported from abroad, catering to the growing demand for Western goods in the local market. The choice of location in Swallow Lane, a known commercial hub, positioned the shop in a favourable environment for trade and

commerce. Dourga Chorone's business acumen was evident in his ability to forge strategic partnerships. By offering Nabakrishna Dutta a zero-share partnership in exchange for a small contribution, Durga Charone successfully expanded his business network. Nabakrishna Dutta's involvement in the tailor shop on Radhabazar Street created a complementary business, allowing for cross-promotion and collaboration between the shops. The reported profit of Rs. 22,000 in the first year, though seemingly extraordinary, reflects the booming demand for ready-to-wear clothes in the local market⁶⁷. During this period, Calcutta's growing urban middle class and European colonial presence created a burgeoning market for Western-style clothing, which would have contributed to the high-profit margins. Dourga Chorone's ability to generate such substantial profits in a short time indicates not only the demand for these goods but also his understanding of market trends and consumer needs.

These events suggest that both Cama and Grady were deeply invested in ensuring the success of Dourga Chorone's venture, leveraging their networks and acquaintances to bring customers to the shop. This portrays the importance of patronage and social connections in the colonial business landscape. The support from individuals like Cama and Grady helped Dourga Chorone navigate the complexities of trade, while also fostering an environment where local Indian entrepreneurs could compete in an increasingly commercialized and globalized market. The success story of Roquitte's reflects the broader trends in colonial Bengal, where entrepreneurial Indians were beginning to rise in response to both the opportunities and challenges posed by colonial rule.

The establishment of **Roquitte & Co.** (at 13 Groundant Lane, Kolkata) is still located in the same place in Kolkata⁶⁸. The successful business partnership with the Dutta brothers marks an important chapter in Roquitte's enterprise development. It alludes to a

shift towards greater self-sufficiency and economic autonomy in the face of British economic dominance. The business journey of Roquitte's exemplifies how mentorship, strategic investments, and adaptability allowed individuals to carve out niches in a system that often seemed skewed in favour of colonial interests. His ability to thrive in this environment foreshadows the emergence of an entrepreneurial class in colonial India that would later play a key role in the economic and social transformations of Chandannagar, as well.

The Roquitte family's significant role in shifting the focus of Indian trade towards exports is a noteworthy part of the 19th-century commercial landscape. While European merchants dominated foreign trade, Roquitte's entry into the export business marked a turning point. His initiative not only helped local products gain access to foreign markets but also set an example for other native traders. Regarding the British-controlled trade network, the importance of Indian merchants like Dourga Chorone becomes even more apparent. Their trade expansion to distant lands, including Australia, and their influence on both imports and exports underscore the shifting dynamics of the time. Other notable exports included opium, indigo, and ghee, showcasing the diversity of India's produce. These goods reached markets as far-flung as France, other parts of Europe, Colombo, Rangoon, Saigon, Hong Kong, Mauritius, and even across the Atlantic to destinations like Trinidad, Jamaica, and Barbados. On the import side, Roquitte & Company brought in a variety of European goods such as metallic paints, medicines, iron products, and French liquors.

The entrepreneurial initiative of the family sets the stage for future economic independence and growth not only for their region but for Bengal's trading sector, too. Their inspiration helped other merchants of Chandannagar, such as Dashrathi Dutta, to expand their business of rubber plantation in Malaya, which exemplifies the growing

local entrepreneurial spirit in the 19th and early 20th centuries of Chandannagar.⁶⁹ Regarding this, Prof. Biswanath Bandyopadhyay's insights into the business growth of Chandannagar highlight how prominent families and traders, despite British dominance, continued to play an influential role in shaping the economic direction of the region⁷⁰. This period saw the establishment of export and import enterprises, like Roquitte & Co., the trading company which eventually became pivotal in bridging domestic products with international markets. He established two shops in Calcutta, one for import trading and the other for exports⁷¹, which reflects the entrepreneurial vigour of his initiatives and sets the stage for future economic independence and growth in Bengal's trade sector.

The Roquitte family's foray into the export business during a time when foreign trade was dominated by European merchants underscores their pioneering spirit and remarkable business acumen. While a few indigenous traders had started exploring exports, the Roquitte family became a trailblazer by establishing a robust export operation that opened international markets to Indian goods. The business headquarters of Roquitte's at No. 1 Old Court House Lane (**another office**) became the epicentre of their export activities. Roquitte & Company managed extensive export goods, including agricultural products **like rice, pulses, sesame, and mustard**, along with **textiles like silk sarees and handkerchiefs**. Other notable exports included **opium, indigo, and ghee**, showcasing the diversity of India's produce. These goods reached markets as far-flung as **France**, other parts of **Europe, Colombo, Rangoon, Saigon, Hong Kong, Mauritius**, and even across the Atlantic to destinations like **Trinidad, Jamaica, and Barbados**. On the import side, Roquitte & Company brought in a variety of European goods such as metallic paints, medicines, iron products, and French liquors⁷². The broad scope of his import-export operations highlighted their capability to cater to both domestic and international demands, creating a bridge between India and the global market.

Managing such an expansive business of both import and export, Dourga Chorone introduced to employ **a mix of both staff**, European and Indian. Regarding this, the French gentleman **Si Bhumen**, a Chandannagar resident, played a notable role. He was the highest-paid employee at the time, reflecting the Roqitte family's willingness to invest in talent. Bengali employees also formed the backbone of the operations, serving as clerks, cashiers, and *muhuri* (legal scribes), demonstrating a commitment to providing opportunities to the local workforce⁷³. Since Bengal required **special expertise** to complement the complex craft of manufacturing cloth and silk textiles, the textile industry of Bengal, which was mainly **rural, domestic, and handicraft** in nature, involved the presence of a considerable number of **skilled workforces** and members of the whole family, including children, who participated in it⁷⁴.

The most fascinating fact is that the specialized works such as the spinning of cotton, and winding of silk were exclusively done by the women in the peasant or the weaver family and even the children in the family were involved in the process of manufacture⁷⁵, which provide us with the information of working-class women in the lower section of the society, emphasizing on this matter, the contemporaries lighten up the fact that the natives of Bengal, both men and women were beautifully adroit in all such manufactures and skillfully done the smallest stiches⁷⁶ and it was barely a common feature that even children contributed their part in the complex process of production of cloth, which also provide us the information of child labouring, inhouse and hereditary production system of the Bengal's rural economy.

A quintessential phenomenon of the regional cotton textile industry of Bengal, including Chandannagar and the Roqitte's family business venture was that the peasant cultivator could often be a weaver, and they were able to switch their profession from one to another in the form of part-time or full-time, depending upon the situation and

requirement, which depicts the flexibility, necessity and the dual mode of economic structure of regional industries of Bengal. Hence, as we see the abundance of labour, flexible transportation, including the cheapness of staple foods like rice or wheat, because of the high productivity in the agricultural sector of those localities, automatically lowers the production cost of the industry in Bengal and its regions, rather than in the other regions⁷⁷. It was highly disseminated in nature and mainly represents a rural domestic industry. The natural conjecture was in its exceptional diffusion, and with that, there was another salient element of decentralization due to its vast and comparatively cheap means of production for Bengal's riverine transportation system. The transportation system indeed made the textile industry in Bengal highly decentralized and spread over a large area, which was not the case in northern and western India⁷⁸

Especially, in the case of the cotton textile trade, the fundamental factor was the localization and concentration of artisans in a particular area, which was dependent upon the availability of the appropriate raw material and the cumulative effect created by a hereditary concentration of craft skills. It seems that the location of these centres of production was neutral concerning transport costs or other important mercantile considerations because not only was the manufacture of luxury cloth localized, but even the story was the same. It is also important to point out here that all the *aurungs* (**workshops**) in the districts, was produced their cotton. The production system of cotton textile became so specific and regional that historian, John Taylor informs us that several of the districts which were big manufacturing centres of textiles, however, 'grew little or no cotton' and made their supplies from other parts of the province⁷⁹ and for that they were not able to produce the same, hence, it appears that the proximity to the supply of suitable raw materials was one of the main factors behind the localization of textile industry in Bengal⁸⁰.

The extent of specialization it had reached during the late 18th to early 19th century. The unique factor was that not only every district but even every *aurung* produced its specialized textiles. Even though many districts produced varieties of cloth in general, it was worth marking that there was not only regional specialization but often the products of every *aurung* had their distinctiveness which differed them from the product of another *aurung* and because of that, It was particularly depending upon the fineness of quality and workmanship and the same types of textiles were produced in several *aurungs* of different districts, which were generally identified by the name of the *aurungs*, of that district and not just by the name of the textile⁸¹.

It is also important to mark that the pivotal qualitative difference between production for a purely local market and production for export and inter-regional trade was mixed up so much that it was difficult to distinguish that and as its outcome, the European Companies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, all had to procure their wares through a network of intermediates from areas widely dispersed all over Bengal, whether it was the traditional Asian merchants or the newcomers in the trade, one of the prime reasons why the Companies could not purchase textiles from the weavers directly was, at least in their initial days, for their ignorance of the local language and unawareness of the condition of local market and the widespread diffusion of the industry in Bengal⁸². Contextualizing the art and culture of colonial Bengal, Prof. **Ratnabali Chatterjee** points out that, in the 19th century, artistic traditions were deeply rooted in Mughal courtly norms. Mughal paintings, particularly portraits, served as visual representations of power and status. These portraits conveyed the subject's identity, whether as a monarch, noble, soldier, or hermit, through specific poses, gestures, clothing, and background elements, similar to European portraiture. As political and economic conditions shifted in eighteenth-

century Bengal, portrait styles also evolved to reflect changes in the social hierarchy and individual status⁸³.

Nonetheless, through dedication and strategic planning, **Roquitte & Co.** rose to prominence in their business venture by surpassing several established domestic and international competitors like Riley Brothers, Shaw Wallace, and Blackwood⁸⁴. This achievement not only highlighted the Roquitte family's entrepreneurial prowess but also proved that Indian businesses could thrive even in a trade environment heavily skewed towards European dominance. The success of the Roquitte family in the 19th-century business world of Bengal laid the groundwork for Indian merchants to gain a foothold in global trade. By exporting a diverse array of Indian goods and importing essential foreign products, it exemplified how perseverance and innovation could challenge the status quo. The Roquitte family business venture and their achievements stand as a testament to the potential of indigenous enterprise in transforming India's economic landscape during colonial times.

Dourga Chorone's life exemplified diligence and integrity. Born in 1841, he achieved extraordinary success in just 57 years, rising from humble beginnings to become a '**merchant prince**' of his town. His reputation for honesty, relentless hard work, punctuality, and meticulous attention to business details earned him respect and prosperity. Dourga Chorone Roquitte's life epitomized discipline, industry, and an unyielding adherence to principle. A man of action, he regarded idleness as a vice and infused every moment of his day with purpose. His routine was a model of precision—beginning before sunrise with personal preparation and a meticulous review of accounts and correspondence. By six o'clock, he was already in the marketplace, directly supervising transactions and negotiating prices with moneylenders. This hands-on

approach enabled him to purchase goods at lower rates and offer competitive prices without compromising quality. His efficiency and punctuality in settling debts soon earned him a reputation that placed him ahead of leading firms such as **Reilly Brothers, Shaw Wallace, and Blackwood**⁸⁵.

Operating from his office at No. 1 Old Court House Lane (another office), the Roquitte family maintained an exacting schedule, often working late into the night on cargo and correspondence. Even weekends were devoted to productive activity: Saturdays were spent in **Chandannagar**, balancing domestic responsibilities with business reviews, while Sundays were used for planning and correspondence. Especially the strict adherence to routine, attention to detail, and moral discipline established by Dourga Chorone Roquitte allowed their family business to harmonize their business with remarkable efficiency. Under his leadership, **Roquitte & Company** rose to prominence in Indian commerce, its success reflecting not merely material ambition but a philosophy grounded in order and self-mastery. Beyond the commercial pursuits, several family members of the Roquitte family also actively participated in Chandannagar's civic and political life, embodying the model of the modern, socially responsible entrepreneur, which we will further study.

The Business enterprise of Roquitte's, thus, illustrates the intersection of moral discipline and economic modernity in colonial Bengal, where time management, industriousness, and ethical leadership became key attributes of indigenous enterprise. His life stands as a paradigm of how personal integrity and strategic foresight could transform individual effort into an enduring legacy. Notably, he was a pioneer in both import and export, demonstrating visionary business acumen. The scale of his operations was vast,

with goods being transported to Europe and other countries, sometimes via entire ships chartered under his name. This ambitious scope of trade marked him as a true trailblazer in India's mercantile history. Despite his profound contributions, his name was not widely recognised outside his immediate sphere because he refrained from engaging in public or political discourse. Instead, his legacy is etched in his dedication to the economic upliftment of his country, cementing his place as a pivotal figure in the commercial evolution of 19th-century India⁸⁶.

To examine the **Roquitte family's** entrepreneurial legacy, particularly the achievements of its foremost figure, **Dourga Chorone Roquitte**, contemporary newspaper tributes recognized their remarkable contributions to India's commercial history⁸⁷. These accounts highlight the understated yet deeply influential character of his life and work. As a French subject from Chandannagar, Dourga Chorone occupied a distinctive position by fully dedicating himself to the economic advancement of his family's business. The business venture of Roquitte's reflects a model of pragmatic leadership that prioritized industrial growth, trade expansion, and local prosperity over political ambition. However, contemporary periodicals discussing Bengal's internal trade during the latter half of the 19th century, though fragmented, provide valuable perspectives on the difficulties that native entrepreneurs faced in navigating this evolving landscape. The often-contradictory nature of these sources reflects the complexity of the economic environment, where opportunities and obstacles were intricately intertwined. Factors such as fluctuating trade policies, intensifying competition, and the gradual decline of traditional colonial trading networks amid industrialization exerted considerable influence. In particular, the decline of the Hooghly Port and the concurrent rise of Calcutta Port

played a decisive role in reshaping regional trade patterns, which we have already discussed in our previous chapter.

III

The Roquitte Family and Colonial Administration: Participation in Governance

The most remarkable feature of the Roquitte family's contribution to French colonial administration in Chandannagar lies in the continuity of public service across generations. While **Dourga Chorone Roquitte**, the most influential businessman of the family, consciously avoided active political roles, his descendants carried forward his legacy through direct participation in governance. Notable among them were his younger son **Tulshi Chorone Roquitte**, who served as **Mayor of Chandannagar in 1937**⁸⁸; his grandson **Tarini Chorone Roquitte**, who became **President of the local French Council**⁸⁹; and his nephew **Sri Bholanath Das**⁹⁰, who held the position of **Mayor in 1899**⁹¹. The family's tradition of civic engagement continued with **Dinendra Nath Das**, grandson of Bholanath Das, who also served as **Mayor in 1883**⁹². Other heirs, such as **Prafulla Chorone Roquitte** and **Amulla Chorone Roquitte**⁹³, played important roles in local administration, while **Debendra Nath Das**, another grandson, joined the **National Democratic Front (N.D.F.)**⁹⁴. It is important to mention that Debendra Nath Das was the only Roquitte lineage member who directly stood against the French colonial rulers of Chandannagar. It reflects the family's gradual involvement in politics, from being a supporter to being a rebel under French colonial rule.

However, a recurring subject of discussion concerns why Dourga Chorone Roquitte, the main character of the family, despite his prominence and influence, chose not to participate directly in Chandannagar's political movements. His approach was notably pragmatic; rather than engaging in overt agitation or advocacy for autonomy, he

concentrated on economic enterprise and administrative efficiency. His business acumen enabled him to navigate the complexities of colonial governance while maintaining neutrality on contentious political issues. Despite his avoidance of direct activism, Dourga Chorone's contributions to Chandannagar's civic and institutional development were substantial. Beginning his public career at a young age, he served for 23 years as a member of the local association, eventually rising to the position of **President**⁹⁵. His leadership emphasized organizational discipline and effective management. Though he never sought electoral office, he was instrumental in forming a local political association dedicated to identifying and electing competent candidates for administrative roles. Through this, he mentored several emerging leaders, ensuring a sustained culture of capable governance.

Recognizing his integrity and administrative competence, the **French government appointed him an honorary judge** in the local petty court, an unpaid position that nonetheless reflected high confidence in his judgment. Despite limited proficiency in English and French during his early years, Dourga Chorone's determination led him to master both languages later in life. His linguistic progress enabled him to read and interpret official communications addressed to the *Chamber of Deputies* and *Chamber of Senators* in France, allowing him to advocate effectively for Chandannagar's civic concerns⁹⁶.

Beyond administration, Dourga Chorone also contributed to Chandannagar's educational and cultural life. He served on the early management committee of the Chandannagar Library (now the Sub-District Library), demonstrating his commitment to intellectual and social development. His intervention during the French government's attempt to forcibly enlist Chandannagar's men into the army further underscored his moral authority; his negotiation led to the withdrawal of the measure, earning him public gratitude. Contemporary accounts, including Sadhucharan Mukhopadhyay's article

‘Rights of Subjects in French India’ in *Sharadiya Matribhoomi*, illustrate his effectiveness in balancing diplomacy with advocacy⁹⁷. His personal refinement and hospitality were legendary. French officials and dignitaries visiting Chandannagar invariably called upon him, enjoying his renowned generosity. His merit and hard work greatly impressed the French authorities, leading to his recognition through prestigious honours. The French government conferred upon him three consecutive titles: including:

- a) **Officier d’Académie**- awarded by the *Société de la Littérature et des Sciences* in Paris⁹⁸.
- b) **Chevalier de l’Ordre Royal du Cambodge**- A title bestowed by the French colonial authorities in Cambodia⁹⁹.
- c) **Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur**, France’s highest civilian distinction, conferred on **June 6, 1896**—making him the **first Indian and Bengali to receive this honour**¹⁰⁰.

In recognition of his service and stature, he was also reverently addressed as “**Raja**”¹⁰¹. The title reflects the esteem that he commanded among his contemporaries. His nephew and disciple **Bholanath Das**, who served as one of the trustees of his estate, later received the title of **Rai Saheb**¹⁰², further exemplifying the family’s sustained prestige. Thus, upon his death, Chandannagar witnessed a solemn tribute befitting his legacy. The **French administrator** and local dignitaries attended his funeral, and the French army detachment marched in slow ceremonial procession, paying military honours at his shrine. The tribute symbolized the profound respect and admiration he had earned across both colonial and indigenous circles.

Nevertheless, the political influence of Roquitte's was evident in significant milestones, including the election of a Deputy for French India in 1946 based on a single electorate, as well as the persistent demands for financial autonomy and electoral reform¹⁰³. At the centre of this distinguished legacy stood **Dourga Chorone Roquitte**, whose discreet yet decisive political style left a lasting imprint on Chandannagar's civic life. Although he refrained from overt political activism, his vision and initiatives laid the groundwork for the town's administrative and intellectual evolution. He focused on cultivating capable leadership, nurturing young talent, and shaping an institutional framework for efficient governance¹⁰⁴. He set an approach that would define Chandannagar's political culture in the decades to come. The Roquitte family lineage, thus, spanned a broad political spectrum, ranging from loyal participation in French colonial administration to active engagement in the nationalist movement.

Cultural and Religious Contributions of the Roquitte Family

The Roquitte family of Chandannagar occupied a distinguished position among the city's prominent elites during the late nineteenth century, not only for their wealth and influence but also for their remarkable contributions to public welfare and religious life. Their benevolence, rooted in both spiritual conviction and civic responsibility, left a lasting imprint on the social and cultural fabric of Chandannagar. The Roquitte family's daily life reflected a profound commitment to social service. Acts of generosity, such as the regular donation of clothes to the poor and the distribution of gifts and sweets during festivals or family ceremonies, were integral to their routine. Pilgrimage, a deeply valued religious practice, also became an opportunity for communal benevolence. Members of the family frequently undertook pilgrimages to sacred Hindu sites, and those who wished to accompany them but lacked financial means were provided for at the family's expense. For **Dourga Chorone Roquitte**, the most eminent member of the family, such practices

were driven by both personal and spiritual motives. Disliking solitude in travel, he found joy in assisting others who shared his devotional aspirations. His philanthropy was guided by humility; he consciously avoided publicity and recognition, believing that true service should remain silent and selfless. Dourga Chorone's sense of social duty extended beyond his lifetime through the careful provisions of his property will and within his family values. He ensured that a portion of his estate would continue to serve the welfare of Chandannagar's residents. The will stands as a testament to his foresight and enduring compassion, outlining several charitable measures¹⁰⁵:

1. **Support for Pilgrimages:** A fixed annual allowance from his estate was to fund the pilgrimage of four individuals to sacred Hindu sites, thereby encouraging spiritual fulfilment among his community members.
2. **Charitable Donations:** During major festivals and *pujas*, clothes were to be distributed among the poor, ensuring that the less fortunate were included in the joy and sanctity of communal celebrations.

Dourga Chorone had also envisioned the construction of a grand *ghat* on the banks of the Ganges—a space for both ritual bathing and rest for pilgrims. Although he did not live to realize this project, his son **Shyama Chorone Roquette** brought his father's vision to fruition. Shyama Chorone built an elegant *Chandni* (pavilion) at **Chowdhury Ghat**, dedicating it to his father's memory¹⁰⁶. The site included separate resting quarters for men and women, providing much-needed facilities for travellers. In addition, Shyama Chorone bore the regular expenses for the maintenance of the ghat and extended his father's charitable work through further civic and religious contributions¹⁰⁷. Among the family's most notable contributions were the **Chandni Jora Ghats**¹⁰⁸, constructed at Chowdhury Ghat under the supervision of two distinguished architects—**Indranarayan Chowdhury**

and **Kashinath Srimani of Barasat**. These twin ghats, connected by a jetty supported by four piers, not only enhanced the aesthetic landscape of Chandannagar's riverfront but also stood as enduring symbols of the city's prosperity and spiritual vitality.

In 1921, **Shyama Chorone Roquitte** expanded the complex by adding two restrooms and another *Chandni*, reaffirming the family's commitment to the physical comfort and spiritual welfare of the community¹⁰⁹. Another historically significant ghat, located east of the French Institute, is believed to have been the very site through which **Swami Vivekananda** entered Chandannagar, further enhancing the town's spiritual heritage¹¹⁰. While many ghats along the Hooghly River later fell into disrepair, the structures established by the Roquitte family remained prominent, symbolizing both civic pride and religious devotion. As historian **Prof. N. K. Sinha** observed, the construction of ghats in the 18th and 19th-century Bengal transcended their functional purpose. They were expressions of piety and social prestige, allowing the affluent to combine acts of faith with visible contributions to community life. In this context, the Roquitte family's architectural philanthropy reflected not mere wealth but an ethical commitment to the public good¹¹¹.

The Roquitte family's prosperity was grounded in strict personal discipline and an unwavering adherence to Hindu religious practices. A devout Hindu, the family organised grand annual worship ceremonies dedicated to deities such as **Durga Puja**¹¹², **Kali Puja**, **Jagaddhatri Puja**, and **Kartika Puja**. These rituals were conducted with deep sincerity rather than ostentation. During *Durga Puja*, members of the family personally prepared offerings, gathered fruits for *prasad*, and participated in early-morning baths in the Ganges before beginning worship at *Brahmamuhurta* (the auspicious pre-dawn hour). Despite their early exposure to European influences—particularly through the Christian, **Ashaishava Buropiya Sahib**, Roquitte family preserved their religious identity with steadfast conviction. They resisted the cultural assimilation common among certain

colonial elites, maintaining their spiritual and ritualistic integrity¹¹³. To this day, the family's *Durga Puja* continues to be celebrated at their ancestral residence, preserving a tradition of devotion that spans generations. Even Dourga Chorone Babu himself was neither blind nor rigid in his religiosity. He interpreted Hinduism through a lens of reason and moral reflection, viewing charity (*daan*) as a sacred duty rather than an act of pity. To him, giving was a divine privilege—an opportunity for the devotee to express gratitude and humility. This philosophical outlook found expression in his writings, which sought to revive the ethical and rational core of Hinduism¹¹⁴. His major works include¹¹⁵:

- *Nibritter Pothe* (1326 Bangabdo)
- *Anoshone Mahatma* (1339 Bangabdo)
- *Hindhutter Punrutthan* (1340 Bangabdo)

In these texts, he emphasized that faith must evolve with time. While he upheld the authority of the scriptures, he also recognized that certain customs, particularly those promoting gender inequality, were relics of a bygone era. He cautioned against adhering to practices that had lost moral relevance, arguing that true devotion must align with understanding, compassion, and justice. Through such reformist thought, Dourga Chorone represented a strand of modern Hindu consciousness that blended scriptural fidelity with intellectual freedom¹¹⁶.

In the final years of his life, Dourga Chorone suffered from severe illness, including acne and polyurinary disease. Despite treatment by eminent physicians such as **Dr. R. L. Dutta of Calcutta** and local doctors **Kshirod Chandra Palit** and **Amritlal Banerjee** of Telinipara, his condition deteriorated rapidly. Fully aware of his impending death, he faced his last days with composure and spiritual preparation. He passed away on **27 August 1898**, at the age of fifty-six. Following Hindu tradition and his own wish, his

body was taken to **Kashi Vishwanath Dham** in Varanasi for the final rites¹¹⁷. His name was later inscribed on the temple floor in recognition of his piety and contributions, the detail confirmed by his great-grandson, **Pranab Charan Roquitte**¹¹⁸. In Varanasi, Dourga Chorone also established a girls' school at **Bengali Tola**,¹¹⁹ underscoring his enduring belief in education as a means of empowerment. The family continues to maintain their ancestral residence in Varanasi, preserving both their lineage and their spiritual connection to the sacred city¹²⁰.

The cultural and religious legacy of the Roquitte family exemplifies the synthesis of faith, philanthropy, and reform that characterized the moral vision of Bengal's enlightened elites under colonial rule. Through Dourga Chorone's personal piety, intellectual contributions, and farsighted philanthropy and through Shyama Chorone's continuation of his father's civic work. The family transformed private wealth into public virtue. The **Chandni Jora Ghats**, the enduring *Durga Puja* traditions, and the educational institutions founded in their name collectively represent a model of socially conscious Hindu aristocracy. In combining religious devotion with rational reform and community service, therefore, the Roquitte family not only shaped the cultural landscape of Chandannagar but also articulated a distinctly Indian form of modernity grounded in spiritual ethics and human compassion.

Philanthropic Activity of the Roquitte Family

The Roquitte family of Chandannagar, renowned for their generosity and civic engagement, occupied a central role in the city's social life during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their philanthropic vision reflected not only affluence but also a profound sense of responsibility toward the welfare of their fellow citizens. Among the family members of Roquitte, **Dourga Chorone Roquitte** emerged as a figure whose altruism,

reformist outlook, and moral foresight set him apart as one of Chandannagar's most remarkable benefactors. A defining episode in the family's legacy occurred during the **rice price crisis of 1919**, following the economic disruptions of the First World War. As recorded by **Maya Bhattacharya**, granddaughter of the noted chronicler **Harihar Sett**, rice prices in Chandannagar soared to unprecedented levels. The poor were reduced to begging, while the self-respecting middle classes, who were unable to afford basic provisions, suffered in silence, many enduring days of fasting. Upon learning of their plight, Dourga Chorone Roquitte undertook extensive relief measures, arranging for the distribution of hundreds of maunds of rice among residents¹²¹. Sensitive to the pride of noble families who would not accept public charity, he ingeniously organized the distribution through local *mutts* (religious establishments), thereby preserving the recipients' dignity¹²². The philanthropy works of the Roquitte family were marked not by ostentation or condescension but by humility and gratitude; he considered the act of giving a divine opportunity rather than a personal triumph.

The Roquitte family's moral courage was further demonstrated in their dealings with **Gilander Arbuthnot & Company**, proprietors of the **Gondalpara Jute Mill**¹²³. The company offered him a lucrative agency to manage maritime trade, proposing that he use their small steamer to transport goods directly from Chandannagar to large sea-going vessels, thereby bypassing the port of Calcutta and avoiding British customs duties. This arrangement would have allowed duty-free trade with France and its colonies under Chandannagar's French jurisdiction. While this opportunity promised immense personal profit, Dourga Chorone Roquitte declined the offer. He foresaw that such unregulated trade would flood the market with duty-free imports, destabilizing the town's economy and ultimately harming its citizens. His refusal, grounded in moral foresight, illustrated his commitment to the collective welfare of Chandannagar over individual enrichment.

Ironically, his predictions proved prescient. In subsequent years, **Japanese silk**, imported through Pondicherry, began to enter Chandannagar illicitly, provoking British retaliation through the imposition of customs restrictions¹²⁴. These measures brought hardship upon innocent townspeople, an outcome the Roquitte family had sought to prevent. Despite such reversals, their ethical stance reinforced the family's enduring reputation for public-minded leadership.

At a time when Chandannagar lacked an institution for indigenous medicine, Dourga Chorone Roquitte took personal initiative to establish an **Ayurvedic hospital** to meet the town's medical needs. He purchased a house in **Haldarpara**, where he set up a dispensary and outpatient facility¹²⁵. The first resident physician was **Kaviraj Ramhari Pal** of Begumpur, an eminent practitioner of Ayurveda. Ramhari's orthodox methods initially drew scepticism, as certain conservative Hindus believed that accepting medicine from a *jati vaidya* during one's final days was essential for spiritual merit. To address such cultural sensitivities, Dourga Chorone employed **Krishna Chandra Gupta**, Ramhari's son, as his assistant on a fixed salary. Though Krishna's medical skills were limited, his presence reassured conservative patients and improved the institution's acceptance. When Ramhari later left to establish a private practice, he was succeeded by **Kali Prasanna Dasgupta**, a physician from East Bengal who devoted the rest of his life to the charitable hospital. The hospital's establishment marked one of Chandannagar's earliest organized healthcare ventures, providing free treatment and medicine to the poor. Its legacy, though marred in later years by neglect¹²⁶, remains an enduring testament to Roquitte's foresight and compassion.

Among the Roquitte family and Dourga Chorone Roquitte's most transformative contributions was his effort to expand education in Chandannagar. His initiatives began with a small *pathshala* housed in the residence of **Guru Gopal Chandra Das Mahasay**,

a respected teacher from the Bagdi caste. In his childhood days, Dourga Chorone Roquitte himself attended a nearby school run by Guru Gopal Chandra Das Mahasay. He was Bagdi by caste; hence, his educational institution was known as the '*pathshala of Bagdi Mahashay*'¹²⁷. This *pathshala* (school), located near Roquitte residence, served the educational needs of the local community for generations. Students paid nominal fees of two or four annas as *dakshina*, according to their means. Recognizing the need for structured education, **Dourga Chorone** institutionalized this humble school, renaming it **Ecole Durga**¹²⁸. It offered instruction in both **Bengali and French**, reflecting Chandannagar's unique colonial identity.

Later, the school was reorganized as **Durga Charan Rakshit Banga Vidyalaya**¹²⁹, which grew into the town's **first boys' high school**¹³⁰. Dourga Chorone Babu personally financed teachers' salaries and maintenance expenses, ensuring access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. His commitment extended beyond immediate funding: he invested substantial resources in constructing a new building near **Vishalakshi Bene Pukur**, signifying his belief in education as the cornerstone of civic progress¹³¹. The evolution of **Ecole Durga** into a bilingual institution encapsulates the broader educational transformations in Bengal's colonial and postcolonial history. Initially functioning under French supervision, the school offered four primary classes in French, consistent with the administrative norms of the colony. However, the introduction of an **English department on 17 July 1946**, just before India's independence, marked a turning point. This change mirrored the shifting sociopolitical landscape, as English emerged as the language of modernity and opportunity in independent India¹³². By **1948**, the English division had expanded to class VI, and by **1949**, it attained the status of a **junior high school** with the addition of classes VII and VIII. That same year, it was renamed **Ecole Durgachorone Rakshit Banga Vidyalaya** in honour of its founder¹³³. Further expansion

of the school followed by the establishment of class IX in **1950**, and by **1951**, the school earned formal recognition from the **West Bengal Board of Secondary Education**. The first batch of students appeared for the school final examination in **1952**, marking the institution's full academic maturity. Over time, the French section of the school was retained as a primary institution under the **Chandannagar Municipal Corporation**, while the English section evolved into a full-fledged higher secondary school¹³⁴. This transformation symbolized not only the blending of colonial legacies but also the resilience of local educational enterprise. The Roquitte family's initiatives inspired other civic leaders, such as **Harihar Sett**, to promote educational advancement across the region.

The Roquitte family's civic service extended to urban infrastructure, most notably during Chandannagar's severe water crisis, caused by prolonged drought. With drying ponds and failing wells, the scarcity reached critical levels. **Dourga Chorone Roquitte** responded with characteristic determination, devising an ambitious plan to draw water from the Ganges using steam power and channel it into local reservoirs. He entrusted the task to a contractor, who, unfortunately, failed to execute it faithfully, installing an inadequate engine that rendered the effort unsuccessful. Unfazed, Roquitte personally supervised the construction of **two water reservoirs (pushkarini)**¹³⁵ to provide temporary relief. He also initiated the **digging of an artesian well** near **Laldighi**, close to the present Krishna Bhavini Nari Shiksha Mandir (the girls' school established by Harihar Sett), though this too had to be abandoned after repeated failed attempts to reach groundwater. Undeterred, he next proposed the construction of a **large bathing ghat** on the Ganges to improve public sanitation and provide residents with a clean space for daily rituals. Financial constraints, however, prevented him from completing this project. Despite such setbacks, these initiatives reflected his **persistent dedication to public welfare** and his capacity to mobilize resources for civic improvement.

Dourga Chorone's philanthropy outlived him through the careful provisions of his **property will**¹³⁶, which ensured the continuation of his charitable projects. His testament reflected meticulous planning and a sense of moral equity. Among its notable provisions were:

- **Educational Rewards:** Annual funds were designated for the distribution of medals and cash prizes to local schools during reward ceremonies, encouraging academic excellence among students.
- **Charitable Hospital Endowment:** A substantial sum of ₹ 20,000 was allocated to the Ayurvedic hospital, ensuring its long-term operation and service to the poor.

Through their multifaceted initiatives, providing famine relief, healthcare, education, and civic infrastructure, the **Roquitte family** exemplified the enlightened humanitarianism that distinguished Chandannagar's elite during the late colonial era. Their actions were guided not by personal ambition but by a vision of community uplift grounded in moral responsibility. Even while the projects of Dourga Chorone faltered, the spirit of service and reform he embodied continued to inspire successors.

In the matter of property, all his children received an equal portion of property, including his two sons and daughters. His will, which ensured his daughter received an equal share of the property, is often presented as evidence of generosity and egalitarianism by his family members¹³⁷. Nonetheless, it is essential to consider the broader societal norms and his own family's practices, which paint a more complex picture. The fact that none of the women in his family received formal education and refrained from social gatherings contradicts the portrayal of his egalitarian mindset.

Especially when the initiative to establish free schools in Calcutta and Mofaswal for new education was a glorious chapter in the history of education.

Prof. Biswanath Bandyopadhyay, a well-known historian of the locality, explicates women's education in pre-colonial Chandannagar by highlighting its core nature. According to his writings¹³⁸ and interviews¹³⁹, since the pre-colonial era, women in Chandannagar enjoyed a considerable amount of freedom and opportunity in terms of education. This stands out especially in contrast to the situation in many other parts of India during the same period. Supporting his statement, Shankar Sett, the youngest brother of the renowned business tycoon Harihar Seth, also mentioned in an interview¹⁴⁰ that women's conditions in French Chandannagar were much better than in the other parts of the country. They both confirmed that, in pre-colonial Chandannagar, the gender division was less pronounced, and both men and women actively participated in various educational institutions like *Pathshalas*, *tolls*, and *Kalidaschtuspathi*. Even the gender division between men and women and the caste system among various social groups and communities were not acute in the educational field at that time. However, in those institutions, the participation of girls of lower and middle-class families was relatively higher as compared to girls of aristocratic families¹⁴¹, which alludes, on one side, to the inclusive approach of the education system and on the other hand, it puts up the evidence of the barriers and strict restrictions of upper-class society.

Over time, changes in the economic and political landscape altered the gender dynamics and eventually put the girls on the weaker side of society. About the matter, the survey report of D. G. Crawford explored that, around the 19th century, regarding the knowledge of the English language, the ratio in the case of males was highest in the province outside of Calcutta and Howrah¹⁴². However, we did not find any important statement regarding female education in his report. Nonetheless, an article by *Samachar*

*Darpan*¹⁴³ suggests that the education sector is experiencing an increasing backwardness among females. Despite that, there is a lack of documentation regarding women's education in the pre-colonial period. This gap makes it challenging to draw an actual scenario of educational opportunities available for women in the pre-colonial era in different regions. Hence, while there are indications of a relatively advanced state of women's education in Chandannagar before colonial rule, the scarcity of detailed records raises questions about the subject.

Although Contemporaries of Dourga Chorone Roquitte, such as Harihar Sett, Prafulladhan Bhar, and Bholanath Das, took significant initiatives for women's education, Dourga Chorone Roquitte did not encourage this for his female family members. This absence of support for women's education, especially when compared to the efforts of other businessmen of the era, does indeed suggest a patriarchal mentality. His reluctance to engage with progressive ideas surrounding women's roles in society, despite being part of a period marked by social reform. It portrays the limitations of his so-called generosity.

Addressing this subject, Prof. Geraldine Forbes¹⁴⁴s and Prof. Judith E. Walsh¹⁴⁵ aptly contextualize the role of women within the socio-political and cultural framework of upper-class Bengali households during the 19th century. Their analysis sheds light on the underlying motives behind social reform activities, particularly those centred on women's education and welfare. The assertion that the financial rise of these families often translated into engagement in social reforms, primarily to bolster prestige and influence, reveals the performative nature of many such initiatives. Women's education, while publicly framed as an altruistic endeavour, was frequently driven by practical concerns, such as raising children in a manner deemed "proper" by the evolving norms of the time. This reinforces the notion that women's welfare was rarely the central focus;

instead, it was incidental, a byproduct of efforts to uphold or elevate familial and societal stature.

The characterization of women as a ‘race of mothers’¹⁴⁶ depicts the deeply ingrained patriarchal expectations that continue to define their roles. The ideals of an “obedient daughter, “devoted wife”, and “sacrificial mother” reflect a restrictive framework where a woman’s value was measured by her adherence to these roles, leaving little room for personal aspirations, autonomy, or identity. In this context, even when women were given access to education, it was often limited to areas deemed relevant to their prescribed roles within the household, rather than empowering them as individuals with independent voices. As noted, this temporary and indirect benefit to women did not challenge contemporary society's patriarchal structures but reinforced them by creating ‘ideal’ women suited to serve familial and societal expectations. “Her” own voice and identity barely resonated there¹⁴⁷. Thus, the paradox of these social reforms: while they paved the way for incremental progress in women’s education and visibility, they simultaneously perpetuated the systemic marginalization of women by framing their advancement within the narrow confines of patriarchal ideals. This nuanced understanding underscores the complexity of 19th-century Bengali social reform and its implications for women’s empowerment.

The property testimony of Roquitte’s stands as an ethical document reflecting both social justice and familial harmony. It was a rare gesture of gender equity in the early 20th century. However, in this light, the emphasis on their will might not indicate an enlightened attitude toward women’s rights but rather a conventional approach to inheritance, which was expected in many cases. While they ensured their daughter was included in the inheritance, it can be argued that this was more of a customary practice, given the societal expectations of inheritance rights, rather than a progressive gesture. It

raises the question of whether their actions were motivated by genuine concern for their daughter's welfare or simply adherence to the legal and cultural norms of the time. Because a woman's right to her father's property has been enforced in Indian society since ancient times, it does not make any difference in making a pathway towards modern society. Instead, the glorification of his decision to include his daughter equally in the property distribution could be seen as a reflection of a patriarchal mindset that highlights the exception rather than the rule, making it less a reflection of generosity and more a strategic move within the established social framework.

Nationalism, Identity, and Transition: The Role of the Roquitte Family

Among the European settlements on the western bank of the Hooghly, Chandannagar emerged as the foremost storm-centre of revolutionary nationalism. Its distinct status under French administration, beyond the reach of British law, made it a natural refuge for revolutionaries and a hub of anti-colonial resistance. The city's defiance was shaped by both the **British–French rivalry** and the pervasive spirit of revolt that swept through India during the struggle for freedom¹⁴⁸. During the early 20th century, Chandannagar's residents actively participated in the nationalist movement. **Rash Behari Bose, Durgadas Sett, Kanailal Dutta, and Motilal Roy** became legendary figures of sacrifice and patriotism¹⁴⁹. The town soon evolved into a centre for revolutionary activities, a supplier of arms, a haven for fugitives, and a site of bomb-making workshops. Local organizations such as the *Pathak Samaj* and *Bandhav Sammilani* helped spread radical nationalist ideas, while the **Jugantar group** exerted strong influence. Several major revolutionary incidents were linked to Chandannagar.

In December 1907, revolutionaries attempted to assassinate Sir Andrew Fraser, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, near the town. In 1908, residents Upendranath

Bandopadhyay and Kanailal Dutta were arrested for their role in the **Muzaffarpur conspiracy** against Douglas Kingsford¹⁵⁰. The revolver used by Kanailal in the **Alipore Jail shooting** was reportedly smuggled from Chandannagar by Mohan Sapui, who was known for importing arms from France. Manindra Nayak of Chandannagar was also linked to the 1912 attack on **Lord Hardinge** in Delhi. Following the **Chittagong Uprising (1930)**¹⁵¹, revolutionaries such as Ganesh Ghosh, Loknath Bal, Ananda Gupta, Sasadhar Acharya, and Suhasini Ganguly took refuge in Chandannagar. Suhasini became the head teacher of *Ushangini Balika Vidyalaya*¹⁵², a school established as part of the city's nationalist educational movement alongside *Hooghly Vidya Mandir*. A 1935 police raid led by **Charles Tegart** culminated in a violent gun battle, killing Makhan Ghosh and sparking widespread unrest. Despite severe repression, the town continued to shelter revolutionaries like Dinesh Majumdar, Nalini Das, and Sachin Kar Gupta, who resisted British authority until the mid-1930s. Between **1905 and 1911**, Chandannagar joined Uttarpara, Hooghly, and Chinsurah as key centres of **Swadeshi and anti-Partition agitation**, later evolving into revolutionary networks. Prominent local figures included Upendranath Bandopadhyay, Matilal Roy, and Charuchandra Roy, while nationalist journalism thrived through publications like *Sandhya* (edited by Brahmabandhab Upadhyay) and *Prajabandhu* (edited by Tinkari Bandopadhyay)¹⁵³. Intellectuals such as Pramathanath Mitra and Aurobindo Ghosh, who briefly took refuge in Chandannagar before departing for Pondicherry, further enhanced its ideological importance.

The *Prabartak Sangha*¹⁵⁴, founded by Motilal Roy, became both a spiritual retreat and a revolutionary shelter, attracting figures like **Rabindranath Tagore** (who visited in 1927)¹⁵⁵ and **Mahatma Gandhi** (who visited *Hooghly Vidya Mandir* in 1925)¹⁵⁶. During the **Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34)**, Chandannagar and Hooghly displayed remarkable mobilization, producing leaders such as Prafulla Chandra Sen, Atulya Ghosh,

and Bijoy Modak. Organizations like the *Prajasamiti*, *Janasammilani*, and *Deshahita Sabha* sustained the nationalist struggle. The **Quit India Movement (1942)** and subsequent **INA and Naval Mutiny agitations (1945–46)** further galvanized the town. Alongside nationalist fervour, socialist and leftist movements also gained ground. Under Kalicharan Ghosh, the *Chandannagar Yuva Samiti* (founded in 1929) became the nucleus of leftist youth activism on the Hooghly's western bank¹⁵⁷. Thus, from the early 1900s to the eve of independence, Chandannagar stood as both a sanctuary and a symbol of India's revolutionary spirit. It was a unique space where anti-colonial struggle, intellectual ferment, and radical nationalism intertwined under the shadow of French neutrality.

The family legacy of the Roquitte family in colonial Chandannagar, though marked by immense financial success and social dominance, still invites substantial criticism, especially regarding their political stance and contributions to the struggle for independence. While their business acumen and influence in local affairs were indisputable, their political silence and lack of active involvement in the nationalist movement stand out as significant shortcomings. As mentioned by Bholanath Das (Nephew of Dourga Chorone Roquitte), the decision of Dourga Chorone Roquitte to remain silent during the peak of the nation's fight for freedom contrasts sharply with the actions of contemporaries like Harihar Sett¹⁵⁸ (1878-1972). While the nation was grappling with colonial exploitation and resistance, Dourga Chorone Roquitte and his family, despite their considerable power, refrained from taking a stand. Even though his son, **Tulshi Chorone Roquitte**, became the mayor of Chandannagar in 1937¹⁵⁹. His grandson, **Tarini Chorone Roquitte**, became **President of the local French Council**¹⁶⁰, and his nephew, **Sri Bholanath Das**, held the position of **Mayor in 1899**¹⁶¹. The family's tradition of civic engagement continued with **Dinendra Nath Das**, grandson of Bholanath Das, who also served as **Mayor in 1883**¹⁶². Other heirs, such as **Prafulla Chorone Roquitte** and **Amulla**

Chorone Roquitte, played important roles in local administration, while **Debendra Nath Das**, another grandson, joined the **National Democratic Front (N.D.F.)**¹⁶³, reflecting the family's gradual involvement in politics under the French colonial setup.

