

**A Study of Three Locations along
the Hugli from the late sixteenth
to the early nineteenth century:
Kasimbazar, Hooghly and Sagor**

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requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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by

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Certified that the Thesis entitled 'A Study of Three Locations along the Hugli from the late sixteenth to the early nineteenth century: Kasimbazar, Hooghly and Sagor', submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of Dr Tilottama Mukherjee and that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere.

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Introduction

Three locations: Kasimbazar, Hooghly and Sagor, situated on the bank of the river Hugli have been chosen for this thesis titled ‘A Study of Three Locations along the Hugli from the late sixteenth to the early nineteenth century: Kasimbazar, Hooghly and Sagor’. The select chronological framework of the thesis is late sixteenth to early nineteenth century. The Mughal *farman*¹ has determined the opening period with a view to the formal sanctioning of the port of Hooghly in approximately 1579. The early nineteenth century is derived from the year 1813², which is generally accepted as the time when the decline of the mart town of Kasimbazar became very apparent. Also in 1819 serious attempts were undertaken by the British to reclaim the desolate island of Sagor. From the period Bengal had become a part of the Mughal empire that officially allowed the establishment of European mercantilism with the advent of the Portuguese in the region to the early decades of the Company state are being covered in this thesis.

More or less evenly spaced out from one another; Kasimbazar, Hooghly and Sagor marked the upper, middle and lower points of the Bhagirathi. Sagor marks the place where the Ganga, called the Bhagirathi-Hugli, empties out into the Bay. The river is the connecting filament between the three locations³. The rivers invariably have some connection with the commercial prospects and prosperity of its littoral settlements, which in turn might attract various political aspirants. In the case of these three places the thesis attempts to examine whether a linkage existed between the river and the historical evolution of the three spaces based on evidences provided by a variety of primary and secondary sources. The thesis will also try to give due importance to the imprint of the other environmental factors on local history.

¹ The official permission to pursue trade in Hooghly was granted by the emperor Akbar to the Portuguese, who shifted base to Hooghly as Saptagram silted up.

² W.W. Hunter, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. 9, London: Trubner and Co, 1886, p. 53. In 1813 the bustling town of Kasimbazar died out due to the changing course of the Bhagirathi which turned the area into a pestiferous malarial marsh. J.H. Tull Walsh, *A History of Murshidabad District (Bengal): with Biographies of Some of its Noted Families*, London: Jarrold and sons, 1902, p. 45.

³ Kasimbazar and Hooghly are roughly 88 kilometres apart; Hooghly and Sagor are 92 kilometres apart.

Indeed within the select chronological framework each of the three geographical spaces located along the Bhagirathi had assumed special historical significance and by the early nineteenth century declined in importance. Could the river be linked in any way, along with the other influences, with the gradual decay of Kasimbazar, Hooghly or Sagor? What was the state of the river that reared these settlements on its bank? Till date, a rich body of scholarly contributions have been made in the field of Bengal's history spanning the Mughal period and initial phase of the British rule. However the focus on these researches has been primarily on economic and political developments and social aspects.

Research on Bengal's history

A large body of work, written in the style of political narratives, by Kalinkar Datta⁴, Jadunath Sarkar⁵, Anjali Chatterjee⁶, Atul Chandra Ray⁷, Tapan Raychaudhuri⁸, helped in envisaging a broad socio-politico-economic perspective of Bengal for this period between roughly sixteenth and early nineteenth century. While Sarkar's elaborate work was apparently a political account of the medieval period, it provided relevant insights on social and economic aspects as well. Anjali Chatterjee made a remarkable contribution to Bengal's history during the time of the last of the Great Mughals, especially in the sphere of trade of the European companies, repercussions of those trading activities and the role of Bengal's *zamindars* in the empire during Aurungzeb's tenure. Atul Chandra Ray's comprehensive study of Bengal's history between 1526 and 1765 covered the economic aspects, though it was mostly overshadowed by the detailed narratives of political events. Tapan Raychaudhuri's work was unique in the sense that it elucidated the contemporary social picture in detail. Kalinkar Datta's book elaborated on socio economic aspects of Bengal, for example the *Bargi* raids and its various implications.

⁴ Kalinkar Datta, *Alivardi and His Times*, Calcutta: World Press, 1963.

⁵ Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Bengal, (Muslim Period, 1200-1757 A.D.)*, Dacca: University of Dacca, 1948.

⁶ Anjali Chatterjee, *Bengal in the Reign of Aurungzeb, 1658-1707*, Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1967.

⁷ Atul Chandra Ray, *History of Bengal (Mughal Period 1526-1765 A.D.)*, Calcutta: Nababharat Publisher, 1968.

⁸ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir: An Introductory Study in Social History*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1969.

Various other scholarly works need to be specially mentioned for their diverse approach to the history of Bengal. P.J. Marshall⁹ asserted that the Company's arrival did not break the long term social, economic and ecological underpinnings from the days predating it in a big way. However, Sushil Chaudhury¹⁰ had taken note of Bengal's prosperity in the *nawabi* era; while linking up its decline in the post Plassey period with the domination of the English East India Company (EEIC). It was proposed that the battle of Plassey was fought to save the declining private trade of the English and do away with the *nawab* who was against the private trade.

Rajat Datta's seminal work¹¹ on agrarian economy of late eighteenth century Bengal is particularly noteworthy. According to Datta, the phase between the 1760s and 1800 in the history of Bengal was marked by recurrent instances of dearth or small scarcities and two instances of major famines, i.e. excessive starvation and excessive death in 1769-70 and 1787. Generally speaking, droughts created a situation of scarcities in food grains in the western Bengal, whereas excessive flooding was the major cause of subsistence crisis in the eastern delta. Food scarcity invariably pushed up agricultural prices. The tendency of the merchants towards short term hoarding of stocks of grain on such occasions, added further to agrarian crises. This could be described as a famine like situation, which has been dubbed as being an 'artificial' situation. The extent of soaring prices was the 'key in transforming a famine-warning into a famine-point in eighteenth century Bengal'. So, human factor combined with inclement climatic condition to bring about subsistence crises.

Again, one of Rila Mukherjee's major works on the history of Bengal¹² appraised the aspects like eastern Bengal's rich Buddhist tradition lasting up to the fourteenth century, its trade relations with the adjoining eastern and northern states; and in general Bengal's mercantile tradition against the larger canvas of South and Southeast Asian history. Further, the work critiqued Bengali merchants'

⁹ P.J. Marshall, *Bengal: the British Bridgehead, Eastern India 1740-1828*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

¹⁰ Sushil Chaudhury, *From Prosperity to Decline; Eighteenth Century Bengal*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1999.

¹¹ Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market, Commercialization in Rural Bengal: 1760-1800*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2000.

¹² Rila Mukherjee, *Strange Riches: Bengal in the Map of South Asia*, New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2006.

inability to take off as a reckonable force. Also, the political subjugation of Bengal, fall of the great Mughals and connected issues like the decline versus continuity debates- had been addressed in some detail. Ecological issues connected to river have also been touched upon.

Different kinds of scholarly works on Bengal's history are worth mentioning. For instance, Radhakamal Mukherjee's¹³ extensive study of the 1930s emphasized on the relevance of ecological and environmental factors in the history of Bengal. It primarily focussed on the riverine shift in the Bengal delta. It brought to our notice the eastward journey of the Bhagirathi river that began since the sixteenth century, gathered much momentum in the next century till it flowed down with much of its water as the Padma watering eastern Bengal. Mukherjee had described the sixteenth century 'as the era of violent reconstruction in the estuary south east of the Bhagirathi'. The outcome of the riverine swing was the contrasting delta systems—the declining western delta as the Bhagirathi in western Bengal choked up in various parts since 1660s as the streams got cut off from the supply of fresh water and silt resulting in migrations from certain parts and the active eastern delta that became the land of cultivation and widespread settlements. Thus in a way geography refashioned Bengal's history by the end of the eighteenth century.

However, Kapil Bhattacharya's work¹⁴ expressed doubt about the general assumption that originally the Bhagirathi represented the main flow of the Ganges. He cited geological evidences¹⁵ that were indicative that the Padma could very well have been the original track of the Ganges in ancient times, though it was difficult to provide a precise account of the development of the Bengal rivers. Even R.K. Mukherjee opines that the natural course of the Bhagirathi was towards the east.

In fact, the myth of the ancient river engineering by Bhagiratha, the great king of the Sagara dynasty, was highlighted by Willcocks and endorsed by Mukherjee. They observed that Bhagirathi was brought to parts of Bengal through

¹³ Radhakamal Mukherjee, *The Changing Face of Bengal: A Study in Riverine Economy*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, first published in 1938, Revised Edition, 2009.

¹⁴ Kapil Bhattacharya, *Bangladesher Nodnodi O Porikolpona*, Calcutta: Bidyodoy Library Private Ltd, 1959.

¹⁵ The yellowish reddish clay mixed with stones underneath the alluvial bed of the Ganges of the north western U.P., Bihar and West Bengal.

a number of canals cut from the Ganga by Bhagiratha to irrigate the agriculturally deficit central and western Bengal. So Bhagiratha was not a mythical personality but a historical character. Bhattacharya opined that several thousand years ago in the epic era, Bhagiratha had excavated the canal as a short cut access to the sea. The canal was channelized through the ancient bed of the choked up rivers of the Chhotanagpur region close to Rajmahal hills and made navigable up to the Bay of Bengal. This was done to facilitate troop movements of the warring kings during the epic wars¹⁶.

Nevertheless, the concept of riverine shifts as an agency of historical change as explained by Mukherjee was further developed by Richard Eaton¹⁷ in the early 1990s, in his approach to explain the history of Bengal covering roughly five hundred years between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries. In fact, along with a review of religion, polity and economy, Eaton's book emphasized ecological factors; especially the shifting of the Ganga and related changes in the Padma and Bhagirathi as a great determinant of the history of Bengal.

According to Eaton, the Bhagirathi's easterly journey and merging with the Padma coincided with the completion of the Mughal penetrations into the heart of Bengal, the establishment of Dacca as the provincial capital in the late sixteenth century. The merging of the Ganga with Padma diverted the bulk of the Ganga's discharge to Padma forging a direct connectivity between north India and Bengal that had facilitated Mughal entry straight into the core of the domain of the *sultans* of Bengal¹⁸. This was possible when in the eighteenth century the easterly shift led to the birth of six new rivers in the north eastern Bengal and connectivity was established with the Mughal headquarters through the river Ganges.

However, there was a school of thought that highlighted that along with the environmental influences like the changing drainage system; human intervention had its bearing on history to a large extent. C.A. Bentley¹⁹, a malaria specialist and the Director of Public Health in Bengal, opined that traditionally the cycle of annual flood in the active delta revitalized the agricultural land, prepared

¹⁶ It was done not to boost up agriculture in certain parts of Bengal, but to forge connectivity with the sea.

¹⁷ Richard Maxwell Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993.

¹⁸ Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, p. 307.

¹⁹ C.A. Bentley, *Malaria and Agriculture in Bengal: How to Reduce Malaria in Bengal by Irrigation*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1925.

it for the next round of crops and washed away the mosquito larvae. But one of the disastrous contributions of the British in Bengal was the construction of embankments that impeded the natural drainage system. The resultant pools of stagnant water on river bed bred malarial mosquito, led to the decline in soil fertility and adversely affected public health.

A British Civil Engineer, William Willcocks²⁰ also stressed on the positive influences of yearly inundations and associated spraying of fresh silt and the way it changed as the British political interest got entrenched in Bengal. In Bengal there was a tradition of living with inundations. As a matter of fact ‘low intensity floods’ were welcomed by the agrarian communities as they nourished the agricultural land with fresh alluvium to prepare it for the next round of bountiful harvest. This kind of flooding and natural process of replenishing of farm land was known as ‘overflow irrigation’. Willcocks felt that colonial engineering like the construction of railways, irrigation system, embankments etc. had a damaging impact on this ‘overflow irrigation’²¹ leading to river congestion, soil depletion, spread of malarial epidemics on a wide scale. All these factors contributed to changes in Bengal’s history.

The impact of the river continued to receive scholarly attention from Indian scholars. S.C. Majumdar enumerated in his work²² that human interventions in river channels had contributed further to dismal conditions in central and western Bengal rivers, along with the natural phenomenon of riverine vagrancy. Kanangopal Bagchi too in his editorial note on the proceedings of a symposium²³ pointed out that a host of geographical factors like erosion, deposition, tectonic movements etc. led to a deterioration of the physical milieu of the river basin. At the same time human interventions in the form of construction of roads, railways, irrigation systems, embankments contributed to a gradually dysfunctional system river.

²⁰ William Willcocks, *Lectures on the Ancient System of Irrigation in Bengal*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1938.

²¹ R.K. Mukherjee too had described this phenomenon as ‘the timely inundations of red water’, in *The Changing Face of Bengal*, p. 14.

²² S.C. Majumdar, *Rivers of the Bengal Delta*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1942.

²³ Kanangopal Bagchi, *The Ganges Delta*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1944.

Nevertheless, Smritikumar Sarkar convincingly argues about the positive aspects of the British intrusion in eastern India in one of his major works²⁴. He has observed that the technological interventions represented by the railways in the early nineteenth century rural eastern India, seemed to have ruptured the village centric traditional order with agro based subsistence, but planted the seeds of new aspirations in tune with the changing world. Nevertheless, such interventions happened in a big way mostly after the 1850s. Prior to that phase, rivers remained the major artery of transport and trade in Bengal.

Some research has been done on the riverine transport and communication in eastern India. Jean Deloche in his major contribution on India's communication system²⁵ described Bengal as a land of roads and waterways and demonstrated that the river system represented the most agreeable and comprehensive mode of communication providing the backbone of the economy. Nitin Sinha's significant work²⁶ on Bihar made parallel references to Bengal and argued that the British were concerned about improved means of communication to reach into the interior for a tighter grip over trade, revenue and administration. Tilottama Mukherjee enumerated the tangle of river system composed of innumerable aquatic strands of the Ganga Bhagirathi as a backbone of mode of transport and commercial exchanges and siting of markets, and its significant impact on the socio economic landscape²⁷.

The overland routes did contribute to the economy of Bengal, but in ancillary capacity to the riverine networks. However, Murari Kumar Jha²⁸ has argued that the Gangetic plains extending from Patna to Hooghly was economically very productive, but the river connecting the two points was accident prone as it was full of blockades. So in dry months pilgrims, merchants and army took to overland routes. Rivers were used in the monsoon for transporting bulk goods from the plains to the delta as it was the most cost

²⁴ Smritikumar Sarkar, *Technology and Rural Change in Eastern India, 1830-1980*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014.

²⁵ Jean Deloche, *Transport and Communications in India Prior to Steam Locomotion*, 2Vols, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.

²⁶ Nitin Sinha, *Communication and Colonialism in Eastern India: Bihar, 1760s-1880s*, London: Anthem Press, 2012.

²⁷ Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture and Economy in Eighteenth-Century Bengal, Networks of Exchange, Consumption and Communication*, Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2013.

²⁸ Murari Kumar Jha, 'The Political Economy of the Ganga River, Highway of State Formation in Mughal India, c. 1600-1800', PhD thesis, Leiden University, 2013.

effective and fastest means of communication. The thesis has also drawn heavily from works on micro history, sub-regional history, study of a set of spaces and bigger geographical expanses. For example: Rhoads Murphey's²⁹ article on the history of Calcutta drew our attention to the state of the Bhagirathi in the heydays of the burgeoning settlement and associated problems of bars and sandbanks that had made entry at the estuary and journey further up extremely hazardous.

A significant contribution to regional history was undertaken by Somendra Chandra Nandy³⁰ in his micro study of Kasimbazar written in Bangla. Though the focus was on Kasimbazar's position as an important river port suggesting that the Bhagirathi was navigable till Kasimbazar up to the 1740s; it also focused on a combination of socio political and economic determinants nurturing the settlement. Further, there is an array of books written in Bangla like Sushil Chaudhury's³¹ work showcasing purely socio political and certain economic aspects. Satish Chandra Mitra's³² two volumes on the history of Jessore and Khulna are not just a compilation of information on the two districts. It is an exhaustive history of the two neighbouring areas from the earliest times down to the colonial period. It has emphasized on the socio cultural evolution of Bengal and the environmental aspects of the Sunderban delta encompassing Jessore and Khulna. Apart from these, two other books edited by Kamal Chaudhury^{33,34} on local history should be mentioned here. The first one is a compilation of the works of Shyamdhon Mukhopadhyay, Nikhilmath Ray, and H. Beveridge on Murshidabad. The second work is a compilation of articles in two volumes on the various facets of the district of Hooghly. The books on Hooghly, Jessore, and Khulna have thrown some light on ecological aspects and natural disasters affecting the district of Hooghly and the Sundarbans including Sagor.

Again, a number of works on the sub-regional history involving a study of more than one place in Bengal deserves to be mentioned for having a bearing on

²⁹ Rhoads Murphey, 'The City in the Swamp: Aspects of the Site and Early Growth of Calcutta', *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 130, no. 2, June, 1964, pp. 241-256.

³⁰ Somendra Chandra Nandy, *Bandar Kasimbazar*, Calcutta: Bangiya Natya Sangsad Prakasani, 1978.

³¹ Sushil Chaudhury, *Nobabi Amole Murshidabad*, Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2000.

³² Satish Chandra Mitra, *Jashohar Khulnar Itihaash*, 2Vols, Calcutta: Dey's Publishers, 2001.

³³ Kamal Chaudhury ed., *Murshidabader Itihash*, vol. 1, Calcutta: Dey's Publishers, 2008.

³⁴ Kamal Chaudhury ed., *Hoogli Jelar Shekal-Ekal*, 2Vols, Calcutta: Dey's Publishers, 2014.

this thesis. Sukla Sen and Jyotirmoy Sen's³⁵ case study of a handful of West Bengal villages located on the dried up Bhagirathi Hugli basin shows how the shifting drainage system influenced population migration, alterations in livelihood, which in turn influenced political and cultural milieu. Again a unique contribution to local history is Aniruddha Ray's³⁶ collection of essays on major towns and cities of medieval Bengal, the rise and fall of which were analysed in terms of social, political, ecological as well as economic exigencies. Further, one of Rila Mukherjee's works³⁷ too underscores the economic evolution of the silk hub of Kasimbazar on the Bhagirathi and the cotton-exporting node of Jugdia on the Feni and compares their specific trade related problems that turned worse due to Company state's intervention. Basically this is a comparative historical analysis of two locations situated on eastern and western Bengal, with emphasis on production and commerce.

In the context of regional history, one must specially acknowledge Iftekhar Iqbal's³⁸ study of the Bengal delta in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Though the time period succeeds that of this thesis, it is relevant as it incorporates social, political, economic, as well as environmental issues in explaining the changes that occurred. The book links the shifting river and formation of revenue rich alluvial land, agrarian buoyancy and decline, scarcity, famine, poverty, people's spirit and the state's coercive policies, revenue measures, land system and emerging islands, reclamation as well as the river's propensity to flush out the *diaras* and state's prospects of collecting more revenue. It demonstrates how the various evolving facets of deltaic Bengal had an environmental undertone beside other influences of other factors.

Also, regional and local histories of different parts of the subcontinent have highlighted the crucial influence of environment and also role of human interference, along with other factors. Meena Bhargava's³⁹ study of Gorakhpur between 1750 and 1830, has pointed out that the Company State had been

³⁵ Sukla Sen and Jyotirmoy Sen, *Evolution of Rural Settlements in West Bengal (1850—1985)*, Delhi: Daya Publishing House, 1985.

³⁶ Aniruddha Ray, *Modhyojuger BharotioShohor*, Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2007.

³⁷ Rila Mukherjee, *Merchants and Companies in Bengal: Kasimbazar and Jugdia in the Eighteenth Century*, New Delhi: Pragati Publication, 2007.

³⁸ Iftekhar Iqbal, *The Bengal Delta, Ecology, State and Social Change: 1840-1943*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

³⁹ Meena Bhargava, *State, Society and Ecology: Gorakhpur in Transition, 1750-1830*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1999.

successful to an extent to instil a spirit of growth that had been achieved by repackaging Mughal traditions and systems. At another level, the Company's interference with the traditional socio economic practices like the framework of property rights and expansion of agricultural land at the cost of natural forests, had irked the common people. Laxman D. Satya observed about Berar district in central India in the nineteenth century⁴⁰. It was a land of abundant rain and black soil supportive of cotton cultivation. The Company's intervention resulted in the replacement of cotton by *jawar* cultivation that led to sapping the moisture of the soil; and also large scale deforestation. These resulted in a dry, hot, rain deficit zone. The famished cattle and people died. Many parallels could be noted in other places of the subcontinent. For example, Rohan D'Souza⁴¹ discussed at length how Hirakud Dam on the Mahanadi altered the flood dependent self sufficiency of the Orissa delta to a flood ravaged terrain. Floods and droughts in late medieval / early modern Bengal often worsened due to such human intrusions. Mayank Kumar in his recent work⁴² noted that though pre-colonial Rajasthan had an agrarian economy, the semi-arid and arid areas within the state had been falling back on pastoralism to sustain their rain deficit settlements. In fact, water conservation and stress on pastoralism provided a new lease of life to the dry areas. Thus ecology had influenced the evolution of a resilient and sustainable agro pastoral economy in Rajasthan.

The thesis has also drawn inspiration from Willem Van Schendel's⁴³ analytical study of a set of distant regions which share roughly similar deltaic topography and historical canvas. Indeed the Bengal delta, Lower Burma and the Kaveri delta had come under the British domination represented the poorest parts of the world. This work focuses on surplus extraction in three different but underdeveloped geographical spaces in the perspective of poverty, inequality etc.

This study was motivated to an extent by the works on very wide geographical expanses and an extensive time frame. Fernand Braudel's novel

⁴⁰ Laxman D. Satya, *Ecology, Colonialism and Cattle, Central India in the Nineteenth Century*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁴¹ Rohan D'Souza, *Drowned and the Damned: Colonial Capitalism and Flood Control in Eastern India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.

⁴² Mayank Kumar, *Monsoon Ecologies: Irrigation, Agriculture and Settlement Patterns in Rajasthan during the Pre-colonial Period*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2013.

⁴³ Willem van Schendel, *Three Deltas: Accumulation and Poverty in Rural Burma, Bengal and South India*, New Delhi: Sage Publication, 1991.

approach to write the history of collective fate of the countries sharing the Mediterranean coast-line⁴⁴ has shown that the stereotypes could perhaps be shelved in order to explore alternative scholarly perspectives. Its emphasis on the *longue duree* with a thrust on the role of natural environment in moulding the course of history over a very prolonged period, without ignoring the interplay of other determining forces has inspired many subsequent works, especially K.N. Chaudhuri. His seminal contribution⁴⁵ on the Indian Ocean essentially represents a work of economic history involving the elaborate maritime trade from the South China Sea to the eastern Mediterranean Ocean. It also reviews overland caravan trade and highlights valuable contributions of Asian merchants. It is extensive in its chronological span, focuses on the gradually changing aspects of the Indian Ocean trade stretching over a wide geographical swathe. Further, it considered various other forces determining history, like the way cultural habits create demand for goods and influence relative prices. Thus, in more ways than one it is a history of trade involving *longue duree*, a wide geographical canvas and varied determinants. Again, M.N. Pearson⁴⁶ in his book on the Indian Ocean looks at the history of the shores from the sea. It shows the Indian Ocean as a connector of countries and varied cultures along its coastline and analyses basic similarities of places situated along its shore.

In case of Bengal, the extensive and interconnected riverine web was a unifying factor to an otherwise widely spread out region. It is a fact that after the formal entrenchment of its economic rights and political control over the *suba* of Bengal in the 1750s, the English East India Company had aimed on harnessing the communication routes consisting of Bengal's tempestuous rivers and overland routes as prerequisites to tap the interior for revenue, commodities and efficient troop movements to quell political disturbances. This factor in its turn had greatly aided in amalgamating parts of the extensive region. In fact in her important work⁴⁷, Susan Gole noted that after 1757, a meticulous survey of available arable

⁴⁴ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995. Originally written in French and published in 1949.

⁴⁵ K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

⁴⁶ M.N. Pearson, *The World of the Indian Ocean, 1500—1800: Studies in Economic, Social and Cultural History*, Burlington and Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005.

⁴⁷ Susan Gole, *Early Maps of India*, New Delhi: Sanskriti in Association with Arnold Heinemann Publishers (India) Pvt Ltd, 1976.

land was done ‘for civil and financial purpose’⁴⁸. Rivers, river side ports, their hinterlands, coastal trading outposts and also roads had to be brought under control in a planned manner. So surveys were followed up with the detailed drawing of maps. That cartography was used as a tool to demarcate and possess a particular geographical space; was categorically stated by Benedict Anderson⁴⁹.

Mathew Edney⁵⁰ had enumerated that the surveys endowed the imperial power to know India in a systematic and scientific manner. This methodical approach towards gathering geographical data was highlighted by Sudipta Sen as well⁵¹. He felt that the geographical knowledge of India ‘grew out of an invasive agenda’⁵² in which cartographical knowledge aided in crossing over difficult terrains and scaling natural barriers. In one of his major works, Ian J. Barrow⁵³ observed that as the English East India Company slowly metamorphosed into a colonial ruler from a trade body, customary route surveys gave way to detailed, accurate and comprehensive route surveys. Indeed map making was a mandatory prerequisite of trading and nascent imperialist interests. This view was endorsed by P.L. Madan⁵⁴, who pointed out that in course of time ‘empirical geographical information’⁵⁵ became a crucial colonial tool. Certainly the English East India Company was driven to gain control over the communication systems that were to work for its material benefit.

The initial perception of the land and environment of Bengal or India, during the early encounters remains an interesting theme of history. David Arnold noted⁵⁶ that the new land embodying culture, customs and rituals, superstitions, natural phenomena like frequent cyclone, floods, drought, humidity, epidemics, etc. led Europeans to associate Bengal with the oriental ‘other’ that embodied

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 76.

⁴⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983.

⁵⁰ Mathew Edney, *Mapping the Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India: 1765-1843*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

⁵¹ Sudipta Sen, *Distant Sovereignty: Nationalism, Imperialism and the Origins of British India*, London: Routledge, 2002.

⁵² Ibid., p. 58.

⁵³ Ian J. Barrow, *Making History Drawing Territory, British Mapping in India c. 1756-1905*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, India, 2003.

⁵⁴ P.L. Madan, *River Ganga: A Cartographic Mystery*, Delhi: Manohar, 2005.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp.71-72.

⁵⁶ David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze; India, Landscape and Science, 1800-1856*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2006.

despair, disease and death. Nevertheless, such identifications did not deter Europeans from their economic and political agenda.

Again, an article authored by Mahua Sarkar⁵⁷ merits mention for addressing the issue of the people's perception of the Ganges. Mercantile interests have looked upon the river as a high road of commerce, by the ruling class and Europeans as a pliable tool of imperialism. The Ganges is associated with sacredness and veneration. Seen as a benevolent deity: as the life giver to the people of the land over which it flows and offers her bounties. However, the cultural/religious ethos of the river came in the way of its cleanliness; while commercial and imperialist perceptions did little to deter its natural demise. Sarkar tackles some of these issues.

Bengal and its Rivers

Since the ancient period, the river Ganga had flowed towards south from the Himalayas through western Bengal into the Bay of Bengal as the Bhagirathi and nurtured a thriving agrarian society and numerous towns on its banks. From the works of scholars like R.K. Mukherjee to R.M. Eaton we know that the river system of Bengal had undergone major alterations between twelfth and eighteenth centuries. Scholars have discerned two clearly identifiable shifts of the Bhagirathi river-- first one had occurred between thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when the Bhagirathi started migrating from east to west and the decline of Gaur could be ascribed to this to a large extent. The westerly swing was followed by its eastward shift between sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Of course tectonic movements, gradient and natural calamities like excessive rainfall and inundations of serious magnitude had facilitated the river change. The Ganga's water had started flowing through the course of the Padma in the sixteenth century which turned into a burgeoning river from above Murshidabad. The old Bhagirathi had lost its headwater in western Bengal and became a decayed channel and prosperous days became a thing of the past. The languid river was unable to spread its silt equitably over its banks. So, prolonged over-siltation led to mounds of old alluvium that choked up the bed of the old channel. This compelled the bulk of the water to cut out its new course conveniently towards the easterly direction, leaving behind its old bed. The

⁵⁷ Mahua Sarkar, 'Imaging the Ganga: Culture and Ecology of the River', in Mahua Sarkar ed., *Environment and History: Recent Dialogues*, Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2008.

natural surface gradient played a definite role. The process is said to have begun sometime in the sixteenth century and ended in the eighteenth century. The river circumvented this problem in the following manner. It united with the nearby channels like Jellenghy, Ichhamati, Bhairab, Mathabhanga, Garai, Madhumati, Arial Khan and finally today's Padma Meghna⁵⁸ to flow into the Bay of Bengal. This phase was to witness the rising fortune of the eastern part of Bengal that was being watered and fertilised by the young river.

The old river Bhagirathi Hugli trickled along western Bengal till its confluence with the Bay of Bengal at Sagor. But the bulk of its water had already veered towards the eastern Bengal roughly at a point close to Sooty in Murshidabad and came to be known as the Padma. The emerging river gave birth to a fresh alluvial fertile plain. This provided the basis for large scale wet rice cultivation; large scale settlements of agrarian communities that pulled away people from parts of the moribund western delta and adjoining areas.

There were the pioneers who had rallied local fishermen and boatmen, henceforth unaccustomed to plough culture, to pursue massive colonisation by reclaiming forests with extensive wet rice farms. Such leaders were mostly enterprising Muslim explorers from places located in northern India. Probably they received Mughal patronage in some form. Many earned respect as *pir* for conforming to a mystical and liberal view of the world. The expansion of agrarian frontiers went hand in hand with mosque building activities and propagation of Islamic order among the settlers and locals who got initiated into cultivation. Thus a large sedentary Muslim agrarian community started inhabiting the young eastern delta. In that sense, the phenomenon of riverine linkage had facilitated Mughal penetration, shoving back of untamed forest and spread of Muslim order based on *pir* culture.

In course of its easterly swing, the Ganga left behind a moribund delta as much of the Bhagirathi's water in central and western Bengal was being diverted to the expanding Padma. The Padma gave rise to a fertile land of fresh alluvium in its new delta in eastern Bengal that encouraged wet rice cultivation, population influx and settled community life. Robert Kyd observed that this was the period

⁵⁸ Kanan Gopal Bagchi ed., *The Bhagirathi-Hooghly Basin (Proceedings of the Interdisciplinary Symposium)*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1972, p. 65; Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, pp. 194-95.

when the granaries of Bengal shifted to Dacca and Backergunj from Burdwan, Hooghly and Rajshahi⁵⁹.

The commercial belt comprising Kasimbazar Murshidabad region, the port of Hooghly and the pilgrim centre at Sagor were entrapped within the decaying western delta. In the western delta, the retreating river got cut off from its source of water and the heaps of old silt deposits entrapped vestiges of the old river and gave rise to pockets of miasmatic marshes and jungles that bred diseases. Nevertheless, the serious implications of such slow changes are realised after a very long period. So Hooghly and Kasimbazar made their presence felt as significant commercial hubs at least till the latter half of the eighteenth century.

The rich body of works reviewed above have provided an overview of Bengal's history and the idea of a study of more than one place. Moreover, the *longue duree* factor encouraged to formulate a riparian perspective based on the prolonged phenomenon of the Bhagirathi's eastward migration from sixteenth century. The riverine shift and decay of western delta has provided the corner stone of my thesis. Eaton's major concern remained easterly movement of the river and development of the active delta.

The primary concern of my thesis is western Bengal and the interface of the river system with three places between sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Also, the history of the Bhagirathi Hugli watering the three locations has been discussed at length. So history of three centres proceeds simultaneously with the saga of the Bhagirathi. Certain influences of the river cannot be discerned immediately. They work silently and unobtrusively over a very extensive period of time to bring about some tangible changes.

It should be mentioned here that R.K. Mukherjee's pioneering work on the riverine economy of Bengal was set against the backdrop of the river shift in Bengal. However, the book covered a wide chronological canvas with the closing period being twentieth century. It has focussed on various regions of Bengal and the riverine influences on its economy, history and geography. The arguments are based on statistical tables, rare maps, diagrams, European narratives, *Mangalkavyas*. Nevertheless, the wide range of available archival sources was hardly referred to. Though diverse scholarly works have enriched history of

⁵⁹Cited in Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p. 68.

Bengal, this attempt by the dissertation to enquire into the river's relevance to the three locations on the basis of varied primary sources; has been a relatively underexplored terrain of research.

Various books and articles have thrown new light on the history of Hooghly and Kasimbazar especially in the field of trade and economy. Nevertheless, a detailed overview on Sagor as an inhospitable place that provided deep sea moorings, have not been furnished. The thesis has explored with the help of archival maps, manuscripts, indigenous and European narratives, how the reefs, barriers, interplay of winds and currents and also predators' threats, piratical menace, along with riverine impediments between Calcutta and Sagor, turned it into a vacant and inaccessible place. Different sources have helped in providing important clues in visualising the evolution of Kasimbazar and Hooghly as busy trading settlements having respective colonies of multiracial residents and their subsequent waning from the status of business hubs. Moreover, the thesis has emphasized the specific riverine problems affecting the trajectory of two locations. In this sense, one could claim that the work attempts to provide ecological explanations to the shaping of local history.

Indeed the thesis tries to relate the changes in physical environment represented by the shifting Bhagirathi river system and its contribution in sculpting the historical landscape of the chosen locations within a fixed time frame. The thesis cannot claim to have intended to begin with a pre conceived notion about the role of the river as an important natural force influencing the rise and decline of Kasimbazar, Hooghly and Sagor. But as the research progressed, it was gradually realised that each place charted out its own unique history and the river did seem to have played a major part.

Sources Consulted

A huge body of primary sources like Proceedings and Original Consultations of the English East India Company archives, official publications like Gazetteers, Reports, Surveys; Persian chronicles, Bangla literary sources, French Company sources and contemporary and near contemporary English, French and translated European travelogues, old maps have been consulted along with extensive secondary readings. These have provided the perspective to build up the research problem. No attempt has been consciously made to play down crucial roles of the social, economic and political factors and other environmental determinants in

moulding the history of the three locations. Rather the thesis does refer to other determinants nurturing the three places, while environmental causations has been given due importance.

Chapters

The thesis comprises two sections and five chapters. **Section I** has three chapters on Kasimbazar, Hooghly and Sagor. Availability of a large body of records for the three places is indicative of the fact that the emerging English Company State identified them as possible sources of revenue. Kasimbazar and Hooghly fulfilled the expectation to a large extent. In Sagor's case, the British had identified it as promising revenue yielding area, though the island failed to take off as one.

Chapter I- Kasimbazar: A Commercial Centre, c. 1600-1800

The chapter would focus on the textile hub and trading centre of Kasimbazar. It will explore the rise of the Murshidabad-Kasimbazar region as a promising commercial centre since early seventeenth century and will consider the presence of a readymade riverine network around its hinterland in encouraging commerce. Also, the chapter will try to figure out the population pattern, the living area of the residents and town planning within the chosen period. Further, the first chapter will consider the factors that facilitated its emergence as the famed centre of raw silk production and of distribution hub of a wide variety of piece goods and textiles. Did Kasimbazar function as an important inland port? What were the factors that were indicative of such an assumption? This will be a major point of discussion here. Moreover, it will trace the activities of the trading groups specially the English Company and the way in which it established its control over Bengal's silk and also its plans to impose command over Kasimbazar through proposals to build an infrastructure and tightening its grip over the rivers watering Kasimbazar and Murshidabad. Finally an attempt will be undertaken to figure out why the place declined from its position of a famed commercial centre and whether the river played a crucial role behind its decay?

Chapter II- Hooghly: A Port, c. 1580-1770s

The chapter would focus on how Hooghly emerged since the sixteenth century from a little known small place to the status of a famous commercial centre and maritime port by the early seventeenth century and took over the business of Satgaon that was silting up. Next the chapter will find out the type of people living

in the multi racial settlement within the select time frame and chalk out a rough town plan. Further, it will enumerate how the Bhagirathi facilitated the growth of commerce in Hooghly and highlight the contribution of watercrafts in it. Also the chapter would attempt to explore the role of Hooghly *Baksh Bundar* as a centre of salt trade. Finally, the second chapter would largely focus on the factors moderating its gradual decline from the status of a premier port and the ways in which the riverine changes influenced the trajectory of Hooghly till late eighteenth century.

Chapter III- Sagor: The Landfall Island, c.1600-1800

This chapter would explore the historical past of the island and its trajectory within the chosen period. It was a forested island and had earned notoriety for its tigers and sharks beside environmental factors like cyclone, storm wave, earthquake, flood, and subsidence of land. So chapter three will endeavour to probe who were its inhabitants between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Further, from the latter part of the eighteenth century, the English East India Company had been surveying parts of the Sundarbans for land reclamation and additional sources of revenue. Why did Sagor attract the attention of the English Company? In what way Sagor could have fitted into its scheme of revenue extraction? It will explore in some detail, how environmental forces typical of the deltaic Bengal at the periphery of the mainland, intervened with the realisation of the Company's proposals.

The underlying themes of **Section II** are the contradictory characteristics of the Bhagirathi as a barrier as well as a facilitator. Both the chapters explore the interface between the Bhagirathi river system and two sets of raiders – the *Bargis* in Kasimbazar and the Arakanese Portuguese also known as the *Magh Firangis*⁶⁰ in Sagor. The section would consider the repercussions of the *Magh* and *Bargi* incursions on Sagor and Kasimbazar from the perspective of riverine shifts and ecological factors.

Chapter IV-TheBargi Raiders and Kasimbazar

The major thrust of the fourth chapter is on the impact of the Bhagirathi on the annual Maratha raids in western Bengal and Kasimbazar Murshidabad area in particular between 1740 and 1750; the most important phase of the raids. The

⁶⁰ The Arakanese and Portuguese marauders often allied together to attack the riparian tracts of the lower Bengal. They were referred to as *Magh Firangis*.

chapter will try to delineate the probable routes of the inroads into Murshidabad, Kasimbazar and also Hooghly as it was one of the chosen locales of the thesis that was occupied by the Marathas for quite some time. Again, this chapter tries to figure out why the raids were essentially confined mainly to the limits of the western bank of the Bhagirathi. A major discussion in the chapter revolves round the *Bargi* fighting strategy and to what extent was it viable in Bengal. What was the impact of such attacks and did it have any far reaching political and economic consequences for some parts of Bengal. These are some of the queries that the chapter endeavours to tackle.

Chapter V-The Arakanese Portuguese Raiders and Sagor

This chapter highlights the contrasting role of the river in Sagor in the context of the Arakanese Portuguese or the *Magh Firangi* raiders. The chapter reveals another facet of the river system that was markedly different from its role in the context of the *Bargi* raiders. The last chapter would explore the aspect of slave raiding and human trafficking with which the *Maghs* and *Firangis* were associated. Also the chapter seeks to probe the operation of varied forces that influenced Sagor to get enmeshed in the slave trading web spanning across both the deltas. Despite being a raiders' zone and a difficult terrain to survive; did the devotees visit this Hindu pilgrim site? The chapter also explores the raiding routes of the marauders. Finally, its long term effects would be analysed in the context of the impacts of the ecological hazards and other factors on the island.

Various primary sources reviewed so far have indicated that the river system did indeed play a crucial part in sculpting the historical evolution of Kasimbazar and Hooghly and their evolution was similar in some ways. However Sagor's location at the brink of the mainland, made it susceptible to the influences of the river as well as the Bay of Bengal. Moreover, in Sagor the brunt of the nature's furies was far more calamitous compared to the mainland, though the interplay of the marine and riverine forces did moderate its history.

In Bengal, the deltaic rivers brought down large amounts of alluvium, fertilising some parts of the land, while overflowing during the full blown monsoon, often inundating and submerging some other parts of the country side. The tumultuous rivers could wipe away large tracts of remunerative lands overnight. The river system also gave rise to *chars* and *diaras* on the beds that

yielded revenues for the following few years, before being washed away in the heavy rain. Again, the entrance into the mouth of the Hugli was a big navigational challenge since the time the European trading companies had cast their eyes on Bengal. There were numerous blockades at the estuary in the form of bars and sandbanks. Erratic interplay of currents, alterations in the channels, coupled with the brutal impact of cyclone and rain at the edge of the mainland posed serious hurdles to safe entry. Indeed, within the select period the river system suffered from a number of impediments in the form of various obstacles starting from the upper reach and also the problem of the receding depth of the river. Further, the prolonged monsoon and other predicaments along with drought, storm, earthquake etc. would lead one to logically assume that Bengal was a land marred by unpredictability of nature.

The study would try to piece together the history of these three places against the canvas of such an ambience of uncertainty and impermanence. The surveying and mapping of such a geographical terrain perhaps reflected the overwhelming avarice of the English Company to have access and control over a luxuriant land. Also, one could say that the English and the Europeans failed to have a deep understanding of the ecological pulse of the unfamiliar region despite gathering topographical, geological and hydrographical data of the *suba* with the help of the professionals. In other words, perhaps the fledgling Company State was in a denial mode to address and accept the ecological realities and was overwhelmingly driven by politico-economic ambitions. Further, it appears to an extent, as though the Company State was constrained by what could be termed as the ‘environmental Eurocentricism’⁶¹— stemming from its deep association with a terrain watered by tranquil rivers flowing down the ancient mountains of moderate slopes and temperate climate⁶².

Indeed, the micro study of the three locations would show that along with the river system of Bengal, the climatic factors typical of this region: like cyclone, storm waves, subsidence of land, rain, heat, humid air, swamps and diseases like malaria, typhoid; refilling of reclaimed land by secondary vegetation and also forest, wild life; all posed myriad challenges to those like the Company State who

⁶¹ Christopher V. Hill and Mark S. Stoll eds., *South Asia: An Environmental History*, Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2008, p. 224.

⁶² Does not have extreme temperature, winter and summer are moderate.

came to Bengal with long term objectives. Most importantly, the study will delineate the ways in which such challenges moderated the historical evolution of the chosen places.

SECTION 1

Section I comprises three chapters that provided a historical overview of Kasimbazar, Hooghly and Sagor. The general objective is to draw attention on how the dynamics of nature like the influence of the Bhagirathi-Hugli, along with other variables had modified the history of the chosen places roughly between late sixteenth early seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries.

Located strategically in the ‘middle and the lower arm of the horse shoe’ of the Bhagirathi; Kasimbazar gradually expanded its commercial sway and according to some, started operating as a port as it was approachable by ships from more than one side and offered good anchorage. Its silk became the iconic commodity of trade in Bengal that attracted merchants and traders from neighbouring as well as distant places. Kasimbazar became a well-known commercial centre after the decay of the port of Hooghly. It could be said that the decline of Hooghly led to the development of Kasimbazar as a major emporium and an inland port.

Hooghly predated Kasimbazar as a Portuguese trading node. Initially it was a salt market. Subsequently it became a major Portuguese port cum unofficial autonomous settlement of the Portuguese of Cochin, Goa, Malacca who kept deserting the *Estado da India*. Merchandises of all kinds from nearby and far off places converged in the port of Hooghly for import and export. It was an autonomous hub. Along with the Portuguese, other traders; mainly a sizable group of resident merchants of Satgaon and Chandernagore shifted their base here. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Hooghly region was to foresee the emergence of the Dutch (1610), English (1640), French (1673), and Danish (1755) Companies as the European trading bodies took permission from the Mughals to set up their trade posts and factories close to one another on the Hugli’s bank. The cornerstone for the European mercantilist nerve centres was first laid by the Portuguese on the bank of the Hugli.

Sagor was the first landfall at the river’s mouth. It stood at the frontier of the western and eastern delta. Naturally, the historical influences moderating it was varied and complex. Sagor was claimed by some historians to be part of the twelfth century deltaic region of Chandecan and prospered from a trading

network. Within the chronological framework, it was under the influence of the Mughals, the local rulers of the delta, the Portuguese and the Arakanese. The island remained largely vacant due to its isolation from the mainland, dense vegetation, ravages of cyclone, tidal waves, earthquake, presence of beasts of prey, pillages of the Arakanese infiltrators. Yet it was famous as a site for an ancient temple of the Hindus and the devotees congregated there annually for a holy bath at the confluence of the sea and the river, known as Gangasagor.

The section deals in some detail with the growing importance of the commercial centre, the port and the pilgrim centre in history; their ecology and mercantile network, kinds of people living there, the living area, trade and the types of boats plying on the river watering the places, importance of the river, the riverine and environmental impact on the settlements; and the eventual decline of these places. Finally this section seeks to show linkages between the slow decay of the three places and various socio political, economic, ecological factors as well as specific riverine problems.

CHAPTER 1

Kasimbazar: A Commercial Centre, c. 1600-1800

I. Introduction

Since midseventeenth century, a place by the name Kasimbazar (previously known as Masumabazar) located near Murshidabad¹; evolved as an iconic silk production centre and a major textile mart town. It had an important place in western Bengal's commerce and drew in the 'Asian merchants' and the European Companies as well as to set up business in and around it. While Kasimbazar came into focus as an internationally renowned nucleus of trade, Murshidabad's claim to fame was its political significance as the capital of the *suba* Bangla. Murshidabad, the seat of the *nizamat* spanned on the either side of the Bhagirathi². The commercial centre of Kasimbazar was its southern neighbour. After Murshidabad the river meandered to form a horse shoe. Kasimbazar was tucked inside the middle and lower arm of the horse shoe³ (See Map 1.1).

Kasimbazar caught the attention of the scholars mostly for its valuable contributions to the textile trade of Bengal. In the works of Rila Mukherjee⁴, Hameeda Hossain⁵, and D.K. Mitra⁶ the place has been treated essentially from the standpoint of trade. While in one of her works⁷ Mukherjee undertook a sub-regional analysis of the economics of the silk hub as compared to the cotton textile node of Jugdia; the same space has been treated not as an isolated small town within the growing Company state; but as a significant participant in the global network of commerce in one of her more recent works⁸. While the trajectories of

¹ Cited in Aniruddha Ray, *Moddhojurer Bharotio Shohor*, Itihash Granthamala Series 1, Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1999, p. 353.

² Nikhilnath Ray, 'Oitihashik Chitro Murshidabad Kahini', in Kamal Chaudhury ed., *Murshidabader Itihash*, vol. 1, Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 2008, p. 59.

³ Somendra Chandra Nandy, *Life and Times of Cantoo Baboo*, vol. 1: 1742-1804, (The Early Career of Cantoo Baboo and His Trade in Salt and Silk, Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1978.

⁴ Rila Mukherjee, *Merchants and Companies in Bengal: Kasimbazar and Jugdia in the Eighteenth Century*, New Delhi: Pragati Publishers, 2006.

⁵ Hameeda Hossain, *The Company Weavers of Bengal: The East India Company and the Organisation of Textile Production in Bengal, 1750-1813*, Bangladesh: The University Press Ltd, 2010.

⁶ D.B. Mitra, *Cotton Weavers of Bengal, 1757-1833*, Calcutta: Firma KLM Pvt Ltd, 1978.

⁷ Rila Mukherjee, *Merchants and Companies in Bengal: Kasimbazar and Jugdia in the Eighteenth Century*, New Delhi: Pragati Publishers, 2006.

⁸ Rila Mukherjee, *Networks in the First Global Age: 1400-1800*, Delhi: Primus, 2011.

its rise in the international business as a silk textile production and trading centre has been addressed by Hossain, its contribution as a premier nucleus of cotton textile has been brought to our notice by D.B. Mitra. A brief insight into its evolution as a significant commercial centre of Bengal since the mid seventeenth century has been provided by Aniruddha Ray⁹.

Again, a rough idea of its landscape could be derived from the works of Purna Chandra Majumdar¹⁰, H. Beveridge¹¹, Shyamdhon Mookerjee¹² and Nikhilmath Ray¹³. Two works by Somendra Chandra Nandy¹⁴ would merit special mention in this context. A short micro study on Murshidabad and Kasimbazar by Aniruddha Ray¹⁵ traces its evolution from an innocuous place to a commercial hub of international repute. Kasimbazar's fame in the international market has on one hand been highlighted, on the other hand the fact that the stiff competition put forward by the Asian merchants to the Dutch and English East India Companies has been brought to our notice by Sushil Chaudhury¹⁶. The volume of silk trade handled by the East India Company at Kasimbazar and its relative decline since the 1730s has been explained in detail by K.N. Chaudhuri¹⁷. Further, in one of Calkins' incisive essays¹⁸, Murshidabad has been depicted as the political and mercantile nucleus of a sub regional zone of Bengal, while Kasimbazar has been described as the commercial zone of the settlement of Murshidabad. The social

⁹ Aniruddha Ray, *Adventurers, Landowners and Rebels, Bengal C. 1575-C. 1715*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1998.

¹⁰ Purna Chandra Majumdar, *The Musnud of Murshidabad (1704-1904), Being a Synopsis of the History of Murshidabad for the Last Two Centuries, to Which are Appended Notes of Places and Objects of Interest in Murshidabad*, Murshidabad: Publisher Sharoda Ray, 1905.

¹¹ H. Beveridge, 'Old Places in Murshidabad', in Kamal Chaudhury ed., *Murshidabader Itihash*, vol. 1, Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 2008.

¹² Shyamdhon Mukherjee, 'Murshidabader Itihash', in Chaudhury, *Murshidabader Itihash*.

¹³ Nikhilmath Ray, 'Oitihashik Chitro Murshidabad Kahini', in K. Chaudhury ed., *Murshidabader Itihash*, vol. 1, pp. 63-67.

¹⁴ Somendra Chandra Nandy, *Bandar Kasimbazar*, Calcutta: Bangiya Natya Prakashani, 1978.

¹⁵ Aniruddha Ray, *Modhyojuger Bharotiyo Shohor*, Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1999.

¹⁶ Sushil Chaudhury, 'The Asian Merchants and Companies in Bengal's Export Trade, circa Mid Eighteenth Century', in Michel Morineau and S. Chaudhury eds., *Merchants, Companies and Trade: Europe and Asia in the Early Modern Era*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 300-320.

¹⁷ K.N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the East India Company*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

¹⁸ Philip B. Calkins, 'The Role of Murshidabad as a Regional and Sub regional Center in Bengal', in Richard L. Park ed., *Urban Bengal*, South Asian Series, Occasional Paper No. 12, The University of Chicago, 1969, p. 27.

composition in the emerging commercial town of Kasimbazar and its dynamics has been explained in one of Sushil Chaudhury's works¹⁹.

However, hardly any attempt has been undertaken to sketch the evolving topography of the settlement and delineate the impact of the natural forces, mainly the river, on the historical trajectory of Kasimbazar between midseventeenth and early nineteenth centuries. This chapter primarily aims to do the same in order to do a micro analysis of the space from the vantage of the Bhagirathi system that watered the settlement. In fact this is the first of the three chosen places located on the western bank of the Bhagirathi, which has been taken up for a review. Kasimbazar is located at the upper reach, Hooghly at the intermediate position along the river and Sagor at the estuary. The river is the underlying thread connecting the three locations that had carved out their niche in Bengal's history. The thesis would attempt to review how far this natural factor common to all three places, along with other relevant historical determinants, could moderate their respective historical journeys between late sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

II. Situating Kasimbazar

Kasimbazar was the suburban production and selling centre under the *faujdar* of Murshidabad. Hence it was a locality under the jurisdiction of the city of Murshidabad. In course of time it carved out its own distinct identity as 'the principal silk emporium in Mughal Bengal' and a manufacturing hub of fine silk items and raw silk.

As a secondary administrative centre under the Mughals it later exercised control over the European factories in Kasimbazar²⁰. Kasimbazar and Murshidabad have been often clubbed together in the thesis to indicate their proximity to each other. According to Walter Hamilton, Kasimbazar lay one mile south of Murshidabad²¹. Their location in Rennell's map confirmed that in late eighteenth century their borders were touching each other (See Map 1.1). The map has shown the main city towards the eastern bank of the river, while Kasimbazar has been

¹⁹ Sushil Chaudhury, *Nobabi Amole Murshidabad*, Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2008.

²⁰ Philip B. Calkins, 'The Role of Murshidabad as a Regional and Sub regional Centre in Bengal', in Richard L. Park ed., *Urban Bengal*, Occasional Paper no. 12, Michigan State University, pp. 22-23.

²¹ Walter Hamilton, *Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of Hindostan and the Adjacent Countries*, London: John Murray, 1820, p. 166.

shown on the other bank, a little towards the south at the centre of the eastward curve of the river, on the open side.

The origin of Kasimbazar could be linked with one Kasim Khan, who probably held a responsible post in the Mughal bureaucratic hierarchy during the *nizamat* period. It was hardly mentioned in travel accounts of the *sultani* state under the Husain Shahi rulers²². One of the earliest historical references of Kasimbazar could be traced back to the English account of William Bruton in 1632, a seaman in the service of the Company, who described it as the centre for great quantities of silk and muslin²³. It might have begun its journey as one of an array of commercial towns that sprouted along the Bhagirathi.

Contrary to the popular belief that Kasimbazar predated Murshidabad, the latter existed as Muksudabad since 1600. Calkins pointed out that though its political relevance is mostly discussed, it was an old commercial centre of considerable significance²⁴. It was a depot of silk. In fact, two English agents from Patna, named Hugh and Parker went there to buy samples of silk worth Rs. 500²⁵. In Brouke's 1660s map it was marked as a major town at the junction of strategic trade routes. Murshidabad evolved from a market town specializing in silk to the provincial headquarter and 'the most prosperous and populous city in Bengal'²⁶; in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its historicity could be traced from at least the third decade of the seventeenth century and it retained its fame till early nineteenth century. Tieffenthaler, the French missionary observed that its origin could be traced from the days of Akbar²⁷. The author of *Riyaz* noted that after founding his capital at 'Mukhsusabad', Murshid Quli Khan met the emperor Aurungzeb at Deccan. He came back, had built a mint there and renamed the place

²² Rila Mukherjee, 'Competing Spatial Networks: Kasimbazar and Chandernagore in Overland and Indian Ocean Worlds', in Michael Pearson, ed., *Trade, Circulation and Flow in the Indian Ocean World*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 134.

²³ W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal; Districts of Murshidabad and Pabna*, vol. 9, London: Trubner and Co, 1876, p. 88.

²⁴ Calkins, 'The Role of Murshidabad as a Regional and Sub regional Center in Bengal', in Richard L. Park, ed., *Urban Bengal*, South Asian Series, Occasional Paper No. 12, The University of Chicago p. 27.

