

Abstract

India's vast and diverse historical landscape has often been interpreted through selective regional and individual narratives. To grasp the true complexity of its past, it is essential to examine the regional dynamics that collectively shaped the nation's historical trajectory. The arrival of European powers profoundly disrupted India's traditional socio-economic and political order, with Bengal emerging as one of the most affected regions due to its fame in trade and agriculture. The early phase of European expansion in India was characterized by experimentation and adjustment, as colonial powers struggled to impose their administrative models within an unfamiliar environment. Over time, particularly during the nineteenth century, the British succeeded in consolidating their authority through a structured bureaucracy that primarily reshaped Bengal's local governance, economy, and society.

In these circumstances, the weakening of Mughal central power enabled the rise of new regional elites, like zamindars and merchants, who appropriated resources and adapted to shifting power dynamics. This transformation was further amplified by the European dismantling of traditional systems and the imposition of exploitative economic structures. Among the regions most affected by these shifts, **Hooghly and Howrah** stand out for their strategic significance. The Hooghly River had long served as Bengal's commercial lifeline, but the decline of the Hooghly Port and the rise of the Calcutta Port in 1870 marked a decisive reorientation of economic and political influence. These changes fostered the emergence of powerful local families- such as the **Roquittes of Chandannagar**, the **Seals of Chinsurah**, and the **Roys of Andul**, whose fortunes and social roles reflected Bengal's adaptation to the colonial world order.

This dissertation explores the **transformations of colonial Bengal** through a regional lens, focusing on the interplay between local elites and colonial powers under different European regimes.

- **Chapter I** outlines the shifting political and economic landscape of Bengal from the decline of Mughal authority to the rise of European influence, emphasizing the adaptive strategies of merchant and zamindar families.
- **Chapter II** examines the **Roquitte family of Chandannagar** under French rule, focusing on their commercial ventures and philanthropy as strategies of negotiation within a distinct colonial framework.
- **Chapter III** studies the **Seal family of Chinsurah** under Dutch control, analyzing their rise within the Subarnabanik community and their interactions with Dutch administrators in a comparatively short-lived colonial setup.
- **Chapter IV** investigates the **Roy family of Andul, Howrah**, tracing how British administrative policies redefined local zamindari power and the Kayastha community's socio-political role.
- **Chapter V** offers a **comparative analysis** of the three families, examining how each navigated different colonial systems while balancing traditional authority and emerging modernity.

By foregrounding these regional case studies, this research seeks to integrate Bengal's local histories into the broader national and colonial narrative. It argues that the adaptive mechanisms and socio-economic strategies of such families were instrumental in mediating between indigenous traditions and colonial structures, thereby shaping the trajectory of Bengal's transformation under European rule.