After holding immense power and influence in French governance, the Roquitte family's political involvement did not extend to supporting the cause of independence, which raised questions about their priorities. In contrast, businessmen like **Harihar Sett**¹⁶⁴ and his family (contemporaries of the Roquitte family) were not only successful in their commercial ventures but also active in politics, taking significant steps to further the independence movement. For example, in Chandannagar, **Durgadas Sett**, who was the younger brother of the prominent business magnate Harihar Sett, emerged as a renowned revolutionary of his time¹⁶⁵. Therefore, the contribution of the Sett family, being the elite family of Chandannagar during the 19th century, through financial support and active involvement in the political movement,¹⁶⁶ was massive, especially in contrast to Roquitte's passive approach. In fact, the main business individual of the Roquitte family, Dourga Chorone Roquitte, was absolutely silent and inactive in the matter of the Indian freedom struggle, at the zenith of the colonial exploitation. The Roquitte family's close ties with the colonial administration, coupled with their receipt of numerous awards and honours, suggest a relationship rooted more in mutual advantage than in genuine concern for national welfare. Such proximity to the British authorities likely afforded them a degree of protection from the social and political upheavals that affected figures like Harihar Sett. This insulation may also account for their apparent reluctance to participate actively in the independence movement. The interesting catch here is, most of the elites of colonial Chandannagar did not even vocal against the French colonial rule. Even though they indirectly supported the French government and enjoyed their subjugation¹⁶⁷. This indicates the beneficial relationship of Native elites and French

Colonial rulers shared. However, the circumstances changed after the post-independence era, which we discuss further.

Even in the realm of social welfare, though the Roquitte family undoubtedly wielded considerable influence, their contributions appear comparatively modest beside those of contemporaries such as Harihar Sett, whose initiatives reflected a deeper engagement with the public good. The overall picture painted by these contrasting legacies in the socio-political history of Chandannagar¹⁶⁸ suggests that, despite their financial success, the Roquitte family's position is marked by a significant silence that tarnishes their other commendable achievements.

Post-Independence Decline and Historical Reassessment

The decline in the prominence and influence of the Roquitte family after India's independence is emblematic of the broader socio-political and economic transformations that accompanied the transition from colonial rule to a sovereign nation. This trajectory underscores the complex interplay between individual enterprise, colonial patronage, and the structural realignments that independence ushered in. During the colonial era, the Roquitte family thrived within the framework of the colonial economic order, which rewarded those capable of navigating or aligning themselves with its mechanisms. The policies and structures of the colonial administration enabled certain individuals and families to accumulate wealth and social standing, particularly in trade, industry, and land ownership. Within this milieu, the Roquitte family's success can be understood as a testament to their strategic acumen and ability to operate effectively under colonial economic conditions.

In contrast, the **post-independence era** brought a sharp reversal of fortunes. The dismantling of colonial administrative systems and the emergence of socialist and

nationalist economic policies undermined families whose power had been rooted in colonial patronage. The dismissal of Dourga Chorone Roquitte symbolized not merely a personal loss of the family but also the broader disintegration of a social order that had privileged collaboration over confrontation. Subsequent generations struggled to adapt to the new socio-economic realities. Without colonial backing and facing shifts in industrial and land policies, the family's influence waned. This decline mirrored the experiences of many colonial-era elites whose success depended on external imperial systems rather than indigenous enterprise or political adaptability. Structural changes in markets, loss of access to administrative power, and the absence of entrepreneurial renewal contributed to this erosion. Interestingly, this pattern was not unique to the Roquitte family; many influential families of the colonial period witnessed similar downturns as India transitioned to a new political and economic order. The journey of the Roquitte family thus stands as a poignant reminder of the transience of power and privilege when it is tethered to external systems of governance. It also highlights the critical role of adaptability and innovation in sustaining legacies through periods of profound societal transformation.

Considering the above facts, we can come to the conclusion that the trajectory of the Roquitte family encapsulates the complex interplay between colonial patronage, individual ambition, and nationalist transformation. Their success under French rule reflected both strategic acumen and the economic opportunities embedded in colonial structures. Yet, their inability or unwillingness to engage with nationalist aspirations exposed the fragility of power built on external authority. Interestingly, French rule in Chandannagar, while exploitative, also facilitated certain civic and infrastructural developments. The construction of schools, hospitals, churches, and courts, though primarily serving colonial interests, contributed to the social modernization of the town.

These developments helped create a more organized and literate society, laying indirect groundwork for the intellectual and political awakening that followed. The Roquitte's family legacy thus stands as a study in contrasts: economic brilliance coupled with political silence. Their prosperity under French rule exemplifies how collaboration with colonial authority could yield wealth and influence, yet their subsequent decline underscores the impermanence of such power when unmoored from broader national ideals. In comparison, the active patriotic role of other elite families of Chandannagar (like, Sett) portrays the moral and historical weight of participation in the freedom movement. Ultimately, the story of the Roquittes reflects a recurring theme in Bengal's colonial history: the rise of native elites through accommodation, their insulation from political change, and their eventual marginalization in a postcolonial order that demanded new forms of legitimacy. Chandannagar's colonial experience, at once distinctive under French rule and emblematic of Bengal's transformation, illustrates the shifting nexus between commerce, power, and nationalism in modern Indian history.

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Chapter -III

The Seal Family of Chinsurah: Under the Dutch Colonial Setup

During the 18th century, Hooghly and its neighbouring towns, particularly Chinsurah, held immense significance in Bengal's trade and commerce. Following the decline of Satgaon, Hooghly emerged as the principal port of Bengal and a vital hub for overseas trade. It functioned as a key depot for goods arriving from the mofussil, while industries gradually developed in its vicinity. Among them, Chandannagar and Chinsurah became important centres of production and exchange. Several scholars highlighted the crucial contribution of these small regions to Bengal's economic vitality. The transformation of the Bhagirathi River into the Hooghly region symbolized a broader regional metamorphosis shaped by European intervention. In this context, the rise of Chinsurah was facilitated by its strategic location, fertile hinterland, and the activities of powerful trading communities, which sustained the region's long-standing commercial legacy and secured its place in Bengal's economic history.

Among the early European powers, the Portuguese were the first to establish control over the Hooghly port and its hinterland, turning it into their *Porto Piqueno*¹ following the decline of Saptagram. Their dominance over the port prevailed during the early 16th century, but it eventually gave way to the Dutch and English East India Companies as the Portuguese power waned. Continuation of these contests, the Dutch East India Company (*VOC*)² was established in 1602 with a capital of 6.5 million florins. It was governed by the Heeren XVII and granted exclusive trading rights east of the Cape of Good Hope. Drawing on Hugo Grotius's *Mare Liberum*, the Dutch justified their challenge to the Portuguese monopoly through the principle of 'free seas'³.

Initially, the *VOC* pursued on spice trade, mirroring Portuguese ambitions. However, as noted by Luis Filipe Thomaz⁴ and Niels Streensgaard⁵, European engagement at the time scarcely disrupted the deeply entrenched Asian trade networks of the 16th century. However, gradually, Dutch commercial interests in Bengal diversified into saltpetre, opium, and cotton-piece goods. In the Hooghly region, Dutch influence centred on Chinsurah, a strategically located settlement on the riverbank that offered significant trading advantages due to its proximity to the Hooghly port. Yet, Dutch dominance steadily declined amid rising British and French competition, particularly after the Battle of Plassey (1757) and especially the Battle of Bidera (1759). The **Treaty of London** on 17 March 1824, which formally ceded Chinsurah and other Dutch possessions to the British. The treaty was effective from 1 March 1825 and implemented on 7 May, marking the definitive end of Dutch influence in Bengal⁶. The city of Chinsurah, therefore, stands as a historical testament to this transition of power, encapsulating the shift from a competitive European trading environment to the unchallenged dominance of British colonial hegemony.

Secondly, as Chinsurah evolved into a prominent hub for influential traders and merchants, families such as the Seals emerged as some of the most celebrated mercantile dynasties of the era. To understand the rise of the Seal family and their role in shaping Chinsurah's socio-economic fabric, it is essential to examine the broader Dutch colonial framework that fostered the town's growth. This includes analysing the dynamics between the new colonial administration and the local population, as well as the competitive relationships with rival European powers. Such a context reveals how Chinsurah's evolving socio-economic environment provided fertile ground for enterprising families like the Seals to prosper, marking a significant chapter in the city's rich mercantile history. In light of the expanding Dutch colonial influence and the concurrent rise of a vibrant

indigenous trading class, this chapter will explore the emergence and contributions of the Seal family, Chinsurah's one of the most prominent mercantile lineages. It will further examine the intricate interplay of cooperation and conflict between the colonial authorities and the local elite, highlighting how these interactions shaped the region's historical and economic trajectory during the colonial period.

I

The Origins and Rise of the Seal Family

The Seal family of Chinsurah belonged to the historic **Subarnabanik community**⁷, whose influence on Bengal's economic and cultural evolution was both profound and multifaceted. Renowned for their expertise in trade and finance, the Subarnabaniks played a pivotal role in Bengal's mercantile history, particularly during the colonial era. The Seals, as part of this distinguished lineage, were among the few privileged families to receive *patta* grants from the British; the subject will be discussed in later sections. The community traces its origin to **926 A.D.**, when a gold merchant, **Sanak Adhya**, descended from the legendary magnate **Krishnachandra Adhya**, migrated to Vikrampur, which was then under the rule of **Maharaja Adisura**. Sanak Adhya established a flourishing trading settlement on the Brahmaputra River, engaging with merchants from China, Arakan, and Brahmadesh. His success in the gold and silver trade earned him the royal title *Subarnabanik* ('gold merchant'). Over time, settlements like **Subarnagram** (modern Sonargaon) evolved into major centres of commerce, and by the 10th century, the term *Subarnabanik* had become synonymous with Bengal's prosperous gold traders⁸.

Historical records mention 16 leading merchants of the *Subarnabanik* community, each of whom played a vital role in shaping Bengal's economy. The *Subarnabanik*

merchants, including the Seals, were instrumental in fostering trade networks that linked Bengal to regions far beyond⁹. Among the 16 eminent *Subarnabanik* merchants recorded in early chronicles was **Meghu Seal (Meghambar Sheel)**, a progenitor of the Seal family. Originally from Ayodhya, Meghu Seal's descendants migrated to **Ujjani Nagar** in present-day Bangladesh. By the 13th century, members of this lineage began dispersing across Bengal in pursuit of trade. **Prayag Seal**, the ninth son of **Gaj Seal**, settled in **Panchra** (near modern Mashagram), where his descendants, including **Chaitanya** and **Yadav Seal**, expanded their commercial reach. Yadav Seal left Panchra for Saptagram, a thriving hub of trade and commerce on the banks of the Bhagirathi River. In Saptagram, **Yadav Seal** emerged as a prominent **salt merchant**, diversifying his trade to include **pepper, chillies, cinnamon**, and other East Indies commodities¹⁰. The global demand for pepper at the time created immense wealth for Yadav Seal, elevating his status as a successful businessman. Recognizing his achievements, the Mughal emperor's court awarded Yadav Seal the prestigious title of '**Mallick**'¹¹. This marked a turning point for the Seal family, as Yadav Seal and his descendants abandoned the title of '**Seal**' and adopted '**Mallick**'. However, the **Seal** family was not alone in its migration to **Saptagram**. Other notable *Subarnabanik* merchants, such as **Patiraj De**, also settled there and received the title of 'Mallick.' The influx of wealthy merchants into Saptagram transformed the area into a bustling commercial centre, further enriching Bengal's trade network¹². The transition also symbolized the family's elevated social status within the merchant community.

A critical aspect of the Seal family's historical evolution lies in its extensive segmentation into multiple collateral branches over successive generations. Among these, **two principal lines** exerted a particularly significant influence on the socio-economic and cultural history of Bengal. The first branch comprised the Seals, who established their

residence in **Chinsurah**, within the Hooghly region, after they migrated from **Panchra** in the wake of the commercial and fluvial decline of **Saptagram**. The second branch consisted of those members who, following the waning prosperity of the Hooghly port and its adjoining settlements, relocated further southwards to Calcutta¹³. This burgeoning urban centre emerged as the principal entrepot of colonial Bengal. The latter branch, upon relocating to Calcutta, adopted and perpetuated the titular appellation ‘Mallick’, a distinction originally conferred upon their ancestor, Yadav Seal, by the **Mughal imperial court** in recognition of his meritorious service and mercantile distinction. As recorded in the compiled genealogy of the Baraseal family of Chinsurah, Prayag Seal, the progenitor of this phase of the lineage, had three sons- **Chaitanya Seal**, the eldest; **Yadav Seal (Mallick)**, the second; and **Srinath Seal**, the youngest. Yadav’s son, **Hardu (Hriday) Mallick**, and his successor was **Raja Rajendra Mallick**, who became the celebrated business tycoon of 19th-century Calcutta and was known for constructing the famous **Marble Palace**, one of the city’s most eminent architectural landmarks and a symbol of mercantile opulence¹⁴.

Several sources provide an authoritative genealogical exposition of the **Chorbagan Mallick** family, identifying their origins, stating that the progenitor of the Chorbagan Mallick family was **Madhu Seal**. The 13th male descendant of Madhu Seal, **Yadav Sil**, received the honorific title *Mallick*. From that period onward, his descendants came to be known as the *Mallick* clan. Madhu Seal initially resided along the banks of the Subarnarekha River, from where his descendants migrated to **Saptagram**¹⁵. Subsequently, they established themselves within the mercantile enclaves of **Hooghly** and **Chinsurah**, traces of which remain discernible even today. **Jayaram Mallick**, the fifteenth lineal successor of the family, migrated to **Calcutta** before the consolidation of British rule in Bengal, seeking refuge from the devastating incursions of the Bargi forces¹⁶.

This mobilization anticipates a larger migratory affair of colonial Bengal during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, where numerous mercantile families from the Hooghly region gravitated towards Calcutta, particularly after the establishment and rapid ascendancy of the **Calcutta Port (1870)**. The **Mallicks**, whose genealogical and titular heritage can be demonstrably traced to the Seals of the Hooghly region, constituted one such influential mercantile lineage that capitalized on this emergent urban-commercial milieu. In contrast, another major branch of the family maintained its domicile in **Chinsurah**, thereby preserving the **Seal** nomenclature and regional affiliation. Intriguingly, a comparative examination of both genealogical lines reveals the contemporaneous existence of two individuals named **Jayaram**, one a descendant of **Yadav Seal (Mallick)**, and the other the great-grandson of **Chaitanya Seal**, the elder brother of Yadav¹⁷. The coexistence of these two eponymous figures within parallel lineages during the same chronological frame is noteworthy, reflecting both the complexity and vitality of intra-family genealogical continuities among the mercantile elite of early modern Bengal. Evidence suggests that, analogous to Jayaram Mallick's migration to Calcutta under the duress of the Bargi depredations, the descendants of **Chaitanya Seal**—notably **Atmaram Seal**, **Ayodhyaram Seal**, and **Nilambar Seal**. Those abandoned **Panchra** and relocated to **Shahaganj**, situated to the north of Hooghly in the vicinity of **Chinsurah**. This relocation appears to have been informed by a discerning strategic foresight.

By the mid-17th century, the gradual desiccation of the Saraswati River had precipitated the decline of **Saptagram Port**, while **Hooghly** emerged as the new epicentre of regional commerce. This hydrological and economic transformation catalyzed the larger historical spatial reconfiguration of Bengal's mercantile geography, compelling numerous **Subarnabanik** and allied trading families to shift progressively southwards to **Bandel**,

Hooghly, and **Chinsurah**¹⁸. However, the present dissertation concentrates on the emergence, consolidation, and mercantile activities of the Seal family of Chinsurah, situating their trajectory within the broader framework of Bengal's early modern commercial transformation, colonial intervention, and the adaptive strategies of indigenous trading elites.

Subsequently, members of the Seal family migrated from Panchra to **Sahaganj** in Hooghly district, a place earlier known as *Babugang*¹⁹, which contributed to the town's growing commercial vitality. Despite facing upheavals such as the Maratha raid of 1741 and later British persecution, the family persevered and laid the foundation for their later prominence in Chinsurah²⁰. The Seal family's association with the Subarnabanik trading community and their successive migrations across Bengal reflect a fascinating narrative of commercial expansion and social ascent. Their prominence gradually consolidated around the key mercantile centres of **Saptagram**, **Ghutiabazar**, **Panchra**, and **Chinsurah**, each representing a phase in their evolution from regional traders to influential merchants²¹. Under the leadership of **Yadav Seal**, the family strategically established itself in **Saptagram**, near **Ghutiabazar**, an area renowned for its exclusive Subarnabanik residences and thriving commercial networks. The prosperous environment of Saptagram provided fertile ground for expanding their trading ventures. While Yadav Seal built his base there, his brothers **Chaitanya** and **Srinath Seal** remained in **Panchra**, preserving the family's ancestral roots and maintaining its regional connections.

Of these lines, Chaitanya Seal's descendants became pivotal in shaping the subsequent history of the family. His fifth male descendant, **Nilambar Seal**, is recognized as the **founder** of the Seal dynasty in **Chinsurah**, marking the family's transition into a new phase of prosperity and influence. In contrast, **Srinath Seal's lineage** is scarcely documented. Though his name appears in the *Sealvansh*²² leaflet published by the **Srisree**

Sridharjiu Trust Estate of Barashilbari,²³ he is notably absent from other genealogical or historical records, which suggests that he may have died young or left no surviving heirs to continue his line. The family's evolution was continued with their next descendant, **Ayodhyaram Seal**, a devout and philanthropic descendant who financed community wells (notably *Sealer Pukur*), organized Durga Puja festivities, and expanded family landholdings in Panchra.

During the **Bargi invasions**, parts of the family relocated to Sahaganj and later to Chinsurah, marking a new phase in their mercantile expansion²⁴. **Atmaram Seal**, a pivotal patriarch, firmly established the family's presence in Sahaganj. Through his two marriages to the sister of Pritvallabh Dutta of Hiranyagram and Vishnupriya of Bardhaman, he fathered four sons: **Nayanchand**, **Kriparam**, **Nilambar**, and **Krishnavallabh**. Among them, **Nilambar Seal** emerged as a defining figure, whose business acumen and leadership elevated the family's status. In 1712, family properties were equitably divided among Atmaram, Shantaram, and their descendants, enabling each branch to consolidate wealth and influence independently²⁵. Understanding the rise of the Seal family also necessitates an examination of the broader historical evolution of the **Subarnabanik community** in the Hooghly region, as the family not only belonged to this illustrious group but was also deeply intertwined with its development and evolution²⁶. During the **mid-16th century**, Bengal was engulfed in political unrest under **Sultan Ghiyas-ud-Din Mahmud Shah**, compounded by the growing intrusion of **Portuguese traders** into its commercial sphere. This period witnessed intense upheaval, as the Sultan of Gaur grappled with mounting challenges to his authority. The defeat of Sultan Nasrat Shah's forces at the Battle of Surajgarh in 1534 further destabilized the region, paving the way for Sher Shah Suri's campaign toward Bengal and plunging the province into a phase of profound political instability²⁷.

This was further compounded by the arrival of Portuguese traders, who sought to dominate Bengal's trade. In 1535, Portuguese emissary Diego Rebella visited Satgaon to negotiate the release of prisoners held by Sultan Mahmud Shah²⁸. Fearing **Sher Shah's advance**, the Bengal Sultan sought the assistance of the **Portuguese** and permitted them to establish a **factory at Satgaon**. This decision intensified commercial rivalry in Bengal, creating a volatile environment for local merchants. Amid this turbulence, the funeral ceremony of Ajarchandra became a contentious issue among Bengal's gold merchants, who, reluctant to leave their assets unguarded in such uncertain times, ultimately divided into two factions — the **Rahi group of Karjana** and the **Saptagrami group of Saptagram**²⁹.

This episode, coinciding with the Portuguese establishment of a factory at Satgaon in **1535**, underscores how foreign intervention and political instability shaped local mercantile organization. Had Yadav Seal participated in the Saptagram ceremony, he would likely have aligned with the Saptagrami group—one of the two powerful Subarnabanik factions that dominated Bengal's trade thereafter. Despite such internal divisions, the Subarnabaniks—particularly families like the Seals played a vital role in shaping urban centres such as **Calcutta, Chinsurah, Hooghly, and Howrah**. Their control over the gold, silver, and spice trade not only strengthened Bengal's economy but also laid the groundwork for early financial institutions and civic philanthropy³⁰. In this context, the Seal family thus mirrors the larger narrative of Bengal's mercantile transformation from early medieval trade settlements to the commercial expansion under European colonialism. Their endurance through migration, adaptation, and enterprise stands as a testament to the resilience and influence of the *Subarnabanik* community in Bengal's pre-colonial and colonial history. They not only retain the throne for being the

leading family of the town, but their descendants also contribute to the larger historical events of Bengal.

Bonedi Families of Chinsurah and The Social Position of the Seal Family

During the 18th century, indigenous bankers and banians played a pivotal role in facilitating European trade and commerce in Chinsurah and across Bengal. Acting as intermediaries, financiers, and guarantors, they not only provided financial backing to European companies but also ensured the security and reliability of their commercial ventures. Notable figures such as Baranasi Ghose, Durpanarain Tagore, Madan Dutt, and Jainarain Ghosal extended crucial financial and logistical support to European merchants in the Hooghly region. Similarly, Akrur Dutt, Ramkisore Ghosh, Lakshman, Durga Charan Mitra, Kebalram Ghose, and Ramprosad Mitra served as *banians* and improved the regional economy. These local agents are responsible for managing trade, credit, and indigenous negotiations on behalf of European principals. Their roles underscore the deep interdependence between European trading firms and the indigenous mercantile elite³¹.

Chinsurah, in particular, emerged as a major hub of indigenous enterprise, home to prominent families such as the **Lahas, Seals, Mullicks, Deys, Borals, and Ghoshes**. These families expanded their commercial networks both within India and abroad, consolidating Chinsurah's position as a crucial node in Bengal's mercantile economy. Their entrepreneurial ventures contributed not only to the economic vitality of the region but also to its evolving social and political landscape under colonial influence. Prominent **banking houses** such as that of **Mathura Mohan Sen**, founded by **Joymani Sen**, and **Nilambar Seal**, an affluent banker from Chinsurah, further exemplify the sophistication of indigenous financial systems. These financiers accumulated substantial wealth and exercised considerable influence over both local and European enterprises. Their activities

reveal the complex symbiosis between indigenous capital and colonial commerce, illustrating how local financial institutions sustained and, at times, mediated the economic framework of British and other European enterprises in Bengal³².

Emphasizing the activity and success of local Merchants, historian **Amiya Kumar Banerjee** stated in his studies that one of the reasons behind the decline of Portuguese dominance in the region was the increasing participation and dominance of local traders. These indigenous business families competed fiercely with foreign traders, gradually diminishing the latter's influence. This competition reflects the dynamic interplay of global and local forces that characterized Bengal's economic history and its role as a significant player in regional and international trade. By highlighting the resilience and adaptability of the local communities, it paves the way for their economic and cultural prominence in Bengal's history³³.

Regarding the matter, the journey of **Jagat Seth Fateh Chand**, a prominent and influential merchant-banker of Chinsurah (1704-1763)³⁴ epitomizes the complex dynamics of commerce and power in the 18th-century Hooghly region, particularly Chinsurah. The Jagat Seth family, founded by Hiranand Sahu, played a crucial role in Bengal's financial and political landscape during the Mughal and early British periods. **Manik Chand**, Hiranand's eldest son, also expanded the family's business to Dacca, a thriving trade hub famous for its muslins. Born into this family, Jagat Seth Fateh Chand initially engaged in moneylending; however, he rose to prominence after being adopted by the wealthy merchant Manik Chand and inheriting the hereditary title 'Jagat Seth', which translates to 'Banker of the World'. Sources suggest that Merchants like **Nilambar Seal**, who belonged to the **Seal family** of Chinsurah, described as a '*Sharafi Banik*' (**gold coin trader**), also operated in Chinsurah. While Seal and his family were engaged in the same line of business as Jagat Seth, they lacked the scale of operations, influence, and political

connections with Bengal's Nawab³⁵. However, Seals found a better bond with the Dutch and British during the colonial period; thus, the rise and role of Jagat Sett, including his interconnection with his fellow merchant line-ups, are equally important to understand the emergence of the Seal family within the Dutch colonial regime.

Jagat Seth rose to prominence as a capital merchant by lending at high interest rates and leveraging his close ties with the Nawab of Bengal to monopolize key commodities. This relationship enabled his family to manage the Murshidabad mint, controlling currency production and consolidating both financial and political influence³⁶. While multiple regional currencies circulated, the '*Badshahi Sikka Taka*' alone held universal trade value³⁷. European traders, particularly the British, depended on Jagat Seth to convert bullion into recognized coins and provide credit, often paying commissions (*bata*). Interest rates, initially 12%, were later standardized to 9% across their trading posts (*kuthis*) at British request³⁸. By controlling currency and credit, the Jagat Seths mediated between local markets and global trade networks, becoming indispensable to both Nawabs and European companies.

The tenure of Fateh Chand (1704–1763) marks the apex of their commercial and political influence in Bengal. The establishment of Jagat Seth's *kuthi* in Chinsurah highlights the region's strategic importance as a commercial hub for European powers, particularly the Dutch and French East India Companies. Situated near Chandannagar, Chinsurah allowed Jagat Seth to efficiently serve both local and foreign merchants, including all European merchants like the Dutch, French, and English, through his Chinsurah's *kuthi*, named '***Seth Fatehchandji and Anandchandji***,' and facilitated large-scale financial transactions³⁹. The proximity of these centres reflects the interconnected nature of Indian and European trading networks, with Jagat Seth's banking operations playing a pivotal role as a financial intermediary in Bengal's economy. The story of Jagat

Seth and his contemporaries not only highlights their successes but also underscores the collective impact of Bengal's merchant class on the broader historical trajectory of the region. Considering the facts, historians such as **Akshay Kumar Adhya**⁴⁰, **Shambhu Chandra Dey**⁴¹, and **Sudhir Kumar Mitra**⁴² have elucidated the emergence, activities, and impact of prominent merchant families like the Seths and Seals. They argue that these families not only shaped the local economy but also influenced the broader socio-political landscape of Bengal. Their studies illustrate how these families' financial ascendancy allowed them to wield significant power and transform the region's history. Historical sources indicate that the ascendancy of these *bonedi* (elite) families in the Hooghly region, particularly in towns such as Chinsurah and Chandannagar, preceded the rise of Calcutta as a commercial hub⁴³.

Historical Background of Chinsura and Dutch Colonial Presence

Chinsurah, a city of great historical significance in Bengal, became a focal point of European rivalry for its regional enrichment. The etymology of Chinsurah traces back to 'Chichirah', meaning 'cane', reflecting its origins as a dense cane forest. It was located on the west bank of the Hooghly River at latitude 22°52'N and longitude 88°28'E, about 22 miles from Calcutta in the Bengal province. The Dutch East India Company established its first factory in 1653, finding the location more favourable than Calcutta. Before this, in 1627, the Dutch Governor of Coromandel had dispatched men to Bengal to establish a trading station. In 1663, the Dutch began to view Chinsurah from a broader societal perspective; their first factory in Bengal was established in 1653, and by 1692, amid the unrest of Sobha Singh's rebellion, the fort *Fort Gustavus* was constructed with little interference from the Mughals⁴⁴. Chinsurah's strategic position along the Hooghly River, fertile hinterland, and proximity to major trade routes made it a vital centre of commerce after the decline of Satgaon. The city's cosmopolitan character was enhanced by the

presence of Armenians, Danes, and other trading communities. The Dutch established their settlement there in the 17th century, transforming it into a major emporium marked by high-walled factories, riverside houses, and gardens⁴⁵. Despite early prosperity, Chinsurah's fortunes fluctuated amid 18th-century European conflicts. The Dutch settlement was blockaded in 1769 by the Nawab's forces over unpaid duties and later seized by the British East India Company⁴⁶. Battles such as Plassey (1757), Wandiwash (1760), and Buxar (1764), alongside the Treaty of Paris (1763), consolidated British supremacy in Bengal. The Battle of Bidara (1759) proved decisive for the Dutch, marking the decline of their commercial and political power in the region and the beginning of Chinsurah's transition to British control.

Initially, the region was subordinate to the Coromandel. However, by the Batavian government in 1655, Chinsurah's growing importance led to the creation of the Directorate of Bengal by marking it as a significant independent settlement⁴⁷. When the Dutch arrived in Chinsurah, it was a small village with a few scattered huts inhabited by Hindus, Muslims, and Armenians. Over the years, it evolved into a bustling port town, pivotal in the Dutch trading network. Nonetheless, by 1740, the Dutch had already been trading in Bengal for about a century, accumulating vast treasures and commodities for export⁴⁸, however, the territorial reach of the Dutch in Bengal was limited to Chinsurah and Baranagore, acquired either through gifts or by agreement with the Nawabs of Bengal⁴⁹. However, the Dutch faced challenges as the English East India Company sought to expand its presence in the region, with Hooghly becoming a critical port for the English.

Among the European powers, the Dutch and the English began trading at the Hooghly port during the reign of Emperor Shah Jahan, obtaining *farmans* in 1625 and 1638, respectively. However, the Dutch soon shifted their base to Chinsurah after securing a charter from the Mughal emperor in 1638. With the Nawab of Bengal's approval, they

acquired territorial rights and constructed a fort, which they named *Fort Gustavus*, to ensure security amid regional instability. The fort extended along the Ganges from Kachari Ghat in the north to Dutta Ghat in the south. However, the Dutch city of Chinsurah fell under British control from **July 28, 1795, to November 20, 1817**. The rivalry between the Dutch and the English in Chinsurah intensified during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, reflecting the broader colonial struggle for supremacy in Bengal. However, this occurrence was temporary because on 20 September 1817, the territory was restored to the Dutch through Danish mediation. During the interim, Chinsurah's administration was overseen by a special commissioner, Mr. R. Birch, illustrating the fluid nature of colonial authority and alliances in Bengal's strategic trading zones.

The Dutch, upon their reinstatement, were obliged to pay an annual rent of Rs. 847 in *siccas* for the lands they held, highlighting the intricate financial obligations between rival colonial powers⁵⁰. The Dutch Resident reported that the *Poor Fund* balance had fallen sharply from Rs. 24,927-11 in 1795 to Rs. 8,000 by 1817, a clear indicator of the Company's declining economic power amid rising British dominance. In a letter dated 27 May 1818, the Dutch Resident, Hon'ble D. Overbeck, detailed financial settlements including the sale of materials from the dilapidated Dacca factory for Rs. 1,152-54 and the collection of arrears for ground rent and *chuppa mehal* at Chinsurah up to August 1817⁵¹. Yet, vestiges of Dutch influence persisted. Later, a treaty signed on **March 17, 1824**, transferred Chinsurah permanently to British possession on **May 7th, 1825**, in exchange for Sumatra⁵².

The Dutch presence in Bengal, particularly at Chinsurah, reflected their mercantile skill and perseverance. Chinsurah was administered by a Director and a Council of seven members under the authority of Batavia, among them only five members holding voting rights⁵³. While the Director was expected to consult the Council, he wielded substantial

authority, enjoying lucrative financial privileges, ceremonial honors, and a retinue of attendants⁵⁴ which underscored the hierarchical and profit-driven nature of Dutch governance. Dutch trading operations extended beyond Chinsurah to key factories in Patna, Cossimbazar, and other centres⁵⁵. Although nominally under Batavia, local traders operated with considerable autonomy, controlling the Hooghly port, establishing dedicated water routes, and deploying fleets for export-import activities. Their commerce focused on generating wealth for the Netherlands while simultaneously fostering regional development in Chinsurah, Chandannagar, Dacca, Patna, Balasore, and Baranagore⁵⁶.

Despite these strengths, the Dutch enterprise was hampered by the Batavia Council's restrictive and conservative policies. The Council failed to support local traders against British competition, neglected proactive measures, and imposed onerous customs duties on local merchants. This mismanagement alienated stakeholders, weakened Dutch influence, and allowed British traders to consolidate dominance through economic and military strategies. While Dutch operations exhibited transparency, professionalism, and innovative financial policies, such as the circulation of their coins alongside Mughal '*Badsahi-coins*' and early forms of customs regulation, their success remained fragile. It also alienated local stakeholders, further weakening their influence. The advanced financial policies, such as customs duties, could be seen as precursors to modern economic systems⁵⁷.

The combination of centralized control from Batavia, lack of adaptive strategies, and inaction against aggressive rivals ultimately curtailed Dutch supremacy in Bengal, leaving their commercial and administrative contributions significant but ultimately overshadowed by the British rise⁵⁸. Between 1640 and 1690, thirteen English agents also operated in nearby Hooghly, attesting to the region's growing mercantile importance. Streyنشam Master's 1676 visit further confirmed Hooghly as the English 'chief factory'

in Bengal⁵⁹. After that, the Dutch traders' strategic procurement of local agricultural goods at competitive rates enhanced profitability and stimulated the hinterland economy. This commercial success, coupled with increasing Anglo-Dutch rivalry, elevated Chinsurah's stature, eventually earning it the distinction of a *royal area*⁶⁰.

The final transfer of Chinsurah was marked by tension, reflecting the fraught relations between European powers. Shortly before the cession, a dispute arose when Hooghly police, while pursuing offenders, crossed into Dutch territory and made arrests, prompting the Dutch Governor to accuse the Hooghly Magistrate of insulting the Netherlands flag. The magistrate refuted the charge, citing the pursuit as accidental. Under the *Treaty of London* signed on 17 March 1824, the Dutch settlements at Chinsurah, Calcutta, Dacca, Patna, Fulta, and Balasore were formally ceded to the British. The treaty took effect on 1 March 1825, with the official handover completed on 7 May 1825, bringing an end to nearly two centuries of Dutch presence in Bengal. The Dutch-English rivalry in Chinsurah thus mirrors the wider European contest for trade and territory in Bengal, where Dutch retreat ultimately marked the ascendance of British supremacy in the nineteenth century. These transactions exemplify the complex fiscal management and negotiations that accompanied the shifting control of colonial establishments in Bengal.

In the same year in 1825, *Fort Gustavus* was destroyed immediately after its conquest by the British⁶¹. The disappearance of the Dutch fort at Chinsurah, once a vital symbol of their commercial and military presence, further reflects their decline and gradual marginalisation in Bengal's colonial hierarchy. It was the most prominent monument of Dutch rule in Bengal, likely named after a Dutch monarch or Governor-General Gustaf William van Imhoff, constructed in 1687⁶². It was originally built as a *kuthi* (trading house) under Mughal restrictions and was fortified with the Nawab's consent between 1687 and 1692, as indicated by dated plaques at its entrances⁶³. Similar fortifications were executed

by the French in Chandannagar (*Fort d'Orleans*),⁶⁴ and the English in Calcutta (*Fort William*),⁶⁵ reflecting the militarization of European trade settlements along the Ganges. The fort stretched north to Joraghat and eastward along the Ganges, standing slightly inland to avoid floods yet maintaining river access⁶⁶. Two plaques discovered at the fort's north and south entrances are dated **1687** and **1692**, suggesting the construction year of the fort (began in 1687 and concluded in 1692). Travellers such as Gautier Schouten (1665) described it as a moated, stone-built fortress armed with cannons that was unmatched among foreign powers in Bengal.

A sketch by the Christian missionary **J. Tiefenthaler** provides an illustrative depiction of the fort in its prime⁶⁷. By the early 18th century, the modest *kuthi* had evolved into a full-fledged fort and the centre of Dutch trade in eastern India. It featured four gates, the northern one distinguished by a Mughal-style three-arched façade. Contemporary visitors, including Strensam Master (1676)⁶⁸ and Alexander Hamilton (1706)⁶⁹, described Chinsurah as a thriving Dutch township of elegant houses, warehouses, and gardens, a sign of its transformation from a trading post into a well-planned colonial settlement. Under Governor Jan Albert Sichterman (1734–1744), the Dutch built *Welgelegen* (now the Burdwan Commissioner's Bungalow), a palatial residence embodying their architectural refinement. In its courtyard lies a black stone block inscribed '16 OVC 87', once part of Fort Gustavus's north gate, offering tangible evidence of the fort's construction⁷⁰. The fort's demolition in 1825 marked the end of Dutch dominance in Bengal⁷¹. Hence, the transformation of Chinsurah from a cane forest (*Betban*) into a thriving town (*Nagar*) was largely shaped by Dutch colonial initiatives. The Dutch legacy in Chinsurah exemplifies the transformative power of commerce and cross-cultural respect in shaping urban society. Their investment in infrastructure, including European-style buildings, improved transport, and an underground sewer system, which enhanced the urban landscape,

stimulated the local economy, and attracted regional elites such as rajas, maharajas, and zamindars, who further contributed to the town's heritage and growth⁷².

Mercantile Rivalry Between Different European Powers

Chinsurah, due to its prominence in trade and strategic location, attracted the attention of various European companies, leading to intense rivalries, particularly between the Dutch and the British. This rivalry not only underscores the city's importance during the colonial period but also reveals the geopolitical dynamics of the time. The period around 1783 marked a turning point in international rivalries among European colonial powers, with the signing of the **Treaty of Versailles on September 3, 1783**. While this treaty symbolized peace and mutual restitution of conquests between England, France, and Holland, its implementation, particularly regarding the restoration of European settlements in India, faced significant delays and challenges. The commercial rivalries that had driven competition in the region persisted despite the formal agreements. The Treaty of Versailles (1783) and its follow-up agreements aimed to restore territories among the European powers. However, the strategic and economically vital Hooghly district remained contentious, demonstrating its importance in colonial trade⁷³.

Especially, the Danish proposal to exchange Baranagar for more significant holdings in Hooghly illustrates the high stakes of maintaining control over this commercially rich region⁷⁴. Despite these negotiations, Chinsurah, a key city within the Hooghly district, remained under Dutch control until 1824, highlighting the slow and often contested process of territorial adjustment. Even after the Dutch regained some of their settlements in the East between 1816 and 1818, tensions between the Dutch and British authorities continued to simmer. These conflicts centred on trade and governance, as both powers sought to maximize their influence in the region. The competition over cities like

Chinsurah and Baranagar exemplifies the larger dynamics of colonial trade and territorial disputes in Bengal. With that, the Treaty of Versailles and subsequent territorial adjustments illustrate both the possibilities and limits of diplomatic agreements in the colonial context. While the treaty ended formal hostilities in Europe, the on-ground reality in India remained fraught with competition and conflict. The enduring cultural legacies, such as Danish influences in Chinsurah, and the strategic focus on regions like Hooghly, depict the layered and contested nature of colonial rule in Bengal⁷⁵. Governed as part of the Dutch East India Company's administration under the control of Batavia (modern-day Jakarta, Indonesia), Chinsurah was managed by a director or governor supported by seven councillors⁷⁶. The city, approximately a mile in length and breadth, was well-inhabited by Armenians and native populations. It served as a refuge for locals seeking protection from the oppressive Mughal administration, further solidifying its role as a significant settlement. The Dutch initially prospered in Chinsurah, particularly in the wake of the Battle of Plassey in 1757, which marked a turning point in the region's power dynamics. Their fortunes declined as the British asserted dominance. The eventual transfer of Chinsurah to British control in 1824 marked the end of Dutch dominance in the area⁷⁷ but also reflected the long-standing negotiations and disputes that had characterized their interactions.

The British, once allies of the Dutch, turned against them to monopolize trade and governance in Bengal. This shift not only forced the Dutch to relinquish control but also signalled the rise of Kolkata as an economic hub, overshadowing Chinsurah. Despite the change in control, Chinsurah witnessed substantial development under British rule. European education systems, organized governance, and improved medical facilities were introduced, transforming the city from a modest settlement into a vibrant urban centre. Before the Dutch arrival, Chinsurah and the surrounding areas, including Hooghly, were

primarily rural. The emergence of Hooghly as a port attracted Portuguese, English, Persian, and Saptagram merchants, setting the stage for Chinsurah's eventual prominence. Discourses of the city reflect its importance as a contested and evolving centre of trade and governance. The city's transformation under successive European powers highlights the interplay of commerce, politics, and culture that shaped Bengal's colonial history. In particular, the bone of contention between the Dutch and British depicted the significance of the town at that time⁷⁸.

The mid-18th century was a critical period in the history of European trade in Bengal, marked by rivalries, alliances, and strategic manoeuvring. The interplay between the Dutch, British, French, and other foreign powers, set against the backdrop of Hooghly's commercial significance, highlights the region's pivotal role in shaping colonial dynamics in Bengal. Two key episodes illustrate the nature of European competition and cooperation in the region. First, the conflict over control of saltpetre production in Patna revealed the economic stakes of European trade. When the Dutch sought a monopoly, English authorities in Calcutta intervened, leading to a truce in 1744. The chiefs of the English, French, and Dutch factories—Barwell, Guillander, and Drabbe—agreed to collaborate to stabilize commerce, showing that pragmatic alliances could emerge amid rivalry⁷⁹. Second, European powers, despite mutual antagonism, collectively restricted Persian traders in the Hooghly region to maintain dominance over local commerce, underscoring both the strategic and exclusionary nature of their trade practices⁸⁰.

The Dutch were significant players in Bengal's trade networks, with a robust presence in Hooghly, Balasore, Patna, and other strategic locations. They established a stronghold in Chinsurah between 1687 and 1702, during which they extended their influence to Baranagore and even ventured to Patna in 1632. By 1712, Dutch trading operations had expanded to Daulatganj, Chapra, Singhia, and Hajipur. Their silk trade

flourished, culminating in the construction of a grand building in Cossimbazar in 1739, costing an impressive 1,53,000 rupees. Despite their success in silk, the Dutch faced challenges in other areas. Their position in Dacca (Dhaka) was initially abandoned in 1690 due to insecurity, although they re-established themselves there in 1753⁸¹. Nevertheless, they maintained their reputation at the Murshidabad *Darbar*⁸², asserting their prominence by controlling river navigation and buoy placement on the Hooghly River⁸³.

In contrast, the French influence in Bengal diminished after 1840, largely due to financial constraints and the ineffectiveness of leaders following the departure of Joseph François Dupleix. While Dupleix had a successful tenure as the Intendant of Chandannagar, his successors failed to maintain the French stronghold in Bengal, especially after their setbacks in 1757 during the broader Anglo-French conflict. The decline of French trade was stark compared to the enduring commercial presence of the Dutch in Bengal during this period. Although the Dutch eventually ceded control of Chinsurah to the British, their impact on Bengal's trade and governance was profound. They established a sophisticated trading network, built impressive infrastructure, and held a prominent position among European traders. Their ability to adapt and re-establish operations in critical centres demonstrates their resilience, even amidst the challenges posed by British dominance. The story of Chinsurah reflects the broader dynamics of European rivalry in Bengal, showcasing the Dutch's significant, if ultimately transient, role in the region's colonial history. Their contributions to trade, urban development, and the cultural fabric of Bengal remain an essential chapter in the history of European colonial endeavours in India.

Regarding this, another subject that played a crucial role in it was the role of the local merchant community of Chinsurah. The arrival of prominent business families in Chinsurah added to the city's vibrancy and highlighted the escalating rivalry between the

Dutch and the British. The Dutch harboured interlopers and adversaries of the British, symbolizing their defiance and competitive spirit. This antagonism peaked in the **Battle of Bidera** (1759), a minor but significant skirmish fought along the Saraswati River between Chinsurah and Chandannagar. The Dutch, emboldened by their secret alliance with Nawab Mir Jafar, underestimated the strength of British forces. The British victory at Bidera marked a turning point, severely undermining Dutch confidence and signalling the beginning of their decline in Bengal. By 1825, following a series of negotiations, Chinsurah officially came under British control. However, the Nawabs of Bengal exploited these rivalries with remarkable diplomacy, playing one power against another to secure political and economic concessions. Even smaller European groups, such as the Danes, occasionally influenced regional politics⁸⁴.

By 1733, the Dutch East India Company's prosperity was evident when it declared a 25 per cent dividend in Holland, reflecting the strength of its Bengal trade. The Company's policy of reserving profits as a "nest egg for accidents" highlighted its financial prudence and stability. In 1734, twenty Dutch ships departed Bengal laden with saltpetre, raw silk, silk goods, and calicoes—illustrating Bengal's centrality to Dutch maritime commerce and its pivotal role in supplying European markets. However, by the mid-eighteenth century, Dutch dominance in Bengal faced growing challenges from the British East India Company. The British, having secured Emperor Farrukhsiyar's *Farman* in 1717, which granted extensive trade privileges and customs exemptions, rapidly gained a decisive competitive edge.

By the 1740s, fierce rivalry emerged over access to export commodities and manufacturing centres across Bengal. Tensions occasionally erupted into open conflict, such as the 1739 Patna incident, when the Dutch forcibly seized saltpetre from the English factory. The confrontation prompted the British Council in Calcutta to lodge a formal

protest with the Dutch authorities at Hooghly. Although resolved amicably by June 1739, the episode epitomised the intensifying Anglo-Dutch struggle for commercial supremacy in Bengal's lucrative trade network. a) **Economic Competition:** The British consistently outperformed the Dutch in trade due to their superior privileges and expanding political influence. b) **Loss of Strategic Advantage:** The British Farman of 1717 and their ability to enforce favourable terms through military and political means eroded Dutch dominance. c) **Shift in Focus:** The Dutch East India Company began losing ground not only in Bengal but across the east coast of India, diverting resources to other priorities within their global empire⁸⁵. This victory catapulted the British into a position of political and economic hegemony, leaving the Dutch and other European powers marginalized. The British consolidated their power by championing slogans like "*Freedom of Trade*"⁸⁶, which were often used to justify their interventions against the Nawab and rival European entities.