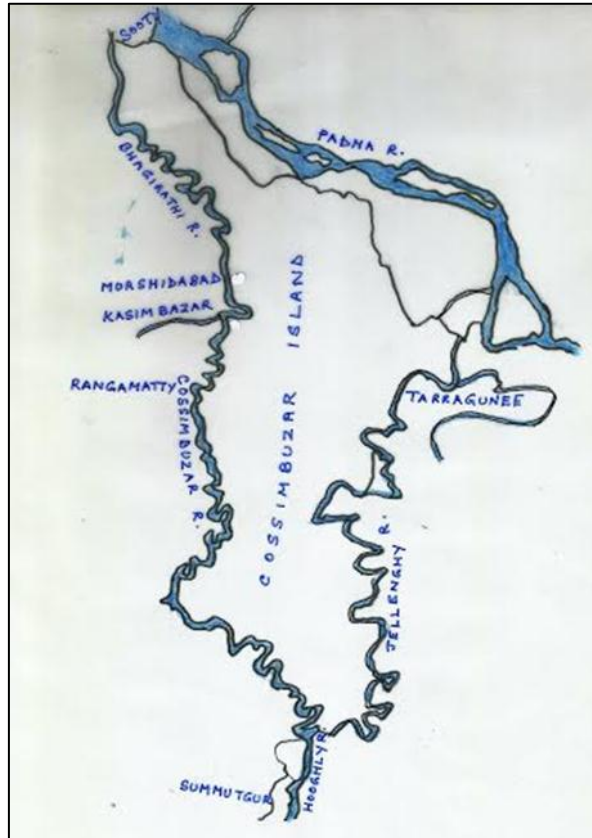
²⁵ W. Foster, *English Factories in India, 1618-1621*, pp. 194, 253.

²⁶ K.M. Mohsin, 'Murshidabad in the Eighteenth Century' in Kenneth Ballhatchet and John Harrison, eds., *The City in South Asia*, London: Curzon Press, 1980, p. 80.

²⁷ Joseph Tieffenthaler, 'Des Recherches Historique et Chronologiques sur l'Inde et la Description du Cours du Gange et du Gaugra avec une tres Grande Carte' in M. Jean Bernoulli, ed., *Description Historique et Geographique de l'Inde qui presente en trois volumes*, vol. 1, Berlin: 1791, p. 445.

Murshidabad²⁸. Though this chapter would concentrate on Kasimbazar specifically it would often refer to the neighbouring towns and specially the capital of Bengal, as well as the broader administrative division of Murshidabad; to lend a geo historical context to the central and interrelated issues.

Map 1.1: Location of Kasimbazar and Murshidabad



Source: Adapted from National Library of India, James Rennell, *Bengal Atlas Containing Maps of the Theatre of War and Commerce on that Side of Hindoostan*, 1783, Plate no. 11, The Cossimbuzar Island.

III. Kasimbazar as a Major Commercial Node

Ecological and Other Factors

Kasimbazar and its extended superabundant hinterland was a triangular piece of land entrapped by the Bhagirathi in the west, Padma in the north and Jellenghy in the east, referred by the Europeans as the 'Cossimbuzer Island'. The northern point of the island was demarcated by Sooty where the Padma branched off from the Bhagirathi; Summitgur, a southern neighbour of Nadia stood at the southern end near the junction of the Jellenghy and the Bhagirathi or Kasimbazar River. Rangamatty stood at the western edge and Tarragony at the eastern point of the

²⁸ Ghulam Husain Salim, *Riyazu-s-Salatin, A History of Bengal*, Maulvi Abdus Salam tr., Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1902, p. 29.

island on the left bank of the Jellenghy (See Map 1.2). Further, the settlement was located at an advantageous position on the western bank at the heart of the ox bow curve of the meandering Bhagirathi²⁹. So, Kasimbazar was naturally endowed to serve as a port.

The eastern part represented sub Vindhyan topography of barren red soil of *rahr Bangla* and the western part an alluvium rich fertile soil of prolific vegetation, typical of *bagri*. As a Company's record observed, 'Almost any Soil or Air will agree both with the Cultivation of the Mulberry Plant and Breeding of Worms'³⁰. A large part of Kasimbazar and its adjoining areas abounded in mulberry trees³¹. However, this 'shrub'³², as a contemporary source defined the mulberry plant, grew in a specific area; hence 'the produce of raw silk seems at present confined to particular spots'³³. Besides mulberry, the Kasimbazar island grew bountiful cotton, rice etc. Actually the 'plaine and levell'³⁴ terrain of Kasimbazar with 'not one mountaine or hill'³⁵; grew easily and abundantly anything that was planted 'by reason of the fertileness of the soile'³⁶.

The luxuriant mulberry belt of the Kasimbazar island nurtured generations of skilled craftsmen comprising of spinners, weavers, finishers and also rearers of silk worm. Raw silk was produced in large volumes in and around Kasimbazar because the crucial food for the silk worms was easily available. A punctual and a fair amount of rainfall, followed by a dry spell ensured a 'proper Food and a plentiful crop of Mulberry Leaves'³⁷ for the worms on which the high quality of silk so much depended. However, excessive rainfall leading to inundations, often harmed the mulberry leaves as those turned rotten. Dry and dusty leaves during drought were as harmful for the worms as the fermented and wet leaves during prolonged monsoon. The silk worms fed on finely cut soft mulberry leaves and needed very special care. Rearing them involved commencing and stopping their

²⁹ Only later did the settlement spill over to the other side of the river.

³⁰ Letter from Court, March 17, 1769, *Fort William-India House Correspondence*, vol. 5: 1767-1769, ed., N.K. Sinha, p. 177.

³¹ Streysham Master, *The Diaries of Streysham Master 1675-1680 and Other Contemporary Papers Relating Thereto*, Richard Carnac Temple ed., vol. 2, London: John Murray, p. 28.

³² Letter from Court, March 17, 1769, *Fort William-India House Correspondence*, vol. 5: 1767-1769, p. 177.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Streysham Master, *The Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 28.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ National Archives of India (henceforth NAI), Bengal Public Consultations, Microfilm, Fort William, October 1728, Accession no. 2666.

feeds at the right time. While women reared the silk worms, men tended to and looked after the mulberry plants and brought home the leaves to feed the worms. The farmers cultivated mulberry plants with the objective of nurturing silk worms; along with the other crops. So the silk industry could be divided into two parts: mulberry plantation and method of manufacturing silk. Hence, as Sushil Chaudhury clarifies, it was partly agrarian based and partly a cottage industry.

Temperature and humidity played a major part in the growth, fertility and mortality of silk worms. Temperature of 24°C and humidity level between 65 and 75 per cent had to be maintained. Temperature and humidity fluctuations adversely affected the growth, feeding pattern and spinning of cocoons. Variation in humidity adversely affected the worms. So the nurturing of silk worms and cocoons was a delicate task. There were seasonal varieties of mulberry silk worms—*nistarigrew* in warm monsoon months, *chhota-palu* or *desi*, in winter and *bara-palu*—an annual variety in which the ‘egg stage’ extended up to ten months. Kasimbazar Murshidabad region used to specialize in *bara-palu* that produced a special kind of white cocoon³⁸. The silk yarn extracted out of those cocoons in spring time was of such high quality that the most skilled weavers lined up to collect them. European Companies came for those yarns that were mostly available in Kasimbazar region. The English Company specialized in its export. In Kasimbazar, those worms contributed largely to high quality March outcrop of silk yarn. The crude silk of Kasimbazar bore a natural yellow tinge. But Tavernier observed in his *Travels* that the people of Kasimbazar had mastered the method of bleaching their silk with a dye made of the ashes of a local variant of plantain tree³⁹.

The agent in the East India Company’s factory in Bengal, Streynsham Master stated sometime in mid seventeenth century that the best silk was extracted from the assortment that came from the November *bund* (*bund* denotes various cocoon rearing seasons or harvest seasons in Bengal)⁴⁰. The other bunds came in March and July. July bund sortments were coarse and their colour was not clear. They were, as a matter of fact considered the worst variety as the rotten and soggy

³⁸ N.G. Mukerji, *A Monograph on the Silk Fabrics of Bengal*, Calcutta: Printed at Bengal Secretariat Press, 1903, p. 9.

³⁹ Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, Valentine Ball tr., William Crooke ed., *Tavernier’s Travels in India between Years 1640-1676*, vol. 2, New Delhi, Chennai: Asian Educational Services, 2007, p. 3.

⁴⁰ Streynsham Master, *The Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 10; NAI, Consultations no. 1, Home Public, April 15, 1779, p. 7.

mulberry leaves after the monsoon could not rear healthy worms. Further, the rains hampered the winding and reeling process. In local parlance the November bund was called *aghrani*, March bund *chaitra* and July bund *srabani*. Sushil Chaudhury noted that in early eighteenth century, amongst the indigenous/ Asian merchants, the Gujaratis were the largest buyers of the finest and most expensive silk of Murshidabad and Kasimbazar. They sent them to Ahmedabad and Surat to be woven into beautiful fabrics. Their main concern was quality and hence they did not hesitate to spend money and never bargained for price.

In fact, the Gujarati merchants were so influential in the silk market of Bengal that the finest Kasimbazar silk became popular as Gujarati silk. In the Company's letters this was referred to as 'Guzzerat' or 'Guzerrat'. It is not clear whether initially it was applicable to the *bara-palu* variety of March bund that was once considered the best. Subsequently the November bund became quality wise as fine as the silk of *bara-palu* worms and was coveted by the traders. Initially the *bara-palu* variety of silk had initially drawn the attention of the Europeans. In fact, the East India Company made large scale export of the silk of this cocoon from the Kasimbazar region and some other areas like Jungypore, Sonamukhi, Radhanagore⁴¹. However, ultimately this superior variant of silk later came to be largely ignored by the Companies and was supplied entirely to the native looms. Om Prakash explained that the November bund came to be accepted as the best variety as the 'dry and cold weather' ensured that the substance produced by the worms 'coagulate' fast. Such a favourable situation in the month of November was probably consistent over the years and hence dependable.

Mercantile Network

Though the area was famous for its products, its markets were highly scattered and hinterland quite far flung⁴². Apart from being a producer of many items, Murshidabad Kasimbazar area was located close to other production hubs and different types of markets. It was a collection point of the items from an array of neighbouring nodes of silk like Jungypore, Rangamati, Gonatia, Shantipore, Kumarkhali, Rangpore, Nadia. Some other silk hubs like Meenkhot, Dinajpur,

⁴¹ N.G. Mukerji, *A Monograph*, p. 9.

⁴² K.N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia*, p. 241.

Burdwan, Malda, and Plassey too were connected to Kasimbazar.⁴³ Thus Kasimbazar Murshidabad became the nucleus of inland commerce with radial trading cum production centres around it. Moreover, its proximity to the future Mughal capital of Rajmahal proved beneficial for its business prospects. Rajmahal was an important inland port town located in between Kasimbazar and Patna, a big trading centre of Bihar. Kasimbazar in Bengal interfaced with northern India and exchanged goods through the buffer zone of Bihar represented by Rajmahal. Rajmahal was an inland port on the Ganges. The textiles of Kasimbazar were sold in Patna in the early seventeenth century and they were in demand in the north Indian towns.

In fact, the Mughal aristocracy had developed a taste for the luxury items like Bengal silk. The growing interface between Agra Delhi axis and north Bengal and further north west created a demand for high quality and expensive silk items. It required a suitable base to tap, access and transship the items from northern Bengal. Hooghly, the principal maritime port of south western Bengal was located far away from north Bengal. Being surrounded by rivers from three sides, Kasimbazar was geographically endowed as a natural river port.

Again, by the late sixteenth century, Bihar merged with the province of Bengal and the latter immensely benefited out of it. Other than its commercial connectivity with the Mughal aristocracy of Agra, Delhi, Lahore, Multan; commodities of Kasimbazar were available in places like Benaras, Mirzapore through the port of Patna. Besides, its goods reached as far as Bhutan in the north east and various places in Central Asia via the caravan routes intersecting Patna. So initially Kasimbazar operated within a limited geographical and economic orbit. This has been enumerated by Rila Mukherjee as the 'small world' of Kasimbazar⁴⁴. However, the iconic silk node lay on the crucial riverine network provided by the Bhagirathi, the major artery of commerce running through the length of the western Bengal, before being connected with the international port of Hooghly and the Bay of Bengal.

The waterway was more cost effective, faster and safer than the caravan route. Such a place could not conform to its 'small world' tag for long. Indeed it

⁴³ K.M. Mohsin, *A Bengal District in Transition: Murshidabad 1765-1795*, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dacca, 1973, pp. 16, 30.

⁴⁴ Rila Mukherjee, 'The Small World of the Silk Merchants of Kasimbazar', in *Networks in the First Global Age*, p. 208.

started catering to Gujarat in the west. The Armenian network was operational in the early seventeenth century. So Kasimbazar silk found its way to as far as Isfahan in the west and Manila in Southeast Asia, besides north India and overland trade with Bhutan. It is another story as to how the Armenian link petered away by the mid seventeenth century. The fame of Kasimbazar silk drew in streams of Europeans along with the Asian merchants⁴⁵ already familiar with its products. To explain briefly, the merchants from other parts of Bengal, the traders from various corners of the Mughal domain in northern and north western parts of the subcontinent, the diverse body of Central Asian traders, down to the Sannyasis, contributed to the multi coloured fabric of Kasimbazar Murshidabad region.

By the 1650s the European trading companies of the Dutch, English and the French had been lured by the silk items, raw silk, cotton textiles and other items and went all out to establish themselves in the commercial field of Kasimbazar. By the 1660s, the French merchants Bernier and Tavernier⁴⁶ had travelled up to Kasimbazar, followed by the English Company's employee Streysham Master about a decade later for the purpose of trade. In the 1660s, the Governor Shayista Khan gave Tavernier a bill of exchange drawn on Kasimbazar. That explains that its commercial reputation was established quite early⁴⁷. The commerce of Kasimbazar further expanded as Murshidabad assumed the status of the capital of the Bengal *nawabs*. A mint came up close to Kasimbazar and paved the way for a smooth sailing of trade.

European introduction to the Bengal fineries gradually reoriented the trade pattern as commerce became transcontinental in a big way. The fineries of Kasimbazar, as goods from other parts of Bengal got linked with the global trading web encompassing Africa, Asia and Europe⁴⁸. Thus the network of Kasimbazar had really turned global by mid eighteenth century. Apart from raw silk and silk items of many kinds and grades; as an emporium it sold primarily cotton items, food grains, handicrafts. The European trading houses utilized the port of Kasimbazar as a connecting port between north Bengal and the European markets through Hooghly and Calcutta. So it joined the rank of one of the crucial port towns of the *nizamat*, along with Hooghly, Patna, and Dacca.

⁴⁵ The term has been explained in detail in Section IV titled 'Evolving Population Pattern'.

⁴⁶ Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 1, p. 103.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.

⁴⁸ R. Mukherjee, 'Networks in the First Global Age', p. 213.

An abundance of silk along with cotton and other articles like food grains, handicrafts in Murshidabad Kasimbazar and its hinterland and efficient waterways provided the backbone to the tradition of a prosperous emporium and node of production cum commercial hub. Kasimbazar has been historically associated with silk. The mercantile compulsions led to the mushrooming of silk manufacturing nodes called *arangs* in the commercial web around Murshidabad Kasimbazar region, of which Kasimbazar was the centre. Hameeda Hossain observed that *arangs* mushroomed in areas where both the raw material and readymade textiles could be collected. Over a period of time conglomerations of weavers' villages evolved around them⁴⁹. The *arangs* around Kasimbazar were functional since seventeenth century. The presence of the mint close to the emporium encouraged big bankers to indulge in large scale financial transactions at Kasimbazar. They financed various mercantile ventures.

Subsequently the East India Company, the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oost Compagnie, henceforth to be referred as VOC) etc. utilized the *arangs* to their advantage to penetrate deep into the core of the silk production located in remote areas close to the mulberry belt. Rila Mukherjee noted that the Kasimbazar factory of the East India Company could access a large conglomeration of *arangs* spread over a far flung area; Malda and Rajshahi in the north, Kumarkhali in the south, as far as Burdwan in the west⁵⁰ and according to Somendra Chandra Nandy Rangpore demarcated the eastern limit⁵¹. So, apart from being a production centre itself, Kasimbazar was at the apex of other production cum collection centres. Nandy mentioned that Jungypore, Kumarkhali, Boalia, Poddapar (probably Boalia stretching over the other side of the Padma) and far flung Rangpore were the major *arangs* of Kasimbazar⁵². The goods were collected from the *arangs* in the interior of the countryside and evidently the Companies and merchants avoided buying 'key article' of trade from the intermediaries at the point of shipment⁵³. The European Companies bought from the sources itself from the heart of the deep interior of the countryside to avoid

⁴⁹ Hameeda Hossain, *The Company Weavers of Bengal: The East India Company and the Organisation of Textile Production in Bengal, 1750-1813*, The University Press Ltd, Bangladesh, 2010, p. 45.

⁵⁰ Rila Mukherjee, *Merchants and Companies*, p. 17.

⁵¹ Somendra Chandra Nandy, *Bandar Kasimbazar*, p. 106.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ K. N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia*, p. 353.

spending too much money. Silk items collected at Kasimbazar from the other *arangs* were often identified by the place names like Radhanagore silk⁵⁴, Kumarkhali silk⁵⁵, Rangpore silk⁵⁶. Cotton and silk goods of Kasimbazar, Kumarkhali and Radhanagore were of very high quality⁵⁷. In fact, the ‘Gorragat’ (Ghoraghat) and ‘Poddapar’ silk were very popular in the 1770s among the ‘Musselman’ merchants of Lahore, Surat, Hyderabad, Gorakhpore, the ‘Gentooz’ (Hindu) merchants of Multan, Mirzapore, Jungypore and the Armenians⁵⁸.

The sprawling Kasimbazar island dotted with *arangs* was supported by a complex nexus of *bazaar*, *hat*, *gunj* and *gola* that took care of the collection and inland distribution of commodities. Situated at the bifurcation point of the Padma and Bhagirathi, Bhagwangola commanded over a maze of perennial channels and acted as a strategic inland port, an important storage centre of grains, a large wholesale mart for grains and an import point of cotton from north western provinces of Bengal. The *gola* had an annual turnover of 65,000 tons. The political nerve centre of the *suba*, Murshidabad housed the *diwani*, mint and other important offices and residential complexes for the nobility and *nouveau riche*. As Calkins⁵⁹ emphasized, it was no less an important commercial hub than Kasimbazar specializing in silk. While Azimgunge was a grain trading centre, Ziagunge was a nucleus of cotton, sugar, wheat, rice⁶⁰. Jungypore, to the north of Azimgunge, was well known for its silk.

The readymade system of production and distribution supported by the crisscrossed fluvial lattice was captured by the European trading houses. K.K. Datta and D.B. Mitra had stressed on the importance of the land routes as Kasimbazar was connected with Patna, Burdwan, Jellenghy, Dinajpore and Malda by road⁶¹. But Calkins noted that the roads were built to ‘supplement’⁶² the river

⁵⁴ H.N. Sinha ed., *Fort William-India House Correspondence and Other Contemporary Papers Relating Thereto*, vol. 2: 1757-1759, Delhi: Government of India, 1957, p. li

⁵⁵ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, August 11, 1745, p. 5.

⁵⁶ H.N. Sinha ed., *Fort William-India House Correspondence*, vol. 2, p. li.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ West Bengal State Archives (henceforth WBSA), Proceedings, Committee of Circuit Appendix, vol. 9A, July 7- September 17, 1772.

⁵⁹ Philip B. Calkins, ‘The Role of Murshidabad as a Regional and Sub regional Center in Bengal’, in Richard L. Park, ed., *Urban Bengal*, Occasional Paper no. 12, The University of Chicago, p. 24.

⁶⁰ K.M. Mohsin, *A Bengal District in Transition: Murshidabad 1765-1795*, The Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dacca, 1973, p. 53.

⁶¹ D.B. Mitra, p. 158, K.K. Datta, *Studies in the History of the Bengal Suba*, pp. 388-89.

system, and the unmetalled fair weather roads of commercial relevance had turned dysfunctional in course of time. Rather the readymade riverine latticework of Bengal that integrated its hinterland; paved the way for mercantile penetrations from near and far. To echo Jean Deloche, in the rainy season the channels and streams ‘accorded to boats, small and large, access to all points and determined thus communications and exchange’⁶³. Sometime in the latter part of the eighteenth century, Father Joseph Tieffenthaler was impressed by the astonishing number of boats and crafts on the Bhagirathi river in Murshidabad and Kasimbazar⁶⁴.

As the level of the river water rose in the rainy season and submerged the surrounding terrain impeding the use of roads, local water crafts of all dimensions like *ulak*, *chupra-ulak*, *bhar*, *hola*, *palwar*, rafts⁶⁵, sprinkled the waterscape of Kasimbazar and its neighbourhood and beyond traversing into the deep crevices of the countryside⁶⁶. Interestingly in quite a few of the paintings on Murshidabad in the Nizamat period, the Bhagirathi river with various types of water crafts have been depicted with the great Nizamat Palace on the river bank dominating the scene. Special mention may be made of two of Robert Smith’s paintings c. 1814-15; one showing myriad boats like the pleasure barge of the nobility that displays an animal head, functional *patellas* close to the disembarkation point and big house boat with a cabin carrying passengers from long distance⁶⁷. The other painting shows a small number of *patellas*, a tiny *dinghy* and a big boat with a huge mast, which was returning after finishing some official duty⁶⁸. Basically the paintings conveyed the dynamics of river traffic at Murshidabad. Apart from *patellas*, *koshas* sailed up to Murshidabad and Calcutta from Purnea, Patna and other parts of Bihar in the early nineteenth century⁶⁹. They could be hired at Rs 7 and Rs 14 for Murshidabad and Calcutta respectively for 100 *mans* of Calcutta

⁶² Calkins, ‘The Role of Murshidabad’, p. 22.

⁶³ Jean Deloche, *Transport and Communications in India Prior to Steam Locomotion*, vol. 2: Water Transport, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 31.

⁶⁴ Tieffenthaler, *Description Historique*, p. 452.

⁶⁵ W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, vol. 9, p. 30.

⁶⁶ *Koshas* resembled the *patellas* in some ways.

⁶⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hazarduari_Palace#/media/File:Hazarduari_Palace_or_the_Nizamat_Kila.jpg

Accessed on 15.5.16.

⁶⁸ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/57/Hazarduari_palace_painting.jpg

Accessed on 15.5.16.

⁶⁹ Francis Buchanan, *An Account of the District of Purnea in 1809-10*, New Delhi: Usha Publications, 1986, p. 589.

weight. They plied in the monsoon months when the cost for transshipping goods from the upper reach of the Kosi river to Bhagwangola, Murshidabad and Calcutta were between 5 and 10, Rs 5 and 10, Rs and 12 and 15 Rs respectively⁷⁰. No boats could sail from the Kosi southwards to the upper reaches of the Bhagirathi in the dry months⁷¹. However, in summer a substantial amount of commodities were carried to and from Murshidabad for commercial purposes with the help of floats made of a pair of canoes tied to a piece of bamboo. Such transports were known as *ber* and *singri*. Those needed very little water to ply⁷².

It is said that in the olden times the river system in and around Kasimbazar island allowed passage to the largest country boats of five hundred *maunds* or more throughout the year⁷³. Much later than that, all places remained accessible by boat in monsoon⁷⁴. Kasimbazar had been acting as a major transshipment centre of saltpetre from Patna to Hooghly since mid seventeenth century⁷⁵. Patna was the supplier of saltpetre to European nations. It was the basic ingredient for making gunpowder. It used to be exported to the European countries from Hooghly port via Kasimbazar. But the river between Kasimbazar and Hooghly used to be barely navigable and the current was extremely sluggish in dry season that continued for around six months. The large amount of silt was carried down the river, which had turned into a spill channel. Hence such deposits could neither be washed away nor be distributed equitably along the surrounding plains. So the river had various blockades in the form of bars and shoals. In the dry month of 1778, the Kasimbazar river was impassable for boats of the smallest size⁷⁶. Hence it could be assumed that even about a hundred years earlier the dry months meant a tedious riverine journey from Kasimbazar. So the bulk of the freight used to be carried from Kasimbazar to downstream in a flat bottomed broad *patella* designed to carry large bulk but avoid being stranded on a sandbank.

Despite such blockades in the river, this commercial settlement under the *nizamat* enjoyed trading linkages spanning far and wide much before it was

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., p. 591.

⁷³ K.M. Mohsin, *A Bengal District in Transition*, p.10.

⁷⁴ Ibid, pp. 10-11.

⁷⁵ Somendra Chandra Nandy, *Bandar Kasimbazar*, p. 52.

⁷⁶ L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Murshidabad*, Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1914, p. 3.

tapped by the European Companies. The three ports of Bengal under the *nizamat* were connected to Kasimbazar: supply of saltpetre, opium and coarser variety of silk came from Patna. Supply of fine *muslins* came from Dacca port⁷⁷. The access to sea was gained via the maritime port of Hooghly. Later, with the European interventions, use of Hooghly port became the established route for the overseas trade. Since Akbar's times, the military exigencies of the Mughals had prompted them to entrench themselves on the main track of the Ganga spread from north Bengal down to the Bay. Through the north Indian corridor via Ganga the high value products of Bengal like silk fineries of various types and fine cotton gained popularity with the Mughal aristocracy and through their linkage, with parts of Afghanistan, Persia and beyond via overland route.

So the north Indian traders from places like Benaras, Mirzapore, Multan and Lahore and also merchants from countries of Central Asia transported expensive goods from the port of Murshidabad northwards via Patna on the Ganges⁷⁸. Some of the high quality silk goods got transported via overland trade routes to the Central Asian countries and also Bhutan⁷⁹. In the western part of India, Surat, Ahmedabad and Aurangabad located down south were ready markets for the Bengal silk, while the Armenian merchants at Kasimbazar carried some of the textile goods as far as New Julfa. So when the Europeans decided to establish their trading centres on the shore of the Bhagirathi at Kasimbazar, the latter was already a very established 'retail wholesale and production hub'⁸⁰ rolled into one.

This was discovered by the European trade bodies in course of their exploratory spree of Bengal, sometime in the seventeenth century. The Dutch silk trade with China and the English trade in silk with Persia and Italy were being supplemented and replaced by silk trade with northern Bengal in the latter part of the eighteenth century. There was a rising requirement for finished silk commodities from the Kasimbazar region to England. Also raw silk, silk piece goods, coarse variety cotton piece goods, food grains, indigo, opium, handcrafted ivory ware found their ways into the European markets. The bulk of saltpetre from Patna and other parts of Bihar used to be transshipped via Kasimbazar. All such items of Bengal were exported overseas via Hooghly and subsequently Calcutta.

⁷⁷ Rila Mukherjee, 'Competing Spatial Networks', p. 133.

⁷⁸ WBSA, Proceedings, Committee of Circuit Appendix, vol. 9A, July 7- September 17, 1772.

⁷⁹ Rila Mukherjee, 'Competing Spatial Networks', p. 133.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

The figures of investment of various factories of the English Company in the two successive years after the Company's entrenchment of power over the *suba* of Bengal in 1757, amply shows the status of Kasimbazar as perhaps the most crucial business hub.

Table 1.1: Investment data of the English Company State's Factories in Rupees

Factories	1758	1759
Patna	2, 12,432	2, 07,307
Dacca	4, 67, 050	1, 59,604
Lushkerpore	32,775	1, 66,185
Balasore	75,330	10,943
Kasimbazar	9, 23,353	8,59,675

Smaller denominations of rupee like 'anna', 'paisa' and 'pai' have been omitted.

Source: Adapted from H.N. Sinha ed., *Fort William-India House Correspondence and Other Contemporary Papers Relating Thereto*, vol. 2: 1757-1759, Delhi: Government of India, 1957, p. xlix.

Table 1.2: Investment data of the English Company State's Factories in Rupees

Factories	1780-81
Kasimbazar	1,11,4668
Bauleah	61,5667
Commercolly	42,4600
Rangpore	12,9920
Junghypore	22,1640
Purnea	60,0783
Dacca	80,2217
Luckypore	64,8385
Malda	30,0000
Midnapore	19,3573

Smaller denominations of rupee like 'anna', 'paisa', 'pai' have been omitted.

Source: Adapted from Board of Trade(Commercial) Proceedings, vol. 30, January 2-March 27, 1782, pp. 54-55.

Table 1.1 shows that Kasimbazar was attracting far more investment than any other centre in 1758, 1759. Table 1.2 shows that more than two decades later, other factories like Dacca, Bauleah, Purnea, Luckypore were catching up. Still Kasimbazar was clearly ahead of all other factories in terms of investment.

IV. Evolving Population Pattern

At the apex of the society lived the aristocracy and the nobility. Between the reigns of MurshidQuli and Alivardi the rich and well-connected families from near and far were invited to relocate in KasimbazarMurshidabad region. Proximity to the political seat of Murshidabad and the mint, *diwani*, and *faujdaricourt*

encouraged the settlement of merchants and various professional groups from near and far. This facilitated the mushrooming of a number of 'grandees'⁸¹ around Murshidabad Kasimbazar complex. The Hindus as well as the Muslims filled in the rank of the nobility. The roles of Raj Ballabh, Rai Durlabh, and Nandakumar as the *diwan* and *rai rayan* in the court politics are indicative of the tremendous influence of the Hindus at the Murshidabad court⁸². Among the Muslims the *shias* were the reigning sect⁸³. The twin towns boasted of as many temples as mosques.

However, the Mughal *mansabdars* (military officers) comprising mostly north Indians, were largely replaced by local *zamindars* who became major collaborators with the state as the Bengal *nizamat* was being effectively freed from the control of Delhi. With the passage of time Murshid Quli Khan had initiated the process and Alivardi Khan had been able to attain a quasi independence from the Mughals. Their main duty was the collection of land revenue on behalf of the *nawab* who had promised a maximum possible revenue extraction for the emperor.

Merchants, traders, bankers of varied hierarchies formed an important section of the population in this seat of commerce. There were a number of local leading families of merchants supplying silk to the East India Company at Kasimbazar between 1685 and 1754⁸⁴. A small group of seven mercantile families used to help in the silk investments by the English East India Company in Kasimbazar. The Katmas, Surmas, Dutts, Biswases were in the league of the 'big partners' *dadni* merchants. The 'small partners' comprising the Ghosh, Tagore and Kapri (Coppas) families could not make it to the big league as they had a lesser share in the investment compared to the other group⁸⁵. They have been extensively mentioned in the archival documents as long as the *dadni* system functioned till the 1750s⁸⁶. Archival sources mention many more names of the *dadni* merchants involved in Bengal's silk trade. Some of them were: 'Bisnodas Seat', 'Jaggernaut Seat', 'Kissore Seat', 'Kissenchurn Cawn', 'Pursootum Caun',

⁸¹ Gautam Bhadra, 'Social Groups and Relations in the Town of Murshidabad, 1763-1793', *The Indian Historical Review*, vol. 2, no. 2, New Delhi, 1976, p. 312.

⁸² Gautam Bhadra, 'Social Groups' in *Indian Historical Review*, p. 313.

⁸³ 'Tarikh-i-Munsuri', in *Journal of the Asian Society of Bengal*, part. 1, 1869, p. 100, cited in Sushil Chaudhury; *Nobabi Amole Murshidabad*, Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2008, p. 132.

⁸⁴ Rila Mukherjee, *Merchants and Companies in Bengal: Kasimbazar and Jugdia in the Eighteenth Century*, New Delhi: Pragati Publishers, 2006, pp. 53-57.

⁸⁵ Rila Mukherjee, *Merchants and Companies in Bengal*, pp. 55-56.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

‘Rambudder Chowdree’, ‘Govinram Cawn’, ‘Ramkissen Dutt’, ‘Callichurn Seat’, ‘Purmanund Bysauk’, ‘Peraun Seat’ etc⁸⁷.

Many of the merchant bankers were drawn towards the Murshidabad Kasimbazar belt from faraway places. The *uttarvahini* Bhagirathi at Kasimbazar was considered sacred for the Hindu merchants. Also till at least mid eighteenth century, the place could claim to have a very moderate and congenial climate that invited settlers⁸⁸. The Gujaratis, Rajasthanis, Punjabis, Calwars of Delhi, Gorakhpuris, Arabs, Armenians, Sidhis, Iranians, Kashmiris, Turks, Pathans etc, loosely grouped together as ‘Asian merchants’, settled around the region. Within the category of the ‘Asian merchants’ there was a sub group of ‘Mughal merchants’ comprising the Afghans, Iranians, Turks who were Muslims. The European trade bodies as well as the ‘Asian merchants’ were major purchasers of cash crops like silk and cotton. In fact an archival document dated 1770 identified the varied merchant groups paying customs duty on silk to the *Puchetra Cutcherry* as follows⁸⁹: ‘Goozeratt and Bauz Goozaratt Merchants’, ‘Gentooz⁹⁰ ‘Multaney’, ‘Gentooz Surrat Merchants’, ‘Musselman Surat Merchants’, ‘Musselman Hydrabaud Merchants’, ‘Musselman Multaney Merchants’, ‘Bazee Rampore Boalia Merchants’, ‘Mirzapore Gentoos Merchants’, ‘Gorockpoor Musselmen’, ‘Jungepoor Gentoos Merchants’, ‘Armenians’, ‘Lahore Musselmen Merchants’, ‘Gentoos Sonasse’, ‘Madras Musselman Merchants’.

The region nurtured influential resident *baniya* Jain community of northern and western India⁹¹ who took up the roles of bankers, merchants and *mahajans* and at times combined all three functions. But he was essentially the ‘Indian business partner of the foreign trader’. He was a ‘commissioned agent’ or ‘contractor-cum-trader’⁹². Apart from the big *baniyas* there were the middling ones who were associated with grain trade. The *Murchas* and *Kuars* hailed from Shekhawati in Rajasthan while *Ujanias* were the Brahmins from Ujjain. The

⁸⁷ NAI, Bengal Public Consultations, Microfilm, April 1722, Accession no. 2664.

⁸⁸ O’Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Murshidabad*, p. 186; Captain Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, Being the Observations and Remarks of Alexander Hamilton Who Resided in those parts between 1688 to 1733, Second Edition, vol. 2, Edinburgh, 1727, vol. 2, p. 21.

⁸⁹ WBSA, Committee of Circuit (Appendix), Proceedings, vol. 9A, July 7-September 17, 1772.

⁹⁰ Gentooz meant the Hindus.

⁹¹ Sushil Chaudhury, *Nobabi Amole Murshidabad*, p. 25.

⁹² Gautam Bhadra, ‘The Role of Pykars in the Silk Industry of Bengal (c. 1765-1830)’, *Studies in History*, 3. 2, 1987, pp. 156-59.

mendicant religious sects like the *Sannyasis*⁹³ and *Vaishnavas* often doubled up as peddlers of high value goods.

Some were keen to work in various capacities as intermediaries. This intermediate group of *baniyas* had multi-tasking ability ranging from petty trade in rural markets, bulk business in town, banking operations at provincial capitals to export import at sea ports. As a whole the evolving mercantile community comprising traders and merchants of varied dimensions supported cash crop cultivation (which fetched higher revenue from the international market) and commercial agriculture. It called for substantial inputs.

Actually this particular group of merchants had spare capital to invest in cash crops. A few had diversified into moneylending. The *zamindars* relied heavily on *mahajans* or moneylenders in order to pay the revenue on time to the *nizamat* exchequer. The moneylenders profited by charging heavy interest on loans taken by *zamindars*. The *ryots* often borrowed from *mahajans* in order to pay land revenue within a stipulated period. The government relied heavily on bankers and merchants to meet varied expenses. The period saw the rise of big time merchant cum moneylenders like the House of Jagat Seths representing the Oswal community from Rajasthan which amassed a huge fortune from interest upon debt. This House became the king makers of Bengal. Subsequently after the battles of Plassey, 1757, and Buxar, 1764, the right of the Mughals was undermined and the right to tax collection was granted to the English East India Company in 1765. Most of the Bengal *zamindars* were made revenue collectors for the Company.

Again, the English, Dutch, French Companies and Armenians built their respective factories and townships in and around Kasimbazar since the mid seventeenth century. Some employees of the East India Company indulged in private trade too. The residual Portuguese population was involved in local trade. The advent of the Europeans inducted the locals into new professions, most significant being those of intermediaries. For example; roughly since at least 1676, as the letter dispatched from Kasimbazar by Matt Vincent, dated November 3, 1676 suggests, once the *bund* is ready,

⁹³ WBSA, Board of Trade (Commercial), Proceedings, vol. 77, March 13, 1789, p. 318.

wee call the silk Merchants or Picaurs (pykar, broker, chapman) and Contract with them accordingly. The quantity every man doth agree to bring in he gives a bill for, intimating alsoe at what time.....If the accompt exceeds what was at first given out to the Picaurs, he is paid the rest in full⁹⁴.

The *pykars* were collectors of cocoon from the primary producers in the pre Plassey and post Plassey days. They collected a ‘small quantity of goods at a time’ to sale in neighbouring markets. Gautam Bhadra had enumerated their crucial role as vital linkages of ‘rural urban trade’. They collected cocoons from the deep interior and brought them over to production centres located in the growing towns like Kasimbazar and Bauleah⁹⁵. The Company used to engage local merchants to procure goods from the market on its behalf. They were also called merchants, because they received advances from the Company for delivering goods under stipulated terms. They provided cash advance to weavers in far off villages in the interior of the *suba*, who were to deliver the finished goods at a fixed time. The advance or *dadān* amounted to a part of the value of the goods to be bought and the rest of it was to be paid when the entire goods had been delivered⁹⁶. The system of *dadān* or advanced contract, according to Rila Mukherjee, imprinted the concept of a ‘concrete European market’⁹⁷ in the mind of Bengal’s rural people.

Locals mediated between the buyers not familiar with Bengal’s interior and weaver producers having no direct access to the market. Money was advanced to them so that they could go into the local market and transfer the advance, to actual manufacturers for delivery of goods within a stipulated time and specifications. The merchants who passed the *dadān* to actual manufacturers, either directly, or through a second degree intermediary called *dalals* (agents), were known as *dadni* merchants. The *dalals* were probably appointed by the trading houses and privateers to procure the finished products. They were paid by the commission at a fixed rate for his goods⁹⁸. The *gomastahs* acted as the intermediary between the East India Company and the collection point. Much later, under the agency system, they played a crucial role in silk trade after being directly put under the Company’s pay roll. They became an integral ‘part of the

⁹⁴ Streysham Master, *The Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 10.

⁹⁵ Gautam Bhadra, ‘The Role of Pykars’, *Studies in History*, p. 185.

⁹⁶ H.N. Sinha ed., *Fort William-India House Correspondence*, vol. 2, p. xviii.

⁹⁷ Rila Mukherjee, *Merchants and Companies in Bengal*, p. xiii.

⁹⁸ Bhadra, ‘The Role of Pykars’, pp. 160-61.

factory organisation' by being its 'regular employee'⁹⁹. Further the trade in Kasimbazar silk got a boost also from the congregation of an integrated network of 'specialist dealers, the owners of mulberry plantations, the winders¹⁰⁰, and spinners, weavers, dyers. Earlier, Streynsham Master had noted the presence of the 'throwsters'¹⁰¹ along with weavers and dyers. There were a large number of tillers of the soil, along with the labourers.

Apart from textiles, the region was famous for its handicrafts like ivory work, wooden craft and toys, various kinds of metal work (brass, copper, and bell metal)¹⁰². Hence various craftsmen swelled the ranks of the residents of the area. The capital city offered other kinds of job opportunities like those of peons¹⁰³, palace guards, gunmen¹⁰⁴ and soldiers¹⁰⁵, porters, boatmen, and attracted migrants from numerous corners of the country.

Again, Murshidabad and its adjoining areas had attracted groups of *amlas*, *quanungos* and others who got involved in the various rungs of the bureaucracy besides other officials and clerks. As the capital of Bengal got transferred from Dacca, as the office of the *diwani*, mint and *faujdari* court shifted to Murshidabad. They settled there and many acquired landed property. People of other professions were residing there too. For example, the Hindu *vaid*s and *kavirajas* seemed to be more sought after than the Muslim *hakims*. Priests, and *maulavis*, enjoyed a special status. As the Company secured itself in Bengal and was on its way to evolve as the Company State, we find records showing demands for lascars¹⁰⁶, workmen, artificiers and boatmen in Kasimbazar to pursue public utility works like repairing of embankments¹⁰⁷ and also labourers for Company's buildings¹⁰⁸, tank diggers¹⁰⁹

⁹⁹Ibid., pp. 159-60.

¹⁰⁰ K.N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World*, p. 353.

¹⁰¹ Streynsham Master, *The Diaries*, vol. 2, pp. 326 -30.

¹⁰² K. M. Mohsin, *A Bengal District in Transition*, p. 30; K.M. Mohsin, 'Murshidabad in the Eighteenth Century', p. 79.

¹⁰³ NAI, Bengal Public Consultations, Microfilm, Fort William, November, 1714, Accession no. 2662.

¹⁰⁴ NAI, Dacca Factory Record, Microfilm, Dacca, April, 1742, Accession no. 2696.

¹⁰⁵ K. M. Mohsin, *A Bengal District in Transition*, p. 77.

¹⁰⁶ WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 15, dated April 6, 1778, p. 200.

¹⁰⁷ WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 15, dated March 16, 1778, pp. 122-24.

¹⁰⁸ WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 8, dated April 15, 1776, p. 225.

¹⁰⁹ NAI, Home Public, Proceedings, 1757, Part 1, p. 206.

and brick layers for building the Company's fortification¹¹⁰. Often local *zamindars* and *talukdars* were asked to provide workforce¹¹¹.

As per certain archival records, at least 550 bricklayers worked every day at the inner buildings of the new fort of Kasimbazar. Also carpenters and ironsmiths reported for work. By December 805 bricklayers, 377 carpenters, 90 ironsmiths, 1070 coolies had reported to work at the construction site¹¹². Further, the English factory at one point of time employed two washermen to wash the silk textiles on a monthly salary of Rs. 10. The factors wanted to see whether the clothes withstood vigorous washing. That seemed to be the only way to test their strength and quality¹¹³. Rs. 10 was considered fairly high salary considering the Company's boatman, mason and barber received Rs 3 each; carpenter an *anna* less than the previous group; watchman and peon of the Kasimbazar English factory received Rs. 2.50 and torchbearer, gardener and ordinary servant Rs 2 per month¹¹⁴. Same jobs under local employers fetched them very little money.

It is interesting to note that though the Kasimbazar island was watered by rivers; fishing was not a very profitable occupation there and the city of Murshidabad imported fish from Malda and other places. The Ganga supplied fish round the year and nurtured a large group of fishermen, but the Jellenghy and Bhagirathi provided the supply mainly during the rainy season. However, the stagnant water of so many *bils* in and around the settlement of Murshidabad supplied fish in abundance and sustained a big community of fishermen¹¹⁵. Indeed, the travelers in and around Kasimbazar island, specially at Bhagwangola and on the Jellenghy observed the presence of 'fishermen in very delicately formed boats in great numbers', which were country crafts¹¹⁶.

However, the bottom of the pyramid consisted of the tillers of soil, the basic contributors to land revenue. Many of the artisans were agriculturists augmenting their income by direct associations with handloom industries in the

¹¹⁰ NAI, Home Public, Proceedings, vol. 32, dated November 23, 1767, p. 1025.

¹¹¹ WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 15, dated March 16, 1778, p. 123; Provincial Council of Revenue Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 15, dated April 6 1778, p. 198.

¹¹² NAI, Home Public, Proceedings, vol. 32, dated December 31, 1767, p. 1143.

¹¹³ S.C. Nandy, *Bandar Kasimbazar*, p. 30.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹¹⁵ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, p. 30.

¹¹⁶ Edward C. Archer, *Tours in Upper India and in Parts of the Himalaya Mountains, with Accounts of the Courts of the Native Princes*, vol. 2, London: Richard Bentley, 1833, pp. 124-25.

off season or via the female family members. Also the artisans produced for local consumption as well as for distant land connected by sea and rivers. There was no water tight compartmentalization between agriculture and industry¹¹⁷. Thus the Murshidabad Kasimbazar region offered opportunities for various kinds of livelihood and attracted people from many walks of life to make it their home. It would have been interesting to note the number of people living there between 1650s and 1800; but the official census was started much later in the nineteenth century. Besides, Kasimbazar was originally a part of Murshidabad and sometime in the early nineteenth century it was again relegated to the status of the northern suburb of the garrison town of Berhampore. So it becomes difficult to gather specific information on the number of people residing in Kasimbazar in the given period.

Somendra Chandra Nandy claimed that in 1740 Kasimbazar was a flourishing settlement where about a hundred thousand people lived, a majority of them being Hindus¹¹⁸. Again, among them the Vaishnavas were the dominant sect. Interestingly, many other communities for example the Jains were living in Murshidabad Kasimbazar area in this period. It is claimed that the people of Kasimbazar suffered from a bad bout of malaria and many lives were lost in 1814, which has been described as ‘depopulation’¹¹⁹. A more or less precise census figure for 1829, for the district of Murshidabad states that there were 555,310 Hindus and 412,822 Muslims living there at that time¹²⁰. In the same year, the population of Kasimbazar was estimated at 3538. It comprised 2213 Hindus and 1325 Muslims¹²¹. So between 1740 and 1829, there was a sharp fall in the number of people living in Kasimbazar. The *Bargi* incursions, Famine of 1770, epidemics etc. had been responsible for this to an extent.

V. The Settlement and the Habitation Area

This section explores the stages of evolution of Kasimbazar between mid seventeenth and mid nineteenth centuries, as an emporium and major silk node of Bengal and how far it was affected by the process of urbanization and

¹¹⁷Aniruddha Ray, *Adventurers, Landowners and Rebels: Bengal c.1575—c. 1715*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Private Limited., 1998, p. 31.

¹¹⁸O’Malley, *Gazetteers: Murshidabad*, p. 187.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹²⁰Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, vol. 9, p. 35.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, p. 90.

commercialization. A comparison has been drawn from time to time with its neighbouring settlement of Murshidabad.

Table 1.3: Kasimbazar and Murshidabad between the 1660s and 1850s on the basis of Contemporary Accounts

Year	Contemporary Observer	Observations	Inference
1660s	Francois Bernier	The Dutch and English had their flourishing silk factories that had employed seven to eight hundred local people ¹²² .	Kasimbazar came in contact with the European mercantilism. Some jobs were generated in the silk factories in an otherwise agrarian economy.
1660-61	Niccolao Manucci	The place was located at three days' distance from Hooghly, Kasimbazar produced white cloth and high quality piece goods. The three European Companies had established their factories there. According to him, Kasimbazar was a village ¹²³ .	It was a village that stood at the bank of the Bhagirathi. It produced textile. These factors attracted the European trade bodies to establish commercial footholds there.
1666	Tavernier	The Dutch sends abroad every year two and twenty thousand Bales of Silk; every Bale weighing a hunder'd pound....the Hollanders usually carry away six or seven thousand Bales ¹²⁴ . The crude yellow silk of Kasimbazar is exported from Hooghly via Ganga ¹²⁵ .	The silk production and exports by the Dutch had hit a significant high. The process of commercialisation of Kasimbazar was taking place.
1670s	Thomas Bowrey	'very famous and pleasant towne, ¹²⁶ The only market place in this Kingdome for Commodities made and vended therein, whence it received this name, Cossum signifiinge the husband or	Kasimbazar was a busy mart.

¹²² Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, 1656-1668*, Archibald Constance tr, London, Edinburgh, Glasgow: Oxford University Press, 1916, p. 440.

¹²³ Niccolao Manucci, William Irvine tr, *Storia Do Mogor or Mogul India*, vol. 2, London: John Murray, 1907, p. 96.

¹²⁴ Jean Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 2, London: Macmillan and Co, 1889, p. 29.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 31.

¹²⁶ Thomas Bowrey, R.C. Temple ed., *A Geographical Account of the Countries Round the Bay of Bengal; 1669-1679*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1993, p. 213.

		Chiefe, and Bazar a market ¹²⁷ .	
1675	Streynsham Master spent almost six weeks in Kasimbazar between 23 rd September and 8 th November, 1676.	Fertile soil that grew many crops. There was an abundance of mulberry trees ¹²⁸ . It was a 'town....two miles long narrow....where a Pallaqueen can but just passe' ¹²⁹ .	It was a typical small settlement that was evolving from its agrarian moorings into a congested town.
1705	Alexander Hamilton	A salubrious place. Conglomeration of merchants added to its prosperity. People were hard working. Murshidabad was a place of a much greater antiquity, though currently 'its trade and grandeur adorns' Kasimbazar ¹³⁰ .	Kasimbazar was a buoyant trading settlement.
However in the early eighteenth century there was a slack in the European commercial activities due to various disturbances like revolt and rapine. The establishment of the <i>nizamat</i> in 1704 meant Kasimbazar became a centre for frequent power struggles between the <i>nazim</i> and the European factories.			
1743	De Gennes de la Chanceliere	Murshidabad was an unplanned city dotted with houses of Amirs, rich Moors, baniyans, merchants. Had a number of suburban villages and there was 'nothing remarkable' about it. Kasimbazar boasted of trees and greenery ¹³¹ .	Murshidabad was on the brink of urbanisation and a wealthy class was emerging; but Kasimbazar retained its rural characteristics.
1760s approximately	Tieffanthaler	Both Kasimbazar and Murshidabad had expanded considerably, had impressive buildings owned by the rich class. The dismal villages that were seen in between Murshidabad and Kasimbazar in the seventeenth century, ceased	Urbanization process had gripped the whole area—so much so that Kasimbazar and Murshidabad touched each other. Kasimbazar evolved from a village to a town and spread far

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Streynsham Master, *The Diaries* vol. 2, p.28.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, vol. 2, pp. 21-22.

¹³¹ Indrani Ray, 'Journey to Cassimbazar and Murshidabad: Observations of a French Visitor to Bengal in 1743', in Lakshmi Subramanian ed., *The French East India Company and the Trade of the Indian Ocean, A Collection of Essays by Indrani Ray*, New Delhi : Munshi Manoharlal Publishers, 1999, p. 165.

		to exist in the next century ¹³² .	and wide.
1773-76	Comte de Modave	Kasimbazar's prosperity was to be related to production of silk and various types of textile. He took note of the thriving European factories and colonies and an Armenian settlement. Murshidabad was a prosperous and beautiful city. Its fame and prosperity was directly linked with its stature as the erstwhile capital of the <i>suba</i> ¹³³ .	Both the towns had assumed a certain degree of urban character.
1786-88	Ghulam Hussain Salim	Murshidabad continued as the seat of administration even after 1757. The important political headquarter of Bengal owed its origin to a little town named Makhsusabad. After 1772, when the criminal, civil and Supreme courts were shifted to Calcutta, the settlement gradually lost its importance ¹³⁴ .	No mention of Kasimbazar though Murshidabad had been described in detail. He had focused on the political developments of the <i>nizamat</i> .
1780s	James Rennell	Murshidabad was a large and modern city, but ill built. Kasimbazar, a 'small city' ¹³⁵ housing the residences of European factors. Was the centre of their trade.	Murshidabad seemed to be impressive, despite Kasimbazar being a commercial hub.
1829	Census	Kasimbazar had only 1300 houses ¹³⁶ .	It subsequently turned into a site for old ruins.
1852-53	Gastrell	Three miles north east of the Berhampore station were the ruins of the Residency, silk filatures, a small grave yard apart from the old Dutch factory of	Both the places had declined.

¹³² Cited in Aniruddha Ray, *Moddhojoger Bharotio Shohor*, Itihash Granthamala Series 1, Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1999, p. 359.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Ghulam Hussain Salim, *Riyaz*, pp. 27-28.

¹³⁵ James Rennell, *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan: or the Mogul Empire, With an Introduction Illustrative of the Geography and Present Division of that Country*, London: 1788, p. 59.

¹³⁶ Major J.H. Tull Walsh, *A History of Murshidabad District, with Biographies of its Noted Families*, London: Jarrold and Sons, 1902, p. 44.

		Kalkapore, old Roman Catholic Chapel and Armenian Church. Population of Murshidabad was languishing, there were many ruins around the settlement indicating the extent of its past city limits ¹³⁷ .	
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Though Kasimbazar was under the administrative jurisdiction of Murshidabad; from early seventeenth century it had been specially mentioned in accounts and travelogues for its profuse production of textile and raw silk. Kasimbazar was a quintessential settlement of seventeenth century Bengal that developed on the Bhagirathi's bank. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth century accounts Kasimbazar was described more as a village than a town. Gradually new forces like the European interventions into textile business in the mid seventeenth century, and commercialization of grain producing zones and textile sector in the eighteenth century helped in its integration with the monetized economy. But that was primarily a takeoff from the agrarian moorings. In many such ways Kasimbazar too was representative of those settlements that could at best be dubbed as 'rurban'¹³⁸, to echo P.J. Marshall.

Still, some facets of an emerging commercial town could be noted within the rural structure. The boundaries expanded after the Battle of Plassey. At a time when parts of the south western Bengal encompassing Kasimbazar Murshidabad was emerging as a vital area; the province remained perennially disturbed by the Arakanese threat from the eastern side from the seventeenth century and *Bargi* raids from Central India apart from the centrifugal forces represented by Afghan overlords, the *bhatichiefs* and the *Sannyasi* and *Fakir* uprisings in the eighteenth century. Besides, some landlords of the central Bengal were as mighty as those in the lower Bengal, hence posed challenge to the power centre. So the province was internally fragmented; a terrain of monsoon rain, periodic floods¹³⁹ and slush;

¹³⁷ J.E. Gastrell, *Statistical and Geographical Report of the Murshidabad District*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Office, 1860, p. 11.

¹³⁸ P.J. Marshall, *Bengal, The British Bridgehead, Eastern India: 1740-1828*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 38.

¹³⁹ WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 7, September 2- November 28, 1771, dated November 25, 1771, p. 202. WBSA, Select Committee, Proceedings, vol. 4, January 28-July 19, 1770, pp. 444-45.

droughts followed by food grain scarcity¹⁴⁰ and suffered from revolts and uprisings, and the Famine of 1770.

Taking advantage of the cracks in the Mughal edifice since late seventeenth century, Murshid Quli Khan established a near autonomy in Bengal. The business capital of the *suba*, Kasimbazar did not face any day to day intervention from the Mughals during Murshid Quli's tenure. Kasimbazar made its presence felt by the early seventeenth century for its raw silk and textile¹⁴¹. The next important ruler Alivardi Khan followed Murshid Quli's pattern of administration. As a result the *suba* became near autonomous during his rule. He encouraged rich businessmen from near and far and high class *Shias* from West Asia to settle down in Murshidabad. People from diverse walks of life: from the less fortunate ones to skilled artisans, men of letters, prosperous gentry made it their home¹⁴². Robert Clive was very impressed with the prosperity of Murshidabad. He wrote in 1757, 'this city is as extensive, populous and rich as the city of London, with this difference, that there are individuals in the first possessing infinitely greater property than in the last city'¹⁴³.

Plan of the Settlement

European Part

The European Companies established themselves in the *suba* in the seventeenth century much before the *Nizamat* was established. Those trade bodies constructed their factories cum residential places at a vantage position along the river bank primarily for an easy access for the transshipment of goods. Such a site was also chosen to enjoy the view of the river and evening promenades, so typical of European culture. In around 1652, the East India Company set up its factory and residency on the western bank of the Bhagirathi in Kasimbazar¹⁴⁴. The VOC factory and colony was set up to the south of the English township overlooking the river at Kalikapore in 1648. In 1691, the French settlement and factory of

¹⁴⁰ NAI, Microfilm, Bengal Public Consultations, Accession No. 2668, Fort William, June 1738.

¹⁴¹ Though Murshidabad's claim to political fame dated back to 1704 as the capital of the Bengal *suba*, it was no less famous as a centre of production and trade. Cited in Philip B. Calkins, 'The Role of Murshidabad As a Regional and Sub regional Centre in Bengal', in Richard L. Park ed. *Urban Bengal*, Asian Studies Centre, South Asian Series, Occupational Paper no. 12, The University of Chicago, p. 19.

¹⁴² Karam Ali, 'Muzaffar-Namah' in J.N. Sarkar tr, *Bengal Nawabs*, Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1985, p. 58.

¹⁴³ W.W. Hunter, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, vol. 10, London: Trubner and Co, p. 23.

¹⁴⁴ J.H.T. Walsh ed., *A History of Murshidabad District*, p. 2.

Sydabad was located still further to the west of the Dutch factory. All three settlements were located contiguous to each other. The Danes and Armenians maintained their commercial contact with Kasimbazar on an individual basis but they did not set up factories there.

Tieffenthaler had sketched an elaborate plan of the English, Dutch, French factory cum settlements and the Armenian colony on the same bank of the Bhagirathi which he had referred to as the 'Ganga minor' (small Ganga)¹⁴⁵. The land was granted to the various trading bodies by the Mughal emperors. The English factory and residential area at Kasimbazar looked small and spartan in comparison with the other two settlements. All three factories were located near the river. The English and Dutch factories had a gate on the far side of the township parallel to the river. The houses of the English township were arranged in a line to the left of the connecting lane between the entrance and the factory. Another lane from the entrance went straight ahead to the factory. The small factory seems to have been fortified.

The Dutch settlement at Kalikapore, located right next to the East India Company's occupied area, was bigger than that of the English. The quadrangular factory seemed to have a boundary wall. It lay adjacent to the residential area. The factory was connected to the squarish residential area located within the four walls having big and small buildings meant for various purposes. Some houses were built along the outer side of the wall. The French had occupied a sprawling rectangular area next to the Dutch quarters at Sydabad. The factory was a solid looking double storied house situated towards the river. The entrance was situated at the western wall close to the Dutch boundary wall. The residences of the distinguished people lay on either side of the two lanes going towards the wall on the opposite direction from the gate. There were one big two storied and one small two storied public buildings to the rear side of the left lane. On the opposite side of the gate lay an array of houses, some of which were meant for commercial purposes. Smoke emitted from two three houses in a row, which could have been indicative of the existing manufacturing units related to textile or saltpetre industries.

¹⁴⁵ Bernuolli ed., J. Tieffenthaler, *Description Historique et Geographique de l'Inde*, vol.1, Plate xiii.

The small adjoining colony to its west was probably those of the Armenians. In fact, the Armenians had their first settlement in Bengal in 1665 on a piece of land at Sydabad, granted to them as an imperial *sanad*. The Armenians had their small colony at Sydabad¹⁴⁶. They never built a factory. The Armenian Church and its big compound with a lineup of single storied hutments parallel to the Armenian colony had been sketched by Tieffenthaler. They were busy in the ‘peaceful pursuit of commerce’ involving import and selling of piece goods and exporting raw silk of Murshidabad and adjoining areas¹⁴⁷. A magnificent Armenian church built on the river front in 1758 was part of the skyline of Kasimbazar. The remnants of the old English and Dutch cemeteries could be seen at Berhampore even today.

Interestingly, the English had a rather humble beginning in Kasimbazar since 1652-53. In 1658 the first English agent came to Kasimbazar. In 1667 the chief of the factory became an *ex officio* member of council. The first Chief Factor Ion Ken, on March 13, 1659 had a frugal ‘chank and mud’ house along with minimalistic accessories like ‘a cot, a table, stool and a candlestick’¹⁴⁸. That was the representative life style of a European expatriate of that time. The fact remains that a part of the prime area along the river front was occupied by the Europeans.

Though the Dutch remained a close competitor of the English in Bengal, from eighteenth century Kasimbazar stood as a representative British trade settlement displaying a quasi-governmental, semi sovereign¹⁴⁹ quality. Gradually the East India Company’s framework of day to day mode of official work and its associated hierarchy of officers exhibited the characteristics of the arm of the state¹⁵⁰. Thus the Kasimbazar factory eventually no longer functioned only as an appendage of a trading body focusing on commerce, but rather a ‘state in the disguise of a merchant’¹⁵¹. In contrast, Murshidabad bore a distinct aura of a resplendent *nawabi* settlement in Alivardi’s tenure.

¹⁴⁶ S.C. Nandy, *Bandar Kasimbazar*, p. 95.

¹⁴⁷ Mesroby Jacob Seth, *Armenians in India from the Earliest Times to the Present Day: A Work of Original Research*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2005, p. 325.

¹⁴⁸ P. Thankappan Nair, *British Beginnings in Bengal (1600-1660)*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1991, p. 123.

¹⁴⁹ Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State, Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 6.

¹⁵⁰ K.N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World*, p. 41.

¹⁵¹ The phrase has been borrowed from the title of the Introduction in Stern’s *The Company-State*, p. 3.

The Area of the Nawabs and the Nobility

While Murshidabad was the *nawab*'s seat, Kasimbazar was the business hub. Both places stood to gain from each other's proximity. In the days of the *Nizamat*, the verdant shore of the Bhagirathi at Kasimbazar Murshidabad region was dotted with palaces, gardens, residences of rulers, wealthy nobles and businessmen. The prime location was monopolized by the upper strata of the society as it looked forward to enjoy the view of the river and town and the evening breeze from the river at their leisure. Murshid Quli Khan had ensured peace and secured administrative autonomy of *nawabs* and an efficient system of government. An overall stability paved way for investments in infrastructure and beautification of the capital and its affluent outlying corners.

Some of the important buildings were raised close to the river. The buildings of the *Nizamat* era were grandiose and commanded good location, as, to endorse the view of the author of *Riyaz*, the nobility and the rich had imbibed refined Mughal taste and lifestyle through their exposure to Delhi¹⁵². Tieffenthaler noted in his account that the residence of the *subadar* was located at a place called Coleria at one end of Murshidabad¹⁵³.

The old fort or the Kila *Nizamat* was located on the eastern bank of the river. This fort was demolished to construct the majestic Hazarduari Palace. Its foundation stone was laid by the then *nawab nazim* Humayunjah in August 1829. This palace was built in the Italian architectural style¹⁵⁴. The campus has notable buildings like Madina Mosque, Imambara, Clock Tower, Chowk Masjid, Wasif Manzil, residential buildings, etc¹⁵⁵. As a *diwan*, Murshid Quli Khan had built his palace at a remote corner of Mukhsusabad, along with the Board of Revenue and Court of Exchequer¹⁵⁶. Once he combined his post of *diwan* with that of the *subadar*, he renamed Mukhsusabad after himself and built a mint on the western bank of the river¹⁵⁷. The Katra *masjid* built by the *nawab* was a large impressive mosque that houses the tomb of Murshid Quli. It had an inbuilt hostel for itinerant

¹⁵² Gholam Husain Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 29.

¹⁵³ Tieffenthaler, *Description Historique*, p. 452.

¹⁵⁴ Mohammad Faique, *Murshidabad in the Era of Nawabs, Persian Architecture, Art, Painting and Culture*, Delhi: Meena Book Publications, 2015, p. 22.

¹⁵⁵ Purna Chandra Majumdar, *The Musnud of Murshidabad*, p. 73.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁵⁷ Kamal Chaudhury ed., *Murshidabader Itihash*, vol. 1, p. 83.

merchants and readers of the Quran¹⁵⁸. It was located to the north east of Motijheel. According to William Hodges, who visited it in the 1780s, it evolved as a grand seminary of Muslim learning, where men of talent were invited to exchange ideas¹⁵⁹. He had also got a palace of forty pillars known as Chihil Satun, built in his capital¹⁶⁰.

The magnificent Motijheel palace was built by Alivardi's son-in-law Nawajaz Muhammad, towards the south eastern side of Murshidabad on the edge of a horse shoe lake that was part of the river Bhagirathi¹⁶¹. Nawajaz Muhammad resided there. The piece of land surrounding the Motijheel in horse shoe formation, had many beautiful houses¹⁶². Sirajuddaullah had got another palace on a lake constructed, which was called Hirajheel palace after the lake. According to Tieffenthaler, it shared the same bank with the Motijheel¹⁶³. Both the palaces have been described in *Riyaz* as the most beautiful of the *Nizamat* palaces¹⁶⁴. Siraj got the site for his grandfather's grave constructed at the heart of a manicured garden named Khoshbagh, opposite Motijheel on the eastern bank of the river. Subsequently Siraj's mortal remains were kept at a burial at Khoshbagh itself¹⁶⁵.

Residential Area of a Wide Section of People

The political centre and the business hub had prompted groups of north and west Indian as well as Asian merchants to settle down there, along with the local Bengali merchants. Murshid Quli Khan had sought the help of one rich Jain banker cum merchant named Manikchand, the founder of the Jagatseth House, in securing his position as the *nawab*. Manikchand lived at a place called Mahimapore near the Bhagirathi river within a striking distance from the *nawab*'s house¹⁶⁶. A rich community of Jain merchants evolved at Mahimapore over a period of time. Later, a large settlement of the Marwari, Gujarati and north Indian

¹⁵⁸ K.M. Mohsin, 'Murshidabad in the Eighteenth Century', in Kenneth Ballhatchet and John Harrison eds., *The City in South Asia; Pre-Modern and Modern*, London: Curzon Press, 1980, p. 74.

¹⁵⁹ William Hodges, *Travels in India during the Years 1780, 1781, 1782 and 1783*, London: 1783, pp. 18-19.

¹⁶⁰ K.M. Mohsin, 'Murshidabad in the Eighteenth Century', p. 74.

¹⁶¹ M. Faique, *Murshidabad in the Era of Nawabs*, p. 25.

¹⁶² Rev. J. Long, 'On the Banks of River Bhagirathi', in Kamal Chaudhury ed., *Murshidabader Itihash*, vol. 2, p. 101.

¹⁶³ Tieffenthaler, *Description Historique*, p. 451.

¹⁶⁴ Gholam Husain Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 29.

¹⁶⁵ H. Beveridge, 'Old Places in Murshidabad', in Kamal Chaudhury ed., *Murshidabader Itihash*, vol. 1, p. 699.

¹⁶⁶ Kamal Chaudhury ed., *Murshidabader Itihash*, vol. 1, p. 47.

Jains was formed at a place in Kasimbazar. The place became known as Mahajantooli. Similarly, there was a Gujaratitooli, formed along the regional line. Mahajantooli, a concentration of north Indian banker cum traders, had an impressive temple of the twenty fourth *tirthankar* Neminath. Apart from the pilgrim centre, the place had a sprawling mansion of the Jagatseths. The Gujarati Shaivites got a number of temples built on the river side, while the *Shaktas* had shrines of the mother goddess. There were many mosques in both the settlements. A famous Muslim shrine came up at Kalikapore near the river. In mid nineteenth century, there were as many temples as there were mosques on the left bank of the Bhagirathi in Murshidabad. Kasimbazar was replaced by Berhampore by then¹⁶⁷.

A redeeming feature of the *nawabi* era was peaceful coexistence of various communities. The Hindus and Muslims lived amicably and the era witnessed the emergence of syncretic culture like paying homage to ‘satyapir’/‘satya narayan’ by both the communities. Celebrations of ‘holi’(festival of colours) and ‘diwali’(festival of lights) by the Hindus and Muslims was encouraged by the *nawabs*¹⁶⁸. The Muslim ritual of worshipping the river by floating decorated hand made boats into the river after monsoon was similar to the Hindu custom of ‘sedho’ performed in winter. Under the *nawabs*, ‘bera bhasan’ assumed the status of a grand festival in which the Hindus and Muslims took part with full enthusiasm¹⁶⁹. The Shias and Sunnis were believed to have prayed in the same *dargah*¹⁷⁰. Apart from the Shias and Sunni Muslims and the Hindus, people of other religion, language and culture lived there and pursued their own religious practices in their places of worship. However the fact remains that though people lived amicably under strong rulers and there were rare instances of social clashes; dwelling spaces were demarcated and the platform of interaction was mostly professional exigencies.

A large number of people associated with various trades, crafts and services in Murshidabad Kasimbazar region, had their own business quarters cum living space. Gastrell’s detailed map of Murshidabad bears testimony to this fact.

¹⁶⁷NAI, Gastrell’s Map, The City of Moorshedabad, 1853-54.

¹⁶⁸ Sushil Chaudhury, *Nobabi Amole Murshidabad*, pp. 134-135.

¹⁶⁹ Rila Mukherjee, ‘Putting the Rafts out to Sea: Talking of ‘Bera Bhashan’ in Bengal’, *Transferring Cultures eJournal*, vol. 3, no. 2.

<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/TfC/article/view/925/907>

¹⁷⁰ Sushil Chaudhury, *Nobabi Amole Murshidabad*, p. 134.

Mention may be made of ‘Chinitola’(sugar quarter)¹⁷¹, ‘Kathgola’(wood mart)¹⁷², ‘Jahurtoli’(jewellers’ corner)¹⁷³, ‘Lakrigunj’(firewood market)¹⁷⁴, ‘Gureewantola’(quarter of the cart pushers)¹⁷⁵, ‘Bakrigali’(cattle lane)¹⁷⁶, ‘Gowkhana’(milkman’s quarter)¹⁷⁷ etc. ‘Oordoobazar’¹⁷⁸ on the right bank was indicative of a concentration of people on the basis of language. Thus contrary to Mohsin’s claim that the place had a craft wise arrangement of localities, some areas were demarcated on the communal and linguistic lines too. While it can be asserted that Mughaltola was demarcated as the living area of some of the Asian merchants¹⁷⁹, a large number of them came and stayed for some time for business purpose. They might have preferred temporary accommodation. A large number of *sarais* (inns) were constructed by the Mughal nobles posted in Bengal. But most of them were in bad state in the *Nizamat* era due to lack of maintenance. However, other kinds of accommodations were available that provided lodging to the travellers from distant land¹⁸⁰. The city along with its prosperous suburbs was supplied with the daily requirements of water. The Bhagirathi, along with the excavated ponds and tanks along with the natural *jheels* connected with the river, took care of the water requirements¹⁸¹.

Kasimbazar and Murshidabad: Some Noticeable Changes, c.1750-1850

Nicholas de Graaf took note of a number of dilapidated villages existing between Murshidabad and Kasimbazar in mid seventeenth century¹⁸². Kasimbazar was originally a locality within Murshidabad. With the passage of time, the mercantile core of the capital had carved out its separate entity as a prosperous town. Poorer sections of people lived in those suburban areas located between Kasimbazar and Murshidabad. More than a hundred years later, Tieffenthaler noted a definite change from Graaf’s observations. Murshidabad was five miles in length and two

¹⁷¹ NAI, Gastrell’s Map, The City of Moorshedabad, 1853-54.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ K.M. Mohsin, ‘Murshidabad in the Eighteenth Century’, p. 79.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ NAI, Gastrell’s Map, The City of Moorshedabad, 1853-54.

K.M. Mohsin, ‘Murshidabad in the Eighteenth Century’, in Kenneth Ballhatchet and John Harrison eds., *The City in South Asia, Pre-Modern and Modern*, London and Dublin: Curzon Press Ltd, 1980, p. 73.

¹⁸⁰ Tilottama Mukherjee, ‘The Co-ordinating State and the Economy: The *Nizamat* in Eighteenth-Century Bengal’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 43, Issue 2, 2009, pp. 389-436.

¹⁸¹ K.M. Mohsin, ‘Murshidabad in the Eighteenth Century’, p. 80.

¹⁸² Graaf cited in Aniruddha Ray, *Bharotio Shohor*, p. 353.

or three miles wide. It was a vast city spread between Baminian and Lalbagh. He observed that Murshidabad had expanded to the other side of the river and also towards Kasimbazar in the south¹⁸³. Its border at some points merged with that of Murshidabad and the shabby peripheral townships disappeared to make more room for a thriving suburban area. There were many big and small localities within and at the fringe of Murshidabad. Some of those attained a certain degree of opulence. Kasimbazar had attained its distinct identity as a big business centre. So there was a sign of widespread prosperity in both the places. Since the 1750s, Kasimbazar had expanded so much that it showcased a certain degree of unplanned growth merging with the border of the capital.

Further, Tieffenthaler had made an interesting observation regarding the existence of a settlement called Mahinagar, located close to Murshidabad on the other side of the river¹⁸⁴. Between the two ‘cities’, the river flowed quietly. Mahinagar extended between Azimungu and Khoshbagh in length. Its width was more than a mile and a half¹⁸⁵. The two great settlements had a lineup of houses built in lime and brick and decorated with a great number of gardens and stately buildings¹⁸⁶. But there were pockets of thatched cottages built in silt in the midst of series of big houses. Actually Mahinagar could have been a rich locality of Murshidabad that had attained considerable prosperity in Tieffenthaler’s time. In fact, Tieffenthaler’s narrative had given more importance to it than Kasimbazar.

The town of Kasimbazar in the mid eighteenth century stood over an area of about six square miles. It was not a big settlement by modern standard. The space allotted for the local people was so thickly studded with *pucca* brick houses and juxtaposed with a maze of narrow alleys, that one could make a circuit of the entire place by jumping from one roof top to the other¹⁸⁷. It was indeed a populous place as its closeness to the capital and other trade centres attracted many soldiers, bureaucrats, servicemen of various statures, businessmen, *nawab*’s extended family and dependents, artisans, weavers, farmers and migrants from other corners. The town in its heydays before the early nineteenth century was so

¹⁸³ Tieffenthaler, *Description Historique*, pp. 451-452.

¹⁸⁴ Aniruddha Ray, *Bharotio Shohor*, p. 358.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 451.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ O’Malley, *Gazetteers: Murshidabad*, p. 187, quoted from E.V. West Maccott, ‘The Territorial Aristocracy of Bengal: The Kasimbazar Raj’, *Calcutta Review*, vol. 57, 1873, London: Trubner and Co.

congested that the sunrays could not penetrate into the living quarters of the ordinary people and was obstructed by the lofty buildings meant for the wealthier class¹⁸⁸. Thus the houses of the rich were strategically aligned with the direction of the sun and faced the river.

Nevertheless, the mid nineteenth century map of Murshidabad by Gastrell shows a number of *bazars, golas, ganjs* on the western side of the river¹⁸⁹. Those were indicative of the urban commercial milieu of the city. Nevertheless, the *pucca* brick houses and the settlement had concentrated along the length of the river towards its left side and a little further than the river along the *pucca* roads that did not extend beyond the middle part of the city¹⁹⁰. The cluster was actually aligned with the westerly moving river. The eastern bank was almost blocked with two huge and long sandbars. Generally speaking, the number of huts had far superseded the number of *pucca* houses. While Kasimbazar was initially a part of the ‘seat of power under the Mughal system’¹⁹¹; it gradually assumed a distinct identity of its own in the world map as one of those towns of the Mughal times that also drew its sustenance from the European factories by the latter part of the eighteenth century. However Gastrell’s map depicted an interesting change in Kasimbazar. By the next century much of its aura was on the wane. Concentration of such thatched temporary hutments was found towards the edge of the city close to the periphery of erstwhile Kasimbazar which had lost its independent identity and amalgamated with Berhampore. According to Lieutenant Colonel Fleming’s survey of the city of Murshidabad, November 1813, there was ‘no house towards Cossimbuzar’, though some ‘hutts’ were spotted at Bhatpara and ‘houses’ at Calcapore¹⁹².

¹⁸⁸ W.W. Hunter, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, vol. 5, London: Trubner and Co, 1881, p. 302.

¹⁸⁹ NAI, *Miscellaneous Maps of the Survey of India*, Map of the City of Murshidabad, Surveyed by Capt. J.E. Gastrell, 1853-54, (Old Ref-Reg.no. 18-0-54).

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ M.S. Islam, ‘Life in the Mufassal Towns of Nineteenth Century Bengal’, in Kenneth Ballhatchet and John Harrison eds., *The City in South Asia*, p. 227.

¹⁹² NAI, Field Book 51. Survey of the City of Moorshedabad, by Lt Colonel Fleming. Received on November 25, 1813.

VI. Emergence of the English East India Company and Silk Trade in Kasimbazar Murshidabad Belt: A Case Study

The English, like the other Europeans, came as traders and set up factories in various parts of Bengal. The Portuguese had a very limited stake in the intra Asian trade after 1630. Between 1630 and 1720, the VOC was the most significant trading body in Bengal, with the English Company being its closest competitor. The French made its presence felt only after 1690 and till the first two decades of the next century, its trade in Bengal was somewhat sluggish. Both the VOC and East India Company came to Bengal in the same period. Silk was the most coveted item of trade and Kasimbazar was synonymous with silk. Having a rather developed taste for the silk fineries, England, prior to this period, was heavily dependent on the silk from Levant. Subsequently an increasing demand in Europe for the finished silk goods from the Kasimbazar region challenged the popularity of Italian silk.

The fertile region and cheap commodities encouraged both the Dutch and the English trading houses to set up a factory in Kasimbazar in the 1650s. Initially the business of the English was nominal compared to the scale and magnitude of its Dutch counterpart. By 1720, the VOC was still leading in total value of trade¹⁹³. However, in the field of exports for European market, the English Company enjoyed a small edge¹⁹⁴. Gradually it managed to have a substantial lead over the Dutch Company which was its closest competitor, apart from the other rivals as it had managed to exempt itself from the customs and transit duties to the Mughals. The Indian silk became popular in Europe since seventeenth century as it was a cheaper and a better quality silk than the other types available. However, a 'sustained import' of the Bengal raw silk and cotton along with the Chinese silk by England took off only in 1670¹⁹⁵. The Europeans bought raw silk that was manufactured exclusively in Kasimbazar, Murshidabad and its adjoining areas. Prior to the European entry into the arena of Bengal silk; raw silk from this region was an important item of 'interregional and international' commerce, in which the merchants from northern India like Agra and western India like Gujarat played

¹⁹³ Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal, 1630-1720*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2012, p. 75.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ K.N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World*, p. 248.

active roles along with the traders of Central Asia. So, the Asian merchants had a major role in the silk trade of Bengal as major importers of bullions in Bengal¹⁹⁶.

Table 1.4: Some of the Silk Varieties Available in and around Murshidabad

Types of Silk	Usage
Hawai ¹⁹⁷	worn by the local noblemen and women to beat the summer heat.
Coarse Silk	used for lining.
Thick Silk	used for 'angrakha' of the Indian rich class and European gowns
Fine mulberry silk	worn as 'dhotis' and 'saris' in the households of the village landlords
'Matka' ¹⁹⁸ silk	the Jains and Buddhists preferred to use a thick variant of mulberry silk.
'Kora' ¹⁹⁹ silk	made into 'chador', 'scarf', 'quilt cover', 'bandana'.
Jaquard ²⁰⁰	used as 'roomals', 'shawls', 'saris', 'table cloths'.
'Baluchari' the most expensive and exclusive woven silk	Usually made into 'saris' with elaborately woven patterns of 'pallu' depicting the 'tree of life' or a large 'kalka'(mango motif) surrounded by pictorial depictions from daily life and small uniform motifs all over the body.

Source: Neeta Das and Rosie Llewellyn-Jones eds., *Murshidabad Forgotten Capital of Bengal*, Bombay: Marg Foundation, 2013, pp. 74-75.

In 1673 the total imports of the raw silk from Bengal was as high as 21,874lb²⁰¹. The East India Company decided to invest 20,000 lb for raw silk in Bengal in December 1674²⁰². In 1680, when Job Charnock took charge of Kasimbazar factory²⁰³ from a total of 230,000 pound sterling to be invested in Bengal by the English; 140,000 pound sterling were dispatched to Kasimbazar²⁰⁴. This highlights the growing British commercial interest towards Bengal in general and Kasimbazar in particular. However in the seventeenth century Kasimbazar produced around 22,000 bales. Each bale weighed approximately 100 pounds. By a rough estimation the total production of Kasimbazar in that century was as high

¹⁹⁶ Sushil Chaudhury, *From Prosperity to Decline; Eighteenth Century Bengal*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1999, p. 333.

¹⁹⁷ Finest silk 'mulmuls'.

¹⁹⁸ Known as 'ahimsa silk' woven from the cocoons from which the silk moths had flown away.

¹⁹⁹ Wild coarser silk variant processed from cocoons collected by the tribals.

²⁰⁰ Beautifully and intricately woven silk of different sizes.

²⁰¹ K.N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World*, p. 347.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, vol. 1, Serial 1, Letters from Court, 1680-1681, p. 1.

²⁰⁴ K.M. Mohsin, *A Bengal District in Transition*, p. 15. Rila Mukherjee, *Merchants and Companies in Bengal: Kasimbazar and Jugdia in the Nineteenth Century*, Delhi: Pragati Publishers, 2006, p. 9.

as 3.1 million pounds²⁰⁵. At that time the major purchasers were the Asian merchants and Armenians. Also the European Companies grew more and more interested to acquire this expensive commodity. Initially in the seventeenth century the Dutch and the English Companies exported substantially the silk manufactures from Bengal²⁰⁶.

Archival sources indicate that the November bund silk, cotton items like 'gurrahs', 'dusutty' were in constant demand by the English Company²⁰⁷ apart from silk piece goods like 'lungeeromalls', 'jamavars', 'yellow', 'cherry', 'pink', 'skies', 'greens', 'crimson' 'stripd taffeties'²⁰⁸, 'red', 'black' taffeties, 'yellow selinges', 'taffeties plain' and 'stripd', 'romals', 'new romals', 'ordinary bandannas'²⁰⁹, 'gurdah romal'²¹⁰, 'fine bandannas'²¹¹, 'very good and superior quality' silk goods like 'jhilimili' and 'saifur'²¹² in Europe till at least mid eighteenth century.

In 1709 the super fine Kasimbazar raw silk fetched a price 30 per cent less than the coarser types in England²¹³. The very fine Kasimbazar type required its twisting into a much thicker yarn, making it cost wise unviable²¹⁴. Also nature's vagaries like 'unusual heavy rains' 'drowned the Country (Cossimbazar), destroyed the Mulberry Trees and Worms; Insomuch that hardly one third Part of the wonted quality of silk was produced'²¹⁵. Since fields were submerged in water for long, the mulberry leaves had rotted, leading to sub standard quality of raw silk. The merchants were almost ruined and resorted to fraudulent activities to

²⁰⁵ Mukherjee, *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁰⁶ H.R. Ghosal, *Economic Transition in the Bengal Presidency, 1793-1833*, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1966, p. 40.

²⁰⁷ NAI, Bengal Public Consultations, Fort William, November 1721, Microfilm, Accession no. 2662; Bengal Public Consultations, Fort William, January 1727, Microfilm, Accession no. 2665; Bengal Public Consultations, Fort William, February 1727, Microfilm, Accession no. 2665; NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, August 3, 1744, p. 165; Home Miscellaneous Proceedings, vol. 11, August 11, 1745, p. 5.

²⁰⁸ NAI, Bengal Public Consultations, December 27, 1716, Microfilm, Accession no. 2662.

²⁰⁹ WBSA, Board of Trade (Commercial) Proceedings, vol. 32, July 3-August 10, 1782, dated July 5, 1782, p. 109.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, 1742-46: January 8, 1742; August 13, 1743; August 3, 1744; August 11, 1745.

²¹² NAI, H.N. Sinha ed., *Fort William-India House Correspondence*, vol. 2, p. li.

²¹³ K.N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World*, p. 348.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

²¹⁵ NAI, Bengal Public Consultation, Microfilm, Accession no. 2666, Fort William, October 1728, dated October 28, 1728.

pass off their defective raw silk to England in 1726²¹⁶. Moreover, 1730s onwards, the English Company started exploring other options like the import of the inferior variety silk from Rangpur, Kumarkhali and a wild Assam variety. The Home Miscellaneous records testify to the price rise of raw silk and various items in 1731-32. For example; apart from contracting for

275 Maunds November bund silk at Rs 6.1 Anna per Seer, 750 Maunds at 6 Rs, 3 Annas and 600 Maunds of Guzarat at 6 Rupees 12 Annas per Seer and advanced 8 Annas in a piece on their Taffaties and 6 Annas in a piece on their Silk Lungee Romalls, immediately forbid the providing any more....untill the Prices of each should fall, the Dutch not purchasing any Silk this Season on Account of the high price.....²¹⁷.

Till early eighteenth century under the Mughal structure (which was also adopted by the Bengal *nawabs*), the European trade bodies as well as other private 'Asian merchants' bought silk against ready money. The Mughals as well as the *nizamat* safeguarded the well being of the local and Asian merchants. During the same century the English Company managed to partially curb the Mughal control on the silk *arangs* by the system of cash advance to the weavers via merchants. By procuring either through *pykars* or from the weavers directly, the factors retained profit margin in either case.

Also the *dadandars* often indulged in private trade and worked for other traders. Often they failed to deliver the stipulated amount of items. For instance, 'Luddoomullick not having delivered any goods upon his Dadney note for Four Thousand, four hundred and fifty Eight Rupees, two Anaes given him the 31st October lest, his bill was now cancelled'²¹⁸. Sometimes the *dalals* and *pykars* were in debt and took advance from the Company which they could not repay²¹⁹. At times, as in 1738, 'payment of their (merchants) dadney....were rendered incapable of complying with their contracts.... (as) there now at that time a very large deficiency in the Honourable Company's cash at Fort William'²²⁰. Besides,

²¹⁶ NAI, BPC, Microfilm, Accession no. 2666, November 1728, dated November 14, 1728.

²¹⁷ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 7, 1731-32, p. 265.

²¹⁸ NAI, Bengal Public Consultation, Microfilm, Fort William, April, 1722, pp. 94-95.

²¹⁹ NAI, Bengal Public Consultation, Microfilm, Fort William, April, 1727.

²²⁰ NAI, Bengal Public Consultation, Microfilm, Fort William, November, 1738.

‘from the uncertain produce of silk in each Bund, it is impossible to ascertain precisely the sums that will be wanted for advances’²²¹.

In 1737 the English East India Company’s contract for raw silk goods and raw silk were as high as 126,100 and 540,000 respectively²²². But the production of cotton and silk in the *rahr* region and specifically in Murshidabad Kasimbazar region was affected between the 1740s and 50s, apparently because of the mounting demand of the European trade bodies and the *Bargi* assaults. The English Company records officially blamed the Maratha raids for disruptions in business and price escalation of cotton and silk textile and raw silk at the Kasimbazar *arangs*.

Table 1.5: The English East India Company Records showing *Bargi* assaults in and around Kasimbazar

Date/Year	Instances of Trouble in Kasimbazar
January 8, 1742	Kasimbazar is in the centre of all the Troubles in the Country ²²³ . Alarm of the Morattoes frightened the Merchants from further Engagements.....From the same Cause Raw Silk and Silk Piece Goods are far short in Goodness, Weavers and Inhabitants fled, Silk often carried away Wett and on the Reels and piece Goods before Manufactured, the one Wound off and the other finished in utmost hurry and Confusion Merchants saying every Article brought in has been got out of Fire ²²⁴ .
August 13, 1743	People deserted the Arangs where Gurrahs are made; an entire stop was put to Business for some time at Calcutta, Cossimbuzar and Patna ²²⁵ .
February 4, 1745/6	At Kasimbazar.....Morattoes are so near that people therefore fear shall fall short of Bales ²²⁶ .
February 22, 1745/6	Cossimbuzer advise 17 th the Morattoes are still near them so Impossible to send Bales with safety ²²⁷ .
1746-47	They (Cossimbuzar Factors) to exclude them the Dadney but having demanded the penalty of 10 p.c. (on) goods due from the Merchants they begged to have represented to us..... the many losses they have sustained by the long continuance of the Morrottoes in the Country ²²⁸ .
1748-49	The goods under his (one Joseph Bradford) charge from Kasimbazar had been Plundered and that he waited our Orders whether to proceed or return with Treasure under his Charge ²²⁹ .

²²¹ WBSA, Proceedings, Board of Trade (Commercial), vol. 3, part 2, May 5-June, 1775, p. 223.

²²² Ibid., p. 7.

²²³ NAI, Proceedings, Home Miscellaneous, vol. 11, 1742-46, dated January 8, 1742, p. 15.

²²⁴ NAI, Proceedings, Home Miscellaneous, vol. 11, 1742-46, January 8, 1742, p. 16.

²²⁵ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, 1742-46, August 13, 1743, p. 77.

²²⁶ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, 1742-46, dated February 4, 1745, p. 315.

²²⁷ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, 1742-46, dated February 22, 1745/6, p. 331.

²²⁸ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 12, 1746-47, p. 39.

²²⁹ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 14, 1748-49, p. 64.

In response to the enquiry dated 2nd January, 1751-52, by the Hon'ble the Court of Directors for the Affairs of the Hon'ble the United Company of Merchants trading to the East Indies, regarding the 'reasons of the high price of raw silk for some years past'²³⁰ the following reply was given :

It was owing to the Morattoes constantly entering Bengal plundering and burning the people's houses and destroying the chief arangs from whence the workmen have fled to distant parts and not to any malpractice in the gentlemen there²³¹.

But in reality, though the production of high value items like silk and cotton goods were affected, it never came to a standstill²³². Nevertheless the quality and quantity²³³ were compromised and price escalated²³⁴ and distribution lines got disrupted²³⁵. The silk sector in Kasimbazar was undergoing some degree of stress since 1730s before the *Bargi* inroads began. Apart from the *Bargis*, the recurrent *Magh* threats from the east and sporadic Afghan uprisings in Bihar in the late 1740s left Bengal in a state of flux. From the 1740s after the dip in the Bengal silk production; there was a steady rise in investment in Chinese silk by the English East India Company. Also silk was imported from Flanders, Italy, Spain and Portugal, Straights, Turkey that accounted for an investment of 231,393 lbs in 1750²³⁶. Between 1750 and 1765, silk import from Bengal increased on an average to approximately 80,340 small pounds of 16 ounces each per year. Also the quantity of import from other places increased²³⁷.

However, after the assumption of the revenue rights in 1765, the Company had enough resources for investments in raw silk in Bengal. In the fifteen years between 1751 and 65 the annual average silk exports amounted to 80,349 'small'

²³⁰ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, I.O. Copy 1752-53, January 2, 1751-52, vol. 17, pp. 17-18. NAI, Home Public, 1753, vol. 1, 26th March, 1753, p. 184.

²³¹ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 17, pp. 17-18.

²³² NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, 1742-46, August 13, 1743, p. 81; August 3, 1744, p. 167, p. 169; August 11, 1745, p. 5.

²³³ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, 8th January, 1742, pp. 15-16.

²³⁴ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, 3rd August, 1744, p.169, 11th August 1745, p. 5. Rila Mukherjee, in *Merchants and Companies Bengal: Kasimbazar and Jugdia in the Eighteenth Century*, New Delhi: Pragati Publishers, 2006, pp. 18-19.

²³⁵ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, 8th January, 1742, p. 29.

²³⁶ Milburn, *Oriental Commerce, containing a Geographical Description of the Principal Places in with the East Indies, China and Japan, with their Produce, Manufactures and Trade*, London: Black, Parry and Co, vol. 2, 1813, p. 251.

²³⁷ Ibid.

pounds²³⁸. Between 1767-71, it had increased by almost 2.5 times²³⁹. Still the Bengal silk could not compete with the superior grade Italian silk because of its uneven quality. This was due to the presence of different types of thread in the same skein²⁴⁰. ‘The inequality and frequent breaks in the threads of the Bengal silk’ needed to be avoided by wounding off ‘at once from the cocoons into skeins of such quality and dimensions as may fit it for the European markets’²⁴¹. Also the artisans of Bengal did not cross the filaments of cocoons while reeling the silk²⁴². Not only the quality was inferior to what it was in former years; the quantity of production had greatly diminished²⁴³. To sort this out, the European system of reeling²⁴⁴ and spinning was introduced in Bengal which was called the filature system²⁴⁵. Thus the Bengal wound, ‘the silk reeled in the rude and artless manner’²⁴⁶, had to give way to a more sophisticated method of reeling. However the peasants and artisans of Bengal failed to match up to the level of discipline needed for the success of the new technology. So the silk lacked the ‘roundness and lightness’ required to produce good organzine or thrown silk²⁴⁷.

Gradually there was a change in the investment pattern of the English Company in Bengal. The focus shifted from silk as the East India Company could not manage to procure the entire quantity of its silk investment in filature wound silk. The *chassars* (farmers of silk worm) were most reluctant to hand over the cocoons to the Company’s filature as they were poorly paid²⁴⁸. Coupled with this,

²³⁸ 1 small lb or lb avoirdupois = 16 ounces. 1 small lb = 0.67 great lb.

²³⁹ Bhaskar Mukhopadhyaya, ‘Orientalism, Genealogy and the Writing of History, The Idea of Resistance to Silk Filature in Eighteenth Century Bengal’, *Studies in History*, August 1995, vol. 11, no. 2, p. 190.

²⁴⁰ Roberto Davini, ‘The History of Bengali Raw Silk as Connective Interplay between the Company Bahadur, the Bengali Local Economy and Society and the Universal Italian Model, c. 1750- c. 1830’, Florence: European University Institute, February, 2008, p. 2.

<http://www.commodityhistories.org/sites/www.commodityhistories.org/files/working-papers/WP06.pdf>

Accessed on 30. 11. 15.

²⁴¹ NAI, N.K. Sinha ed., *Fort William-India House Correspondence*, vol. 5: 1767-1769, March 17, 1769, Delhi: Government of India, 1949, p. 177.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ WBSA, Proceedings, Provincial Council of Revenue, Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 7, September 2- November 28, 1771, dated November 2, 1771, p. 122.

²⁴⁴ The Piedmontese reeling machine was introduced in Bengal, cited in Davini, ‘The History of Bengali Raw Silk’, p. 3.

²⁴⁵ WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue, Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 7, dated November 25, 1771, p. 203; Bhaskar Mukhopadhyaya, ‘Orientalism, Genealogy and the Writing of History’, p. 190.

²⁴⁶ William Milburn, *Oriental Commerce*, p. 252.

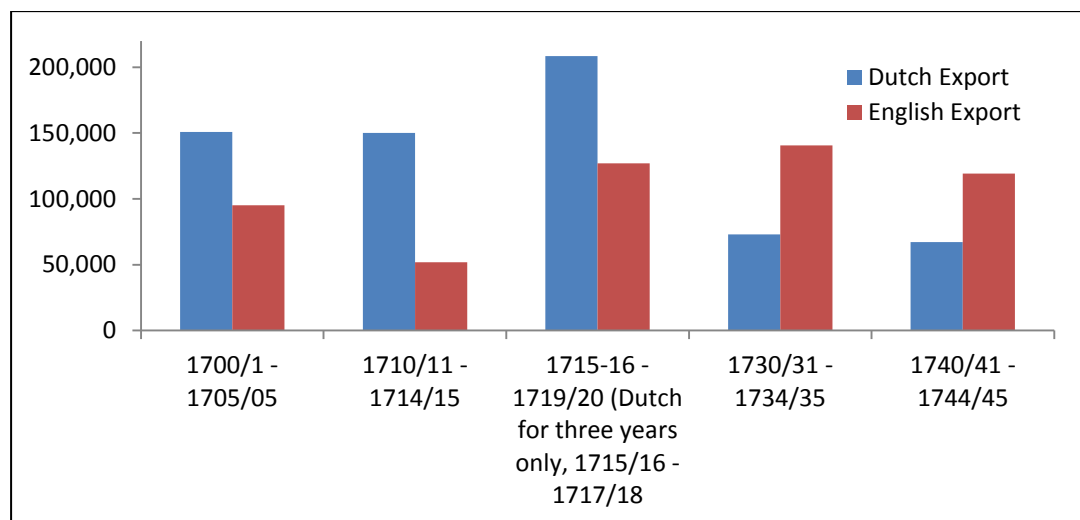
²⁴⁷ Davini, ‘The History of Bengali Raw Silk’, p.3.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

Kasimbazar silk was losing its ground as a viable source of revenue because of being very expensive and the *nawabs* became interested in promoting saltpetre trade in a big way. The European wars created a demand for gun powder and ballast for marine vessels. Since the 1740s, Kasimbazar became a major centre for the transshipment of saltpetre from Patna to Hooghly and beyond. Still silk and Kasimbazar remained synonymous, attracting traders from all over the world. However, after 1750s, pattern of export between England and Bengal started changing. England preferred to import raw silk and cotton from parts of India like Bengal. Kasimbazar, like other silk producing areas, was looked upon as a major supplier of raw silk. England was now in a position to make large scale silk products in their factories²⁴⁹.

Comparing data of silk exports from Bengal by the Dutch, the English and the Asian merchants(See Graphs 1.1 and 1.2); we see that both the British and the Dutch were close competitors initially, with the Dutch enjoying an initial edge over the English Company.

Graph 1.1: Rivalry between the Dutch and English over Raw Silk Exports: 1700-1745



Source:Adapted from Sushil Chaudhury and Michel Morineau eds., *Merchants, Companies and Trade, Europe and Asia in the Early Modern Era*, p. 306; Om Prakash, *Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal, 1630-1720*, p. 218.

²⁴⁹ Kasimbazar also remained a prolific producer of cotton and cotton gurrh and dosutti. The other varieties of cotton goods were '*doria*', '*tanzeb*', '*kashida*', '*sannoe*', '*bafta*' etc. In the eighteenth century, Kasimbazar gave tough competition to the renowned cotton hub of Dacca. In 1730 and 1731 the English factory at Dacca contracted for 544 and 200 bales of cotton while its counterpart at Kasimbazar contracted for 2,681 and 2,000 bales of cotton. In 1739, the total sum advanced to the merchants of Kasimbazar and Dacca amounted to Rs. 791,750 and Rs. 122,526 respectively. Cited in H.N. Sinha ed., *Fort William-India House Correspondence*, vol. 2, p. li, p. 9.

This is not to ignore the significant role played by the Asian merchants. Scholars like Sushil Chaudhury²⁵⁰ have claimed that the exports of these merchants from Bengal and their import of cash and silver in the 1750s, was far greater than those of the Europeans. K.M. Mohsin made an interesting observation that between 1740 and 56, during Alivardi Khan's tenure, raw silk export worth of Rs 70,000 was yearly recorded at the account of the Murshidabad custom house. This did not include the European investment²⁵¹. The consignments were directed towards parts of the empire, Kabul and adjoining countries²⁵². Even in the 40s of the eighteenth century, the Asian merchants enjoyed a clear lead in the sphere of the silk trade. The Factory Record of Kasimbazar suggests that the assorted group of the Asian traders dictated the terms of price in the silk market²⁵³.

In 1750-51, the Asian merchants exported 124,675 pieces of silk textiles while the Europeans sold 25,650 pieces. Then onwards we see a dip in the exports by the Asian merchants to 75,062 in 1754-55. On the other hand, the export by the European merchants increased to 75,043 in 1754-55, thereby signifying an equal share of sales in the market. However the phrase 'Asian merchants' indicated a loose heterogeneous group within which intra group competition must have existed to retain position in the market. The term European traders included mainly the Dutch and the English²⁵⁴.

²⁵⁰ Sushil Chaudhury, 'The Asian Merchants and Companies in Bengal's Export Trade, circa Mid Eighteenth Century', in Sushil Chaudhury and M. Morineau eds., *Merchants, Companies and Trade: Europe and Asia in the Early Modern Era*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 300-320.

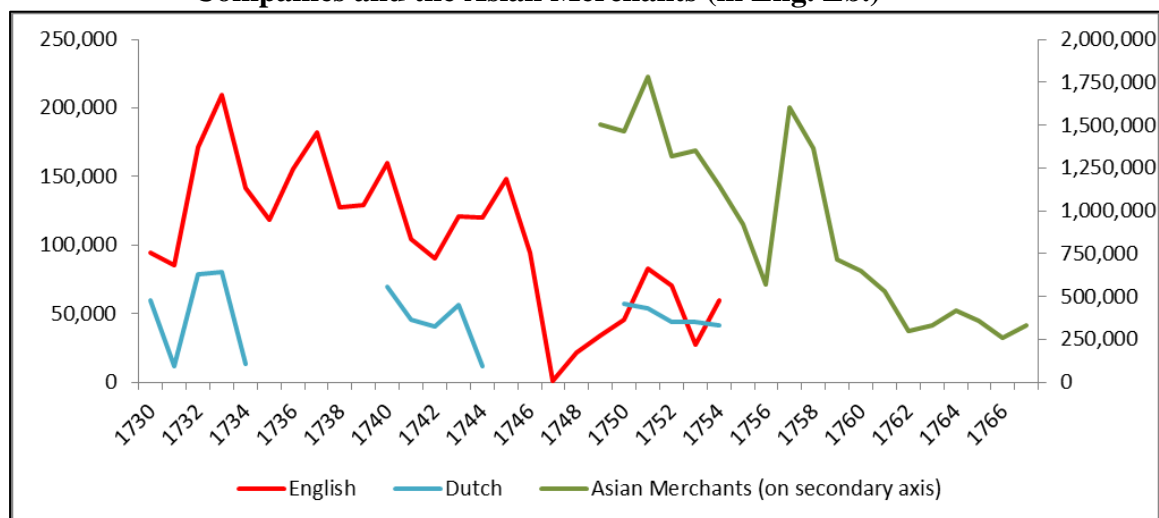
²⁵¹ K.M. Mohsin, *A Bengal District in Transition; Murshidabad, 1765-1793*, Dacca: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1973, p. 40.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ IOR, Factory Records, Kasimbazar, vol. 6, 23 January 1744. Cited in Sushil Chaudhury, 'Asian Merchants and Companies in Bengal's Export Trade', in S. Chaudhury and Michel Morineau eds., *Merchants, Companies and Trade*, p. 304.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 317.

Graph1.2: Comparison of Raw Silk Exports by the English and Dutch Companies and the Asian Merchants (in Eng. Lb.)



Source: Adapted from Sushil Chaudhury and Michel Morineau eds., *Merchants, Companies and Trade, Europe and Asia in the Early Modern Era*, pp. 314, 316; Sushil Chaudhury, *From Prosperity to Decline, Eighteenth Century Bengal*, pp. 351, 352. (The data for the Asian merchants has been plotted on the secondary axis because the volumes are much higher than their English and Dutch counterparts).

Table1.6: Trend of the English East India Company's Investments

Years	English East India Company investments in pound sterling
1681	140,000
1777	414,952

Source: Data collected from K.M. Mohsin, *A Bengal District in Transition*, p. 15.

However in a letter dated March 25, 1757, the Directors expressed their dissatisfaction with the quality of silk²⁵⁵. Nevertheless, the English economic objective of revenue maximization at all cost had a sharp backlash on Bengal's agrarian sector and trade. The major subsequent outcome was the Famine of 1770. All these diverse factors adversely hit the silk sector in particular. Moreover, the price of mulberry plants rose sharply and became very expensive from late eighteenth century due to low rainfall. The leaves were dry and crumbling. In anticipation of the return of a favourable season, the *chassars* 'preserved many more worms than the crop of mulberry leaves though abundant, would suffice for.....the leaf has risen excessively in price, that the great part of the worms have been starved, the silk spun by them weak'²⁵⁶. This trend was common to Kasimbazar and in important places within its silk producing hinterland like

²⁵⁵ *Fort William-India House Correspondence*, vol. 2, p. xlix.

²⁵⁶ WBSA, Board of Trade (Commercial) Proceedings, vol. 75, January 2-January 30, 1789, p. 233.

Bauleah²⁵⁷, Kumarkhali²⁵⁸, Radhanagore²⁵⁹, and Malda²⁶⁰. So the raw material price had spiraled and affected the quality of the goods produced. Quality of silk depended on both the quality of the mulberry leaves and silk worms.

In the mid eighteenth century the English East India Company had also taken a serious review of the pitfalls associated with the system of trade, especially in Kasimbazar, to beat various economic issues linked with the slump in business. The East India Company established its political superiority over Bengal. Accordingly fortunes of the local traders, Asian merchants and other European trade bodies, specially its closest competitor, the Dutch, had to be realigned in favour of the emerging Company State. It started innovating in its mode of trade in order to secure its economic position as well. The Dutch were methodically beaten in the struggle for supremacy as the East India Companygomastahs captured the *arangs*.

For example, a letter dated November 24, 1764 stated, ‘Our Gomastahs have the first Choice of the Goods at every Place, and they can only purchase what We refuse in the sorting’²⁶¹. The Dutch Directors argued that ‘the Weavers have an equal Right to sell to their Gomastahhs for ready Money in the middle or latter end of the Season’²⁶². In many ways the silk trade of Kasimbazar provided the fulcrum in the race for economic supremacy. If one compares the amount of Company’s investments in Kasimbazar in the late seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries, one sees that it had trebled within a gap of approximately a century.

Interestingly, the Bengal silk had a well established global market since pre Plassey days and was the most significant commodity of export next to cotton. Since early nineteenth century, Britain emphasized more on the export of the raw silk of Bengal and not the silk goods; as the emerging textile industry back home needed raw silk and it needed to safeguard the interest of the textile manufacturers’ lobby²⁶³.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 234.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 240.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ WBSA, Board of Trade (Commercial) Proceedings, vol. 76, February 3-February 27, 1789, p. 684.

²⁶¹ NAI, Home Public, General Letter to Court, 1764-65, Proceedings, Serial no. 12, p. 16.

²⁶² Ibid., p.18.

²⁶³ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, ‘Eastern India’, in Dharma Kumar ed., *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. 2, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2008, p. 319.

The *dadni* system got replaced by the contract system in the late 1770s and 1780s²⁶⁴. It ensured that the artisans sold directly and exclusively to the English Company State. The following table is representative of the phase between late 1770s and 1780s when the contract system emphasized on certain regulations that ensured that artisans sold their products exclusively to the fledgeling Company State. A correspondence addressed by an agent²⁶⁵ named ‘Loaknaut Durhum Chand’ to the President and members of the Board of Trade stated

We propose to contract for all the silk and silk piece goods of Cossimbuzar, or for any quantity the Board may please to order, at the undermentioned prices, and the goods may be equal to the Export Warehouse musters the advances may be paid at the same time and in proportion to the amount paid to the Company by the subscribers²⁶⁶.

Table 1.7: Prices of Kasimbazar silk in Sicca Rupee in June 1782

Items	R. a.
Filature ⁷² Sicca weight	8.8
Guzerat 6 lettered wound silk	8.6
Tanah 5 lettered wound silk	8.2

Source: Adapted from WBSA, Board of Trade (Commercial) Proceedings, vol. 32, July 3-August 10, 1782, p.109.

Table 1. 8: Prices of silk piece goods of Kasimbazar in Sicca Rupee in June 1782

Items	R. a.
Striped Taffaty	12 --
Red Do	12 --
Taffaty of different colours	11.12
Do White	11.12
Do Black	11.14
Loongee Rumal	9.12
Pulicat Do	10 --
Pamree Bandanne	6.10
Gurdah Rumal	6. 6
Fine Bandanne	6.10
Ordinary Do	6. 6

Source: Adapted from WBSA, Board of Trade (Commercial) Proceedings, vol. 32, July 3-August 10, 1782, p.109.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 288-290.

²⁶⁵ who collected all the products from the artisans on behalf of the Company.

²⁶⁶ Board of Trade (Commercial) Proceedings, vol. 32, July 3-August 10, 1782, dated July 5, 1782, pp. 108-109.

Again, the agency system²⁶⁷ was started in 1787-89, by which the Company State directly intervened with *arangs* bypassing the hierarchy of the local intermediaries. The new system depended on a class of *gomastahs* or subordinate agents in the pay roll of the Company. The *gomastahs* were involved in procurement of export goods as paid Indian agents under the supervision of the Company's servants. The system managed to get rid of the Indian middlemen: the *dadni* merchants or even *dalals* or petty brokers from the Company's textile business²⁶⁸. However, the change over from the *dadni* to the agency system ensured the 'cutting down to size'²⁶⁹ the European rivals in commerce, besides ensuring the power of the Company's *gomastahs* over the artisans. By this phase the English Company had already established its temporal might on the province of Bengal. All these paved the way for the 'foundation of a system of domination'²⁷⁰ in the textile sector.

As the agency system was reinforced in 1787, the silk sector showed some improvement. 1793, 1796 and 1797 were particularly bad years. Though the situation had improved by the next year and the agency system continued till 1803, the situation in Kasimbazar had taken a new turn. Due to the interplay of many factors, the place had become unhealthy and disease ridden and was gradually adversely affected by the atrophy of the river.

VII. Enclavisation

Kasimbazar silk had top priority in the European Companies' export list because of its high value and small bulk. It was certainly a major driving force behind the establishment of various European factories cum settlements. A strong desire to dabble in commerce was subsequently followed by a race for control of the economy and polity. Apart from the three principal settlements of Hugli, Chandernagore and Chinsura; the English, the French and the Dutch had erected factories and the settlements in Dacca, Kasimbazar, Balasore and Jugdia in the mid seventeenth century. The Kasimbazar factory of the East India Company had at a much later date constructed walls around. Except for Calcutta and

²⁶⁷ In Kasimbazar it was introduced in February 1754: Rila Mukherjee, *Merchants and Companies*, p. xvi.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

²⁶⁹ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 'Eastern India', p. 288.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Chandernagore, none of the other factories had strong boundary walls around them. The construction quality of the factories was poor. The trading houses or factories were encircled by a 'quadrangular enclosure the walls of which were constructed to carry guns'²⁷¹.

Such puny constructions provided nothing more than a psychological feeling of being segregated from the local people of the land. In fact the unfortified Dutch and French factories looked more like country houses²⁷². However, the construction of a protective wall around the old Kasimbazar English factory in 1742-43²⁷³ was prompted by an instinctive reaction to the annual *Bargi* attacks. 'Kasimbazar Fortified the Walls of the Factory by Erecting four good Bastions so that they feared no Surprise from any Party'²⁷⁴. The other European factory and colonies of Sydadab, and Kalikapore had their own settlements separate from the living space of the local people. However, as K.M. Mohsin claimed, Kasimbazar, Sydadab, Kalikapore housing the English, French and Dutch living quarters belonged to the administrative jurisdiction of the settlement of Murshidabad²⁷⁵. The locals traders, moneylenders and businessmen and the 'Asian merchants' had their respective colonies too. Even living cum working areas were formed on the basis of profession and language.