Apart from this, a few more factors played a significant role in the entire matter. a) The Hooghly region's wealth and strategic location made it a focal point for European powers. Its importance transcended commercial interests, becoming a battleground for colonial supremacy. b) Despite their intense rivalries, European powers occasionally collaborated when mutual interests aligned, as seen in the saltpetre truce and efforts to exclude Persian merchants, and c) The post-1759 period marked the definitive decline of other European powers, including the Danes and the Dutch, as British dominance in Bengal became unassailable⁸⁷. Thus, this period exhibits the complexities of colonial commerce, where economic ambitions, political strategies, and pragmatic alliances intersected to shape Bengal's history.

Dutch Traders with the Native People

The historical account of Chinsurah paints a picture of harmonious coexistence and mutual respect between the Dutch traders and the local population of Bengal, an era

unmarred by the interference of a third power⁸⁸. Before the arrival of the British, life in Chinsurah and neighbouring Chandernagore was characterized by cooperation and a lack of exploitation, with both communities contributing their wealth and resources towards shared goals. This balance was maintained through mutual understanding and trust. The local inhabitants embraced the Dutch traders' advanced agricultural techniques, reflecting a strong partnership that went beyond mere trade. The Bengali weavers of Chinsurah and Chandernagore achieved significant recognition across Southeast Asia for their expertise in producing fine textiles, underscoring the region's prominence in the global trade network⁸⁹.

The flourishing of self-reliance among local farmers and traders further defined Chinsurah's character, positioning it as a hub for sustainable and unrestricted economic activity. Contractual and daily labourers started arriving in the city, prompting the establishment of housing facilities for soldiers and a police force to maintain order. Unlike other parts of Bengal, Chinsurah was not rooted in the feudal system. This distinction allowed the farmers of Chinsurah to enjoy a remarkable degree of self-dependence, surpassing the autonomy of farmers elsewhere in the province. Self-reliance became a defining characteristic of Chinsurah, contributing significantly to its development. Although officially a colony, its unique governance, social structure, and economic independence placed it in a class above the typical colonial framework. This distinct identity set Chinsurah apart as a model of autonomy and progress during the Dutch colonial era⁹⁰. The Dutch administration also played a critical role in societal development, implementing thoughtful initiatives to improve living standards. Efforts such as ensuring a steady drinking water supply and introducing an underground drainage system reflect a forward-thinking approach to urban management, which remains remarkable even by contemporary standards. Their early consciousness about environmental and public health

issues, over two centuries ago, highlights their progressive governance. This era in Chinsurah's history shows how collaboration, respect, and a shared commitment to progress can create a prosperous and harmonious society⁹¹.

During the 17th to mid-18th century, travellers and contemporary observers frequently praised Chinsurah for its scenic beauty, well-planned urban layout, and the grandeur of Dutch administrative and trading establishments. Reports in *Hicky's Bengal Gazette*⁹² and *Calcutta Gazette*⁹³ highlighted the city's vibrancy and the Dutch administration's distinctive approach to fostering mutual trust and respect with the local populace. Their inclusive ethos, marked by social mingling across ranks, encouraged collaboration, enriching Chinsurah's cultural and social life. A notable instance of this cordiality was the rehoisting of the Dutch flag in September 1817, celebrated with an elaborate dinner, ball, and supper hosted by the Hon'ble J. A. Van Braom. Attended by the English Commissioner Mr. Forbes and eminent families from Chinsurah, Chandernagore, and Serampore, the event symbolised enduring harmony between European officials and the local elite⁹⁴.

Regarding this, the collaboration between the Dutch traders and the local inhabitants of Chinsurah and its surrounding regions, like Chandannagar, also played a crucial role in the success of the Dutch trading activities. The local population, irrespective of caste and creed, supported the Dutch traders, facilitating a mutually beneficial exchange that led to significant profits. Additionally, the friendly and trustworthy relationship the Dutch developed with the French people of Chandannagar proved to be pivotal in enabling the Dutch to thrive in their commercial endeavours. The region's reputation for high-quality craftsmanship, such as the renowned embroidery from Babnan and the black-edged fine white dhuti (a traditional Bengali garment) from Farashdanga, added to the region's cultural and economic prestige. These unique textile products, highly valued across

Southeast Asia, became key commodities in the trade, contributing to the prosperity of the Dutch trading enterprises in the area. The seamless integration of local skills with Dutch trade networks not only benefited the traders but also elevated the status of the artisans and merchants of Chinsurah and Chandernagore, reinforcing the region's significant role in global trade during that time⁹⁵.

The Dutch traders' efforts in Chinsurah reveal a deep sense of concern for the welfare of the local population, demonstrated through their practical approach to development and social progress. Their initiatives were not only seen as beneficial by the locals but were also appreciated for their genuine intent to uplift the community. Despite the presence of foreign powers, the local people of Chinsurah managed to preserve their cultural identity, refusing to allow it to be overshadowed by external influences. While the Dutch were progressive in their thinking and open to new ideas, the locals resisted efforts to radically change their town, choosing to remain independent of the conservative limitations of the old feudal system. One of the Dutch administration's significant contributions to the region was its investment in education. They established several educational institutions in Chinsurah, with the intention of enlightening and uplifting the local populace. This initiative aimed to foster a more informed and skilled community, thereby contributing to the region's economic and social advancement⁹⁶.

The Dutch authorities, aware of the economic challenges facing Bengal, sought to introduce measures aimed at economic reform, agricultural growth, and industrial development. Their efforts included improvements in infrastructure, agricultural techniques, and trade systems. These reforms were progressive for their time and held great potential to transform the region's economy. Unfortunately, due to the political interference of the British and the subsequent loss of the Dutch in the Battle of Bidara, these plans were never fully realized. The British takeover thwarted the Dutch's efforts to

implement these reforms, and Chinsurah, along with much of Bengal, was left to fall under British colonial control⁹⁷. This story portrays how the Dutch, despite their eventual defeat, made substantial strides in promoting local welfare and development. Their vision for a prosperous and modern Chinsurah was cut short, but their legacy of progressive thought and cultural sensitivity continued to influence the region.

The Dutch traders in Chinsurah made significant contributions not only to their prosperity but also to the development of the local community. Their efforts extended beyond trade and commerce, as they recognised the importance of improving the lives of those around them. Much like their approach in their homeland, they used trade as a means to introduce various reforms in Bengal, including advancements in security, infrastructure, and social welfare. The Dutch were committed to building a well-organised and vibrant city, with a focus on education, healthcare, environmental protection, and conflict resolution. Their initiatives in these areas reflect their broader goal of fostering a harmonious, thriving society. A particularly interesting aspect of their cultural engagement was the Dutch influence on local art and culture. The artists of Chinsurah and Chandernagore were strongly drawn to the Dutch artistic style, resulting in a unique blend of Dutch techniques and local traditions in their paintings and artworks. This fusion of artistic styles is evident in the works produced during that period, which display Dutch influences and local Bengali art's distinct characteristics⁹⁸.

The Dutch government officials and the local people of Chinsurah shared a close, mutually respectful relationship, which extended to matters of religion and culture. The local temple of Shandeshwar (a form of Shiva) was adorned and celebrated in a manner that reflected this cultural exchange. It is believed that the five-faced silver idol of Shandeshwar, presented by the last Dutch Governor, Daniel Overbeck, embodied the distinct Dutch artistic influence, both in its craftsmanship and design. As a result of this,

the local god *Shandeshwar* (Siva) of Chinsurah used to be dressed up for eight consecutive days for the occasion towards the end of the month of Chaitra of the Hindu calendar⁹⁹. This example highlights the unique and enduring impact of the Dutch presence in Chinsurah, where they not only contributed to economic development but also engaged with local customs and traditions in a way that fostered cultural exchange and enriched the region's artistic heritage. The influence of the Dutch style, particularly in religious and artistic practices, can still be traced in certain noble families' collections of paintings that depict the social and political life of Chinsurah during that time¹⁰⁰. Nonetheless, the history of Chinsurah, a small village elevated to the status of a 'royal port' and 'city' through Dutch influence, offers a compelling narrative of cultural exchange, collaboration, and prosperity. For nearly 180 years, the Dutch traders, with their industrious efforts and amicable engagement with the local community, left a legacy that distinguished them from other European trading communities.

II

Economic Enterprise of the Seal Family

Chinsurah's mercantile structure was defined by the coexistence of European commercial houses and indigenous banking and brokerage firms. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) relied heavily on banians, gomastas, and shroffs from established merchant castes to facilitate its inland trade. It is within this context that the Seals' early economic role must be understood. They served not only as financiers and suppliers but also as credit brokers who mediated between European demand and rural production networks. The business venture of the Seal family exemplifies the intertwining of familial legacies and larger historical movements. As we have discussed, the Seal family's migration from Panchra (near Saptagram) to Chinsurah in the early eighteenth century

coincided with the decline of the older riverine emporium of Saptagram and the simultaneous rise of the Hooghly-Chinsurah corridor as a new axis of Indo-European trade. Dutch, Portuguese, and British companies competed intensely for control over the region's export economy, particularly in textiles, saltpetre, and grain¹⁰¹.

However, the Seals were not unique in this process of mobility. Other notable Subarnabanik merchants, such as *Patiraj De*, also migrated to Saptagram and received similar recognition, collectively transforming the locality into a prominent centre of commercial and financial activity¹⁰². This concentration of affluent trading families reinforced Saptagram's position as a principal node within Bengal's inland and maritime trade networks. Subsequent generations of the Seal family gradually expanded westward. The Seal family migrated from Panchra to **Sahaganj** in Hooghly district, a place earlier known as *Babugang*¹⁰³, where they contributed to the region's growing commercial vitality. Despite external disruptions, including the Maratha incursions of 1741¹⁰⁴ and later British administrative pressures, the family maintained economic resilience and adaptability.

These experiences laid the foundation for their eventual establishment in *Chinsurah*, where they emerged as one of the region's leading mercantile households. Archival evidence and family records suggest that the Seals expanded their economic base through investment in inland trade routes extending toward **Burdwan** and **Murshidabad**, while simultaneously consolidating property holdings in and around **Chinsurah**. They were mostly involved in gold coin trading, including other trading commodities. As discussed earlier that the earliest genealogical traditions identify *Meghu Seal* (also recorded as *Meghambar Sheel*) as the progenitor of the Seal family. By the 13th century, members of this lineage had begun to disperse across Bengal in pursuit of expanding commercial opportunities. Within this volatile environment, the merchant-prince Meghu

Seal (or Meghambar Sheel) successfully repositioned themselves as crucial intermediaries between local producers, European factors, and the emerging colonial bureaucracy¹⁰⁵.

Prayag Seal, the 9th son of *Gaj Seal*, established himself in *Panchra* (near modern-day Mashagram), where his descendants, particularly *Chaitanya Seal* and *Yadav Seal*, extended the family's mercantile influence within the region. *Yadav Seal* subsequently relocated to *Saptagram*, then a flourishing emporium of Bengal situated on the banks of the Bhagirathi River. Capitalizing on the region's strategic position within Indo-European trade routes, he rose to prominence as a major **salt merchant** and diversified his commercial ventures to include **pepper, chillies, cinnamon**, and other East Indies commodities¹⁰⁶. The global demand for spices, especially pepper, enabled him to accumulate considerable wealth and prestige. In recognition of his economic success and social influence, the Mughal imperial court conferred upon him the honorific title of '**Mallick**'. This distinction signified a crucial moment of upward social mobility for the family, marking their transition from regional traders to members of the mercantile elite. Thereafter, *Yadav* and his descendants adopted '*Mallick*' in place of '*Seal*', reflecting their elevated status within the Subarnabanik trading community¹⁰⁷. While *Yadav Seal* consolidated the family's position in *Saptagram*, his brothers *Chaitanya* and *Srinath Seal* remained in *Panchra*, maintaining the ancestral homestead and preserving local connections. Of these two lines, *Chaitanya's* descendants assumed greater historical significance.

Atmaram Seal, a pivotal patriarch, firmly established the family's presence in Sahaganj. Among his four sons and the fifth descendant of *Chaitanya Seal*, **Nilambar Seal** emerged as a defining figure, whose business acumen and leadership elevated the family's status. In 1712, family properties were equitably divided among *Atmaram*, *Shantaram*, and their descendants, enabling each branch to consolidate wealth and influence

independently¹⁰⁸. He was born in 1730 in Panchra; his legacy overshadowed his other brothers. Nilambar Seal's marriage to Padmavati in 1750, the daughter of Atmaram Adhya from the same Subarnabanik merchant community, further strengthened the family's connections to prominent merchant clans¹⁰⁹. Through this marriage to **Padmavati Adhya**, daughter of another renowned merchant family of Chinsurah's Subarnabanik Community, those who had also migrated from Panchra, Nilambar Seal reinforced inter-merchant alliances that underpinned his economic recovery and expansion.

The years 1741 to 1757 were critical in the history of Bengal, coinciding with the death of Alivardi Khan, the Nawab of Bengal. His death in 1756 led to the ascension of Siraj-ud-Daulah, a young ruler whose conflicts with the British East India Company would escalate into a significant confrontation. Siraj-ud-Daulah's decision to march into Calcutta, capturing the English fort, exemplified the Nawab's resistance to British interference. However, the British, led by Colonel Clive and Watson, swiftly recaptured Calcutta, and Clive's subsequent military campaigns led to the British control of Chandannagar and Hooghly. This political turbulence must have had a direct impact on Nilambar Seal and his family in Sahaganj. The Seal family, though not directly involved in the military conflicts, would have been affected by the shifts in trade, governance, and local power dynamics.

The period was marked by increasing tension between the Nawab's forces and the British, and the Seal family's mercantile activities would have been closely tied to these developments. The Nawab could not bear the insolence of the English and marched into Calcutta with an army and captured the English fort (which was adjacent to the G. P. O.). Within days, Colonel Clive and Watson arrived and recaptured Calcutta. But Clive did not stop there - further north, he went on to capture Chandannagar, Hooghly¹¹⁰.

The business venture of the Seal family was deeply embedded in the changing political and social fabric of Bengal during the mid-18th century. Their family's migration from Panchra to Sahaganj, their involvement in trade, and their ties to other influential merchant families such as the Adhyas, reflected the interconnectedness of Bengal's local communities and broader historical events. As the British and Nawab's forces clashed, the Seal family witnessed firsthand the shifting balance of power in the region, and their legacy continues to be shaped by these momentous changes in Bengal's history. The tragic events surrounding the Seal family during the mid-18th century illustrate the tumultuous period of British colonial expansion and its devastating local impacts. The events surrounding the British attack on Hooghly Fort and its aftermath in 1757 had a profound impact on the Seal family, which was part of the local elite in Sahaganj.

The account reveals the turbulence and destruction faced by the Seal family during this period. Dr. William Forth, a surgeon at the British Casimbazar Kuthi, played a pivotal role in reporting the escalating crisis in Hooghly. After escaping from Casimbazar, he sought refuge in Chinsurah under the protection of the Dutch. Forth's intelligence about the mass exodus of people from Hooghly, combined with his strategic advice, recommended that an attack on the fort would boost British prestige. He also provided the British with a map of Hooghly, assisting in their military strategy. On 9th January 1757, the British launched their attack on Hooghly Fort, where Manik Chand was the Mughal Faujdar. After two nights of intense artillery fire, the British successfully captured the fort. This victory marked a turning point in the region's history. Following the capture, from the 10th to the 19th of January 1757, widespread rioting and looting ensued, devastating the entire locality. It was reported that not a single house or piece of artillery remained standing after the destruction¹¹¹.

Amidst the chaos, the Seal family was severely affected. The family's wealth, including money and ornaments, was looted by the rioters. Tragically, Nilambar's two brothers, Nayanchand and Krishnavallabh, lost their lives in the attack. The loss was compounded by the family's destruction, and it is said that Nayanchand was possibly childless, further severing the direct line of his descendants. However, Kriparam and Dharanidhar, Nilambar's second cousin, survived the disaster. Kriparam and Dharanidhar, along with their respective families, continued the lineage of Nilambar Seal. Despite the calamity, the lineage of Nilambar Seal's family endured. Kriparam and Dharanidhar's children carried on their legacy, and Dharanidhar's youngest son, Rammohan Seal, continued the family line. Dharanidhar's eldest son, Brajmohan, who had been working in Murshidabad at the time of the family's misfortune, was likely absent from the scene of the destruction.

Brajmohan returned to Sahaganj after the incident, though he faced a tragic end. In 1771, he was robbed and killed while travelling back from Murshidabad by water, an unfortunate incident marking the violent and chaotic period in which he lived. Despite the tragic losses, the Nilambar Seal family was resilient. The family's continued influence and their ability to endure through such tumultuous times speak to their significant place within the region's history. This chapter of their story highlights both the devastating impact of the colonial conflicts and the ongoing strength of family ties through successive generations¹¹².

The period following the devastating attack on Hooghly and the Sahaganj disaster, the Seal family took significant steps to rebuild their life and business. After fleeing Sahaganj due to the violent unrest, Nilambar Seal sought refuge in Chinsurah, a place that offered some stability amidst the turmoil. He travelled to Calcutta with a group of businessmen who were primarily traders. These boats were not mere passenger vessels but

business caravans, with the majority of their passengers being merchants who sought the protection of group travel to avoid bandit attacks on the river route. After making his way to Chinsurah, Nilambar sought solace and opportunity in the community. Lakshmikanta, an individual of importance during this period, purchased a house in **Kankashali** village, located southwest of Holland Kuthi, in May 1758 (6th Jaishtha, 1165 Bangabdo). This house became Nilambar's new residence and a base for his renewed efforts in business¹¹³. With a fresh resolve to overcome the past's horrors, Nilambar poured all his energy into his work, rekindling his entrepreneurial spirit. His business ventures began to take root again, and gradually, he built a sense of hope and opportunity for himself and his family. In the same house in Kanakshali, Nilambar's second son, Madanmohan, was born, symbolizing a hopeful future for the family despite the recent tragedies. The birth of Madanmohan not only represented a new chapter for Nilambar's personal life but also marked a point of recovery for his business and social status. By rebuilding their family business, the Seal family demonstrated resilience and their ability to start anew in Chinsurah following such a devastating loss. It was a testament to their strength and determination to rise from the ashes of despair.

Nilambar Seal's foresight and trading intelligence became evident as he observed the shifting dynamics of trade and commerce in Bengal¹¹⁴. Recognizing the decline of Saptagram's commercial dominance and the rising importance of Hooghly and Calcutta¹¹⁵, he strategically positioned himself to capitalize on the opportunities offered by these emerging centres of trade. Nilambar purchased a house in **Kankashali**, Chinsurah, an ideal location situated near both the Hooghly Port and the upcoming Calcutta Port, highlighting his sharp commercial acumen. This move ensured that he remained well-connected to the evolving trade networks of southern Bengal. When his second son, Madanmohan, was two years old, Nilambar joined hands with Radhakant Pal, a fellow merchant, to run a shop in

Barabazar and Chinsurah. Radhakant Pal was an influential figure and the father of Rammohan Pal, who would later become the grandfather of the notable Jibankrishna Pal. This partnership not only strengthened Nilambar's trading ventures but also established connections with influential merchant families of the time.

As the business flourished, Nilambar Seal experienced economic prosperity, allowing him to expand his influence further. In 1763 (1169 Bangabdo), Nilambar constructed a grand mansion, known as the 'Bara Seal Bari,'¹¹⁶ south of the Dutch fort in Chinsurah. This structure remains a symbol of his growing wealth and status. The Bara Seal Bari became a prominent landmark in Chinsurah, reflecting the Seal family's elevated social standing and economic success. The same year that Nilambar commenced building the Bara Seal Bari, the Dutch Chapel near Ghanta Ghat was completed¹¹⁷. The Dutch Chapel later became the lecture hall of Mohsin College, a testament to the rich cultural and historical fabric of Chinsurah¹¹⁸. Unfortunately, due to the ravages of time and administrative neglect, the Dutch Chapel has been lost to history, a poignant reminder of the impermanence of architectural heritage. Nilambar Seal's strategic moves, business partnerships, and architectural legacy underscore his remarkable vision and ability to adapt to changing commercial landscapes. By aligning himself with the emerging prominence of Hooghly and Calcutta, Nilambar not only rebuilt his family's fortunes after the Sahaganj disaster but also left an indelible mark on the history of Chinsurah.

The main business of the Seal family was **currency exchange**, and their business reached its peak in the late 18th century. Of course, the political instability of the country must have also affected this business. At that time, different types of regional currencies were in circulation in different parts of India. Needless to say, the value of all those currencies was not the same. The value of that currency fluctuated from region to region. As a result, currency traders emerged in the country, who supplied regional coins of

equivalent value to different currencies. Naturally, to conduct such a business, it was necessary to set up houses or agencies in different parts of the country. The agents or brokers used to receive a commission of '*Bata*' instead of exchanging the currency. These houses were known as '*Sarafi houses*'. In the year 1764 (1171 Bangabda), Nilambar Seal expanded his entrepreneurial ventures by establishing a shop in **Calcutta**, marking his formal entry into the currency exchange business. During this time, India faced significant challenges due to the lack of a uniform currency system. Regional currencies varied in value and were prone to devaluation, creating a demand for currency exchange services.

For managing this type of business, it is necessary to set up offices or agencies in different parts of the country. Agents or *Kuthials* used to get '*bata*' (commission) instead of exchanging that currency¹¹⁹, these *Kuthis* were known as '*Sarafi Kuthis*'. Capitalizing on this demand, Nilambar Seal set up *Sarafi Kuthis* (currency exchange offices) in key commercial centres, including **Chinsurah, Calcutta, Murshidabad, Bardhaman (Kanchannagar), Kalna, Kshirpai, Katwa, and Sursagar**. His central office, or headquarters, was located in **Chinsurah**, where all the accounts for his network of *kuthis* were managed. By the 1770s, Nilambar's *sarafi* enterprise had achieved regional dominance, integrating Bengal's fragmented monetary circuits into a cohesive private network.

The Chinsurah Kuthi handled all inter-office accounts until Nilambar died in 1794, testifying to the longevity of this early **proto-banking system**. His model combined family capital, kinship trust, and commercial intelligence, situating the Seals within the wider evolution of indigenous financial capitalism in eighteenth-century Bengal. To ensure the safe transfer of money between *kuthis* amidst the threat of banditry, Nilambar Seal secured chests in the **Gurap, Haripal, and Dewanganj** police stations, demonstrating his meticulous planning and risk management. These measures provided a layer of security

for his growing empire of currency exchanges, ensuring the smooth operation of his business network. All their business affairs were centralized at Chinsurah Kuthi, which served as the headquarters for all the transactions. His ability to manage the inter-regional currency flow became one of his key business strengths, allowing him to amass significant wealth. By the latter part of the 18th century, Nilambar Seal's business had reached its peak. Nilambar Seal passed away in 1794 (1199 Bangabda)¹²⁰, leaving behind an enduring legacy of commercial success, philanthropy, and religious devotion. He amassed great wealth from his business through his ability and the active participation of his sons¹²¹. His family continued his business endeavours, and his contributions to his community and the region's religious landscape left a lasting impact. Nilambar Seal had six son's **Jagamohan, Madanmohan, Anandamohan, Gourmohan, Krishnamohan, and Vishwamohan**, who continued the family's traditions of commerce, philanthropy, and religious devotion. They followed in their father's footsteps by managing the various *kuthis* that Nilambar had established and later ventured into their businesses, contributing to the Seal family's growing wealth and reputation. It is needless to say that the success of the Seal's family business is not only due to Nilambar Seal's foresight and ingenuity, but also to the active participation of his sons, who contributed to managing and expanding the family's enterprises.

Jagmohan Seal, the eldest son of Nilambar Seal, was born in 1752 AD in Panchra at the residence of his maternal uncle, Atmaram Adhya. A man of remarkable business acumen, cultural patronage, and philanthropy, Jagmohan carried forward the legacy of his illustrious father, making significant contributions to Bengal's social, cultural, and economic history¹²². After completing his primary education, Jagmohan joined his father's trading ventures, quickly proving his skill and proficiency. In addition to maintaining the *Sarafi Kuthis* established by Nilambar, he established several new *kuthis* under his

initiative, further expanding the family's business empire. Apart from their gold coin trading, in 1800, Jagmohan Seal diversified his business by starting a **salt trade** at **Babuganj** in Hooghly (Chinsurah), which became a significant source of income¹²³. His ventures brought him immense wealth and cemented his reputation as an astute businessman. Thus, for the Seal family, trading emerged as a more viable source of wealth, offering them the means to thrive.

Ramchandra Seal, son of Jagmohan Seal, played a pivotal role in shaping the economic fabric of early 19th-century Chinsurah was significant. He was involvement in trade, especially in the silk industry, was crucial to his financial success. His partnership with the colonial rulers allowed him to benefit from the shifting dynamics of the economy, particularly when the East India Company was dominating trade. By purchasing **silk looms** and expanding his business across **Murshidabad, Bardhaman, Medinipur**, and other regions, he was not able to acquire significant wealth. He was the **Dewan of the Palmer & Company (Agency House)** and the use of his signature on the currency notes indicates the high regard and trust placed in him by the colonial system. Ramachandra Seal lived in Calcutta for the family business. He had bought several zamindaris in places like **Latkhajur, Srihatta**, etc. When the East India Company gave them the monopoly of the silk trade in 1230 or 1231, Bangabdo Ramachandra started a silk business in such a way that the public did not realize that the business had been transferred. Ramachandra had established silk factories in **Murshidabad, Saudabad, Baswa, Jangipur, Mirzapur, Kanthalpara, Ghatal, Sarberde, Bogori, Kanchannagar, Kolkata, Ganiti, Khirpai**, etc. Ramchandra passed away on 9th Kartik in the year 1256¹²⁴.

Ramchandra Seal's life story exemplifies the complex relationship between business, art, and the culture of Bengal during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. He was born in 1786, when the Permanent Settlement was implemented in Bengal and Bihar.

The impact of the Permanent Settlement, which entrenched the zamindars as hereditary landowners while also introducing new burdens, created instability for many land-owning families reliant on agricultural income.

As a result, all the big families, whose main source of income was Zamindari, had to fall into economic uncertainty¹²⁵. Needless to say, this type of socio-economic system could not affect the financial base of the Seal family. They chose trading over zamindari and made a partnership with the colonial rulers by taking advantage of that partnership. Because, without being involved in trading, they could not patronize the arts with a free hand¹²⁶.

Newly discovered landed property transaction records of the Seal family of Chinsurah shed light on the intricate nexus between indigenous landed interests and colonial authority in the late nineteenth century¹²⁷. Around 1850, the British East India Company's Board of Revenue sought greater control over *Patta* agreements (written contracts between peasants and landowners) within the Chinsurah division (*Mahakuma*)¹²⁸. However, beyond the Company's administrative motives, internal conflicts among influential native families, particularly the Seals, also contributed to this process.

Haimanti Devi, the wife of Kashinath, a prominent zamindar of Chinsurah with ties to the Seal family, approached the British authorities for assistance in a land acquisition dispute. Kashinath's two marriages likely led to family conflicts over inheritance and property rights¹²⁹. Such private litigations created opportunities for British intervention, as the affected families sought judicial assistance¹³⁰. These intra-family litigations provided convenient entry points for colonial intervention, as disputants sought judicial mediation through British courts. The resulting legal proceedings not only reinforced British judicial

authority but also allowed the colonial government to extend control over *Patta* lands, thereby tightening its grip on Chinsurah's zamindari framework.

During this period, one of the most notable figures of the Seal dynasty was Braja Doorlabh Seal¹³¹. As mentioned earlier, the Seal family had multiple branches in various locations, including Calcutta, where the most renowned merchant was **Raja Rajendralal Mallick**. Similarly, **Braja Doorlabh Seal**, originally a broker and moneylender from Mahajantooli, Murshidabad, migrated to Chinsurah in the mid-18th century¹³². His grandson, Mahendranath Seal, later became a small landlord in Chinsurah. The records primarily pertain to land estate transactions involving Mahendranath Seal and his family¹³³. Sri Sudhindra Kr donated these historical documents, which offer critical insights into the evolving patterns of land ownership and the socio-economic strategies of the Seal family under colonial rule. Seal on June 21, 1989. The records include the following land grants (Pattahs)¹³⁴:-

1. **Pattah granted to Braja Doorlabh Seal**, an inhabitant of Chinsurah, issued with the Company Seal on stamped paper, dated 12 Phalgun 1268 (Bangabda).
2. **Pattah granted Brojo Durlabh Seal (Shill)** land at Kamar Para Bazar with a yearly rent of 2-1 annas and one piece, issued with the Company Seal on December 18, 1849¹³⁵.
3. **Pattah granted to Brojo Doorlabh Seal**, an inhabitant of Chinsurah, 8-0-0 of land at Kamarpara Bazar, with a yearly rent of one rupee, five annas, and four pieces, issued with the Company Seal on January 15, 1850.
4. **Pattah granted to Neelmany Seal (Sheel)** land at Kamar Para, with a yearly rent of five annas and eleven paise, issued with the Company Seal on May 26,

1846¹³⁶. (Neelmany Sheel has been identified as Nilambar Seal in previous discussions.)

Land Grants Related to Other Merchant Families of Chinsurah:

Apart from the Seal family, several other prominent merchant families of the Subarnabanik community in Chinsurah were also granted land by the government. These include¹³⁷:-

1. **Pattah granted to Doorga Charan Laha**, an inhabitant of Chinsurah, for Rs. 5 annas 8 and Paise 10, for land at Panchanone Tola, issued with the Company Seal on October 28, 1861.
2. **Pattah granted to Sreekisto Laha and others**, inhabitants of Chinsurah, for 5 *cottahs* and 6 *chattaks* of land at Panchanantola, with a yearly rent of one rupee and one anna, issued with the Company Seal on February 22, 1856.

Regarding the granting of *patta* land, another interesting detail has been found that, at the time of each land transfer, a *patta* (deed of ownership) was issued, for which the buyer was required to pay a fee known as *pata selami*. In addition to this, Indians were obliged to contribute a certain sum towards the expenses of the Secretary of Revenue, known as the *Cachari*. The *Tantubai* community of Calcutta once protested against this tax, but the protest was suppressed. On this, we must note that the Seal family of Chinsurah also engaged in cotton textile trading along with their principal trade in gold during the time of **Ramchandra Seal**.

However, we don't have such strong evidence in favour of this argument that the Seal family of Chinsurah was also involved in this protest. The amount of *selami* was fixed at **6 taka 4 annas per patta**. Moreover, for land surveys, Indians had to pay **5% of the**

land donation value, along with **2 taka per patta** as survey expenses for the land. According to the revenue accounts of **1784**, a total of **800 taka** was collected under this head, indicating that **400 pattas** were granted that year. However, the money collected from these charges was appropriated by the Company to meet its **annual administrative expenses**¹³⁸. Thus, the above documents reveal that while other influential families, such as the Lahas, were also granted land, the Seal family of Chinsurah engaged in far more extensive business and estate transactions during this period. These records demonstrate the Seal family's dominance in land ownership and financial influence, unveiling their significant role in the economic transformation of Chinsurah and Bengal, too.

III

Pattern of Patronage, Power and Social Dominance

The Seal family has made remarkable contributions to social and philanthropic endeavours, many of which have been previously discussed. Their wealth and social influence are evident in the various notable constructions and establishments they have undertaken in Chinsurah¹³⁹, such as 1) **Shrirajgannath Jeeura Temple**: Originally built on the banks of the Ganga at Nabganj, north of the present-day Burdwan Commissioner's house. The temple was later demolished by the East India Company, leading to the relocation of the idol to Jandeswartala, where a new temple was subsequently built. To this day, the deity is known as *Nab Jagannath*. 2) **Jandeswartala Ghat and Chandni**: Constructed by Nilambar Seal to facilitate religious activities and public use. 3) **Padmavati Ghat (Dattaghat)**: Built by Nilambar Seal in honour of his wife, Padmavati. Though popularly known as *Dattaghat*, its rightful name should be *Padmavati Ghat*. 4) **Nimaichand's Thakurbari**: Built in Madhabitala as a place of worship and community gathering. 5) **Baladev's Thakurbari**: A temple dedicated to Lord Baladev, an incarnation

of Balarama. 6) **Mahaprabhu's Thakurbari:** Located in Balramgalli, dedicated to the worship of Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. 7) **Gopaljee's Thakurbari:** Established in Shilgali for the worship of Lord Gopaljee. 8) **Gopinath's Thakurbari:** Another significant temple in Shilgali, dedicated to Lord Gopinath. 9) **Srivas Mahaprabhu's Thakurbari:** Built at Chaumatha, further enriching the town's spiritual heritage. 10) **Renubala's Thakurbari:** Established in Madhabitala, continuing the family's tradition of temple-building. 11) **Bandhubihari Temple:** Located at Jandeswartala, a key religious site. 12) **Shandeshwarjee's Bhog House:** Constructed at Jandeswartala to prepare and distribute religious offerings. 13) **Pushkarini (Sacred Pond) and Bathing Ghat:** Built at Kulihanda in Dharampur to facilitate rituals and daily bathing. 14) **Drinking Water Well:** Dug at the same location to provide fresh drinking water for the community. 15) **Pushkarini and Bathing Ghat in Yugipara:** Further contributing to the town's infrastructure for religious and daily use. 16) **Annual Fairs during Shandeshwar Puja:** Organized on the Seal family land, attracting large gatherings and cultural festivities¹⁴⁰.

Apart from these, the Seal family's philanthropy extended beyond their hometown, leading to the construction of temples and religious sites in other regions¹⁴¹: 1) Thakurdalan of Mahaprabhu in Katwa District. 2) Mahaprabhu Temple in Burdwan. 3) Shiva and Ganesh Temples in Lakhaudi and Burdwan. 4) Gopinath's Pushkarini and Bathing Ghat in Amaragram, Bardhaman District. 5) Shyamsunderji's Randhan Shala in Khardah, 24 Parganas. 6) Seal-er Dighi (Large Pond) in Panchra, Bardhaman District. 7) Seal-er Dighi in Sahaganj, Hooghly District.

The family is also deeply committed to philanthropic activities, contributing significantly to their community. Among his various philanthropic efforts¹⁴²: 1) **Support for Orphans and Families:** Nilambar Seal was known for his generosity toward orphans,

widows, and struggling families. He offered financial support to help them rebuild their lives. 2) **Empowering Youth:** Nilambar Seal also provided capital to young and aspiring merchants, enabling them to establish their businesses and contribute to the economy. 3) **Temple Establishments and Religious Donations:** He was a devout man who constructed temples and shrines in Chinsurah, providing financial support for their upkeep. He built a Jagannath Dev Temple in the Gurkha Grounds of Chinsurah, known as Nabganj during his time. Despite these temples being later demolished for the Chinsurah Barracks project, the authorities compensated the temple, and Nilambar's idol of Jagannath was relocated to a newly built temple at Shandeswartala, thanks to his grandson, Lakshman Chandra Seal. 4) **Construction of Bathing Ghat and Pilgrim Stayacations:** In 1792 AD (1199 Bangabda), Nilambar constructed a bathing ghat next to the Shandeshwar Jeur Temple. To accommodate pilgrims, he also built *postas*, *chabutras*, and staycations, demonstrating his commitment to supporting the welfare of the common people.

Nilambar Seal's wife, Padmavati Devi, was as committed to philanthropy as Nilambar, leaving behind her legacy of charitable works¹⁴³ : 1) **Temple Construction:** She built the **Nimaichand Jeur Temple** at **Madhavitala** in Chinsurah and funded the construction of a **Mahaprabhuji Temple** in **Katwa**, dedicating her resources to spiritual and cultural development. 2) **Sacrifices for Public Welfare:** Padmavati sold her ornaments to fund public welfare projects, notably to **dig a well**, ensuring access to clean water for the community. 3) **Dattaghat and Legacy:** Her successors, inspired by her dedication, established a **bathing ghat** along the **Ganges**, known today as **Dattaghat**. This ghat also houses a **samadhi shrine** for **Shailbala**, the revered consort of **Nitaichand Seal**, a literary luminary of the Shila dynasty. Padmavati passed away on 26th Bhadra, 1210 Bangabda (1804 AD), about a decade after Nilambar Seal's demise¹⁴⁴. Her contributions

to Chinurah's social, cultural, and spiritual fabric ensured that she remained an immortal figure in the town's history.

Jagmohan Seal, the eldest son of **Nilambar Seal**, carried forward his father's illustrious legacy, emerging as a key figure in Bengal's social, cultural, and intellectual landscape. He married **Ishwari**, daughter of **Mulukram Dev Mandal**, whose shared devotion to *Sevadharmā* (service to humanity) made her an ideal partner in his philanthropic pursuits. Together, they sponsored temple construction, educational scholarships, and charitable initiatives for community welfare. A distinguished **patron of Marga music**, Jagmohan supported renowned musicians such as **Ramachandra**, a master of the Sadarangā tradition from Gwalior (invited in 1806), and **Man Khan**, celebrated for his Khayal renditions, who lived under Jagmohan's patronage in Chinsurah. His patronage extended to education: he endowed annual scholarships for about 200 **Brahmins and Goswamis**, fostering the advancement of learning.

According to a manuscript by **Nitaichand Shila** of the Shila family, Jagmohan hosted vibrant scholarly assemblies attended by luminaries like Jagmohan Goswami, Ramananda Vidyabagish, Panchanan Bhattacharya of Farasdanga, Thakurdas Acharya, and Thakurdas Samaddar of Panchra. He engaged in theological and philosophical debates with leading reformers, notably **Rammohan Roy**, reflecting his intellectual openness and religious curiosity. He also upheld his family's temple-building tradition and deepened his spiritual ties during his pilgrimage to **Vrindavan (1803)**, where he formed a lifelong friendship with the philanthropist **Lalababu**¹⁴⁵. His later years were marked by civic engagement, most notably, his substantial donation to the **Dhaniakhali Road project (1837–38)**, alongside patrons like **Kalikinkar Palit** of Amarpur and **Jayakrishna Mukhopadhyay** of Uttarpara¹⁴⁶. Through his synthesis of entrepreneurial success, cultural patronage, and humanitarian service, Jagmohan Seal stands out as a visionary leader who

not only preserved but elevated the Seal family's legacy, leaving a lasting imprint on Chinsurah's cultural and social history.

Other sons of Nilambar Seal, Madanmohan Seal, were instrumental in maintaining and enhancing the family's religious and cultural standing. He constructed the famous **Thakur Dalan** at **Bara Seal Bari** in **1803**, which became the site for the annual **Kartik Puja** celebrations that continued for 80 years¹⁴⁷. His efforts ensured that the Seal family played a significant role in the cultural life of Chinsurah, hosting numerous cultural festivals. In addition to the Thakur Dalan, Madanmohan also purchased a garden and water tank in the Dharampur area, where he bathed every Baishak (Bengali month). He made massive donations to sundry temples in Chinsurah, further establishing his reputation as a philanthropist. Ananda Mohan, Madanmohan's brother, was also a deeply religious man and contributed to the community's spiritual life by financing the construction of Gopal's temple in Chinsurah Seal Gali. He installed an idol of Gopal in the temple and played an important role in preserving religious artefacts. Notably, a Gangesagar pilgrim, Bala Babaji, requested to stay in the house, and following this, Shalgram Shila Nrisinghaji was worshipped in the temple under the direction of Bala Babaji, whose shoes, dhoni, tongs, and utriya were preserved in the Thakur Dalan after his passing.

Despite their religious and philanthropic endeavours, the Seal brothers were not immune to disputes. They engaged in numerous legal battles to maintain their property, some involving **the East India Company**. In **1839**, the Seals had to take the Company to the **Supreme Court** to assert their claims. After winning the case, the matter was taken to the **Privy Council of Her Majesty the Queen of England**, where the Seals again emerged victorious. The East India Company was forced to compensate the family adequately, further solidifying their legal and financial standing¹⁴⁸. Nonetheless, the sons of Nilambar Seal maintained the family's wealth and ensured its continued influence in **Chinsurah's**

religious and cultural spheres. Their contributions to **philanthropy, religion,** and **litigation** helped elevate the Seal family's stature, and their legacy remains prominent to this day in the region.

Ramchandra Seal, son of Jagmohan Seal, played a pivotal role in shaping the cultural, economic, and intellectual fabric of early 19th-century Bengal. His legacy rests equally on his entrepreneurial success, musical patronage, and engagement with colonial institutions, reflecting the intertwined worlds of commerce and culture that defined his era. A passionate patron of **classical music**, Ramchandra supported eminent artists such as **Bare Mia, Chhote Mia, and Hsu Khan**, fostering a vibrant musical community in **Chinsurah**¹⁴⁹. His association with **Madhav Chand**, teacher of Miya Saheb, and his own training under **Ustad Man Khan** linked him to the core of Hindustani classical traditions. His compositions, noted in *Rag Kalpadrum* by **Krishnananda Rassagar**, attest to his musicianship. He mentored disciples like Gopal Pathak, Paran Mukhopadhyay, Jaldhar Mukhopadhyay, Swarup Sarkar, and Ramakrishna Brahmin, providing them with education and guidance at his own expense¹⁵⁰. Through these efforts, Ramchandra transformed patronage into pedagogy, nurturing Bengal's evolving musical heritage. Economically, his wealth—derived from trading ventures and colonial partnerships—enabled his cultural and philanthropic pursuits. Yet he also stood as a **defender of indigenous rights**: his legal battle against the **East India Company**, culminating in victories before both the **Supreme Court (1839)** and the **Privy Council in London**, compelled the Company to compensate the Seal family, which was an extraordinary achievement that highlighted the resilience and legal acumen of Bengal's elite¹⁵¹.

Ramchandra's lifetime coincided with a transformative phase in Bengal's history: the British takeover of Chinsurah, the rise of **Western education**, and the **Bengal Renaissance**. The inauguration of Lebedev's 'Bengali Theatre' in Calcutta and the

establishment of the Hindu College were milestones in Bengal's intellectual and cultural renaissance¹⁵². Inspired by the circumstances, Ramchandra's outlook also resonated with the reformist spirit of contemporaries like **Raja Rammohan Roy**. The establishment of **Charles Lewis Vogel's English school** in Chinsurah and the activities of philanthropists like Mohammad Mohsin highlighted the role of the Seal family in contributing to the social welfare of the region. Although Ramchandra's wealth, much of which was spent on music patronage, could be seen as part of this larger movement of using one's resources for social impact, particularly in the cultural and intellectual spheres. Yet, other cultural landmarks, such as the installation of the idol of Karunamayi Devi by Mahesh Chandra Som at Shyambabu Ghat and the construction of Bibi Gore by Sat Saib, demonstrated the flourishing of religious and cultural practices during Ramchandra's time¹⁵³.

Nimai Chand Seal, a significant figure in the Seal family of Chinsurah, was born in 1835 during the lifetime of his illustrious ancestor, Ramachandra Seal. His father was Yadav Chandra Seal, and his grandfather was Gour Mohan Seal. Nimai Chand lived during the golden age of Chinsurah and Bengal, marked by a flourishing of art, culture, and literature. The late 19th century witnessed a wave of dramatic endeavours in Bengal, with an increasing interest in both translated and original plays. While early plays like *Bhadrarjuna* (1852) by Taracharan Shikdar and *Bhanumati Chittabilas* (1853) by Harachandra Ghosh were translations, the first original Bengali theatrical milestone was *Kulin-Kul-Sarvasva* by Ramnarayan Tarkaratna in 1854. This play created a stir in Bengal before the arrival of Deenbandhu Mitra's *Neeldarpan*¹⁵⁴. Chinsurah also embraced this theatrical wave. On July 3, 1858, *Kulin-Kul-Sarvasva* was performed at Narottam Pal's house in Shandeswartala, an event reported as a resounding success in *Sambad Prabhakar* on July 9, 1858. Nimai Chand played a pivotal role in this effort as its treasurer. It is believed that, as a classmate of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, he facilitated an invitation

to Bankimchandra to participate in the performance. Although Bankimchandra declined to act, he attended the event as a spectator. Nimai Chand's enthusiasm for theatre was evident from his youth, and he actively contributed to Bengali drama. Among his works are the following notable plays and farces¹⁵⁵: includes, **Baralok** (Farce, 1274 Bangabdo/1867), **Chandravati** (1275 Bangabdo/1868), **Dhruvacharitra** (Puranic historical drama, 1278 Bangabdo/1871), **Hotat Babu** (Farce, satirizing Kshetranath Seal of Kamarpara, 1872), **Tirtha Mahima** (1280 Bangabdo/1873). He also authored two plays, *Nilamber Tagore* and *Kadambari*, although they remained manuscripts. *Nilamber Tagore* was based on the life of Nilambar, the ancestor of the Seal family, showcasing Nimai Chand's deep connection to his lineage and his interest in historical narratives. Nimai Chand Seal was as active in public service as he was in cultural pursuits. He served as the Secretary of Chinsurah Shishu Shikshalaya (Balika Shiksha Mandir) and was a Commissioner of the Hooghly-Chunchura Municipality¹⁵⁶. His dedication to public welfare was evident in his efficiency as an unpaid magistrate in Chunchura, a role in which he served with distinction. Nimai Chand Seal passed away in 1893, leaving behind three sons and a lasting legacy as a dramatist, philanthropist, and public servant. His contributions to Bengali drama, particularly during its formative years, and his efforts to uplift the cultural and educational fabric of Chinsurah ensured his place among the luminaries of 19th-century Bengal. His life exemplifies the harmonious blend of literary passion, civic responsibility, and dedication to heritage¹⁵⁷.