Much later in 1756, the English settlement of Calcutta, the French settlement of Chandernagore and the Dutch settlement of Chinsura had a clear cut compartmentalization of 'white' and a 'black' town. The nucleus of the 'white' township was provided by the factory. In 1756 the 'white' townships around the factories of Bengal consisting of 'handsome buildings, large and lofty, with wide covered verandahs, and standing in large gardens or compounds' stood in stark contrast to the unimpressive shabbier settlements of the locals and hence attracted undue attention from the latter²⁷⁶. Post 1757, the Company that was asserting itself as a nascent political power, started thinking in terms of an enclosed area for itself at Kasimbazar.

²⁷¹ S.C. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-57*, vol. 1, New Delhi: Manas Publications, 1985, p. 34.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p. xxxv.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁴ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 10, 1737-42, p. 363. Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, 1742-46, p. 37.

²⁷⁵ K.M. Mohsin, 'Murshidabad in the Eighteenth Century', in Kenneth Ballhatchet and John Harrison eds., *The City in South Asia, Pre-Modern and Modern*, London and Dublin: Curzon Press Ltd, 1980, p. 73.

²⁷⁶ S.C. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-57*, vol. 1, p. xxxv.

The East India Company's attempts at consolidation of its own office and residential areas, along with its attempts to facilitate riverine trade, reflected the importance of the area. Some of its activities were driven by a subconscious assumption of statehood. For example, the young CompanyState started displaying a growing intolerance towards other European settlements and factories in Kasimbazar. It was gradually becoming less accommodative and any remote hint of consolidation by other European powers; like the French hoisting flags at their own bases, was looked upon as a threat²⁷⁷. The activities of the French *gomastah* at the French township of Sydabad were closely monitored²⁷⁸. The other Europeans in Bengal were apprehensive of the rising British might. When in 1757 the *nawab* Sirajuddaullah sought military support from their establishments on the eve of launching an attack against the English at Kasimbazar, the Dutch and the French Company representatives at Kasimbazar had taken a neutral stand by acting as benign trading bodies, to avoid altercations with the English factors.

VIII. Plans for Revamping Kasimbazar

During the battle of Plassey, a part of the town along with the English factory was burnt down and fortifications demolished by Sirajuddaullah²⁷⁹. After the English political supremacy was entrenched over Bengal in 1757, the East India Company was keen to earmark an area around Kasimbazar for a 'citadel to the southward of the old dock'²⁸⁰ with apartments for offices and residences. Political exigencies and lucrative business prospects prompted them to think in terms of a protected area as settlement cum factory. The logic behind having a secure domain was as follows; 'a fortified place near the capital of the soubahship would be of use in preserving our influence at the durbar and checking any designs that the government might in future conceive against us'²⁸¹. How far they could push it forward is another matter. But the fact that they had prepared a detailed blue print of a township has been endorsed by archival evidences. In January 1758, the Government had informed the Directors that it had been granted four hundred

²⁷⁷ WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 8, dated February 5, 1776, pp. 72-74.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 73.

²⁷⁹ O'Malley, *Gazetteers: Murshidabad*, p. 175.

²⁸⁰ C.R. Wilson, *Old Fort William in Bengal*, Indian Records Series, vol. 2, London: John Murray, 1906, p. 128.

²⁸¹ H.N. Sinha ed., *Fort William-India House Correspondence*, vol. 2, 1757-59, p. 122.

bighas of land at the Berhampore plain²⁸² by Mir Kasim's *sanad*²⁸³. Captain Brohier was asked to survey the area to plan for the Company's stronghold²⁸⁴.

So rebuilding a segment of the city that was considered useful became a part of the agenda. In an official correspondence dated July 25, 1757, addressed to Roger Drake, the President and Governor in Council, the Company's architect John Brohier wrote on his plan for the building of a 'citadel' and to enclose a certain area for that purpose²⁸⁵.

The works I propose to erect with your approbation are to form a Hezagoneas a citadel to the town from the old dock southwards as the bank of the River projects in this part and admits that three of the sides of the citadel flank the current of the River which I propose to strengthen with proper cutworks before them to multiply the defences of these fronts or as the channel is on this side a naval force will be exposed to the fire of near hundred piece of cannon which I conceive must effectually prevent any squadron from passing further up.....most of the apartments in the remains of the old Fort ...must be rebuilt in the citadel with the military and civil store Houses, Magazines and Bomb proof lodgements requisite intime of siege..... and other needful works....and I propose to erect them all....feet above high water mark which will not take up many bricklayers to execute.....As the town is composed of many valuable buildings from Mr Carvalho's House to the Portuguese and Armenian Churches and from thence to the Riverside and. I conceive it will be absolutely necessary to enclose that space of ground by our fortifications²⁸⁶.

Brohier had planned for the guarding of the river front.

The Riverside for the whole length of the town must also be attended toin a proper manner by erecting the necessary works along its bank to prevent an enemy's landing - should a squadron supported by an Army have forced its way by the citadel.....their fire will meet the shipping²⁸⁷.

Another extract of the same letter shows that the English part of the post Plassey Kasimbazar was to be a planned township.

²⁸² Berhampore was essentially a part of southern Kasimbazar.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ *Fort William-India House Correspondence*, vol. 2, p. 245.

²⁸⁵ Was originally fortified during the *bargi* raids.

Murshidabad Phire Dyakha, <http://murshidabad.net/history/places-topic-places-zone-one.htm>
Accessed on 2.12.15.

²⁸⁶ NAI, Home Public Proceedings, 1757, Part 1, p. 206.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 206.

When the town is enclosed, it is necessary to layout regular streets ...and although many houses must come down...it will be found such an advantage for the circulation of air and wholesomeness of the place that it will be deemed a useful work²⁸⁸.

Reclamation of the stagnant pools around the settlement was proposed in the same correspondence. 'The great number of excavations and tanks which are all round the town full of stagnated water will be filled up and the place rendered thereby more wholesome than it is at present'²⁸⁹. But such steps evoked sharp criticism from the Court of Directors in England on the following grounds. It was neither prudent nor practicable to have a garrison contiguous to the *nawab's* residence. It was not advisable to challenge the might of the fully armed *nawab's* army and 'the whole power of the country'²⁹⁰ from so far away from the British base at Calcutta, 'cut off from all resources'²⁹¹.

IX. Recognising the Importance of the River

Viewing River as a Major Device of Consolidation

Though the Court of Directors did not want to displease the *nawab*, it is evident from the extract of the correspondences cited above, that the Company was determined to guard the region to utilize and tap it for its own benefit. For that it was crucial to control the river. The Kasimbazar River, a segment of the Bhagirathi Hugli spanning from Sooty to Serampore, was the benefactor to the fertile and prosperous island and the principal artery to tap the hinterland. The volume of commodities moving in and out reached its peak in the monsoon months when the riverine web composed of its countless channels used to be brimming to its brink, and turned the surrounding terrain into an extended and continuous waterscape. In fact Kasimbazar handled extensive river traffic in the monsoon months 'whose importance and variety has been called unique in the world'²⁹². The items from Murshidabad Kasimbazar region passed through local, provincial, national marts and headed towards the international markets through

²⁸⁸Ibid., p. 207.

²⁸⁹Ibid., p. 207.

²⁹⁰*Fort William-India House Correspondence*, p. 122.

²⁹¹Ibid.

²⁹²Rila Mukherjee, *Merchants and Companies*, p. xxxviii.

the river route and the Bay via Hooghly and Calcutta ports. So the Kasimbazar River was also the main highway of international and oceanic trade.

Obviously the English Company felt the urge to control the river and the revenue rich land nurtured by it. In other words it wanted to ensure a compliant economy. It was necessary to gather a thorough knowledge of the extent of attainable arable land through meticulous surveys 'for civil and financial purposes'. Hence the Company needed to chalk out well defined routes for troop march in order to command over and defend this economically sensitive zone.

Importance of Kasimbazar as a Port

Moreover, the Bhagirathi river had been nurturing a port at Kasimbazar. Being surrounded by the Bhagirathi's twisted shape of a horse shoe from three sides, Kasimbazar was geographically evolved as a natural port²⁹³. Indeed Kasimbazar had been functioning as one. Rila Mukherjee argued that Kasimbazar assumed the status of an important port of Bengal, transporting commodities of so much variety in such a volume that it won for itself a special status in the world²⁹⁴. In Joa de Barros' map titled 'Descripcao Do Reino De Bengala', 1615²⁹⁵, both the Hugli and Padma appeared as wide channels. Betor, Agarpara and Satigam (Satgaon) were clearly identifiable. The interconnected rivers have been shown and the Gangetic delta extended up to the bifurcation points of the Padma and Bhagirathi and hence far beyond Kasimbazar in the map. The map has not shown Kasimbazar. Nevertheless, the river has a clear passage all the way to the north of the place.

Before the 1630s, Kasimbazar was not mentioned in the accounts and travelogues and other primary sources. The Dutch cartographer Pieter Van der Aa's map titled 'Koninkryk van Bengale En Landschappen Aande Gangele Vloed tussen Mogol en Pegu Gelegen'²⁹⁶ (1706), depicted that the island of 'Kasimbazar' was surrounded by a very wide Ganges, a burgeoning Padma and an exceedingly vibrant Jellenghy. Of course, the data required for the map might have been

²⁹³ S. Nandy, *Bandar Kasimbazar*, p. 5.

²⁹⁴ Rila Mukherjee, *Business History*, p. 153.

²⁹⁵ Joa de Barros, 'Descripcao Do Reino De Bengala', 1615, Houghton Library, the Digital Collection of Harvard's Houghton's Library.

<http://houghtonlib.tumblr.com/post/90361038212/barros-jo%C3%A3o-de-1496-1570-asia-dos-fectos-que>

Accessed on 11.2.16.

²⁹⁶ Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA), Susan Gole, *A Series of Early Printed Maps of India in Facsimile*, New Delhi: Jaya Prints, First Edition 1980, Plate 25b.

collected much before 1706. 'Kassembasar' has been shown and Satigam and a flourishing 'Ougeli' have been marked. A very broad river had watered the bank of Kasimbazar Murshidabad and much beyond to its north till Sasaram. It leaves enough scope to imagine that the big cargo vessels had a passage upto 'Patana'. Graaf mentioned about a port named 'Bander Bana' at Patna²⁹⁷. The East India Company must have been familiar with the place before that. From the map study of the geographical location of the place, it appears as though Kasimbazar allowed the passage of big ships. The extensive trading network of Kasimbazar spread between the Mughal headquarters in the north west, north Indian settlements, Patna port; Gujarat in the west and Aurungabad to its south west, have been discussed earlier. The widespread riverine lattice and a wide access for penetrations could have drawn the European Companies to the place.

According to an eighteenth century official letter of the East India Company, there was an already existing 'old dock'²⁹⁸. So a port did exist in Kasimbazar. Somendra Chandra Nandy²⁹⁹ claimed that in 1744, at least forty to fifty British ships had been frequenting Kasimbazar. Even in the early nineteenth century the Danish French geographer M. Malte Brun described Kasimbazar as the port of Murshidabad and centre for the best wire knit silk stockings³⁰⁰. According to Thomas Macaulay, Kasimbazar was a 'port and a place of trade renowned for the quantity and excellence of the silks which were sold in the marts' and were 'constantly receiving and sending forth richly laden barges'³⁰¹. In fact, it has been claimed that close to the 'Chhoto Rajbari' (Little Palace) there was a landing place or *ghat*. The big cargo vessels of the East India Company anchored to the east of the *ghat*. There existed a jetty to facilitate the loading and unloading of cargo³⁰².

Aniruddha Ray³⁰³ contradicted the claim that Kasimbazar was a major port by stating that there was neither a *Shah Bandar* nor a *mutisuddi* stationed there. Under the Mughals and the Bengal *nawabs*, it functioned as a *Pachotra Bandar*

²⁹⁷ Nicolas de Graaf, *Voyages*, p. 70.

²⁹⁸ NAI, Home Public, 1757, Proceedings, Part 1, p. 206.

²⁹⁹ Somendra Chandra Nandy, *Bandar Kasimbazar*, p. 48.

³⁰⁰ M. Malte Brun, *Universal Geography; or A Description of all the parts of the World on a New Plan*, vol. 2, Philadelphia: John Lavall and S.P. Bradford, 1827, p. 160.

³⁰¹ T.B. Macaulay, *Essays on Lord Clive and Warren Hastings*, New York: Charles E. Merrill Co, 1910, p. 150.

³⁰² Kamal Chaudhury, *Murshidabader Itihash*, vol. 1, p. 748.

³⁰³ Aniruddha Ray, *Bharotio Shohor*, p. 355.

collecting inland duties from all the vessels passing through the place. Further, Sushil Chaudhury observed, the bulk of saltpetre supply to Patna used to be transported from Kasimbazar to Hooghly on specially designed flat bottomed vessels to avoid riverine obstructions that existed between Hooghly and Kasimbazar³⁰⁴ before being transported to Calcutta. Such sand banks between Kasimbazar and Hooghly were noted by Streynsham Master as early as the 1660s. Hooghly and then Calcutta were progressively closer to the Bay and hence better disposed as ports. Against this backdrop, Nandy's claim that Kasimbazar had provided anchorage to so many British vessels; appears to be an over exaggeration or he could have referred to smaller crafts as ships. Rila Mukherjee observed that in the eighteenth century Kasimbazar was basically a royal port of the *nawabs* and a minor shipping centre³⁰⁵. It was officially under the administrative control of Murshidabad and also acted as a news hub for the court regarding business. The latest information on the anchoring of trading vessels, incoming merchants and their linkage with the court, their monetary worth etc. could be picked up from the port of Kasimbazar³⁰⁶.

Nevertheless, the old maps are indicative of a distinct possibility of heavy vessels plying up to Kasimbazar and beyond for some time. It might have allowed the entry of big ships for some years post 1650s at least in the monsoon months when the river was full to its brim. So it could well have been an active port till the 1650s when the river was navigable and seemed quite broad on some of the older representative maps. The seventeenth century Dutch account of Schouten mentioned about the difficulties of the comparatively bigger Company vessels to reach even up to the port of Hooghly and their prevalent system of unloading at Balasore and Hijli. So it was unlikely that too many large ships were plying as far up to Kasimbazar after the 1650s³⁰⁷. After mid seventeenth century, Kasimbazar definitely worked as a busyemporium as well as an entrepot of Hooghly as the latter was the functioning maritime port where foreign ships used to anchor regularly. Foreign merchants like Graaf, Bowrey, Master had reached Kasimbazar via Hooghly. Eventually the smaller crafts of lighter draft from the port of

³⁰⁴ Sushil Chaudhury, 'The Rise and Decline of Hooghly', *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 86, part. 1, no. 161, Master, vol. 2, p. 325.

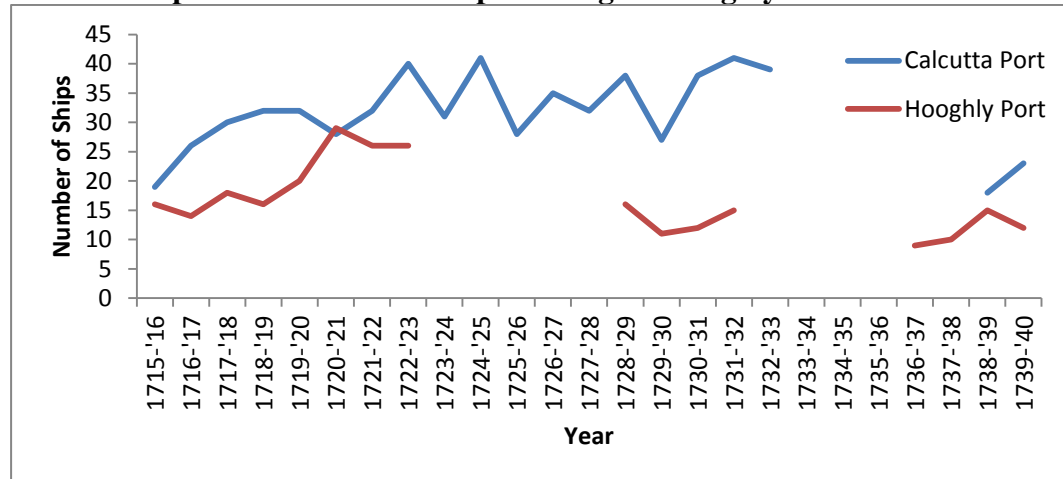
³⁰⁵ Rila Mukherjee, 'Competing Spatial Networks', p.133.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

³⁰⁷ Gautier Schouten, *Voyage*, vol. 2, p. 157.

Kasimbazar fetched mostly raw silk, textiles and saltpetre to the international port of Hooghly. However, the English East India Company had virtually started controlling the Bengal rivers since the beginning of the eighteenth century and since 1730s intervened with the passage of its goods³⁰⁸. By the early eighteenth century Hooghly port had lost out to the new British port of Calcutta.

Graph 1.3: Number of Ships Calling on Hooghly and Calcutta



Source: Adapted from the shipping data culled from P.J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes, The British in Bengal in the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1976, pp.55, 57.

Despite its reduced navigability, Kasimbazar and its wide spread hinterland could boast of large scale distribution of raw silk and cotton and silk textile, apart from other cash crops and handicraft items. The Company officials found Kasimbazar to be a commercially promising centre that needed an appropriate place of embarkation to access and transport various goods. So a detailed planning to control Kasimbazar followed via correspondences and huge investments on infrastructures. In fact in 1757, the British did consider building ‘proper wharfs and stairs to the waterside’³⁰⁹.

Keeping in view its importance, certain degree of entrenchment of power through map making became mandatory. The Company got a map of Kasimbazar drawn by James Rennell, the Surveyor General of the Bengal Presidency. The cartographic depictions of the routes, towns, cities, hydrological detailing and topographical nuances was initiated by the Europeans who had been making their presence felt on the subcontinent since the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The special sheet map entitled the ‘Map of Cossimbuzer Island’ was

³⁰⁸ Rila Mukherjee, ‘Competing Spatial Networks’, p. 139.

³⁰⁹ NAI, Home Public, Proceedings, 1757, Part 1, p. 206.

attached to his '*Bengal Atlas Containing Maps of the Theatre of war and Commerce on that Side of Hindoostan*' and formally published in 1781.

Rennell had drawn heavily from the data collected through extensive topographical surveys during military route marches and his own traverse surveys. Incidentally the *Bengal Atlas* was the first surveyed map of India. This was considered a landmark work for 'the large scale of its maps and the unprecedented accuracy of its details'³¹⁰. Although at least three other European maps showing Kasimbazar predated that of Rennell³¹¹, the latter's sheet map was unique for its detailed geographical study. In Rennell's map the Bhagirathi flowing past the Kasimbazar Murshidabad area was identified for the first time as the 'Cossimbuzer River' and an extensive hinterland around Kasimbazar and Murshidabad entrapped by the Bhagirathi, Jellenghy and Padma as the 'Cossimbuzer Island'.

X. Various Influences on Kasimbazar

Socio Political and Economic Forces

As mentioned earlier, map making was needed for a better control over the sensitive places of Bengal. In fact, western Bengal with its power centre at Murshidabad, had its own sets of problems. Alivardi Khan's usurpation as the new *nawab* in 1740 after the battle of Giria, the Afghan uprisings in Bihar in the mid 1740s, Sirajuddaullah's revolt against his grandfather Alivardi Khan in 1750 had destabilized the province. Further, the period between 1740 and 1755 saw recurrent annual Maratha *Bargi* raids in *rahr* Bengal³¹². Established trading linkages of Kasimbazar with northern and western India and beyond, got disrupted. The Europeans too faced difficulties in their pursuit of commerce. Though Sushil Chaudhury claimed that Kasimbazar remained more or less unfazed by such incursions, the French record of Genne de la Chanceliere noted that 'Cossenbazar'

³¹⁰ 'Rennell' in B.G. Niebhur, *Life of Carsten Niebhur: The Oriental Traveller*, Edinburgh, 1836, p. 5.

³¹¹ The mid seventeenth century Dutch map by Van den Brouke (Nieuwe Kaarte van't Koninkryk) in approximately 1660, in the French cartography by Bellin (Nouvelle Carte du Royaume de Bengale) in mid eighteenth century and a map of the town of 'Cassimbazard' was drawn by the French artiste l'Eludue de l'Aldee in 1729.

³¹² Rila Mukherjee, 'Competing Spatial Networks' p. 139.

and ‘Muxadabad’ had been badly affected³¹³. A letter written sometime in 1748 to the Court of Directors for Affairs of the Honourable the United Company of Merchants of English Trading to the East Indies read that the ‘Morattoes being encamped within sight of the factory’³¹⁴.

Nevertheless, as Rennell’s map suggested, Kasimbazar Murshidabad region was located at the northern terminal point of the *Bargi* route march. So though the area had a brush with Maratha marauders more than once and the Company’s records squarely blamed such incursions for the price escalation of the textiles; there were worse affected regions in Bengal than this area. Even if they did not penetrate the interiors of Kasimbazar, the supposed fear of an impending attack could have led to some degree of destabilisation of the settled socio political life. Kasimbazar and Murshidabad were targeted more than once. The workers fled, production was hampered and distribution channels cut off. The raids prompted a series of migrations to eastern Bengal and also to rising English power nucleus at Calcutta. Nevertheless, various determinants had been influencing the silk price much before the *Bargis* appeared on the scene and a set of factors continued to influence the price after the intensity of Maratha incursions had died down. In fact since the 1750s, saltpetre was slowly replacing silk as the most coveted item of export from Bengal. Indeed the state of the silk industry in western Bengal in the eighteenth century remained worrisome for the Company because of its escalating price³¹⁵.

Further, the period coincided with a series of natural disasters. The upper part of western Bengal had experienced an acute want of rain in 1768-69 that adversely affected the ‘Careef Harvest’ and the land was also ‘prevented being Cultivated for the Rubby Harvest’³¹⁶. This had an adverse effect on the rice crop in all the districts to the north of Serampore including Murshidabad. By year end, the impact of drought led to high price of grain and acute food grain scarcity. ‘The oppressive measures of the English Gomastahs’ combined with ‘the oppressions caused by several persons Employed in the like of ‘the aumils, Zemindars and

³¹³ Indrani Ray, ‘Journey to Cassimbazar and Murshidabad: Observations of a French Visitor to Bengal in 1743’, in L. Subramanian ed., *The French and the Trade of the Indian Ocean: A Collection of Essays by Indrani Ray*, New Delhi: Munshi Manoharlal, 1999, p. 170.

³¹⁴ NAI, Home Public, Proceedings, 1748-49, Serial No. 1, p. 30.

³¹⁵ WBSA, Comptrolling Committee of Revenue, Proceedings, May 15, 1772, p. 281.

³¹⁶ WBSA, Comptrolling Committee of Revenue at Fort William, Proceedings, December 31, 1771, p. 563.

other Creatures of Government (who) have enriched themselves at their Collections' 'Expence, nay even their ruin'³¹⁷.

The next year, a large tract of upper Bengal, including Murshidabad, Kasimbazar and other adjoining places, fell under the grip of the Bengal Famine. There was a severe food shortage that was partially manipulated by the vested interest groups like grain merchants³¹⁸. This combined with the inflation to trigger an economic crisis. The silk sector was adversely affected. For instance, in one of the principal silk *arangs* at Lushkarpore; fall in silk production was accompanied by price rise and debasement of quality that impaired business. Those associated with textile sector fell back on agricultural land that was already hit by drought³¹⁹. A severe variant of small pox broke out sometime in 1769. It killed 63,000 people from Murshidabad itself and the streets were full of dead bodies. The common man's sufferings knew no bounds. An increase in land tax by 10 per cent by Reza Khan acted as a catalyst.³²⁰

a deduction in the ensuing year's settlement will therefore we apprehend become necessary to enable the district to recover itself from that state of poverty and desolation(sic) to which it has been reduced by a too rigid collection³²¹.

The net collections of 1771 exceeded even those of 1768.

Table 1.9: Net revenue collection in the years preceding and following 1770

Bengal Year	Net Collections in Rupee
1175(1768-69)	1,52,54,856
1176(1769)	1,31,49,148
1177(1770)	1,40,06,030
1178(1771)	1,53,33,660

Source: Adapted from the abstract of accounts of the Board of Revenue at Murshidabad cited in C.S. Srinivasachari ed., *Fort William-India House Correspondence and Other Contemporary Papers Relating Thereto*, vol. 6: 1770-1772, Delhi: Government of India, 1962, p. 418.

Notwithstanding the loss of at least a third of the population of Bengal and the resultant decline in cultivation; revenue extractions were stepped up leading to the

³¹⁷ WBSA, Revenue Department, Copy Book of Letters of the Resident at Durbar, Proceedings, vol. 1, December 27 1769- August 7, 1770, Letter dated July 14, 1770, p. 34.

³¹⁸ WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue, Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 6, July 3-September 30, 1775, pp. 560-61.

³¹⁹ WBSA, Committee of Circuit Appendix, Proceedings, vol. 9A, July 7 to September 1772, p. 161.

³²⁰ Subhas Chandra Mukhopadhyay, *British Residents at the Darbar of Bengal Nawabs at Murshidabad (1757-1772)*, Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1988, p. 424.

³²¹ WBSA, Committee of Circuit, Kasimbazar, Proceedings, vol. 2, July 7-August 20, 1772, p. 98.

fact that the net collections of 1771 exceeded those of 1768. Moreover, the random taxes imposed by the *zamindars* multiplied the plight of the *ryots*. To cite an instance; one of the Committee of Circuit records dated August 25, 1772 stated that

the Collector at Lushkerpore Ramchunder Sen is said to have established several arbitrary taxes and articles of Collection in their nature highly oppressive....in order to compensate for the deficiency arising from large tracts of land found waste and the value of the district last year falling short of his expectations he collected without any regard to Engagement or Pottah arbitrarily from one riot to make good deficiency on the part of another³²².

Debrit recounted that the whole *suba* resembled one big charnel house and about three million people died; the Bhagirathi became polluted with thousands of corpses floating over it³²³. The post famine phase coincided with the *Sanyasi* movement that affected the seat of the *nizamata* apart from other places in the northern and eastern Bengal. The huge band of the North Indian mendicants, mostly armed, during their yearly cycle of pilgrimage³²⁴, pursued a custom of collecting religious tax from the village headmen and *zamindars* on their way to various pilgrim centres. But the latter were overburdened with the pressure to pay the Company's land revenue and hence could not oblige the *Sanyasis'* demands. The death of about one third of the population of the *suba* implied that much of the arable land remained fallow. Areas in and around Murshidabad suffered from loot and desecration.

Besides, in the post Plassey period due to a 'policy of frugality' adopted by the English Company State, there was a dip in the extravagant lifestyle of the *nawab* and the nobility³²⁵. This curtailment in dues and privileges, pressures on the *nawab* for various monetary payments and for personal needs in the altered politico economic scenario, had enhanced the burden of revenue on the people. Thus the variables like the Maratha raids, *Sanyasi* uprising, epidemic, flood, draught, the famine of 1770, popular unrest as a fall out of the new revenue

³²² WBSA, Committee of Circuit Appendix, Proceedings, vol. 9A, July 7 to September 1772, p. 163.

³²³ Debrit, *Transactions*, pp. 127-130.

³²⁴ WBSA, Comptrolling Committee of Revenue at Fort William, April 1 1771-30 May 1771, Proceedings, vol. 1, April 1 1771, p. 27.

³²⁵ Gautam Bhadra, 'Social Groups and Relations in the Town of Murshidabad: 1763-1793', *The Indian Historical Review*, vol. 2, No. 2, p. 314.

system, inflation; curtailment of aristocratic privileges and the revenue enhancement sapped the vitality of the old order. The period saw the rise of the new British megapolis cum port on the bank of the Bhagirathi, situated close to the Bay. Subsequently the *diwani adalat* and mint got transferred to the new city of Calcutta at the lower reach of the Bhagirathi, closer to the Bay of Bengal. This foretold a quantum shift in the population comprising the professionals, merchants and landed class. Kasimbazar as the pure mercantile 'other' of Murshidabad, naturally bore the impact of the dwindling political seat.

River in Kasimbazar and Its Hinterland

Apart from those tangible forces, there were certain other impalpable factors that tended to moderate the trajectories of history in an unhurried fashion. Their effects were not felt immediately, but after a long time. While the East India Company was entrenching its command over the Kasimbazar island; the Ganga river system was undergoing a very slow paced and prolonged phase of alteration spanning over two centuries, which was to have a far reaching impact on its delta. The period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries corroborated with the eastward swing of the Bhagirathi river that might have accelerated sometime in the mid sixteenth century. During this phase there was a great surge of the Padma that turned voluminous as the burgeoning main stream at Sooty at the northern edge of the Kasimbazar island, by gradually replacing the Bhagirathi.

The oscillating river bed of the Bhagirathi was one reason behind the river shift. Further, the general gradient of drainage in the district of Murshidabad does not tilt towards south from north along the course of the river, but from north west to south east. Again, the 'clayey highlands'³²⁶ along the western edge of the Kasimbazar River might have put a check to the westerly migration. The main course of the Ganga as Padma, in its various phases of the eastward journey, was supplying very little head water to the Bhagirathi Hugli. So the accumulated silt could not be washed away. The deposits came in the way of the already reduced flow of the Bhagirathi, which continued to flow in its course skirting the various deposits. The process turned vigorous since sixteenth century. It has been predicted that one day the river would either disappear or linger as a tidal channel

³²⁶ W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, vol. 9, p. 26.

being totally cut off from the head water supply³²⁷ as its main flow was captured by the Padma.

This led to the contraction of the river that got cut off from the major towns and marts located along its bank in the south western Bengal. As the grand trading route represented by the 'Cossimbuzer River' got slowly reduced to an insignificant seasonal channel, Kasimbazar and Murshidabad stood far away from its bank. The dryness of river bed, formation of shoals and *chars*, pools and marshy surroundings, periodic floods and encroachments were essentially indicative of the slow process of change that was taking place in the Ganga river system. The river shift was simultaneously precipitating two opposite delta system-- a dying western delta in which Murshidabad Kasimbazar zone got entrapped and an active eastern delta that stood for the new land of cultivation and colonization along the vibrant Padma³²⁸.

The river shift had been predicted by Rennell in eighteenth century. He noted that the Kasimbazar river used to remain dry between October and May. Further, the head of the Jellenghy gradually shifted three quarters of a mile downwards. The two surveys done at a pace of nine years recorded one of the fastest movements of the river. The normal rate of encroachment was around a mile in ten or twelve years³²⁹. A few of the riverine impediments associated with the shift, that affected the Kasimbazar Murshidabad region and the surrounding area, are discussed below.

One of the major problems that the Company faced was that parts of the river bed used to turn almost dry in post monsoon seasons, revealing shoals and sand banks at various points on its flow path. In fact the navigability of the Kasimbazar river was most directly affected by the formation of sandbanks at various points of its course. Such blockades were the direct fall outs of inundations in the monsoon during which the river in its 'unsettled state' raked up its side or washed away deposits from its bottom. When the river reverted to its original level in post monsoon months, considerable depositions in the form of shoals and sandbanks were found in the place where the river was deep and

³²⁷ Radhakamal Mukherjee, *The Changing Face of Bengal: A Study in Riverine Economy*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, Revised Edition, 2008-2009, p. 134.

³²⁸ Radhakamal Mukherjee, *Changing Face of Bengal*, pp. 122-123.

³²⁹ James Rennell, *An Account of the Ganges and Burrampooter Rivers*, Royal Society of London: 1781, p. 96.

accessible in the previous year. The formidable ones were capable of diverting the channel to a new course³³⁰.

The earliest record of its declining navigability was provided by Tavernier in January 6, 1666. A very large sandbank at Sooty impeded the passage³³¹ between Rajmahal and Kasimbazar. In November 1676, Streysham Master observed that the water level of the Bhagirathi at Kasimbazar between September 23, and November 8, 1676, had receded by at least five fathoms 'right up and downe' after the rainy season³³². Hedges noted in April 1683 that the river above Nadia was full of shoals. Besides, he had to travel from Maula to Kasimbazar by a palanquin³³³. Sometime in 1750 Holwell had to abandon his budgerow and ply on a smaller boat over the Bhagirathi at Kasimbazar. The Surveyor of the Cossimbuzer River Major McGowan had reported shoal formation at a number of places on the bank of the river, namely Sooty, Belgotta, and Bomincut opposite Jumjumcolly³³⁴. It was a common practice to fetch boat loads of timber from the jungles of Morung at Purnia to the Kasimbazar factory and Berhampore³³⁵. But such boats often had to be pushed manually to avoid obstructions around Bhagwangola near Sooty. In the early 1760s, James Rennell had taken note of the fact that at the 'conflux' of the Jellenghy and Kasimbazar river at the lower tip of the Kasimbazar island; the combined water was fairly narrow and 'is now navigable for middle sized boats'³³⁶ in the month of May, 1764.

While shoals, sandbanks hindered the river's navigability, the extensive sandbanks or *char* were fertile islands with high productivity³³⁷, hence a potential source for revenue. A few of them gathered a lot of sediments around them to become very firm. They extended for miles on the Kasimbazar river and got filled up with jungle. Some of those jungles stood higher than full grown elephants.

³³⁰ R.H. Colebrooke, 'On the Course of the Ganges through Bengal', in *Asiatik Researches, Transactions of the Society Instituted in Bengal*, vol. 7, London: 1803, pp. 3-4.

³³¹ O'Malley, *Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Sikkim*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917, p. 49.

³³² Streysham Master, *The Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 221.

³³³ Cited in O'Malley, *Gazetteers: Murshidabad*, p. 10.

³³⁴ NAI, Home Public, 28 December, 1778, Proceedings, vol. 14, p. 2.

³³⁵ WBSA, Comptrolling Committee of Revenue at Fort William, 10 June-31 December 1771, Proceedings, vol. 2, 8 October 1771, pp. 365, 405.

³³⁶ James Rennell, T.H.D. La Touche ed., *The Journals of Major James Rennell, Written for the Information of Governors of Bengal during his Surveys of the Ganges and Brahmaputra Rivers, 1764 to 1767*, Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1910, p. 11.

³³⁷ Jenia Mukherjee, 'No Voice, No Choice: Riverine Changes and Human Vulnerability in the Chars of Malda and Murshidabad', Occasional Paper, 28, IDSK, July, 2011.

Many of the *chars* were inhabited, cleared, cultivated and provided land revenue for ten to twelve years. Quite a few were sources of dispute among the local people who possessed them³³⁸. Then one day the entire island would get washed away by a gush of lashing rain³³⁹.

Further, part of the region flanked by the Ganga and Bhagirathi in the Kasimbazar island, was extremely prone to river changes. At the takeoff point of the Padma, the distance between the Ganges and Kasimbazar river was decreasing at a fast pace. Colebrooke assessed that during his time the narrow isthmus between the two rivers was decreasing by a hundred yards per annum³⁴⁰. (See Map:1.3). This phenomenon could be explained in terms of flood and associated encroachments by river. In fact Kasimbazar Murshidabad belt lay in a flood prone area. Inundations were another major deterrent to a settled way of life and commerce. An instance of the occurrence of a severe flood in September 1671 has been mentioned by the Dutch doctor Nicolas de Graaf, who left an incisive account of it.

Il y eut le 7, le 8 et le 9 Septembre une tres grande inondation par un violent debordement du Gange, qui rompit plusieurs Dignes & Chaussées & mit la pluspart des terres basses sous l'eau; tellement qu'on pouvoit aller en bateau presque par tout. Quantité de personnes et de betes se sauverent vers les montagnes et vers les lieux élevez; mais avec tout cela, il en périt beaucoup avant que de pouvoir y arriver. Plusieurs tours, pagodes, maisons et jardins, même de fortes murailles furent renversées; principalement ce qui étoit près du Gange. Ce desastre renouvela la famine et la misere dans tout le pais³⁴¹.

(On the 7th, 8th & 9th September, there was a great flood by a violent overflow of the Ganges, which broke several Dams & Roads, putting the greater part of the lowlands under water ; so that one could go by boat almost everywhere. Lot of people and beasts fled to the mountains and to the raised places; but with all this, many perished before they could get there. Several towers, pagodas, houses and gardens, even strong walls were overturned; mainly which were near the Ganges. This disaster renewed the famine and misery throughout the country).

Translation: Author

³³⁸R.H. Colebrooke, 'On the Course of the Ganges through Bengal', in *Asiatik Researches, Transactions of the Society Instituted in Bengal*, vol. 7, London: 1803, p. 4.

³³⁹O'Malley, *Gazetteers: Murshidabad*, p. 6.

³⁴⁰Colebrooke, 'On the Course of the Ganges through Bengal', *Asiatik Researches*, p. 9.

³⁴¹Nicolas de Graaf, *Voyages de Nicolas de Graaf aus Indes Orientales; Et en d'autres lieux de l'Asie*, Amsterdam: 1829, p. 74.

Years later, Major Colebrooke described the devastation caused by the river in the Murshidabad district. He noted,

The quantity of land, which has been destroyed by the river in course of a few years, will amount, upon most moderate calculation, to 40 square miles, or 25,600 acres: but this is counter-balanced, in a great measure, by alluviation which has taken place on the opposite shore³⁴².

The Revenue Series took note of the fact that in 1775 the 'dyke of Bommeneahwas of the greatest importance to the city'³⁴³ and had given way to the vagaries of river. Further,

an unexpected inundation of the River at this early season of the year has greatly damaged the Pools under the Management of the Khalsa at Bommeneah and Durjuncolly to repair which....an additional expense of near six Thousand Rupees will be incurred over and above, the sum annually disbursed for this purpose—as these Pools are the immediate defence of the City³⁴⁴.

In 1778, the Board of Inspection noted that the great encroachment was made for the past few years,

by the river between Kasimbazar and Byram Gunge and being under great apprehensions of danger to Kasimbazar and Burrampore and all the low lands in that neighbourhood should further encroachments be made at Aumlahtullah and Bautparah which is to be expected next rains unless some mode be adopted to prevent them³⁴⁵.

The River between Kasimbazar and Byramgunge has been gaining for some years on the Road that leads from Mootyjill through Chunacolly and Bautparra to Kasimbazar Barrampore etc this last year it has made such desertation that the road is almost impassable³⁴⁶.

While on a particularly bad monsoon season, the overflowing river tended to chart out a new flow path and encroached upon land, the pockets of forsaken old bed of

³⁴² Colebrooke, 'On the Course of the Ganges', pp. 8-15.

³⁴³ WBSA, Proceedings, Revenue Department, Governor General in Council, June 20-30, 1775, Proceedings, vol. 5, part. 2, p. 591.

³⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 597.

³⁴⁵ WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 18, September 22-December 21, 1778, dated December 21, 1778, pp. 792-93.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 794.

the Kasimbazar river contained pools of residual water. Those were stagnant water bodies locally known as *bil*. The oldest known channel of the Bhagirathi in Murshidabad district originated from the east of Motijheel, passed through the north of Ayeshbagh and flowed southward. A segment of this path is represented by the Bansbari *bil*. Turning south the river veered towards Boalia *bil* meandering through the east of Chunakhali, west of Hatinagar and Madapur. The channel then flowed towards Mahula. Natural lakes or pools like Boalia, Bhandardaha, and Putijol were connected by the Bhagirathi. There are others like Bishtupur, Chaltia, Telkar *bil*³⁴⁷ (See Sketch 1.1). At least three more paths of the Bhagirathi had been traced around Kasimbazar Murshidabad complex. Such topographical changes probably indicated that the tips or a segment of a serpentine 'S' circuit of the river got joined by the river water in times of high water during excessive rainfall, while the rest of the 'S' forming the part of the old bed, got cut off. The vestigial portion of the old river channel no longer received fresh water and turned into a stagnant water body. Thus marshes were formed along the parts of the abandoned river bed. Such alterations could be explained in terms of excessive deposition of sediment blocking the river's flow and shifting of the river (See Map 1.3). Part of the Kasimbazar river close to Murshidabad Kasimbazar region flowed in a zig zag manner and was prone to shifts.

Impact of Shoal, Bar, *Char* on the Navigability

While the formation of shoals, bars, *chars* most directly affected the navigability and commerce; *chars* were an important source of revenue too, albeit temporary. Inundations, encroachments, formation of stale water bodies definitely led to exodus, shrinkage of arable land and loss of revenue.

Since 1820s the Company State showed its inclination to possess the *char* lands evidently to enhance its revenue receipt. The landowners of Bengal used to regularly squabble amongst themselves for the ownership of those unclaimed lands that emerged out of the river bed. The Collectors were specifically asked to note down the ownership of *char* lands as the Board of Revenue had realized that the value of *char* would increase over a period of time as with every passing year

³⁴⁷ O'Malley, *Gazetteers: Murshidabad*, pp. 14-15; Nurul Amin Biswas, 'Murshidabader Jolashoy Puratotto o Tar Artho Shamajik Gututto', in Kamal Chaudhury ed., *Murshidabader Itihash*, vol. 2, pp. 385-393.

it would yield more crops³⁴⁸. Many *zamindars* in possession of *chars* in the MurshidabadKasimbazar area had to give up their claims in favour of the East India Company.

Further a correspondence addressed by the Lieutenant Colonel R. Tickell, the Superintendent General, Low Province, to Captain G. Young, Secretary, Military Board, dated December 30, 1833, enumerated that the *char* lands were prone to alter their dimensions that had an adverse impact on the settlement and infrastructures built on them.

On reference to the accompanying Sketch.....of the Coossimbuzar Island, it will be seen that the Factory has been erected on the point of a Churr or Sand Bank, which 50 years ago, was atNabobGunge....bearing NE 45* from the Factory and distant about 1/1/2 Mile.

The Sand Bank it appears subsequently extended a long way to the Eastward as much probably as $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile, judging from the appearance of the opposite River Bang between Nabob Gunge and Furreedpore. The stream has however of late years been gradually returning to its old channel and is nowalmost close under the Residents Dwelling House which is only 25 feet from the edge of the Bank but was 445 feet distant in December 1829....³⁴⁹

Again, by the 1850s, an old quarter named Mahajantolee in the close proximity of Kasimbazar-Murshidabad belt that housed a settlement of the Rajasthani and Gujarati merchants, was being encroached by the Bhagirathi and the evacuees resettled in the upcoming town of Ziagunge popularly known as New Murshidabad (See Sketch1.2). The process of river encroachment had started much earlier³⁵⁰. For some years a fertile *char* raised its head around the place roughly corroborating with Mahajantolee³⁵¹. *Chars* were fertile tracts of land and hence brought rich revenue to the owners. This often initiated legal battles among multiple claimants. An extract of the representation by Rajah Rajballav may be quoted in this context.

the new land which has been founded by the alteration in the course of the river to which I lay claim may be Kettar Chir etc

³⁴⁸ Somendra Chandra Nandy, *History of the Cossimbazar Raj*, vol. 1, pp. 113-115.

³⁴⁹ WBSA, General (General) Department, Proceedings, vol. 1, November 21, 1834-March 25, 1835, December 1, 1834, p. 109.

³⁵⁰ WBSA, General (General) Department, Proceedings, vol. 55, Part 2, 13 September, 1848, p. 342.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

which my agents had voluntarily given up. My agents write me that the Maleerchir etc included in the Jaghier being washed away by the River, formed a Chir, which they cultivated and made it produce a revenue, but the Gomastahh of the farmer giving it the name Kettar Chir, usurped it³⁵².

Due to the blockades at Sooty, Belgutta, Bomincut by the sandbanks in the river, a number of *arangs* located close to it faced difficulty in transshipping their items for export. This led to exploring alternative river routes; as is evident from the following letter,

Arangs at which the raw silk is procured are Puchareah, Silgunge, Malda, Nabobgunge, Beauleah, Commercolly and so far north east of the Pudda or Great River as Rungpore why these arangs should not immediately send their investments to a presidency by a navigation which is free and open during every season of the year through the channel of the Comar Nullah which falls from the Great River at Cushtee, passes by Commercolly and communicate with the passage of Balligaut and Major Tolly's Canal and thereby avoid subjecting the Company the double expence of carriage, package and toll levied by Captain Mc Gowan³⁵³

Generally, inundations and encroachment of land by the river went hand in hand (See Map1.4 and Sketch 1.1). The following citations would enumerate the extent of water borne devastations in and around KasimbazarMurshidabad region and the adjoining areas. The extract of a letter dated August 23, 1779, to Edward Baber, the Chief of the Provincial Council of Revenue, Murshidabad, written by the Contractor for the city and Baminia pools would testify to the region being prone to high intensity inundations posing challenges to settled community life.

You have been witnesses to the very bad weather we have lately had and the effects of it have been felt everywhere—but on the river more remarkably on the 9th, 10th, and 11th instant it rose to so astonishing a height to overflow many of the bounds and the rising of the water came with such violent force and rapidity that it bore away everything before it. I had taken every precaution....to prevent the rivers making any encroachments upon the Island of Kasimbazar and should no doubt have succeeded in my endeavours

³⁵²WBSA, Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 7(A), 2 September to 21 October, 1771, p. 46.

³⁵³NAI, Home Public, Consultation, March 22, 1779, No. 6, "B", pp. 1-2.

had the river but continued in its usual channel but having run higher by several levels that it may have known it overflowed³⁵⁴.

At Zeah Gunge, just above Muxadabad, and at Byramgunje, Chunacolly and Bottparra, close above the factory at Kasimbazar the encroachments have been so great as not to leave room for making new poostahs without destroying large bazaars and great numbers of houses advancing far on the towns of Muxudabad and Kasimbazar and approaching very near the low ground in which numbers of tanks, ditches and zeels which extends a considerable way into the country near the back of the cantonments at Berhampore towards Daudpore³⁵⁵.

The following extract of a Company's letter dated May 25, 1772, explains the adverse effect of inundations on the land revenue.

The waters have flowed over a large extent of cultivated land. Wherever this misfortune has happen'd and by having on the subsiding of the rains an immense quantity of land has rendered them for a considerable time unfit for culture of any kind of crop. This is an evil which must every year increase unless a speedy and effectual repair of bunds.... It is a work so essential to the welfare of a great part of the province by securing the lands and crops, that the expence attending it is unavoidable³⁵⁶.

The extract cited below from the proceedings of the Committee of Circuit, acknowledged the fact that the riverine vagaries affected cultivation and hence revenue generation in Lushkarpore, a major silk hub near Kasimbazar. Located on the Kasimbazarisland close to Kasimbazar, it used to be one of the twenty five *zamindaris* under Nawab Sujauddin Khan's land revenue system. Between 1772 and 1774 it was one of the few districts whose collections were controlled by a Commissioner at Murshidabad³⁵⁷. It was a principal silk producing *aranging* Bengal³⁵⁸.

³⁵⁴WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue, Murshidabad, June 7-November 4, 1779, Proceedings, vol. 20, pp. 462-65.

³⁵⁵WBSA, Board of Revenue, Proceedings, vol. 21, July 24, 1787, p. 7.

³⁵⁶WBSA, Comptrolling Committee of Revenue, February 4, 1772-October 10, 1772, Proceedings, vol. 3A, p. 228.

³⁵⁷O'Malley, *Gazetteers: Murshidabad*, p. 50.

³⁵⁸WBSA, Proceedings, Committee of Circuit, Kasimbazar, Appendix, vol. 9A, July 7- September 17 1772, p. 163.

Table 1.10: Account of the balances in revenue to be collected from Lushkarpore by the encroachment of river and drifts of land (*Hustabud Jamma and Vasul Baki* of the *Zamindary* of Lashkarpore for the Bengal Years 1177 (1771) and 1178 (1772)).

Types of Land	Bengal Year 1177 (1771)	Bengal Year 1178 (1772)
Khas Mahals	Rs. 1,786	Rs. 2,403
Lands in Farms	Rs.556	
‘Mogucoury’(Malguzari) Talooks	Rs.166	
Charity Lands Resumed	Rs.36	
	Rs. 2,544	Rs. 2,403

Smaller denominations of Rupee like ‘anna’, ‘paisa’, ‘pai’ have been omitted.

Source: Adapted from WBSA, Proceedings, Committee of Circuit, Kasimbazar, Appendix, vol., 9A, 7 July-17 September 1772, p. 163.

However the archival documents consulted so far are indicative at best of an impressionistic pattern, leaving a wide scope for further research enumerating a clear cut trend. The *chars* meant additional cultivable lands. But floods, marshes, river encroachments and shoals, bars came in the way of smooth navigability; invariably led to migration, resettlement, shrinkage of arable land and living space, reforestation by secondary undergrowth in pockets. Often the *jheels* turned the adjoining areas uninhabitable. The marshes along the Bhagirathi’s bank indicated loss of navigability and the stagnant water bred malaria and water borne diseases like cholera. People moved away from such unhealthy areas.

Again another example would not be out of context here. Though in the 1770s, Plassey was under the jurisdiction of Serampore, geographically it was situated within the ‘Cossimbuzar Island’. The following data has been cited to show that among other factors, river encroachment was considered a major factor influencing the revenue balance.

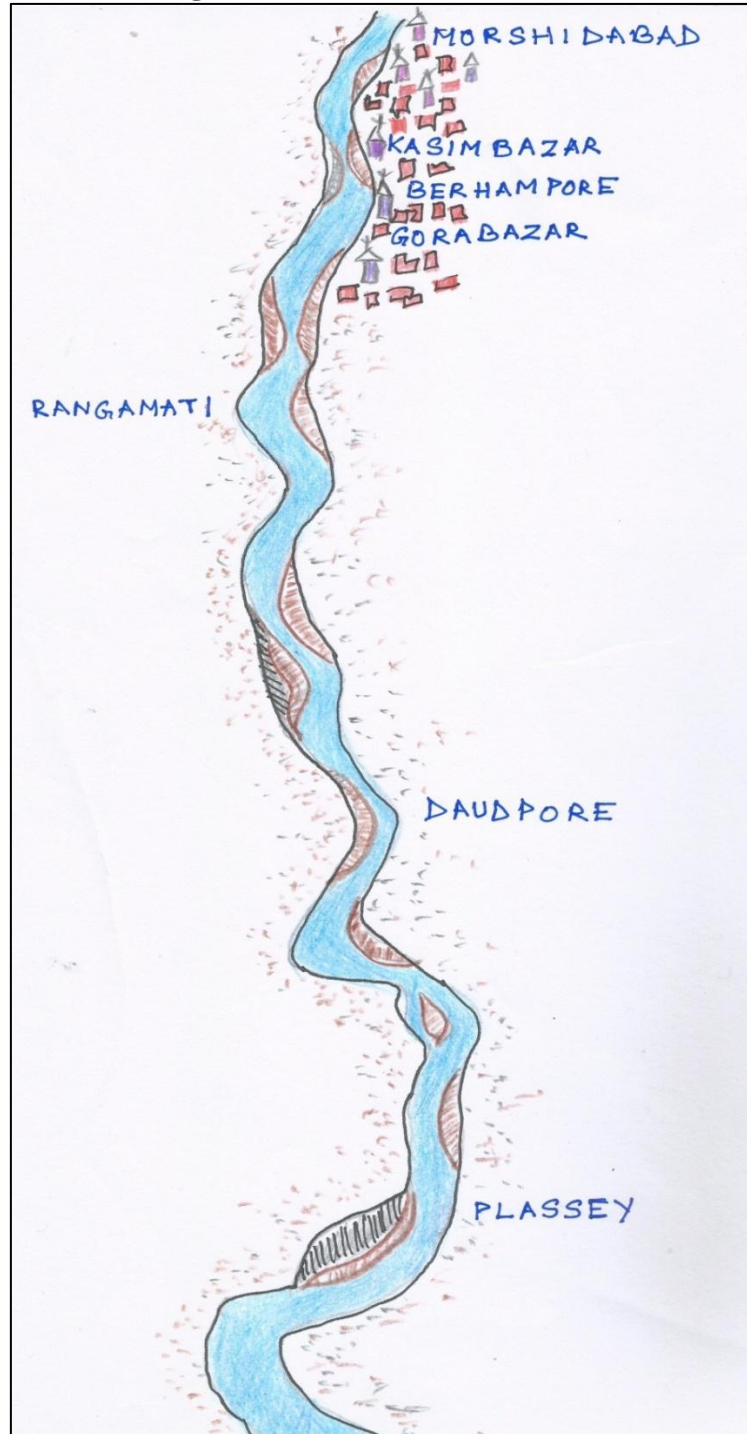
Table 1.11: Encroachment by the river influencing the revenue balance

This revenue the farmers were unable to pay but incurred a balance of	In which the following abatements were made viz	Remained in Balance
Rs. 28,214	Rs. 6,000 (On account of the encroachment of the river)	10, 207
	Rs.12,007 (Abolition of duties on Grain)	
	Rs. 18,007	

Smaller denominations of Rupee like ‘anna’, ‘paisa’, ‘pai’ have been omitted.

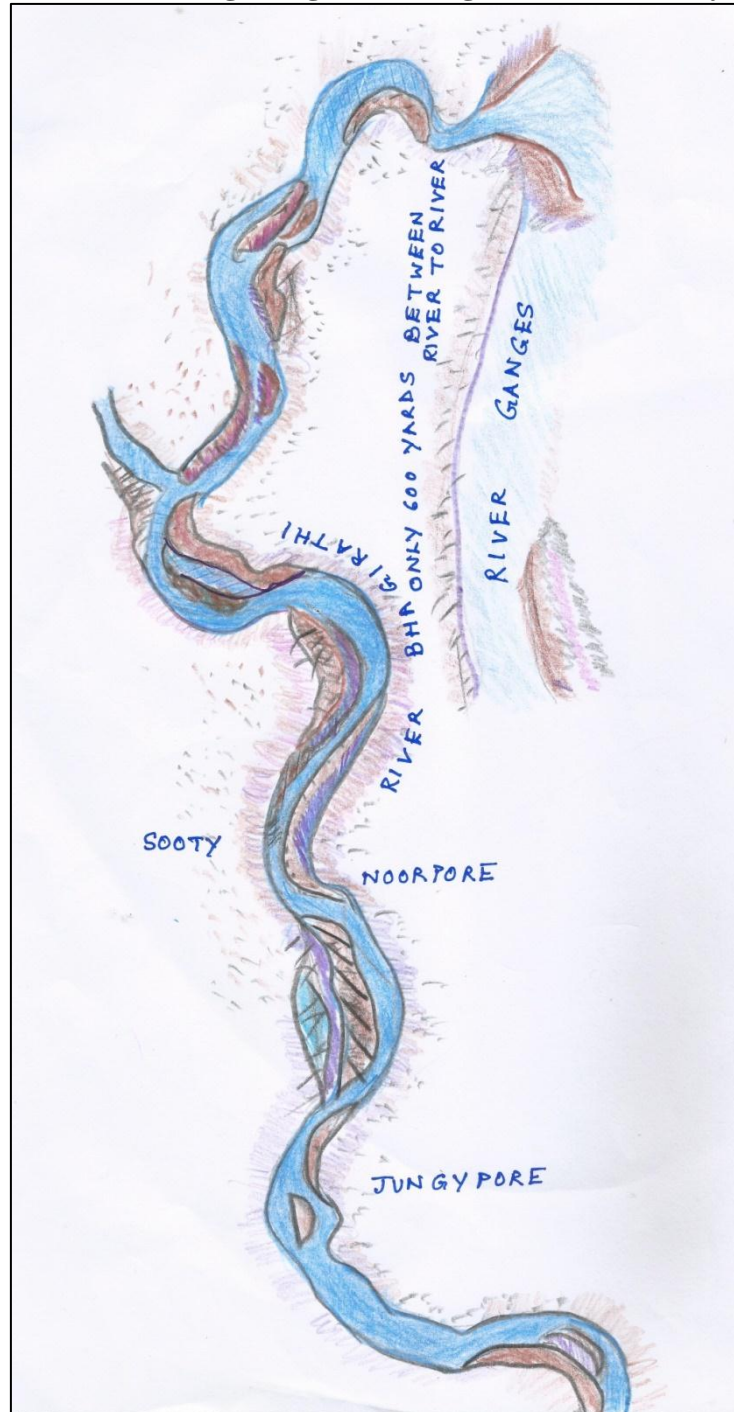
Source: Adapted from WBSA, Proceedings, Revenue (Governor General in Council), 1-29 October, 1776, vol. 19, part 1, dated October 4, p. 65.