Nitai Chand Seal, born in 1882 (1290 Bangla), son of **Gokulchandra Seal** and nephew of **Nimai Chand Seal**, upheld the literary and cultural legacy of the Seal family. A distinguished **poet and dramatist**, his major works include *Meghdoot*, *Ashrama*, *Tripadya*, *Lahri*, *Jivan Sangeet*, and *Shokanjali*. For his poetic excellence—particularly *Ashrama*—he received the titles '**Sahityaratna**' and '**Kavibhushan**' from the

Vishwamanad Mahamandal of Nadia. Among his most notable contributions are *Sri Gauranga*, a poetic life of **Sri Chaitanya Dev**, and the plays *Shikhandi Bahan* (from the *Mahabharata*) and *Ilabati*, a Bengali adaptation of **Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*** (1334 Bangla). Nitai Chand's life was marked by personal tragedy; his **divorce** and the **deaths of two sons** profoundly shaped his emotional world. Works like *Shokanjali* transformed this grief into universal artistic expression, a quality noted by **Professor Chandrasekhar Debnath**. Despite these sorrows, he remained devoted to literature until he died in **1963 (1370 Bangla)**, leaving behind his eldest son, **Navakishore** and two daughters. His oeuvre stands as a testament to his poetic brilliance, emotional depth, and ability to turn personal suffering into timeless art¹⁵⁸.

Shiv Chandra Seal, the eldest brother of **Gokulchandra Seal** and father of **Nitai Chand Seal**, was a pivotal figure in Chinsurah's intellectual and cultural advancement. A versatile scholar, his works encompassed history, folklore, religious studies, and poetry. Among his notable writings are *Shivbhuti's Epistle*, *Gouda Suvarnavanika*, *The Original Abode of the Arya Caste* (published posthumously in 1931 through Nitaichand Seal's efforts), *The Need for Upanayana of Goldsmiths and Judgment about Impurity*, and his most acclaimed work, *Govindchandra Geet*. Other significant compositions include *History of Silvanish of Chunchura*, *Lakhinder and Behula*, *Rescue Datta Thakur*, *Srilakshminarayana Bratrajakatha*, and studies on rulers such as *King Vikramaditya*, *King Vikramkesari*, and *King Dharmapala II*. In **1920**, Shivchandra played a leading role in founding a **Sahitya Parishad (Literary Council)** at Barasilbati, Chinsurah, attended by eminent scholars like **Mahamahopadhyay Haraprasad Shastri**, **Mahendrachandra Mitra**, **Maulvi Ejad Bux**, and **Nagendranath Dhar**. His paper, *The Original Abode of the Arya Caste*, presented there, reflected his deep engagement with questions of **origins, caste, and cultural identity**. Through his extensive research and literary contributions,

especially *Govindchandra Geet*, Shiv Chandra Seal secured his place as one of the most distinguished intellectuals of the Seal family and a notable figure in modern Bengali scholarship¹⁵⁹.

Among the recent descendants of the Seal family, **Rabindranath Seal** holds a notable place. He was a descendant of **Nilambar's fourth son, Gaurmohan**. In the early 20th century, Rabindranath was deeply influenced by the artistic revival led by figures like **Gaganendranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, and Asit Kumar Haldar**, who championed the oriental style of painting¹⁶⁰. As a result, mythological themes and traditional Indian aesthetics strongly shaped his artistic expressions. However, Rabindranath pursued art at a time when Western artistic movements, such as abstract representation and cubism, were beginning to make an impact in India. This shift in artistic sensibilities may have contributed to the fact that, despite his dedication and talent, **Rabindranath Seal** Babu did not receive the recognition he had hoped for. In tracing the long history of the Seal family, we have focused primarily on individuals who distinguished themselves through intellectual and creative contributions. Since the family's primary occupation was trade, many members gained prominence in business and various independent professions. However, due to the lack of sufficient information and geographical dispersion, their stories remain largely undocumented¹⁶¹.

The Seal family's wide-ranging contributions, spanning commerce, social welfare, and cultural patronage, cemented their lasting influence in Chinsurah and across Bengal. A portrait depicting **Rabindranath Tagore's visit to the Seal residence**¹⁶², underscores their deep cultural ties with Bengal's intellectual and artistic circles. Their wealth enabled them to make enduring investments in education, religion, and community welfare, leaving behind institutions and traditions that remain as living testaments to their legacy. However, their prominence also invites critical reflection. Despite their vast financial and political

power, certain aspects of their engagement during pivotal historical moments raise questions about their social and national priorities. These complexities reveal the nuanced character of their influence, at once transformative and constrained by the values of their time.

In the sphere of religious conviction and beliefs, the Thakur Dalan of the Seal family in Chinsurah, built in 1803 by Madan Mohan Seal, stands as a testament to the family's enduring religious and cultural heritage. For over **80 years**, it has been the centre of grand **Kartik Puja** celebrations, alongside **Itu Puja**, both deeply rooted in the family's faith¹⁶³. When Jagmohan's wife, Ishwari, gave birth to two daughters in succession, she undertook the Kartik Puja *Vrat* (fasting), fervently praying for a son. Soon after, her eldest son, Ramachandra, was born. A similar event occurred in the life of Madan Mohan Seal. After having eight daughters, his wife also observed the Kartik Puja vow, following which she gave birth to a son, Veerananarayana¹⁶⁴. Once a major attraction in Chinsurah, the **Kartik Puja** drew **Dutch and British officials**, featuring lanterns, dancers, jesters, English music, and the famed rhymes of **Dhan Singh Sardar**, capturing the grandeur of the festivities¹⁶⁵. **Durga Puja** at Sealbari was equally distinguished, which was initiated in 1404 Bangabda by the family's Sri Sri Sreedhar Jiu servitors¹⁶⁶. Interestingly, the Seal family's unique worship of Durga as Parvati with Shiva and their divine family¹⁶⁷, a custom shared by the **Laha family** of the Subarnabanik community¹⁶⁸. Performed by Shri Umanath Bandopadhyay, the family priest of the Seal family, the rituals include the Kalabau's sacred Ganges bath and culminate on Bijaya Dashami¹⁶⁹, amid grand illumination, joy, and familial unity, reflecting the Seal family's devotion and legacy.

It is needless to say, the extensive contributions of the Seal family highlight not only their financial affluence but also their deep commitment to social welfare, religious

patronage, and cultural preservation. These enduring structures and traditions continue to serve as landmarks of their legacy in Bengal. While the Seal family of Chinsurah made substantial contributions to their community, social welfare, and the prosperity of the region over a prolonged period, their legacy also invites scrutiny. Despite their immense financial, social, and political influence, certain aspects of their conduct raise questions regarding their broader role in society and the nation, particularly during crucial historical moments. These limitations reveal deeper insights into their mindset and priorities, as we shall explore below.

Despite the intense national struggle for independence during British colonial rule, it is notable that none of the Seal family members actively participated in the freedom movement. While the nation roared for independence, opposing colonial dominance, the Seal family chose not to involve themselves in the cause. This absence of involvement in the larger national struggle raises concerns about their alignment with the colonial government, possibly prioritizing their personal and business interests over the greater values of the nation. The family's silence during such a pivotal time suggests a degree of partisanship and intimacy with the British authorities, potentially due to their advantageous position under colonial rule.

Another defining characteristic of the Seal family was their rigid adherence to the caste system, particularly in terms of marriage. All members of the Seal family married exclusively within the Subarnabanik merchant community. Marriages in this community were not just personal unions but also strategic alliances aimed at safeguarding business interests and property. Such marriages ensured that wealth and assets remained within the community, thereby preserving family resources and business dominance. This approach highlights the family's inflexibility and their limited engagement with broader social or

economic networks beyond their immediate circle. The Seal family's insular approach to business and marriage reflects a prioritization of material interests over social integration or progress.

One of the most striking aspects of the Seal family's social structure was their lack of focus on the education and empowerment of women. While many other families of the time were making strides in the education and social advancement of women, the women of the Seal family remained largely confined within the traditional boundaries of family norms and prestige. Apart from Padmavati, the wife of Nilambar Seal, there are no notable female figures associated with the family. This absence of prominent female members and their limited role in formal education or socialization outside the home reflects the family's conservative and chauvinistic mindset. The lack of efforts to promote women's education and welfare during a period when women's rights were gaining attention elsewhere suggests a deeply entrenched patriarchal system.

Thus, it is important to understand that while the Seal family's legacy in Chinsurah remains undeniably significant, particularly in terms of their contributions to the region's development and prosperity, their actions also reveal certain limitations. They operated within a narrow set of convictions that prioritized family interests, caste practices, and business concerns. While their impact on the city and their community is still felt today, their failure to engage with progressive movements—such as the freedom struggle and social reforms—suggests that they were constrained by an outdated, orthodox mindset. Nevertheless, their endeavours laid down a significant foundation for Chinsurah's development and the larger context of modern Bengal, leaving a unique mark on the region's history.

IV

The Prosperity and Decline of Dutch Hegemony

The 18th century witnessed the zenith and subsequent decline of Dutch trade dominance in Bengal, shaped by intense rivalries with the British and broader shifts in colonial power dynamics. The Dutch trading enterprise in eighteenth-century Bengal reflects a trajectory of adaptation, competition, and eventual decline under growing British dominance. Their early success centred on key commodities such as **saltpetre, opium, and cotton piece goods**, which formed the backbone of their commercial operations. The Dutch pursuit of a monopoly over the saltpetre trade underscores the commodity's strategic importance. Their willingness to pay a substantial *nazrana* of Rs. 32,000 demonstrated commitment, yet their aversion to recurring payments led them to favour straightforward cash transactions. This pragmatic outlook echoed the remark of a Dutch director: 'As the river flows, you have to adjust the light', meaning adapt trading method according to circumstances. Such flexibility enabled them to amass 17,966 bags of saltpetre in 1755, alongside additional acquisitions through intermediaries.

Before the Battle of Plassey (1757), the Dutch held a dominant position in Bengal's saltpetre trade, annually procuring up to 60,000 maunds, nearly half of Bihar's total output. In 1746 alone, 36,000 maunds were transported to Chinsurah, while the English, hindered by logistical constraints, managed only 27,000 from Patna and at times relied on Dutch supplies. Following Plassey, however, the Dutch lost their commercial advantage as the British, backed by favourable alliances and monopolistic privileges, began to control key markets. Indian intermediaries such as Deep Chand, who leased major saltpetre districts in Bihar, and his successor Khojah Wazid, who obtained a Mughal monopoly (1752–1754), played pivotal roles in this transition. Unlike saltpetre and opium, the Dutch trade

in cotton-piece goods remained modest and inconsistent: exports fell from 57,000 pieces in 1750 to 45,000 in 1758, with a minor recovery to 47,000 in 1764. Although the Dutch later redirected efforts toward cotton goods, this shift could not offset losses in their core trades¹⁷⁰.

Despite focusing primarily on trade, the Dutch imposed various taxes (**abwabs**) and duties. However, they did not view land revenue as a major source of income, unlike the British. The Dutch East India Company prioritized commodities like saltpetre and opium over goods such as cotton and silk. They also traded **Boxar**, with **Patna** being a central hub for these activities, and Cassimbazar, the centre of silk production, was also considered highly pertinent¹⁷¹. Although in **Dacca**, the Dutch were relatively inactive compared to the British. Nevertheless, despite these adaptive strategies, the British gradually outmanoeuvred the Dutch, securing control over both the saltpetre and opium trades. Although the Dutch initially led in opium exports from Hooghly, their dominance waned as British commercial aggression intensified. By the mid-eighteenth century, British predominance in Bengal's export economy had decisively curtailed Dutch influence, marking the decline of their once-flourishing enterprise¹⁷². By the early nineteenth century, the Dutch had ceased to be a significant commercial force in Bengal. The *Treaty of London* (1824), which ceded Chinsurah and other trading posts to the British, marked the definitive end of their presence in the region. Though the Dutch had contributed notably to Bengal's trade, particularly in saltpetre and opium, their limited success in cotton-piece goods and inability to adapt to shifting political and economic realities led to their decline. The transition of Chinsurah to British control epitomised the broader European struggle for dominance in Bengal, ultimately culminating in unchallenged British supremacy after the Battle of Plassey.

The changing course of Bengal's maritime trade from the Hooghly region. The decline of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in Bengal (near Chinsurah, under the Hooghly district) and the concurrent rise of the English East India Company (EIC) around the Howrah region towards Calcutta, both events were responsible for a gradual process of this financial shift. It was also influenced by broader shifts in the Indian Ocean trade, regional political changes, and European imperial rivalries. In this matter, historian **Om Prakash** delineates three distinct phases in the VOC trade (1600-80, 1680-1740, and 1740-1800)¹⁷³. The transition from VOC dominance to EIC supremacy in Bengal was a gradual process spanning the 1730s to the late 18th century. The VOC had earlier established a stronghold in Hooghly and Chinsurah, thriving on Bengal's textile, silk, and saltpetre trade. However, the Mughal Empire's decline, coupled with the EIC's superior financial backing and military assertiveness, began undermining Dutch control from the 1730s onward. By the 1740s, the EIC actively expanded its influence, and the Battle of Plassey (1757) marked a decisive turning point, granting it control over Bengal's revenue system and trade¹⁷⁴. The VOC's fortunes dwindled due to declining profits, mismanagement, and British pressure, culminating in the **Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1825**, which ceded Dutch settlements, including Chinsurah, to the British. This shift symbolized a broader global transformation from Dutch maritime supremacy to British imperial dominance¹⁷⁵.

In this regard, the rise of the English East India Company (EIC) as Bengal's dominant power must be viewed within the broader context of eighteenth-century European rivalries and South Asia's fragmented political landscape. The Company's evolution from a trading enterprise to a colonial authority resulted not only from military success but also from its strategic exploitation of European conflicts and local divisions. By the 18th century, the EIC had established a firm foothold in Bengal, contending with the Dutch, French, and Portuguese for control of regional trade. Its joint-stock structure

and parliamentary support provided financial stability and long-term vision unmatched by its rivals. Guided by the Court of Directors, the Company effectively combined commerce with diplomacy and military force. The global turbulence of the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) further enabled the EIC to consolidate power, culminating in the Battle of Plassey (1757), where its victory over Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah marked the dawn of British political supremacy in Bengal¹⁷⁶.

However, the Battle of Buxar (1764) proved even more decisive than Plassey, ending resistance from the Nawab of Bengal, Shuja-ud-Daula of Awadh, and Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II. The Treaty of Allahabad (1765) granted the East India Company Diwani rights over Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, securing the fiscal foundation of its empire. Yet, military success did not resolve conflicts over trade and governance. Indigenous merchants, zamindars, and elites resisted the Company's monopolistic and exploitative policies, which disrupted traditional economies and contributed to famines and unrest. Adam Smith's description of the Company as a "despotic and noxious monopoly" aptly captures the paradox of its rule, an entity driven by profit but functioning as a colonial state. We must understand that the transformation of Bengal into a revenue-extracting base for the Company's operations in India and Britain set the stage for the broader fiscal-military state that the British would establish in the 19th century. The extended struggle over Bengal's trade routes and markets and the EIC's dominance was not a linear conquest but a protracted and disruptive process that reshaped the region's economy, politics, and social structures¹⁷⁷. Thus, the consequences of this transformation would be felt well beyond the 18th century, as the foundations of British colonial rule in India were laid in the marketplaces, ports, and political conflicts of Bengal. The establishment of the Calcutta port catalysed a significant migration of local merchants, including Hindus, Muslims, and Armenians, who flocked to the city to pursue trade under the protection of the British East India Company¹⁷⁸. It is important to recognise two decisive factors in this

transformation. First, the British had already consolidated their supremacy in the colonial race by defeating rival European powers in India.

Secondly, the rapid development of Calcutta was profoundly influenced by the large-scale and continuous migration of merchant families from the Hooghly region. Notably, four branches of the Bysack family, a section of the Setts (while others remained in Chandannagar), the Tagores, and members of the *Subarnabanik* community (one branch of which continued to reside in Chinsurah under Hooghly), along with several other influential families, relocated to Calcutta during this period¹⁷⁹. This movement not only accelerated the decline of Hooghly's commercial prominence but also laid the foundations for Calcutta's emergence as the new economic nucleus of Bengal. The English East India Company (EIC) accelerated Calcutta's emergence as a major commercial hub while contributing to the decline of smaller towns like Hooghly. Driven by the demand for calicoes and the need to secure a permanent foothold, the British systematically eliminated commercial rivals. Holwell, who was an employee and a temporary governor of Bengal, also emphasized maximizing Company revenues, which reflects the strategic focus on economic control of EIC¹⁸⁰. Although the EIC invested little in urban infrastructure, Calcutta attracted settlers, fortune-seekers, and new-generation compradors eager to prosper under Company administration.

The Seal family of Chinsurah eventually became associated with one of the prominent lineages that migrated from Chinsurah to Calcutta. As previously mentioned, the family's genealogy branched into two distinct lines: one that remained in Chinsurah, continuing their ancestral business, and another that moved to Calcutta, where they rose to greater prominence. The Chinsurah branch of the family gradually lost its pre-eminence in the post-Independence period, as Calcutta (Kolkata) emerged as the dominant urban and economic centre of Bengal, overshadowing the declining importance of Hooghly. In

contrast, the other branch, adopting the title *Mallick*, sustained and even expanded its social and economic influence. Yadav's son, Hardu (Hriday) **Mallick**, and his successor, **Raja Rajendra Mallick**, a renowned business magnate of 19th-century Calcutta was among the distinguished descendants of the Seals. Despite their relocation, the family maintained enduring ties with their ancestral region of Chinsurah, while actively participating in broader transregional trade and financial networks. This dual orientation rooted in local tradition yet adaptive to new urban and colonial opportunities exemplified the Seals' (later Mallicks') capacity for strategic mobility and socio-economic negotiation.

The migration of Seal family significantly contributed to reshaping Calcutta's social and economic landscape, symbolizing the wider movement of mercantile families from smaller riverine towns to the emerging colonial metropolis. Through their financial acumen, cultural adaptability, and cross-cultural engagements, they bridged the realms of indigenous enterprise and British imperial commerce. In doing so, they not only adapted to but also helped define the contours of colonial Bengal's hybrid economic order one that fused traditional mercantile values with the structures of a modern colonial economy. Hence, the Seals' movement from Chinsurah to Calcutta mirrors a broader pattern of 19th and 20th century mercantile migration, where indigenous business families strategically relocated to capitalize on new economic opportunities under British rule. Even after migration, the family preserved its ancestral connections, reflecting the tension and balance between *regional rootedness* and *colonial modernity*. This duality underscores the social resilience of Bengali merchant elites. By aligning themselves with emerging colonial trade structures, the Seals-Mallick's exemplified how indigenous entrepreneurs adapted to , rather than were displaced by imperial capitalism, maintaining agency in a changing socio-political order. Their success in Calcutta was not merely economic but also cultural, as elite mercantile families like theirs became patrons of art, education, and public philanthropy, shaping the cultural landscape of 19th-century Bengal.

Notes and References

- ¹ *Porto Piqueno* - *Porto Piqueno*, meaning 'Small Harbor' or 'Little Port' in Portuguese, was the name given to the 16th-century Portuguese trading post established at **Satgaon** in Bengal. Founded with the permission of the Sultan of Bengal, it served as an important center of early Portuguese trade and maritime activity in eastern India. However, the settlement was eventually abandoned after the Ganges River changed its course, leading to the decline of Satgaon.
- ² *VOC*- United East India Company or Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie. It was a Dutch trading company that came to India for trading purposes and eventually paved the way for colonial rule.
- ³ Das Suranjan and Chattopadhyay Basudeb, *European and The Hooghly: The European Settlements on the West Bank of the River*, K.P. Bagchi & Company, Kolkata, 2014, p.15.
- ⁴ Subrahmanyam, Sanjay and Thomaz, Luis Filipe F.R, 'Evolution of Empires: The Portuguese in the Indian Ocean during the Sixteenth Century' in James D. Tracy ed., *The Political Economy of Merchant Empire, State Power and World Power 1350-1750*, Cambridge University, Cambridge, 1991, cited in Das Suranjan and Chattopadhyay Basudeb, *European and the Hooghly: The European Settlements on the West Bank of the River*, K.P. Bagchi & Company, Kolkata, 2014, p.15.
- ⁵ Streensgaard, Niels, *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: The East India Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade*, Chicago University, Chicago, 1973 edtn, cited in Das Suranjan and Chattopadhyay Basudeb, *European and The Hooghly: The European Settlements on the West Bank of the River*, K.P. Bagchi & Company, Kolkata, 2014, p.15.

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- ⁶ Toynbee, G, *A Sketch of the Administration of the Hooghly District from 1795 to 1845: With Some Account of the Early English, Portuguese, Dutch, French and Danish Settlement*, Bengal Secretariate Press, Calcutta, 1888, pp. 12-13.
- ⁷ **Subarnabanik Community** - The *Subarna Banik* community of Bengal, also called Suvarna Banik or Bene, is a traditional mercantile caste historically engaged in gold and silver trading, money-lending, and commerce. Although of lower ritual rank, they attained considerable wealth and social standing through their business skills, particularly in the late 18th century and under British rule, becoming prominent figures in finance and trade.
- ⁸ Chatterjee, Dinabandhu, *A Short Sketch of Rajah Rajendo Mullick Bahadur and His Family*, G. C. Day at the Calcutta Printing works, Calcutta, 1917, pp. 1-5.
- ⁹ Seal, Arunkumar, *Itihaser Pathabhumikay Chinsuraher Seal Bangsha*, Pandulipi Printers, Chinsurah, 1407 Bangabda, pp. 1-2.
- ¹⁰ Adhya, Akshay Kumar, *Hooghly Chinsurah Nanakotha*, Vol. III, Radiance, Calcutta, 2012, p.142.
- ¹¹ Adhya, Akshay Kumar, *Subarnabanik Kotha*, Hooghly Sangbad, Hooghly, 2016, p.42.
- ¹² Chaudhury, Sushil, *Companies, Commerce and Merchants: Bengal in the Pre-Colonial Era, 'The Rise and Decline of Hugli: A Port in Medieval Bengal'*, 1st ed, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, London, 2017, pp. 1-38.
- ¹³ Adhya, Akshay, *Hooghly Chinsurah Nanakotha*, Vol. I, Hooghly Sangbad, Hooghly, pp. 147-148.
- ¹⁴ Chatterjee, Dinabandhu, *A Short Sketch of Rajah Rajendo Mullick Bahadur and His Family*, *loc. cit.*

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- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Laha, Narendranath, *Subarnabanik Katha O Kirti*, Vol. III, Hrishikesh Series-18, Oriental Press, Calcutta, 1942, pp.1-2
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Adhya, Akshay, *Hooghly Chinsurah Nanakotha*, Vol. I, *loc. cit.*
- ¹⁹ Adhya, Akshay Kumar, *Hooghly Chinsurah Nanakotha*, Vol. II, Radiance, Calcutta, 2010, pp. 41-43.
- ²⁰ Chattopadhyay, Saratchandra, *Baikuther Will*, Calcutta, Calcutta, 1916.
- ²¹ Banerjee, Amiya Kumar, West Bengal District Gazetteers: Hooghly, official records, Government of West Bengal, 1972, p. 693.
- ²² Palm leaf documented about the Seal family, in 8th Asar, 1746 Sakabda, Family Papers of the Seal family, Department- private papers, West Bengal State Archive, Kolkata, p. 1.
- ²³ Private Papers, the family tree was published by Kunjabihari Mallik, 1886, cited in Akshya Kumar Adhya, *Hooghly Chinsurah Nanakotha*, Vol. I, *loc. cit.*
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Seal, Arunkumar, *Itihaser Pathabhumikay Chinsuraher Seal Bangsha*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
- ²⁶ Adhya, Akshay Kumar, *Kurshinama*, Rupali, Calcutta, 2022, pp. 180-190.
- ²⁷ Chandra, Satish, *Medieval India: From Sultanat to the Mughals (1526-1748)*, Vol. II, Har-Anand Publication Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 1st year of publication 1999, revised 2006, pp.73-74.
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Chapter-IV

The Roy Family of Andul, Howrah: Under the British Colonial Setup

As discussed in the previous chapters, the history of the Hooghly District and its adjoining regions was deeply intertwined with the prominence of the Hooghly Port, which had long served as a vital centre of trade and communication¹. However, the establishment and subsequent expansion of the Calcutta Port significantly altered this balance. The development of Calcutta Port, particularly from the mid-19th century onward, accelerated the city's emergence as the principal hub of commerce and administration in Bengal. This shift, culminating in the official recognition of Calcutta Port in 1870, marked the gradual decline of Hooghly's maritime importance². During the early 19th century, Hooghly's strategic location and economic prosperity fostered the rise of several influential zamindari families whose power and patronage shaped not only the socio-economic fabric of the district but also influenced Bengal's broader cultural and political landscape.

As the colonial era progressed, neighbouring districts such as Howrah and Calcutta began to mirror this trend, witnessing the emergence of new elite families whose fortunes were closely linked with colonial economic expansion. In this context, Professor Sabyasachi Bhattacharya insightfully observes that European powers systematically sought to dismantle India's ancient towns, indigenous institutions, and traditional financial networks. They replaced these with an exploitative colonial order designed to channel wealth and resources toward imperial interests³. The transformation of Bengal's riverine ports from Hooghly to Calcutta, thus symbolises not merely an economic shift but also a deeper reconfiguration of social and political power under colonial hegemony.

During the colonial period, Bengal underwent drastic transformations across socio-economic and political spheres, leading to the decline and emergence of zamindari

families. The East India Company, in line with local administrative practices, appointed a **zamindar** or tax collector to oversee revenue collection in its territories. Assisting this official was an Indian counterpart, commonly referred to as the *Black Zamindar*, who played a crucial role in managing tax collection and maintaining local governance. By **1704**, the Company had already established a workable town administration, indicating a strategic effort by the Company to strengthen its control over newly acquired territories.

This early administrative framework not only facilitated efficient revenue collection but also helped the company integrate into the existing land revenue system of Bengal. The appointment of local intermediaries ensured smoother governance and minimized resistance from the indigenous population, ultimately solidifying the Company's authority in the region⁴. As colonial rule penetrated the core of Bengal's economy, zamindars played a crucial role in navigating the challenges and opportunities of this new order. On the other hand, many British administrators were prudent in accruing alliances among powerful Bengal zamindars to secure their interests by utilising the delicacy of time. This partnership helped both parties⁵, thus, the rise of new zamindars, who then gained power and prominence in colonial Bengal, affected the economic structure of Bengal significantly and eventually impacted the socio-economic layers of the society.

In this process, **Permanent Settlement**⁶, enacted in 1793, played a pivotal role in the land ownership structure of Bengal and laid the foundation for the emergence of new zamindars by replacing the old ones⁷. Before 1700, the governance of Bengal was largely controlled by non-Bengali *mansabdars*, who were appointed temporarily by the Mughal Empire. These *mansabdars* often relied on sub-collectors to manage the collection of taxes and revenues. However, in the early 18th century, Bengali-speaking zamindars began to replace these non-Bengali *mansabdars*, significantly shifting the structure of revenue

collection. The new Bengali zamindars, along with their dependent collectors, played a crucial role in collecting revenue from various products, including handicraft textiles, rice, sugar, salt, and other commodities. This revenue was then forwarded to the provincial diwan and nizam, with a substantial portion ultimately reaching the Mughal emperor. This shift led to a more localized and semi-permanent system of revenue collection, with the Bengali zamindars acting as key intermediaries. Bengal, with its advanced monetized economy, became the most important source of revenue for the Mughal Empire and later for the East India Company, particularly due to its textile and agricultural sectors⁸.

The fate of the Roy family of Andul in Howrah was deeply intertwined with Bengal's evolving history, both geographically and historically. This chapter will explore how Bengal's shifting historical landscape enabled the Roy family to rise as the most powerful Zamindari family in the Howrah region and contribute to the overall development of their territory. However, the beginning of the emergence Roy family predates the full consolidation of British colonial dominance in Bengal. Still, it is important to understand that the gradual emergence of eminent families like the Roy exhibiting socioeconomic and political changes in Bengal was part of a continuous process of the transformation of Bengal rather than a sudden shift and thus, examining his era provides crucial context to understanding Bengal's transformation overlapping under the late Mughal and early colonial influences.

Owing to the fact in this chapter, we examine the rise and impact of the Roy family of Andul in the Howrah District, which gained prominence under British rule during the colonial period. Unlike other influential families who thrived through trade, the Roy family gained prominence primarily through their zamindari holdings. By examining how their fortunes were shaped by the shifting financial course of the Hooghly River and the transformation of the Howrah district, we gain deeper insight into the broader socio-

economic changes of the time. Their ascent reflects the opportunities and challenges faced by local elites as they navigated colonial rule and contributed to the growth of a regional zamindari and merchant community within the new colonial framework⁹. Given the growing significance of the Howrah district, we will also explore its historical and commercial importance as a key administrative and economic hub.

I

Genealogical Roots and Early Social Position of the Roy Family

The late 19th century's Howrah experienced the rise of several prestigious zamindari and business families around the district¹⁰, such as Ghosh, Dutta Chowdhury, Kundu, Mitra, and Kar. They gained considerable dominance in the Howrah district¹¹. Some of these families, for instance, the Dutta Chowdhury family held their pre-eminence since the medieval period and are known as the oldest Zamindari family of the locality. However, in the colonial era, the Dutta Chowdhury family lost their hold, while concurrently, the Roy family procured superiority in the locality by sharing a strong bond with the British government. Since the pre-colonial period, they acted as a **Gomastha**¹² of the Nawab of Bengal, and later, they were employed as **royal officials** (also known as a **Gomastha**) under the British rulers. Their royal family emblem¹³ stands as the symbol of their power and status. However, in the colonial era, the Dutta Chowdhury family lost their hold, while concurrently, the Roy family procured superiority in the locality by sharing a strong bond with the British government.

The Dutta Chowdhury and Roy families shared a strong genealogical bond through marital ties. While, as mentioned earlier, the Dutta Chowdhury family was the oldest zamindari in Howrah district that prevailed since medieval times, the Kar (later known as Roy) originally hailed from Pathuriaghata at Sutanuti village near Sovabazar in Kolkata.

They were contemporaries of Maharaja Naba Krishna Deb Bahadur of the Sovabazar Raj family¹⁴, another prestigious *bonedi* (*elite families*) family of colonial Bengal. The Roy family settled at Andul in the Howrah district after relocating from Sutanati; however, initially, it belonged to the influential landowning community of the Hooghly district. Previously, the regions of Hooghly and Howrah were part of the Burdhaman district. However, in 1795, these two areas were separated from Burdhaman and collectively known as the Hooghly district. Again, in the years 1937-38¹⁵, the region was separated from the Hooghly district to form the newly established Howrah district, and the family was included there. The early residential area of the Roy family is still known as ‘Andul Roy Para’¹⁶ in the Howrah district, reflecting their prestigious legacy and growth under the colonial dictum¹⁷.

Here, it is important to note how the Kar family strengthened their social status through the marital connections with the Dutta Chowdhury family¹⁸. Regarding this, the main initiator behind the rise of the Roy family was **Kashiswar Dutta Chowdhury**, whose son-in-law, **Gauri Shankar Basu-Mullick**, exercised the power of the Dutta Chowdhury family to secure the zamindari on his own at Andul and subsequently escorted his brother-in-law, **Bhubaneshwar Kar**, to gain the zamindari in the same locality¹⁹. At that time, the power and dominance of the Dutta Chowdhury family were so evident that it helped both the families, Mullick and Kar, to get the locality’s zamindary²⁰. Dutta Chowdhury and Kar, both families, were part of the **Kayastha community** and belonged to the Bharadwaja clan. Back then, the Kayastha community was also recognised as an esteemed and highly influential group, which endorsed both families to elevate their position. It demonstrates how intermarriages and strategic alliances among the prominent zamindari families of Bengal contributed to consolidating wealth and power, thereby sealing their zamindari by overcoming all challenges.

The genealogy and prestige of Bengal's Kayastha families cannot be understood without reference to the enduring legend of **King Adisur** and the supposed migration of five Brahmins and five Kayasthas from Kannauj. This myth, deeply ingrained in Bengal's social memory, asserts that these migrants laid the foundation for Bengal's **Kulin Brahmin** and **Kulin Kayastha** lineages²¹. Two competing interpretations frame this tradition. The traditionalist view maintains that Adisur's invitation marks the origin of Bengal's highest social orders, thus legitimizing the Kulin elite as *foreign-born bearers of Sanskritic purity*²². The revisionist view, advanced by scholars such as **Nagendra Nath Basu**, argues instead that the Kulin status was locally constructed. According to this theory, the Kayasthas were indigenous to Bengal, and their elevated rank was a royal or administrative distinction granted to powerful families rather than a marker of northern origin. Basu's argument deconstructs the notion of migration, proposing that Bengal's Kulin system evolved from regional power structures, court patronage, and marital regulation, rather than from imported lineages²³.

This debate was particularly active in the early 20th century, when Bengali intellectuals sought to reconcile caste origins with historical evidence. The Kayasthas' identity was central to these discussions: while some traditional narratives classified them as *Sudras* or subordinates to Brahmins, others emphasized their historical roles as scribes, administrators, and warriors, aligning them with the Kshatriya order. Prominent Kayastha families such as the **Bose, Ghosh, Mitra, Datta, and Guha**, considered the five principal Kulin Kayastha lineages of southern Bengal (Rarh), became the subjects of both genealogical and social-historical scrutiny²⁴. Modern research, including genealogical documentation and genetic analysis, has attempted to reassess the authenticity of the Adisur legend. Yet both sources present challenges: genealogical records often carry ideological biases, while genetic evidence can be obscured by centuries of intermarriage

and regional mobility. Even so, such inquiries have illuminated how social status in Bengal evolved as a complex interplay of myth, political power, and self-representation, rather than a straightforward consequence of migration.

Regardless of its factual basis, the Adisur legend finds institutional continuity in the Sena dynasty's codification of Kulinism during the 12th century²⁵. The Sena migrants themselves from southern India were ardent patrons of orthodox Hinduism. Under **King Ballal Sena**, genealogical registries were formalized, and specific **Brahmin, Kayastha, and Baidya** lineages were officially designated as *Kulin*, cementing Bengal's caste hierarchy for centuries to come²⁶. This royal formalization elevated families such as the **Dutta Chowdhury and Kar (Roy)**, whose administrative roles and Sanskritic affiliations aligned with the state's emphasis on literacy, record-keeping, and social order. The result was a deeply stratified but mutually reinforcing system of power, in which genealogy, landholding, and cultural prestige converged to sustain elite dominance, a pattern visible in Howrah's zamindari networks well into the colonial era.

Short Chronological History of the Prominent Personalities

Among the most prominent personalities of the Roy family, **Bhubaneshwar Kar** was known as the earlier patriarch of the family. Ram Charan Roy was the direct descendant of Bhubaneshwar Kar. Though the precise tenure of his zamindari was not very clear, several documents have indicated that it could be around 1720 to 1770²⁷. Bestowed by fortune, the Kar family rose to prominence during the time of Bhubaneshwar Kar, who was awarded the title of 'Roy' by the then Muhammadan Government of Bengal and thus, used it instead of 'Kar'²⁸ since then. It has been said that he worked as a *gomastha* (the royal officials of Bengal's nawab) and the title was bestowed for his efficiency, which

signifies his distinction in the government. Nonetheless, it was during the tenure of **Ram Charan Roy**, whose leadership laid the foundation for the family's rise to prominence.

Several descendants of the Ram Charan Roy, including **Ram Lochan Roy (son)**, **Raj Narayan Roy (grandson)**, **Bijoy Keshab Roy (great-grandson)**, and later **Kshetra Krishna Mitra (successor)** and **Upendra Nath Mitra (successor)**, and **Nagendra Mitra (successor)** continued the family legacy by serving the British administration in various capacities and attaining notable positions of distinction. Their collective contributions spanned diverse spheres, ranging from politics, administration, economy, education, to culture, reflecting the family's multifaceted influence on colonial Bengal's socio-political fabric, which we study in the upcoming section of the chapter. Notably, members such as **Ram Lochan Roy**, **Raj Chandra Roy**, and **Raj Narayan Roy** were conferred with **honorary titles** by the British government, affirming their prestige and establishing the Roys as one of the eminent "**Raj Families**" of Bengal²⁹.

II

Integration with the Colonial Economy: Andul and Howrah as Commercial Hubs

The name of the 'Howrah' region by itself contains an intriguing and somewhat debated history, with multiple theories about its origin. Historically, the town and district, sometimes spelt as 'Haurah'³⁰ and also pronounced 'Habra', gained prominence with the establishment of the **railways in 1854**, a development that marked the region's integration into the colonial economy. The advent of the railways exemplified how colonial infrastructure projects transformed rural Bengal, turning modest settlements like Howrah into significant urban and industrial centres. Before the expansion of railways, it was basically a village named 'Harirah' is believed to have occupied the area where Howrah town now stands, potentially serving as the source of the district's current name.

Linguistically, the evolution of 'Howrah' from 'Harirah'³¹ may have occurred through processes such as epenthesis and vocalic harmony, resulting in gradual transformations like Harirah → Hairiah → Hairrya → Howrah³². Such phonetic shifts are common in Bengal. However, another theory suggests that the name might have originated from a different source, though documentation on this perspective is incomplete. As a result, the true etymology of 'Howrah' remains a subject of scholarly debate.

Geographically, the Howrah district was part of the southeastern Burdwan Division, lying between 22°13' and 22°47' north latitude and 87°51' and 88°22' east longitude³³. Covering an area of approximately 510 square miles, it was the smallest district in Bengal in terms of size but had a substantial population of 850,514. Despite its limited land area, Howrah was more densely populated than districts such as Angul, Palamau, Singhbhum, and Darjeeling, particularly during the colonial period when the population surged³⁴. This density reflects the district's economic and strategic significance. The district was bordered to the north by the Arambagh and Serampore subdivisions of Hooghly district and to the east by Kolkata and the Barrackpore, Alipur, and Diamond Harbour subdivisions of 24 Parganas district. To the south, it connected with the Tamluk subdivision of the Midnapore district, while to the west, it bordered the Tamluk and Ghatal subdivisions of Midnapore and the Arambagh subdivision of the Hooghly district³⁵. Howrah's boundaries consisted of natural and artificial demarcations. The Rupnarayan River formed the natural boundary on the west and southwest, while the Bhagirathi River marked the eastern and southeastern limits. In the north, aside from small stretches defined by the Baly Khal and Damodar Rivers in the northeast and northwest, the district's boundary was established through artificial lines marking the southern limits of the Hooghly district³⁶. Due to the colonial expansion and reshuffling, disputes arose over district boundaries, leading to significant administrative challenges in Bengal³⁷.

These disputes disrupted governance and necessitated official interventions to clarify territorial demarcations. Especially in operating zamindari estates which came under the local zamindari families, like, Roy, thus, this subject will be examined in the upcoming section of the chapter.

Howrah region was situated between the Hooghly (Bhagirathi) River to the east and the Rupnarayan River to the west, intersected by the Damodar River, and characterised by a flat alluvial plain. This plain rises gradually and almost imperceptibly towards the north and northwest, causing the general flow of drainage to be directed towards the south and southeast³⁸. The district's landscape is largely shaped by the action of these rivers and their tributaries, dividing it into two primary regions: the elevated riverbanks and the expansive marshes or lowlands that lie between them. These features further create three distinct geographical tracts, each defined by a central depression enclosed by higher riverbanks³⁹:

1. **Eastern Tract:** Extending from the Hooghly (Bhagirathi) River and its branch, the Saraswati River.
2. **Central Tract:** This region is traversed by the Damodar River and its branch, the Kana Damodar (also known as the Kausiki River).
3. **Western Tract:** Located between the Damodar and Rupnarayan rivers.

The upper courses of the Damodar and Rupnarayan rivers are slightly elevated compared to the Hooghly (Bhagirathi), and the land between them is crisscrossed by numerous canals, known locally as *khals*⁴⁰. These canals, vital for drainage and navigation, often dry up or become very shallow during the hot season. Therefore, a prominent feature of this riverine landscape is the formation of natural levees along all the major rivers. These levees enclose extensive swamps (*jheels*) and depressions (*jalas*), which transform into

vast sheets of water during the monsoon. For instance, the eastern part of Howrah city is built on the levee formed by the Bhagirathi River, while its western section lies over the Dankuni and Howrah swamps, which extend from north to south between the Bhagirathi and Saraswati Rivers. Other notable swamp areas include:

- **Rajapur Swamp:** Located between the Saraswati and Kana Damodar rivers.
- **Amta Swamp:** Stretching between the Kana Damodar and Damodar rivers.

By around 1909, several *khals*, including Bali, Raiganj, Sankrail, Sijberia, and Champa, were vital navigable channels for both Howrah and Bengal⁴¹. However, the depth of the Hooghly River gradually decreased over time. As it enters the Howrah district at Bally, the river flows past Ghosuri, forming the boundary between the cities of Calcutta (now Kolkata) and Howrah⁴².

The district Howrah had an irregular triangular shape, bordered on two sides by major rivers, with its apex located near the confluence of these rivers near Fort Mornington. The district's maximum length from east to west was about 28 miles, while it stretched nearly 40 miles from north to south between the Hooghly River to the east and the Rupnarayan River to the west. The interior of the district was marked by extensive swamps and depressions that transformed into vast sheets of water during the rainy season. The land was generally low-lying, with higher ground found primarily along the riverbanks, where most villages were situated. These villages followed the winding paths of the waterways, creating a picturesque landscape surrounded by dark belts of mango trees, feathery palms, and clusters of bamboo, with rice fields extending to the edges of reed-bordered marshes. However, in certain areas, such as between Makardah and Bargachhia, the land was so low that miles stretched without a single house or tree, with only the banks of the Rajapur channel breaking the monotony of the flat, fen-like terrain⁴³.

South of the South-Eastern Railway, from Kolaghat to Uluberia, the landscape underwent a noticeable transformation. The channels of the three major rivers—the Hooghly (Bhagirathi), Damodar, and Rupnarayan—broadened, and their currents strengthened, necessitating the construction of embankments to prevent flooding.

In this region, villages were more sparsely situated, roads were fewer, and the numerous watercourses or embankment paths served as the primary avenues of communication. The deep channel of the Hooghly alternated from left to right, following the river's winding course, except where it was influenced by large tributaries entering at the southern end of the district. Starting from the Howrah Bridge, the deep channel followed the Calcutta side of the river in the Calcutta Reach, passing landmarks such as Fort William and Kidderpore before continuing to Garden Reach. At Rajganj, opposite Hangman Point, the deep channel shifted to the Howrah side, following the Sankrail Reach up to Melancholy (Manikhali) Point. From there, it zigzagged at each bend, reflecting the river's dynamic nature. During the rainy season, the rivers often flooded, breaching embankments and inundating the countryside, turning the district into an inland sea, with scattered villages appearing as islands amidst the floodwaters. It exhibits how the rivers, carrying significant amounts of silt, flowed with increased velocity, eroding their banks as they moved toward the sea. However, the Howrah district was known for its extensive network of deep channels before the arrival of Job Charnock. This phenomenon was attributed to the formation of the 'Sumatra Sand Bank', created by the sinking of the ship *Sumantra* at the projecting angle of 'Howrah Ghat'⁴⁴.

Although, the early history of Howrah remains obscure, with limited documentation and heavy reliance on conjecture. However, its proximity to **Tamralipti (modern Tamluk)**, an ancient seaport frequently cited in the *Mahabharata*, Jain and Buddhist texts, and Ptolemy's *Geographia*, suggests that the area was inhabited long

before the Christian era⁴⁵. Given its low-lying, riverine terrain, early settlers were likely **fishermen and boatmen**, a tradition that persists today, with the **Kaibartta** community comprising nearly one-third of the district's population⁴⁶. In ancient times, Howrah likely fell under the **Suhma or Tamralipta** kingdoms before becoming part of the **Radha region**⁴⁷.

By the 12th century, it may have come under the rule of the **Ganga kings of Orissa**, notably Chodaganga, who is said to have conquered "Mandar," possibly corresponding to modern **Mandaran**. Palm-leaf chronicles from the **Jagannath Temple** mention King **Anangabhimadev (1200 A.D.)**⁴⁸, who extended his northern frontier, indicating Orissan influence over Howrah and adjoining regions⁴⁹. Since ancient times, Suhma was part of Radha, possibly corresponding to the modern Howrah and Midnapore districts⁵⁰. Thus, Howrah's early history reflects shifting control among regional powers, from Suhma to Radha and later to the Gangas of Orissa.

Opportunities Created by Colonial Economic Restructuring: Railways, Port of Calcutta, Industrial Expansion

During the late 18th and 19th centuries, due to the changing discourse of the Hooghly River, the commercial significance of the Howrah region was increased, which laid the foundation for its continued development as a port and industrial centre in the 20th century. In this process, Howrah rose to prominence through the evolution of salt trading and the role of *gohlahs* (milkmen) in it, which reflects the region's adaptation to changing economic and logistical demands. Salt was a major commodity under the East India Company's monopoly and crucial for paying European servants after the Company acquired the *Dewani* (revenue collection rights) in Bengal. In 1766, the price of salt was fixed; however, by 1772, salt manufacturing in Bengal had been standardised and

controlled by the Company. Initially, salt manufactories were farmed out to private operators, but by 1780, European servants began receiving wages and commissions instead of profits.

This system, established in 1793, remained in effect until 1862. While no salt was manufactured in Howrah, the region played a crucial role in the storage and distribution of imported salt⁵¹. On the other hand, the *gohlahs* (Milkman) in Howrah served as bonded labourers in warehouses for imported salt. Their exact establishment date is uncertain, but it likely occurred between 1793 and 1801. Initially, under the Western Salt Chowkey, they came under the Board of Customs, Salt, and Opium's supervision in 1819. Originally located in Howrah, the *gohlahs* were moved to Sulkea when the Railway Company expanded its premises. The original buildings in Sulkea were later destroyed by fire, leading to new warehouses being constructed across the river and additional *gohlahs* established in Goosery, Bandah Ghat, and Seebpore by 1861⁵².

Growth of Howrah as a Trading Centre under British Rule

The first European reference to a site within Howrah appears in the journal of **Cesare Federici (1578)**, who described *Bator* (now *Betor*) as a seasonal river port⁵³ with temporary trading structures, signifying Howrah's early role in Bengal's maritime commerce. With the **Battle of Plassey (1757)** and the subsequent **Treaty of 1760**, Burdwan, Midnapore, and Chittagong were ceded to the British, bringing Howrah under Company rule as part of the Burdwan district. A notable 18th-century incident occurred in **1759**, when British and Dutch forces clashed on the Hooghly River near Howrah, marking the region's early entanglement in colonial rivalries⁵⁴. During the **Indian Mutiny of 1857**, Howrah again drew attention when Colonel **James Neill** led the *Madras (1st Royal Dublin) Fusiliers* through the district. A brief but fierce encounter damaged the British

ship *Duke of Dorset*, though casualties were avoided through improvised defensive measures.

After this incident, administratively, Howrah underwent significant changes during British rule. In 1787, the British government divided parts of the Hooghly district, transferring portions to Jessore and Nadia to streamline administration and reduce costs. Muhammad Aminpur was transferred to Nadia. Following the decennial settlement in 1795, Hooghly and much of Howrah were detached from Burdwan to form a separate magisterial charge, though the Collectorate remained unchanged⁵⁵. *Thanas* (Police Station), like Bagnan and Amta, were placed under Hooghly's jurisdiction, while Howrah city was administratively linked to Calcutta. Criminal cases from Howrah were tried by the Magistrate and Judge of 24-Parganas, who visited weekly. Further restructuring in the early 19th century saw Rajapur (now Domjor) transferred from 24 Parganas to Hooghly in 1814, followed by Kotra (now Syampur) and Uluberia in 1819. On May 1, 1822, the Hooghly and Howrah Collectorates were separated from Burdwan, reflecting their growing administrative importance. Howrah's city continued to expand, and in 1843, its magisterial jurisdiction was separated from Hooghly. William Tayler was appointed the first Magistrate of Howrah, overseeing areas like Salkia, Amta, Rajapur, Uluberia, Kotra, and Bagnan. For 20 years, the Magistrate of Howrah was subordinate to the Judge of 24 Parganas, but in 1864, the district was placed under the jurisdiction of the Judge of Hooghly⁵⁶.

Nonetheless, the transformation of Howrah from a small village to a significant administrative centre spanned over a century, marked by multiple attempts to establish its independent jurisdiction. By 1861, Howrah's growing importance led the *Sudder* Diwani Court to propose appointing a Civil and Sessions Judge exclusively for the district. This judge would also serve as an Additional Judge for the 24-Parganas and Hooghly, replacing

the Additional Judge responsible for cases related to the Dacoity Department. Additionally, it was suggested that the newly appointed Small Cause Court Judge be granted the powers of Principal Sudder Ameen and be stationed at the circuit house⁵⁷. While the government acknowledged the necessity for these changes, the proposal was quietly abandoned. The idea resurfaced in 1865 with a modification that proposed establishing a fiscal jurisdiction for Howrah, but this too was quickly dismissed. In 1867, another attempt was made to create an independent district for Howrah, covering revenue, civil, and magisterial matters, excluding a regular treasury. However, the projected expenses were deemed too high compared to the perceived benefits, leading to the proposal being dropped once again.

Despite these setbacks, a Magistrate had been appointed specifically for Howrah as early as the 1840s. Nevertheless, Howrah remained administratively dependent on Hooghly. Even by 1909, as narrated by O'Malley in his *Bengal District Gazetteers*, the administration of revenue and civil justice in Howrah was still under the jurisdiction of Hooghly⁵⁸. The District and Sessions Judge of Howrah continued to function as an Additional District and Sessions Judge of Hooghly, a situation that persisted until 1937. A significant milestone was reached on December 8, 1937, with the formal separation of the administration of civil justice between the two districts, as noted in Notification No. 9150-J.

As a result, a separate judgeship for Howrah was established, effective January 1, 1938. Previously, in 1920, the Revenue Departments of the Howrah Collectorate had been independently organised, marking the point at which the Collector of Howrah became independent of the Collector of Hooghly in revenue matters. This gradual administrative evolution was crucial in Howrah's journey toward becoming an independent district, solidifying its status as a key administrative hub in Bengal⁵⁹. Here, it is worth noting that

previously, the regions of Hooghly and Howrah were part of the Burdwan district. However, in 1795, these two areas were separated from Burdhaman and collectively known as the Hooghly district. Again, in the years 1937-38⁶⁰, the region was separated from the Hooghly district to form the newly established Howrah district, and the family was included there. The early residential area of the Roy family is still known as ‘Andul Roy Para’⁶¹ in the Howrah district, reflecting their prestigious legacy and growth under the colonial dictum⁶². The causes behind the formation of the Howrah district were vast and complicated, which we will discuss later.

III

Economic Activities of the Roy Family

The financial rise of the Andul Roy family must be traced back to the **pre-colonial era**, for their enduring legacy seamlessly bridges both the Mughal and British periods. This rare continuity of influence distinguishes them as one of the few zamindari families in Bengal who managed to sustain their social and political dominance across the two epochs. The early economic history of the Andul’s **Roy family** was deeply intertwined with the **Dutta Chowdhury family** of Andul, one of the region’s most age-old landholding lineages. As mentioned earlier that the Dutta Chowdhury, and Roy families were bound by close genealogical and marital ties, which proved instrumental in consolidating their collective fortunes. The principal architect behind the rise of the Roy family was **Kashiswar Dutta Chowdhury**, a powerful zamindar whose son-in-law, **Gauri Shankar Basu-Mullick**, leveraged his father-in-law’s influence to secure independent control of the Andul zamindari. Later, Gauri Shankar assisted his brother-in-law, **Bhubaneshwar Kar**, in acquiring another share of the zamindari in the same locality⁶³. At that time, the fatal dominance of the **Dutta Chowdhury family** in the region facilitated the

establishment of both the **Mullick** and **Kar** families as zamindars⁶⁴. In this way, the Kar family strengthened their social status through the marital connections with the Dutta Chowdhury family⁶⁵. Thus, the early phase of the Roy family's financial history was closely intertwined with the patronage and protection of the Dutta Chowdhury family. To understand how the Andul's Roy family administered their estate during this formative period, it is essential to examine the Mughal land revenue system, which served as the fundamental administrative framework prior to the complete consolidation of British rule.

During the Mughal era, the empire's administrative divisions were fundamentally organized based on the country's revenue settlements and structure. The Mughal state was divided into *subahs* (provinces), which were further divided into *sarkars* (districts), *parganas* (sub-districts), *talukas*, and finally *mauzas* (villages). Bengal, as a *subah*, comprised several *sarkars*, among which the **Sarkar of Satgaon** (present-day Howrah and Hooghly districts) was particularly important⁶⁶. Several sources confirmed⁶⁷ that the **zamindari of Andul Raj** family came under the division of **Satgaon Sarkar** (district) and under the **Pargana** (Sub-district) of **Muzaffarpur**⁶⁸. However, the name of 'Muzaffarpur' believed to be derived from *Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah*, the first Sultan of independent Bengal, who styled himself as *Muzaffar* on his coins. Within this administrative geography, the foundation of the Andul zamindari began to take shape.

In the late 14th century (1380–1390), **Devdas (Tekari) Dutta**, a patriarch of the Dutta Chowdhury family. He inherited vast estates from his father, **Murari Duttabiswas**, in the Muzaffarpur pargana and migrated to the western bank of the **Saraswati River**, finally settling down at **Andul-Mahiyari** in the Howrah region. Accompanied by groups of occupational castes, like Brahmins, washermen, barbers, potters, blacksmiths, Malakars, Dules, Dhirabs, Shabars, and others, Tekri Dutta cleared the forested land of the region and established a thriving agrarian settlement. Through these efforts, he effectively

became a **self-governing landlord**, consolidating authority over approximately **252 bighas** of land. In this newly developed territory, **Tekari Dutta** constructed temples, hospitals, and educational institutions, laying the groundwork for what would become the **Dutta Chowdhury empire of Andul**. His growing power did not go unnoticed by **Sultan Sikandar Shah**; hence, recognizing his influence and economic prosperity, **Sultan** appointed him as the **chief revenue collector (Chowdhury)** of the **Muzaffarpur pargana** and honour him with the prestigious title of 'Chowdhury'. The designation *Chowdhury* was a **Royal title**, signifying government recognition of a local ruler's administrative competence; thus, they identify themselves as '**Dutta Chowdhury**'. This royal endorsement elevated Tekari Dutta to quasi-princely status; his subjects referred to him as **Raja Babu**, a local term denoting princely authority. Henceforth, the family became known as the **Dutta Chowdhury of Andul**, rather than merely of **Muzaffarpur**, as their residence and *kachari bari* (administrative headquarters) were located in the Andul-Mahiyari area⁶⁹.

Under Mughal norms, Chowdhurys were responsible for collecting land revenue from the *mouzas* (villages) within their *pargana*. They typically retained **one-fourth (25%)** of the collected revenue as commission, remitting the remaining **three-fourths (75%)** to the state treasury. However, given the vast scale of **Tekari Dutta's** estate and his hereditary claim over large tracts of land, it is probable that his share exceeded the standard quarter. Over time, he and his descendants effectively gained **ownership over the entire pargana**, turning their administrative power into hereditary property. The **Muzaffarpur pargana** comprised nearly a hundred *mouzas*, many of which today fall within the **Howrah district**, which includes **Andul, Mahiyari, Aorgori, Mashila, Jhorhat, Kamrangi, Duilya, Mirzapur, Alampur, Jangalpur, Sankrail, Dhulagori, and Kandua**. This system, deeply embedded in the Mughal agrarian and fiscal framework,

formed the economic and institutional base upon which the later **Andul Roy family** built their wealth and authority. The family's success in transitioning smoothly from the Mughal to the British regime testifies to their political adaptability, administrative acumen, and shrewd maintenance of social alliances⁷⁰.

In the reign of Nawabs of Murshidabad, Bengal developed a highly intricate revenue-collecting system that foreshadowed the complex land tenure for which it became infamous under British rule. The Mughal administration, seeking to avoid the cost and difficulty of managing numerous petty zamindars, allowed Murshid Quli Khan and his successors to consolidate large territories under powerful zamindars titled "Rajas." Some of these, such as the Rajas of Bishnupur and Chandradwip, were ancient Hindu chiefs who retained autonomy under Mughal rule, while others—like those of Rajshahi, Bardwan, and Nadia were Mughal officials or revenue farmers who transformed their jurisdictions into hereditary zamindaris. The colonial Bengal revenue system was a complex and deeply hierarchical structure, extending from the **zamindars (sadr)** at the top to the **village heads** at the base. In the **mufassal** or rural interior, village heads were often superior **raiyats**. They were responsible for collecting revenue from cultivators and paying it to the lower-grade revenue collectors. The presence of numerous **grihastha** gentry, clean-caste householders of moderate rank and income, further complicated the system. Their customary rights in the land's produce had to be integrated within the revenue chain, resulting in a multilayered hierarchy with a natural tendency toward **sub-infeudation**. This sub-infeudation was encouraged by the fact that **zamindars and Taluqdars** held rights not over the land itself but over its revenue. Only in their home villages did they maintain private estates known as **nij jote, khamar, or nankar**, where they enjoyed effective ownership akin to that of the **Jotedars**⁷¹. In other villages under their jurisdiction, however, they exercised authority primarily through revenue collection and the imposition

of **mal** (land tax) and **sayer** (customs duties). Originally denoting tenants holding land directly under zamindars (not subtenants), the term came to represent a powerful rural elite by the nineteenth century. Unlike the literate and ritually high zamindars, they often came from the casts like, **Brahmans, Kayasthas, Vaidyas, Saiyads, or Maulvis**⁷². Owing to the fact, the **Andul Roy** family was one of them and belonged to the **Kayastha** community.

By the time of British rule, about **15** such great estates paid **60%** of Bengal's total land revenue and governed nearly half its parganas. These were not private estates but quasi-principalities, where the zamindars functioned as territorial administrators rather than landholders, maintaining armed forces, enforcing law and order, and managing revenue collection. Beneath them existed a dense hierarchy of **Taluqdars** and service-holding **gentry**, each with inherited and transferable rights to collect revenues from defined areas. This pyramidal system of fiscal rights, extending from zamindars down to village heads, fostered sub-infeudation since these rights were tied to revenue, not to the land itself⁷³. The **Andul Roy** family was one of those zamindars who emerged during the colonial period, who fulfilled all those requirements for making a strong bond with the colonial ruler, which needs to be examined further.

The real rise of the Andul Roy family can be traced to the era of **Ram Charan Roy**, whose career marked the family's entry into prominence during the early colonial period. Originally residing in **Pathuriaghata** (Kolkata, near Sutanuti village), he later relocated to **Andul** (Howrah), where his fortunes began to flourish. Around the mid-18th century, Ram Charan entered the service of the **British East India Company**, beginning his career as a *Vakil* (legal representative) of the Hooghly district with a modest monthly salary of **Rs. 20**. Displaying exceptional administrative ability, he soon assumed the post of **Sirkār**, which was a respected and influential position in the Company's local administration. His efficiency and growing reputation led him to a **transfer to**

Murshidabad, which was a political hub of Bengal back then, where his remuneration rose to **Rs. 40 per month**, supplemented by an additional **Rs. 28 as peon allowance**⁷⁴.

What distinguished Ram Charan Roy was not merely his official designation but his intellectual discipline and adaptability in a rapidly changing colonial milieu. He mastered multiple languages, **Persian, Arabic, and English**, which was a rare accomplishment at a time when linguistic versatility was key to navigating both Mughal bureaucratic traditions and the emerging British administrative system. With this, his diligence, loyalty, and diplomatic acumen earned him the confidence of influential British officials, including **Lord Clive** and **Warren Hastings**, who recognized his competence and integrity⁷⁵. In this state of affairs, Ram Charan effectively bridged two worlds through his service- the waning Mughal order and the rising British regime, thereby laying the foundation for the Roy family's social and political ascendancy in Bengal. His career reflects the broader transformation of the Bengali elite during this transitional period, as families of administrative and intellectual merit aligned themselves with the colonial power structure to secure prosperity and influence.

After the Battle of Plassey, when the East India Company became the de facto ruler of Bengal, Dewan Ram Charan's fortunes soared. His increasing influence and deep connection with the British made him an indispensable ally⁷⁶. As a result, around 1757, he emerged to the rank of *Diwan* during the time of **Governor H. Vansittart and General Smith**. With a salary of **Rs. 60 per month**, he accumulated great wealth during the tenure of **Lord Clive**⁷⁷. He continued to serve with distinction, and his prestige increased after the Battle of Buxar in 1764, when the British cemented their control over Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa⁷⁸.

The role and connection of the Andul Roy family to the aftermath of the Battle of Plassey is indeed a fascinating event in Bengali history. Although much has been documented in history about the failure of Siraj-ud-Daulla, the transfer of his wealth by plunder and the role of Andul zamindars in this incident have not been extensively covered yet. Siraj's massive treasure, which might be valued at around **100 crores** today, reached Andul by boat through the river Saraswati. It has been recorded that by taking advantage of this chaotic situation, Ram Charan Roy managed to assemble massive wealth⁷⁹. Regarding this, some sources suggest the involvement of the *Zamindar* of Andul in the suspicious execution of Maharaja Nandakumar in 1775 during the tenure of Warren Hastings as the Governor-General. However, these claims have been disputed historically. Many contemporary historians view his execution as a miscarriage of justice orchestrated by Hastings to eliminate his political rivalry, in which the Andul Roy family was mentioned to be linked to the incident in favour of the British government. Although historical records suggest their role might not have been as central as speculated⁸⁰. Nevertheless, the controversy alluded to the partnership between the British government and Bengal's Zamindars for their mutual interest. It has been seen that the political transformation following Plassey, which established British supremacy in Bengal, enhanced the prospects of many high-ranking Indian officials serving the East India Company, including Dewan Ram Charan Roy and Raja Nabakrishna Deb, who enjoyed the trust of the colonial administration and emerged as a colonial elite by utilizing the circumstances.

Continuing this synergy, Warren Hastings, who recognized Ram Charan Roy's dedication, granted him the village of **Jorhat**, and during the first regime of Mir Jafar, he was given the village, named **Kolorah**. Some other villages along with the **Taluka** (subdivision of districts) of the Howrah region also given to him and thus, he became the

Talukdar. Additionally, under the rule of Kashim Ali Khan, Ram Charan also **received** several *Parganas* (administrative districts)⁸¹. It is important to note that the rise of Ram Charan Roy not only elevated the family status but was also linked with the development of the Howrah region. Since the time of **Ram Charan Roy**, several family members diligently worked for the flourishing of their locality in various ways, starting from socio-economic to cultural. This transformation of the Howrah region was further connected to the transformation of Bengal at large.

The directors of the East India Company deeply acknowledged Ram Charan Roy's importance and sent a letter of condolence to his son, Ram Lochan, when he passed away. At the time of his death, Ram Charan had amassed a fortune of **72 lakh rupees in cash, 18 lakh rupees in hundi** (bills of exchange) and zamindari assets, as well as ornaments worth **25 lakh rupees**. His wealth included **80 gold and 320 silver pitchers**, which further signified the prosperity of the family. All of his property was accumulated through the extraction of land revenue by their allotted zamindari land; however, Ram Charan's wealth was not only due to his service to the Britishers but also came from grants and rewards for his loyalty.

Several descendants of Ram Charan Roy served the British government and achieved distinguished positions. His immediate successors, **Ram Lochan Roy, Raj Chandra Roy (Sons)**, and **Raj Narayan Roy (Great-grandson)** were honoured with the titles of '*Raja*', '*Babu*' and '*Rajah Bahadur*' respectively, ensuring the family was recognised as one of the 'Raj Families' in Bengal⁸². Ram Lochan Roy, the elder son of Ram Charan Roy, received the title of 'Raja' from the emperor Shah Alam on the recommendation of **Lord Clive**. Here, it is important to mention that initially, the title of '*Raja*' was recommended for Ram Charan Roy, who insisted that the British government to honour his son instead of him⁸³. Subsequently, Ram Lochan Roy accepted the title of

'Raja' and established himself as a powerful figure in the region. However, his brother and younger son of Ram Charan Roy, **Raj Chandra Roy**, preferred to be known as '**Babu**', and his tenants addressed him as **Babu Raj Chandra Roy**⁸⁴. In 1835, Raj Narayan Roy, the great-grandson of Ram Charan Roy, received the title of '**Rajah-Bahadur**'⁸⁵ from the British Government, which we will discuss later. Nonetheless, these titles came with immense privileges, including the command of **5,000 troops**, **permission to use fringed palanquins**, **the right to play musical instruments in public processions** and **possession of a royal cannon obtained from the emperor**, which elevated their **military status**⁸⁶.

Their successors continued the financial bloom of the Roy family. **Ram Lochan Roy**, who had two sons, **Kumar Kashi Nath Roy** and **Kumar Siv Chandra Roy**, both were highly educated in Sanskrit, Bengali, and Persian, reflecting the scholarly traditions of their lineage. Despite their limited proficiency in English, their loyalty to the British government ensured their continued influence and prestige. After Raja Ram Lochan Roy passed away in **1787**, his son **Kashi Nath Roy** inherited not only a vast estate and wealth but also a legacy of scholarly excellence, religious patronage, and political diplomacy. The continued prominence of the family serves as a testament to the far-reaching impact of Raja Ram Lochan Roy's vision and leadership. Kashi Nath Roy's ascension to power at such a young age, under the guardianship of Rani Sakhi Sundari, Raj Chandra Roy, and Siv Chandra Roy, played a crucial role in shaping his future as a ruler. As the **Dewan of the Subadar of Murshidabad**, he wielded significant influence, continuing his father, **Raja Ram Lochan Roy's** legacy of governance, scholarship, and religious patronage. His reign came to an end in **1815** when the mantle passed to his son, **Raja Raj Narayan Roy**. The history of Kashi Nath Roy's rule showcases a blend of governance, philanthropy, and devotion, illustrating the Andul family's royal lineage's enduring impact on society⁸⁷.

Raja Raj Narayan Roy⁸⁸, born in 1809, was a distinguished figure dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of the Roy family and the Kayastha community's social standing. He was the son of Kashinath Roy and the great-grandson of Dewan Ram Charan Roy, the founder of the dynasty. His early life was marked by the loss of his father, leading to the management of his estate by the 'Court of Wards' until he reached adulthood. Educated at Hindu College (Presidency College), he gained profound knowledge of Sanskrit, shaping his scholarly inclinations⁸⁹. Raj Narayan and his brother Tarak Nath settled in Andul, near Howrah. He was awarded the title '**Rajah Bahadur**' by the British government in recognition of his loyalty and character.

Legacy, Decline, and Historical Significance: Changing Fortunes of the Roy's in the Late Colonial Period

Following the death of **Raja Raj Narayan Roy**, his wife, **Rani Mahodaya**, instantly took over the responsibility of managing the zamindari as the guardian of their minor son, **Bijoy Kesab Roy**. Through her diligent efforts, the estate's income significantly increased, showcasing her remarkable administrative abilities. The succession of **Raja Bijoy Keshab Roy** after the death of his father, Raja Raj Narayan Roy, presents an intriguing story of both continuity and legal turmoil within the Andul royal family. When Raja Bijoy Keshab Roy passed away in 1879, he passed away leaving behind no legal heir. His childless death created a complex succession crisis, exacerbated by the dual adoption of heirs by his widows, **Rani Navadurga** and **Durga Sundari**. After the death of Bijoy Keshab Roy, his two wives adopted heirs for the estate, but their adoption was not supported by either the Calcutta High Court or the Privy Council. This controversial act violated established Hindu *Shashtra* practices, as it was believed that only one adoption could occur in such circumstances. The Privy Council's ruling in favour of rejecting the dual adoptions had far-reaching implications for the Andul Roy family and

the broader dynamics of colonial land politics in Bengal. On the surface, the decision appeared to be a matter of legal inheritance; yet, it raises deeper questions regarding the latent motives of British administrators, whose policies often served to weaken traditional zamindari authority and consolidate colonial control over landed estates⁹⁰.

At that time, the **Permanent Settlement of 1793** had already transformed the agrarian landscape, enabling the East India Company to entrench its fiscal and political dominance over Bengal's zamindars. Against this backdrop, the Privy Council's intervention in the Andul succession dispute cannot be viewed merely as a neutral act of justice. Rather, it may reflect the British desire to destabilize hereditary rights and ensure that estates remained dependent upon or aligned with the colonial regime. Thus, the ruling may be interpreted as part of the broader imperial strategy to absorb or influence traditional royal properties under the guise of legal arbitration. Nevertheless, the **Andul Roy family** managed the crisis with remarkable prudence and adaptability. Unlike many other landed families who faced ruin under colonial interference, the Roys maintained a consistent alliance with the British Raj, skillfully navigating the shifting political order.

Consequently, the Andul estate, instead of passing through the windows of **Raja Bijoy Keshab Roy**, was lawfully transferred to **Kshetra Krishna Mitra**, a close relative from the lineage of **Kashi Nath Roy**. While this judgment terminated the direct line of succession from Raja Bijoy Keshab Roy, it also ensured continuity of the zamindari within the extended royal family, preserving both the family's prestige and its relationship with the colonial administration. This episode ultimately illustrates how legal, political, and familial strategies intertwined under colonial rule, where survival often depended on diplomatic alignment rather than rigid adherence to hereditary principles.

Kshetra Krishna Mitra was the son of Babu **Kalipada Mitra**, an aristocrat from Bandisha, who settled in Konnagar, Hooghly district, after marrying **the daughter of King Kashi Nath Roy**. Bijoy Keshab Roy passed away, leaving two widows, both of whom had adopted sons, ensuring the continuation of the lineage of this influential family⁹¹. With the death of Kumar Bijoy Keshab Roy in 1879, who passed away childless, the dynasty's succession passed to **Kshetra Krishna Mitra**, who was the nephew of **Raja Raj Narayan Roy**. This union brought a significant amount of land and wealth to **Kalipada Mitra**, which provided a strong foundation for his son Kshetra Krishna Mitra's future endeavours. Despite the financial strains on the zamindari, Kshetra Krishna remained committed to charity and public welfare. Thus, his generosity and contributions to society earned him the honorary title of '**Raja**', and thus, he was known as '**Raja Kshetra Krishna Mitra**' among his people. The case illustrates not only the intricacies of caste and inheritance laws during British colonial rule but also the challenges faced by royal families in maintaining their estates and status. Moreover, it highlights the intersection of Hindu traditions with colonial legal systems, where adherence to *Shastra* practices was often at odds with the evolving legal landscape⁹². This transition marked a new chapter for both families, the Andul Raj family's history, and the Mitra family. The Mitra family, therefore, also continued and contributed to religious and cultural life, notably.

Raja Kshetra Krishna Mitra's tenure as the head of the Andul dynasty was marked by a blend of prudence, philanthropy, and controversy. Despite the financial challenges inherited from prolonged legal disputes over the zamindari, he successfully stabilized the estate's fortunes while making substantial contributions to public welfare. This union brought significant land and wealth to the **Mitra family**, which provided a strong foundation for Kshetra Krishna's future endeavours. Raja Kshetra Krishna Mitra had three sons: **Kumar Upendra Nath Mitra**, **Kumar Debendra Nath**, and **Kumar**

Nagendra Nath. His eldest son, **Upendra Nath Mitra**, actively supported his father's charitable activities. However, his second son, **Debendra Nath**, predeceased him, leaving behind a daughter. He passed away on September 4, 1907, at the age of 85, marking the end of an era for the Andul dynasty. Despite his complex reputation, his legacy as a zamindar who navigated financial hardships while contributing generously to society remains significant. His impact on education, healthcare, and religious institutions continues to be remembered, making him a figure of both reverence and historical intrigue⁹³.

Raja Kshetra Krishna Mitra's intention in his will to divide the estate in a manner that ensured both his sons would play pivotal roles in its management was rooted in his desire to maintain family harmony and continuity. By designating his eldest son, **Kumar Upendra Nath** as the head of the family and giving him the larger share of the property (**10 annas, or 62.5%**), while assigning his youngest son, **Kumar Nagendra Nath** a smaller share (**6 annas, or 37.5%**) with the role of working under his elder brother, the Raja hoped to ensure efficient oversight and a division that could prevent rivalry⁹⁴. However, this arrangement sparked a legal dispute within the family, rather than fostering unity, which escalated after Raja Kshetra Krishna's passing. The division of property and zamindari estates, though seemingly fair based on the share system, however, it led to a power struggle between the brothers.

Kumar Upendra Nath's larger portion of property holding and his leadership quality placed him in a position of authority, but it also fostered feelings of resentment and dissatisfaction in **Kumar Nagendra Nath**, who likely felt subordinated or overlooked despite being given a significant stake in the estate. These underlying tensions eventually manifested in legal disputes, which would later become the defining challenge for the family, shifting the focus of their legacy from growth and welfare to the costly and draining

process of litigation. The rift that followed the king's death, centred on these disparities and the interpretation of the will, suggests that familial bonds could be strained even in the most meticulously planned succession arrangements.

The division of the vast Andul zamindari between **Kumar Upendranath** and **Kumar Nagendra Nath**, though intended to provide a structured inheritance, ultimately led to prolonged litigation. Kumar Upendra Nath was well-versed in the administrative functions of the zamindari, having gained extensive experience during his father's lifetime. He personally supervised the estates and earned widespread affection from his subjects due to his gentle and amiable nature. His cordial disposition also helped him cultivate close ties within European circles. The vast landholdings of the Andul royal family were divided into two branches — *Boro Torof*, under Kumar Upendranath, and *Choto Torof*, under Kumar Nagendranath⁹⁵.

Their zamindari estates extended across multiple districts, including **Habra, Hooghly, Khulna, Burdwan, 24 Parganas, Medinipur, the Santal Parganas, and Puri**, reflecting the family's extensive territorial influence across Bengal and adjoining regions. While Kumar Upendranath efficiently managed the larger portion of the estate, tensions arose over control, leading to a costly legal battle. The dispute not only drained the family's financial resources but also underscored the difficulties of succession in large zamindari families. After significant expenditure on legal proceedings, a compromise was reached—both brothers agreed to an equal division of the estate, with Kumar Nagendra Nath compensating his elder brother, Kumar Upendranath. This resolution maintained the family's estate under shared ownership while bringing a degree of stability, though not without financial consequences. Ultimately, Kumar Upendranath passed away on July 1, 1901, at the age of 52, leaving behind five sons and four daughters. A decade later, on

October 16, 1911, Kumar Nagendranath Mitra also passed away, survived by his only son, Shailendra Mitra, and three daughters⁹⁶.

Kumar Upendra Nath Mitra had five sons—**Pramath Nath, Manmath Nath, Surath Nath, Bharat Nath**, and the youngest, **Jagat Nath**—faced the challenge of preserving their father's legacy. At the time of Upendranath's death, Jagat Nath was still a minor, leading to a legal dispute over the estate's management. Although Kumar Upendranath had appointed two executors to oversee the estate until Jagat Nath came of age, disagreements within the family led to litigation in the High Court. **Kumar Pramath Nath Mitra**, born in Andul in 1296 Bangla, married the third daughter of Babu Brajlal Bose, a distinguished Kulin Kayastha from Rairkathi village in Barisal. The couple had one son and two daughters⁹⁷.

Pramath Nath Mitra was an astute administrator with a keen understanding of estate management, like his father. However, his talents extended far beyond zamindari affairs. He was a man of wide-ranging interests, encompassing literature, painting, photography, music, zoology, agriculture, and the mechanical sciences. He demonstrated exceptional leadership in safeguarding the family's interests and, after prolonged legal proceedings, secured a favourable verdict on January 2, 1919. This victory not only ensured that the estate remained under family control but also allowed him to concentrate on its reorganization and efficient governance. Pramath Nath's efforts further fostered unity within the family, leading to a reconciliation between the two branches and the appointment of a joint manager to oversee the estate's administration. After his death, the Mitra family's legacy continued through his descendants; however, their financial growth remained largely tied to the zamindari system⁹⁸. Their generational wealth, built upon land revenues and influential positions held under the British Raj, provided a strong economic foundation for the subsequent generations. Capitalizing on the family inheritance, their

successors, such as **Manmatha Nath Mitra**, **Surath Nath Mitra**, and **Shailendra Nath Mitra**, upheld and expanded the family's legacy, leaving a lasting imprint on the social and cultural history of the Howrah district, the theme that will be discussed later.

Regarding the family's zamindari estate management, another important aspect that requires discussion is the land revenue structure and rates paid by the **Andul Roy family** to the colonial government. As records indicate, the family maintained multiple zamindari estates across Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, making their fiscal obligations both extensive and complex. In this context, it is essential to understand that the land revenue extraction system of the Andul Roy family was not an isolated phenomenon but rather deeply intertwined with the broader historical and administrative framework of Bengal's agrarian economy. Their revenue practices reflected the evolving dynamics of colonial land policies, regional variations in settlement systems, and the shifting balance between state demands and zamindari management. Initially, the British government asked for around **90%** of the rental share as revenue; this land revenue demand was fixed in the year 1793 under the permanent settlement. However, the **Permanent Settlement of 1793** did not entirely freeze land revenue; the East India Company continued to secure increases through various means. Many estates of defaulting zamindars, initially left unsold due to a depressed land market, gradually became profitable as cultivation expanded and prices rose. A major source of additional income came from the resumption of rent-free land properties previously exempted for religious and educational endowments. Perhaps, for this reason, local zamindars also took more initiative in philanthropic activities. Although in Patna, after such resumptions also raised the revenue by **48%** between **1790** and **1870**⁹⁹.

Nevertheless, despite these gains, the government's share in the total agricultural output steadily declined from **90%** of rental in **1793** to about **28%** by the **19th century**, and only **18.5%** dwindled by **1940**. As an outcome of permanent settlement, John Shore's

estimated revenue was around **45%** for Bengal; however, it dropped dramatically within the year **1938–39**. Thus, unlike Bengal, the **Permanent Settlement** model was rejected by British administrators in **Orissa and Assam**, where revenue demands were periodically revised upward. In Orissa, government income through land revenue rose **12% by 1804–05** and increased by around **93%** within the year **1897**. Though the burden eased over time as prices and cultivation expanded. Assam’s peasants, however, bore a heavier revenue load, surrendering a larger share of their produce¹⁰⁰.

The disparities in the land revenue system across Bengal are particularly evident in the administrative records of the **Hooghly and Howrah districts**, which serve as a crucial case study for understanding the complexities of colonial land management. Several official reports reveal that colonial expansion, administrative reshuffling, and unclear district boundaries frequently led to disputes between these two districts¹⁰¹, causing significant governance challenges and confusion in revenue collection. An **administrative survey of Hooghly (1875)** highlighted these issues, noting persistent difficulties in collecting land revenue due to ambiguous geographical demarcations and a general laxity of supervision. A major problem arose in distinguishing between service lands (assigned to village officials such as chowkidars) and zamindari lands, which often overlapped without proper documentation¹⁰².

In an official correspondence, the **Senior Superintendent of Survey** reported to the **Commissioner of the Burdwan Division** that several villages recorded under the Hooghly Survey actually fell within Burdwan’s jurisdiction. He emphasized the need for proper measurement and verification by requesting the Hooghly register officer. The report also exposed the frequent encroachments by zamindars, who sought to illegally resume service lands. The superintendent noted that chowkidars often colluded with zamindars, making it “**almost a hopeless task**” to trace disputed plots. Further discrepancies were

found between the recorded areas of service lands in roll-books and those measured by surveyors. In the absence of reliable measurement papers, proving whether small plots were genuinely service lands or part of zamindari estates became exceedingly difficult. These administrative irregularities not only reflected the inefficiency of colonial land surveys but also exposed the manipulative practices of local zamindars, who exploited bureaucratic ambiguities to expand their estates at the expense of public and service lands¹⁰³.

In the matter of land revenue structure of colonial Bengal by taking the Andul Roy family as a case study, another dimension that calls for a close introspection is the role of the **Jotedars** within the rural community and their influence on land revenue extraction. The presence of numerous *Grihasthas*, those who acted as a *Gentry*, mostly came from respectable, clean-caste householders of moderate means, which further complicated Bengal's agrarian structure. Their customary rights to a share in the land's produce had to be accommodated within the revenue hierarchy, producing a multi-tiered and complex system characterized by a natural tendency toward sub-infeudation. This process was intensified by the fact that **Zamindars** and **Taluqdars** held rights over revenue rather than land itself. Only in their home villages did they maintain private estates, where they exercised effective ownership similar to that of the **Jotedars**.

Within the villages, it was the **Jotedars** who emerged as a more dominant rural proprietor. Initially, the term *jotedar* referred simply to tenants who held land directly from the zamindar, but by the nineteenth century, it came to denote a wealthy and influential rural elite. Their landholdings ranging from 50 to 6,000 acres, illustrated stark rural inequalities. As Buchanan Hamilton's 1808 Dinajpur survey recorded, only **6%** of cultivators controlled **36.5%** of leased land, while over half of the agricultural workforce was landless, surviving as sharecroppers or laborers. The concentration of landholding was

further reinforced by the **Jotedars'** control over credit and grain trade, allowing them to combine agriculture, money-lending, and commerce. Through this integration of economic and social power, the Jotedars became the central pivot of Bengal's rural order, embodying the interconnection of agrarian wealth, caste privilege, and local authority that defined the colonial countryside¹⁰⁴.

Pertaining to these issues, the British policy of **maximizing land revenue** led to key institutional changes throughout the colonial period. Initially, many traditional zamindars were replaced by "**new men**", individuals enriched through British patronage or commerce, but most were soon ruined by excessive exactions and unstable markets. By the 1780s, the British restored the **old landed aristocracy**, recognizing its indispensability to rural stability. The **Andul Roy family** exemplifies this pattern. Emerging under colonial patronage, they supplanted the older **Dutta Chowdhury zamindars**, who failed to meet British revenue expectations or maintain effective ties with the new regime. Through strategic alliances and administrative adaptability, the Andul Roys consolidated their position as the dominant zamindars of Andul, reflecting the broader transformation of Bengal's landed society under British rule.

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, Bengal's agrarian structure witnessed a striking disparity between rent increases and cultivation growth. This scenario was also visible for the zamindari of the **Andul Raj family**. As they have mainly been associated with the zamindari of **Muzaffarpur** district, we found sources that refer that in the **235 villages of Muzaffarpur surveyed by Collin** during 1887-88, landed estate rent rose by **137%**, since 1840, while the cultivation increased by 'probably not more than **12%**. Enquiries about a decade later in the same district also brought out the sharp contrast between the two phenomena: the land revenue rose by **115% to 192%** since 1843, and the growth of cultivation by only **14%**. In Darbhanga, during the same period, there was a

nearly **100%** rise in land revenue, against a merely **20%** increase in cultivation¹⁰⁵. Similar patterns were observed in most places of the **Howrah** and **Hooghly** regions, where rents nearly doubled despite minimal extension of cultivation. To overcome the high revenue system, the tendency of the actual rent burden to diminish with the rising agricultural prices, particularly, has been noted since about the end of the 19th century by numerous contemporary reports, though this did not necessarily enrich the peasants¹⁰⁶.

An official assessment conducted in February 1933, drawing on data from settlement officers across eleven districts, estimated that rent constituted about 5% to 6% of the total gross produce. A comparison between the figures compiled by the Government of Bengal in 1901 and those reported by the Floud Commission in 1939 for Burdwan, Birbhum, Midnapur, 24-Parganas, and Nadia indicates that this proportion remained largely consistent over time, except in the 24-Parganas district, where it rose from 10% to 13%. This disproportionate rise reflected the **zamindars' tightening control over land** and their efforts to expand income despite legal and structural constraints. While the Permanent Settlement (1793) had vested property rights in zamindars, it did not give them unlimited authority over rents. Early on, they struggled to justify rent hikes through legal means, as outdated pargana rent rates made comparisons difficult¹⁰⁷.

As its Consequence, many zamindars resorted to illegal methods, like remeasurement, resettlement, and coercion, around the Hooghly and Howrah districts, where the zamindars often abused their powers under the **Regulations of 1799 and 1812**, which allowed distraint of ryots' crops and property. However, after 1859, such abuses declined, as the **Bengal Tenancy Acts of 1859 and 1885** gradually regulated the rent increases, permitting revisions based on rising prices or new tenancies. The Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 legally recognized occupancy and settled ryots (peasants), peasants who had cultivated the same land or lands in the same village for at least twelve years.

Their rents could only be increased under specific conditions, and they comprised nearly **80% of Bengal's cultivated area**, according to settlement officers. Though another smaller group, the *Mukarari* ryots (peasants), held about **8% of ryoti land** during 1938–39 and paid permanently fixed rents¹⁰⁸.

In the case of the Andul Roy family, as mentioned earlier that they extended their landed estates across **Bengal, Bihar, Orissa** and including **Santal Pargana**. In Santal pargana, the population growth and migration of **tribal and Muslim peasants** further heightened land revenue demand and enabled the zamindars to charge higher entry fines and rents legally. It shows the rent escalation was uneven across colonial Bengal. However, many traditional zamindars valued social prestige over exploitation or were constrained by poor estate management, malaria, or intra-family disputes. Others abandoned rural life altogether. Furthermore, peasant resistance, particularly among higher-caste cultivators, curbed arbitrary increases, though low-caste and tribal tenants often remained vulnerable to eviction and coercion. Regarding this, the matter of peasant wages raised several controversies and doubts¹⁰⁹.

In fact, the matter of peasant wages is equally confusing; regarding this, a special survey was made by the **Datta Committee**. As their data excluded **bonded and attached labourers**, a large share of the rural workforce in **Bihar, Orissa, and Bengal**¹¹⁰, this became a bit questionable. Nonetheless, the enquiry reveals that in Muzaffarpur, which came under the Andul Roy family's jurisdiction, **25% of labourers were bonded in those regions and mostly** belonged to the outside the organized economy. The rural workers of the region lived in deep poverty, surviving on cheap root crops during slack seasons. Overall, their wage increases were not uniform, mostly rare, evictions from the work were seldom, and the rising agricultural prices were hardly able to mitigate the peasant rent burden¹¹¹. Depicting the rural peasants' condition, the contemporary observers often

overlooked two crucial aspects of **grain wages**. First, as agricultural prices rose, employers increasingly paid wages in **inferior grains** such as millets or coarse rice, especially in Bihar districts like **Sahabad, Saran, Darbhanga, and Gaya**. Second, when **tribal or migrant labour** replaced local workers, wages dropped **25–50%**, as reported for the **Hooghly district**¹¹².

The misery of the peasants under the **Andul Roy family's zamindari** reflects, in many ways, the broader plight of Bengal's peasantry across the ages. Despite periodic reforms and shifting administrative systems, the fundamental condition of the rural cultivators remained harsh, marked by economic vulnerability, social dependence, and heavy rent burdens. Under colonial rule, these hardships intensified further. The integration of zamindars into the colonial revenue machinery transformed them from traditional patrons into agents of extraction, aligning their interests with those of the British administration.

In this system, the peasants bore the brunt of exploitation, as both the colonial government and the intermediary landholders sought to maximize their own gains. The collaboration between these two forces created a structure where profit and revenue collection outweighed human welfare. In such a framework, questions of nationality, caste, religion, or race became secondary, overshadowed by the **imperatives of power, politics, and profit**. Thus, the experience of the peasants under the Andul Roy family's reign serves as a microcosm of colonial Bengal's rural society, where the fusion of traditional hierarchies and colonial capitalism perpetuated exploitation and deepened socio-economic inequalities in the countryside.

In spite of the above facts, we must consider that the vast economic transformations of the Howrah region from the pre-colonial to the colonial era, particularly driven by

powerful zamindari families such as the **Andul Roy family**, had profound and far-reaching effects on the economic and social landscape of Howrah. Through their initiatives in regional infrastructure development and the improvement of transportation networks, these families played a pivotal role in reshaping the district's agrarian economy, trade, and administrative framework, which now needs to be studied. In the late 19th century, the financial history of the Howrah district witnessed a substantial transformation, catalysed by the construction of two major roads—the **Andul Raj Road** and **Raja Raj Narayan Street**¹¹³, now, these roads are maintained by the Calcutta Corporation. This serves as a lasting reminder of the significant role played by the Andul family in Bengal's history. Both roads were established by the influential Andul Raj (Roy) family and connected the Howrah region to Calcutta, which had become Bengal's primary economic hub following the establishment of Calcutta Port in 1870¹¹⁴. This development marked a decisive moment for Bengal, situating Calcutta as a focal point for commerce and subsequently as the centre of Bengal's socio-political and cultural evolution for the upcoming decades.

The Andul Raj Road¹¹⁵ was built in remembrance of the Andul Raj family, which connected the Howrah district to Calcutta. It starts from the Hajra area and is located across from the Kalighat Basusri cinema hall. After that, Raja Raj Narayan Street¹¹⁶ was built in remembrance of Raja Raj Narayan Roy, a notable descendant of the family. This road is located near the Raja Bazar Science College area. These two roads significantly boosted the Howrah district's economy by facilitating trade, easing access to Calcutta and linking various small villages within Howrah to the major city and its expanding port. The improved transport network enabled better movement of goods and resources, making Calcutta Port more accessible to Howrah's residents and traders. The newfound prosperity attracted a diverse population, enriching the socio-cultural condition and prompting the growth of local institutions, educational facilities, and social organizations. The roads,

thus, not only played a central role in shaping Howrah's economic history but also laid the groundwork for a dynamic socio-political and cultural evolution in the area. Further exploration into this socio-cultural shift could reveal how the district of Howrah adapted to new, changing discourses of Bengal history and benefited from the economic development of its region.

With these economic changes, the late 19th century of Bengal also witnessed a major territorial and administrative revision. As mentioned earlier, in the year 1795, the Hooghly and Howrah regions were separated from the larger district of Burdwan, which was a part of the British administrative strategy and aimed at improving administrative efficiency by managing the increasing population and industrialization, particularly in the Hooghly and Howrah regions. Both regions were initially merged, with the temporary merging of Hooghly and Howrah, which reflected the administrative needs. Nevertheless, as Howrah experienced increasing industrial growth, especially due to its proximity to Calcutta, the British government felt the necessity to divide these regions further to get better control over the economy. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th century, Howrah rapidly thrived as a major hub for industry, transportation and river traffic. As a result, Howrah district was officially established during 1937-38 and became a popular industrial and urban centre¹¹⁷.

Regarding this, the decline of Hooghly Port and the emergence of Calcutta Port played a crucial role in the entire matter. As **Prof. Sushil Chaudhury** has emphasized that the historical precedence of Hooghly District and its surroundings were closely tied to the emergence of Hooghly Port,¹¹⁸ and it controlled the trade and commerce of Bengal until the establishment of Calcutta port in 1870¹¹⁹. However, the shifting course of the Hooghly River,¹²⁰ along with inadequate depth of water¹²¹ and repeated natural calamities,¹²² gradually diminished the Hooghly Port's viability and forced the foreign powers to search

for a new alternative trading hub,¹²³ which hastened the decline of Hooghly Port and accelerated the rise of Calcutta Port, simultaneously. Thus, the development of Calcutta port in 1870 marked a turning point in Bengal's history and its adjacent regions, like Howrah, eventually became the central hub of Bengal's economy for the ensuing decades.