Map 1.2: Meandering Kasimbazar River from Murshidabad to Nadia



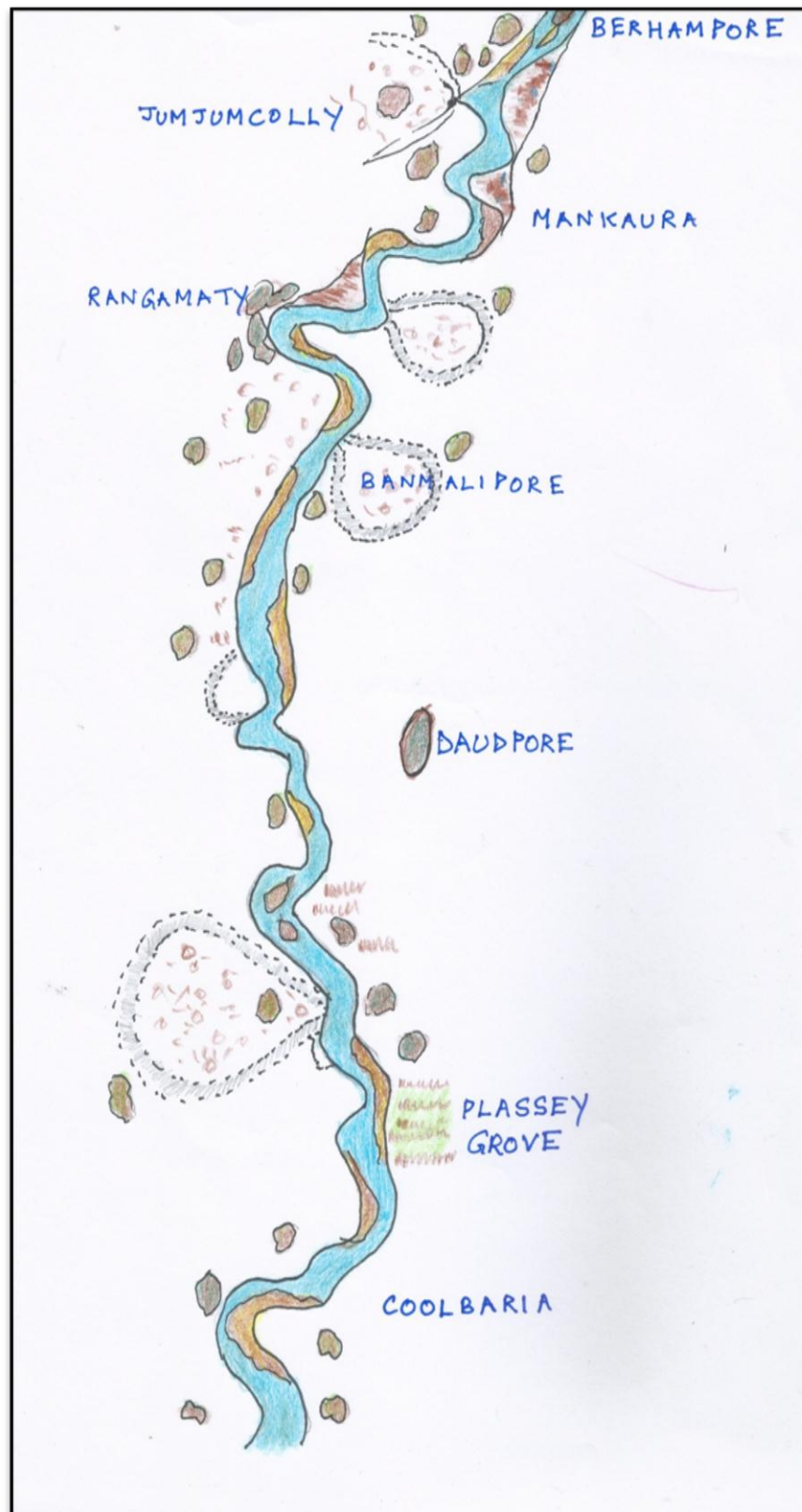
Source : Adapted, National Library of India, J. F. Stace, *To the Merchants of Calcutta These Maps of the Hoogly, Bhagruttee, Ganges, Goorae, Burasshee and Soonderbund Rivers Used by Steamers in the Inland Navigation*, 1847, Sheet 1 of the Bhagruttee, From Nadia to Rampore Factory. Map not to Scale.

Map 1.3: Encroaching Ganga and Bhagirathi above Sooty



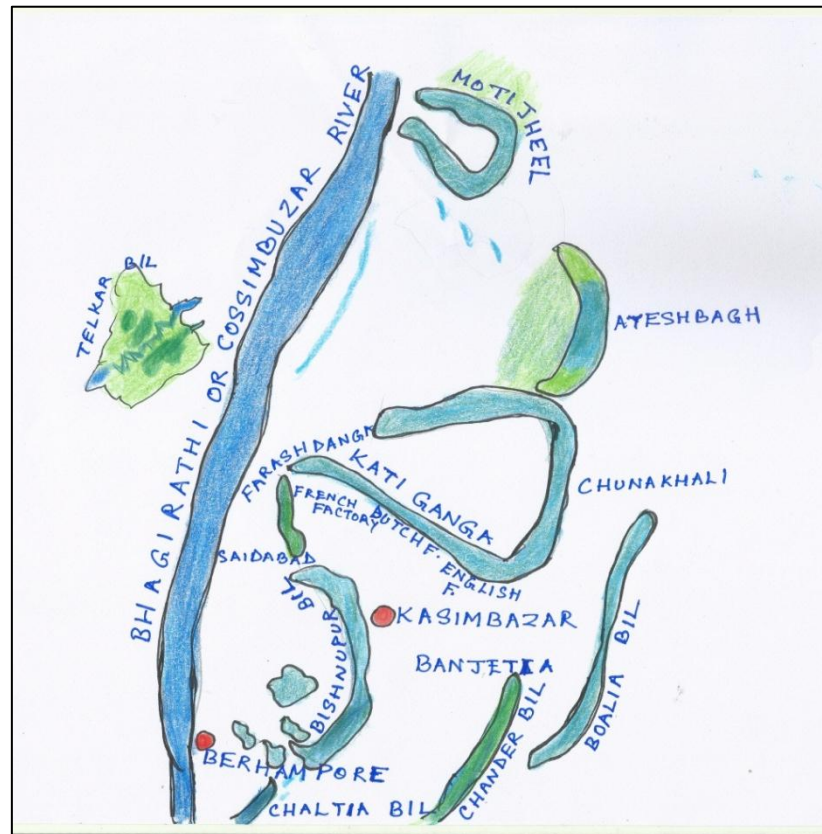
Source: Adapted, National Library of India, Stace, *To the Merchants of Calcutta*, Sheet 2 of the Bhagruttee, From Rampur Factory to the Ganges. Map not to Scale.

Map 1.4: The Kasimbazar River and its Ox Bow Lakes



Source: Adapted from NAI, Cartography Section, Catalogue of the Historical Maps of the Survey of India (1700-1900), Survey of the Baugrutty or Cossimbuzar River from Nuddea to Berhampore, Colebrooke, 1796. Map not to Scale.

Sketch 1.1: Ox bow lakes (bils) or parts of old river bed in and around Kasimbazar

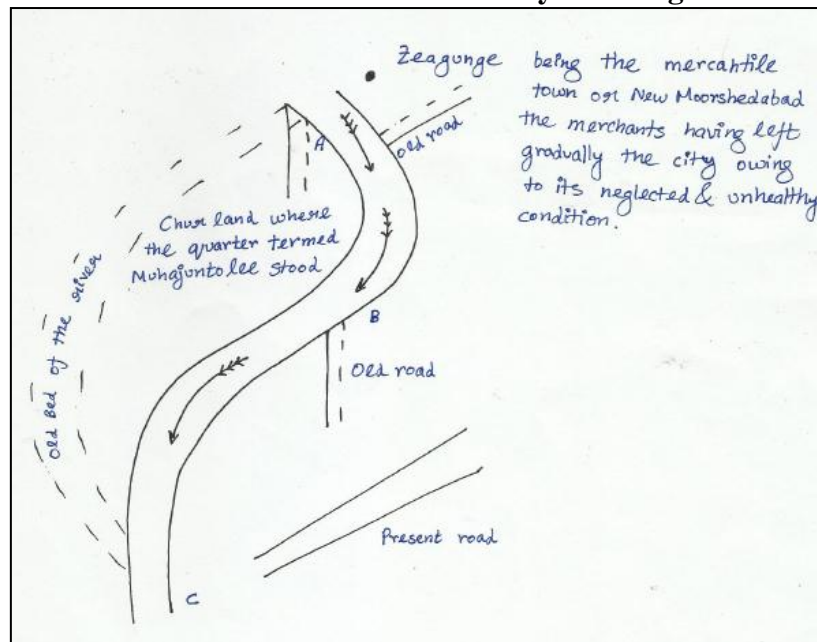


Source: Adapted from *Murshidabad Phirey Dyakha; A Glimpse from the Past*, Main Page, 'Account of change of course of Bhagirathi', April 16, 2012.

<http://www.murshidabad.net/news/news-id-8.html>

Accessed on 21.2.17.

Sketch 1.2: Land Encroachment by the Bhagirathi



Source: Adapted from WBSA, Proceedings of General (General) Department, Volume 55, Part 2, September 13, 1848.

Table 1.12: Condition of the River: c. 1650-1850

Riverine alterations over a period of two centuries could be discerned from the visitors' narratives that have been arranged chronologically.

Travellers	Approximate Period of Visit	Observations on the River	Inference
Tavernier	January, 1666	'The great bank of sand' at Sooty obstructed his way to Kasimbazar ³⁵⁹	The big sandbank that was to impede the headwater flow had appeared already.
Streynsham Master	Between September 23 and November 8, 1676	'The water did fall in the river about five fathoms right up and down' ³⁶⁰ .	The water level diminished in post monsoon dry weather.
Alexander Hamilton	Years of Travel, 1688-1723	Located along the 'Ganges', it was a large and prosperous commercial place, frequented by rich merchants. Cassenbazaar had taken over the 'trade and grandeur' of 'Muxudabaud' ³⁶¹ .	
De Gennes de la Chanceliere	Early 1740s	The 'Kasimbazar River' was referred to as a 'small river' that was not navigable in dry season. In the rains one used it as a short cut route. ³⁶²	The river that was brimming full in the rains, turned narrow in post monsoon times.
Joseph Tieffenthaler	Work was published in 1787	He described the Bhagirathi as 'le petit Gange' and Padma as 'le Grande Gange'. Bhagirathi was being drained through Sotimohana (Sooty) and was navigable for four months ³⁶³ .	Noted the burgeoning Padma and a narrow Ganga watering the two cities.
Archival Record: Provincial Council of	A letter dated October 16, 1771, from the	'Cassenbuzer' bound boats carrying timber from Purnianeeded	The headwater barely trickled from Sooty

³⁵⁹ Jean Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 1, Valentine Ball and Crooke, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2004, pp. 125-26.

³⁶⁰ Streynsham Master, *The Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 28.

³⁶¹ Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies, Being the Observations and Remarks by Captain Alexander Hamilton, 1688-1723*, vol. 2, C. Hitch and A. Millar, 1744, p. 20.

³⁶² Indrani Ray, 'Journey to Cassimbazar', p. 156.

³⁶³ Joseph Tieffenthaler, 'Le Developpement du Cours du Gange et de celui du Gagra', in M. Aquetil Du Perron, *Recherches et Geographique Sur L'Inde*, vol. 2, New Edition, Berlin: The Press of Pierre Bourdeaux, 1787.

Revenue at Murshidabad	Provincial Council of Revenue at Murshidabad to James Alexander, the Chief of the Comptrolling Council of Revenue	assistance at Sooty as 'boats may fall behind or be detained at Sooty' due to lack of depth of the river ³⁶⁴ .	downwards.
James Rennell	Publication in 1788	The map of Rennell explicitly shows an expanding Padma as a splendid channel and an inconsequential channel of the Kasimbazar River or Bhagirathi. The 'Kasimbazar River is almost dry from October to May' ³⁶⁵ .	The river at Kasimbazar was barely navigable in dry seasons.
Lord Valentia	Publication in 1807	Though the Kasimbazar Island was populous and had many miserable mud houses, the river turned into a 'trifling channel' in summer ³⁶⁶ .	The river barely watered the once lively settlement that was on the wane.
J. E. Gastrall	1852-55	The Ganga was open for steamers and large boats round the year. Its effluents; the Bhagirathi and Jellenghy remained dry and unnavigable by large boats between 15 th October and 15 th June. But mid June onwards for the next six months those provided passage up and down to steamers and large boats. Thus the longer route via the Sundarbans was avoided ³⁶⁷ .	The river condition did not improve. It turned into a rain fed seasonal channel that got cut off from its headwater.

³⁶⁴ WBSA, Proceedings, Provincial Council of Revenue, Murshidabad, vol. 7, September 2- November 28, 1771, p. 80.

³⁶⁵ James Rennell, *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan, or the Mogul Empire: with an introduction, illustrative of the Geography and the Present Division of the Country, and the Map of the Countries situated between the head of the Indus and the Caspian Sea*, London, 1788, p. 259.

³⁶⁶ Josiah Conder, *The Modern Traveller, A Popular Description, Geographical, Historical, and Topographical, of the Various Countries of the Globe. India*, vol. 3, Edinburgh: Oliver and Royd, 1828, pp. 146-47.

³⁶⁷ J. E. Gastrall, *Statistical and Geographical Report of the Murshidabad District*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Office, 1860, p. 6.

Thus at the entrance of the Kasimbazar island, blocked the Bhagirathi's flow and indicated an early riverine shift in the 1660s and over the next two hundred years the situation turned worse.

XI. Plans to Control the River

However, in the rainy season that extended for several months boats provided the cheap and convenient mode of trade and exchange in the Kasimbazar island. Thomas Bowrey noted,

All the Saltpeeter is Sent hence to Hugly in great flattbottomed Vessels, of an Exceedinge Strength, which are called Patellas; each of them will bringe downe 4,5,6,000 Bengala maunds.

They are built Very Stronge, by reason of the most impetuous Eddies they meet with in some places, that force them many times Upon one Shoale or Other, soe that, were they not Stronge and very flat, they, would be in greater peril of wringing to pieces or turning bottom up. Yet some years the both the English and the Dutch doe Suffer very considerable losses by them.

Many Patellas come downe yearly laden with Wheat and other graine, and Goe up laden with Salt and bees wax, the Kings onely Commodities³⁶⁸.

Many a times the big saltpetre boats from Patna waited with cargo at Kasimbazar as the smaller sized *patellas* drawing little water between Kasimbazar and Hooghly; reached late. So it was a common practice for the Patna fleet to unload huge volumes of saltpetre at Kasimbazar after which it started its return journey³⁶⁹. The *patellas* at Kasimbazar used to collect the saltpetre at their own pace and transport it to Hooghly port. So Kasimbazar evolved as the collection point and export node of saltpetre. Another important river of the Kasimbazar island, Jellenghy provided better navigability than the Kasimbazar river as even in the driest months the boats of less than two feet draught could sail on it. Its traffic added to the revenue of the Nadia Rivers as fisheries brought in approximately Rs. 2,000, per year³⁷⁰.

³⁶⁸Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account*, p. 225.

³⁶⁹Sushil Chaudhury, 'The Rise and Decline of Hoogly', *Bengal Past and Present: A Journal of Modern Indian and Asian History* (January-June), vol. 86, part 1, no. 161, pp. 33-68.

³⁷⁰J.H.Tull Walsh, *A History of Murshidabad District (Bengal): With Biographies of Some of its Noted Families*, London: 1903, p. 38.

However, according to an official English letter of the early 1770s; in the summer, the shoals and sandbanks used to impede the navigability so badly that the officials were 'deprived of the benefit of water Carriage'. The locals used to hire out their cattle on 'long and hazardous Journeys'. That was the time when 'constant employment' was found for cattle and 'rates of hire' increased because of the rise in demand³⁷¹. The imperial roads or the trunk roads of the Mughals connected Kasimbazar with Rajmahal, Bhagalpore, Patna, to as far as Delhi and Agra. Another route connected the settlement with Malda, Dinajpore, Rangpore, while yet another with Dacca, Calcutta, Burdwan and Beerbhum. Local roads networked Murshidabad with Bhagwangola, Jellenghy, Plassey, Burdwan, Sooty, Rajmahal³⁷². Nevertheless, till the introduction of the railways in the 1850s, such a busy commercial belt thrived essentially on the riverine communication. So boatmen were an integral part of the socio commercial milieu.

Removal of Sandbanks

The Company's official correspondences expressed concerns with the riverine challenges that came in the way of navigation and trade. The vast body of secondary literature on the attempts to tame the Bengal rivers hardly made a detailed reference of the obstructions around the Kasimbazar island. Some references have been made to the extensive sandbank at Sooty. The archival records have been used in this particular segment in order to highlight the extent of planning and proposals by Major McGowan in rendering the Kasimbazar river navigable.

The East India Company was desperate to overcome riverine challenges in order to pursue its business in a smooth manner. The immediate objective was to turn the Kasimbazar river into a perennial channel so that the inland navigation of Bengal improved, by keeping open the concerned river and the Jellenghy during the dry season. The major sandbank at Sooty, 'at the junction of the three branches of the Ganges',³⁷³ had grown into such an impassable blockade that the vessels plying down the Hugli via Kasimbazar had to be moored there. The cargoes were

³⁷¹ WBSA, Copy Book of Letters Issued by the Resident at the Durbar at Murshidabad, September 28 1772- March 2 1774, dated July 26, 1773.

³⁷² K.M. Mohsin, *Bengal District in Transition*, pp.11-12.

³⁷³ NAI, Home Public, December 14, 1778, Proceedings, vol. 25, p. 1.

transported by road to Jungypore and from there carried by small boats down the Bhagirathi³⁷⁴.

The pioneering effort to intervene with the Bhagirathi's navigability was proposed by Captain McGowan. In 1778 a contract was signed between him and the authority at Calcutta to restore a year round navigation of the Bhagirathi from its source at Sooty to its confluence at Serampore with the Hugli. The river was to be made fit to adjust to boats of upto 600 mounds burden and McGowan was to collect toll from boats passing through this channel between 20th November and 20th June.

A letter dated December 8, 1778, sent from Fort William to the Provincial Council at Murshidabad stated that McGowan was permitted to work for the navigation of the said river,

throughout the year for twelve months and to establish *chokies* for the collection thereof at Sooty Belgotta Bomincut opposite to Jumjumcolly and at Burragunge near Nadia³⁷⁵.

They (the shoals) obstructed the passage of boats during the dry season, hence the plan was to keep the old navigation open throughout the yearwe have reserved to ourselves the power of removing or altering these stretches by the 1st of June next if before that time it shall be found necessary for the relief of the said navigation³⁷⁶.

McGowan adopted the following steps to maintain the year round navigability of the river. He made a cut at the head of the river in question, which though incomplete, showed considerable improvement, as the volume of water pouring into it increased considerably. Further he proposed to cut a canal of about a mile long and 200 yards broad from the Ganga above Furrakabad in order to channelize the water of the Goman Murdan that poured its water near the head of the said river. He expected that if done perfectly, it could be successful in maintaining the navigability of the Kasimbazar River throughout the year³⁷⁷. Moreover, McGowan had requested the concerned authority at the Provincial Council of Revenue, to permit him to exact a toll on all boats passing the river for the period between

³⁷⁴ Kalyan Rudra, *The Encroaching Ganga and Social Conflicts: The Case of West Bengal, India*, p. 5. <http://www.gangawaterway.in/assets/02Rudra.pdf>, Accessed on 24. 11. 15.

³⁷⁵ NAI, Home Public Proceedings, vol. 14, December 28, 1778, p. 1.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

November 20 and June 20³⁷⁸, ‘in consideration of the great expense, labour and risqué to effect this work of keeping the channel open throughout the year’³⁷⁹.

Table 1.13: The proposed rates of toll for the period between November 20, 1778 and June 20, 1779, for 20 years

On budgerows with persons travelling	8 <i>annas</i> per oar
On empty budgerow	4 <i>annas</i> per oar
On empty boat	4 <i>annas</i> per 100 maunds
On fishing boat	1 <i>anna</i> per day

Source: Adapted from WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol., 15, March 16, 1778, p. 121.

The English East India Company Resident at Kasimbazar and the Members of the Board of Trade nurtured some resentment regarding the collection of tolls amounting to Rupees 24,888 per annum³⁸⁰ by McGowan as they felt that his performance fell short of his big promise. Also, an alternative river route to transport the whole of Company’s raw silk investments amounting to approximately 70 lakhs of rupees was proposed sometime in 1779.

A letter written by Thomas Burges dated February 27, 1787, addressed to John Shore, the President; the Board of Revenue highlighted the formation of a series of sandbanks along the Bhagirathi around Murshidabad city and the cantonment area at Kasimbazar opposite Baulpurragunge and Byramgunge in Burdwan district. This called for its immediate removal as a prerequisite for the reclamation of pools³⁸¹.

The young CompanyState was feeling the adverse impact of inundations and river shifts on the revenue receipt. In a reply to an official correspondence the Naib Dewan commented,

The charges for repairing and fencing the banks of the river and mending broken bridges are indispensably necessary, both for the security of the city and its neighbourhood, as well as for the preservation of the harvest of the ryots against the inundation of the river.³⁸²

³⁷⁸For the period when the river remained closed.

³⁷⁹WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 15, March 16, 1778, p. 121.

³⁸⁰NAI, Home Public Consultation no. 3, September 18, 1780, p. 1.

³⁸¹WBSA, Board of Revenue, Proceedings, vol. 10, Part 2, February 20-February 27, 1787, pp. 581-85.

³⁸²WBSA, Comptrolling Committee of Revenue at Fort William, Proceedings, vol. 1A, April 1-May 30, 1771, p. 97.

Poolbundy

The work of *poolbundy* was basically taken up ‘to serve the factory of Kasimbazar against all encroachments and inundations’³⁸³. The *poolbundy* was initiated more as a spontaneous act to tackle exigencies rather than a chalked out approach towards initiating a definite hydraulic culture³⁸⁴. A more or less similar view was endorsed by Tirthankar Roy, who claimed that there was never a definite embankments policy in early years of the Company’s rule³⁸⁵. In pre-colonial Bengal, this specific public work traditionally lay within the domain of the local landlords till the Company officially began asserting itself as the collector of revenue of the *suba* in 1765. As a Company correspondence dated December 18, 1798 indicated; at times the cultivators themselves got involved in building embankments in Kasimbazar area. But such efforts were often played down by the Company which was trying to assume a benevolent stance. In fact Roy pointed out that the Company records claimed that embankments along the Bhagirathi in Murshidabad town were repaired by the government to secure the ‘lives and properties of thousands of its subjects’³⁸⁶.

Records are replete with innumerable instances of rain, flood and damaged *poolbundies* in the Murshidabad region. Calcutta Committee of Revenue records show that Lushkerpur pools frequently gave way to inundations till late eighteenth century and caused worry to the Government³⁸⁷. At,

Sachilapre Sreemantpre etc on the north east side of the Cossembazar Island....I find no bunds of any consequence were ever erected there or were indeed necessary until lately and that the trifling embankments which were thrown up occasionally, upon any extraordinary rise of the river, were made by the ryots themselves to prevent more water coming into their rice fields than was absolutely proper.....³⁸⁸.

³⁸³ WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 20, February 6, 1779, p. 57.

³⁸⁴ Ujjayan Bhattacharya, 'Management of Water Channels: Some Reflections on Colonial Projects and their Objectives', Paper presented at *5th International Water History Association Conference*, 13-17 June 2007, Tampere, Finland, p. 2.

³⁸⁵ Tirthankar Roy, *Natural Disasters and Indian History*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 78.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

³⁸⁷ WBSA, Committee of Circuit, April 6-30, 1781, April 25, 1781, pp. 664-65.

³⁸⁸ WBSA, Board of Revenue (Miscellaneous), Proceedings, vol. 273, December 4-24, 1798, p. 427.

The Superintendent of the pools, Captain James Parlby, took stock of the situation, noted the indifference of the Government and had urged the Government to intervene. He had received some disbursements ‘for the repairs of the pools and bunds in the district of Moorshedabad’ and had enclosed a receipt for the excess amount still due on the estimate.

Estimate approved by the Government..... 23,806

Amount received..... 23,500

Balance306³⁸⁹

Captain Parlby emphasized that

the excess of the estimate is entirely owing to the extraordinary height to which the river rose in September last. It exceeded the level of 1796 by exactly nine inches some of the bunds were overflowed—a few failed and those of the most importance which were pressed by a very heavy body of water could only be preserved by indefatigable labour. The people were employed on them day and night³⁹⁰.

However recurrent emergency situations ultimately called for appointment of trained engineers and surveyors and gradually local level interventions started diminishing. Thus specialists came in and serious floods were prevented by numerous and expensive *bunds*. Nevertheless, in as early as 1778 itself, an official letter forwarded to the Governor General Warren Hastings and the Members of the Provincial Council of Revenue took note of the fact that Kasimbazar and adjoining areas were under a serious threat of encroachment. The extract of the correspondence stated that,

The River between Cossimbuzer and Byaram Gunge has been gaining for some years on the Road that leads from Mootyjill through Chunacolly and Bautparra to Cossimbuzer Barrampore etc this last year it has made such desertation that the road is almost impassable....if it should break in, it will overflow all the low lands in the neighbourhood and surround the whole town of Cossimbuzer and the cantonments at Burrampore³⁹¹.

‘It will be necessary to erect a pool’ to check this ‘vast incroachments’ between Kasimbazar and Byaramgunge³⁹² which was happening at a fast pace. Kumud

³⁸⁹Ibid., p. 429. Smaller denominations of Rupee have been ignored.

³⁹⁰Ibid., pp. 429-430.

³⁹¹WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 18, 21 December 1778, pp. 793-794.

³⁹²Ibid., p. 794.

Ranjan Biswas pointed out that the embankments in Murshidabad district generally tended to hinder the ‘dissemination of spill’³⁹³. Instead of an equitable spread of the fertilizing silt, it got deposited back on top of the river bed and raised it, which enhanced the chances of inundations in the adjoining land in monsoon. The area turned uncultivable, water logged and unhealthy; being devoid of the ‘top dressing’ that could have reinvigorated the soil³⁹⁴.

As the Bhagirathi around the Murshidabad Kasimbazar region was veering eastward, the silt deposits were no longer receiving sufficient water to get dispersed equitably. This led to raised surface that obstructed a proper flow of river water and created conditions of flood. One of the earliest recorded floods in this region occurred in 1785.

The great river had overflowed its banks and laid the country between the city and Bogwangola entirely under water.... That from the same unfortunate cause some of the dykes on the Cossimbazar river had likewise given way below the Berhampore Cantonments; and that the water from these two sources having joined, had overflowed that part of the country and had come up to the walls of the Cossimbazar filature³⁹⁵.

At times ill maintained old embankments collapsed under the pressure of the gushing streams in times of heavy rain. The extract of a correspondence dated October 19, 1798, forwarded by C. Buller, Subordinate Secretary; Revenue Board to the Earl of Mornington, K.T., the Governor General in Council, has been cited in this context. This appears as an enclosure to the Board’s letter to the Collector of Murshidabad, C. Oldsfield Esqr.

With respect to the district of Moorshedabad we beg leave to point out to the notice of your Lordship in Council that the casualty which is stated to have happened in that part of the Country, has not arisen so much from breaches in the Embankments as from the waters overflowing the Bunds and in other elevated places (where no bunds have been raised) over the natural Banks of the river, which as it is a thing Entirely unprecedented could neither have been foreseen or prevented³⁹⁶.

³⁹³ Kumud Ranjan Biswas, *Rivers of Bengal: A Compilation*, vol. 3, Calcutta: West Bengal District Gazetteers, Government of West Bengal, p. 49.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁹⁵ L.S.S. O’Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteer: Murshidabad*, p. 116.

³⁹⁶ West Bengal District Records, New Series, Murshidabad, Letters Received, 1789-1803, Revenue Board, October 19, 1798, p. 371.

But an extract of an official correspondence noted that it was perhaps meaningless to grapple with the vagaries of nature.

in every year the poostahs have been destroyed wherever the stream happened to sett forcibly against them, and with them a considerable part of the banks, so much as to require from fifty to one hundred and fifty feet to cut further on the banks for forming slopes to fix new poostahs, and this has often happened in places where villages and bazaars stood consequently great loss have been sustained³⁹⁷.

XII. Problems in Controlling the River

However in the 1770s Rennell had cautioned against intervening with the natural flow of the major rivers. Especially since the Ganga had been prone to so many changes, one had to make a thorough survey of the river and its probable impact on the riparian tracks during the highest floods before undertaking such a major step against the nature³⁹⁸. Nevertheless the navigational problem of the Kasimbazarriver had haunted the British in Bengal for a long time and plans to experiment with the river flow continued unabated, despite warnings by experts. In 1797, Jellenghy and Bhagirathi remained fordable throughout the dry months³⁹⁹. The compulsions of trade and revenue were indeed so pressing that the English Company State had undertaken a highly risky venture of moderating the Bhagirathi river. In 1801, Colebrook reopened the issue of making a passage from the Ganga to the Hugli in order to improve the inland navigation of the province. But his plan could not be implemented. In 1810, Garstin surveyed the Bhagirathi from Sooty upwards to the bank of the Ganga in the vicinity of Farrukhabad and lower down to the opening of the Jellenghy. He observed sharp river sweeps and concluded that between McGowan's time and his tenure there had been a remarkable change of track to the effect that the Ganga laid within five miles from Murshidabad. He enquired, 'Is Government prepared to run the risk of having the course of the Ganges turned into the Baugrettey and half of the City of Moorshedabad swept away'⁴⁰⁰?

³⁹⁷ WBSA, Board of Revenue, Proceedings, vol. 21, July 24, 1787, p. 7.

³⁹⁸ R.H. Phillimore (comp.), *Historical Records of the Survey of India: 1800-1815*, vol. 2, Dehra Dun: Published by Order of the Surveyor General of India, 1950, p. 20.

³⁹⁹ O'Malley, *Gazetteer: Murshidabad*, p. 11.

⁴⁰⁰ Phillimore, *Historical Records*, p. 20.

Garstin concluded that the Ganga for the last few years had been pursuing a new route lower down in its track. In fact it found a new one near Sibnibas into the Hugli and Churni. Hence in all likelihood the Kasimbazar river remained almost dry for a few months which hampered the transshipment of goods lower down into the Bay. The presence of shoals at the junction of the Ganga and Bhagirathi prompted the concerned authority to cut a canal across 'a narrow sandy strip' to establish a communication channel. The proposal was implemented by digging a channel of about a hundred and fifty yards in breadth and at least for a time the communication was ensured. Garstin was happy to note that

There is no chance of its being again closed for many years, which will be of inestimable advantage to the general commerce of the country and particularly to the City of Moorshedabad⁴⁰¹.

However Rennell's apprehensions regarding the futility of intervention with rivers turned out to be true. During the 'rains', or from June to September, it was navigable in certain years for the largest steamers, and formed the shortest route from Calcutta to Patna and the north-west. Almost a week was saved when the channel turned navigable in the monsoon. It permitted small vessels at other times, despite a huge investment made annually to keep it perennial⁴⁰².

In 1813 the river left its old bed near Amanigunge, made a straight cut towards the south west joining both the tips of the horse shoe shaped circuit of the river to chart out an altogether new course. In the process it veered three miles away from Kasimbazar. The textile town along with Kalikapore, and Farashdanga stood on the left bank. The old bed turned into a marsh⁴⁰³. Murshidabad too fell within the moribund area as the river bypassed the town. A letter dated November 25, 1813, recorded the closure of the river at a number of places within 'Cossimbuzar'⁴⁰⁴. The bastion of the *nizamat* and the famous silk mart were reduced to malaria infested land of the swamps because of 'ruthless vagaries of the river'⁴⁰⁵.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., p. 21.

⁴⁰² Walsh, *A History of Murshidabad District*, p. 38.

⁴⁰³ O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteer: Murshidabad*, p. 11.

⁴⁰⁴ NAI, Cartography Section, Field Book 51, Lt Col. Fleming, Survey of the City of Murshidabad, Received November 25, 1813.

⁴⁰⁵ Radhakamal Mukherjee, *The Changing Face of Bengal: A Study in Riverine Economy*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 2008-2009, p. 102.

XIII. Other Long term Ecological Changes

Disease and Insalubrity

Kasimbazar was famed for its salubrity. An official correspondence of the East India Company dating back to 1757 stated that ‘when it is fortified there in great probability it will become the resort of many considered wealthy merchants’⁴⁰⁶. According to a Government record of 1763; ‘Mr. McGuire sends in a letter requesting our permission to go to Kassimbazar for the recovery of his health’⁴⁰⁷. But a particularly bad bout of drought in 1776 was closely followed by a toll of small pox epidemic which could be compared with the one that had stricken Gaur⁴⁰⁸ and partially contributed to the decline in the population of Kasimbazar. Also the eruption of swamps on the drying river bed had much to do with the unhealthiness of the region. Along on the stale water of the marshes, a particularly virulent strain of malarial mosquito proliferated in number.

An epidemic broke out killing three fourth of the population. The combined effect of the nature’s vagaries, revenue burden, extortions by the hoarders and the epidemic had a magnified impact on the inhabitants. About three million lives had been wiped away from the *suba*⁴⁰⁹ during the 1770s. On May 10, 1838, in one of his letters to the Collector, Krishnanath Roy of Kasimbazar mentioned, ‘I am to go to Calcutta for my health and prosecute my studies there, as Kasimbazar is a very unhealthy place, I am always sick here’⁴¹⁰. Thus the place that in the seventeenth century had encouraged settlements of people from near and far, failed to hold on to its salubrious status.

Changes in Flora and Fauna

Within this period certain changes were observed in wildlife and vegetation pattern. Tavernier had taken the land route from Dacca to Kasimbazar in the 1660s⁴¹¹. He noted in his account that the route leading to Kasimbazar was full of jungles and dotted with swamps. It might as well be imagined that the terrain of the “Cossimbazar Island” had tangled vegetation, marshes, interspersed with thick

⁴⁰⁶ NAI, Home Public Proceedings, 1757, Part 1, p. 206.

⁴⁰⁷ James Long, *Selections from Unpublished Records of Government: 1748-67, Relating to the Social Conditions of Bengal*, vol. 1, Calcutta, 1869, p. 310.

⁴⁰⁸ E. V. West Maccott, ‘The Territorial Aristocracy of Bengal’, p. 89.

⁴⁰⁹ Debrit, *Transactions*, pp. 127-30, cited from *British Residents*, p. 395.

⁴¹⁰ Somendra Chandra Nandy, *History of the Cossimbazar Raj in the Nineteenth Century; 1807-1897*, vol. 1, Calcutta: Dev-All Private Ltd, 1986, p. 200.

⁴¹¹ Jean Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*; vol. 1, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2001, p. 106.

foliage of mulberry trees covering extensive areas, rice fields, while there were pockets of open clearings overrun with grass. Some jungles grew so impenetrable that it became havens of carnivorous animals like tigers.

In the latter part of the seventeenth century Kasimbazar could boast of having large mammals like rhinoceros in its forest. One day in 1671 Jacobus Verburg, the Director of the Dutch East India Company on his way back to Kasimbazar from Hugli, was given a baby rhino by some hunters⁴¹². The cub was around five feet in height. It could well have been the Great Indian One Horned Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros Unicornis Linnaeus*), a grazer by nature and limited by its type of food to living in the grass jungles of the alluvial plains of Bengal where abundant water and diverse vegetation are available round the year⁴¹³. Its food comprised chiefly of grass; which obviously was available in fair proportion, as it seemed to have bred and nurtured at least one rhino family. A full-grown rhino is a gigantic animal that needs a large foraging area. The other species, the Javan rhino or the *Rhinoceros Sondaicus* was a browser and its usual habitat was the forested hill regions at elevations of 7000 feet above sea-level⁴¹⁴. This happened to be the incident of a solitary sighting of the rhinoceros in Kasimbazar during the period under survey. Possibly the subsequent change in the pattern of flora in the habitat did not support the rearing of such gigantic grazers.

More than a hundred years later, Captain Williamson⁴¹⁵ observed that the 'scourge'⁴¹⁶ of tigers persisted. Tigers were multiplying because areas in and around the town were turning desolate. In the 1780s a German hunter named Paul had killed at least twenty three of them besides several leopards⁴¹⁷. Again due to the menace of carnivorous predators the cultivated lands became overrun with

⁴¹² Graaf, *Voyages*, p. 73.

⁴¹³ G.S. Rawat, 'Vegetation Dynamics and Management of Rhinoceros Habitat in the Duars of West Bengal: An Ecological Review' in *National Academy of Science Letters*, vol. 28(5&6), 2005, pp. 179-186.

http://www.rhinosourcecenter.com/pdf_files/130/1307485617.pdf

Accessed on 5.8.16.

⁴¹⁴ S.H. Prater, *The Book of Indian Animals*, Bombay Natural History Society, 1965, pp. 228-33.

⁴¹⁵ Thomas Williamson, *Oriental Field Sports: being a Complete Detailed and Accurate Description of the Wild Sports of the East*, vol. 1, London: Printed for Edward Orme, Printseller to His Majesty, 1807, p. 238.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*

undergrowth of 'long grass and brambles'⁴¹⁸ till extensive areas became covered with forests.

The following information from the Proceeding of the Revenue, Governor General in Council, shows a local alteration in the pattern of flora and fauna in the Kasimbazar island. It enumerated the state of Plassey that was at that time put under Serampore, though geographically it stood within the Kasimbazar island.

Revenue, State of the Pergunnahs of Plassey and Muttiary under Nadiawere formerly made a Runch or Forrest by the Suba of Bengal for the preservation of Beasts of Chace, that they have ever continued in wild and uncultivated state and overrun with Tygers and Buffaloes, as is notorious to everybody—that on this account it is impossible to procure ryots to go and reside there and although the Pergunnahs of Plassey stands rated in W. Riders valuation and the Rajah was to pay for it to Govt in the yr 1182-72, 198, 15, 10, 3 Rupees. He has only been able to let the said Pergunnah for 35,000--Rupees—⁴¹⁹

Conscious efforts were undertaken by the Government to tackle the problem by declaring prize money on the tigers' head—ten rupees for a full grown tiger and five for a leopard or a tiger cub⁴²⁰. In fact, a letter dispatched to Edward Baber, the Chief of the Provincial Council of Revenue, Murshidabad, dated July 7, 1775, would reveal the extent of the predator's menace:

Willing to free the country of tigers so dangerous to the inhabitants we desire you will offer a reward of ten rupees for the head of every tiger which shall be brought and delivered to your chief who must take effectual measures to prevent the head being brought a second time by cutting off the ears⁴²¹.

Lord Valentia noted in around 1800 that though formerly the island was full of tigers and leopards⁴²² by the late eighteenth century the only specimens of predators to be left were wolves and jackals⁴²³. While the rice fields lay bare, mango topes and palm trees bore fruits. On his onward journey from Murshidabad he saw luxuriant crops of wheat and barley and occasional indigo plantations.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ WBSA, Revenue, 1 to 29 October 1776, Proceedings, vol. 19, pp. 68-69.

⁴²⁰ George Viscount Valentia, *Voyages and Travels to India, Ceylon, The Red Sea, Abyssinia and Egypt: 1802-1806*, vol. 1, London: W. Bulmer and Co, 1809, p. 50.

⁴²¹ WBSA, PCR, Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 6, July 17, 1775, p. 527.

⁴²² O'Malley, *Gazetteer: Murshidabad*, p. 17; W.W. Hunter, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, vol. 8, London: Trubner and Co, 1887, p. 81.

⁴²³ Ibid., p. 17.

However, a different picture was portrayed by George Valentia in 1811 who observed that while Kasimbazar retained its fame in silk, *koras* and ivory work, it had turned into an abode of predators like leopards, tigers, huge crocodiles and snakes. About eleven or twelve miles away from Berhampore a deep forest existed that was haunted by tigers⁴²⁴. Such contrasting and altering pictures of the same region spanning over a period of more than a century indicate that perhaps certain enclaves along the shifting bed experienced migration, and got refilled with secondary vegetation and jungle. The mapping of flora and fauna between 1670s and 1800 showed many changes and disparate pockets of evolution. So between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries certain changes were taking place very slowly in the ecological ambience, in the sphere of flora and fauna apart from the riverine changes in the Kasimbazar Murshidabad area.

XIV. Conclusion

The English East India Company during its phase of the entrenchment of power seemed to have hardly realized the seriousness of the gradual ecological and topographical alterations that were affecting the select space and the area around it. From the map making it is evident that the British had a long term agenda to explore Kasimbazar and its adjoining area. Even other European countries were interested to explore the region. The Dutch cartographer Van der Aa's (1659-1733) map titled 'Koninkryk van Bengale En Land happen Aunde Ganges.....'⁴²⁵ approximately dated between late seventeenth and first decade of the eighteenth century; had marked 'Kasembasar' on the Ganges, but made no mention of Murshidabad. Another Dutch map maker called Herman Moll, in his late years undertook journeys on behalf of the Dutch Government. His map titled 'The West Part of India or the Empire of the Great Mogul'⁴²⁶ and dated 1736 overlooked the centre of the *nizamat*, but underscored the silk hub of 'Cassunbazar'. In fact, Murshidabad eluded the attention of the Europeans specially after the shifting of the civil court or *sadar nizamatadalat* to Calcutta. Gradually its southerly neighbour Berhampore,⁴²⁷ located very close to Sydadab,

⁴²⁴ Ibid., p. 186.

⁴²⁵ Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA), Susan Gole, *A Series of Early Printed Maps of India in Facsimile*, Jaya Prints, First Edition 1980, New Delhi, Plate 25b.

⁴²⁶ IGNCA, Susan Gole, Plate 27b.

⁴²⁷ Kamal Chaudhury ed., *Murshidabader Itihash*, vol. 1, p. 748.

started drawing attention as a British cantonment town and bastion of European stronghold from 1767. This trend of highlighting a commercially prosperous region or a European power centre without even a cursory recognition to the political cornerstone emanated out of a single track agenda of mercantilism. This spirit was subsequently very explicit in Rennell's 'Map of Cossimbuzer Island'.

Rennell's map included an inset of 'A Plan of the Battle of Plassey, 1757'. It showed the detailed war strategies, positions of the British army and Sirajuddaullah's troops along with its French ally, also the route march of the Indian army and British soldiers along the left bank of the Cossimbuzer River, the British ammunition shades, position of Clive's camps including the mango grove of Plassey where the *Nawab's* force had its base⁴²⁸. It was a blueprint for a strategically successful and economically fruitful victory of the Company that turned a particular geographical terrain into a 'Theatre of War and Commerce'. To reiterate Rila Mukherjee's observation⁴²⁹, the map itself bore the name of the relevant commercial space ignoring the political legacy of the *nizamat*. Indeed the European cartographic knowledge ensured an 'alignment of map and power'⁴³⁰ driven by a compulsion to 'circumscribe the possession'⁴³¹.

Further, the East India Company had ably tackled the major problems like *Bargi* inroads and *Sanyasi* uprisings and numerous centrifugal challenges; noted the causes and repercussions of the Famine of 1770 and tried at times to counter its impacts. Still the simple fact that the nature has its own unfettered pace had been ignored by the Company. The river shifts and the associated problems like frequent floods and land encroachments, formation of sand banks, marshes, changes in the pattern of flora, fauna, waxing and waning of the forest covering, changing climate; reveals that the Kasimbazar Murshidabad region represented a fragile topography and an ephemeral ecology. Along the slowly shifting river course unhealthy marshes containing stagnant water were coming up and parts of

⁴²⁸ Manosi Lahiri, *Mapping India*, New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2012, p. 193.

⁴²⁹ Rila Mukherjee, *The Strange Riches*, pp. 283-284.

⁴³⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983, p. 173.

⁴³¹ Ian Barrow, *Making History, Drawing Territory: British Mapping in India, c. 1756—1905*, USA: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 14.

Kasimbazar was overrun by them. Gradually both the settlements were reduced to swamp ridden cholera and malaria infested places⁴³².

Human interventions in the form of attempts at watering the dry beds, diverting other channels into the Bhagirathi and building embankments seemed miniscule attempts to shackle and command the river. The same space at the same time had witnessed two parallel trends of history: the blatant politico economic penetration but a silent perpetuation of a process of slow decline of a premier riverine centre of commerce and settlement that had once carved a niche place for itself in the map of European commerce. Jacques Nicolas Belin (1703-1772), a hydrographer with the Hydrography office, France, drew a map titled 'Carte de L'Indoustan'⁴³³ dated 1764; in which both 'Cassimbazar' and 'Morsudabat' had been shown. But the river had clearly veered away from the settlements, to the east.

Perhaps certain observations made by Tieffenthaler in the 1770s would provide some crucial clue to the issue of riverine changes in the region. He drew our attention to an old map sketched by cartographer Bartholomew Plaisted in which Murshidabad was placed between two rivers that seemed to be more or less equal. Another map by John Thornton titled 'Bengal and Parts of Odisha and Bihar' (1704) had placed Murshidabad, Kasimbazar and Sydabad similarly between two almost equally broad channels of the Ganga⁴³⁴. Tieffenthaler basically spoke about the Bhagirathi and a branch of the Bhagirathi located towards its west. Roughly two decades later, Modave too had confirmed Tieffenthaler's observation based on Plaisted's map. He stated that Kasimbazar was located between the two branches of the Ganges⁴³⁵.

Murshidabad was located on the Bhagirathi between two streams when Plaisted visited, while Mahinagar stood on the shore of the said branch. Murshidabad did not depend on any single river. But that branch of the river

⁴³² Radhakamal Mukherjee, *The Changing Face of Bengal: A Study in Riverine Economy*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 2008-2009, p. 102; J.E. Gastrell, *Statistical and Geographical Report of the Moorshedabad District*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Office, 1860, p. 14.

⁴³³ IGNCA, Susan Gole, *A Series of Early Printed Maps*, Plate 33.

⁴³⁴ John Thornton, Bengal and Parts of Odisha and Bihar (1685-1711), in *Cosmology to Cartography: Early Players in the Indian Subcontinent*, Kalakriti Archives. <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/exhibit/EwKigcL5BRCTKw?hl=en&position=13%3A0%3A7>

Accessed on 4.5.16.

⁴³⁵ Aniruddha ray, *Moddhojoger Bharotio Shohor*, p. 359.

basically contained 'dormante' i.e. stagnant water and the narrator categorically mentioned that the volume of water contained was far less than the Bhagirathi⁴³⁶. The other river obviously indicated a once active segment of the older track of the Bhagirathi that was about to detach itself from the current bed to form an ox bow lake or a *bil*. The main water started flowing in the Bhagirathi towards its east, referred to as the 'Gange' by the geographer. Probably Mahinagar had flourished at a time when the stagnant water body was part of the main track of the river.

Even in the terminal phase of the eighteenth century, the English, Dutch and French factories stood on the western bank⁴³⁷. By early nineteenth century the picture had greatly altered as part of the Bhagirathi had veered towards west leaving Kasimbazar, Murshidabad and the sites of the three European Companies a couple of miles away from its eastern bank. So, the fact remains that due to changes in the Bhagirathi, Kasimbazar stood close to the Bhagirathi's old languishing track in the east bank far away from the fresh track. This process of riverine alterations was to happen over a long period of time. Probably an intervention with the river had hastened the process of riverine movement. In fact Hamilton had pointed out that in 1813 a canal was dug to connect the Bhagirathi and the Ganges to ensure a steady flow of 'wholesome water' for Kasimbazar and its neighbouring villages⁴³⁸. An independent miasmatic marsh with stagnant water grew out of the severed portion of the river.

The river bypassed the settlement. Though long after 1813 there were many silk filatures producing 'Kasimbazar Silk' all over the district, till it could withstand the competition from mass produced cheap Manchester cotton; the towns as living spaces were paling. In the 1850s Gastrell noted the ruins of the Residency and silk filatures of Kasimbazar and also a desolate look of both the settlements⁴³⁹. The extent of shoaling represented in Gastrell's map of 1853-54, showed that the river had turned almost impassable. Large scale riverine commerce eluded such a place.

⁴³⁶ Tieffenthaler, *Description Historique*, p. 452.

⁴³⁷ Nurul Amin Biswas, 'Murshidabader Jolashoy o Puratotto', in Kamal Chaudhury ed., *Murshidabader Itihash*, vol. 2, Calcutta: Dey's Publishers, 2011, p. 393.

⁴³⁸ Walter Hamilton, *The East-India Gazetteer containing the Particular Descriptions of the Empires, Principalities, Provinces, Cities, Towns and Districts, Fortresses, Harbours, Rivers, Lakes etc. of Hindostan and the Adjacent Countries beyond the Ganges and the Eastern Archipelago*, vol. 2, London: William H. Allen and Co, p. 244.

⁴³⁹ Gastrell, *Statistical and Geographical Report*, pp. 11-12.

At least between July and September 1772, the ‘Punchetra Cutcherry’ was very much operational and had collected its duties⁴⁴⁰. In less than a century the scene had changed for the worse. In fact, an official record reflected the state of Murshidabad and hinted at certain symptoms of a kind of a subsistence economy.

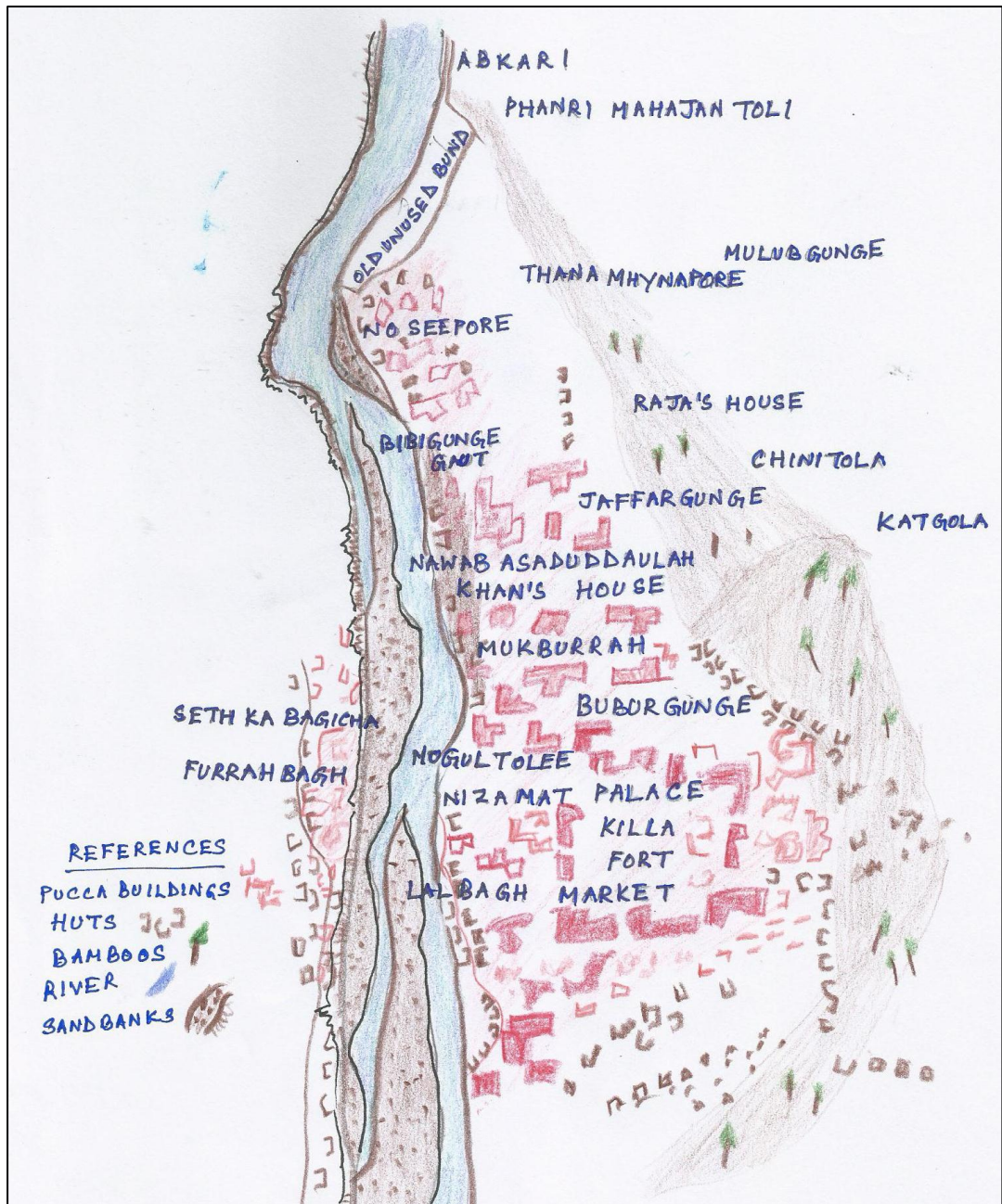
Moorshedabad is now reduced to a Village compared to its former state, and the Country around affords a sufficiency of the articles of Consumption to the Inhabitants, so that Grain and other articles of heavy Carriage and Small Profit will not except on extraordinary occasions, bear the Expences of Transportation to so great a Distance as Calcutta, now become necessary⁴⁴¹.