Considering the economic transformation and improvement, the contributions of **Khestra Krishna Mitra** to improving the transportation and infrastructure of Howrah were equally significant. Responding to the request of Mr. Grierson, the then Magistrate of Habra, he reconstructed the bridge over the Saraswati River at Andul, spending Rs. 5,000 on the project. The bridge, which facilitated the daily passage of nearly 5,000 people and numerous cattle. He also financed the paving of the **Andul–Rajganj Road** at Rs. 800, bringing great convenience to the residents of the area¹²⁴.

Thus, we must recognize that the initiatives of the Andul Roy family significantly improved local connectivity and contributed to improving the transportation of colonial Bengal, in a way. Their financial investments and regional contributions not only enhanced local infrastructure and revenue efficiency but also catalyzed Howrah's transformation from a traditional agrarian landscape into a thriving centre of economic and cultural activity. Their sustained efforts left an enduring imprint on the district's historical and socio-economic evolution, shaping Howrah's emergence as a key regional hub during the colonial period.

IV

Patronage and Influence: Philanthropy, Cultural Patronage as a Means of Consolidating Influence

In the spheres of patronage and influence, the most striking feature of the Roy family (earlier 'Kar') was their strong bond with the contemporary rulers since the pre-

colonial period. As we studied that **Bhubaneshwar Kar** was the earlier patriarch of the family, bestowed by fortune. Due to his intimate connection with the Bengal Nawab in the pre-colonial era, the Kar family rose to prominence during the time of Bhubaneshwar Kar. He was awarded the title of '**Roy**' by the then Muhammadan Government of Bengal and thus, used it instead of 'Kar'¹²⁵ since then. It has been said that he worked as a *gomastha* (the royal officials of Bengal's nawab) and the title was bestowed for his efficiency, which signifies his distinction in the government. His traits continued within his successors, too. Ram Charan Roy, who was the direct descendant of Bhubaneshwar Kar, enjoyed numerous prestigious positions and gained immense financial affluence under the British Raj, which we studied in the prior segment of the chapter.

Several descendants of Ram Charan Roy served the British government and achieved distinguished positions. His immediate successors, **Ram Lochan Roy**, **Raj Chandra Roy (Sons)** and **Raj Narayan Roy (Grandson)** were honoured with the titles of '**Raja**', '**Babu**' and '**Rajah Bahadur**' respectively, ensuring the family was recognised as one of the '**Raj Families**' in Bengal¹²⁶. Descendants of Ram Charan Roy, Raja Ram Lochan Roy and his brother, Raj Chandra Roy, were truly influential figures in Bengal's Kayastha community. Ram Lochan Roy's acceptance of the '**Raja**' title marked his rise to prominence, aligning him with the social elite and giving him significant authority and influence. His younger brother, Raj Chandra Roy, though just as powerful and respected, took a humble approach, preferring the title of 'Babu' over the aristocratic '**Raja**'. This choice reflected his personality and values, as he believed in maintaining closer ties with the people, and his tenants were instructed to address him as '**Babu**'¹²⁷. Despite their differing titles, both brothers shared a reputation for their intellectual prowess, generosity, and compassion. Nonetheless, this evolution from '**Kar**' to '**Roy**' and later to '**Raja**

Bahadur’ illustrates their ability to adapt to the changing political scenario with the increasing influence in colonial Bengal’s governance and regional power structure.

In the socio-cultural domain, the Roy family of Andul impacted the history of the Howrah district profoundly and left a special mark in all spheres, continuing with Raja Ram Lochan Roy, son of Ram Charan Roy. His legacy is deeply intertwined with the cultural, religious, and historical identity of the Andul dynasty. One of Raja Ram Lochan Roy’s most remarkable contributions was the introduction of the *Andulabda*, a unique calendar era that marks the years of the Andul dynasty’s rule. This chronological system, currently in its 174th year, remains a distinctive feature of the dynasty, highlighting its historical continuity and the family’s commitment to preserving its heritage. His role in cultural and religious patronage further elevated his stature. He commissioned the construction of a grand *Natmandir* in front of the *Kalimandir*¹²⁸, reinforcing his devotion to tradition and community gatherings. Additionally, in **1770**, he established the annual **Durga Puja** at his residence¹²⁹, a significant event that drew the attention of **British Governor Robert Clive**, who visited his home during the festivities¹³⁰. This interaction underscores the stature of Raja Ram Lochan Roy in both native and colonial circles.

After the passing of Raja Ram Lochan Roy in 1787, his son **Kashi Nath Roy** inherited not only an extensive estate and immense wealth but also a legacy of scholarly refinement, religious patronage, and administrative diplomacy. His tenure as **Dewan to the Subadar of Murshidabad** allowed him to wield considerable influence, perpetuating his father’s vision of enlightened governance and cultural patronage. In his regime, the construction of Andul royal residence, popularly known as the “*ghar chankar*” house, stood as a symbol of the family’s prosperity and artistic sensibility. Its architectural design bears a striking resemblance to the **Char Minar of Murshidabad** (now known as, Char Bangla temple of Murshidabad), which reflected the Nawabi and Mughal influence that

Kashi Nath encountered during his service in Murshidabad. The mansion, encircled by a vast **garhkhai** (moat) and guarded by two temple-like structures at its entrance, embodied a graceful synthesis of **Bengal's indigenous aesthetics** with the **Islamic architectural vocabulary** of the Murshidabad court. Over time, however, it became neglect and decay reduced this once-magnificent structure to ruins. Its materials were dismantled for reuse, and the site has since been repurposed for **agricultural use**, now serving as government land used for **eggplant cultivation**¹³¹. Yet, beyond its physical remnants, the residence remains a potent symbol of cultural exchange, illustrating how regional elites like the **Andul Roy family** bridged the bequest of **Murshidabad and Howrah**, integrating local traditions with the cosmopolitan currents of late 18th-century Bengal.

Kashi Nath Roy's contributions also extended deeply into the religious and educational spheres. His patronage of Sanskrit and Persian scholarship, along with his **charitable land grants to Brahmins**, underscored his commitment to sustaining intellectual and spiritual life. The construction of the **Annapurna Devi Temple** in Andul stands as a lasting testimony to his piety and social responsibility. When Kashi Nath's reign ended in **1815**, the mantle passed to his son **Raja Raj Narayan Roy**, ensuring the continuity of the Andul dynasty's influence in Bengal's cultural, educational, and religious domains¹³². The history of Kashi Nath Roy's rule reveals a rare synthesis of governance, philanthropy, and devotion, reflecting how the Andul royal lineage continued to shape the social and spiritual fabric of Bengal well into the 19th century.

Continuing the family legacy, **Raja Raj Narayan Roy** impacted the socio-cultural history of the Howrah district profoundly and left a special mark in all spheres. His contributions to education and culture were remarkable. Spending substantial wealth to transform Andul into a hub of Sanskrit learning, he established many Chatushpathis (traditional schools for learning Sanskrit) to enrich Sanskrit education in the locality. For

that, Andul was eventually recognised as the '*Navadwip of South Bengal*'. By inviting many esteemed scholars from **Mithila** and **Varanasi**, such as **Bhairava Chandra**, who brought immense fame to Andul through their expertise in Sanskrit and yoga, he enriched the cultural domain of the locality. His patronage extended beyond academia, as their court became a vibrant cultural centre that hosted eminent musicians and dancers from Delhi, Lucknow, and Gwalior. The majlis gatherings were renowned for their formality and sophisticated atmosphere, symbolising a deep respect for tradition and cultural refinement.

Raj Narayan Roy's close relationship with Lord Auckland and the British government solidified his authority, earning him the official confirmation of the titles '*Raja*' and '*Bahadur*'¹³³ in 1835, along with a jewelled sword and dagger. These honours were published in the *Calcutta Gazetteers* in 1835¹³⁴. His deep appreciation for the arts and music led him to patronize musicians and dancers from Delhi, Lucknow, and Gwalior, turning Andul into a cultural hub. Beyond cultural advancements, Raja Raj Narayan Roy undertook public welfare projects, constructing ponds, roads, and the Durbar Hall at the Andul Raj Palace. His efforts increased the royal family's income and influence. He was also credited with constructing *Andul Rajbari*¹³⁵ in 1834, an architectural marvel that stands as a testament to his legacy. His philanthropy was particularly evident upon the birth of his son, Kumar Bijoy Keshab Roy. In celebration, he distributed gifts to scholars and provided charity to the poor. His generosity extended beyond his estate, reaching even the larger metropolitan area of Calcutta¹³⁶.

Raj Narayan Roy was also a generous patron of education, donating 20,000 rupees to the government and offering stipends to scholars. His contributions extended to publishing *Kayastha-Kaustubh*, a significant text defending the status of the Kayastha community. To enhance the educational condition of the region, he established the school

Andul Academy, which eventually became *Andul H. C. (Higher Class) English School* and is now known as *Mahiyari Kundu Chowdhury Institution*¹³⁷. Mahiyari is situated next to Andul, which is now known as Mourigram¹³⁸. Nonetheless, he was instrumental in improving the educational sector of Andul. For that, on July 11, 1841, he convened a meeting at his residence, gathering nobles and intellectuals to discuss the establishment of a school that would provide both Sanskrit and English education¹³⁹.

The institution was named '*Andul Academy*' based on the proposal of Babu Tarakchandra Ghosh and Raj Narayan Roy, the main promoters of the school. While the history of Andul Academy and its transformation into *Andul H.C. (Higher Class) English School* remains somewhat unclear, strong connections exist between the two. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that *Andul H.C. (Higher Class) English School* eventually evolved into what is now known as '*Mahiyari Kundu Chowdhury Institution*'. Established with the support of Zamindar Jagannath Prasad Mallick of Mahiyari, the school played a crucial role in shaping future scholars and leaders. Raja Raj Narayan Roy's contributions to literature, education, public welfare, and governance make him a significant figure in Bengal's history. His legacy of cultural, intellectual, and administrative achievements continues to be remembered and celebrated¹⁴⁰.

According to records from an old school prospectus, sealed and dated in 1841, the school was founded by Raj Narayan Roy of Andul and Jagannath Prasad Mallick, the zamindar of Mahiyari. Their goal was to promote higher English education in the region. The school's history is distinguished by its longevity and the key figures associated with it. Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, a significant figure in Bengal's educational reform, served as headmaster for a time, along with Durgaprasad Mukherjee. Despite the challenging financial conditions in rural education, where the headmaster's salary was a modest Rs. 13 per month, the school played a crucial role in advancing English education in the Howrah

district¹⁴¹. Unfortunately, it could not celebrate its centenary due to the disruptions caused by the Second World War and local conflicts, but its legacy continues through the Mahiyari Kundu Chowdhury Institution. The establishment of this school was part of a broader 19th-century movement in Bengal to promote English education. Other institutions, such as Bagnan High School (founded in 1854 by Hemchandra Ghosh) and Shalkira S. School and Belur High School (both established in 1855 and later associated with Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar), reflect the spread of English education into rural Bengal.

These schools significantly contributed to the intellectual and social development of the region, shaping future generations of scholars and leaders. The curriculum emphasized both Sanskrit and English, supported by scholars like Harchandra Kaviraj. The planning process involved several notable attendees, with Golokchandra Chowdhury appointed as secretary. It was decided that both an English teacher and a foreign teacher would be hired. In his speech, the Maharaj highlighted Andul's rich cultural heritage, comparing it to a southern Navadwip, once home to scholars like Kasishwar Vidyalka Bhattacharya. However, he expressed concern over the decline of Sanskrit studies and the waning interest in scholarly pursuits. The meeting concluded with a unanimous agreement on the necessity of the school to revive both ancient knowledge and modern learning in Andul village¹⁴².

In the regime of Raja Raj Narayan Roy, 19th-century Bengal was burned by several movements for Caste identity and upliftment. In this context, Raja Raj Narayan Roy of the Andul Roy family emerged as one of the foremost leaders advocating for the advancement and recognition of the Kayastha community. His efforts to revive the *Upanayana Sanskar* among Kayasthas and promote Sanskrit education reflected his determination to align the community with a higher ritual status within the Hindu varna system. By investing vast resources and employing Brahmin scholars, he sought to legitimize the Kayasthas' claim

to Kshatriya identity, an ambitious attempt to redefine their social standing in a rigid caste hierarchy¹⁴³. This movement, however, unfolded within a contentious social landscape. The Kayasthas, traditionally occupying an intermediary position between the upper and lower castes, faced staunch opposition from Brahmin and Vaidya elites. Leaders such as Raja Radhakanta Dev resisted their attempts to adopt the *Upanayana*, arguing that sacred-thread initiation could not elevate them to Brahminical parity. Such opposition was further reinforced by widespread misconceptions about the Kayastha community, some deliberately propagated to preserve existing hierarchies¹⁴⁴.

The British administration's involvement through a commission headed by Sir Gurudas Banerjee did little to resolve the dispute. Its neutral stance, placing Kayasthas and Vaidyas together without assigning relative rank, reflected colonial reluctance to interfere in sensitive caste matters, leaving the social tension unresolved¹⁴⁵. Within this milieu, the Roy family of Andul, tracing their lineage to Dewan Ramcharan Roy, became prominent landholders and reformists. Raja Raj Narayan Roy's publication of *Kayastha Kaustav* and earlier works like *Kayastha Hitarnabh* (1841) by Jagannath Prasad Basu Mallick of Andul exemplify their sustained efforts to assert Kayastha prestige through scriptural and literary means¹⁴⁶. His initiatives aimed to consolidate the Kayastha identity and legitimize claims to a noble lineage.

However, Raj Narayan's assertiveness drew criticism and controversy. His conflict with *Sambad Bhaskar*¹⁴⁷ editor Srinath Roy, whom he had imprisoned and beaten for publishing exposés, resulted in his brief imprisonment and fine, revealing the friction between elite power and the emergent colonial legal order. Despite his wealth and influence, he struggled to gain full acceptance among Bengal's social elites, as many Brahmins and even Kayasthas resisted his reformist ambitions¹⁴⁸. Notably, the incident involving the newspaper's editor, Srinath Roy, illustrates the risks faced by journalists who

challenged powerful zamindars. Srinath Roy had published reports exposing atrocities committed by Raj Narayan Roy¹⁴⁹. In response, Raj Narayan ordered his men to capture and imprison the editor. Srinath Roy was subsequently beaten and flogged, a clear act of retribution for his exposé¹⁵⁰.

Nevertheless, his leadership in the Kayastha movement was acknowledged when the British government conferred upon him the titles of '*Rajah*' and '*Bahadoor*' in 1835, as reported in *Samachar Darpan* (June 13, 1835)¹⁵¹. However, His advocacy for the Upanayana Sanskar and his work to raise the social status of Kayasthas were significant. Still, his efforts were stymied by the opposition of influential figures like Radhakanta Dev, who remained resistant to such reforms. The tensions surrounding the Upanayana Sanskar continued, with some scholars later acknowledging the errors in the opposition to the reform¹⁵². Later scholars, such as Raja Rajendralal Mitra, confirmed that certain verses used to discredit the Kayasthas were fabrications, vindicating parts of Raj Narayan's claim. Yet, the complete acceptance of the *Upanayana Sanskar* among Kayasthas remained unrealized in his lifetime¹⁵³. The Kayastha movement in Bengal, while driven by a desire for greater social recognition, encountered fierce opposition from Brahmin and Vaidya groups¹⁵⁴.

The **Kayastha-Purana**, authored by **Sashi Bhushan Nandi** in 1881 (1288 Bangabda), sheds further light on the debate over the Upanayana Sanskar. In the introduction, he discusses how the holding of the *upaveeta* had become voluntary due to the absence of a Hindu **Chakravarti** (universal monarch) and how social norms were no longer as rigid. However, he also points out that certain sections of society questioned the scriptural legitimacy of the Kayasthas adopting the *upaveeta (poite)*, considering it inappropriate for their caste¹⁵⁵. Despite these challenges, leaders like Raja Raj Narayan Roy and other reformers played a crucial role in advocating for the community's social

mobility, marking a pivotal moment in the caste dynamics of Bengal. However, the British government's reluctance to provide a definitive verdict left the caste struggle unresolved, highlighting the complexities of caste politics and social mobility during this period. Raj Narayan remained steadfast in his beliefs. He continued to assert his position and defend his stance despite facing public criticism. His efforts highlight the deep social divisions in colonial Bengal regarding caste and status, as well as the broader challenge of reshaping entrenched social hierarchies. Raj Narayan Roy's story exemplifies the resistance faced by individuals attempting to alter caste dynamics, often encountering opposition not only from outside their caste but also from within. His case underscores the complexities of caste identity and status negotiations in colonial and pre-colonial India.

Continuing the social initiatives of the Roy family, Raj Narayan Roy also commissioned **Pandit Premchand Tarkabagish** to compose *Andul-Raj-Prasasti*,¹⁵⁶ an unfinished epic celebrating his lineage and the cultural legacy of the Andul Raj family. His association with the Hindu Dharma Mahasabha¹⁵⁷ further underscored his dual pursuit of social reform and cultural renaissance. In essence, Raja Raj Narayan Roy's endeavours embodied the complexities of caste mobility and identity negotiation in colonial Bengal. His persistent yet controversial efforts to elevate the Kayastha community reveal both the transformative aspirations and structural constraints of 19th century Bengali society. His legacy, marked by scholarship, reform, and resistance, remains an enduring chapter in Bengal's socio-cultural history. Thus, the Roy family's contributions to the community, along with their scholarly inclinations, reinforced the Kayastha family's esteemed status in Bengal. Their story reflects the diversity of paths that could be taken by powerful families in the region, with some embracing traditional titles and others opting for more egalitarian approaches.

As we mentioned that the succession of **Raja Bijoy Keshab Roy** after the death of his father, **Raja Raj Narayan Roy**, presents an intriguing story of both continuity and legal turmoil within the Andul royal family. However, when Raja Bijoy Keshav passed away in 1879, his childless death created a complex succession crisis; therefore, the Andul estate, instead of passing through the line of Raja Bijoy Keshab Roy's widows, was transferred to **Kshetra Krishna Mitra**, a relative from the lineage of **Kashi Nath Roy**. This ruling marked the end of the direct line of succession from **Raja Bijoy Keshab Roy**, yet ensured that the zamindari remained within the extended royal family¹⁵⁸. This transition marked a new chapter for both families, the Andul Raj family's history, and the Mitra family. The Mitra family, therefore, also continued and contributed to religious and cultural life, notably.

Despite the financial strains on their family, the zamindari and legal dispute for property, **Kshetra Krishna Mitra** remained committed to charity and public welfare. He provided regular financial assistance to several institutions, including the *Cholera Hospital in Uluberia*, *Bihuchika Hospital of Uluberia* and also made generous donations to the *Dafferin Hospital* in Hooghly. His monthly contribution was fixed for the *Uluberia Government School, Khulna*, *Amadi Madhya Bangla Vidyalaya in Khulna* and the '*Andul Jubilee School*'. His support for education was particularly noteworthy, as he established an unpaid higher English college at Andul, known as the *Andul Jubilee School*, which operated for about five years with a monthly expenditure of Rs. 500 and a founding cost of Rs. 30,000. The school was established at the request of Mahamahopadhyay Prakash Chandra Nyayaratna and Mahesh Chandra Shastri; however, due to administrative or political reasons, the school was eventually closed¹⁵⁹. His involvement in the construction of Habra Town Hall and two temples at Devapura in Varanasi,¹⁶⁰ demonstrated his

commitment to both civic development and religious patronage. Though some considered him infamous for his stern rule, his philanthropic efforts continued to shape the region.

The Andul Raj family also maintained extensive religious and charitable traditions. Within the *Thakur Dalan* of the Andul Rajbari, there are hundreds of idols of Lord Shiva, Goddess Annapurna, and Nand Gopal. An annual budget of Rs. 4,000 was allocated for their worship, in addition to Rs. 3,500 for the Durga Puja celebrations. Offerings and *prasad* from these rituals were distributed among Brahmins and the poor. The expenses for these religious activities were met from the income of the Jorhat Mouza estate. Furthermore, from the revenue of Andul Bazar, a daily charity service for saints and the poor, known as *Sadavrata*, was maintained. Kshetra Krishna was also deeply involved in religious activities. The Rajbari in Andul housed numerous idols of **Shiva** and **Annapurna Devi**, with a dedicated annual budget for their worship. He allocated funds for Durga Puja and supported the feeding of Brahmins and the poor. His donations for cremation grounds at **Hanumanta Ghat** in Shibpur and contributions to 4 Temples around the Hanumanta Ghat showcased his commitment to spiritual and community welfare. His philanthropic work earned him formal recognition from the British government. On June 20, 1897, he received an appreciation certificate of recognition from the Viceroy and Governor-General in the name of Queen Victoria, acknowledging his public spirit and generosity. The certificate affirmed his status as a distinguished zamindar whose contributions benefited society¹⁶¹.

Raja Kshetra Krishna Mitra had three sons: **Kumar Upendra Nath, Kumar Debendra Nath, and Kumar Nagendra Nath**. His eldest son, Upendra Nath, actively supported his father's charitable activities. Kumar Upendranath, beyond his role in managing the zamindari, was a respected figure known for his diplomatic skills, kindness, and ability to foster positive relationships. His strong European connections were

exemplified in his meeting with Lord Kitchener, a key figure in British India. During their encounter, Lord Kitchener took note of a jewelled sword that had once been presented to an ancestor of Upendra Nath, symbolizing the family's longstanding prestige. A portrait of Lord Kitchener with his signature remains in the Andul Rajbati as a testament to this historic meeting. Despite his relatively early death at the age of 52 on July 1, 1901, Kumar Upendra Nath Mitra left behind a rich legacy. His five sons and four daughters carried forward the lineage of the Andul royal dynasty, ensuring that the zamindari's influence and reputation endured for future generations. His contributions to estate management and diplomacy cemented his place in the family's history as a capable and revered leader¹⁶². The passing of Kumar Upendra Nath Mitra on July 1, 1901, at the age of 52, left a significant void in the Andul royal family. In remembrance of Kumar Upendranath, his widow constructed a **Shiva temple** and a **cremation ghat** on the banks of the Saraswati River in Andul, benefiting the local community by providing a sacred space for worship and important rituals. The vast landholdings of the Andul royal family were divided into two branches — ***Boro Torof***, under Kumar Upendra Nath, and ***Choto Torof***, under Kumar Nagendranath¹⁶³.

Kumar **Nagendra Nath Mitra** was known for his sociable nature, fondness for hymns, and passion for sports. In 1911, his untimely demise at the age of 39 was a great loss to the family. His son, Kumar **Shailendra Nath Mitra**, born in 1300 Bangla, inherited the family's responsibilities and cultural legacy. Shailendranath married the third daughter of Babu Rajnikant Bahu, a noble zamindar from Banagram in the Bakharganj district, and had two sons and one daughter¹⁶⁴. A passionate patron of music and poetry, he possessed the rare ability to compose poetry himself. He founded the '***Makhan Kumari Chatushpathi***' in honour of his mother, entrusting a Sanskrit scholar with its management¹⁶⁵. His philanthropic endeavours extended to providing financial assistance

to impoverished families in his village, reinforcing his reputation as a generous and community-oriented leader.

Upendra Nath Mitra had five sons: Pramath Nath, Manmath Nath, Surath Nath, Bharat Nath, and the youngest, Jagat Nath. Like his father, the eldest son of the family, **Pramath Nath Mitra**, was an able administrator with a deep understanding of estate management. However, his contributions extended beyond zamindari affairs; he was a man of diverse interests, including literature, painting, photography, music, zoology, agriculture, and mechanical sciences¹⁶⁶. He took the lead in defending the family's interests and, after years of legal proceedings, secured a favourable verdict on January 2, 1919. His victory ensured that the estate remained under family control, allowing him to focus on its restoration and administration. He also played a pivotal role in renovating the temples, family residences, and markets in **Andul** and **Shibpur**. His efforts also facilitated a resolution between the **two branches** of the family, leading to the appointment of a joint manager for the smooth operation of the estate. His passion for rural development led him to establish a model agricultural field to educate and support local farmers. Additionally, he was deeply involved in community service, serving as Chairman of the Andul Union Committee, a past president of the Andul Orphan Store, and the founder and editor of '**Gramya Hitkari Samaj**,' a rural welfare association focused on health, education, and village improvement. Under his leadership, the '**Gramya Hitkari Balika Vidyalaya**' school was established, offering education to girls in Andul¹⁶⁷. His philanthropy extended to financial aid for underprivileged villagers, reinforcing his role as a community leader dedicated to social progress. Through his leadership, Pramath Nath ensured that the Andul zamindari remained a stronghold of cultural, educational, and social advancements, continuing the family's tradition of service and stewardship.

The history of the Mitra and Roy families of Andul presents a fascinating study of aristocratic legacy, governance, and social influence in Bengal during and after the colonial period. Kumar **Manmatha Nath Mitra**, born in 1298 Bangabda, was known for his athletic prowess and deep love for animals. He married the daughter of Babu Akshay Kumar Bose, a respected figure in the Calcutta High Court, and had one daughter. His reputation as a sportsman and animal lover added a distinct dimension to his role within the Andul royal family. **Kumar Suran Nath Mitra**, born in 1304 Bangla, pursued higher education and earned a BA degree before becoming an article clerk in the ATP office. His marriage to the only daughter of Kumar Khagendrakrishna Deb Bahadur of the illustrious Sobhabazar dynasty linked the Mitra family to one of Bengal's most distinguished aristocratic lineages. The couple had one son. The marital relationship between the elite family members continued for decades, proving their urge to improve their family legacy by marrying other notable families and keeping the property only within the reputed zamindari families. Other notable family members, like Kumar Bharat Nath Mitra and Jagat Nath Mitra, were all highly educated and kept their family legacy high.

V

The Roy family of Andul, whose history is closely tied to the Mitras, played a significant role in shaping the cultural and political landscape of Bengal during British rule. As major landowners, their influence extended beyond economic matters into governance and cultural patronage. The postcolonial transfer of the Roy family's property to the Mitras, who claimed descent from the Roys, adds an intriguing layer to the historical narrative. While the legitimacy of this transfer remains a subject of controversy, it did not diminish the family's enduring legacy. The Roy and Mitra families exemplify the role of Bengal's aristocratic houses in local governance, education, and social reform. Their

contributions to political affairs, religious patronage, and cultural advancements shaped the trajectory of Andul and Howrah. These families were not mere landowners but centres of power and progress, influencing Bengal's history in a way that warrants deeper historical exploration.

However, in this regard, **Prof. Venkoba R. Rao** observed that the Andul Roy family maintained a distinctly superior position for many years, even when compared with other eminent zamindar families of the Hooghly region, such as the Mukherjee family of Uttarpara and the zamindari household of Singur¹⁶⁸. Thus, the enduring legacy of the Andul Raj family is particularly noteworthy, as it extended seamlessly from the pre-colonial to the colonial period. This continuity of influence distinguishes them as one of the few zamindari families in Bengal that managed to preserve their social and political dominance across both epochs. However, their prominence began to decline in the post-independence era. The abolition of the zamindari system, coupled with the rise of anti-feudal sentiments and the widespread Marxist movement in post-colonial Bengal, played a decisive role in diminishing their authority and socio-economic standing.

However, in spite of the immense financial, social, and political influence of the Roy family, certain aspects of their conduct invite critical reflection regarding their broader role in society and the nation, particularly during crucial historical junctures. Among them, most notably, their remarkable prominence contrasts sharply with their limited engagement in the larger political and nationalist movements of their time. Especially, during the intense period of India's freedom struggle, it is striking that none of the Roy family members are recorded as having taken an active part in the national movement. While the nation echoed with the call for independence, the Roy family remained detached, choosing not to align themselves with anti-colonial activities. This absence of participation raises significant questions about their ideological stance and

priorities. It suggests that the family may have preferred to maintain their privileges under British patronage rather than risk their established socio-economic position. Their silence and apparent neutrality during one of the most defining phases of Indian history indicate a possible alignment, whether intentional or circumstantial, with colonial interests. In doing so, the Roy's appeared to prioritize the preservation of wealth, status, and zamindari influence over collective national aspirations.

At the same time, while the Roy family's contributions to Howrah's regional development remain undeniable through philanthropy, education, and civic initiatives, their legacy reveals inherent limitations. Their activities were largely confined to the domains of zamindari administration, caste-based upliftment (particularly among Kayasthas), and social conservatism. Though they fostered educational and cultural growth within their community, their vision did not extend to the progressive movements sweeping Bengal and India during the late colonial era. The rigidity of their worldview, shaped by orthodoxy, class consciousness, caste identity and caste movements, prevented them from embracing broader social and political reforms.

This conservative disposition extended to the domestic sphere as well. The near-total absence of women from the family's public or intellectual life underscores the narrow boundaries within which the Roy women lived. While other elite families of Bengal were beginning to embrace the education and social empowerment of women, inspired by reformers like Vidyasagar and the Brahma Samaj, the Roy household remained bound by older conventions of respectability and seclusion. The women, though respected as custodians of family honour, were denied the opportunities for education or public engagement that might have broadened their roles. This omission reflects not only the family's patriarchal mindset but also the limits of their social imagination in an age of change.

Considering all facts, we can conclude that the journey of the Roy family is one of duality - of achievement and restraint, progress and conservatism. They helped shape the civic and cultural framework of Howrah, yet they stopped short of engaging with the revolutionary transformations taking place around them. Their world was one of continuity rather than disruption, of safeguarding lineage rather than embracing reform. And while this made them pillars of local society, it also rendered them distant figures in the larger narrative of Bengal's awakening. Theirs was a legacy both luminous and limited, a reflection of a class that thrived under empire, but could not fully rise to the call of freedom. The constant calculative loyalty of the Roy family has ensured their survival during a time when other families like Dutta Chowdhury fell into decline or faced reprisals for opposing colonial interests. In Howrah, prestigious families like the Roy family and eminent zamindars like Ram Charan Roy played an intermediary role during the transformation of Bengal from pre-colonial to the colonial era. They emerged as powerful zamindars of their region by utilizing the chaotic circumstances of colonial Bengal, although their ascendancy not only did their whole region develop but the history of Bengal also found a new direction. Through the networking of these zamindars, their region connected to the larger course of Bengal's history, both economically and culturally. It depicts the rise of illustrious zamindari families and the economic transformation of Bengal are not isolated themes; rather, are intertwined and have shaped Bengal's history extensively. Thus, by adding their unique regional flavour, they indelibly left a special distinction and contribution to the history of Bengal.

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Chapter-V

Business and Zamindari Families of Chandannagar, Chinsurah & Andul: A Comparative Study

In this chapter, we aim to examine the similarities and differences among three prominent regional elite families, the Roquitte, Seal, and Roy families, within the broader historical context of Bengal during the transformative era of colonial rule. Because we must understand that the anecdote of these families is not detached from the mainstream discourse of Bengal's history; rather, they illuminate the grassroots realities of the region's past. Accordingly, this chapter explores how their experiences and trajectories reflected both their unique family histories and their connections to Bengal's larger transition from the pre-colonial to the colonial era. It also examines how these families navigated the challenges and opportunities created by colonial rule, despite operating under different colonial contexts—French, Dutch, and British regimes, respectively—common patterns emerge in their ability to adapt, negotiate, and influence socio-political discourses. At the same time, their divergent trajectories reveal the regional and administrative particularities of their colonial rulers, offering a comparative framework for understanding the multifaceted impact of colonialism on Bengal.

Thus, we will first untangle the factors and elements these families shared, which may seem 'individual' but were all interlinked. The families' responses to colonial pressures will also be explored, particularly in terms of resistance and adaptation. How did these families navigate the changing political landscape, and what strategies did they employ to maintain their influence? The study will investigate whether these elites resisted colonial interference or adapted to new political and economic systems. By cooperating with colonial authorities, they consolidated their regional influence, expanding their wealth and power. Such collaboration allowed zamindars and business families, such as

the Roquitte, Seal, and Roy, to solidify their standing within the colonial hierarchy, securing both financial benefits and social capital.

Economic Emergence

The economic emergence of influential zamindars and business houses, such as the Roquitte, Seal, and Roy families, was marked by their extensive influence on the economy, spanning from regional to national levels. It reflects their integral roles in shaping the socio-economic landscape of Bengal during French, Dutch, and British colonial rule. Their financial prominence was not only a result of their wealth but also due to their active involvement in land management, trade, and their strategic partnerships with colonial powers. For instance, families like the Roquitte and Seal played pivotal roles in trade and commerce, and their connections with the French and Dutch, through alliances, made them instrumental in facilitating the growth of trade networks. These families helped bolster regional economies by handling local production, such as textiles, salt, and other essential goods, and engaging in international trade. By leveraging their business acumen and land management skills, they contributed to local and global markets, becoming vital players in Bengal's economic framework.

On the other hand, Families like the Roys, who were prominent zamindars, took on significant responsibility for managing vast estates and ensuring agricultural productivity. The revenue from these estates was crucial to sustaining the colonial economy, as the British heavily relied on revenue collection from the farming sector. These zamindars were not just landowners but also local elites who managed the livelihoods of countless farmers, ensuring a smooth revenue collection process that benefited both colonial authorities and their own families. For example, in the late 19th century, the financial history of Howrah district witnessed a substantial transformation,

catalysed by the construction of two major roads—the Andul Raj Road and Raja Raj Narayan Street. Both roads were established by the influential Andul Raj (Roy) family. They connected the Howrah region to Calcutta, which had become Bengal's primary economic hub following the establishment of Calcutta Port in 1870¹. This port development marked a decisive moment for Bengal, situating Calcutta as the focal point for commerce and subsequently as the centre of Bengal's socio-political and cultural evolution in the upcoming decades.

The Andul Raj Road² was built in remembrance of the Andul Raj family, which connected the Howrah region to Calcutta. It starts from the Hajra area and is located across the Kalighat Basusri cinema hall. After that, Raja Raj Narayan Street³ was built in remembrance of Raja Raj Narayan Roy, a notable descendant of the family. This road is located near the Raja Bazar Science College area. These two roads significantly boosted the Howrah district's economy by facilitating trade, easing access to Calcutta and linking various small villages within Howrah to the major city and its expanding port.

The improved transport network enabled better movement of goods and resources, making Calcutta Port more accessible to Howrah's residents and traders. The newfound prosperity attracted a diverse population, enriching the socio-cultural condition by prompting the growth of local institutions, educational facilities, and social organizations. The roads, thus, not only played a central role in shaping Howrah's economic history but also laid the groundwork for a dynamic socio-political and cultural evolution in the area. Further exploration into this socio-cultural shift could reveal how the district of Howrah adapted to new, changing discourses of Bengal history and benefited from the economic development of its region.

With these financial changes, the late 19th century in Bengal also witnessed a crucial revision of its territorial and administrative structure. As mentioned earlier, in the year 1795, the Hooghly and Howrah regions were separated from the larger district of Burdwan as a part of the British administrative strategy, which aimed at improving administrative efficiency by managing the increasing population and industrialization, particularly in the Hooghly and Howrah regions. Both the regions were initially merged, and the temporary merging of Hooghly and Howrah was a reflection of administrative needs. Nevertheless, as Howrah experienced increasing industrial growth, especially due to its proximity to Calcutta, the British government felt the necessity to divide these regions further to get better control over the economy. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th century, Howrah rapidly flourished as a major hub for industry, transportation and river traffic. As a result, Howrah district was officially established during 1937-38 and became a popular industrial and urban centre⁴.

Hence, this phenomenon demonstrates that the relationships between these local elites and the colonial powers (French, Dutch, and British) were symbiotic. While colonial rulers imposed foreign policies and structures, they heavily depended on the influence and support of these local elites. The collaboration helped the colonisers maintain control over Bengal, while the local elites gained economic advantages, including trade privileges, land rights, and titles. This interaction not only shaped the political landscape but also influenced the development of regional commerce. The local elites played a significant role in the hierarchical structure of Bengal society. The colonial powers, especially the British, acknowledged the importance of the indigenous social order, which helped maintain local governance and ensured a smooth colonial administration. As landowners and powerful figures, the zamindars and business families exercised authority over the peasants, merchants, and workers. This power was instrumental in the colonial

management of Bengal, and their cooperation helped solidify the political control of foreign rulers over the region.

Thus, the intertwined roles of these families in the socio-economic fabric of Bengal left a long-lasting impact on the region's development. Their ability to maintain a balance between tradition and collaboration with colonial authorities allowed them to thrive despite the challenges posed by colonial governance. Their involvement in land management, trade, and local governance significantly shaped Bengal's economy, laying the foundation for the region's growth even after the colonial period. The regional elites, such as the Roquitte, Seal, and Roy families, played a crucial role in both the colonial and pre-colonial periods, shaping Bengal's socio-economic structure through their business ventures, land management, and collaboration with colonial authorities. Their involvement in trade, agriculture, and governance not only solidified their wealth but also had a lasting impact on the regional economy, reinforcing the importance of local elites in maintaining Bengal's socio-political and economic stability under colonial rule.

The Matter of Property Disputes and Colonial Legal Intervention

One of the most intricate aspects concerning the finances and inheritance of Bengal's landed aristocracy lies in the recurring clashes and disputes over property rights within elite families. These internal conflicts, while rooted in traditional systems of kinship and inheritance, became deeply entangled with the colonial legal and administrative apparatus, which functioned simultaneously as both arbiter and beneficiary. A closer examination of the **Seal family of Chinsurah** and the **Roy (later Mitra) family of Andul** vividly illustrates how familial inheritance issues became instruments through which the colonial state consolidated its authority over Bengal's landed society.

In mid-19th-century Bengal, property disputes among influential families often became avenues for colonial interference. Around 1850, the British East India Company's **Board of Revenue** sought control over the *Patta* system, which was a written agreement between peasants and landowners in the Chinsurah division (*Mahakuma*)⁵. This administrative effort to regulate land tenure under the guise of "legal standardization" was, in effect, a mechanism to extend fiscal supervision over indigenous zamindars. Within this framework, the **Seal family of Chinsurah** became embroiled in a protracted dispute regarding land grants. **Haimanti Devi**, the wife of **Kashinath**, a prominent zamindar with Seal lineage connections, approached the British authorities for assistance in resolving a land acquisition conflict. It appears that **Kashinath's two marriages** had created internal disputes over inheritance and legitimacy⁶, prompting family members to seek colonial judicial mediation. Such private litigations, though seemingly domestic in nature, **enabled the British to intervene** in local power structures⁷. As families like the Seals turned to British courts for arbitration, the colonial government exploited these opportunities to **assert control over Patta lands**, thereby reinforcing their authority within the zamindari system of the Chinsurah region.

A parallel narrative unfolded in the **Andul zamindari**, where a major succession dispute arose following the death of **Raja Bijoy Keshab Roy** in 1879. His death without a biological heir triggered a crisis of succession, aggravated by the **dual adoption of heirs** by his widows, **Rani Navadurga** and **Durga Sundari**. The matter reached the **Calcutta High Court** and subsequently the **Privy Council**, which rejected both adoptions because the Hindu *Shashtra* permitted only one adoption under such circumstances⁸. While ostensibly a legal question of inheritance, the decision must be situated within the broader imperial strategy of control over landed property. By the late nineteenth century, the **Permanent Settlement of 1793** had already institutionalized British supremacy over

Bengal's agrarian economy, converting zamindars into revenue intermediaries rather than autonomous rulers. Within this context, the **Privy Council's** ruling can be interpreted not as a neutral application of law, but as part of the colonial policy of weakening hereditary estates. By invalidating traditional rights of succession, the British ensured that estates remained juridically dependent on the colonial state, reinforcing the illusion of legal impartiality while furthering imperial objectives.

In the aftermath of the Privy Council's decision, the Andul zamindari passed not through the direct line of **Raja Bijoy Keshab Roy**, but to **Kshetra Krishna Mitra**, a close relative descending from **Kashi Nath Roy's** lineage. Kshetra Krishna's father, **Babu Kalipada Mitra**, an aristocrat of **Bandisha**, had married the **daughter of King Kashi Nath Roy**⁹, thereby linking the Mitra family with the Andul royal house. This transfer of inheritance, legally sanctioned yet socially negotiated, preserved the continuity of the **Andul estate** within the extended family, while aligning it more firmly with the colonial order. Despite financial strain from prolonged litigation, **Raja Kshetra Krishna Mitra** demonstrated remarkable administrative prudence and philanthropic zeal. His tenure was characterized by efforts to stabilize the estate's economy and maintain its charitable traditions, earning him widespread respect and the honorary title of *Raja*. The Andul zamindari, thus, entered a new phase, where traditional legitimacy intertwined with colonial recognition, signifying a pragmatic adaptation to shifting political realities rather than resistance.

The two case studies- Chinsurah and Andul- reveal how colonial law became a site of negotiation between power and legitimacy. The British judiciary projected itself as an impartial arbiter, yet its interventions systematically dismantled indigenous legal autonomy. Disputes among zamindars and their kin provided fertile ground for judicial colonization, where every judgment further legitimized British oversight of private

property. These property conflicts underscore the dual nature of elite collaboration. Families such as the Seals and Roys sought British intervention to safeguard or legitimize their interests, inadvertently facilitating the erosion of their traditional sovereignty.

Their survival depended on strategic accommodation rather than confrontation, a theme that defines much of Bengal's colonial landed history. In addressing these legal predicaments, elucidated by Prof. Ranajit Guha, which he terms the “**prose of counter-insurgency**”¹⁰, a subtle but pervasive form of domination, exercised not through direct coercion but through the language of legality and reform. The colonial courts thus served as instruments of both justice and subjugation, mediating family disputes while embedding imperial control within the very structures of indigenous society.

The inheritance disputes of the **Seal family of Chinsurah** and the **Andul Roy (Mitra) family** illuminate a critical intersection of **law, lineage, and imperial politics** in nineteenth-century Bengal. Beneath the façade of judicial neutrality, colonial authorities harnessed local disputes to reconfigure property relations in their favour, undermining the autonomy of traditional elites while fostering their dependence. Yet, the adaptability of families like the Roys and Mitras ensured their continued prominence, albeit within a transformed sociopolitical framework defined by colonial legality and economic pragmatism. Ultimately, these episodes illustrate the transition of Bengal's zamindari from sovereign custodians of land to subjects of colonial jurisprudence. They remind us that property disputes in colonial India were never merely familial or financial; they were profoundly political, reflecting the deep entanglement of personal ambition, social legitimacy, and imperial power.

Role of Religion, Rituals, Caste and Customs

On the eve of the nineteenth century, religion, caste, local rituals, and customs continued to play a crucial role in structuring Bengal's social order. Their significance was

not confined merely to the realm of spirituality or religious devotion; rather, they constituted an integral framework through which social hierarchy, authority, and power relations were articulated and maintained. These elements of traditional Indian society were so deeply rooted that neither the European colonial powers nor the indigenous elites could ignore their pervasive influence. The participation of elite families, such as the Seal family of Chinsurah, the Andul Roy family, in major religious and ritual practices offers a vivid example of this phenomenon. Rituals such as *Durga Puja*, performed by all the elite families and *Kartik Puja*, celebrated by the Seals, or the *Itu Puja*¹¹, a distinctly local festival, demonstrate how religious observances transcended mere faith and became mechanisms of social cohesion and legitimacy. Similarly, the Andul Roy family's construction of a grand *Natmandir* in front of their *Kalimandir*¹² signifies not only religious piety but also the architectural expression of status, prestige, and patronage.

Caste, as a central axis of social identity, further shaped the political and cultural engagements of these elite families. Their involvement in caste-based reform movements, such as the Seals' participation in the *Subarnabanik Upliftment*¹³ initiatives and the Roys' active role in the *Kayastha Movement*¹⁴, demonstrates how social and ritual hierarchies were both reinforced and renegotiated within the changing context of nineteenth-century Bengal. These efforts were often framed as spiritual or moral reforms, but they also served pragmatic socio-political ends, allowing elites to preserve or enhance their authority in a transforming colonial milieu. It would be simplistic, however, to interpret these religious and ritualistic engagements as pure expressions of devotion. Rather, they operated as strategic instruments of power mediation.

The zamindars and local elites stood as crucial intermediaries between the upper echelons of authority, the Mughal or later the colonial rulers and the lower strata, particularly the tenants and peasants. In such a multi-layered social hierarchy, rituals and

religious patronage functioned as a *symbolic language* through which the elites communicated with, and exercised moral authority over, their dependents. These public religious performances cultivated a sense of communal belonging, legitimized the elites' dominance, and maintained the intricate networks of loyalty and obligation that underpinned agrarian society. Thus, it is important to understand that the intertwining of religion, rituals, and customs with Bengal's social and political life during the 19th century illustrates how spiritual practices were inseparable from strategies of governance and social control. The elites' patronage of temples, festivals, and caste movements reflected both genuine religiosity and calculated efforts to reinforce hierarchical stability. Thus, religion in colonial Bengal cannot merely be viewed as a domain of faith; it must be understood as a dynamic instrument of cultural politics, one that enabled the zamindar elites to mediate between rulers and subjects, sacralize their authority, and perpetuate the moral order of their time.