Even if we look at it as an exaggeration, Kasimbazar definitely lost its status of the iconic nucleus of Bengal’s commerce. However a parallel process of urbanization had been already set to motion in another corner of the province around another blossoming metropolis. Again, that was nurtured by an altogether different set of determinant like commercialism. So, the decline of the *nizamat* and the business centre did mark the waning of Bengal at the upper reach of the river. It was more than compensated for by the nourishment of another vector of growth close to the estuary that embodied new aspirations for many.

Map1.5: Settlement along the choked up Kasimbazar river: 1850s

⁴⁴⁰ WBSA, Committee of Circuit Appendix, Proceedings, vol. 9A, July 7-September 17, 1772.

⁴⁴¹ WBSA, Revenue, Governor General in Council, July 4-25, 1775, Proceedings, vol. 6, dated July 18, pp. 330-331.



Source: Adapted, NAI, Cartography Section, *Catalogue of the MRIO-Miscellaneous Maps of the Survey of India*, Map of the City of Murshidabad, Surveyed by Capt. J.E. Gastrell, 1853-54, (Old Ref-Reg.no. 18-0-54); Map drawn not to Scale.

CHAPTER 2

Hooghly: A Port, c. 1580-1770s

I. Introduction

While Kasimbazar was entrenched on the Bhagirathi's upper reaches, about eighty kilometres to its south stood Hooghly at the midpoint of the western bank of the same river. Hooghly's presence in history predated that of Kasimbazar, though their period of journey had matched for some time. However the trajectories had distinct points of departure, making the micro study of Hooghly interesting in its own way.

Sanjay Subrahmanyam¹ had focused on the political and economic facets of Hooghly under the Portuguese. Trade in the Hooghly belt had attracted the attention of historians like Sushil Chaudhury², Om Prakash³, K. N. Chaudhuri⁴. Sushil Chaudhury noted Bengal's prosperity in the *nawabi* era; while linking up its decline in the post Plassey period with the domination of the English Company. The plan for the conquest of Bengal was prompted by the decision to smash the rival private trading activities from the port of Hooghly. In fact Arasaratnam⁵, Ashin Dasgupta⁶, P.J. Marshall⁷ were primarily concerned about the decline of the indigenous trading efforts and the petering away of the ship owning merchants of Bengal during the Company's era. Further, scholars like Balai Barui⁸, Sayako

¹ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500—1700: A Political and Economic History*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012; Idem., *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005.

² Sushil Chaudhury, *From Prosperity to Decline: Eighteenth Century Bengal*, Delhi: Manohar, 1999.

³ Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal: 1630-1720*, Delhi: Manohar, 2012.

⁴ K.N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the East India Company, 1660-1770*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

⁵ S. Arasaratnam, *Maritime India in the Seventeenth Century*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁶ Uma Das Gupta compiled, *Collected Essays of Ashin Das Gupta*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

⁷ P.J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes: The British in Bengal in the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.

⁸ Balai Barui, *The Salt Industry of Bengal: 1757-1800, A Study in the Interaction of British Monopoly Control and Indigenous Enterprise*, Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1985.

Kanda⁹, Indrajit Ray¹⁰ have noted the flourishing salt industry in Bengal in which Hooghly played a significant role.

Among the three geographical spaces chosen for the thesis, perhaps Hooghly's historical journey had been the most chequered and complex. As the ancient port of Satgaon (the *Port Pequena* or small port) on the Saraswati started declining, its southern neighbour Hooghly, located on the major flow path of the Bhagirathi, succeeded Satgaon in the sixteenth century as a principal emporium and port of Bengal under the Portuguese, subsequently the Mughals, the European trading companies and finally the English East India Company. Hooghly became an important node of the Portuguese and then the English East India Company and the neighbouring places along the river comprising Chinsurah, Chandernagore, Serampore, witnessed the entrenchment of the Dutch, French, Danish powers in India in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (See Map 2.1). So Hooghly and some places in its close proximity along the river acted as a major port area for more than a century and a half. It played a significant part in local, regional and international spheres of commerce.

The struggle for control over trade naturally involved complex politics and clashes. So politics and economy of Hooghly had been the primary concern of the leading authorities of this region. Innumerable ocean liners and country crafts of various configurations frequented this busy inland trading node and international port. Evidently, the river was an integral part of such a lively region.

In the vast body of work on Bengal, the major academic enquiries on Hooghly have scarcely been on a sub-regional history from the vantage of environmental issues such as the contribution of the Hugli river in shaping its evolution within the chosen period. Hence the central concern of this chapter would be to focus on the role of the river in the historical development of Hooghly. The same river had been watering Kasimbazar at the upper reach. In fact the historical evolution of both Hooghly and Kasimbazar had converged for some time. The Bhagirathi at Kasimbazar had been quite unpredictable and moderated

⁹ Sayako Kanda, 'Environmental Changes, the Emergence of a Fuel Market and the Working Conditions of Salt Makers in Bengal, c. 1780-1845', Peter Boomgaard, Marjoline t' Haart eds., *Globalization, Environmental Change and Social History*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

¹⁰ Indrajit Ray, *Bengal Industries and the British Industrial Revolution (1757-1857)*, London: Routledge, 2011.

its history to an extent. Did the river¹¹, along with the other determinants perform the role of a consistent facilitator in case of Hooghly's trajectory within the chosen phase? Then why did Hooghly cease to hold on to its status of such a significant port after the eighteenth century? How far was the river system responsible for this? These are the major issues that the chapter would endeavour to focus on.

II. Situating Hooghly

Fifteenth century onwards, the official Portuguese commerce in the western coast of India was characterized by state control over the ports and waterways through fortifications, settlements and a tab on diversion of trade, mainly of spices, to Europe through passages controlled by them. However, the eastern side of the Indian Ocean – the Bay of Bengal in particular became a happy hunting ground for the unofficial private¹² Portuguese *casado*¹³ traders from Cochin and Goa. Since 1518, the yearly visits by the Crown ships from Goa were at times accompanied by the *casado* ships. However, the volume of *carriera* trade was minimal in Bengal.

Gradually pepper from Cochin, Malacca and parts of South East Asia, flooded the markets and smaller entrepots of Bengal. The momentum of trade pushed the *casados* into the interior of the *suba* and eventually to set up big and small bases along the rivers and the coast. Scholars like Malekandathil¹⁴, Sanjay Subrahmanyam¹⁵, Radhika Chadha¹⁶, Jayaseela Stephen¹⁷ observed that the Bay of Bengal coast was a wonderland for the Portuguese private merchants who initiated a multitude of settlements and controlled the sea borne commerce since sixteenth century. The famed ancient port town of Satgaon was frequented by the Portuguese *casado* traders cum explorers. As Satgaon was declining, new bases

¹¹ The river has been reerred to as the Hugli and Bhagirathi-Hugli at times.

¹² C.R. Boxer, *Portuguese India in the Mid Seventeenth Century*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 46.

¹³ Married Portuguese citizens having Indian spouses.

¹⁴ Pius Malekandathil, *Maritime India, Trade, Religion and Polity in the Indian Ocean*, New Delhi: Primus, 2010.

¹⁵ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Improvising Empire, Portuguese Trade and Settlement in the Bay of Bengal: 1500-1700*, Oxford University Press, 1991.

¹⁶ Radhika Chaddha, 'Big Generals in Little Kingdoms: The Portuguese Settlements of Chittagong and Sandwip, 1530-1640', in Yogesh Sharma and J.L. Ferreira eds., *The Portuguese Presence in India in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, New Delhi: Viva Books, 2008.

¹⁷ Jayaseela Stephen, *Portuguese in the Tamil Coast: Historical Explorations in Commerce and Culture, 1507-1749*, Pondicherry: Navjothi Publishing House, 1998.

like Hooghly initially started off as temporary seasonal marts consisting of shanties in winter time¹⁸, similar to the one at Betor. In their heydays the Portuguese made a huge profit as the margins of difference between the buying and selling prices were great. Subsequently Hooghly metamorphosed into a settlement as it regularly derived a huge surplus capital from the Bengal cotton textile and saltpetre that were in high demand in Lisbon and Brazil. In Hooghly the official representatives of Portugal were hardly present.

The Hooghly *Bandar* or 'Bandel', meaning a landing place, replaced Satgaon as the new *Port Pequena* (small port). Chittagong was the *Port Grande* (Big Port). The Portuguese slowly became an important stake holder in Bengal's commerce. One dynamic Portuguese named Pedro Tavares had impressed Akbar at his court so deeply that the Emperor had granted him a *farman* to set up a colony, full religious liberty and a permission to build churches. According to an English record,

The grant of the Badshaw of Dhelly to the king of Portugal were at Chittagong, Ghole Gaut, Bully and some parts of Houghly, all these places excepting Chittagong are now within the compass of Houghly which borders a creek that divides the limits of Balagur to the north and that of Houghly to the south¹⁹.

It seems originally those places fell within 'Balagur' in 'pergunnah Arsah'²⁰. The Portuguese and their 'padres' brought the jungles and wastelands under cultivation, established a *bazar*, church and built dwelling units²¹ within an area the boundaries of which touched the Ganges in the east; the tank called 'Banea Poker' in the west; 'Goalparah', the river Ganges to the north and to the south from Goalparah to 'Busburreah Nullah'²². The settlement evolved and spread rapidly and in no time blossomed into the greatest trading centre of Bengal by superseding Satgaon²³. However, though the port activities of Satgaon waned in

¹⁸ Manrique, 'Itinerario', Chapter 4, in J.J.A. Campos, *History of the Portuguese in Bengal*, Calcutta: Butterworth, 1919, p. 147.

¹⁹ WBSA, Proceedings, Board of Trade, May 11, 1787, p. 214.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 197.

²¹ Ibid., p. 198.

²² Ibid., p. 199; WBSA, Proceedings, Board of Revenue, July 18, 1786, p. 248.

²³ J.J.A. Campos, *History of the Portuguese in Bengal*, p. 53.

the early seventeenth century, it continued as a town and had Mughal office well into the early eighteenth century²⁴.

Nevertheless Hooghly capitulated before the Mughal might in 1632. After the capture of Hooghly the seat of the royal port of the Mughals was transferred from Satgaon to Hooghly. According to the English company's records, the Mughals had established four major ports in the *suba*, the most important being the *Buksh Bandar* of Hooghly in 1632. It was set up to collect duties from external commerce meaning commodities exported and imported via the port of Hooghly. As Abdul Karim aptly emphasized, the *Bandar* of Hooghly was established by the necessity to control the external trade²⁵.

Nevertheless, 'the loss of their (Portuguese) settlement in Bengal occasioned primarily from the numberless complaints which the *faujdar* at Satgaon daily received from the officers at the Bander of Houghly'²⁶. Perhaps this prompted Shahjahan to expel the Portuguese from Hooghly. The Portuguese had relocated to a township named Bandel on the bank of the Hugli, situated a little upriver towards Satgaon²⁷. Bandel was previously known as Balagarh²⁸. As their

Factory or Fort was destroyed by the natives and as a satisfaction or recompense for the same, for the purpose of erecting a Church thereon and propagating the Christian religion, containing 777 secundry or biggahs....and certain rights, privileges, exemptions, jurisdiction, power and authority were then or have been since annexed for the Christians aforesaid and the successors to exercise, use and enjoy within the same without interruption from any person or persons whatsoever, free from any rent, claim or demand, as will appear by the copies of the Persian records hereunto annexed. The name Bandel suggested that they moved closer to the port area. The township of Bandel had an officially demarcated boundary²⁹.

²⁴ Aniruddha Ray, 'The Rise and Fall of Satgaon, An Overseas Port of Medieval Bengal' in Jeyaseela Stephen ed., *The Indian Trade at the Asian Frontier*, New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2010, p. 88.

²⁵ Abdul Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan and His Times*, Dacca: The Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1963, pp. 212-213.

²⁶ WBSA, Proceedings, Board of Revenue, May 11, 1787, p. 215.

²⁷ Aniruddha Ray, *Modhyojuger Bharotio Shohor*, p. 333.

²⁸ WBSA, Proceedings, Board of Revenue, July 18, 1786, pp. 247-249.

²⁹ WBSA, Proceedings, Board of Revenue, May 11, 1787, pp. 214-215.

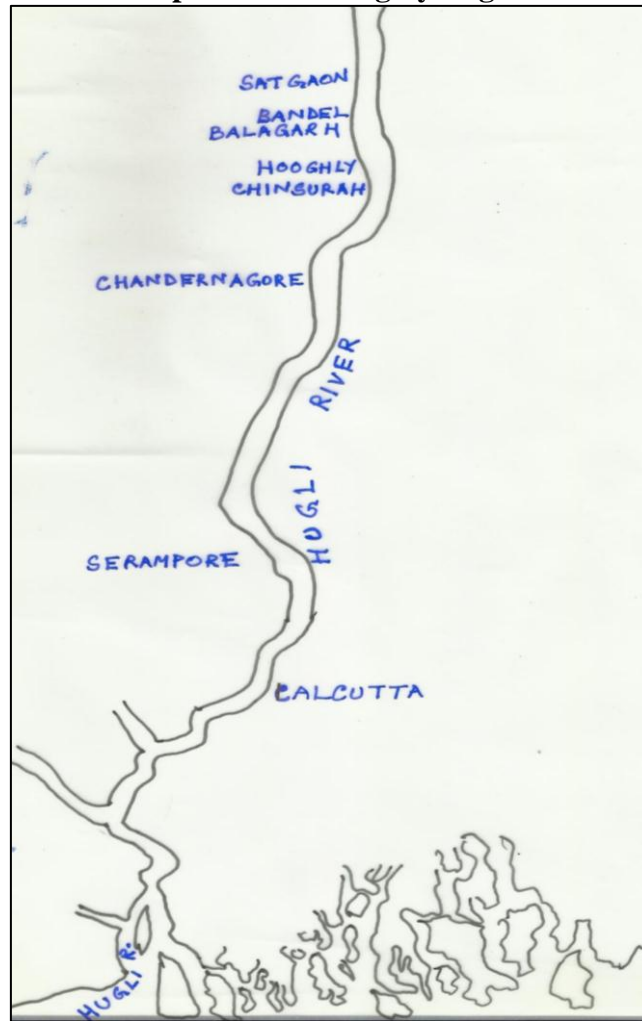
Jorge Manuel Flores described Hooghly as one of the most active *bandeis*³⁰ in Asia that despite various setbacks survived for more than two centuries. He further highlighted the controversy regarding the issue of its governance; that was supposedly the responsibility of the Church of Bandel. This area also drew the attention of Pius Malekandethil³¹ who emphasized that Bandel symbolized ecclesiastical collaboration with Portuguese commercial interests in distant unofficial *diasporas*. Again Winius³² drew our attention to the unofficial nature of the Portuguese settlement of Hooghly. Flores, in one of his articles had argued that long after Hooghly's fall, the Portuguese government had planned for a comeback in India sometime in the end of the eighteenth century by using Hooghly as its 'springboard'³³.

³⁰Jorge Manuel Flores, 'Relic or Springboard? A Note on the Rebirth of Portuguese Hughli, ca. 1632-1820', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 39, issue 4, pp. 381-395. The word Bandel meaning landing place, has been derived from it.

³¹ Pius Malekandathil, *Maritime India: Trade, Religion and Polity in the Indian Ocean*, New Delhi: Primus, 2010.

³² George D. Winius, *Studies on Portuguese Asia: 1495-1689*, Great Britain: Ashgate Variorum, 2001, p. 281.

³³ Jorge Manuel Flores, 'Relic or Springboard', pp. 393-394.

Map 2.1: The Hooghly Region

Source: Adapted from National Library of India, *J.F. Stace, To the Merchants of Calcutta These Maps of the Hugli, Bhagruttee, Ganges, Goorae, Barrasshee and Soonderbund Rivers used by the Steamers in the Inland Navigation, Calcutta to Nadia* (not legible).

III. Ecology and Mercantile Network

As Satgaon was silting up, the Portuguese had shifted their attention to Hooghly in the early sixteenth century. The Portuguese were on the lookout for another port. The Bhagirathi Hugli river around that time represented the main flow of the Ganges. It was a mighty river joined by other channels at various points. In Bengal it attained a gigantic proportion sometime in the middle of the sixteenth century. A fairly prodigious Jellenghy had joined the Bhagirathi near Nadia. The Damodar cascaded down southwards from the west near Triveni to join the Bhagirathi above Hooghly. So the combined water flowed down the mighty Bhagirathi during the sixteenth century to water the Hooghly region when the place became a natural choice for the port cum settlement by the Portuguese. However, subsequently it was a victim of geographical changes.

In fact, the early sixteenth century account of the Portuguese India officer Duarte Barbosa clearly stated that Satgaon was ‘much nearer to the open sea than they are now’³⁴. *Ain* had confirmed this³⁵. Hooghly lay near Satgaon and so it stood fairly close to the sea in the sixteenth century. Hence as Satgaon was slowly choking up, it became the natural choice. The routes undertaken by the protagonists of the *Mangalkavyas* indicate that beyond Satgaon and its neighbouring Triveni³⁶; they had opted for the Bhagirathi to sail up to the estuary³⁷. Of course, Hooghly did not attain its fame at that time and had an imperceptible presence; it was watered by a navigable river and seemed suitable for port.

Subsequently *Port Pequena* established itself as the preferred gateway to maritime commerce as south western Bengal became integrated with Mughal administration and the west Asian world via the Mughal network. The Mughal nobility and rich class welcomed the exotic luxury items like raw silk, silk items of Bengal, and spices specially pepper brought in by the Portuguese. Chittagong served as their *Port Grande* in eastern Bengal for some time. After the Portuguese made an exit from the helm of Bengal’s commerce, the English East India Company stepped in. It coincided with the initial phase of the easterly movement of the Ganges though it hardly made an impact at that point of time. So the Bhagirathi Hugli was a fairly enormous river. There were initial dilemmas bothering the English factors before finally choosing Hooghly as their main trading base in western Bengal. The following extract of a letter dated November 12, 1616, addressed to the Surat Factors noted;

Concerning their (the Company’s) advise for Port Pequena in which the Portugals are seated....it will send no commoditye, neyther is ther any mart from Cathaya or Tartary, but a few peddling fellowes that carie packs³⁸.

³⁴ Mansel Longworth Dames, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa Including the Coasts of Malabar, Eastern India, China and the Indian Archipelago*, vol. 2, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1989, p. 140.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ The Bhagirathi divided into three channels: the Saraswati, Bhagirathi and Jamuna at Triveni.

³⁷ The earliest *Mangalkavya* was written in the 1490s, so it is debatable whether Saraswati became difficult to navigate in as early as the fifteenth century. The issue has been addressed in the thesis.

³⁸ William Foster ed., *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India, 1615-19: As Narrated in His Journal and Correspondence*, vol. 1, New Delhi: Munshi Manoharlal, 1990, p. 308.

Nevertheless, in 1616, the English Ambassador Sir Thomas Roe knew that Hooghly was functioning as a commercial centre and a port³⁹. Also the English company's factors were aware of the redeeming features of Hooghly. An extract of the correspondence dated May 26, 1616, addressed to the Surat Factors by Sir Thomas Roe, the English Ambassador, has been quoted below:

that Bengala⁴⁰ should bee poore I see no reason; it feedes this cuntry with wheate and rise, it sends sugar to all India; it hath the finest cloth and pintadoes, musck, civitt and amber (besides) almost all raretyes from thence by trade from Pegu.... And it is the fittest place of all these dominions....for our residence. The number of Portugalls residing is a good argument to seek it; it is a signe their is good doing, ...wee must fire them out and maynteyne our trade at the pikes end⁴¹.

Roe was well informed about the fact that Hooghly derived good trade and that the Portuguese commerce was based there. Hence he felt it was a promising site to be explored. The prospect of the easy movement of cargoes down the river, a readymade landing place, its fertile hinterland well connected by riverine channels, Hooghly's connectivity with the Bay, were possibly the decisive factors in the choice of the site for trade. Actually Hooghly commanded over a vast network of commerce stretching up to Patna and beyond till the Mughal bastions in the north and north west and also the Persian Gulf and Red Sea and across the Bay up to South East Asia, Srilanka, Maldives etc.

In its extended commercial journey spanning between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, Hooghly had experienced variations in trade relations, though the broad geographical area remained more or less the same. In fact the Satgaon Hooghly belt stood at a vantage point seaming together the inland trade based on the infinite interconnected channels spread over the hinterland with the vast maritime world that beckoned beyond the realm of the delta.

So Hooghly got commercially entangled with many places based on a regular congregation of boats of great diversity on its river bank. Water crafts of different types and usage, like *patella*, *ulak*, *bhar*, *bajra*, *pinnace*, *donga*, *jaliya*,

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ By Bengala they meant Hooghly and adjoining areas in western Bengal frequented by the Portuguese. Hooghly was the major trading hub in Bengal.

⁴¹ Foster, ed., *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India, 1615-19: As Narrated in His Journal and Correspondence*, vol. 1, London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1899, p. 218.

dingi were commonly spotted in Hooghly and its extended neighbourhood. Those crafts had effectively bound together a web of different grades of markets and marts in and around Hooghly. Overland routes supplemented the riverine connectivity in many places. In rainy seasons, travel by land was replaced with travel by watercraft. This was the season of fast and cheap transportation of surplus items from one end of the *suba* to the other end through the overflowing rivers. Various *golas* or store houses hoarded food grains and other essential items like textile, salt. Those were located at strategic points on the river bank that facilitated easy embarkation and disembarkation in bulks. From *golas* items were distributed to the intermediate markets like *hats* and *bazars* in monsoon. As Baijayanti Chatterjee noted, though storage involved some charge, river transport was much cheaper than exchange of goods via overland routes⁴². In fact, in eighteenth century, the cost of overland transport in Bengal was twenty-eight times more expensive than riverine transport⁴³.

IV. Evolving Population Pattern

Apart from being a large port and an emporium, Hooghly was supportive of multi ethnic settlements. Initially Hooghly under the Portuguese did not represent a structured society and polity. It was one of those innumerable Portuguese ‘spontaneous colonies’⁴⁴ that outnumbered the official ones in India. It practically showed no allegiance to the Mughal empire and had a nominal adherence to Goa or Lisbon. There was no law and order as the early settlers lived in the manner of ‘wild men’, mostly having criminal records⁴⁵. Yet many of the Portuguese traded extensively in local products like rice, cotton and cotton piece goods of various kinds and items made of textile and also cane and cane baskets⁴⁶. They also traded in chunam, salt and food grains⁴⁷. Salt was the oldest business for the Portuguese

⁴² Baijayanti Chatterjee, ‘The Rivers of Bengal: The Role of the Fluvial Network in the Development of the Regional Economy, c. 1600-1700’, *The International Journal of Humanities and Social Studies*, vol. 3, Issue. 3, March, 2015, www.theijhss.com, p. 141.

⁴³ John Crawford cited in Dougal Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon: Colonial Armies and the Garrison State in India 1819-1835*, London, 1995, p. 113.

⁴⁴ Cited in Flores, ‘Relic or Springboard?’ ,p. 382.

⁴⁵ Arthur Coke Burnell ed., *The Voyage of John Huyghen van Linschoten*, vol. 1, London: Hakluyt Society.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

⁴⁷ Ujjayan Bhattacharya, ‘Continuities in Bengal’s Contact with the Portuguese and its Legacy’, in Laura Jarnagin ed., *Portuguese and Luso Asian Legacies in South East Asia, 1511-2011. The Making of the Luso Asian World: Intricacies of Engagement*, Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 2011, p. 122.

in Bengal⁴⁸. Gradually unlimited trading opportunities and ‘plentiful foodstuff’ drew in the married Portuguese with families towards Bengal, from other corners of the *Estado da India*. This laid the expansion of the Portuguese colony in Hooghly.

Also the merchants and professionals from the other communities, like Muslims and Hindus from various parts of the subcontinent and beyond, poured into the new settlement in search of a better life. Indeed, ‘the non Portuguese part of the population’ joined the service class in capacities of seamstress, cook, confectioner, dancing girl and comprised a large segment of the residents of Hooghly⁴⁹. Also, when the Portuguese were trading in Bengal, the Bengali and ‘Asian merchants’ were active in the spheres of overland and inland commerce. The Bengalis had ventured into coastal trade and the Mughal nobility had begun exploring in the realm of intra Asian commerce. However, the ‘volume of trade controlled by the non Portuguese shipping was hardly considerable’⁵⁰.

It is difficult to estimate the number of people inhabiting Hooghly at any point of time. The Company documents provide ample hint that ‘Feringhees’ along with their ‘padres’ were among the initial groups of settlers in Hooghly⁵¹. Before Hooghly was attacked by the Mughals, apart from Christians and slaves, many Sayyids and Brahmins were living there. Broadly speaking, in 1632, the white people could not have numbered more than a thousand. The captive Christians in Agra numbered around 4,000. So the number of local residents including Indian merchants, various types of artisans, work force including slaves, confectioners, cleaners, cooks, dancing girls was at least two times more than that. There were the Indo Portuguese population of the *mesticoes*. So the total population in 1632 could vary between 10,000 and 12,000⁵². Even S.A. Carvalho estimated the number of Christian inhabitants prior to 1632 at nearly 10,000 apart

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Radhika Chadha, ‘Merchants, Renegades and Padres: Portuguese Presence in Bengal in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries’, PhD Dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2005, pp. 145-46.

⁵⁰ Tapan Roy Chowdhury, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir: An Introductory Study in Social History*, Delhi: Munshi Manoharlal, 1990, p. 105.

⁵¹ WBSA, Proceedings, Board of Revenue, May 11, 1787, p. 197.

⁵² R. Chadha, ‘Merchants, Renegades’, p. 202.

from great many Hindus and Muslims⁵³. In approximately 1660s, Bernier estimated that ‘Ogouli alone contains 8 to 9,000 Christians’. Nevertheless, as per Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s estimate, in 1665, the sum total of the Portuguese and native Christians of Hooghly was around 6,000⁵⁴. Obviously the total population was far more than this, including the members of other communities⁵⁵. However, according to Khafi Khan, the author of *Muntakhabu-L Lubab*; during the siege of the town, 50,000 ‘rai-yats’ of that place took refuge with Quasim Khan, the Governor of Bengal⁵⁶. If we believe this statement, then Hooghly was a thickly populated place with a section of the population having some ties with land. Probably the Christian friars and travellers never included them in their count.

Later on, between the regimes of Murshid Quli and Alivardi, in the early decades of the eighteenth century, Hooghly had become the residence of the people of England, China, Arabia, Persia, Turan, Mughals⁵⁷. The *baniyas* made it their home and so did the Turks and Armenians⁵⁸. Alivardi esteemed all of them as the ‘Kingdom’s benefactors’⁵⁹. In the post Portuguese heydays, the European traders under active royal patronage further infused Hooghly with a spirit of vigorous mercantilism. The Portuguese relocated at Bandel, having a defined boundary⁶⁰, but ceased to be a deciding mercantile force. They maintained a low profile in Hooghly⁶¹ almost merging with the local population. The *nawab* and his officials never identified them with the other Europeans⁶² and the French, Dutch and the English had clubbed them together with the Armenians and not with Europeans.

⁵³ S.A. Carvalho, *Bandel Church and Hooghly, A Historical Study of the Foundation of Hooghly, its Golden Days, its Destruction and the Miracle of Our Lady of Bandel*, Krishnanagar: Rev. Fr. Luciano Colussi S.D.B., 1972, p.41.

⁵⁴ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Improvising Empire*, p. 238.

⁵⁵ Francois Bernier, Archibald Constable anno., *Travels in the Mogul Empire A.D. 1656-1668*, London: Oxford University Press, 1916, p. 439.

⁵⁶ Khafi Khan, ‘Muntakhabu-L Lubab’, in H.M. Elliot and J. Dowson eds., *The History of India as told by its Own Historians*, vol. 7, Delhi: Low Price Publications, 2008, p. 212.

⁵⁷ Ghulam Husain Salim, Maulvi Abdus Salam trans. *Riyazu-S-Salatin*, Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1902, p. 29.

⁵⁸ Farhat Hasan, ‘The Mughal Port Cities of Surat and Hugli’ in Lakshmi Subramanian ed., *A Historical Tour of the Indian Littoral*, Marg Publications, 2008, p. 91.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Sushil Chaudhury, *From Prosperity to Decline*, p. 126.

⁶⁰ WBSA, Proceedings, Board of Trade, May 11, 1787, p. 199.

⁶¹ S.C. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-57*, p. xxxv. Walter Clavell, ‘Accompt of the Trade of Hugly’, in R.C. Carnac ed., *The Diaries of Streysham Master, 1675-1680*, vol. 2, p. 32, dated December 15, 1676, Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of the Countries*.

⁶² Ujjayan Bhattacharya, ‘Continuities in Bengal’s Contact with the Portuguese and Its Legacy’, p. 112.

They were looked upon as an inferior group. The offspring of the Portuguese men and South Asian women were categorised as *topasses*⁶³. There were many Portuguese in Hooghly but their trade was ‘inconsiderable’. They mainly subsisted as soldiers under the local government or as small traders selling homemade condiments and hand knitted woollens at local levels, baking bread for the Dutch and English neighbours⁶⁴. The heterogeneous and evolving mercantile groups added to the spirit of commerce of Hooghly and its neighbourhood. Slowly the Dutch and then the English trading body overtook the Hooghly merchants and competed with each other for survival.

Hooghly had its share of ship owning *shia* aristocratic merchants having linkages with the Mughal aristocracy. In fact Hedges noted the existence of a powerful coterie of Mughals and *sayyids* in Hooghly⁶⁵. Murshid Quli Khan was a great patron of the learned *shia* immigrant groups and Hooghly had turned into a *shia* colony even before Murshidabad attained its full glory⁶⁶. Alivardi Khan continued this tradition⁶⁷. Nevertheless, there was a large group of resident *sunnis* as well⁶⁸. Hooghly was spread over on the either side of the river. Even after the Portuguese prime period was over, it remained the chief port and mart of western Bengal till early eighteenth century. Flanked by the major river and crisscrossed by its various channels, the Hooghly region was dotted with fishermen and boat makers’ nodes at Satgaon, Balagarh, Sripur, Guptipara⁶⁹. The home grown mercantile communities of the *suvarnabaniks* (traders of gold), *kangsabaniks* (traders of copperware), *gandhabaniks* (traders of perfume), *sankhabaniks* (traders of shell items), had relocated from Satgaon. They must have been coastal stragglers in the eighteenth century who had *dingas* as their trading crafts. The locals inhabiting the neighbourhood were mainly weavers of cotton and silk cloths, boat-makers, fishermen, *majhi*, *dandi*, Bengali merchants, farmers, small traders, labourers etc. Like any typical river side business node and settlement of

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Bowrey, *Geographical Account*, p. 192.

⁶⁵ William Hedges, Henry Yule ed., *Diary of William Hedges, Esq. (Afterwards Sir William Hedges), During His Agency in Bengal, as Well as on His Voyage Out and Return Overland (1681-1687)*, London: Haklyut Society, 1887, p. xcvi.

⁶⁶ Abdul Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan*, p. 247.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 248.

⁶⁹ Partha Chattopadhyay, *Hugli Jelar Noushilpo*, Calcutta: Ubudash, 2012, p. 37.

seventeenth and eighteenth century Bengal, Hooghly's social milieu was composed of the above mentioned groups.

Traditionally Hooghly represented an agrarian society with farmers as the backbone of the economy. The legacy of the local trading groups and boat makers continued in the altering milieu. There were weavers of cotton and silk cloths⁷⁰. The changing circumstances triggered by the European interventions encouraged the artisans and agriculturists and poor *malangis* or salt makers to produce for local consumption as well as distant land. Also there emerged a group of 'bannians' in Hooghly, who provided 'security'⁷¹ or advances to the merchants so that they delivered a specified amount of goods like salt, textiles on a stipulated date to the European factories. Often they doubled up as money lenders. Further, as the settlements flourished, local *zamindars* and *talukdars* were asked to provide workforce⁷² for repairing of embankments⁷³, Company's buildings⁷⁴, road construction⁷⁵. An early nineteenth century British official correspondence indicated that the postal service was functional in Hooghly as there was a 'dawk house' there⁷⁶. Hence, it could be assumed there were peons and other relevant staff to man it.

The Mughal *mansabdars* and officials like the *subadars* and also the *nawab* and local aristocrats formed the upper echelon of society. The Mughal *faujdar* of Buksh Bandar had an office in Hooghly. Even under the Company's rule his office was retained to deal with the other foreign powers residing in Hooghly's neighbourhood. The *faujdar*'s small office had a 'peshkar' and a couple of 'mohrers'⁷⁷. Further, 'an establishment of the bergundazzes have been entertained in the pay of the Company'⁷⁸ as it was necessary to guard the fort,

⁷⁰ Master, *Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 81.

⁷¹ Master, *Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 83.

⁷² WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 15, dated March 16, 1778, p. 123; Provincial Council of Revenue Murshidabad, dated April 6 1778, p. 198.

⁷³ WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 15, dated March 16, 1778, pp. 123-124.

⁷⁴ WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 8, dated April 15, 1776, p. 225.

⁷⁵ George Toynbee, *A Sketch of the Administration of the Hugli District from 1795 to 1845*, Calcutta, 1888, p. 107.

⁷⁶ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no., 41, September 8, 1809.

⁷⁷ WBSA, Revenue Board Consisting of the Whole Council, Proceedings, vol. 9, January 4-February 22, 1774, p. 12.

⁷⁸ WBSA, Revenue Board Consisting Whole Council, Proceedings, vol. part 1, August 6-September 14, 1773, dated August 31, 1773, p. 228.

preserve the peace of the town and execute the orders of the *faujdar* with respect to foreign nations.

V. The Settlements: Hooghly and Its Neighbourhood

The following table will depict the evolution of the settlement of Hooghly within a span of about three hundred years from an unknown place to a port town of repute and show the impact of commercialisation and urbanisation on it.

Table 2.1: Hooghly and the Adjoining Area between 15th and 18th Century

Visitors	Period of Visit	Observations	Inferences
Bipradas Pipalai, <i>Mansa Mangal</i>	15 th century	Chand saudagar and his fleet of cargoes passed by Hooghly that lay on the right and Bhatpara on the left, Bodon on the west, Kakinada in the east. The fleet quickly passes by Mulajor, Garulia leaving behind Paikpara and Bhadrassarwar in the west ⁷⁹ . Satgaon (Saptagram) has been mentioned as a prosperous port settlement. There is no mention of Hooghly.	Hooghly was not a noticeable place during this period as is evident from the reference of Satgaon as an important hub of commerce.
Mukundaram Chakrabarty in <i>Chandimangal</i>	16 th century	There is no mention of Hooghly by Mukundaram though the neighbouring areas were mentioned and also Halishahar, Guptipara at the opposite bank were noted. ⁸⁰	Hooghly was not well known in Mukundaram's time.
Cesar Frederici, the Italian merchant	1567 in Bengal	He was silent about Hooghly, but noted a commanding business of Satgaon where 'buzrahs' and 'patuas' and small ships plied up with merchandise from Bettor ⁸¹ .	Satgaon was an active port and Hooghly was yet to make its mark.
Ralph Fitch,	Between	He noticed thriving	Hooghly was in wilderness

⁷⁹ Bipradas Pipilai, *Manasamangal*. But it has been claimed that some of the place names including Hooghly were interpolations.

⁸⁰ Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakrabarty, Binodbihari Bhattacharya ed., *Chandimangal*, Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1966, p. 217.

⁸¹ T. Hickock tr., *The Voyage and Travel of M. Caesar Frederick, merchant of Venice, into the East India, the Indies, and beyond the Indies. Wherein are contained very pleasant and rare matters, with the customes and rites of those Countries; also, herein are discovered the Merchandises and commodities of those Countreys*, London, Printed by Richard Jones and Edward White, page no not given.

<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A00611.0001.001>, accessed on 22.6.15.

the first Englishman to visit Bengal	1560s and 1581 in Bengal	commerce in Satgaon , which was a 'faire citie of the Moors' and was 'very plentiful of all things' ⁸²	and Satgaon was a reputed port drawing a sizeable business.
John Huyghen Van Linschoten	Died in 1611. Hence visited between 1580-1611	'They have no forte, no government, nor any policie'. The Portuguese lived in the manner of 'untamed horses'. But they derived 'great trafficke' ⁸³ .	Hooghly under the Portuguese represented a state of anarchy.
Sebastian Manrique, the Portuguese friar	1620s and 1632	large golas or store houses, and their partitions, with frames made of a kind of strong cane, which is found in many parts of India, and which the local people call bamboos. These they covered with straw, and there they kept their goods.....until the return of the season favourable for the homeward journey. This season is called 'moncient endiente'..... ⁸⁴ The city stood on a flat plain, unprotected by any defensive wall, save an earthen trench on one side ⁸⁵ .	During Manrique's visits Hooghly was a seasonal business mart of the Portuguese that over a period was on its way to assume a permanence, though it lay more or less open without much of fortification.
Father Cabral	Hooghly's fall in 1632	The city stands on a flat plain on the banks of the Ganges, open on all sides, unprotected by any wall or other form of defence, save an earthen trench.....a work of little utility and no strength ⁸⁶ .	His description matched that of Friar Manrique and both had visited around the same time.
Abdul Hamid Lahori	Badshahn amah 1648	The city was prosperous in Portuguese heydays, spread on both sides of the river and well fortified with cannon, muskets and other armaments ⁸⁷ .	It transformed from a temporary kind of a settlement to a well protected well established Portuguese node in a few years' time.

⁸² Foster, *Early Travels in India, 1583- 1619*, London: Oxford University Press, 1912, pp. 25-26.

⁸³ John Huyghen, Burnell ed., *The Voyage of John Huyghen van Linschoten*, vol. 1, p. 95.

⁸⁴ Sebastian Manrique, 'Itenerario', chapter 4, *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 12, no. 24, 1915, Calcutta.

⁸⁵ Sebastian Manrique, C.E. Luard and H. Hosten tr., *Travels of Fray Sebastian Manrique, 1629-1643*, vol. 2, Oxford, Printed for the Hakluyt Society, p. 323.

⁸⁶ Fr. Cabral, in Manrique, *Travels*, vol. 2, p. 323.

⁸⁷ Abdul Hamid Lahori, 'Badshah-nama', in H.M. Elliot and J. Dowson, *The History of India as told by Its Own Historians*, vol. 7, Delhi: Low Price Publications, Reprint, 2008, pp. 33-34. These facts have been corroborated by W.E. Begley and Z.A. Desai eds., *The Shah Jahan Namah of*

Gautier Schouten	Travelled in the East from 1658 to 1665	Hooghly was 'tolerable large'. It was a longish settlement on the river bank having large but unpaved roads. It had nice walks, fashionable buildings, opulent shops, convenient homes, boutiques of infinite kinds of merchandise particularly silk, fine cotton and drapery from all parts of India ⁸⁸ . He noted brisk trade in opium and saltpetre with Chhapra and Patna ⁸⁹ .	In Schouten's time, Hooghly was a remarkably well established commercial town. Further, he hinted about the peaceful coexistence between the Hindus and Muslims in Hooghly.
Francois Bernier	1660s	The Portuguese were concentrated mostly in Bandel. There was a fairly large concentration of Christians in Hooghly as the English had its trading post there after the Portuguese power was decimated ⁹⁰ .	Bernier visited after the fall of Hooghly in 1632. He blamed the Portuguese involvement in piracy, slave trade and association with Arakan in depredations of Bengal as their downfall in Hooghly.
Nicholas de Graaf	1670	described the place as 'beautiful' and fertile ⁹¹ .	His account is important mainly because of its insight on the highly effective centralised Mughal surveillance.
Niccolao Manucci	Between 1653 and 1703	Inhabitants of Hooghly were mostly rich Portuguese. They dealt in salt trade. It was not far from the sea. The waters of the settlement had carnivorous crocodiles ⁹² .	Manucci spoke about the Portuguese. But Hooghly was operating as a British trading post cum factory at that time. He might have referred to Bandel where the Portuguese were concentrated after the siege of Hooghly.
John Marshall	1670	Hooghly was a 'very great Towne' in which there were many Portuguese. The English and the Dutch had 'stately' factories by the river side ⁹³ . He spotted	Marshall portrayed Hooghly as a commercial node in which the Europeans had a strong business interest. But it had pockets of wilderness where predators abounded.

Inayat Khan, An Abridged History of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan Compiled by His Royal Librarian, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 84-85.

⁸⁸ Gautier Schouten, *Voyage aux Indes Orientales* (tr. Into French from Dutch), vol. 2, Amsterdam, 1707, vol. 2, p. 184.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Francois Bernier, Irvine Brock ed., *Travels in Mughal Empire, A.D. 1656-68*, New Delhi: First Edition, 1983, p. 178.

⁹¹ Nicolas de Graaf, *Voyages de Nicolas de Graaf aux Indes en d'autres lieux d'Asie depuis 1639 jusqu'en 1687*, p. 43.

⁹² Niccolao Manucci, *Storia Do Mogoror Moghul India*, vol. 2, p. 82.

⁹³ Shafaat Ahmed Khan ed., *John Marshall in India, Notes and Observations: 1668-1672*, London: Oxford University Press, 1927, p. 65.

		‘many Tygers’ close to Hooghly ⁹⁴ .	So it was emerging from its small village based agrarian moorings that was surrounded by jungles.
Thomas Bowrey	1670s	The town is not ‘uniforme’ but located at a pleasant place. It is the chief factory and the residence of the Chief Factor. Very rich merchants reside here. The ‘publicke’ ‘bazar’ sells items of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. There are other bazaars some specializing only in coarse calicoes and provisions ⁹⁵ . Hooghly was ‘very populous’ of men, women and children. The Portuguese are for the most part very poore’. But they were hard working people and tried their best to reinvent themselves as small traders and entrepreneurs knitting silk and cotton stockings, baking bread and making condiments like fruit jam and a variety of vegetable and fruit pickles ⁹⁶ . The city is ‘famous and sumptuous’, ‘populous’ and had many fine structures and gardens, besides having fine European factories. The Dutch had a ‘new and comely building; the old one adjoining the English factory got wiped away by flood ⁹⁷ .	Bowrey portrayed it as a town having various types of people as residents: rich merchants, not so well off Portuguese, Europeans. The European companies had beautiful residential cum factory areas at the better parts of this crowded market town. But Bowrey had nothing much to say about the locals. However, from the extent of the infrastructure of the European settlements, one could assume that they were driven by long term motives of continuing the stay in Hooghly.
Streynsham Master	1676	Spoke about the stately Dutch factory close to a garden. The old factory was abandoned, but was conveniently located to receive the Company’s vessels carrying bulky items like saltpetre, lead ⁹⁸ . Many trees surrounded the English factory and kept it cool and	The European East India companies, especially the English had long term plans of continuing in Hooghly. Accordingly, many alterations and renovations within the factory premises were planned.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 102.

⁹⁵ Bowrey, *A Geographical Account*, p. 168.

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 192.

⁹⁷Ibid., p.168.

⁹⁸ Master, *Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 48.

		moist but such a house bred vermine ⁹⁹ . The Chief and Councill in the Bay resided in the factory that needed alterations to make room for married people, a Penthouse, an office, a councill chamber, a place for registers etc. The factory premise needed to accommodate a sizeable population of the English privateers too to bring them under the vigilance of the Chief ¹⁰⁰ .	
Alexander Hamilton	1688-1713	'Hugly is a town of a large Extent derives a great Trade'. ¹⁰¹	Hooghly was a busy node of commerce.
Dacca Factory Record	November , 1690	A Company's official noted that he attempted to influence the <i>Diwan</i> to transfer the mint from Rajmahal to Hooghly as 'the merchants sending up their silver soe far as Rajahmaull', were at a great risk ¹⁰² . A mint at the town itself 'would be of great advantage to the King being the port Town', ¹⁰³ as that could save their valuable time that was being wasted in travelling to and fro Rajmahal.	In as late as 1690, the Company officials made their presence felt in Hooghly.
De Gennes de la Chancelier, an officer of the French East India Company	1743	Chinsurah enjoys great commerce and has many beautiful buildings. The Government House is an architectural wonder and has 'evergreen grove', 'well shaded walk', 'flower bed' and is surrounded by 'many well built houses' ¹⁰⁴ . He went to a place named Balour on the opposite bank, which Rennell identified as Bhatpara and Tieffenthaler	Chancelier took note of the Dutch settlement as it was organised and beautiful. He observed a predominantly Muslim culture in the multi-racial trading town.

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 272.

¹⁰⁰, Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁰¹Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies, Being the Observations and Remarks of Captain Alexander Hamilton, Who Spent his time from the year 1688 to 1723*, vol. 2, Edinburgh: 1727, p. 20.

¹⁰²NAI, Dacca Factory Record, Accession Number, 2695.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Indrani Ray, 'Journey to Cassimbazar and Murshidabad', pp.149-151.

		as Louncagola, meaning salt depot. De Gennes had mentioned about a major salt depot there and huge bulks of salt were stacked along the river. Next he reached Hooghly on the same side of Chinsurah. Once the focal point of the Portuguese activities along the Ganges, Hooghly is a 'Moor' town. It has a custom house from which one has to get stamped the <i>dastak</i> of the place from which one has travelled. There is a fort which houses the office of the chief of customs ¹⁰⁵ .	
Bijoyram Sen <i>Tirthamangal</i>	1770	Hooghly lay on his travel route. It has been described as a town by the river side where the boat took a halt. His patron went to see the town along with the local <i>dewan</i> . Nearby places on the either bank like, Haliashahar, Bansaberia, Chinsurah, Farashdanga were mentioned in the account. But Satgaon had ceased to exist as an important settlement by that time. ¹⁰⁶	Hooghly existed as a Bengal riverside town.
Ghulam Husain	1786-88	The <i>nawab</i> Murshid Quli had struck a cordial and peaceful relation with the foreign traders and merchants ¹⁰⁷ .	In early eighteenth century, Hooghly was a busy site for the international trade.

The table 2.1 depicts Hooghly's historical development from the time of Satgaon's decline and Hooghly's rise and decay. While Fitch reminisced the golden days of Satgaon; Lahori, Cabral and Manrique bore testimony to the decline of the Portuguese colony in Hooghly. In 1632, the Portuguese of Hooghly had evoked the Mughal wrath due to their unruly activities, hence were driven away from Hooghly¹⁰⁸. Hooghly served as the Mughal *Buksh Bandar* or the custom collection point at the port under a *faujdari* and a host of subordinate

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 151-152.

¹⁰⁶ Bijoyram Sen, *Tirthamangal*, Calcutta: Parashpathar edition, 2009, pp. 39, 122.

¹⁰⁷ Ghulam Husain Salim, *Riyazu-S-Salatin*, p. 29.

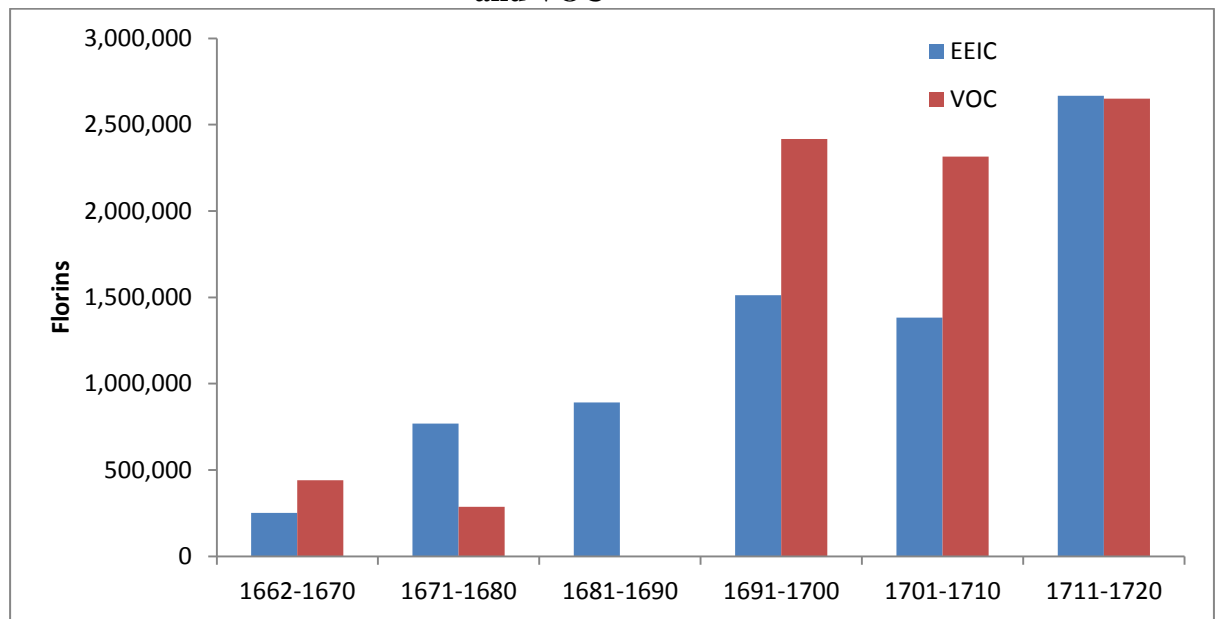
¹⁰⁸ WBSA, Board of Revenue, Proceedings, May 11, 1787, p. 215.

Mughal officers. However, subsequently the strong Bengal *nawabs* managed to impose their influences over the Mughals in certain administrative matters. Trading interests mostly reflected the predominance of the elite section of the society, in which ship owning Bengali merchants were active for some time, serving the interests of the north Indian aristocracy as well as catering to the west Asian commercial demands. Between 1630s and 1750s, Hooghly witnessed the race for the rooting of the European commercial interests. In the commercial sphere the Dutch and the English trading bodies were the major stake holders since 1625 and 1651 respectively. The Portuguese were relegated to an insignificant position in the intra-Asian trade. The English and the Dutch were close rivals in the arena of Bengal trade.

The Dutch Company was leading in the total value of trade, but the English East India Company had a small edge in the field of procurement for Europe. Nevertheless, they were strong contenders in the commercial arena. Moreover, unlike the other mercantile Companies, the EEIC had managed to exempt itself from paying customs and transit duties. The VOC had to pay an average annual liability of Rs. 120,000 as customs duty at the rate of 2.5 per cent of the value of imports and exports¹⁰⁹. Thus the English company had a clear edge over others. Bengal was brought under the exclusive control of the English East India Company in 1757.

¹⁰⁹ Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, pp. 79-81.

Graph 2.1: Graph showing the average annual value of exports by the EEIC and VOC



Source: Adapted from Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal: 1630-1720*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2012, p. 82.

The Town and the Living Space

The settlement of Hooghly was initiated by the Portuguese sometime in the sixteenth century. According to Abdul Hamid Lahori, the author of *Badshahnamah*, Hooghly was an extension of Satgaon, one of their earlier major settlements in western Bengal. At Satgaon by the river Saraswati, the Portuguese had built 'several houses in the Bengali style' for business transactions. Over a period of time such constructions increased in number and 'large substantial buildings' were erected for living purposes also. They were fortified with canons, muskets and ammunitions. Tieffenthaler, one of the earliest European geographers and a Jesuit missionary, who travelled along the entire course of the Ganga down to Calcutta, observed sometime in the late eighteenth century, 'la forteresse, assez grande, qui forme un parallélogramme, construit selon les regles de l'architecture ancienne'¹¹⁰. (A large enough fortress forming a parallelogram is built on the ancient rules of architecture'. Translation: Author). However, it is not clearly established whether it was the Portuguese fort or the subsequently constructed Mughal fort that was in ruins.

¹¹⁰ Joseph Tieffenthaler, *Geographie de L'Indoustan qui presente in trois volume*, (tr. from German), vol. 1, Berlin: 1784, p. 455.

In due course Satgaon had declined, and the port of Hooghly flourished along the bank of the Bhagirathi. Initially, the settlement had river on one side and a ditch filled with the river water ran on three sides. The European ships anchored at this port as the place turned into one of the finest emporia of south Asia. Subsequently Hooghly and its extensive neighbourhood spread over both the banks of the Bhagirathi; which later became known as the river Hugli.

In fact, Joao de Barros' map of Bengal has provided a rough indication that Hooghly was an extension of Satgaon. The settlement of Satgaon had started from the southern bank of the Saraswati. The nucleus could have been the port as it took advantage of the deep water for safe anchorage in the initial phase on the southern bank. For some reason, the settlement seemed to proceed further towards the south and not much towards the east. Then over a period of time as the Saraswati tended to shrink up in summer months and the Bhagirathi to the east prospered; the old town seemed to extend towards the emerging Bhagirathi to take advantage of the better mooring facilities, vacant land on the bank and explore new routes for trading purposes. In due course, the settlement towards the eastern side on the west bank of the Hugli became a busy mercantile hub and residential colony and assumed a new identity. So Hooghly could well be an extension of Satgaon.

According to the geographer Tieffenthaler's account published in 1784,

Hougli Bandar c'est à dire (le Port de Hougli) assise sur la rive élevée citerieure, étoit ci-devant une ville peuplée, remplie d'habitans Portugais, remarquable par de beaux Palais & autres Edifices'¹¹¹.

(Hooghly Bandar meaning the port of Hooghly is located in front of a city inhabited by the Portuguese. It is remarkable for its beautiful palaces and other edifices).(Translation: Author).

As they were settling down along the river, the Portuguese Catholic priests started converting the locals. A church named the Basilica of the Holy Rosary, popularly known as the Bandel Church, was established near the port along the river in 1599. It was established by the Augustinian friars of the Roman Catholic denomination. According to Tieffenthaler,

¹¹¹Ibid.

on voit au Nord ouest, sur le bord même du fleuve, une église et un couvent d' Augustins'.

(On the north west, along the same bank of the river, lies a church and a convent of the Augustins).

(Translation: Author)

On the west one saw another Jesuit church dedicated to St. Vierge¹¹². The Augustinian church was destroyed when Hooghly was attacked in 1632. However, it was rebuilt later. Initially a temporary straw church was erected in Bandel and in 1661 a brick one was built 'in its head'¹¹³. This still remains a major Christian pilgrim centre of India. According to Khafi Khan, the chronicler of *Muntakhabu-L Lubab Muhammad Shahi*, apart from flanking Hooghly with a strong fort, with towers and walls and artillery, they built a church or 'kalisa'¹¹⁴. The Portuguese documents testified that the Jesuit fathers named Francisco Fernandez and Dominigo D'souza had arrived in Hooghly in May 1598. They had set up a school, a dispensary and a Jesuit college of St. Paul. But those establishments were in ruins by 1765¹¹⁵. Besides other educational institutes, a special mention should be made of another school named Public School and Nunnery of Misericordia that was established in the end of fifteenth century¹¹⁶.

The English East India Company had decided to make Hooghly its chief settlement in Bengal sometime in the 1640s. It had inherited from the Portuguese 'the large, badly built Indian town with its narrow lanes, stretched for about two miles along the river-side'¹¹⁷. The northern part of it was called Bandel and to its south was Chinsurah, the Dutch factory and settlement established in 1635. The Dutch VOC had subsequently formed its factory and township at the latter place. Similarly, a French trading post and township had grown at Farashdanga in Chandernagore in 1673 and a Danish settlement had evolved at Fredericknagore in Serampore between 1755 and 1845.

The English factory cum settlement was located on the western bank near the centre of the town where there was a small indentation forming a whirlpool.

¹¹² Joseph Tieffenthaler, *Geographie de L'Indoustan*, vol. 1, p. 455.

¹¹³ WBSA, Proceedings, Board of Revenue, July 18, 1786, p. 249.

¹¹⁴ Khafi Khan, 'Muntakhabu-L Lubab', p. 211.

¹¹⁵ H. Hosten, 'A Week at the Bandel Convent', *Bengal Past and Present*, vol.10, part, 1, serial no. 19, January-March, 1915, pp. 36-120; Campos, *History of the Portuguese*, pp. 93, 101-102.

¹¹⁶ D.G. Crawford, *A Brief History of the Hughli District*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1902, p. 9.

¹¹⁷ C.R. Wilson, *The Early Annals of the English in Bengal, The Bengal Public Consultations for the First Half of the Eighteenth Century*, London: W. Thacker and Co, 1805, p. 61.

The locals identified the area as Gholghat. The author of *Riyaz* had endorsed this fact by stating that as the port of Satgaon was no longer ‘practicable’, another port was fixed at Gholghat¹¹⁸. *Diary of William Hedges* confirmed that it stood on the western shore of the river¹¹⁹. At Hooghly there was a Mughal fort where the Mughal *faujdar* was the only Indian official of worth with whom the Europeans had the ‘closest relations’¹²⁰. As per *Riyaz*, the English were prohibited from erecting towers, *bazars*, forts and moats in Hooghly¹²¹. Actually all the settlements were situated on the western bank of the Hugli almost contiguously.

European travelogues written on the basis of first hand impressions have mostly focussed on the European townships and have remained generally silent about the living spaces of the locals. The Dacca Factory Record suggested that the ‘former edifice in Hugly was utterly ruined most part of the factory being fallen for want of repair and the rest being carries away by one or otherthe Gaut on whole (?) before our factory being wholly filled up with sand’ that hindered the trading activities.¹²² Evidently, the European factories and the landing spaces for ships were repaired and revamped from time to time.

S.C. Hill noted that on the eve of 1757, that most of the European settlements in Bengal had the areas demarcated for the ‘Black’ and the ‘White’ towns. The factory was located in the centre of the White Town. Hill further explained the implication of the term fortified associated with those towns. The factory was ‘surrounded by a quadrangular enclosure, the walls of which were constructed to carry guns’¹²³. At each corner was a bastion to flank walls or curtains. Those poorly constructed buildings were dignified by the name of forts¹²⁴. Yet a contemporary archival evidence dated December 3, 1713, stated that the ‘French and Dutch Factorys at Hughly look as like fortifications’¹²⁵. The living quarters around the factories were actually quite ‘feeble’¹²⁶. However those were often built to a greater height than the factories and they closely surrounded

¹¹⁸ Ghulam Husain Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 29.

¹¹⁹ William Hedges, *Diary of William Hedges*, vol. 3, p. 219.

¹²⁰ S.C. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, vol. 1, pp. xxxiv-xliii.

¹²¹ Ghulam Husain Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 29.

¹²² NAI, Dacca Factory Record, dated December 8, 1690, Microfilm, Accession no. 2695.

¹²³ S.C. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, vol. 1, p. xxxiv.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 4, pp. 265.

¹²⁶ S.C. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, vol. 1, p. xxxiv.

the factories¹²⁷. The towns outside the factories had practically no fortifications¹²⁸.

Riyaz observed that all such settlements like Chandernagore under the French, Chinsurah under the Dutch, Serampore under the Danes were autonomous units¹²⁹. The European houses in those settlements of Hooghly typified the European colonies in Bengal. They were handsome, large and lofty, with wide covered verandahs and large gardens¹³⁰. The important inhabitants of Hooghly other than the Europeans not only spent their leisure time in those gardens, they got their own gardens constructed. The White town symbolized a high life to the local inhabitants. The town seemed to be demarcated along community lines, while 'mixed localities' were common too¹³¹.

The Mughal offices got transferred from Satgaon to Hooghly as Satgaon was silting up. As Hooghly port was declared the royal port of Mughal *Buksh Bandar* after 1632, the port office and the custom office were formed along the river bank. Besides, the *faujdar* had constructed a new Mughal fort at Hooghly after the city capitulated and the Portuguese fort was destroyed by the Mughals. The *faujdar* was traditionally appointed directly by the Mughal emperor. *Riyaz* brought to our notice that Murshid Quli changed this tradition by bringing the office of *faujdar* directly under his jurisdiction. So, in a way he 'placed the financial resources of the country of Bengal upon the customs duties levied from traders'¹³². Hooghly used to earn a sizeable custom duty during that phase. The impression of the volume of goods passing through the *Buksh Bandar* could be gathered from the following fact: In 1728, the total customs duties calculated was approximately Rs. 29,289¹³³.

As he maintained peaceful relations with the European and all Asian merchants of China, Persia, Turan, Arabia, Mughals etc. by not imposing any extra unjust duty; those rich ship owning people 'made their quarters here'¹³⁴ in Hooghly. But the influence of the Mughal merchants was much more than that of

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xxxv.

¹²⁸ S.C. Hill, *Bengal in 1757-1758*, p. xxxiv.

¹²⁹ Ghulam Husain Salim, *Riyaz*, pp. 35-36.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xxxv.

¹³¹ Farhat Hasan, 'The Mughal Port Cities', in L. Subramanian ed, *A Historical Tour*, p. 91.

¹³² Ghulam Husain Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 29.

¹³³ Cited in Abdul Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan*, p. 215.

¹³⁴ Ghulam Husain Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 29.

the other merchants of Hooghly. There was a large section of rich Muslim trading community. A locality in Hooghly was identified as ‘Mughalpura’¹³⁵. The prosperous *shia* merchants and aristocrats, mainly Mughals might have lived there. It is difficult to say whether it was same as ‘Mughaltooly’ located close to the Imambara. Also, present day areas referred to as ‘Imambazar’, ‘Chawk Bazar’, ‘Hussaingully’, ‘Karbala’, ‘Motijheel’, ‘Khagrajhor’, ‘Miar Ber’, used to have a sizeable *shia* population¹³⁶. Such localities had evidently provided dwelling spaces to the ‘Asian merchants’ from distant corners of the world, some of whom subsequently started staying permanently in Hooghly. Nevertheless, the houses of the common men on the bank of the Hugli, outside the European colonies, were, to generalise Streynsham Master’s observation on the Dutch colony at Chinsurah, ‘all built of thatch hovells’¹³⁷.

Gautier Schouten’s account on the town of Hooghly is particularly insightful as it has some unique observations about the local inhabitants. He spoke about a large community of ‘idol worshippers’, divided in at least twenty five sects¹³⁸; who lived peacefully under the Muslim rule in the latter half of the seventeenth century¹³⁹. Schouten noted that there were five temples in the market area, each meant for a particular sect among the five main sects of idol worshippers. He mentioned the names of four sects with some description. The ‘Cenrawach’ believes in no god, no paradise and no hell¹⁴⁰; the ‘Bisnau’ believe in one god—‘Bramma’ or ‘Ram’ or ‘Vistnau’¹⁴¹; the third sect is ‘Zamarath’ comprising the people working by hand like artisans, carpenters, masons¹⁴²; the fourth sect is called ‘Ciophi’ or ‘Joeji’ or ‘Gougi’¹⁴³. Each sect had its own neighbourhood. Temples were built at the end of the locality with relevant idols.

¹³⁵ Nawab Muhabbat Khan, ‘Akhbar-i Muhabbat’, in H.M. Elliot and J. Dowson eds., *The History of India*, vol. 8, 2008, p. 379.

¹³⁶ Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, ‘Narrated Time and Constructed Space: Remembering the Communal Violence of 1950 in Hooghly’, in Paula Banerjee and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury eds., *Women in Indian Borderlands*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2011, p. 43.

¹³⁷ S. Master, *Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 325.

¹³⁸ Gautier Schouten, *Voiege aux Indes Orientales*, vol. 2, p. 253.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 184. Interestingly he never used the term Hindu, but used the term ‘idolâtre’.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 261.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

So deep rooted sectarianism was existing among the Hindus of Bengal around that time¹⁴⁴.

However, professional compulsions and social interactions cut across all such divides¹⁴⁵. Still as Farhat Hasan stated, ‘most neighbourhoods were exclusive and insular’¹⁴⁶. Further, as the Europeans lived within exclusive enclaves around their respective factories; there existed an overarching psychological divide between the European and local living quarters. For the local people, the European sectors were distant ‘magnificent towns’ and for the Indian soldiers of the European companies the glamorous parts of Chinsurah, Chandernagore awaited to be ‘plundered’¹⁴⁷. This meant that the contrast between the living areas and lifestyle had created an insurmountable disconnect between the locals and Europeans, amounting to an extremely negative feeling of the former towards the latter.

In contrast, the European townships were almost mini replicas of the towns back home. According to Schouten,

There is nothing in it more magnificent than the Dutch Factory. It was built on a great space at the distance of a musket shot from the Ganges, for fear that, if it were nearer, some inundation of the water of the river might endanger it or cause it to fall. It has more the appearance of a large castle than a factory of merchants. The walls are high and built of stone and the fortifications are also covered with stone. They are furnished with canon, and the factory is surrounded by ditches full of water. It is large and spacious. There are many rooms to accommodate the Director, the other officers..... There are large shops built of stone, where goods that are brought in the country and those that our vessels bring there are placed¹⁴⁸.

It had the living quarter of the Director, officers, court, secretariat, various departments, down to factory, workshop for ships, medicine shop, place for anchor, rope, cable store arranged in a planned and structured manner¹⁴⁹.

According to Francois de L’Estra’s contemporary account, ‘The Dutch Director

¹⁴⁴Ibid., p. 184.

¹⁴⁵ Farhat Hasan, ‘The Mughal Port Cities’, in L. Subramanian ed, *A Historical Tour*, p. 91.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ S.C. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, vol. 1, p. xxxv.

¹⁴⁸ L.S.S.O’Malley and M. Chakravarti, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Hooghly*, Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1912.

¹⁴⁹ Akshay Adhya, *Hooghly Chnuchurar Nana Kotha: A Collection of Articles based on Historical Events*, vol. 2, Hooghly: Hooghly Samvad, 2010, pp. 54-55.

lives and is treated like a king, who has amassed inestimable riches because he profits in everything. The houses have beautiful embroidered bed cover, beautiful muslins, beautiful carpets designed like Turkish'¹⁵⁰.

It was a secure factory, guarded by Fort Gustavus. Thomas Bowrey described it as the 'largest and the compleatest factory in Asia'¹⁵¹. The Dutch Governor Sitcherman's residence was built in 1744, overlooking the Bhagirathi¹⁵². The Dutch church was built by the Governor Sir G. Vernet on the river bank¹⁵³. The oldest Christian church in Chinsurah was built by the Armenians in 1695 and it was also the first church ever erected in Bengal¹⁵⁴. Also the Dutch burial ground bears testimony to the history of the Dutch presence in Bengal. However, most of the Dutch forts like Kasimbazar, Piplely and Hooghly were described as 'handsome' and 'stately'¹⁵⁵. It was located close to the Dutch racquet court occupying sixty five *beeghas* of land¹⁵⁶. The French founded a settlement at Chandernagore in 1690 and built Fort Orleans in 1701. Similarly, the Danish colony of Fredericknagore at Serampore was established in 1755. Its factory was designed as a fort too. It was surrounded by a moat on three sides and the Bhagirathi on the fourth side. According to Bishop Heber, 'it looked more of a European town than Calcutta'¹⁵⁷.

The availability of a large body of Dutch *pattas* or land documents has provided insights into the modes of revenue collection by the Dutch company. It

¹⁵⁰ Francois de L'Estra, *Relation ou journal d'un voyage nouvellement fait aux Indes Orientales depuis l'annee 1671 jusqu'en 1675*, p. 191.

<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=tP0EzsZDQ-kC&pg=PA67&lpg=PA67&dq=Francois+de+L%E2%80%99Estra&source=bl&ots=27EJJdiRrC&sig=IZIoygtYg2HKnuuBFw7d-2pBYgQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEWjjgdiPzsPSAhXHQo8KHVqQA184FBD0AQgdMAE#v=onepage&q=Francois%20de%20L%E2%80%99Estra&f=false>

Accessed on 8.3.17.

¹⁵¹ Bowrey, *A Geographical Account*, p. 168.

¹⁵² Stavorinus cited in Akshay Adhya, *Hooghly Chnuchurar Nana Kotha*, p. 54.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Charles Joseph, 'Notes on the Right Bank of the Hooghly, Topographical Survey of the River Hooghly from Bandel to Garden Reach, Exhibiting the Principal Buildings, Ghats and Temples on both Banks, executed in the year 1841', in Kamal Chaudhury ed., *Hooghly Jelar Shekal-Ekal*, vol. 2, Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 2015, p. 962.

¹⁵⁵ Kalikinkar Datta, *The Dutch in Bengal and Bihar, 1740-1825*, Patna: University of Patna, 1948, pp. 7-8.

¹⁵⁶ George Toynbee cited in Oindreela Lahiri and Aishwarya Tipnis, 'The Dutch in India and Chinsurah, A Historical Perspective',

https://issuu.com/aishwaryatipnisarchitects/docs/ata_final_paper_by_oeendrilahiri

Accessed on 16.5.16.

¹⁵⁷ M.A. Laird ed., *Bishop Heber in Northern India, Selections from Heber's Journal*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971, p. 51.

also reveals the Company's long term political and economic agendas in Bengal. For instance; it demanded revenue on any kind of transaction of property.

Patta granted to Gungadhur Sheel inhabitant of Chinsurah for one kottah of ground land and two pakah brick rooms bought in the outcry for the sum of one hundred and eight sicca rupees and it is further agreed between the parties that the purchaser should pay the annual revenue at the rate of eight annahs per year the measurement at four cubits and half per kattah and twenty kattahs to one biggah.

Chinsurah, 30 October,
1795.

Signed by J.B. Birch
Deputy Commissioner
for Chinsurah¹⁵⁸.

Similarly one Suboolchand Dutto lived in Chinsurah on 'two cottahs and twelve chuttacks of ground given to him as a gift by his grandfather Godadhur Dutto'. The latter was made to 'pay the annual revenue at the rate five annahs and six pies per year the measurement of four cubits and half per cottah and twenty cottahs to one biggah'¹⁵⁹. Such a land reform enumerated one of the various means of inflating its treasury.

A painting of the Dutch headquarter of Hooghly, by Hendrik van Schuylenburgh, 1665, could be brought to our attention for a number of interesting points common to more or less all the factory cum settlements and their neighbourhoods¹⁶⁰. It is built within a quadrangular boundary wall with two rows of factory buildings running parallel on either side of the main entrance. Probably the staff quarters were located close to all four sides of the boundary walls with the office and residence of the factors located at the end of the two lines of the factories. Curiously, the main entrance bore an influence of the Mughal style architecture and the garden resembles the Persian style garden layout known as Chaharbagh in which a quadrangular plot of garden is divided in four equal parts by pathways or fountains. Outside the boundary wall to its immediate left is the river and the quay area. A few big boats are about to berth in with various commodities.

¹⁵⁸WBSA, Chinsurah Records, Bundle no. 3, Patta no. 1375.

¹⁵⁹WBSA, Chinsurah Records, Bundle no. 3, Patta no. 1426.

¹⁶⁰ Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot, *India before Europe*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 262.

On the right is an extensive field in which the Muslim merchants and nobles are seated in various groups under the Mughal style tents and pavilions. A number of people are labouring within the Dutch trading post. A lot of activity is seen outside too. Otherwise the painting depicted a predominantly rural milieu with big and small thatched mud houses, groves and farm lands. Beasts of burdens, horses and elephants have been portrayed. It seems as though a European township had been superimposed on a society that was entrenched in rural moorings. This again greatly justifies P.J. Marshall's concept of a 'rurban' society in the seventeenth and eighteenth century Bengal.

Nevertheless, all those European townships shared similar characteristics. They replicated the European localities typical of their respective countries in more ways than one, complete with neat looking bungalows, gardens, town square, promenades, church, along with fortified factories and ports. However, by the latter half of the eighteenth century their near desolate streets, frayed European style shops and one or two clients, empty quay area with minimal activities, forlorn markets enumerated the fact that those high expectations were met with lost hopes. So the rural indigenous milieu continued while the European pockets dwindled over a period of time. Roughly a hundred years later, Tieffenthaler's account had captured the dismal spirit of the European quarters in Hooghly¹⁶¹. At the same time it is interesting to observe that W. Lushington was posted as the Collector of Hooghly on behalf of the English East India Company sometime in the early 1770s when Hooghly had past its prime. He noted that the property price was very high even then along the 'whole bank of the river' as Hooghly was 'once a place of considerable trade'¹⁶².

Indigenous Shrines and Places of Worship

However, as mentioned earlier, the Hooghly belt had a large resident population of locals and naturally it nurtured numerous ancient shrines dating back to pre European times. The banks of the Saraswati and Bhagirathi; two most significant rivers watering the region, were dotted with the shrines of 'Chandi', a manifestation of the supreme goddess worshipped by the Hindus. Bipradas's *Manasamangal* composed in the 1490s, mentioned about the merchant protagonist

¹⁶¹ Tieffenthaler, *Geographie de L'Indoustan*, vol. 1, p. 455.

¹⁶² WBSA, Proceedings, Revenue Board Consisting of the Whole Council, vol. 1, October 18-December 30, 1772, p. 229.

worshipping ‘Borai Chandi’ of Boro, before embarking on his business trip across the Bay of Bengal. Actually before Chandernagore acquired its European name, the region was composed of a conglomeration of prosperous villages namely Khalisani, Boro, Gondalpara among others¹⁶³. The western edge of Chandernagore is watered by the Saraswati, while Bhagirathi flows to its east. In fact, the Hooghly belt, specially Satgaon along with pre European Chandernagore, among other areas of *rahr*, had a large population of resident Bengali merchants, the *baniks*, who followed the ritual of paying homage to ‘Chandi’ before undertaking a sea voyage.

Originally worshipped by the local fishermen and boatmen; she became a goddess of river or a patron deity of sorts for the Bengali merchants. Mention of Hooghly among other places like Rishra, Kakinara, Bhatpara, Chitpore, Calcutta in *Mangalkavyas* could be interpolations by the later poets of this genre of literature. Satgaon enjoyed an old historicity. In *Chaitanyabhagavat*, Vrindavan Das (1530-40) had mentioned about a very big Bengali mercantile community of Satgaon¹⁶⁴. In fact, this community was so influential that in 1537, a group of merchants became identified as the *Saptagrami Subarnabanik Kul*. It was an offshoot of the Bengali *Subarnabanik Samaj*¹⁶⁵. However, though Hooghly was yet to be identified by the Portuguese, the place existed by the Bhagirathi’s side which was to take up the centre stage of history in future.

Among the first few places during Chand Saudagar’s journey, Boro was mentioned by Pipilai. Again, after a long southward journey, Chand Saudagar had performed a *puja* at the shrine of ‘Betai Chandi’ at Betore, corresponding with the modern day Shibpore in Howrah¹⁶⁶. Betore was a Portuguese station at the confluence of the Saraswati and Bhagirathi (Hugli) where the ocean vessels transferred their goods destined towards Satgaon, to small boats, as the river had lost its navigability to the north of Howrah. In 1585 Ralph Fitch had found Satgaon to be a prosperous city and an active port. So the settlement functioned till the end of the sixteenth century. In fact, the protagonist of *Chandimangal*,

¹⁶³Biswanath Bandopadhyay, ‘Hooghly r Phorashi Uponibeshher Shuchona Porbo O Prashongik Itihaash’ in *Hooghly Jela: Shekal O Ekal*, A Collection of Research based Articles on Hooghly District, vol. 1, Calcutta: Anima Prakashani, 2010, pp. 73-74.

¹⁶⁴ Arun Nag, ‘Mangalkabyer Bhugol’, in Abhra Ghosal et al eds., *Bitorkika*, River Number, Calcutta: Setu Prakashani, 2014, p. 108.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ C.R. Wilson, *The Early Annals of the English in Bengal*, p. 181.

Dhanapati too had paid homage to 'Betai Chandi' before proceeding further south at the mouth of the river.

Though Chand Saudagar reached the prosperous town of Satgaon on the Saraswati, he proceeded seawards with his fleet via Bhagirathi. After Satgaon, he passed by places like Kumarhat, Hooghly, Bhatpara, Boro, Kakinara, Mulajor, Garulia, Paikpara, Bhadreswar etc along the Bhagirathi river. In fact Chand Saudagar had avoided the Saraswati's course beyond Triveni and travelled via Ajay before sailing through Bhagirathi in order to reach the confluence of the river and sea. The route traversed by the heroes of *Chandimangal* differed from that of *Manasamangal* till Triveni¹⁶⁷. Beyond Triveni, both sets of merchant explorers had followed more or less the same route to reach the estuary. In fact, the heroes of both the *kavyas* followed the Adi Ganga's route to reach the Bay from Betor onwards. At least during Pipilai's time in around 1495, it was the scare of the Arakanese pirates that prompted the merchants to avoid the Saraswati that was deep and navigable till such time¹⁶⁸.

Indeed the Saraswati was an old river that found entries in the first century A.D. accounts of Ptolemy and the anonymous author of *Periplus*. In Akbar's time its active port Satgaon brought an income of 12,00,000 *dams* which was equivalent to Rs 30,000¹⁶⁹. Though the Saraswati was functional till mid sixteenth century and the port of Hooghly was formally established in 1580; the Bhagirathi had become a navigable river much before that, roughly around Pipilai's time in late fifteenth century. He had described the Saraswati, Bhagirathi and Jamuna as three great rivers. It could imply that the Saraswati was functioning and was famed for its greatness, but the Bhagirathi too had already emerged as an alternative route and had a good current. This aptly justifies Pipilai's lines in *Manasamangal* as Chand Saudagar and his entourage passed through Satgaon and the confluence of the three rivers at Triveni:

*Ganga o Saraswati Jamuna Bishal tothi*¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Ketakadas Kshemananda, Bijonbihari Bhattacharya ed., *Manasamangal*; Kavikankan Mukunda, Sukumar Sen ed., *Chandimangal*; Arun Nag, 'Mangalkabyer Bhugol', in Abhra Ghosal et al eds., *Bitorkika*, p. 109.

¹⁶⁸ Radhakamal Mukherjee, *The Changing Face of Bengal, A Study in Riverine Economy*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, Revised Edition, 2009, p. 117.

¹⁶⁹ Cited in J.J.A. Campos, *History of the Portuguese*, p. 22.

¹⁷⁰ Bipradas Pipilai, *Manasamangal*, cited in Biswanath Bandopadhyay, 'Hooghly r Phorashi Uponibesher Shuchona Porbo O Prashongik Itihaash' in *Hooghly Jela*, p. 75.

(Ganga and Saraswati, along with Yamuna are great rivers).

Translation: Author

Biswanath Bandopadhyay has argued that the trading vessels sailed towards the sea through the Bhagirathi and brought back their imports via Saraswati. As the Saraswati's bank was more populated than that of the Bhagirathi; the merchants opted for that route in their homeward journey touching Satgaon. That way they could do some trade on their return journey home. The bank of the Saraswati was thickly populated so the imports they brought in had a ready market¹⁷¹. Apart from the commercial hub of Satgaon, there were other old populous settlements like Khalisani, Maheshpore, Jagannathbati, Jarura, Bilkuli, Byajra etc. in its neighbourhood. The banks of both the rivers: the old route of the Saraswati and the new route of Bhagirathi had innumerable shrines of 'Chandi'.

It shows that the *baniks* of Bengal frequented both the routes, the former till at least the terminal phase of sixteenth century, the latter till the phase of an overpowering European presence and all along the way constructed and patronised the places of worship of their favourite deity. So, much before the Bhagirathi could borrow its name from the Portuguese base, its bank provided an extensive locale for the shrines of the Hindu mother Goddess. This explains the existence of many big and small temples of 'Chandi' in Saptagram Hooghly Chandernagore belt.

In Khalisani, there was an old temple of the goddess 'Vishalakshmi', established in 1498, which could either be a deity of the cult of 'Tantric' Buddhism or a manifestation of 'Manasa', the snake goddess¹⁷². It was venerated by the local farmers and labourers. There was a predominance of the worship of feminine deity in Hooghly and its adjoining areas. A special mention should be made of the famed Hanseswari temple of Bansberia, located in between Triveni and Bandel and close to Satgaon. In late eighteenth century, it was started by the local *zamindar* named Raja Nrisimha Deb Roy, an acclaimed tantric, and completed by his widow Rani Shankari. The temple is unique for more reasons than one. It has thirteen minars representing various aspects of Tantric cult. The architecture is representative of tantric 'sat-chakraved' and thirteen minars

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Biswanath Bandopadhyay, 'Hooghly r Phorashi Uponibeshher Shuchona Porbo O Prashongik Itihaash' in *Hooghly Jela*, p. 67.

represent thirteen lotus buds¹⁷³. It was ‘self-consciously built to reflect Tantric crucial index by which to document the popularity of Tantra in Bengal’ in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries¹⁷⁴. The idol of ‘Kali’ is also unique as it is blue coloured and has four hands. It is made of ‘neem’ wood. The temple complex has Ananta Basudev temple and Swanhaba ‘Kali’ temple, with exquisite terracotta work on their walls.

Though the worship of the *shakti* form was common, the locals paid homage to the divine male form too. Guptipara has an array of temples some of which are famous for intricate terracotta murals. Among them Krishnachandra temple was built by nawab Alivardi in 1745. This ‘atchala’ style (hut shaped with eight sloping roofs adjoining each other) temple is famous for terracotta panels. However, the Shandeswar temple is probably the oldest temple of Hooghly (Chinsurah), located at the bank of the Bhagirathi. The foundation was laid sometime in the sixteenth century by one Digambar Haldar. It later received the patronage of the Dutch company.

Again, located close to Bansberia, Triveni is famous for its earliest surviving Muslim mosque of Zafar Khan Gazi, built in 1298. It was initially a Hindu holy site that came under the Muslim influence in the early phase of Muslim conquest of Bengal. It is one of the earliest representative Muslim architectures of brick and stone combination, located close to the bank of the Hugli¹⁷⁵. The materials from Hindu temples were used to build this mosque. Actually the area close to Hooghly had come under the Islamic influences since the time Bengal became a province of the Delhi Sultanate. However, Bengal did not remain under the Delhi Sultanate and since 1338 the Muslim rulers became autonomous. This tradition lasted from 1338 to 1576, well into the Mughal times.

However, prior to 1338, when Lakhnauti/Gaur became the provincial capital and Satgaon and Sonargaon the regional centres of administration, those places drew in lots of Muslim fortune seekers, bands of soldiers, skilled craftsmen, artisans, poets and writers, apart from rulers and bureaucrats. Over a period of time settlements of Muslim population had evolved as an integral part of

¹⁷³ Tapan Chattopadhyay, *Hanseswari, the Mother Divine*, Bansberia: Sabita Prakasani, 2013, pp. 145-153.

¹⁷⁴ Mohini Datta-Ray, ‘Monumentalizing Tantra: The Multiple Identities of the Hamsesvari Devi Temple and the Bansberia Zamindari’, PhD Thesis, McGill University, Montreal, 2008.

¹⁷⁵ H. Blochmann, ‘Notes on the Arabic and Persian Inscriptions in the Hugli District’, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, part 1, vol. 39, 1870, pp. 281-282.

the social milieu of the western Bengal. Hence it was natural to find traces of Muslim culture in and around Hooghly. In fact, those areas saw a surge in construction of mosques and *madrāsas*. The excellent examples of early Islamic monuments are to be found at Pandua near Hooghly. Those built before 1410, like the Chhota Pandua Minar and the Adina mosque at Pandua bore strong north Indian and central Asian architectural influences. Actually in these areas many ancient structures were destroyed and their relics were used to construct Islamic monuments. Pandua and its neighbourhood was brought under the Turkish rule in 1478 by one Shah Safiuddin; a close associate of Feroz Shah Tughluq. His mausoleum, better known as Shah Safiuddin's Astana is an important historical site¹⁷⁶. The pillars of the Pandua mosque bear Hindu and Buddhist icons¹⁷⁷. It was much later that a variant of architectural representations conforming to the local milieu were built. Such specimens of architecture were far more 'modest' in comparison with the earliest Muslim architectures of Chhota Pandua and Pandua.

In Bilkuli village, there was a sizeable population of local Muslims as the area came under a local Muslim landlord in the late Sultanate period. The *zamindars* had converted many of the resident population of fishermen into Islam. There exists a ruin of an ancient mosque and a graveyard. Furfurah Sharif is a mosque built in Jangipara close to Serampore. It was built by one Muqlish Khan in 1375¹⁷⁸. It is a significant pilgrimage site where people have been traditionally congregating during the festival of 'Urs'. People of this area are said to be descendants of those Muslims who had invaded Bengal in the fourteenth century. Since Akbar's time, it has evolved as a centre for Sufi culture. Satgaon too has a number of relics of Muslim influence, like the mosque built by one Sayyid Jamaluddin.

According to inscriptions on the mosque, he was a resident of a place called Amul on the shore of the Caspian Sea. The year of its construction could not be established decisively¹⁷⁹. In more recent times in nineteenth century, the

¹⁷⁶ Biswanath Bandopadhyay, 'Pandua' (Hooghly), in Ranjan Chakrabarti ed., *Dictionary of Historical Places in Bengal, 1757-1947*, Delhi: Primus Books, 2013, p. 473.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 472-473.

¹⁷⁸ <http://www.furfurasharif.com/%E0%A6%AA%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%9A%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%A4%E0%A6%BF/>
Accessed on 9.3.17.

¹⁷⁹ H. Blochmann, 'article title', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, part 1, vol. 39, 1870, p. 280.

impressive two storied Imambara building came up on the river bank in Chinsurah. It had a beautiful mosque and a huge clock tower .The construction was started by one Persian merchant named Haji Karbalai Mohammad¹⁸⁰. The Imambara was administered by a particular *shia* sect. It is adorned with intricate designs and has the Quran engraved on its wall. Many such constructions indicate the linkages of the commercial spaces of the Hooghly region with the mercantile groups of other Asian countries.

VI. The Boats and the River

However the cosmopolitan and multi-cultural settlement of Hooghly charted out its evolution in phases from the wilderness to function initially as a landing and storage place and subsequently as a burgeoning port involved in inland and international commerce. The utilization of the natural waterways by a wide variety of merchants, protection extended by the *nawab* to the merchants who came from other places; participation of the Mughal aristocracy and the *nawab*'s coterie of the favoured ones in trade, monetised economy, presence of *mahajans* and middlemen etc. led to the commercialization of the settlement and its important position in the international trade.

Most of all, the riverine connectivity provided the basis for commercialisation of Hooghly, among other places in Bengal. Abul Fazl is believed to have been effusive about the land of 'countless' rivers¹⁸¹, the main one being the Ganga via which commuting was mostly done by boats specially in the rains. But prior to the early seventeenth century, Bengal's connectivity with the Mughal headquarters was maintained by the overland route through Surat¹⁸². The Agra-Delhi region had a crowd of great connoisseurs of high value items like the Bengal raw silk and textile that found its way up to Turkey and Persia through the land route running via Kandahar. It was realized much later that the production centres of Bengal like Kasimbazar, Hooghly, Malda etc. were linked with Rajmahal, Patna, Benaras, Allahabad, and Agra via the cheaper and faster alternative of the Ganga river system. Land routes were used to tap the nearest

¹⁸⁰ Smritikumar Sarkar, 'Chinsurah', in Ranjan Chakrabarti ed., *Dictionary of Historical Places in Bengal*, pp. 150-151.

¹⁸¹ H.S. Jarrett tr, from original Persian, Abul Fazl Allami, *The Ain I Akbari*, vol. 2, The Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1891, p. 120.

¹⁸² Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*, p. 37.

navigable river way. It was observed by Calkins that throughout the seventeenth century, the overland roads were initially laid to augment the river routes¹⁸³. The time and cost effective riverine routes were utilised at a later date.

Nevertheless by the late eighteenth century, the high roads of Bengal were no longer suited to overloaded wheel carriages and crumbled due mainly to the substandard construction materials used, lack of maintenance and excessive inundations¹⁸⁴. In Hooghly and its neighbourhood after 1765, roads meant narrow tracts of land at the European settlements that were kept aside for the usage of public traffic. The techniques of ‘metalling’ and ‘raising’ were not introduced¹⁸⁵ till late eighteenth century. They were roads in name, erratically maintained by local bigwigs. The towns and ports were networked by the river system. The goods were transhipped from and distributed into the interior via the inland connectivity provided by pack animals and transporters¹⁸⁶. Their ill kept routes in the remote places often met with canals and rivers. Thus the aquatic capillaries were the primary ducts of transport and commerce of the Hugli region.

It was due to the crisscrossing of numerous, extensive and intertwined channels of the Bhagirathi river system that a highly evolved trade nexus was existing in Bengal. Hooghly had a widely spread out hinterland roughly spanning up to Patna in the north, though the boats of Hooghly did sail beyond, up to Agra and down south to Tanna (Thana)¹⁸⁷ near Howrah. All goods from the various corners of the far flung villages and towns reached the great emporium and entrepot. Apart from being a node of inter-regional commerce, Hooghly was a centre of ‘inter-local¹⁸⁸’ trade implying movement of commodities for short distances from many rural centres to the urban sector in which the connectivity between periodic *hat* (local weekly markets), *mandi* (wholesale market), *gunj*, *bazar* (retail markets) played a significant role. Again, with the arrival of the Europeans, the space was used as a linkage between ‘inter- local’ and international trade, in which the river provided the commercial interface with the

¹⁸³ Philip B. Calkins, ‘The Role of Murshidabad as a Regional and Sub regional Center in Bengal’, Occasional Paper no. 12, in Richard L. Park ed., *Urban Bengal*, The University of Chicago, p. 22.

¹⁸⁴ Alexander Hamilton, *The East India Gazetteer, Containing Particular Descriptions of the Empires, Kingdoms, Principalities, Provinces, Cities, Towns, Districts, Fortresses, Harbours, Rivers, Lakes etc.* London: Printed for J. Murray, 1815, p.126.

¹⁸⁵ George Toynbee, *A Sketch of the Administration of the Hugli District*, p. 105.

¹⁸⁶ Toynbee, *A Sketch of the Administration*, pp. 105-106.

¹⁸⁷ Streysham Master, *The Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 66.

¹⁸⁸ It was a short distance version of inter-regional trade.

Bay of Bengal. The accumulation of commodities in Hooghly's marts and port was facilitated mostly by river crafts. Thus, of the goods collected at Hooghly some were destined to nearby places while others exported to distant land. So a bridging of internal trade with trans-oceanic commercial network through the waterways was spearheaded by the Hooghly port. It was indeed the premier port in Bengal 'by reason of shipping'¹⁸⁹.

There are innumerable instances of men and material being carried up and down the Hugli river by the European crafts like sloops and ships touching Hooghly. For example: a Dutch ship sailed out of Balasore Road up to Hooghly¹⁹⁰. A Captain Thomas Kaines sailed out of Balasore Roads to Hooghly and from there undertook an onward journey to Achin¹⁹¹. One sloop had arrived from Balasore to Hooghly carrying George Herring, who brought in from Hooghly Captains Henry Dall and Allen Catchpole among several others¹⁹². That Hooghly was a part of the international commercial network is obvious from the following archival entries.

Passed by the harbor three English ships from Surat and one from ye coast as likewise a small French ship from Surratt being all bound up for Hugley¹⁹³.

This day arrived in Ballasore a Company ship from Hugly bound to Madras.¹⁹⁴

A Dutch sloop from Hugly arrived in this river..... a Japan ship arrived from Batavia at Hugly¹⁹⁵.

Also, the same record noted that two crafts had reached Hooghly from 'Madrasapatam'¹⁹⁶.

Apart from commerce; political and economic exigencies of the indigenous government and the early English Company State necessitated tightening of riverine communications. Keeping a tab on exact commercial exchanges, payment of toll, tariff, revenue collections were crucial activities based

¹⁸⁹ NAI, Dacca Factory Record, November, 1690, Microfilm, Accession no. 2695.

¹⁹⁰ NAI, Balasore Factory Record, December 1, 1679- March 19, 1687, Microfilm, Accession no. 2634.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ NAI, Balasore Factory Record, June 1684, Microfilm, Accession no. 2634.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., September, 1684.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., February 1683-84.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

on riverine transport. Further the different ramifications of trading nodes like *bazars*, *mandis*, *hats* in a vital place like Hooghly, involved convergence of people from near and far. Hence those were ideal places to gather information on brewing political discontent and administrative threats. The East India Company as the evolving Company State was rather particular about collecting relevant feedback to step up production of commodities in demand as well as strengthen its security measures. This again compelled the Company in improving the system of river transport¹⁹⁷. Indeed various kinds of boats were needed by the East India Company for the circulation of ‘men and material’ from one corner to the other end¹⁹⁸. The Company officials frequented important trading centres and government offices in big luxurious boats like pinnace or *bajra*, while their underlings travelled by smaller and simpler boats¹⁹⁹. Nevertheless, business was the primary concern of the state: indigenous or otherwise.

Numerous types of water crafts brought in merchandises from various corners of the *suba*. The empty boats returned with essential items from the port to the interior. Naturally each variant belonged to a specific aquatic world and geographical background. The heavy *patellas* meant to carry bulk goods of considerable burthen from Patna, Chhapra to Hooghly and later Calcutta where the Ganga was deep and placid; sailed down with the stream. Those vessels were essentially unsuitable to sail back from the land of shallow water full of shoals in the downstream. A *patella* was a flat bottomed clinker boat²⁰⁰ built to displace less water so had less to push aside while moving on comparatively shallow water of the moribund western delta. Hence while sailing back, they were invariably tracked up by rope and did neither need the aid of oars nor the ‘aptitude for the sail’²⁰¹. Again, a smaller and lighter craft like *dinghy* with oars and sails was the most suited to traverse in the narrow and meandering deltaic tidal rivers and

¹⁹⁷ Nitin Sinha, *Communication and Colonialism in Eastern India: Bihar, 1760s-1880s*, Anthem Press, New York, 2012, pp. 71-72.

¹⁹⁸ Smritikumar Sarkar, *Technology and Rural Change in Eastern India: 1830-1980*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 31.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

²⁰⁰ Deloche, *Transport and Communications in India*, vol. 2: Water Transport, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 161.

²⁰¹ Alexander Hamilton, *The East India Gazetteer*, pp. 125-126.

creeks, where one moment the craft was aided by the stream and the next moment impeded by the current²⁰².

The domain of inland trade was aided by numerous water crafts of myriad shapes and sizes. It ranged from the elaborately crafted *mayurpankhis*²⁰³ or peacock faced roomy luxury cruisers that were actually large multi oared boats with cabins allotted for various daily chores, accommodating a number of passengers; to the tiny one man fishing *dinghis*. The *mayurpankhis* were used by the rich and the influential for various excursions, business tours and pleasure rides in towns and villages²⁰⁴ located at the upper and intermediate reaches of the river. The cumbersome crafts were unfit to ply in the narrow waterways and tidal creeks close to the delta.

The spacious wind driven luxury boats that resembled a small ship, had oars, a 'native structure' and a European style square rig²⁰⁵ were called *bajra*. It was fitted with a high mast and twelve to sixteen oars²⁰⁶. The English Company improvised a better version of it and called it *pinnace*, for the use of its employees²⁰⁷ who commuted for serious business. The Governor General's *pinnace* was named *Sona Mookhee*²⁰⁸. The Company's *pinnaces* were used to carry heavy traffic in parts of Bengal and Bihar and at times hired by the nobles and high ranking Company officers as luxury boats. The *purgoos* were commonly used between Hooghly, Pipeley, and Balasore for lading into and unloading from the English and Dutch mariners²⁰⁹. It had oars and possibly sail²¹⁰. A *boora* was a 'floaty light boat' used to carry saltpetre, pepper, salt and other goods from Hooghly downwards²¹¹. They also doubled up as tow boats to ships on their way up or down the river.

²⁰² Rama Sarker and Sila Tripathi, 'Boat Building Technology of Bengal: An Overview of Literary Evidences', *Marine Archaeology*, vol. 4, July 1993, pp. 85-86.

http://drs.nio.org/drs/bitstream/handle/2264/2886/J_Mar_Archaeol_4_84.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

Accessed on 4.8.15.

²⁰³ Deloche, *Transport and Communications*, vol. 2; p. 158.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Francis Buchanan, C.E.A.W. Oldham ed, *Journal of Francis Buchanan Kept during the Survey of the District of Bhagalpur in 1810-1811*, Government Printing, Patna, 1930, p. 764.

²⁰⁶ Thomas Twining, *Visit to India, Hundred Years Ago*, London: Osgood, MacIlvaine and Co, 1893, p. 83.

²⁰⁷ Deloche, *Transport and Communications*, vol. 2, p. 160.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 160.

²⁰⁹ Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account*, p. 228.

²¹⁰ Sean McGrail et al, *Boats of South Asia*, London: Routledge, 2003, p. 33.

²¹¹ Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of the Countries*, p. 228.

The *patellas* were most commonly used big boats to transport bulky merchandise to and from Hooghly. These strong flat bottomed burthensome big boats were designed to sail in shallow water and ply safely avoiding abrasions against shoals. According to Hamilton, they used to be approximately 50 yards long and 5 yards broad and 2.5 yards in depth, having a burthen of more than 200 tons. They plied down to Hooghly from upstream when the latter was Bengal's major international port but were made to track up the river by hand, on their return journey²¹². Such boats mainly carried saltpetre from Patna, Chhapra, Rajmahal and goods from the port of Kasimbazar. John Marshall had spotted such boats sailing between Rajmahal and Hooghly²¹³. Master too had seen the typical saltpetre boats sailing from Rajmahal to Hooghly via Kasimbazar which were hired at between Rs 400 and 500²¹⁴. In 1652, the East India Company had identified Balasore and Hooghly as important sources of saltpetre. Saltpetre from Bihar actually piled up in Hooghly for overseas export. The Dutch Company imported it from Patna and got it refined in Hooghly.

The huge bulk of saltpetre used to be carried from Patna to Hooghly by *patellas* to the Dutch and English ships moored at a distance from the river front. In fact the 'Pattana'- 'Kasimbazar'-'Hugly' was an old route for exporting saltpetre since late seventeenth century²¹⁵. Later when Calcutta took over as the principal port, the Company officials had to send a fleet of boats to Patna to carry saltpetre down to the port of Calcutta; as *patellas* for heavy traffic were not always available at Patna. Thus the Patna Fleet was formed specially to transport saltpetre to the transshipment points at Bengal. Apart from the Companies, the bureaucrats and the nobility participated in the highly profitable saltpetre trade. An influential nobleman during Suja Khan's tenure, Haji Muhammad and his son Husain Khan amassed a huge profit by buying it cheap at Patna and selling at a high price to the European trade bodies at Hooghly²¹⁶. Apart from the *patella*, *bhar* or light boats were often used to send saltpetre from Hooghly to downstream

²¹² Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account*, vol. 2, p. 21.

²¹³ S.A. Khan, *John Marshall in India*, pp. 14-15.

²¹⁴ Master, *Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 325.

²¹⁵ NAI, Proceedings, Home Miscellaneous, vol. 2, Copy Book of Hugly Letters, 1680-81, p. 189.

²¹⁶ Bengal Public Consultations, August 4 1737, September 9 1737, cited in Sukumar Bhattacharya, *The East India Company and the Economy of Bengal, 1704 to 1740*, London: Luzac, 1954, p. 150.

at Tanna²¹⁷. A *pansway* or *pansi* was a typical boat of the Hugli carrying cargo and passenger²¹⁸, not as large as *patella* or even *bhar*.

Another type of big boat called *ulak* and its bigger variant known as *huliya*, carried goods from Patna to Bengal²¹⁹. In fact Bowrey's account mentioned the use of *ulaks* and *boora* by the Company officials in Hooghly for the transportation of heavy materials like timber²²⁰. The freight from Calcutta for a hundred *mans* of grain varied between Rs 12 and 15²²¹. The towns of Murshidabad, Calcutta and the intermediate settlements like Hooghly depended on Dinajpur district for a regular supply of food. A big boat from the towns like Potram on the Atreyi river or Damdamal on the Punarbhaba was worth Rs 13 per 100 *maunds* for transporting rice to Calcutta²²² below Hooghly. Similarly in the monsoon the freight to Calcutta from the towns on the Korotoya was Rs 10 per 100 *maunds*²²³.

In Hooghly and its adjoining areas, small country boats known as *bhar* with light draught and broad bows were used to carry commodities for inland trade²²⁴. While *pansies* were small passenger boats,²²⁵ *dongas* and *dingis* were small boats of multi utility and varying in size and capacity according to its use. According to O'Malley a *dingi* was 25-30 feet by 4 feet in size, accommodating a burthen of 12 to 15 *maunds*²²⁶. Those small crafts were commonly used for short journeys and also to tranship heavy cargoes from the land to bigger carriers moored at a considerable depth²²⁷. Such boats varied in size from very small fishing boats known as *jaliyas*²²⁸ to bigger boats that could carry a burthen of as high as 10 tons²²⁹. Very small fishing *dingis* were common along the Hugli. In the

²¹⁷ Streysham Master, *Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 66.

²¹⁸ Sean McGrail, *Boats of South Asia*, p. 33.

²¹⁹ Francis Buchanan, *An Account of the Districts of Bihar and Patna in 1811-1812*, vol. 2, Published by the Bihar and Orissa Research Society, Patna, p. 764.

²²⁰ Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of the Countries*, p. 227, cited from Factory Records, Hugli, September 9, 1684.

²²¹ Francis Buchanan, *An Account*, p. 764.

²²² Francis Buchanan, *Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of the District or Zilla of Dinajpur in the Province or Soubah of Bengal*, p. 327.

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Hooghly*, p. 201.

²²⁵ Sean McGrail et al, *Boats of South Asia*, p. 33.

²²⁶ O'Malley, *Gazetteers: Hooghly*, p. 201.

²²⁷ Bengal Public Consultations, August 27, 1733, Microfilm, Accession no. 2669.

²²⁸ Deloche, *Transport and Communications*, vol. 2, p. 158.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

river side towns, a bigger *dingi* was often used to carry rice and grains²³⁰. A *donga* that was roughly 30 feet by $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet in size could accommodate a bulk between 3 and 20 *maunds*²³¹. A *donga* was also a much used carrier in the rains to traverse over the flooded rice fields, to reach the local marts or the interior nook of the waterlogged hutments²³². Again, since early nineteenth century the Government took sporadic initiatives to encourage water transport for public interest. For example, in 1828, a fleet of steamers were introduced for daily postal services at places like Chandernagore and Chinsurah²³³.

Probably Hooghly's neighbourhood had played a proactive part in salt trade since a long time. Sometime in 1743, an officer of the French East India Company, De Gennes de la Chanceliere, saw a big village named Balur opposite Chinsurah that was the 'principal storehouse' of all salt produced 'below the Ganges'²³⁴. The phrase could well have indicated the lower reaches of the river. If we believe in Chanceliere's account then Chinsurah was the next station after Hooghly. Also a particular variant of boat had been associated with the importation of salt by 'Telinga' (probably Telugu speaking men), 'Mussalman' and 'Hindoo'²³⁵ merchants in the eighteenth century from the Coromondal coast to Hooghly. Such boats were known as *dhonis*,²³⁶ *doonees*²³⁷ or *donus*²³⁸. They

paid the Mussulman or Hindoo duty on their salt at importation valued also at one Hundred and twenty p% maunds. If they themselves transported into any place in Bengal and Behar, they had no additional duty to pay.... If it was purchased from them by others at places on this side of the Buckshbunder, such as Chinsurah etc. It was subject to the Hindoo or mussulman duty on Transportation, and a Rowannah was taken out for carrying it to different places of the country²³⁹.

²³⁰ Ibid., p. 162.

²³¹ O'Malley, *Gazetteers: Hooghly*, p. 201.

²³² Deloche, *Transport and Communications*, vol. 2, p. 158.

²³³ Toynbee, *A Sketch of the Administration*, p. 113.

²³⁴ There were numerous huge sacks (*bouris*) of salt, some weighing upto three hundred tons. Salt was transported upstream as far as Delhi and Agra²³⁴. Balour corresponded with Bhatpara in Rennell's map and Louncagola in Tieffenthaler's map. Louncagola meant storehouse of salt.

²³⁵ WBSA, Revenue, Governor General in Council, Proceedings, vol. 14, part 1, p. 11.

²³⁶ WBSA, Revenue, Governor General in Council, Proceedings, vol. 11, part 1, November 7-December 1, 1775, pp. 258-59.

²³⁷ WBSA, Revenue, Governor General in Council, Proceedings, vol. 14, part 1, p. 13.

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

²³⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

Dhonis were a medium sized version of the Arab ‘dhow’, fitted with a mast and lateen sail, which varied between 50 and 250 tons. Those flat bottomed smaller edition of the ‘dhow’ crafts were designed to sail the shallow waters of the Coromondal coast and the Hugli river and the unpredictable currents of the Bay²⁴⁰ to carry salt.

VII. Hooghly and Salt: A Case Study

The extensive filaments of the river system left a significant contribution in the distribution of salt in Bengal, apart from many other articles. Between 1757 and 1765, the two third of Bengal’s salt producing lands were taken over by the East India Company. It introduced the ‘Farming System’ in 1772, as per which salt *mahals* were let out for five years to the highest bidders at the *Buksh Bandar* of Hooghly.

All country vessels of varied sizes and burthens, trading in salt between the Coromondal coast and Bengal, were known as ‘dhony’²⁴¹. Those *dhonies* hoisted flags of European companies (other than the English) and sailed past Hooghly to anchor at Chandernagore, Chinsurah, and Serampore to evade paying duties at Hooghly. Moreover, the French and Dutch factories misused their own *dastaks* and used to grant this right ‘indiscriminately’ to their own people, to the Armenians and ‘black’ Merchants, or to any other people, who were ready to transport goods under their flag²⁴².

However the ‘Farming System’ of salt had been severely criticised on following accounts by William Lushington, a senior officer of the East India Company, posted at Hooghly, on April 12, 1771;

As to the proposal of farming the salt duties.....when they are in the hands of Government, the degree of trust unavoidably reposed in those who are to survey and calculate the duties, is a temptation often too strong to be resisted by persons who have only from 28 to 30 Rs per month..... a farmer could afford to offer more to Government than Government could collect by its own officers—

²⁴⁰ Tirthankar Roy, *India in the World Economy, From Antiquity to the Present*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 99.

²⁴¹ Spelt like this in the archival records.

²⁴² WBSA, Revenue Board Consisting of the Whole Council, Proceedings, vol. 6 July 2-August 3, 1773, p. 28.

and if substantial security be given....the former mode is preferable to the latter²⁴³.

It was the standard practice that the boats laden with salt were supposed to pay only the established duty of 30 sicca rupees per 100 *maunds* of Bengal salt after obtaining a *parwannah* that exempted them from paying any other duty or tax²⁴⁴. Though such boats ‘accompanied by a proper rowannah’ were officially liable to no further duty or import; at several *chowkis* they were made to pay an extra duty of *gully magnum* exclusive of the fixed tax²⁴⁵. The two salt *chowkis* under Buksh Bandar, namely Iadooppore and Chundiah extracted Re 1 and Rs 2 as *gully mangan* respectively from the salt boats²⁴⁶.

In 1780, the ‘Farming System’ of salt was replaced by the system of direct management through the Agency System on the basis of annual contracts. Salt agents were appointed by the Board of Revenue. The Company became directly responsible for production and its sale through the auction of salt at Calcutta²⁴⁷. Basically a number of steps were undertaken by the East India Company to ensure the monopoly in salt. The extensive salt producing region of Bengal widely spread out between Chittagong and Jaleswar was divided into six agencies²⁴⁸. Thus production became limited to specific areas. Private production of salt and its by products as well as private importation was banned²⁴⁹. The East India Company started importing ‘foreign’ salt from Balasore and Coromandal. Illegal productions as well as smuggling were ruled out. However the prerogative to trade in salt was given to indigenous merchants.

In the Company’s tenure, the salt market of eastern India was segmented into regional markets that grew around the entrepots that housed salt *golas* or store houses. The entrepots supplied to local wholesale markets, *bazaars* (daily markets) and *hats* (periodic markets) of villages and towns located close by. A

²⁴³ NLI, W.K. Firminger ed., *Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad*, Proceedings, vol. 5, April 1-July 15, 1771, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1922, pp. 67-68.

²⁴⁴ NLI, *Ibid.*, vol. 3, January 3-February 14, 1771, 1920, p. 174.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ Barui, *The Salt Industry of Bengal*, p. 4.

²⁴⁸ Tamruk, Hijli, Twenty Four Parganas, Sundarbans, Chittagong, Bhulwa.

²⁴⁹ Sayako Kanda, ‘Environmental Changes, the Emergence of a Fuel Market and the Working Conditions of Salt Makers in Bengal, c. 1780-1845’, in Peter Boomgaard, Marjoline t’ Haart eds., *Globalization, Environmental Change and Social History*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 126.

chain of several regional market zones formed larger inter-regional commercial zones. Such commercial areas were as follows: Western Bengal and Bihar; Central Bengal; Eastern Bengal; Midnapore and westwards²⁵⁰.

Within the commercial zone of Western Bengal and Bihar, salt from Hijli, Tamluk and also the Twenty Four Parganas agencies were distributed through the marts of Ghatal, Amta, Ghirihati, Kalna, Katwa, Sutanuti, and Patna.

The business nodes for the important wholesale markets were Calcutta, Kalna, Katwa and many markets dotting the bank of the Hugli. In the western Bengal, the Bhagirathi Hugli river and its major arteries like the Damodar, Ajay, Rupnarayan, Haldi and also the Subarnarekha and various tidal rivers of the Sundarbans provided the routes for the transportation of salt. The district headquarter of Hooghly, which served as a river port; was a major distribution centre of Hijli salt along with Midnapore, Ghatal, Dewangunge, Amta, Calcutta²⁵¹. Hooghly was a distribution point of Tamluk salt too along with Krishnanagar, Burdwan, and Murshidabad²⁵². Also from the *khalaris* of Midnapore along the Hugli river in the east a large consignment of salt was sent towards Mungher and Bhagalpore in Bihar via the Hugli and Ganga river system. Some of the Bengal salt was distributed to Nepal via Bihar. Map 2.2 clearly depicts Hooghly as an important centre for the dispersal of salt that initially got collected there.