Role of Being the Intermediator

The socio-economic shifts brought about by the Permanent Settlement and its impact on zamindars, merchants, and peasants in Bengal. The transformation of zamindari and merchants from pre-colonial setups to colonial setups significantly altered the traditional power structure, leading to widespread economic distress among the rural population. Eric Stokes' argument that the 1857 Revolt was partly a peasant uprising led by displaced zamindars highlights the broader agrarian discontent. Many zamindars, who had once wielded immense influence, found themselves unable to meet revenue demands and lost their lands to moneylenders and merchants, who often lacked the feudal obligations of traditional landowners. This, in turn, exacerbated the suffering of peasants, who faced increased exploitation under the new landlords. They ensured their status remained unchallenged through the collection of land revenue, legal authority, and, in

some cases, the use of private militias. This led to instances of exploitation, with peasants and tenants bearing the burden of heavy taxes and forced labour.

The dual nature of zamindars¹⁵—as both protectors and oppressors—is a recurring theme in Bengal’s history. For example, some postal letters¹⁶ of the zamindars of Taltor depict the real scenario of that time. In that letter, a peasant or the subordinate requested the zamindar of their locality (Ghosh family of Taltor) to attend his daughter's wedding; however, his invitation shows his urge and the influence of the zamindari family of that region. This shows that, while they played crucial roles in maintaining order, funding cultural and religious institutions, and influencing local governance, they also enforced their dominance through coercion, fear and respect. Their ability to maintain status across different layers of society was often linked to their close ties with the British administration and their willingness to suppress dissent among their subordinates. Throughout Bengal, particularly during British rule, zamindars frequently served as intermediaries between the colonial government and local populations. While some resisted British policies to protect local interests, others collaborated for personal gain, further entrenching their influence over their subordinates. This phenomenon of dominance through force, economic control, and social hierarchy was evident all over Bengal, leaving a lasting impact on its sociopolitical fabric well into the post-colonial era.

Greater Interest or Self-Interest

The idea of ‘Greater Interest vs. Self-Interest’ is indeed a complex issue when evaluating the philanthropic activities of elite families. Their contributions to society, such as founding schools, ghats, or other charitable institutions, may be seen as a positive attempt to uplift society. However, the material wealth they accumulated, as well as the luxury in their personal lives, raises significant questions about their underlying

motivations. The lavish lifestyle of these families, with their mansions, exclusive furniture, and vast properties, may suggest a significant disparity between their philanthropic work and personal indulgences¹⁷.

This contrast might lead to the interpretation that their charitable contributions were not entirely selfless but could have been intended to secure their family's legacy, further consolidate their wealth, or maintain their social standing. The naming of institutions and public places after themselves, such as 'Dourga Charan Rakshit Banga Vidyalaya' or roads named after the Andul Raj family, adds to the perception that such philanthropic acts could also serve as a vehicle for self-promotion. While the tangible benefits to the community should not be dismissed, it's valid to consider whether these acts were driven by genuine altruism or a desire for recognition. In some cases, such efforts may reflect a broader pattern of social self-interest, where philanthropic gestures serve the elite family's public and private interests, enabling them to maintain or enhance their reputation, legacy, and influence.

Ergo, the question remains: Was their philanthropic work driven by the desire to improve society, or was it a strategic move to ensure the continuity of their name, power, and wealth? The nature of philanthropy is debated, with questions raised about whether it is driven by genuine altruism or a desire for social status and legacy-building. While these elite houses did contribute to public welfare, the grandeur of their personal lives and the tendency to name institutions after themselves suggest a self-serving motivation. This pattern of patronage, seen in the naming of schools, ghats, and roads, suggests an effort to establish lasting recognition rather than pure selflessness. However, this raises a broader question: does self-interest necessarily invalidate the benefits of their philanthropy?

For example, Dourga Chorone Babu's actions, particularly regarding his daughter's inheritance, have often been portrayed as evidence of his generosity and egalitarian principles. However, a closer examination of the broader societal context and his family's practices suggests a more complex reality. While his will ensured that his daughter received an equal share of the property, this decision appears to align more with customary inheritance practices than a progressive stance on gender equality. Despite the perception of his will as a reflection of an enlightened mindset, the fact that none of the women in his family received formal education or participated in social gatherings contradicts this narrative. Ensuring his daughter's inheritance may have been a response to societal expectations rather than a deliberate effort to advance women's rights. However, historically, Indian society has recognized women's rights to paternal property, rendering such a decision less groundbreaking and more a reflection of established norms. The glorification of his decision, therefore, may reflect a patriarchal perspective that frames this inclusion as an exception rather than an inherent right.

Historians such as Sudhir Kumar Mitra have noted that the first half of the 19th century witnessed significant initiatives to establish free schools in Calcutta and Mofaswal, marking a crucial chapter in the history of education. Contemporaries of Dourga Chorone Roquitte, such as Harihar Sett, Prafulladhan Bhar, and Bholanath Das, played pivotal roles in promoting women's education. In contrast, Dourga Chorone Roquitte did not extend similar support to female education within his own family. This lack of encouragement, particularly at a time when social reform movements were actively advocating for women's empowerment, suggests a reluctance to engage with progressive ideals regarding women's roles in society.

Hence, while Dourga Chorone Babu's decision to include his daughter in the inheritance may appear egalitarian on the surface, it ultimately conforms to traditional

expectations rather than signifying a genuine commitment to gender equality. His reluctance to support women's education, especially when juxtaposed with the efforts of his contemporaries, underscores the limitations of his perceived generosity. Rather than being a trailblazer for women's rights, his actions can be interpreted as a strategic adherence to societal norms, reinforcing rather than challenging the patriarchal structures of his time.

Regarding the subject, we must analyse that the participation of local zamindars and businessmen from Chandannagar, Chinsurah, and Howrah in expanding women's education was remarkable; yet, their intention behind it raises suspicion. For instance, the establishment of 'Krishna Bhabini Nari Shiksha Mandir' by Harihar Sett and the involvement of other merchants of the locality in establishing 'Lal Bagan Balika Vidyalaya' were exactly in the same year. It indicates the silent contest within the merchant community regarding social welfare somewhere down the line. In these schools, students mostly came from lower- or middle-class families, whereas women from upper-class families' engagement was negligible. Regarding this matter, the role of all influential businessmen in the locality was quite doubtful. It is being stated¹⁸ that Harihar Sett, the eminent businessman and the founder of 'Krishna Bhabini Nari Shiksha Mandir', went door to door to congregate female students. Many girls and their families could not refuse his request, and in this way, he was able to increase the participation of students in his school. This campaign of Harihar Sett engenders the continuing controversy. While he was successful in encouraging girls from the locality to attend school, why couldn't he persuade his wife or daughters to enrol in education?

Despite the direct involvement of merchant communities of Chandannagar, girls from these families (*bonedi*) not only refrained from pursuing formal education but also remained isolated from social interactions. Explaining this fact, family members of these

households noted¹⁹ that the women in their families preferred not to socialize outside. However, the effort and contributions to educating girls by Krishnabhabini Dasi and Tarakdasi, who belonged to these families, contradicted this statement. Another area of uncertainty regarding the contribution of the merchant community is how these schools faced financial distress in the later phase of the colonial regime, despite the financial affluence and political dominance of these merchant communities. It is also bewildering to understand why women in Chandannagar seemed to have been introduced to the modern education system much later compared to other places in Bengal during the colonial period. Chandannagar, having an advanced structure of education in the pre-colonial era, naturally raises questions about the role of contributors in this matter.

Another question that is raised that why these merchants showed interest in developing women's education only after a significant delay, despite their awareness of Calcutta's cultural milieu and extensive travels? Similarly, diversity and controversy were evident even among leftist leaders. While leftist movements often championed equality and social justice, their implementation sometimes did not align with these principles. Sulagna Ghosh, a researcher, lamented that, during the leftist movement, popular leaders did not encourage their daughters to step outside. The researcher's grandmother experienced this neglect²⁰. Exploring the reason behind this contradictory nature in women's education, Prof. Geraldine Forbes²¹ and Prof. Judith E. Walsh²². They elucidated that upper-class families (*Bonedi*) used their financial dominance to engage in philanthropic activities, mainly to 'increase power, prestige and influence', and in this matter, women's welfare was a secondary matter of concern for them.

This scenario was prevalent in every household across Bengal²³. In the colonial regime, the subject of women's education and their upliftment or any social welfare, for that matter, often acted as a tool for opportunists to strengthen their self-interests. In this

process, the greater society may have indirectly and temporarily benefited. Such as several schools and institutions provided educational opportunities to women and enabled them to contribute to the larger socio-economic development of society. These educated women played a seminal role in various fields, from social reform to the professional sphere and gradually shaped the future of society. However, in the ultimate game of maintaining aristocracy and prestige, the system of protecting ‘the patriarchy’ required women to make sacrifices in the name of chastity.

Political Domain

In the political domain, the active participation of these families, whether as individuals or in groups, not only reinforced their regional political status but also played a crucial role in shaping Bengal’s political response to colonial rule, setting the stage for future regional progress. Their legacy is one of convergence, where commerce, politics, culture, and social transformation intersect. By balancing tradition with adaptation, these families demonstrated how collective and individual agency could shape history, influencing both the colonial experience and Bengal’s evolving societal framework. Because these families not only reshuffled regional political structure, but also engaged with colonial powers—French, Dutch, and British—they navigated changing political and economic landscapes, adapting to colonial modernity while preserving traditional structures. They were all highly appreciated by colonial governments, with several awards, such as ‘Raja’, ‘Raja Bahadur’, ‘Ray Saheb’ by Britishers, ‘Oflicer d’ Academi’, ‘Chevalier de l’ordre royal du Cambodge’, ‘Chevalier de la légion d’honneur’, by the French, etc. It shows their strong bond and amicability with their respective government.

Nevertheless, the power stability of elite houses in Bengal during the colonial period was deeply intertwined with the colonial rulers, as their influence and social

standing were often reinforced by the patronage, titles, and privileges granted by the colonial regime. These families, such as the Roquitte, Seal and Roy, gained prominence through strategic marriages, economic alliances, and support for colonial governance. The recognition of their contributions to the colonial system, whether in administration, landholding, or cultural patronage, allowed them to maintain their position as key players in Bengal's social and political hierarchy. However, with decolonisation and the subsequent shifts in India's political landscape, these elite houses began to experience a gradual erosion of their power. The end of British colonial rule meant the removal of the specific structures that had allowed them to thrive, such as colonial administrative support, titles, and social preferences. The rise of new power structures, particularly under an independent Indian government, marginalised many of these elites, who had once been integral to the colonial establishment.

Though some of these houses attempted to adapt to the changing circumstances, forging new relationships with post-colonial powers, their influence could never fully replicate the level of control and prestige they had enjoyed during the British era. The dissolution of colonial-era power structures led to a reorganization of societal hierarchies, and the formerly dominant families found themselves at a disadvantage in the face of modern political and social changes. This shift in power dynamics is reflective of the broader transformation in Bengal's elite families and their power relationship, showcasing how colonialism shaped local social structures and how these structures unravelled with the onset of independence. The loss of colonial support, combined with the emergence of new political powers, left these elite houses struggling to maintain their former status in a rapidly changing society.

However, one of the key differences between the French and British colonial systems was the structure of local governance. While British India had councils with

several layers and involvement of many authorities, including in law-making, the French system was much more centralized and controlled by the French authorities. The councils in Chandannagar were more about local governance, with limited influence over higher political matters, including law-making and policy decisions. The lack of power in the local councils made it clear that, under French rule, the colonies had little real political autonomy. Chandannagar's political structure under French rule was marked by limited local representation and restricted governance powers, with much of the decision-making concentrated in the hands of the French authorities. Although there were demands for financial autonomy and other political reforms, the region's limited representation in the General Council meant that these aspirations often went unfulfilled. The contrast between French and British colonial governance was stark, with the French system being more centralized and less responsive to local needs²⁴.

The contributions of these families, both individual and collective, played a defining role in shaping the societal structure of colonial Bengal. The Seal family, for instance, stands out for the diverse roles its members undertook in various fields. Unlike families such as the Roquittes, where a single individual's accomplishments often overshadowed those of others, the Seals operated as a cohesive unit. Each member uniquely strengthened the family's reputation and influence, ensuring sustained prominence across generations. Even among the family members, disparity was quite stark. While Dourga Chorone himself avoided active political roles, his family members carried forward his legacy.

Notable figures like his younger son, Tulshi Chorone Roquitte (Mayor of Chandannagar in 1937), his grandson, Tarini Chorone Roquitte (President of the local French council), and his son-in-law, Sri. Bholanath Das (Mayor in 1899), grandson of Bholanath Das, Dinendra Nath Das (Mayor in 1883) served directly to the government²⁵.

Furthermore, several other heirs of Dourga Chorone Roquitte, such as Profulla Chorone Roquitte and Amulla Chorone Roquitte, also played prominent roles in the town's governance. His other grandson, Debendra Nath Das, was also involved in revolutionary activities and became a member of the **National Democratic Front (N.D.F.)**, highlighting the family's enduring connection to political activism. Roquitte Mahasay and his descendants, such as Bhola Nath Das, contributed to significant milestones, including the election of a Deputy for French India in 1946 based on a single electorate, and ongoing demands for financial autonomy and electoral reforms.

Dourga Chorone's discreet yet impactful political style left an indelible mark on Chandannagar. He focused on nurturing young leaders and creating a framework for effective governance. While avoiding direct roles in active politics, his vision and actions laid the groundwork for the town's political and administrative evolution. His family continued to embody his ideals, cementing the Roquitte name in Chandannagar's history. However, along with these varied contributions, we must acknowledge that these families not only reshuffled the regional political structure but also impacted overall Bengal politics by engaging with colonial powers—French, Dutch, and British. They navigated changing political and economic landscapes, adapting to colonial modernity while preserving traditional structures.

In the political domain, these families were often perceived as both benefactors and oppressors—serving the interests of colonial rulers while simultaneously exerting control over their tenants. Chandannagar (under the French), Chinsurah (under the Dutch), and Howrah (under the British) functioned as rival colonial territories, and the 19th century marked an era of intense revolutionary activity within these regions. Influential elite families such as the Roquittes and Setts played significant roles in these movements. Numerous instances highlight their political dominance and their intricate

connections with their respective colonial authorities. They were instrumental in maintaining order, supporting local infrastructure, and patronizing arts, culture, and education. Many zamindars took pride in their social contributions and acted as guardians of their regions by forging strategic partnerships with colonial powers. Yet, their authority often carried an undercurrent of resistance to colonial rule. For example, in Chandannagar, **Durgadas Sett**, who was the younger brother of the prominent business magnate Harihar Sett and emerged as a renowned revolutionary of his time²⁶. It demonstrates the dual role of these elites as both partners and challengers.

Contributions to the Socio-Cultural Sphere

The actions of these elite houses massively contributed to the socio-cultural sphere of both local and larger evolution of Bengal. For example, the Roquitte family's experiences under French rule may highlight French culture and economic policies on local trade practices. Similarly, the Seal family's adaptation to Dutch governance could reflect the nuances of non-British colonialism in Bengal. The Roy family's interaction with British policies offers insights into the long-lasting effects of British colonial rule on local governance, social hierarchies, and land ownership. However, as a whole, they all actively participated in and shaped the history of Bengal. The families didn't only focus on trade and land management; their patronage of education and culture also had lasting effects on regional development²⁷.

For example, the Roy family established several institutions, like the *Andul Academy*, which eventually became part of the *Mahiyari Kundu Chowdhury Institution*. On the other hand, the Roquitte family also founded the school, *Durga Charone Roquitte Banga Vidyalaya*. Continuing the trend, the Seal family also contributed in numerous ways to enhance their cultural heritage, significantly contributing to the intellectual

growth of Bengal. Their role in promoting Sanskrit studies and intellectual discourse positioned them as key influencers in the cultural renaissance of Bengal during the colonial period.

The role of family ties and social networks in shaping the fortunes of these zamindars and business houses. The influence of family connections, marital alliances, and regional networks will be examined to understand how these families maintained their social and economic positions despite colonial disruptions. These social structures provided a sense of continuity and stability in an otherwise changing world. Families like the Roquitte, Seal and Roy were not only patrons of economic growth but also played a crucial role in the social upliftment of their communities. The Roy family's engagement with the Hindu Dharma Mahasabha and Kayastha movement, the Roquitte and Seal, focused on supporting local education and scholarship, allowing for a sense of collective identity and socio-political development in the face of colonial rule.

The Domain of Contribution Varied

Within these families, the spheres of contribution varied considerably. For instance, Dourga Chorone Roquitte of Chandannagar focused primarily on achieving economic and commercial success, whereas the merchant Seal family of Chinsurah played a far more prominent role in cultural activities, with many of their members making significant contributions to the arts and literature. Even within a single family, individual interests often diverged: while Dourga Chorone Roquitte himself refrained from direct political activism, other members of his family actively participated in political affairs. In contrast, the Roy family of Howrah was deeply involved in the Kayastha movement, striving to uplift their community, a form of engagement not observed among either the Seal or the Roquitte families.

The similarities and differences in their economic strategies, social positions, and adaptive mechanisms under French, Dutch, and British rule, the study also shows the diverse ways in which local elites navigated shifting colonial landscapes. For instance, in some families, the rise to the highest position of authority was carried out mostly by a single individual, such as Dourga Chorone Roquitte. In contrast, within the Roy family of Andul, Howrah, the pursuit of local power was undertaken collectively by multiple members, including Ram Charan Roy, Ram Lochon Roy, and Raj Narayan Roy. Beyond economic enterprises, the chapter will explore how these families balanced traditional values with the forces of colonial modernity, shaping their immediate communities and the evolving socio-political fabric of Bengal.

Equation between Contemporaries

The dynamics of negotiation and interaction among elite families in colonial Bengal form a critical dimension of the region's social and political history. These relationships were shaped by layered patterns of competition, collaboration, and strategic accommodation, reflecting how elites not only negotiated power with colonial rulers but also among themselves. Their interactions reveal the mechanisms through which influence, prestige, and survival were sustained within Bengal's hierarchical social fabric. In colonial **Chandannagar**, the **Roquitte** and **Sett** families exemplified a form of elite coexistence characterized by quiet rivalry under the guise of civic engagement. Although historical evidence does not indicate open conflict, the parallel trajectories of their activities, ranging from political involvement to educational patronage, exhibit a subtle contest for regional prominence.

The simultaneous establishment of educational institutions by these families indicates that benevolent acts often masked deeper motives of prestige-building and social

assertion. As **Prof. Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal** notes, the promotion of women's education or the establishment of various educational institutions to improve the region's educational domain by Bengal's elites frequently carried undertones of ambition and social competition²⁸. In this context, education became a symbolic field where elites negotiated visibility and cultural authority, transforming philanthropy into a medium of rivalry and reputation.

In contrast, the **Andul Roy family's** interactions with contemporaries, such as the Kar (later Roy) and Dutta Chaudhuri families, reveal a different pattern, rooted in *strategic kinship alliances* and *political adaptability*²⁹. The evolution of the Kar family, who rose to prominence and later acquired the title of "Roy," demonstrates how marriage and alliance served as instruments of social mobility. Through the mediation of **Kashiswar Dutta Chaudhuri**, his son-in-law **Gauri Shankar Basu-Mullick** leveraged familial influence to secure zamindari power in Andul, simultaneously facilitating his brother-in-law **Bhubaneshwar Kar's** rise³⁰. The interlinking of the **Dutta Chaudhuri, Basu-Mullick, and Kar (Roy)** lineages created a network of kinship-based power that redefined local authority during the colonial period³¹. The **Andul Roy family** effectively adapted to the changing colonial order through *calculated loyalty* and *strategic diplomacy*. Unlike older families such as the Dutta Chaudhuris, who faced decline due to their resistance or inability to adjust, the Roys forged alliances with colonial officials and cultivated an image of cooperation. Their ability to consolidate wealth and maintain influence exemplified how zamindar families survived by aligning traditional authority with the new political economy of colonial Bengal.

A comparative perspective highlights that elite negotiation in new urban colonial centers like Chandannagar and rural zamindari regions like Andul followed distinct yet intersecting logics. In urban contexts, elites such as the Roquittes and Setts operated within

a cosmopolitan environment where competition was mediated through civic philanthropy, education, and participation in reformist movements. Their visibility depended on cultural capital and association with colonial institutions of progress. Conversely, in rural Bengal, elite rivalry was embedded within landed power, kinship networks, and agrarian patronage. Families like the Andul Roys and Kars strengthened their positions through marital alliances, temple endowments, and acts of loyalty toward the colonial state. Here, prestige was measured not only by wealth but by *control over social hierarchies* and the ability to command local allegiance.

Thus, while the urban elite's negotiation revolved around *public benevolence and symbolic capital*, the rural elite's strategy centred on *dynastic consolidation and political survival*. Both, however, reveal the adaptive intelligence of Bengal's elites in sustaining dominance under colonial modernity. The negotiation between elite families in colonial Bengal was a complex interplay of rivalry, cooperation, and strategic adaptation. Whether through philanthropy in urban Chandannagar or kinship alliances in rural Andul, these elites redefined the contours of power in a period of profound change. Their calculated relationships, with both contemporaries and colonial rulers, illustrate how social capital, rather than ideology, determined survival and prestige. Ultimately, the elites of Bengal mastered the art of *negotiating rivalry as diplomacy*, ensuring their endurance through the tides of colonial transformation.

Decisive Role of Elites in Epoch-Making

A close examination of Indian history reveals that the elites, whether aristocrats, zamindars, or wealthy merchants, have consistently played a decisive role in shaping transitions between historical epochs. Across successive regimes, from the Mughal to the colonial and post-colonial periods, the Indian elite functioned as active agents in the processes of both continuity and change. As Professor Blair B. Kling aptly described in

his seminal work *Partner in Empire: Dwarkanath Tagore and the Age of Enterprise in Eastern*³², the elites in India often acted as collaborators or intermediaries in sustaining and legitimizing imperial authority, while simultaneously safeguarding their own interests within shifting political frameworks.

This phenomenon was neither accidental nor purely opportunistic; it reflected a deeply ingrained structural reality of Indian polity. Since the pre-colonial period, elites served as indispensable partners in the mechanisms of governance, mediation, and economic extraction. Their collaboration with the ruling powers, be it the Mughals or later the European colonial rulers, ensured the stability of the administrative apparatus and facilitated imperial expansion. The British conquest of India, for instance, was not achieved through military supremacy alone; it depended fundamentally on the cooperation of local intermediaries such as zamindars, revenue officials, and influential merchant families.

Several sources show that several regional elites actively or tacitly supported the decline of the waning Mughal authority, aligning themselves with the colonial power to secure their own positions within the new order. However, the political behaviour of the Indian elite was far from monolithic. Their loyalties were shaped by pragmatic calculations rather than ideological commitments. When colonial rule began to threaten their privileges or economic interests, many members of the same class that had once collaborated with the British gradually became sympathetic to nationalist causes. The case of **Durgadas Sett of Chandannagar**, the younger brother of the prominent business magnate **Harihar Sett**, exemplifies this duality. While his family occupied an influential position within colonial economic structures, Durgadas emerged as a noted revolutionary, demonstrating how elite households could simultaneously serve as collaborators and challengers of imperial

authority³³. Such cases underscore that elite allegiance was never absolute; it was conditional, strategic, and inherently fluid.

In this light, the role of the Indian elite in “epoch-making” must be understood as that of both *agents of transformation* and *guardians of continuity*. Their participation in political shifts from the decline of the Mughal Empire to the rise of British colonialism, and later to the nationalist awakening, was driven by the pursuit of self-preservation, status maintenance, and adaptation to changing power dynamics. This pattern reveals that historical transitions in India were rarely the product of revolutionary ruptures alone; rather, they were often negotiated through elite recalibrations and realignments.

Hence, the Indian elite acted as the pivotal force in mediating the transitions between the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial orders. Their engagement with imperial powers was characterized less by ideological conviction and more by strategic pragmatism. The shifting loyalties of these elites, alternating between cooperation and resistance, illustrate how political epochs in India were continually shaped by negotiated partnerships between rulers and intermediaries. Thus, the Indian elite must be viewed not merely as passive beneficiaries of empire, but as active participants in its making and unmaking, decisive agents whose calculated alliances and dissensions profoundly influenced the trajectory of Indian history.

Emergence, Endurance and Eventual Decline: Elite Longevity in Colonial Bengal

The trajectory of Bengal’s elite families, marked by their emergence, endurance, and eventual decline. It reveals a complex pattern shaped by shifting political economies, social hierarchies, and ideological transformations. The evolution of these families was neither uniform nor linear; rather, it reflected their distinct historical circumstances, adaptability, and relationships with contemporary power structures. Families such as the **Roquitte** and **Seal** of Chandannagar exemplify the rise of new elites under colonial

modernity. Their prominence was largely a product of the **colonial economy**, which created fresh avenues of wealth accumulation through trade, administration, and cultural patronage.

Unlike older landed aristocracies, their influence during the pre-colonial era remained limited. It was under European rule, especially during the nineteenth century, that they ascended socially and economically, benefiting from proximity to colonial institutions and the expanding urban economy. However, their dominance proved transient. Following India's independence, the **abolition of the zamindari system**, the spread of **anti-feudal and Marxist movements**, and the transformation of Bengal's agrarian landscape collectively undermined their socio-economic foundations. The decline of such families underscores how colonial prosperity was often contingent upon imperial structures that could not survive the nationalist and postcolonial order.

In contrast, the **Andul Roy family** presents a strikingly different narrative of longevity and continuity. Their ascent cannot be confined to the colonial era; it must be traced back to the **pre-colonial period**, when their fortunes became intertwined with those of the **Dutta Chaudhury** family, one of the oldest and most influential zamindari lineages of Andul. Through **genealogical and marital alliances**, the Roys consolidated wealth, land, and legitimacy under the protective patronage of the Dutta Chaudhuris. The **Mullick** and **Kar** families, who also emerged from this web of kinship and alliance, similarly benefited from this association. The **Kars**, who later assumed the title of '**Roy**', strengthened their social standing through strategic matrimonial ties with the Dutta Chaudhury household, thus embedding themselves within the broader framework of Andul's aristocratic order.

The Roy family's financial and social resilience across the Mughal, colonial, and even postcolonial periods reflects an exceptional adaptability. Their relationship with

successive regimes, first with Mughal administrators, later with British officials, was characterized by **calculated loyalty and pragmatic diplomacy**. This enabled them to retain influence even as other families, such as the Dutta Chaudhuris, faced decline due to political missteps or failure to adjust to the changing conditions of colonial governance. In this regard, **Prof. Venkoba R. Rao** observed that the Andul Roy family sustained a distinctly superior position for many years, surpassing even the renowned **Mukherjee family of Uttarpara** and the **zamindars of Singur** in social prestige and political relevance³⁴. Their endurance across epochs, spanning the Mughal, British, and post-Independence eras, renders them one of the few zamindari dynasties in Bengal to have preserved both continuity and symbolic authority over such a long duration.

The comparative study of these families highlights how historical adaptability, strategic alliances, and institutional negotiation determined the lifespan of elite dominance in Bengal. The Roquitte and Seal families, emblematic of the *colonial bourgeois elite*, rose swiftly under imperial patronage but declined just as rapidly when the colonial framework dissolved. Conversely, the Andul Roy family, rooted in pre-colonial aristocracy yet flexible enough to navigate colonial and postcolonial transitions, represents a model of dynastic continuity amid systemic change. Ultimately, the endurance or decline of Bengal's elite families was not merely a matter of wealth or lineage; it was defined by their ability to reposition themselves within evolving political orders. The Andul Roys' story exemplifies how adaptability and alliance-building could extend the lifespan of feudal power, even in an era increasingly hostile to it. In contrast, the fate of families like the Roquittes and Seals illustrates the fragility of colonial modernity, dependent on a system whose disappearance erased the very conditions that had once ensured their prominence.

Changing Discourse of Bengal's History with the Changing Significance of Regions

The historical evolution of Bengal cannot be understood without considering the changing significance of its regions—each possessing distinct geographical advantages and socio-economic trajectories that profoundly shaped the rise, transformation, and decline of its elite families. The story of Bengal's aristocracy is not merely one of lineage or wealth; it is fundamentally tied to the shifting centres of power and commerce that defined the province's regional history. To understand the rise, endurance, and eventual decline of Bengal's elite families, it is imperative to examine the historical and geographical trajectory of the regions they inhabited. Regional dynamics, shaped by shifts in trade, governance, and colonial intervention, did not merely influence the economic base of these elites but also dictated their strategies for survival, adaptation, and dominance within the evolving order of Bengal.

During the early 19th century, the strategic location of the Hooghly River and its prosperous port towns became instrumental in nurturing several prestigious zamindari and mercantile families. As Prof. Sushil Chaudhury elucidates, the history of Hooghly and its surrounding districts was intimately tied to the Hooghly Port's prominence until the establishment of Calcutta port in 1870, after which Calcutta's ascendancy decisively shifted the balance of power³⁵. Hooghly's prominence as a trading and administrative hub under both European and indigenous control fostered an environment where families like the **Seals, Roquittes, and Duttas** accumulated wealth and influence through maritime trade, brokerage, and landholding. However, the decline of the Hooghly port and the establishment of the Calcutta Port in 1870 fundamentally altered Bengal's economic geography.

This transition marked a turning point in regional significance, as Calcutta emerged as the new nucleus of colonial administration and commerce, while older centres such as

Hooghly and Chandannagar gradually receded into decline. By the late 19th century, the **Howrah and Calcutta districts** mirrored the shifting epicentres of colonial development. As Calcutta flourished into the metropolis of British India, Howrah—its industrial hinterland—experienced parallel growth through transport, manufacturing, and trade infrastructure. The redistribution of economic attention and investment towards these new centres directly influenced the trajectories of Bengal’s elite families.

The experience of the **Seal family of Chinsurah** vividly illustrates this transformation. Originating as prominent merchants during the colonial phase of Hooghly’s prosperity, the Seals strategically adapted to the shifting regional dynamics. Their family lineage diverged into two distinct branches—one remaining in Chinsurah to continue their ancestral enterprise, and another migrating to Calcutta, where they rose to greater prominence. The **Chinsurah branch** gradually lost its pre-eminence in the post-Independence period, as Calcutta (now Kolkata) established itself as Bengal’s dominant urban and economic centre. In contrast, the **Calcutta branch**, adopting the title *Mallick*, sustained and expanded its socio-economic influence. Figures such as **Hriday (Hardu) Mallick** and **Raja Rajendra Mallick**, celebrated for their business acumen and cultural patronage, became emblematic of the new urban elite of nineteenth-century Calcutta. Despite their relocation, the Seal-Mallick family retained enduring ancestral ties with Chinsurah while simultaneously participating in broader, transregional trade and financial networks.

This **dual orientation** was rooted in local tradition yet adaptive to urban modernity, epitomising the family’s capacity for strategic mobility and negotiation within a changing socio-economic environment. Their migration symbolized a broader pattern in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Bengal, where mercantile families from riverine and semi-urban towns strategically relocated to the emerging colonial metropolis to exploit

new commercial opportunities. Through financial ingenuity, cultural adaptability, and cross-cultural engagements, the Seals-Mallicks bridged the realms of indigenous enterprise and British imperial commerce. They were not passive victims of imperial capitalism but active participants in shaping Bengal's hybrid colonial economy, which fused traditional mercantile ethos with modern economic institutions. Their transformation from Chinsurah merchants to Calcutta magnates underscores how indigenous entrepreneurs could redefine agency under colonial modernity, maintaining their influence through strategic alignment with changing political and economic currents.

On the other hand, the emergence of the **Calcutta Port** and the accompanying colonial infrastructure brought about an asymmetrical pattern of regional development. With this, Prof. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya³⁶ also elucidates the process of **De-urbanisation** as a core phenomenon of colonial hegemony, which shows how European powers attempted to dismantle all the old cities and traditional systems of the nation by replacing them with an exploitative structure of the economy. The shift accelerated the concentration of colonial hegemony and capital investment in Calcutta and its environs, marginalizing older port towns that once anchored Bengal's trade and culture. Consequently, while the elites of Hooghly and Chandannagar gradually declined or relocated, the elites of Calcutta and Howrah emerged and expanded, reflecting the reciprocal relationship between regional prominence and elite prosperity. This dynamic underscores a crucial historical insight: the **fortunes of Bengal's elites were inextricably tied to the fortunes of their region**. The development and decline of regional centres not only dictated the flow of capital and prestige but also redefined the identities, loyalties, and survival strategies of elite families.

The History, geography, and social mobility thus remained deeply intertwined in the Bengal context, each influencing and reshaping the other across centuries. The shifting

significance of Bengal's regions reveals how regional geography acted as a catalyst for historical transformation. The rise of Calcutta and the decline of Hooghly were not isolated economic shifts but reflections of broader structural reorientations in colonial Bengal. The journey of the Seal-Mallick family epitomizes how elite families navigated these transitions through mobility, adaptation, and negotiation, transforming regional displacement into opportunities for reinvention. In the larger historical discourse, Bengal's elites were both products and producers of regional change. Their fortunes rose and fell with the ebb and flow of the very regions that nurtured them. This interplay between geography and history reaffirms that the evolution of Bengal's elites was not a static inheritance but a dynamic negotiation shaped by shifting centres of power, trade, and identity.

Thus, by weaving these individual narratives into the broader historical context of Bengal's colonial transformation, the thesis identifies the complexity of the period. It shows that the history of Bengal during the colonial era was not simply one of exploitation and decline but also adaptation, innovation, and cultural exchange. The stories of the Roquette, Seal, and Roy families represent the broader experience of the Bengali elite during this period, balancing traditional values with the demands of a colonial world, preserving social status while adapting to the changing political landscape, and contributing to the cultural and political evolution of the region. Their journeys reflect the larger societal shifts of the time, offering valuable insights into how traditional values and colonial modernity coexisted, clashed, and ultimately shaped the cultural and political evolution of Bengal. This analysis will provide a compelling narrative of Bengal's transformation, grounded firmly in the mainstream historical discourse of the era.

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Conclusion

In this thesis, we have examined how the mid-19th and early 20th centuries represented a transformative phase in the historical trajectory of India, particularly in Bengal. The penetration of European powers into India radically altered the traditional course of its history, with Bengal emerging as one of the most critical provinces due to its strategic importance in both commercial and agrarian sectors during the colonial era. The initial phase of European expansion in India was characterized by tentative experimentation and adaptation. The colonial powers, unfamiliar with the complex socio-political and administrative fabric of the subcontinent, initially sought to transplant their institutional frameworks and Western economic ideologies onto Indian soil. These attempts, however, were often met with resistance and inefficacy, as they failed to reconcile their imported models with indigenous realities.

This period of trial and error revealed the limits of European governance when divorced from the local context. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the British had achieved a greater degree of administrative consolidation. Through the introduction of a structured bureaucratic apparatus and codified systems of governance, they succeeded in institutionalizing control across Bengal. This new order not only reinforced centralized authority but also produced far-reaching transformations in the region's socio-economic and cultural magnitudes. The emergence of a disciplined bureaucracy, the imposition of revenue settlements, and the assimilation of Bengal into global capitalist networks reconfigured local hierarchies and modes of production.

Simultaneously, the 19th century also perceived the proliferation of regional polities and localized centres of power. While some of these retained continuities with earlier traditions of state formation, others derived legitimacy from emergent ethnic, caste,

or community-based identities. The weakening of the Mughal imperial structure opened avenues for new forms of political agency, both indigenous and foreign. Families such as the **Roquittes**, the **Seals**, and the **Roys** in Bengal exemplified this phenomenon, asserting influence at the **micro-regional** level even as European powers like the **French**, **Dutch**, and **British** expanded their dominance on a **macro scale**. This redistribution of political and economic authority was accompanied by profound cultural and ideological shifts. The dismantling of traditional institutions and the imposition of an extractive colonial economy fundamentally restructured Bengal's social order. Yet, amid exploitation and subjugation, the colonial encounter also catalyzed new forms of consciousness, modernity, and reform, producing a dialectical relationship between domination and resistance.

In this backdrop, the closing decades of the 18th century and the early years of the 19th century marked a critical transitional phase in the historical evolution of Bengal's merchant and zamindari communities. Positioned at the intersection of political realignment, economic restructuring, and shifting regional networks, these groups found themselves steering new realities shaped by the decline of older regimes and the gradual consolidation of colonial authority. The socio-political landscape of this period was one of flux: local polities were redefined, systems of landholding reconfigured, and traditional trade routes redirected in response to changing imperial priorities. Within this dynamic environment, the merchants and zamindars, who were long associated with mobility, commerce, and frontier adaptability, responded to the twin forces of opportunity and constraint in complex ways that reveal much about the resilience and transformation of Bengal's sub-regional societies in the early modern period. The British administrators, on their part, pursued a pragmatic policy of forging alliances with influential Bengal zamindars and merchant elites, thereby securing their own economic and political foothold. This symbiotic partnership between colonial officials and indigenous

intermediaries facilitated the emergence of a new class of powerful zamindars and merchants whose rise fundamentally altered Bengal's economic structure. The resulting shifts in land relations, patterns of investment, and commercial orientation had enduring implications for the stratification of colonial society and the broader socio-economic order.

Focusing on this theme, the first chapter of the thesis examines unravelling the processes through which Indian history transitioned from the pre-colonial to the colonial era, with particular attention to the responses of local kingdoms and elite families to the expanding influence of European powers and the eventual entrenchment of British rule. In this regard, two interrelated dimensions of transformation emerge from this analysis: first, the reconfiguration of landholding systems through the introduction of the Permanent Settlement; and second, the restructuring of the trading sector under new conditions of colonial capitalism. By the early 19th century, therefore, Bengal's landowning and mercantile spheres represented an assortment of continuities and disruptions. Traditional modes of livelihood, alliances, and customary rights persisted, yet they were increasingly subjected to the pressures of market expansion, fiscal demands, and administrative rationalization under the embryonic colonial regime. The experiences of these communities, shaped by migration, fluctuating trade circuits, and intricate social hierarchies, offer a critical vantage point for understanding how marginal, mobile, and intermediary groups negotiated power, identity, and survival during a time when older socio-economic frameworks were being dismantled and replaced by new forms of governance and economic control. In this context, the smaller regions of Bengal played a pivotal role in shaping the broader historical transformations of the period.

This chapter, in this context, elucidates the historical background to understand how local and imperial ambitions became interlocked by examining how regional agency and the process of European expansion operated as mutually constitutive forces in shaping

the socio-political landscape of early modern Bengal. Within this framework, the chapter highlights how gradual geographical shifts, such as the decline of the Hooghly port and the emergence of new port centres around the 1870s, played a decisive role in transforming the region's economic dynamics. These spatial changes coincided with a series of significant historical developments, including recurring political instability, the rise of new commercial and banking institutions, the introduction of revised tariff policies, changes in the international distribution of trade, evolving patterns and materials of commerce, the expansion of transportation networks, and the periodic renewal of the Charter Acts (1818, 1830, 1854). Furthermore, the Swadeshi Movement and the Partition of Bengal in 1905 collectively reshaped the economic and political consciousness of the province. Together, these interwoven developments not only redefined the economic life of Bengal but also set the stage for a new epoch in its historical trajectory.

The chapter illuminates that while colonial expansion in India reached its zenith under British dominance, certain enclaves such as **Chandannagar** and **Chinsurah** followed distinct trajectories of subjugation under the influence of other European powers. Governed respectively by the **French** and the **Dutch**, these regions exhibited alternative modes of colonial administration, economic control, and cultural encounter that diverged significantly from the British model. Such variations not only highlight the heterogeneity of colonial experiences in Bengal but also enrich the composite narrative of its encounter with European imperialism. It is essential to underscore that regional history retains a unique significance within the broader historical milieu, for it captures the multiplicity of lived experiences often overshadowed by grand imperial narratives.

The political, socio-economic, and cultural conditions of these micro-regions, each shaped by its own legacy of governance, mercantile networks, and social institutions, differed markedly from those of British-ruled territories. Yet, they remained inextricably

connected to the larger processes of transformation occurring across the subcontinent. These distinct regional trajectories reveal how local histories interacted dynamically with the overarching structures of colonialism, producing a complex web of negotiation, adaptation, and resistance. Accordingly, the subsequent chapters of this thesis adopt a comparative framework to examine the experiences of three prominent business magnate and zamindar families of Bengal who operated under different colonial dispensations: the **Roquitte family** under the French in Chandannagar, the **Seal family** under the Dutch in Chinsurah, and the **Roy family** under the British in Howrah. Through this comparative lens, the study investigates how these influential families navigated shifting political allegiances, exploited economic opportunities, and redefined social hierarchies within their respective colonial contexts, thereby illuminating the diverse modes of adaptation that characterized Bengal's complex colonial experience.

As, the research underscores the idea that major historical transformations often originate from subtle, grassroots-level developments that remain largely unrecorded in mainstream narratives. In this context, the second chapter focuses on colonial **Chandannagar** and the **Roquitte family**, the most prominent mercantile house of the region, to illuminate the local dynamics shaping Bengal's broader historical trajectory. The study reveals that the growth of Bengal's renowned cotton textile industry was deeply intertwined with indigenous enterprise, exemplified by **Dourga Chorone Roquitte's** pioneering ventures in export trade. At a time when European merchants dominated overseas commerce, Roquitte's foray into the global market marked a decisive rupture in the colonial economic hierarchy. His business enterprise successfully expanded exports of rice, pulses, indigo, ghee, silk, and cotton textiles to diverse destinations across Europe, the Indian Ocean, and the Caribbean. Simultaneously, his import of European goods, such as ironware, medicines, and French liquors, reflected a reciprocal commercial vision that

linked Bengal's local economy with global circuits of exchange. Roquitte's cosmopolitan enterprise also reshaped labour and managerial practices by blending European and Indian employees in a single organizational framework. Figures like Si Bhumen, a French resident of Chandannagar, worked alongside Bengali clerks, cashiers, and *muhuris*, demonstrating Roquitte's pragmatic approach to human resource management and his openness to cultural diversity. This model of mixed labour not only reflected cross-cultural collaboration but also signalled the emergence of a hybrid commercial modernity, wherein local initiative absorbed and adapted European administrative techniques without surrendering its indigenous character.

Beyond commerce, the Roquitte family's influence extended into education and philanthropy, linking economic capital to moral and social legitimacy. The establishment of *Ecole Dourga*, later renamed **Dourga Chorone Roquitte Banga Vidyalaya**, the first boys' high school in Chandannagar, illustrates their commitment to civic upliftment. This initiative inspired contemporaries such as **Harihar Sett**, **Prafulladhan Bhar**, and **Bholanath Das**, who later spearheaded efforts in female education through institutions like *Krishna Bhabini Nari Shiksha Mandir* (1926) and *Lal Bagan Balika Vidyalaya*. Yet, the Roquitte family's limited engagement with women's education exposes the persistence of patriarchal restraint, suggesting that social reform was often pursued within boundaries defined by prevailing gender norms. Their philanthropic works, ranging from the construction of ponds, ghats, and rest houses, embodied a moral economy wherein charity functioned as a mechanism for reinforcing social status and communal harmony. The simultaneous establishment of educational institutions by these families indicates that benevolent acts often masked deeper motives of prestige-building and social assertion. Thus, Prof. Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal analysed that it is difficult to say that there was no 'greed' in contributing to the philanthropic work. The increasing political dominance,

power, social fame, prestige, and suppressed rivalry with other influential families played important roles in the entire matter.

Politically, while **Dourga Chorone Roquitte** maintained a deliberate distance from overt political activity, his descendants transformed the family's mercantile prestige into **civic and political authority**. Figures such as **Tulshi Chorone Roquitte** (Mayor of Chandannagar, 1937) and **Tarini Chorone Roquitte** (President of the local French Council), along with associates like **Dinendra Nath Das** and **Debendra Nath Das**, played pivotal roles in municipal governance and the emerging nationalist movement. This continuum from mercantile wealth to civic leadership of the Roquitte family demonstrates how economic success under colonial conditions evolved into instruments of local empowerment and political participation. The Roquitte family's trajectory thus encapsulates the interplay of commerce, culture, and power within the unique Franco-Bengali milieu of Chandannagar, revealing how a provincial mercantile household could both mirror and modify the larger patterns of Bengal's colonial modernity.

Illustrating this broader trend, the subsequent chapter shifts focus to the **Dutch settlement of Chinsurah**, where the **Seal family** exemplified a similar pattern of elite adaptation within a Dutch colonial framework. The Seals demonstrate how financial success could evolve into cultural stewardship and civic influence, embodying the transition from mercantile affluence to social leadership. Their contributions extended well beyond trade; members of the family actively engaged in Bengal's literary and cultural life, producing plays such as *Baralok*, *Dhruvacharitra*, and *Tirtha Mahima*, and hosting eminent figures including **Rabindranath Tagore**. Their role was thus not merely economic but also intellectually catalytic, fostering a localized cultural renaissance within the Dutch enclave. The significance of the Seal family must also be understood in relation to the wider spatial reconfiguration of Bengal's mercantile geography. The rapid rise of

Calcutta as a colonial metropolis was profoundly shaped by the continuous migration of merchant families from the Hooghly region. Notably, four branches of the **Bysack family**, sections of the **Setts** (while others remained in Chandannagar), the **Tagores**, and members of the **Subarnabanik** community relocated to Calcutta during this period. As **Prof. Sushil Chaudhury** elucidates, the prosperity of Hooghly and its surrounding districts was historically tied to the prominence of the Hooghly Port, which flourished under both European and indigenous control until the establishment of Calcutta Port in 1870. This event decisively shifted Bengal's economic gravity southwards, marking the decline of older riverine centres like Hooghly, Chinsurah, and Chandannagar and the ascendancy of Calcutta as the nucleus of colonial power.

The strategic geography of the Hooghly district, coupled with its prosperous port towns, had long nurtured Bengal's elite merchant and zamindar families. Under both European and local influence, families such as the **Seals, Roquittes, and Duttas** amassed wealth through maritime trade, brokerage, and landholding. Yet the displacement of economic vitality from Hooghly to Calcutta following the 1870s redefined the fortunes of these elite houses. As Calcutta emerged as the imperial metropolis, **Howrah**, its industrial counterpart across the river, simultaneously developed as a manufacturing and transport hub, drawing in new investments and labour. The redistribution of capital and colonial attention toward these centres profoundly influenced elite trajectories, compelling families to adapt through migration, diversification, or transformation of identity.

On this ground, the Seal family's experience vividly encapsulates this process of adaptation and reinvention. Originating as prosperous merchants in Chinsurah during the Dutch period, the family responded to the changing economic landscape by dividing into two branches, one remaining in Chinsurah, and another migrating to Calcutta, where they redefined themselves under the title **Mallick**. While the Chinsurah branch gradually

declined in the post-Independence period, the Calcutta branch rose to prominence as part of the new urban elite of nineteenth-century Bengal. Figures such as **Hriday (Hardu) Mallick** and **Raja Rajendra Mallick**, renowned for their commercial enterprise and artistic patronage, became emblematic of **Calcutta's hybrid modernity**, where wealth, Western education, and indigenous cultural identity coexisted in a dynamic balance.

Despite their relocation, the **Seal-Mallick family** retained enduring ancestral ties to Chinsurah while integrating themselves into Calcutta's expanding networks of finance, culture, and politics. This dual orientation, rooted in local tradition yet adaptive to urban modernity, epitomized their strategic mobility and negotiation within an evolving socio-economic order. Their migration reflected a broader nineteenth- and twentieth-century trend in Bengal, wherein mercantile families from semi-urban riverine towns strategically relocated to the colonial metropolis to exploit emerging commercial and bureaucratic opportunities. Through financial ingenuity, cultural adaptability, and cross-cultural collaboration, the **Seals-Mallicks** bridged the realms of indigenous enterprise and British imperial commerce. They were not passive beneficiaries of colonial capitalism but active agents who shaped Bengal's hybrid colonial economy, combining traditional mercantile ethos with modern institutional frameworks. Their transformation from Chinsurah merchants to Calcutta magnates underscores the capacity of Bengal's elites to redefine agency within the constraints and possibilities of colonial modernity.

At a structural level, the emergence of Calcutta Port and its infrastructural networks introduced an asymmetrical pattern of regional development. As **Prof. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya** notes, this process can be read through the lens of "**de-urbanisation**", a hallmark of colonial hegemony whereby European powers systematically dismantled older urban centres and indigenous commercial systems, replacing them with exploitative economic structures centred on imperial needs. The concentration of capital and

governance in Calcutta marginalized once-thriving towns like Hooghly and Chandannagar, precipitating a spatial and social realignment of Bengal's elite order. Consequently, while many of Hooghly's traditional elites either declined or relocated, **Calcutta and Howrah** emerged as the twin epicentres of modern colonial Bengal. This reciprocal relationship between regional prominence and elite prosperity underscores a fundamental historical insight: the fortunes of Bengal's elites were inextricably tied to the geography of power. The rise or decline of regional centres not only dictated the flow of capital and prestige but also reshaped elite identities, loyalties, and survival strategies.

The trajectory of the **Seal-Mallick** family thus provides a compelling lens through which to interpret the dialectical relationship between geography, economy, and elite agency in colonial Bengal. Their mobility between Chinsurah and Calcutta was not merely a response to shifting economic opportunities but a conscious act of historical negotiation, an effort to sustain relevance amid changing structures of power. The family's evolution mirrors the transformation of Bengal itself, from a network of regional port towns under multiple European influences to a centralized colonial metropolis under British rule. In this larger discourse, Bengal's elites emerge not as static inheritors of privilege but as dynamic agents of historical transformation, whose fortunes rose and fell with the ebb and flow of regional significance. The interdependence of history, geography, and social mobility, as seen through the Seals' journey, reveals that the making of Bengal's modern elite was inseparable from the remaking of Bengal's regional order. The Seal-Mallick experience, therefore, encapsulates the essence of Bengal's colonial modernity: a story of continuity through change, rootedness through mobility, and adaptation through negotiation.

By the late 19th century, the focus of Bengal's transformation shifted toward **Howrah**, where British dominance profoundly restructured the socio-economic landscape.

The **Permanent Settlement of 1793** catalyzed the rise of a new landed aristocracy that strategically aligned itself with colonial authority to secure influence and legitimacy. Among these emergent elites, the **Roy family of Andul** stood out as the most powerful zamindars in the district. Their contributions extended beyond agrarian administration to the realm of civic and infrastructural development. They spearheaded the construction of **Andul Raj Road** and **Raja Raj Narayan Street**, vital arterial routes linking Howrah with **Calcutta's rapidly expanding port** after 1870. The construction of these two major roads profoundly transformed the economic landscape of the Howrah district by facilitating trade, improving connectivity with Calcutta, and integrating numerous small villages into the expanding urban network of the metropolis. This infrastructural development catalyzed regional economic integration, enabling a more efficient movement of goods, labour, and capital. The easier access to Calcutta Port, then one of the busiest in colonial India, allowed Howrah's traders and residents to participate more actively in the commercial life of the colonial capital. Consequently, the district witnessed a surge in prosperity that attracted diverse groups of settlers, artisans, and entrepreneurs, thereby enriching its socio-cultural fabric. The emerging prosperity also prompted the establishment of educational institutions, civic bodies, and social organizations, which collectively nurtured a new urban consciousness.

These developments were not merely economic but deeply intertwined with social mobility, literacy, and cultural exchange, reflecting the broader patterns of modernization occurring across Bengal during the late colonial period. Thus, the roads were not just instruments of commerce; they symbolized a structural shift towards a more interconnected and socially dynamic regional identity. Parallel to these economic and infrastructural transformations, the late 19th century witnessed significant territorial and administrative reorganization within Bengal. As noted earlier, in 1795 the Hooghly and

Howrah regions were detached from the larger Burdwan district—a decision that reflected the British colonial government’s effort to refine administrative efficiency in response to population growth and industrial expansion in the region. Initially, Hooghly and Howrah were temporarily merged under a single jurisdiction, underscoring the colonial tendency to adapt administrative boundaries to economic priorities. However, Howrah’s strategic location adjacent to Calcutta and its rapid industrialization soon necessitated a separate administrative identity. By the early 20th century, Howrah had emerged as a crucial node in Bengal’s industrial economy—an epicentre of railway workshops, jute mills, and riverine commerce. Recognizing its growing importance, the British administration formally established Howrah as an independent district between 1937 and 1938. This demarcation not only symbolized the administrative acknowledgement of Howrah’s economic vitality but also marked the region’s evolution from a peripheral settlement into an essential urban-industrial hub of colonial Bengal.

Parallel to their economic enterprise, the Roy family invested in education and culture, establishing **Andul Academy**—later **Andul H.C. English School**, now **Mahiyari Kundu Chowdhury Institution**, as a center of learning that blended traditional Sanskrit scholarship with modern English education. Their sustained patronage of Sanskrit learning and music earned Andul the epithet “**Navadwip of South Bengal**”, turning it into a regional nucleus of intellectual and artistic life. The Roys’ participation in the **Hindu Dharma Mahasabha** and the **Kayastha movement** reflected their engagement with the social reform currents of the time, even as they maintained a conservative orientation. Their support for reviving traditional rituals like the **Upanayana Sanskar**, alongside documented contributions to cultural and religious life in *Andul Raj-Prasasti* by **Prem Chand Tarkabagish**, demonstrates the family’s effort to reconcile orthodox religiosity

with modern social aspirations, a hallmark of Bengal's elite ethos under colonial modernity.

The trajectory of Howrah's development from a peripheral agrarian landscape to a major industrial and urban centre epitomizes the complex interplay between colonial infrastructure, administrative strategy, and regional transformation. The district's evolution underscores how infrastructural modernity under colonial rule was both an economic and cultural phenomenon, redefining patterns of settlement, mobility, and identity. Moreover, Howrah's case demonstrates how the colonial state's administrative reconfigurations were not merely bureaucratic decisions but deeply economic in nature, designed to consolidate control over regions of high industrial productivity. In a broader historical context, the socio-economic transformation of Howrah illustrates Bengal's transition into the age of industrial modernity and urban capitalism. The roads that once linked its villages to Calcutta became conduits of cultural and political interaction, shaping a new social consciousness that paralleled the shifting discourses of Bengal's history. Further exploration into these socio-cultural shifts could illuminate how Howrah's regional dynamism contributed to the larger narrative of Bengal's adaptation to modernity, where colonial intervention, local enterprise, and social reform converged to redefine the historical trajectory of the region.

Yet, the journey of the Roy family embodies a duality of progress and restraint, an equilibrium between adaptation and preservation. They helped shape the civic and cultural framework of Howrah, but their engagement stopped short of embracing the revolutionary and nationalist transformations that defined Bengal's later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their world was governed by continuity rather than rupture, by an impulse to safeguard lineage rather than challenge authority. This conservatism ensured their survival and prosperity at a time when other landed families, such as the **Dutta Chaudhury**

zamindars, declined or faced reprisals for opposing colonial interests. In this sense, the Roys exemplified the “**calculative loyalty**” that characterized many successful colonial intermediaries, families who thrived by mediating between imperial power and local society. The enduring legacy of the Andul Raj family is particularly noteworthy, as it extended seamlessly from the pre-colonial to the colonial period. This continuity of influence distinguishes them as one of the few zamindari families in Bengal that managed to preserve their social and political dominance across both epochs.

During Bengal’s transformation from pre-colonial to colonial order, influential figures like **Raja Raj Narayan Roy** and **Ram Charan Roy** played crucial intermediary roles, aligning with British administrative frameworks while anchoring local stability. Their ascendancy exemplifies how zamindars utilized the chaotic flux of colonial restructuring to consolidate local authority. The development of Andul under their stewardship was not merely a story of economic expansion but also a microcosm of Bengal’s adaptive transformation, a process in which regional elites both benefited from and contributed to the reordering of power. The British revenue policy played a pivotal role in shaping this trajectory. The **Permanent Settlement**, designed to maximize land revenue, initially empowered a class of “**new men**”, merchants, revenue farmers, and local intermediaries who acquired estates through British patronage. Many of these nouveau elites succumbed to debt and instability due to excessive exactions and market volatility. Hence, by the 1780s, recognizing the need for continuity and control, the British reinstated the older landed aristocracy as indispensable custodians of rural order.

The **Andul Roy family** perfectly embodies this pattern of adaptive resurgence. Emerging under colonial patronage, they supplanted the Dutta Chaudhury zamindars, who failed to maintain revenue obligations and political connections. Through strategic alliances, administrative acumen, and loyalty to British rule, the Roys entrenched

themselves as dominant zamindars of Andul, symbolizing the reconfiguration of Bengal's landed elite within the colonial order. The rise of illustrious zamindari families like the Roys demonstrates that economic transformation and elite consolidation were not isolated developments but mutually reinforcing processes that shaped Bengal's history. Their regional contributions, whether through infrastructure, education, or cultural revival, added distinctive local textures to Bengal's larger historical evolution.

The fifth chapter will attempt to bridge the individual stories of the families with a broader cultural and historical narrative. Focusing on the similarities and diversities between the families (Roquitte, Seal and Roy), the chapter will also elaborate on how their respective histories and social positions reflect the larger dynamics of Bengal's transition from the pre-colonial to the colonial era. By weaving these aspects together, the chapter will provide a layered portrayal of how different *zamindars* and business houses contributed to the cultural and political evolution of Bengal while remaining firmly grounded in the mainstream historical narrative of the time. The idea of exploring their cultural intersection, with a blend of traditional values and the influence of colonial modernity, will offer a compelling reflection of the larger societal shifts.

By examining the similarities and differences in their economic strategies, social positions, and adaptive mechanisms under French, Dutch, and British rule, this comparative study highlights the diverse ways in which local elites navigated shifting colonial landscapes. For instance, in some families, the rise to the highest position of authority was carried out by a single individual, such as Dourga Chorone Roquitte. In contrast, within the Roy family of Andul, Howrah, the pursuit of local power was undertaken collectively by multiple members, including Ram Charan Roy, Ram Lochon Roy, and Raj Narayan Roy. These case studies reveal that Bengal's transition from the precolonial to the colonial age was not a linear narrative of decline or subjugation but a

multidirectional process of negotiation and reinvention. The Roquittes, Seals, and Roys illustrate diverse strategies of adaptation, commercial innovation, regional migration, cultural patronage, and political mediation that enabled them to maintain relevance within shifting imperial and regional structures. Their stories complicate the binary of colonizer and colonized, showing instead a continuum of collaboration, competition, and cultural hybridity. Beyond their economic and political roles, these families were also cultural intermediaries, shaping Bengal's evolving identity under colonial modernity. They sponsored schools, promoted literature, engaged with reformist movements, and facilitated the circulation of new ideas, thus contributing to Bengal's intellectual awakening. Their philanthropic endeavours and civic leadership reflected an emergent consciousness that linked wealth with moral and social responsibility, a feature that foreshadowed the later rise of Bengal's nationalist intelligentsia.

By comparing their journey, the study also found some interesting patterns and processes, which further illustrate the method of infiltration of colonial rule in Bengal. For instance, the recurring disputes over property rights within Bengal's elite families reveal the intricate nexus between private inheritance conflicts and colonial power. A closer examination of the Seal family of Chinsurah and the Roy (later Mitra) family of Andul demonstrates how familial litigation became a subtle yet effective means for the colonial state to entrench its authority within Bengal's landed society. What appeared as domestic quarrels over inheritance often functioned as mechanisms of imperial consolidation, allowing the colonial judiciary to penetrate deeply into indigenous structures of property and kinship. In Chinsurah, as families like the Seals turned to British courts to resolve inheritance and revenue disputes, the colonial administration found in these litigations a strategic entry point to regulate *Patta* lands and reshape the economic geography of the region. By positioning itself as a neutral arbiter, the colonial judiciary effectively expanded

its reach over semi-autonomous estates, turning local contests into instruments of governance. The process transformed private law into a site of public control, where the language of legality masked the logic of domination.

A similar pattern unfolded in Andul following the death of Raja Bijoy Keshab Roy in 1879. His demise without a biological heir led to a crisis of succession when his two widows, Rani Navadurga and Durga Sundari, each adopted separate heirs. The ensuing conflict, culminating in a Calcutta High Court case and ultimately in a Privy Council judgment, rejected both adoptions because the Hindu *Shastra* permitted only one. While the decision appeared to uphold religious law, its deeper implications were unmistakably political. Situated within the framework of the Permanent Settlement (1793), which had already subordinated zamindars to the colonial state as revenue intermediaries, this ruling further eroded hereditary autonomy. The British legal apparatus, by invalidating customary rights of adoption, ensured that estates remained juridically dependent on imperial authority.

These case studies from **Chinsurah's mercantile Seals** to **Andul's aristocratic Roys** reveal how colonial law operated as a dual-edged instrument: simultaneously legitimizing British intervention and disempowering indigenous authority. The judiciary's claim to neutrality disguised its role as a tool of governance. Through each verdict, the British courts did not merely adjudicate disputes; they redefined the very nature of property, kinship, and legitimacy in colonial Bengal. These property conflicts underscore the paradox of elite collaboration under empire. Families like the Seals and Roys sought British intervention to secure their own status and estates, yet in doing so, they facilitated the progressive erosion of their traditional sovereignty. The colonial judiciary's interventions transformed Bengal's zamindari order from a system of hereditary authority into one of legal dependency. The law thus became not only a field of negotiation but a

theatre of subjugation, where indigenous elites, driven by self-preservation, inadvertently strengthened the very empire that curtailed their autonomy. This dynamic reflects what scholars such as Bernard Cohn and Ranajit Guha have branded as the ‘**judicialization of colonial power**’ and ‘**prose of counter-insurgency**’ respectively, the transformation of law into an ideological and administrative weapon that reshaped indigenous societies under the guise of reform. The cases of Chinsurah and Andul exemplify this process: they illuminate how colonial legality, far from being a neutral domain, became a cultural and political instrument through which the empire translated its authority into permanence.

II

These examples attest that despite operating under different European powers, French, Dutch, and British, respectively, these families reveal striking parallels in their ability to adapt, consolidate power, and foster cultural renewal within shifting political structures. Their calculative loyalty ensured survival and continuity at a time when many traditional lineages declined. More than mere symbols of wealth, these elites functioned as intermediaries between local society and colonial authority, simultaneously facilitating and contesting imperial control. Their legacy lies in their dual role as agents of economic modernisation and custodians of cultural heritage, bridging regional initiative with global change, and ultimately redefining Bengal’s socio-political landscape. However, their prominence began to decline in the post-independence era. The abolition of the zamindari system, coupled with the rise of anti-feudal sentiments and the widespread Marxist movement in post-colonial Bengal, played a decisive role in diminishing their authority and socio-economic standing.

Therefore, Bengal’s transformation during the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century must be understood as a process of historical negotiation, not as a simple episode

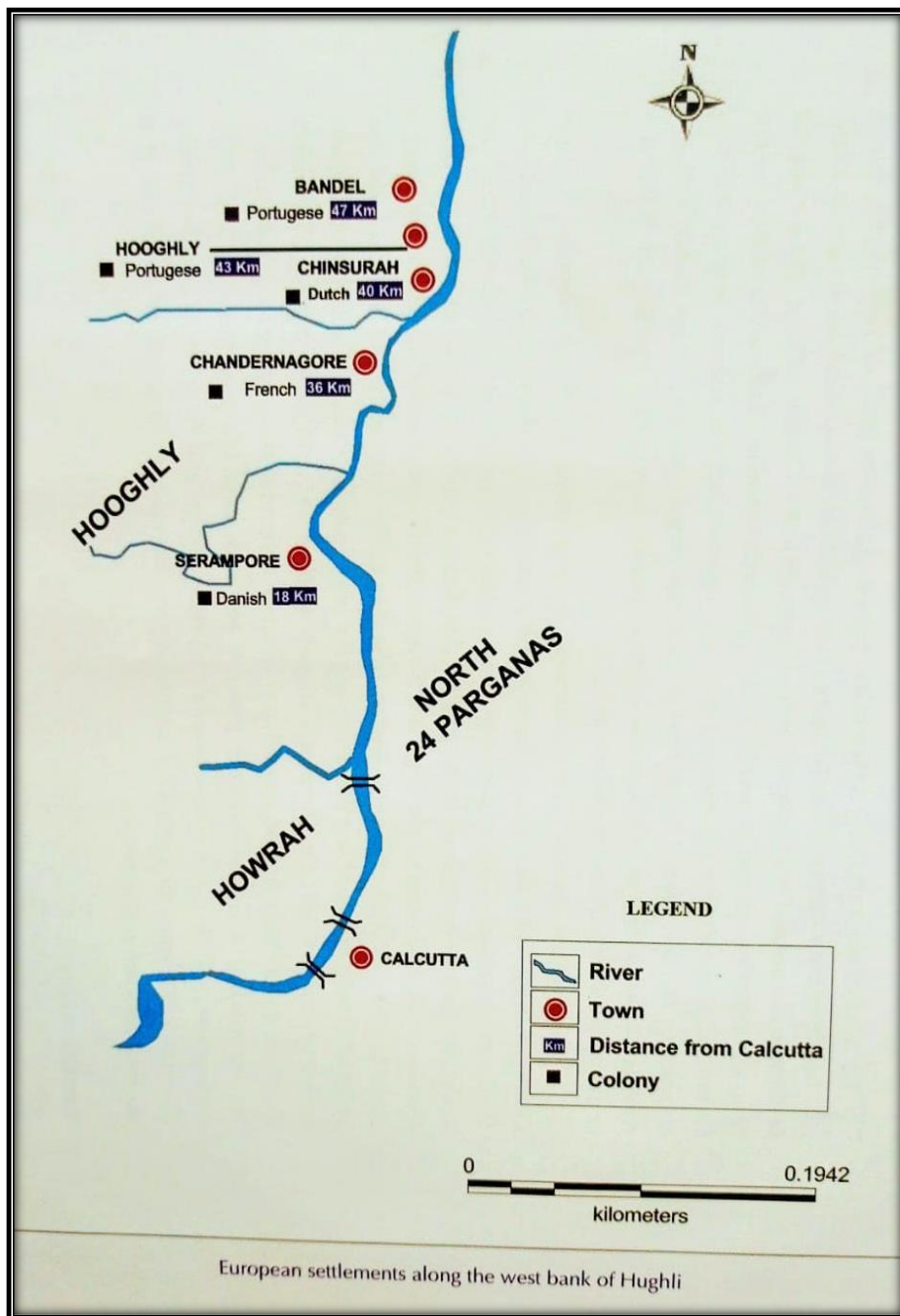
of imperial domination. Colonialism, while extractive and repressive, also acted as a crucible within which new identities, social hierarchies, and institutions were forged. The interplay between colonial power and regional resilience produced a complex historical fabric where continuity and change were in constant dialogue. In the broader historiographical discourse, this study contributes to re-centring regional histories as vital analytical units for understanding the making of modern South Asia. The micro-histories of Chandannagar, Chinsurah, and Howrah illuminate the multiplicity of colonial encounters that collectively shaped Bengal's destiny. They reveal that historical change often emanates not from imperial capitals or revolutionary centres, but from the interstices of regional experience, from merchant offices, zamindari courts, and riverine ports that mediated between local realities and global transformations. Ultimately, the evolution of Bengal's elite families encapsulates the paradox of colonial modernity: the simultaneous destruction and regeneration of tradition, the coexistence of loyalty and dissent, and the transformation of subordination into agency. Their legacy lies not merely in wealth or lineage but in their capacity to bridge indigenous initiative with imperial structures, crafting a hybrid modernity that continues to inform Bengal's cultural and intellectual identity today.

The pioneering efforts of local zamindars and business houses should not be reduced simply to accounts of their eventual decline or celebrated only for their wealth. Rather, their capacity to establish themselves, adapt, and flourish within an increasingly competitive and colonial environment stands as a testament to their vision and resilience. By introducing new business practices and setting important precedents for entrepreneurship within their communities, these families helped to shape the wider transformation of Bengal's socio-economic landscape. Their legacy lies not merely in the material fortunes they accumulated but also in the cultural and economic shifts they

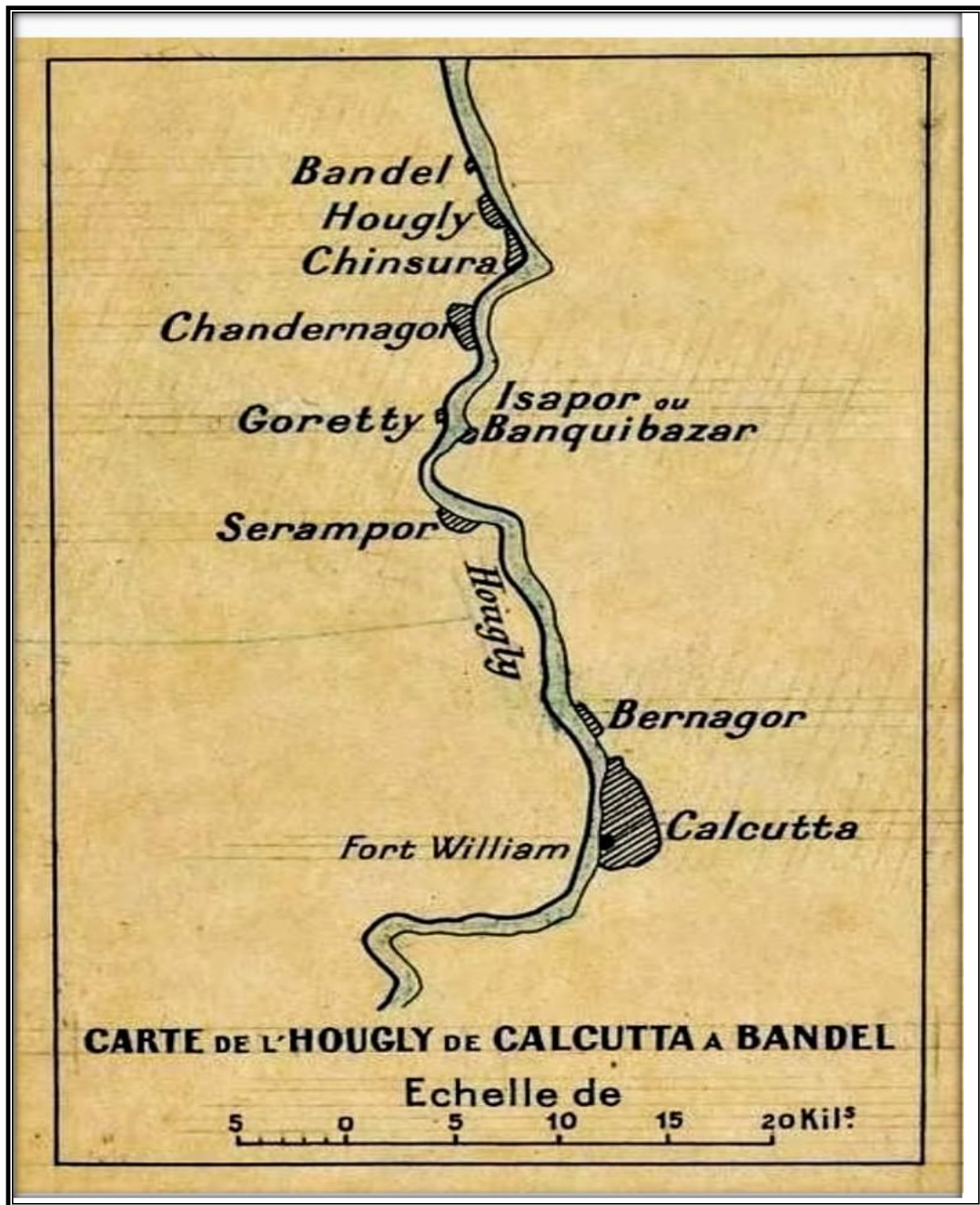
embodied, paving the way for subsequent generations of entrepreneurs to innovate and thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Thus, the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century must be seen not merely as a period of colonial subjugation but as an era of historical negotiation, where global imperial forces intersected with deeply rooted regional traditions. Bengal's transformation encapsulates the broader contradictions of colonial modernity: the simultaneous destruction and creation of institutions, the erosion of indigenous autonomy alongside the emergence of new socio-political identities, the coexistence of exploitation with intellectual awakening, especially the constant process of construction and deconstructing. In the larger historiographical discourse, this period stands as a crucible in which the foundations of modern Bengal, and by extension, modern India, were forged. It illustrates how the interplay between colonial power and regional resilience produced a complex, layered, and contested historical experience that continues to shape South Asian socio-political realities today.

Appendix I: Map



Picture-1, The map of Hooghly and Howrah district, taken from the book *‘Europe and Hooghly: The European Settlements on the West Bank of the River’*, by Suranjan Das and Basudeb Chattopadhyay, K.P.Bagchi and Company, Calcutta, 2014, Map section, p.ix.



Picture-2, Open web domain.

Appendix II: Gallery



Picture- 1, Dourga Chorone Roquitte, personal collection, Chandannagar, 11.9.2022.



Picture-2, Rakshit Bhavan, personal collection, Chandannagar, 11.9.2022.



Picture-3, Rakshit Bari Inner Side (*Andarmahal*), personal collection, Chandannagar, 11.9.2022.



Picture- 4, The Barasat gate, located at Borobazar, Bhadeshwar, marks the border of Chandannagar (under the French regime) and Bhadeshwar (under the British regime). Personal collection, Chandannagar, 14.7.2021.

Roquitte & Co Kolkata Address & Contact details

Roquitte & Co Kolkata is located in Kolkata at 13 Groundant Lane Kolkata Kolkata West Bengal - 700012 India .

🏠 Roquitte & Co Kolkata

	✉ Address : 13 Groundant Lane Kolkata Kolkata West Bengal - 700012 India Company Name : Roquitte & Co Kolkata Category :
About Company :	
City :	Kolkata
State:	West bengal
Industrv :	Readvmade Garment

Picture- 5, The present location of the shop of Dourga Chorone Roquitte, open web domain,12.4.2022.



Picture-6, Bholanath Das, personal collection from his residence, Chandannagar, 2.1.2018.



Picture-7, Nameplate at 'Durga Charan Rakshit Banga Vidyalaya', personal collection, Chandannagar, 10.7.2019.



Picture-8, Nameplate of Chandni Joraghat, at Strand Road, personal collection, Chandannagar, 7.12.2022.



Picture-9, Chandi Joraghat, at Strand Road, Personal Collection, Chandannagar, 7.12.2022.



Picture-10, Thakurdalan of Rakshit Bari, Durga puja at Rakshit Bhavan, personal collection, Chandannagar, 12.10.2021.



Picture-11, Maa Durga Baron on Bijaya Dashmi at Rakshit Bhavan, personal collection, Chandannagar, 12.10.2021.



Picture-12, Roquiite residency in Varanasi at Bangalitala, personal collection, Varanasi,15.11.2024.



Picture-13, Charitable dispensary at Haldarpara in Chandannagar made by Dourga Chorone Roquitte, personal collection, Chandannagar, 9.9.2023.



Picture-14, Nameplate of 'Ecokl' at 'Durga Charan Rakshit Banga Vidyalaya', personal collection, Chandannagar, 10.7.2019.



Picture-15, 'Durga Charan Rakshit Banga Vidyalaya', personal collection, Chandannagar, 10.7.2019.



Picture-16, Harihar Sett, Kumar, Swapan, Ek nojore Desasri Harihar Sett, 'Purasree', Official Organ of the Chandernagore Municipal Corporation, New edition: 3rd year, 4th edition, Chandannagar, February, 2004, p.1.



Picture-17, Boro Seal Bari, personal collection, Chinsurah, 12.2.2022.



Picture-18, Boro Seal Bari, during Kartik puja, personal collection, Chinsurah, 7.9.2022.



Picture-19, Durga puja,
Thakur Dalan of Seal Bari,
Personal Collection, Chinsurah, 9.10.2022.



Picture-20, Harhari Puja of Laha family,
Personal Collection, Kolkata, 12.10.2023.



Picture-21, Royal Emblem of Dutta Chowdhury family of Andul, Howrah, personal collection, given by Dhurba Dutta Chowdhury, Descendant of their family, 10.4.2022.



Picture- 22, Mitra, Raj Narayan, *Kayastha Kausthav*, Vol. III, 3rd edition, ed. Sudhir Kumar Mitra, New Madan Press, Calcutta, 1848 (Shraban 1251 Bangabda), p.25.



Picture-23, Andul Rajbari, Personal collection, Howrah, 14.10.2023.



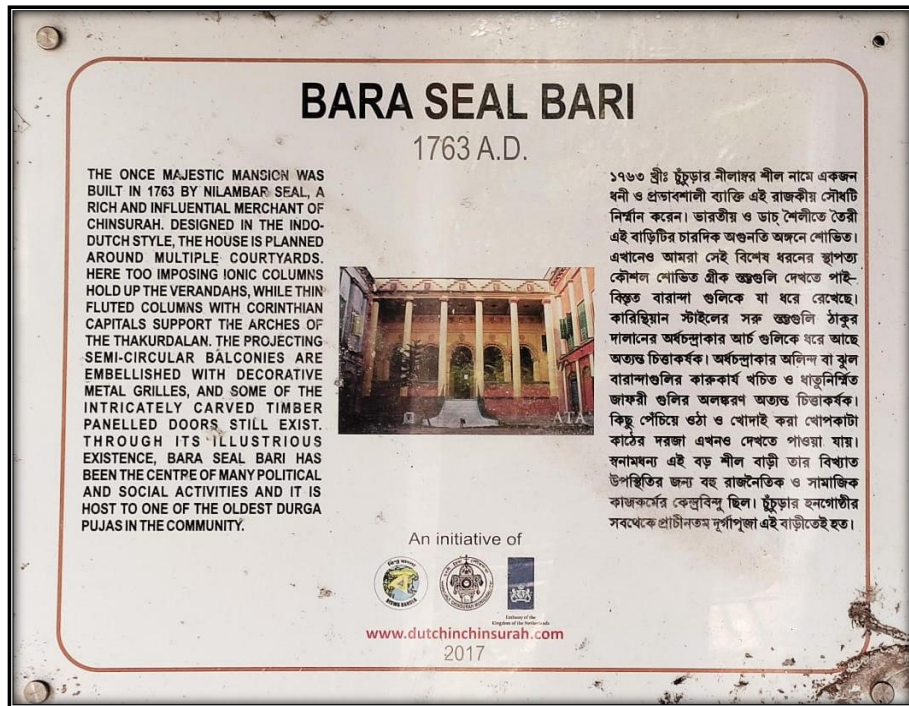
Picture-24, Maa Durga, Personal collection, Howrah, 14.10.2023.



Picture-25, Andul Raj Bari of Howrah, built by Raja Narayan Roy in 1834, Open web domain. 19.11.2023.

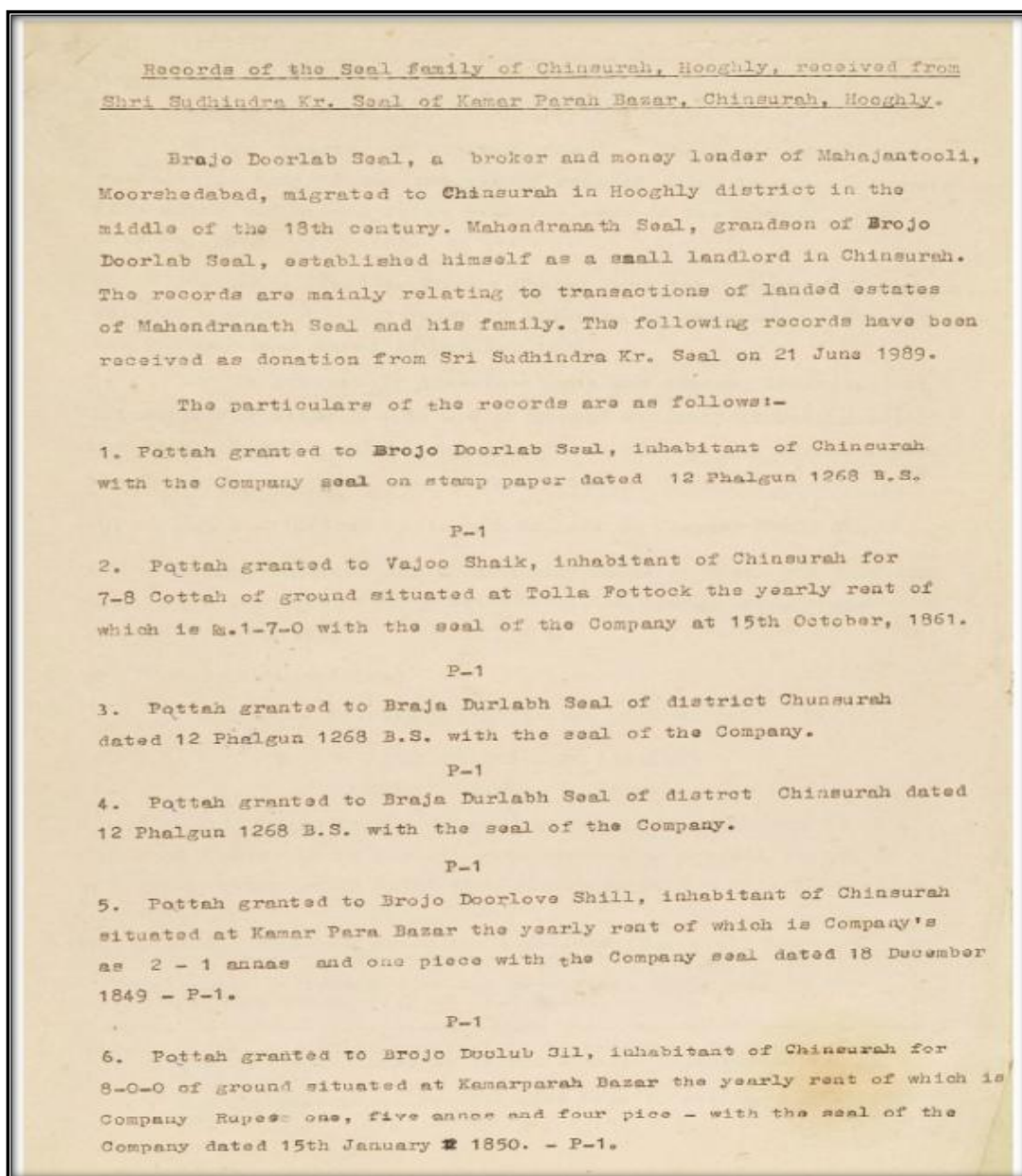


Picture-26, Antic Sculpture of Roquette at ‘Rakshit Bhavan’, personal collection, Chandannagar, 3.2.2024



Picture-27, The Heritage Declaration plate of Bara Seal Bari, Personal Collection, Chinsurah, 1.9.2022.

Appendix III: Documents



Picture 1, Family Papers of the Seal family, Department- private papers, West Bengal State Archive, Kolkata, p.1.

7. Pottah granted to Neelmany Sheel - inhabitant of Chinsurah situated at Kamar Parah the yearly rent of which is Company rupees five annas and Eleven Paise with the seal of the Company dated 26th May 1846.

8. Pottah granted to Doorga Charan Laha, inhabitant of Chinsurah for Rs.5 - annas 8 - and Paise 10 situated at Panchanone Tola with the Company seal dated 28 October 1861.

9. Pottah granted to Sreekisto Laha and others, inhabitant of Chinsurah for Cotta 5 - Ch - 6 of ground situated at Panchanantola the yearly rent of which is Company's rupees one and one anna with the Company seal dated 22nd February 1856.

10. Potta - 10 (ten) Pottas in Bengali on Company Stamp Paper

11. Court Judgement for Adhar Mouny Dasse of Chinsurah Perganah dated 24th September 1874 - written on the Company stamp paper with Bengali translation.

12. Parchas - 5 (five)

Condition:- Extremely brittle and worm eaten.

= Total Pottas - 20 (twenty)

Total Parcha - 5 (five)

13. Court Judgement for Adhar Mouny Dasse and Rajendra Kr. Sil and Shyam Chand Sil in English with vernacular Bengali rendering on Company stamp paper dated 24th September 1874 - Chinsurah - Kamar Para Bazar

* 14. Palm leaf document dated 8th Asar 1746 (Sakabda), One page.

* Original to be returned to the custodian, xerox copy to be preserved in the custody of W.B.S.A.

N.B. - Sl.No. 1 - 12 in original to be preserved in the custody of W.B.S.A, whereas xerox of the same to be returned to the custodian.

The abovementioned records have been donated by Shri Sudhindra Kumar Seal.

Picture 2, Family Papers of the Seal family, Department- private papers, West Bengal State Archive, Kolkata, p.2.



Picture 3, Family Papers of the Seal family, Department- private papers, West Bengal State Archive, Kolkata, p.7.


128		AIN-I-AKBARI	
<i>Sarkars</i>		<i>Districts</i>	
Baklā	North and East Bakarganj and S.-W. Dacca.	
Tājpur	...	East Purnia and West Dinajpur.	✓
Ghorāghāt	...	S. Rangpur, S.-E. Dinajpur, and N. Bogra.	
Pinjāra	...	Dinajpur and parts of Rangpur and Rajshahi.	
Bārbakābād	...	mainly Rajshahi, S.W. Bogra and S.E. Malda.	
Bāzuhā	...	partly Rajshahi, Bogra, Pabna and Dacca.	
Sonārgāon	...	West Tippera and Noakhali.	
Sharifatābād	...	mostly Burdwan.	
Sulaimanābād	...	North Hugli, and adjacent parts of Nadia and E. Burdwan.	
Sātgāon	...	24 Parganas, W. Nadia (?) and Howrah.	
Mandāran	...	Bankura, Vishnupur, S.E. Burdwan and W. Hugli.	

See picture 4, Fazl-I-Allami, Abul, *Ain-I-Akbari, A Gazetteer and Administrative Manual of Akbar's Empire and Past History of India*, Vol. II, translated into English by Colonel H. S. Jarrett, Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Kolkata, 1949, p.128.

Sarkár of Sátgáon.	
53 mahals. Rev. 16,724,724 dáms.	
Castes, various. Cavalry, 50. Infantry, 6,000.	
Banwa, Kotwáli, Farásatghar, (†)	726,300
3 mahals, ...	1,540,770
Ukrá, ...	236,950
Anwarpúr, ...	236,950
Táwáli Sátgáon 2	
Srirájpúr, ...	125,792
Sáir dues from Bandarbán and Mandawi, 2 mahals, ...	1,200,000
Sákhát, Kátsál, 2 mahals, ...	45,757
Fatpúr, ...	80,702
Calcutta, Bakoya, ⁶ Bárakpúr, 3 mahals, ...	936,215
Khárar, ...	365,275
Kanđáliyá, ...	242,160
Kálarú, ...	197,522
Magórá, ...	801,303
Matiyári, ...	307,845
Medni Mal, ...	186,242
Muzaffarpúr, ...	108,332
Mundgáchhá, ...	98,565
Máhhatti, ...	49,935
Naddiya ⁷ and Sátanpúr, 2 mahals, ...	1,508,820
Héki, ...	90,042
Háthi Kandhá, ...	55,702
Haiyagarh, ...	781,860
Sádháti ¹ , ...	468,058
Sakotá, ...	204,072
Dhaliyápúr, ⁵ ...	78,815
Ranihát, ...	1,358,510
Bárháti, ² ...	25,027
Phalká, ...	38,245
Baliyá, ...	94,725
Bágwán and Bangábári, ...	100,000
Bálinhá, ...	125,250
Bélgáon, ...	233,602
Barmhattar ⁴ and Mánikhatti, ...	383,803
Púrah, ...	652,470
Panwán and Salimpúr, ...	952,505
Bođhan, ...	956,457
Akbárpúr, ...	115,590
Táwáli Sátgáon 2 mahals, ...	234,890
Tortariyá, ...	36,604
Subarban district, ...	502,330
Husainpúr, ...	324,322
Hájipúr, Bárakpúr, ³ 2 mahals, ...	142,592

See picture 5, Fazl-I-Allami, Abul, *Ain-I-Akbari, A Gazetteer and Administrative Manual of Akbar's Empire and Past History of India*, Vol. II, translated into English by Colonel H. S. Jarrett, Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Kolkata, 1949, p.128.

Numb. 46. [451]



SUPPLEMENT TO

The Calcutta Gazette.

Published by Authority.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 10, 1835.

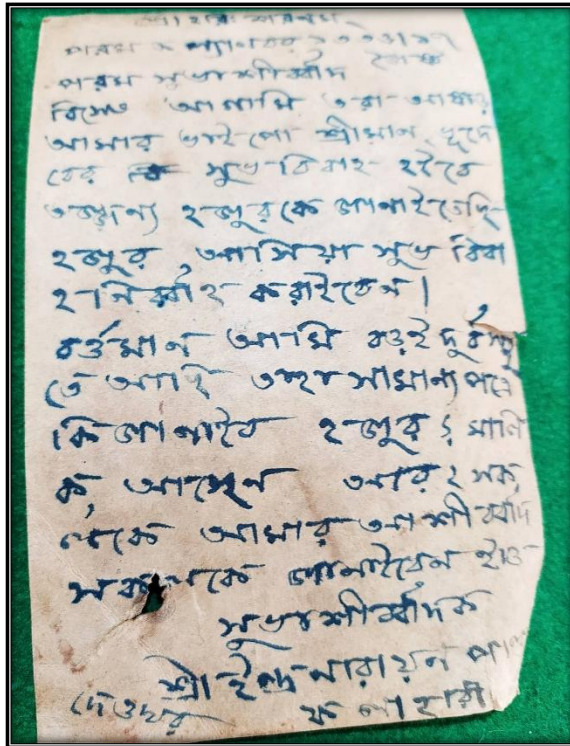
Picture 6, personal collection from a family member (Dhruba Dutta Chowdhury) of the Dutta Chowdhury family of Andul, Howrah, 24.10.2023.

POLITICAL DEPARTMENT,
FORT WILLIAM, THE 28TH OF APRIL, 1836.
The Governor General of India in Council has
been pleased to appoint Major Morison, 2d Regi-
ment Light Cavalry, Madras Establishment, to be
Resident at Bushire.

FORT WILLIAM, 18TH OF MAY, 1835.
The Honorable the Governor General in Council
has been pleased to confer upon Bahoo Raj Narain
Roy, Zeemindar of Undole, the Dignity and Title
of Rajah and Behadoor.

W. H. MACNAGHTEN,
Secy. to the Govt. of India.

Picture 7, personal collection from a family member (Dhruba Dutta Chowdhury) of the Dutta Chowdhury family of Andul, Howrah, 24.10.2023.



Picture 8, Postal letters of the Ghosh family of Taltor, personal collection, Birbhum, 8.10.2022.

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- Family Papers of the Seal family, Department- private papers, West Bengal State Archive, Kolkata, pp. 1-10.
- Family Papers of the Seal family, Department- private papers, West Bengal State Archive, Kolkata, p. 3.
- Family Papers of the Seal family, Department- private papers, West Bengal State Archive, Kolkata, pp. 3-4.

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- Family Papers of the Seal family, Department- private papers, West Bengal State Archive, Kolkata, p. 4 and p.6.
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