The distribution of salt was adversely affected by excessive rain and floods in the Hugli river system. The official correspondences are replete with the instances of calamity affecting the salt trade. A letter was addressed to Richard Becher, the Chief of the Council of Revenue from the office of the Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad;

The loss of salt that has been sustained from the severity of the rains and from the sinking of boats in their passage to Hougly.....by the difficulty of procuring boats to transport the salt

²⁵⁰ Kanda, 'Merchants, Institutions and Market: Changes in the Salt Trade in Early Colonial Bengal', *Discussion Papers in Economics and Business*, Discussion Paper -08-02, Graduate School of Economics and Osaka School of International Public Policy, Osaka University, January 2008, p. 3. <http://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/7005264.pdf>
Accessed in 27. 7. 15.

²⁵¹ Balai Barui, *The Salt Industry of Bengal*, p. 140.

²⁵² Map study, Ibid.

to Hougly, there remained large quantity in the Districts which was distributed in payment of the old balances²⁵³.

The concerned authority at the office of the Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad, took measures 'to prevent the like damage as much as possible for the future' by arranging for

conveying the salt to the gauts as soon as it has been received from the Moloungis and shall transport it from thence as fast as possible to the Bunder; where I propose to erect some new golahs for the reception of it²⁵⁴.

Further the production of salt in Hijli and Tamluk agencies was largely dependent on the supply of fuel needed to evaporate water at the salt pans to collect salt as residue. This supply often got cut off due to the vagaries of the weather like drought leading to dried up river bed and inundation²⁵⁵. Subsequently the agents of Hijli and Tamluk applied to the President of the Board of Revenue William Cauper to authorize them to supply the *molangis* with fuel to ensure a timely manufacture and supply of salt²⁵⁶.

Among the sixteen *chowkis* functioning under the custom house of the Hugli *Buksh Bandar*, a few had been set up specifically to keep a tab on salt trade and also the commerce of the non-English European factories located close to the *Buksh Bandar*. Jahanabad on the river Rupnarayan located close to the southern boundary of Burdwan, Hijli, Midnapore; initially collected salt duties. Subsequently, as salt duties used to be collected at the *pargana* itself; its main function was to check irregularities in salt business²⁵⁷. Jahnpa on the bank of the Hugli close to the Dutch and French settlements supervised the transportation of salt and grain to and from the interiors of the country²⁵⁸. Again Furrora, located two *kos* inland from Gyretty used to keep a check over all goods including salt passing between Radhanagore, Chandrakona, Calcutta, and Chandernagore, Chinsurah²⁵⁹.

²⁵³NLI, W.K. Firminger ed., *Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad*, Proceedings, vol. 2, December 3-31, 1770, p. 127.

²⁵⁴Ibid., p. 128.

²⁵⁵Ibid., p.118.

²⁵⁶ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 203; Separate Revenue, Salt Proceedings, January- May, 1792, p. 38.

²⁵⁷ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 217.

²⁵⁸NAI, Ibid.

²⁵⁹NAI, Ibid.

Map 2.2: Hooghly as the major distribution node of Salt



Source: Adapted from Balai Barui, *The Salt Industry of Bengal: 1757-1800, A Study in the Interaction of British Monopoly Control and Indigenous Enterprise*, K.P. Bagchi and Co, Calcutta, 1985. Sayako Kanda, 'Environmental Changes, the Emergence of a Fuel Market and the Working Conditions of Salt Makers in Bengal, c. 1780-1845', in Peter Boomgaard, Marjolijn t' Haart eds., *Globalization, Environmental Change and Social History*, Part of Internal Review of Social History Supplements, Special Issue 18, Cambridge University Press, May, 2011, pp. 127-150.

VIII. The Hugli River and the Custom *Chowkis*

Apart from facilitating the distribution of salt in parts of Bengal, the river system also supported the functioning of the custom *chowkis* by seaming them together under *Buksh Bandar*. This section would focus on the role of the inland waterways of the Hugli in collecting the custom duties in the south western Bengal. The *chowkis* or custom houses were built at strategic points of major trade routes along the Hugli river system.

We are concerned here with the inland custom duty stipulated in 1773 'on every article of foreign and inland trade excepting salt, betel nut and tobacco' which was to 'pay a duty to Government of 2.5% upon a standard

appraisal²⁶⁰. It was a great privilege obtained by the East India Company. In fact since the post Plassey period the Company had been relentlessly working towards imposing a monopoly on trade as a part of the strategy to grab the revenue of Bengal.

However, initially the British were trying their best to put up their pretence of acknowledging the Mughal suzerainty. The Company undertook an apparently benevolent stance by not taking an outright control over the inland duties. The Mughal legacies were made to linger in certain administrative and fiscal practices.

The establishment of Customs reported by Mr. Hosea, the Collector of Customs at Hooghly, was known as Bakshbandar or Government Custom House. The original establishment was made by the King (of Delhi) and had three King's officers—the Daroga, a Mushriff or Accountant and a Tavildar or Cash keeper and a Muckim or appraiser of goods chargeable with duties.the office of the aumin.... Was originally instituted to serve as a check upon the King's officers when Dewan was responsible for a fixed revenue from the provinces and he supposes a respect to an establishment which had its origin from the king....²⁶¹.

Soon the Board of Revenue 'decided that the Bakshbunder of Houghly should for the present be delivered over by M. Hosea upon his quitting his Collectorship to the charge of the Phousdar'²⁶². Actually the *faujdar* of the *Buksh Bandar* of Hooghly was handed over the charge of collecting duties on goods belonging to the foreign nations like the French and the Dutch and those of the merchants inhabiting the town of Hooghly and grant them *rowannahs* on behalf of the fledgling government under the English company²⁶³. This was done on one hand to appease the Mughals, on the other, to put a counterpoise against the other European rivals and thirdly, to save the 'expenses of a separate establishment of servants', excepting a very small number of workers for keeping the accounts'²⁶⁴.

Further, as Rajat Datta remarked, 'state intervention assumed apparently contradictory policies of rigorous control in the marketing of some commodities

²⁶⁰ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 217, April, 14, 1773.

²⁶¹ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 216.

²⁶² WBSA, Revenue Board Consisting of the Whole Council, Proceedings, vol. 9, January 4-February 22, 1774, p. 13.

²⁶³ Ibid., vol. 7, part 1, August 6- September 14, 1773, pp. 225-226.

²⁶⁴ WBSA, Revenue Board Consisting of the Whole Council, Proceedings, vol. 9, January 4-February 22, 1774, p. 12.

and non interference in the movement of others'²⁶⁵. The *nizamat* as well as the Society of Trade had maintained 'restraints' on certain commodities. Duties were abolished from a variety of agricultural products to introduce fair trade beneficial to people²⁶⁶. At least 16 major *chowkis* — mainly riverine and a handful of inland ones were formed and put under the control of the *Buksh Bandar* of Hooghly. Those were as follows: 'Meerbahr', 'Huldapore', 'Jaldanga', 'Tanna Mugwa', 'Furrora', 'Chatra', 'Halceapore', 'Cootchoppa', 'Juddopoor', 'Choadea', 'Jehanabad', 'Alumsha', 'Birassea', 'Rajebulhat', 'Jahnpa', 'Shaistabad'.

Among them 'Huldapore', 'Furrora', 'Halceapore', 'Choandea' were inland *chowkis* and 'Jehanabad', 'Alumsha' overlooked the Rupnarayan²⁶⁷. All those were situated quite close to the Hugli by road or connected to it via aquatic tentacles. The rest were located on the bank of the river Hugli.

The practice of inland transit duty continued from 1773 till 1788 and again between 1801 and 36. Basically the mesh work of *chowkis* on the Hugli was effectively used to search cargo boats, carriages, collect duty and distribute *rowannah* mentioning the articles taxed. This way the major marts of south western Bengal were brought under control. Again, a standardized rate of inland duties irrespective of the distance travelled, implied that the EEIC often enjoyed 'a great mass of business in the Presidency' based on 'small transactions' between the village and town, adjoining districts and different areas within the same district²⁶⁸.

Also products of high overseas value like opium, indigo were monitored from its production down to each and every stage in distribution. Salt, involving a heavy and bulky cargo, was officially monopolized by the East India Company after 1772 for being a commodity of very high demand in the internal commerce. However it did not have much overseas value.

IX. Hooghly as an Interface between the River and the Seaborne Trade

Bengal had a long lineage of trade. It was commercially linked with the parts of the subcontinent and countries via the river and the sea by coastal sailing. Also the

²⁶⁵ Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market, Commercialization in Rural Bengal, c. 1760-1800*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2000, p. 203.

²⁶⁶ Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, pp. 202-03.

²⁶⁷ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 217.

²⁶⁸ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 'Eastern India', in Dharma Kumar ed., *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. 2, New Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd, Reprint, 2008, pp. 276-77.

European East India Companies had been trying relentlessly to penetrate into Bengal from the 1620s. But it seemed almost impossible to do the same through the countless channels crisscrossing the delta, as they were too narrow to accommodate the ships. Still the Hugli's estuary seemed to be more permissive to the vessels than the rest. Thomas Bowrey had once remarked that the most admirable of the Bhagirathi's arm is Hugli river²⁶⁹. When urged by the Company to open a base at Hooghly in the initial years of the East India Company, the factors in Bengal wrote back in November 2, 1616 that the suggested voyage to the *Port Pequeno* was shelved as there were no small ships 'fitting that purpose'²⁷⁰.

Brisk trade in small country vessels up and down the river was not sufficiently profitable for the European companies. In fact in 1669, Thomas Bowrey along with seven more ace seamen had set up the Bengal Pilot Service. The pilots were formally appointed as aids in showing the way along the Hugli. A pinnace was allotted to be steered by a capable seaman from the Indiamen²⁷¹ to usher Company's big crafts in to and out of the Hugli river. However Balasore provided the mooring for large crafts till it was replaced²⁷² by Hijli for the anchorage of and unloading from the Company's ships. This continued till Hooghly took over as the English East India Company port. Initially cargoes were carried up to Hooghly by sloops popularly called the 'country ships', manned by the Company's pilots to avoid the 'perils of braces and the unknown dangers of the river'²⁷³. Meanwhile, the pinnaces named 'Diligence' and 'Madras' were employed to locate the correct channels leading up to the Hugli. One of the apprentice pilots Herron wrote the first instruction of piloting through the Hugli and sketched the first near accurate chart of the river. It was only in 1679 that the first of the Company's ships named 'Falcon' could sail up the river²⁷⁴.

²⁶⁹ Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of the Countries*, p. 166.

²⁷⁰ William Foster ed., *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe*, London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1899, p. 193.

²⁷¹ Armed merchant ships plying in India with the license or charter of the major European countries and carrying cargo, passenger and arms.

²⁷² C.S. Srinivasachari ed., *Fort William-India House Correspondence and Other Contemporary Papers Relating Thereto*, vol. 4, 1764-66, Government of India, Delhi, 1962, Letters from Court, no. 322, February 1764, p. 36.

²⁷³ *Notes and Queries : A Medium of Intercommunication by Literary Men, General Readers etc*, Twelfth Series, vol. 3, January-December 1917, London: J. Edward Francis, p. 2.

<https://archive.org/stream/s12notesqueries03londonoft#page/2/mode/2up>

²⁷⁴ Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account*, p. 66.

Since the 1680s the promising option of investing in the Bengal textiles further propelled the penetrations deep into Bengal, and the Hugli river seemed to be the only passage, albeit not without hassles. The shifting shoals and misleading channels, leading up to the mouth, various blockades on the river bed, posed navigational hurdles. Further, many spots along the river were 'too shallow' to let big crafts with full cargo loads pass by without hazard. Such problems could not be successfully tackled till 1672 when the Company ships could sail up to the estuary to reach Hooghly. The able piloting service undoubtedly paved the way for a regular maritime link between Hooghly and other countries. Alexander Hamilton wrote sometime between the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, the international port of Hooghly drew 'a rich Cargoes of fifty or sixty ships yearly, besides what is carried to neighbouring Countries in small Vessels'²⁷⁵. But even in the end of seventeenth century the large vessels made their headway from the estuary 'at extreme peril'²⁷⁶. Thus it was an unstated reality that Hooghly's port life would be limited.

The Company records show that Hooghly remained a major place of commerce in 1690 as it was mentioned as 'the Chiefest and greatest place of trade in Bengall'²⁷⁷. But it would seem too ambitious to attempt to compute the volume and extent and exact items of the maritime trade handled from the port of Hooghly due to paucity of available sources. At best a general picture could be recreated on the basis of the available contemporary narratives supported by secondary source material.

Saltpetre, fine grade cotton textiles or *muslins* and raw silk were the key items of the Hugli belt that turned it into the principal node of trade of the European commercial organizations in south western Bengal. In fact, other than Kasimbazar and Dacca, the areas in and around Hooghly emerged as an important node of textile production. But it mostly produced medium quality piece goods²⁷⁸. Saltpetre was a very important item of export for making gunpowder, glass,

²⁷⁵ Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, vol. 2, p. 20.

²⁷⁶ W.K. Firminger, *Historical Introduction to the Bengal Portion of the Fifth Report*, R. Cambay and Co, Calcutta, Reprint, 1962, p. 77.

²⁷⁷ Dacca Factory Record, November 1690, Microfilm, Accession no. 2695.

²⁷⁸ Sushil Chaudhury, 'Asian Merchants and Companies in Bengal's Export Trade', in Sushil Chaudhury and Michel Morineau eds., *Merchants, Companies and Trade, Europe and Asia in Early Modern Era*, Maison des Sciences de L'Homme: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 304-311.

preserving meat, cooling water, dyeing²⁷⁹. Apart from saltpetre many kinds of textile items and cotton and silk piece goods, raw silk were the principal items of export from the latter half of the eighteenth century²⁸⁰.

Items like cotton, cotton cloth, 'tesser', 'herba' of 'Severall sorts' and the manufactures like 'silk', 'sugar', 'opium', 'rice', 'wheat', 'oyle', 'butter', 'coarse hemp', 'gunnyes' and many other commodities were brought to the emporium of Hooghly by water. They were bought by the *bannians* at the cheapest rate and transported wherever needed, free of custom²⁸¹. England had to part with its bullion to pay for its imports from Bengal. In fact apart from lead, iron, tin, copper and some trivia and between 1708 and 56, 'bullion formed 74 per cent of total imports to Bengal'²⁸². England exported very expensive woollens that had little demand in Bengal. The balance of trade often tilted in Bengal's favour. It would be interesting to cite a list of England bound cargoes comprising goods exported from Bengal in the early eighteenth century. 'Saltpetre', 'Baftas', 'Lacware', 'Cossaes', 'Tanjeeb', 'Mulmulls', 'Dooseas Fine', 'Soosies Fine', 'Tafetaes', 'Mebannus', 'Photoes', 'Tanjeeb Flowr'd', 'Raw silk', 'Mucktah', 'Ginger', 'Gruff goods', 'Cotton yarn' etc²⁸³.

In 1698, 1700 and 1701 the English company had ordered 13,000; 20,000; and 20,000 pieces of cloth respectively from Hooghly²⁸⁴. A crucial feature of trade in Hooghly was that the textile remained the most popular merchandise of export in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Medium and ordinary piece goods were mainly exported by the Dutch and the English companies. The principal hubs were Patna, Kasimbazar, Malda, Dacca and Hooghly.

Table 2.2: Total Value of Medium and Ordinary Piece goods Exported in Percentage

Place	Total value of Textiles (in Percentage)
Patna	8-12
Kasimbazar	25-38

²⁷⁹ K.K. Datta ed., *Fort William-India House Correspondence: And Other Contemporary Papers Relating Thereto, 1748-1756*, vol. 1, Delhi: National Archives of India, p. xlii.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xli.

²⁸¹ Streysham Master, *Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 82.

²⁸² K.K. Datta, *Fort William-India House Correspondence*, vol. 1, p. xlii.

²⁸³ NAI, Bengal Public Consultations, Microfilm, Accession no. 2661, Fort William, August 4, 1704.

²⁸⁴ Anjali Chatterjee, *Bengal in the Reign of Aurangzeb*, Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1967, p. 182.

Hooghly ²⁸⁵	50
Dacca	5-8

Source: Adapted from information provided by Sushil Chaudhury in Sushil Chaudhury and Michel Morineau, eds. *Merchants, Companies and Trade*, p. 311.

The chunk of the Portuguese trade of Bengal was taken over by the Dutch after 1632 when around twenty Dutch oceanic crafts started anchoring at the Bengal ports in the years of vigorous trade²⁸⁶. Though the VOC extracted a Mughal *farman* in 1634 to trade in Bengal, it established its headquarter in Hooghly only in 1651, to be shifted to its close neighbourhood at Chinsurah in 1654, which received the status of the Directorate of Bengal. As both the Dutch and English East India Companies at that point of time could not offer any item of exchange apart from broadcloth; they had to part with bullion. Apart from gold from Japan, the Dutch brought in copper from Japan, tin, tutenag from Malaya, pepper, chank, betelnuts, elephants, ivory, cloves, mace, nutmeg from the Dutch East Indies²⁸⁷, bell metal, quick silver, vermilion and some clothes. The Dutch ships took back rice, oil, butter, hemp, cordage, 'saile'(sic) cloth, raw silk, silk wrought, saltpetre, opium, turmeric, nila, gingham, carpet, hangings, sugar bee wax etc. from Hooghly²⁸⁸, Pipley and Balasore²⁸⁹. Initially in the seventeenth century raw silk from Bengal was the major item of export to Japan, while opium was exported to Indonesia; contributing substantially to a segment of the` Dutch intra-Asian trade²⁹⁰.

Again a portion of the French document titled 'Correspondance du Conseil Superiur de Pondichery Avec Le Conseil de Chandernagor', had clearly indicated that at least between 1728 and 37, many French vessels plied to and from Chandernagore on a regular basis. Dupleix had organized numerous voyages between 1731and 1741. In the west it went to Pondicherry, Malabar, Surat, Maldives, Mozambique, Mocha, Jedda, Basra etc; while in the east the destinations were Aceh, Pegu, Mergui, Melacca, Manila, and Canton.

Those voyages were focused mainly on the intra Asian trade in which the French Company decided to involve men in its payroll and the private European

²⁸⁵ The Hugli merchants often procured from Malda too.

²⁸⁶ P.J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, p. 51.

²⁸⁷ K.K. Datta ed., *Fort William-India House Correspondence*: vol.1, p. xLii.

²⁸⁸ Master, *Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 83.

²⁸⁹ J.S. Stavorinus, *Voyages to the East Indies*, S.H. Wilcocke trans., vol. 3, London, 1798, p. 90.

²⁹⁰ Om Prakash, *European Commercial Enterprises in Pre Colonial India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 110.

and Indian traders. The ships based in Pondicherry as well as Chandernagore were involved in the private intra-Asian trade. The ships sailing from Chandernagore often picked up the cargo from Pondicherry. This explains the continuously busy traffic either way.

Table 2.3: Some of the French Ships at Chandernagore

Years (Between 1728 and 1737)	Arrival to/Departure from Chandernagore	Names of Ships
September 28, 1728	Arrived	<i>Syrenne</i> ²⁹¹
	Arrived	<i>Entreprenant</i> ²⁹²
	Departed	<i>Fortune</i> ²⁹³
		<i>Pondichery</i> ²⁹⁴
		<i>Maure</i> ²⁹⁵
		<i>Saint Joseph</i> ²⁹⁶
		<i>Phillibert</i> ²⁹⁷
		<i>Dauphin</i> ²⁹⁸
		<i>Duchesse</i>
		<i>Reine</i> ²⁹⁹
		<i>Jupiter</i>
		<i>Thetis</i>
January 19, 1737	To Mauritius	<i>Marie Joseph</i> ³⁰⁰
	To France	<i>Paix</i> ³⁰¹
	To Saint Helena	<i>Amphilrite</i> ³⁰²
December, 1737	Arrived	<i>St. Louis</i> , a British ship sent to fetch 'rice and provisions' for Pondicherry; 'has entered the Ganga, we reckon that the others will also reach safely' ³⁰³ .

Source: Adapted from Archives de L'Inde Francaise, Correspondance du Conseil Superiur de Pondichery Avec Le Conseil de Chandernagor, 1728-1757, pp. 199-362.

²⁹¹Institut de Chandernagor, Library, Archives de L'Inde Francaise, Correspondance du Conseil Superiur de Pondichery Avec Le Conseil de Chandernagor, 1728-1757, Tome 1, Pondichery Societe De L'Histoire De L'Inde, 1915, p. 1.

²⁹²Ibid., p. 418.

²⁹³Ibid.

²⁹⁴Ibid., pp. 199-200.

²⁹⁵Ibid.

²⁹⁶Ibid.

²⁹⁷Ibid.

²⁹⁸Ibid.

²⁹⁹Ibid.

³⁰⁰Ibid., letter dated March 16, 1737. p.362.

³⁰¹Ibid.

³⁰²Ibid.

³⁰³Ibid.

However, transcontinental trade slowly picked up from this time onwards. During this phase, the French ships used to touch the Pondicherry factory of Fort St Louis before reaching Chandernagore with commodities and provisions and plied out of Chandernagore towards France carrying certain specific items of Bengal.

A series of letters dated between September 1728 and September 1737 have been selected to depict the pattern of import and export trade between France and Chandernagore -

1/ The Correspondence dated September 30, 1728: The French ship named 'Syrenne' loaded 715 bunches of 'bois rouge' (redwood) weighing 70,465 pounds³⁰⁴.

2/ The Correspondence dated August 22, 1729: France asked for a packet of different qualities of handkerchiefs made in Bengal; should be 2/3 pieces in square shape and in pure cotton, pure silk, cotton and silk mix³⁰⁵.

3/ The Correspondence dated July 31, 1731: To send provisions and drinks destined for the trading post, also to send pepper, redwood, rattan (cane) in three ships. One of the ships was named 'Argonaute'. France wanted 2000 'coats of cowries' from Bengal³⁰⁶.

4/ The Correspondence dated August 30, 1731: In December load the ship 'Saint Joseph' with *cauri*, saltpetre and bales. Sending redwood and we are not in a position to send you pepper more than what we have received from Mahe³⁰⁷.

5/ The Correspondence dated August 16, 1735: Sending 189,000 pounds of pepper out of 3000,000 that the Company has fixed to be paid and the provisions³⁰⁸.

6/ The Correspondence dated July 7, 1736: Like the previous year, the Company thinks that you are behind by four hundred thousand Roupies not counting for the Pepper and Red Wood that we are sending.

The ship that the Company has decided to send us being rather large, it{ can accommodate ?? } 5 or 600 bales of white *garas* or more.....less than 600 bales of *garas* that you will send us³⁰⁹.

³⁰⁴Ibid., p. 1.

³⁰⁵Ibid., p. 41.

³⁰⁶Ibid., pp. 138-40.

³⁰⁷Ibid., p.184.

³⁰⁸Ibid., p. 308.

7/ The Correspondence dated March 16, 1737: You have requested us to send 4,000 mans of Pepper for the consumption of Bengale and Pattena³¹⁰.

8/ The Correspondence dated September 15, 1737: Despatching a ship called 'l'Indien'. It will touch Mazulipatam and Yanaom carrying the cargo of 350 candil of Red Wood³¹¹.

So the heavy and frequent cargo movement to and fro Chandernagore indicated that the Hugli allowed a busy traffic of ocean going vessels at least between 1728 and 1737. But still the safe entry into the river's estuary was a matter of great worry during this phase.

Apart from textile; redwood, pepper and *cauri* had a good demand too. In fact the mention of red wood is particularly interesting and its possible usage by the French needs to be explored. One logical conjecture could be its usage in making water crafts and Hooghly and its neighbourhood had a long tradition of boat making. But the suitability of the wood needed for that purpose needs to be ascertained.

Again, we must not ignore the significant role played by the Asian merchants who have been generally overshadowed by excessive discussions about the commercial enterprises of the European trade bodies. Scholars like Sushil Chaudhury³¹² have claimed that the exports of these merchants from Bengal and their import of cash and silver were far greater than those of the Europeans before 1757. They operated through the overland trade routes also, but such trade records are difficult to access. K. N. Chaudhuri's claim that the Europeans were the major importers of precious metals to Bengal during this period³¹³, has been questioned by Sushil Chaudhury who believed that the Asian merchants had much more stake in the Bengal trade as they brought in more bullion than what the European trade bodies could³¹⁴.

It is not easy to collect the shipping data of various trade bodies and other merchants and traders pertaining to the settlement of Hooghly to establish the

³⁰⁹Ibid., pp. 337-38.

³¹⁰Ibid., p. 363.

³¹¹Ibid., p. 413.

³¹²Sushil Chaudhury, 'The Asian Merchants and Companies in Bengal's Export Trade, circa Mid-Eighteenth Century', in Sushil Chaudhury and M. Morineau eds., *Merchants, Companies and Trade*, pp. 300-20.

³¹³K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trading World of Asia*, p. 247.

³¹⁴Sushil Chaudhury, *From Prosperity to Decline*, pp. 330-333.

extent of overseas trade handled by Hooghly between late seventeenth and eighteenth century, before Calcutta became Bengal's premier port and the English East India Company's chief operational base in Bengal. The following tables can at best, provide a very sketchy picture of the volume of business commanded by the port of Hooghly. However these figures clearly show that Hooghly was a busy port. After 'Falcon' successfully penetrated into the interior of south western Bengal to reach Hooghly, the large vessels of the English Company started plying up the Hugli.

Table 2.4: Some of the English Ships at Hooghly

Year	Names of Ships	Tonnage
1682	<i>Welfare</i>	250
1682	<i>Crown</i>	300
1683	<i>Henry and William</i>	250
1683	<i>Hare</i>	190
1683	<i>Prudent Mary</i>	350
1684	<i>Persia Merchant</i>	350
1684	<i>Anne</i>	470

Source: G.T. Labey, Branch Pilot, Bengal Pilot Service and R.K.H. Brice, Branch Pilot, Master Mariner, Hon'ble Company of Master Mariners and Bengal and Hooghly Pilot Services, comp., *History of the Bengal Pilot Service, being an Account of the Navigation of the Hooghly River, 1534-1800*.

<https://remistry.wordpress.com/2009/01/14/introduction-geographical-historical/>

In a good year for business as many as twenty Dutch ships called on the Bengal ports in the second half of the seventeenth century. But a detailed account of the ships on call at Hooghly could not be obtained. Many of the Asian merchants, the *nawab*, the aristocrats owned trading crafts. As Bowrey noted, their 'twenty saile of ships of considerable burthen lay moored in Hooghly, Balasore and Piple³¹⁵'. Though the following table is based on the various incomplete shipping lists of VOC and the available lists that have chronological gaps; it amply elucidates the port activities of Hooghly revolving round the indigenous trade. Balasore and Hooghly had operated concurrently as Dutch ports for quite some time.

Table 2.5: Shipping Activities of the Merchants based in Bengal between 1671 and 1718 at Hooghly and Balasore

Countries Visited	Number of Ships left Hooghly between 1681-1718	Number of Ships left Balasore between 1681-1718	Merchants
Southeast Asia	21	32	Merchants from Bengal

³¹⁵ Bowrey, *A Geographical Account*, p. 179.

Maldives	27	64	Merchants from Bengal
Surat	94	8	Merchants from Surat
Malabar	3	--- ³¹⁶	Merchants from Malabar
Coromandel	129	9	Merchants from Coromandel
Red Sea and Persian Gulf	10	---	Merchants from Surat
Ceylon	1	17	Merchants from Bengal

Source: Adapted on the basis of the information given by Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal: 1630-1720*, Manohar, Delhi, 2012, pp. 26, 27, 29, 225-228.

Table 2.6: The number of Portuguese and Asian ships at Hooghly between 1715 and 1735 are as follows:

Year	Number of Ships
1715-16	16
1716-17	14
1717-18	18
1718-19	16
1719-20	20
1720-21	29
1721-22	26
1722-23	26
1728-29	16
1730-31	12
1731-32	15
1732-33	--
1733-34	11
1734-35	--
1735-36	--

Source: Adapted from P.J. Marshall, *East India Fortunes*, p. 57.

Again, though the Danes had their factory cum settlement and port along the Hugli belt in 1755, they had an erratic interaction with Bengal. Aside from their Company ships, private Danish ships had frequented the Bengal water, even if a consistent record could not be tabulated.

From the above cited data it is evident that Hooghly was a functioning port between the 1680s and 1750s though by early eighteenth century Calcutta had established itself as its close competitor and then subsequently as its replacement. In fact the 'Asian merchants' used to indulge in their trading activities mainly from the ports of Balasore and Hooghly between the late seventeenth and early

³¹⁶Information not available.

eighteenth century. They were mainly had their commercial interests in the branch of eastward trade in Asia³¹⁷. Again, the Asian merchants comprised the Mughal nobles as well as local merchants. As Balasore ceased to function since the 1680s, they started depending on Hooghly in a big way. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, there was a marked decline in the Asian merchants' participation in trade from the functioning ports of Bengal: Balasore and Hooghly.

This could be largely explained in terms of the withdrawal of the ship owning Mughal state officials from Southeast Asia's commerce and shipping. The growing metropolis of Calcutta never attracted the Mughal nobles and merchants in a big way. Further, the ordinary merchants of Bengal pursued their trade and there was no obvious dip in the volume of trade handled by them. Also, Om Prakash claimed that the VOC's flourishing commerce with Indonesia and its pass policy did not have much impact on the total trade of the Asian merchants in Bengal³¹⁸.

However, the available data indicates that at least till the early years of the eighteenth century Hooghly derived vigorous trade as the premier port of Bengal. When In 1705-06, Alexander Hamilton remarked,

Hugly is a town of a large Extent drives a great Trade, because all Goods of the Product of Bengal are brought hither for Exportation, And the Mogul'sCustom-house is at this Place. It affords rich Cargoes for fifty or sixty Ships yearly, besides what is carried to neighbouring countries in small Vessels³¹⁹.

X. Braving the Hazards in the Hooghly Region: c. 1600-1800

Wilderness and Nature's Furies

However, it was not easy for the Europeans like the Portuguese down to the English, French, Dutch, Danes, and also the Armenians from distant lands to acclimatise with the new ambience of Bengal and adopt places like Hooghly as their place of posting. It called for the zeal of the pioneers to make the inconspicuous Hooghly region into a habitable place and a very viable port. Though the space had been identified early as a promising site for commerce; it took real courage of those who had long term plans to pitch their tents in the

³¹⁷ Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*, p. 226.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

³¹⁹ Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, vol. 2, p. 20.

unfamiliar tropical environment encompassing forests and swamps, heat and miasma, dangerous predators and extreme nature's furies like cyclone, lashing monsoon rains and inundations which had no parallels in the temperate zone.

The humidity sapped the vitality of the foreigners. It was described as a 'whott' country³²⁰ and also moist³²¹ region that bred vermin³²². The Dutch factory specially suffered from this. Hooghly, according to Ralph Fitch, was an inhospitable region of woodland and undergrowth. The wilderness abounded in buffalo, boar, deer and many tigers. There were pockets of grasses that stood taller than grown up men³²³. When the Portuguese set their feet on it in the sixteenth century it was overrun by *hoglas* and bamboo groves that were typical of swampy areas. In 1671 John Marshall noted that there were many tigers in Hooghly³²⁴. The Venetian traveller Manucci³²⁵ specifically mentioned about the menace of man eating crocodiles in the river of Hooghly in the mid seventeenth century. A good hundred years later Stavorinus in 1768-71, noted the presence of numerous tigers and wild beasts in and around Hooghly³²⁶. Satgaon and Balagarh; and also the connecting route between Gaur and Hooghly comprised tracts of forests that harboured robbers and predators.

Moreover, during the active phase of the port / ports dotting the bank of the Hugli; the interface with wilderness and vagaries of nature, new diseases could have weighed heavily on the foreigners. Apart from being a flood prone area, the Bengal delta is one of the most cyclone ravaged zones of the world. As Hooghly is located at the heart of the delta, the impact of cyclone and flood have been rather scaled down in comparison to places at the edge of the delta, like the Sagor island which are at the receiving end of full blown elemental onslaughts. Such encounters with inclement weather were recorded by European visitors to Hooghly and beyond, closer to the estuary. For example, Bernier recounted a night in a forest located somewhere between Piply and Hooghly when lashing rain

³²⁰ Surat Letters, May 26, 1616, cited in William Foster, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe*, London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, p. 193.

³²¹ Bowrey, *A Geographical Account*, p. 169.

³²² Master, *Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 48.

³²³ William Foster ed., *Early Travels in India, 1583- 1619*, London: Oxford University Press, 1912, pp. 25-26.

³²⁴ Bowrey, *A Geographical Account*, p. 25.

³²⁵ William Irvine trans. Niccolo Manucci, *Storia Do Mogor*, vol. 2, Calcutta, Reprint, 1966, p. 86.

³²⁶ J.S. Stavorinus, *Voyages to the East Indies*, vol. 1, p. 106.

and very loud thunder storm raged in an ‘unabated force’ for two hours and he survived by clinging on to a tree trunk³²⁷.

In 1681 Hooghly experienced a major flood when people were stranded within the town as ‘there was noo foot way out of this city’³²⁸. A similar situation had occurred sometime in 1684. Also a special mention should be made of the cyclone and heavy rain of September 30, 1737, that led to serious damage and destruction of the Company’s vessels sailing close to Hooghly.

There happn’d a Storm extreamly violent, which forced all the ships in the River, both European and Country from their anchors.People and Money were immediately sent to Hughley and the parts adjacent to procure Boats and Assistance for them. But the Storms having likewise reache’d those Places, They cou’d not help us³²⁹.

Halifax carrying 557 bales, redwood and saltpetre was badly ravaged and ‘lying ashore on a dangerous way’³³⁰. *Newcastle* lost 2000 bags of saltpetre and ‘seems quite broke’³³¹.

Decker belonging to Captain Williamson was quite stranded and initially ‘feared was irrevocably lost’³³². *Lyell* broke near the Rogue’s River³³³. *Princess Louisa* was damaged³³⁴. *Devonshire* was ‘quite stranded’³³⁵.

A particularly intense cyclone and heavy rain led to a flood in November 2, 1787, and a flood of much greater magnitude and graver consequences overwhelmed the district in September 1823. Missed monsoon for two consecutive years (1768-69), great loss of inhabitants³³⁶ followed by migrations, combined with drought, grain scarcity, illegal hoarding of food grains, enhanced rate of revenue ‘on the land lying to the eastward of the Kasimbazar river on the

³²⁷ Bernier, *Travels*, p. 446.

³²⁸ NAI, Dacca Factory Record, July 1681, Microfilm, Accession no. 2695.

³²⁹ NAI, Bengal Public Consultation, Microfilm, November 24, 1736-January 1, 1738, Accession no. 2672.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

³³¹ *Ibid.*

³³² *Ibid.*, pp. 298, 315.

³³³ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 314

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

³³⁶ WBSA, Committee of Circuit, Kasimbazar, July 7-August 20, 1772, Proceedings, vol. 2, p. 196.

*Bagree Zamin*³³⁷, etc. culminated in a famine of great magnitude, affecting parts of Bengal in the 1770s, had a negative impact on Hooghly and its adjacent areas.

Riverine Hazards

Further, the river became very untrustworthy in many ways. The riverine aberrations manifested in occasional inundations, land encroachments; and also hindrances in the form of the sandbars, shoals in dry seasons and otherwise in the relatively shallow water and meandering turns of the river. Combating the river's unpredictable aspects was a great challenge for the settlers of Hooghly.

In the 1660s it was noted by Thomas Bowrey that the old Dutch factory and the new English factory, were located at close proximity to one another, 'within twenty paces of the River Side', much of the 'dry land' being slowly taken over by the Hugli River³³⁸.

The Dutch were badly affected as their whole factory, store houses, more than a thousand huts in their township at Chinsurah had been washed down into the great depth of the river³³⁹. Water rose more than 3 or 4 feet above the level of the Hugli Bazar. The following entry dated September 3, 1684 from *Hedges' Diary* stated:

The river of Ganges is raised so high as it has not been known in ye memory of man—the water being 3 or 4 foot high in ye Bazar. It is reported more than 1000 houses are fallen ye Dutch quarters and boats may row round their factory in Hooghly³⁴⁰.

The English vessels used to ply the very place where the old Dutch Factory once stood. The old factory was submerged under the depth of sixteen fathoms which subsequently came to be known as the 'Hugly hole'. The Dutch factory was rebuilt at a safer distance from the river. De L'Estra³⁴¹ confirmed that "a league distant from the Dutch factory [at 'Ougly'] the English have one, on the same side of the river, the left giving up". Also the roving river track leading to encroachment of land was noticed at Bandel by none other than Hosten himself. Till his time the river remained calm and did not betray any symptoms of unleashing itself to wash away the land. At the same time Hosten observed,

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Bowrey, *A Geographical Account*, p. 170.

³³⁹ Schouten has been cited by Bowrey, *A Geographical Account*, p. 168.

³⁴⁰ R. Burrow and H. Yule eds., *The Diary of William Hedges, Esq. during his Agency in Bengal, as well as his Voyage Out and Return Overland: 1681-87*, London: Hakluyt Society, 1887, p. 159.

³⁴¹ De L'Estra had been cited by Bowrey, *A Geographical Account*, p. 69.

Yet the river is a dangerous child to trust. ...Some three hundred feet from my room, close to the bank, a long island was formed within the last eight years, and a new one was thrown up last year, there to the north. Now she is eating away her eastern bank and throwing up the sand this side. Tomorrow it may be the reverse. The present Ghat of the Convent, which once the water licked, is now 290 feet away from the edge of the river. How many fair cities have sprung up on this side and are gone.³⁴²

The Problem of Reduced Navigability in and around Hooghly

However the most pressing challenge of the region was the Hugli's reduced navigability. Though the maritime vessels were frequenting the ports dotted along the Hugli by maneuvering through the hazardous estuary and lower reaches; slowly the central part of the Bhagirathi's bed began posing a new kind of navigational challenge. The river's middle section extended for about 120 miles from Nadia to its confluence with the Rupnarayan at the Hugli Point. The river entered Hooghly district from opposite Santipore. Then it flowed downwards towards south east after passing Guptipara, Balagarh, Jiret and Sukhsagar which lay at Nadia. On its journey it meandered all along the way forming a number of *chars*. From Sukhsagar it flowed south west and then towards south up to Hooghly and Chinsurah.

The flow path oscillated from east to west till it reached Mahesh³⁴³. A segment of 50 miles ran along the eastern periphery of Hooghly district roughly corresponding with the Hugli belt, was believed to be growing shallower and shallower with the passage of time. There is no definite record of its depth before the Europeans started plying their ships on the Bengal water. But we have a rather confusing series of reports on the navigability of the middle section of the river in the eighteenth century. In Baranagore water level was 5 and 1/2 to 6 fathoms that gradually decreased to about 4 fathoms close to Hooghly, has been mentioned in Bowrey's Chart of 1688 and the Pilot Chart of 1703. In fact in 1757, the Company's ships men-of-war³⁴⁴ of considerable tonnage carrying 50 to 70 guns

³⁴² Hosten, 'A Week at the Bandel Convent', p. 55.

³⁴³ O'Malley, *District Gazetteers: Hooghly*, pp. 6-7.

³⁴⁴ British men-of-war were frigates or war ships fitted with canons and propelled by sail. Those were in use in India between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.

could sail up to Chandernagore at the time of high tides³⁴⁵. In fact on the shoal of Gyretty there was a good channel of 10 feet water at low water.

In 1797, Admiral Watson led his fleet that had a heavy war ship of 64 guns up to Chandernagore to bombard the township³⁴⁶. But in late eighteenth century, the French traveller L. De Grandpre noted the inability of the French Company vessels to reach Chandernagore for lack of the ‘necessary depth of water’³⁴⁷. According to primary sources consulted so far; it could be claimed that despite the river’s shallowness around Hooghly, the ships could ply up to Chandernagore in the rain at least till the end of the eighteenth century. Serampore being located closer to the estuary compared to Chandernagore and other places in the Hugli belt; allowed entrance to the vessels till early nineteenth century. In 1821 ships of 800 tons sailed up to Serampore³⁴⁸.

The course of the Hugli gradually started blocking up the approach to the settlements along its bank. The first one to be ruined was Chinsurah, then Chandernagore, Bankipore and finally Serampore. Hunter observed, ‘Hugly being one of the tracts which suffered most’ from malaria due to the surrounding marshes along the choked up beds that harboured anopheles mosquito. In case of the array of port towns close to Hooghly, the gradual process of siltation impeded an easy passage to the big crafts, a major deterrent against the operations of a port town.

Probable Explanations

The choking of the port of Hooghly and its nearby areas can be explained in terms of long term ecological phenomenon of the Bhagirathi’s eastward journey. Richard Eaton argued that there was a major shift in the Gangetic delta between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries during which the Padma river took off from the Ganga above Bhagwangola. The Padma gradually became a vibrant channel by capturing most of the water from the western arm of the Ganga named Bhagirathi. In the process the Bhagirathi turned into a rather sluggish channel. As a result of the riverine shift, the site of the active delta had moved towards eastern

³⁴⁵ O’Malley, *District Gazetteers: Hooghly*, p. 13.

³⁴⁶ J. Johnson, *Inland Navigation on the Gangetic Rivers*, Thacker Spink and Co Ltd, Calcutta, 1933, p. 16.

³⁴⁷ L. De. Grandpre, *A Voyage in the Indian Ocean and to Bengal 1789-1790 Containing an Account of the Seychelles Islands and Trincomale*, vol. 1, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1995, p. 249.

³⁴⁸ Johnston, *Inland Navigation*, p. 16.

Bengal. As the emerging river was charting its own path, it went on spraying fresh inundation alluvium all along its way. The siltation ensured an agriculturally buoyant new delta that nourished a comparatively more populous area than the central and western Bengal. The old western delta started languishing as the Bhagirathi received very little water from the Ganga due to riverine alterations. As the volume of water of the Bhagirathi was diminishing, the old discharged silt started piling up on and beside the river bed. Binary delta system was taking shape simultaneously: the evolving delta of fresh silt in the eastern Bengal and the decaying delta with little inputs of fresh silt in western Bengal. As the old mounds of hardened sediments could not be washed away by slack flow of water; the river had to turn and meander into infinite loops to chart out its way to meet the sea³⁴⁹. In the changing scenario much of water was draining through the Padma. Rennell had explained the complex geographical phenomenon in his own way.

In remote times this River doubtless gained the sea by the Western Channel (or Hooghly River), but having raised that too high, it sought a lower bed, in a new situation, and by a repetition of the same causes and effects moved progressively to that bed, in which we now find it, after having in turn, occupied the several intermediate Channels, whose upper parts are now nearly filled up, whilst the lower parts have been kept open by means of the flux and reflux of the tides. We find that further we go Eastward the deeper are the intermediate channels; in other words they have been the latest forsaken by the great River.....³⁵⁰.

Anyway, the receding depth of water at Hooghly could be explained in terms of excessive siltation on the river bed that cut off its connection with the head water from the Ganga that was channelizing its water mostly to the active Padma that took eastern and then south eastern flow path.

(The) additional supply of water from the Ganges never enters the Hugli (via the cut at Sooty) in any considerable body except the very worst season of the year, viz the Rains when only it carries large quantities of sand and clay, which though of a lighter texture and easier removal if deposited above, are when deposited in conjunction with the coarser sand of the Dumoodah more firmly bound together and more difficult of removal by the action of the

³⁴⁹ R.M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 194-198.

³⁵⁰ NAI, Field Book no. 9, Observations on the Proposition for Making a Canal between the Ganges and the Houghly River, 1796, p. 73.

water.....boats drawing from one to two feet water cannot pass through the cut at all times of the year, therefore this cut, instead of assisting in clearing the River acts in quite an opposite manner by bringing down large bodies of sand from the Ganges during the Rains³⁵¹.

Also the Damodar, a major tributary of the Hugli had contributed to the riverine atrophy at this phase. The combined waters of the Damodar and Hugli maintained a certain level of flow of the river in and around Hooghly that retained its navigability. But changes in the Damodar river too were noted in the early nineteenth century.

The Dumoodah River rises in the hilly part of the Burdwan district and carries with it a heavier and coarser kind of sand than the Ganges does in this part of its course.....A great body of this sand is now brought into the Hugli only during the Rains, when the Dumoodah forces itself into the Hugli through its old bed as well as new³⁵².

The Bhagirathi flowed southwards after passing by Sooty, Bhagwangola and cascaded down till Triveni near Bandel. There the Bhagirathi bifurcated into the Saraswati, Bhagirathi and Jamuna. The Bhagirathi at that time had its estuarine outlet via Adi Ganga, to the east of the present Hugli river below Calcutta before flowing past Sagor island into the Bay of Bengal. The main course of the Damodar originally joined the Hugli from right side at Naya serai, north of Triveni near Kalna. The volume of water carried down by the said river had aided in washing clear the silt deposits on the river bed round the year. A contemporary source stated that,

Formerly there was a great body of water from the dumoodah during the cold weather as well as during the hot and rainy seasons which carried off this sand by its long continued action during these most favourable seasons and by not allowing it to settle³⁵³.

It was a flood prone river, locally known as the 'river of sorrow', and its inundations carved out more passage to the south. The Damodar's alterations have to be reviewed in the entire perspective of the riverine shifts that took place in the delta. But a serious flood of 1770 forced it to alter its flow drastically and meet the

³⁵¹ NAI, Proceedings, Home Public, vol. 328, July 1822, p. 53.

³⁵² Ibid., pp. 52-53.

³⁵³ Ibid., p. 52.

Bhagirathi about forty kilometres south of Calcutta. The vestigial channels survived as 'Kana' and 'Bnaka' Damodar. Such changes brought about some alterations in the river system. As the confluence point shifted down south, the Saraswati and the old channel of the Bhagirathi that is the Adiganga dried up above the new convergence point. The Bhagirathi started flowing back a little westward to its old track, which marks the present course of the Hugli river that meets the sea by flowing past Sagor. The vestigial Adiganga, the 'last part of the Bhagirathi and not the Hugli'³⁵⁴ trickled as a thin swampy channel. The Adiganga is venerated as the original flow path of the Bhagirathi and all Hindu ceremonies and rituals are performed along the bank of the disappearing channel. Even the famous temple of Kalighat is located on its bank. The remaining original track of the Ganga at the lower reach could be traced in the silted up marshes bearing names like 'Boser Ganga', 'Ghosher Ganga', 'Kati Ganga' in Joynagore, Majilpore, Baruipore, Mathurapore areas of the Twenty Four Parganas³⁵⁵.

In the late eighteenth century, the Damodar's major shift took away some water from the river system that had been watering its intermediate reach roughly corroborating with Hooghly and its neighbourhood. This explains the sluggishness as silt could not be washed away and lack of depth of the river watering Serampore, Chandernagore, Chinsura, Hooghly. 'But now that the Dumoodah has changed its course it can no longer assist during the favourable season in clearing the sand by augmenting the body of the water and accelerating its velocity'³⁵⁶.

The most striking change brought about by the Damodar's altered course was the formation of the tricky and dangerous 'James and Mary Sands just below Fultah'. Several ships had been lost and damaged since seventeenth century because of this huge sandbank and the Company's correspondences were replete with apprehensions that if no steps were undertaken in near future, 'ships of 500 Tons burthen' would not be able to proceed beyond Diamond Harbour³⁵⁷, let alone up to Calcutta and Hooghly.

Nevertheless, in case of Kasimbazar at the upper reach, the riverine problem involved major shifts that could be traced from many tortuous loops in the form of ox bow lakes on its bed and paleo channels of the Bhagirathi in and

³⁵⁴ Mahua Sarkar, 'Imaging the Ganga', pp. 45-70

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ NAI, Home Public, July, 1822, Proceedings, vol. 328, pp. 52-53.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 53.

around Murshidabad. In case of Hooghly the main issue was the decreasing depth of the river due to excessive silt deposition during the period under review. The Ganges had altered its course at the upper reach, so the major source of water was being withheld. The Damodar's deviation had added further to the problem. The early maps had indicated that the mighty Jellenghy had joined Bhagirathi close to Nadia. However during Rennell's time roughly in the mid eighteenth century, the same Jellenghy had become narrow³⁵⁸. There was an earlier instance of saltpeter boats from Patna being detained in the river due to its shallowness³⁵⁹. In the winter of 1771, it could give passage to boats of 150 to 300 *maunds* burthen³⁶⁰. So water in the Hugli river declined considerably as sources were drying up.

Table 2.7: The River in and around Hooghly between the late 15th and 18th centuries

Travellers	Period of Visit	Observations	Inference
Ralph Fitch, one of the earliest English travellers	Between 1560s and 1581	Hooghly was in wilderness, but he noticed thriving commerce in Satgaon, which was a 'faire citie of the Moors' and was 'very plentiful of all things' ³⁶¹ .	The Saraswati river was active.
Cesar Frederici, a traveller from Venice		Saw active trade in Satgaon which he referred to as the 'harber Picheno' and did not mention about Hooghly. The light and small 'barks' could not ply against the swift ebbing tides. The river is shallow and only small vessels could ply up from the seasonal mart of Buttor, downstream ³⁶² .	The Saraswati river was silting up.
English Factors to the	November 2, 1616	The voyage to Port Pequeno could not be undertaken for	So as early as 1616, the

³⁵⁸ NLI, W.K. Firminger, *Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad*, vol. 3, January 3-February 14, 1771, 1920, p. 174.

³⁵⁹ NAI, Proceedings, Home Miscellaneous, Fort William, December 30, 1765, p. 375.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ William Foster ed., *Early Travels in India, 1583- 1619*, Oxford University Press, London, 1912, pp. 25-26.

³⁶² *Voyage and Travel of M. Caesar Frederick*, page number not given.

https://books.google.co.in/books?id=JG2km_lggToC&pg=PR198&lpg=PR198&dq=the+Dutch+h+ave+ships+of+600+tons/Hedges+Diary&source=bl&ots=SDISgd6YQP&sig=MFvClmwUJvHkgaZZIZfaQWEDMtM&hl=en&sa=X&ei=BXqRVZXCf9iXuATs5bWgCw&ved=0CCAQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=the%20Dutch%20have%20ships%20of%20600%20tons%2FHedges%20Diary&f=false

Accessed on 29.6.15.

Company		want of small ships fitting that purpose ³⁶³ .	English were aware about the difficult approach to the place through the river.
Gautier Schouten, a Dutchman	1662	Mentioned the reluctance of pilots to guide the comparatively bigger Company vessels to the port of Hooghly. So the ships dropped anchor near Sagor ³⁶⁴ .	Depth of the river was inadequate to bring the large vessels to Hooghly.
Francois de L'Estra, a Frenchman	1670 approximately	The Dutch had reached Hooghly by small crafts after anchoring their ocean going vessels at the mouth of the Hugli to avert accidents. In 1672, few Dutch vessels got damaged due to abrasion with the shoals at the entrance of the Hugli. ³⁶⁵	Bars and sandbanks were forming in and around the Estuary. So approaching Hugli was a tough task.
William Hedges, in 1681 became the First English Agent in Bengal	quoted the correspondence from the Court to Fort St. George, dated December 31, 1662.	It is 'hazardless' for the ships to go upto Hooghly and 'the Dutch have shippes of 600 tons that Tyde it up thither' ³⁶⁶ .	Hedges depicted a positive picture. Large ships too were reaching Hugli in his time.
Thomas Bowrey, the English merchant sailor with East India Company	1669	The River is soe named from the great towne of Hugly. Scituated Upon the banks of it, neare one fifty miles up from the Braces or Shoals that lye at the Entrance thereof ³⁶⁷ .	Hugli was difficult to reach due to blockades at the estuary.
Home Miscellaneous Proceedings.	December 1680- November 1681	The 'Patteloos' or shallow boats carrying saltpetre from Patna that 'draw little water'; should be sent to Hooghly to avert chances of accidents ³⁶⁸ .	Probably dry months were especially difficult for reaching Hugli

³⁶³ William Foster ed, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe*, London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1899, p. 193.

³⁶⁴ Gautier Schouten, *Voyage aux Indes Orientales* (tr. Into French from Dutch), vol. 2, Amsterdam, 1707, p. 72.

³⁶⁵ Mentioned in Aniruddha Ray, 'Hooghly', *Modhyojuger Bharotio Shohor*, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 1999, p. 333.

³⁶⁶ William Hedges, Andrew Yule, *Diary of William Hedges, Esq. (Afterwards Sir William Hedges), During His Agency in Bengal, as Well as on His Voyage Out and Return Overland (1681-1687)*, Cambridge University Press, p. 198.

³⁶⁷ Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account*, p. 169.

³⁶⁸ NAI, Proceedings, Home Miscellaneous, Copy of Hugly Letters Sent from December 1680- November 1681, no 1, pp. 189-91.

			and flat bottomed boats could access the port.
Balasore Factory Record	December 1, 1679-March 19, 1687	<p>Arrived in ye road ye sloop Ganges to Hugly after having layn long in Hugley river³⁶⁹.</p> <p>Gott news from Banksall of a Dutch ship arrived from Piplely belonging to ye Dutch here and this day sailed out of Ballasore Road up to Hugly³⁷⁰.</p> <p>Passed by the harber Three English ships from Surat and one from ye coast as likewise a small French ship, from Surrat being all bound up for Hugely³⁷¹.</p> <p>This day arrived in Ballasore a Company ship from Hugly bound to Madras³⁷².</p>	<p>Such records show that Balasore was not only emerging as a safe intermediate anchorage on which Hooghly bound vessels probably waited till the water level rose during high tides; it had the capacity to harbor big ocean vessels around the time it was problematic to access Hooghly³⁷³. Actually the English were weighing the pros and cons of lading between Piplely, Balasore and Hooghly, before opting for 'silt laden and changeable Hooghly'³⁷⁴. Regular pilot service on the Hugli had commenced</p>

³⁶⁹ NAI, Balasore Factory Record, Microfilm, Accession no. 2634, August, 1684.

³⁷⁰ Ibid, January, 1683-84.

³⁷¹ Ibid, June, 1684.

³⁷² Ibid., September, 1684.

³⁷³ Ibid., January, 1683-84; February, 1683-84.

³⁷⁴ Rhoads Murphey, 'The City in the Swamp: Aspects of the Site and Early Growth of Calcutta', *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 130, no. 2, June 1964, pp. 241-256.

			only as late as 1691.
Dacca Factory Record.	1690	‘The river was not navigable for shipping ³⁷⁵ . But still it functioned as a port town; ‘by reason of shipping’, ³⁷⁶ .	Shipping was continuing though it faced serious hindrances while accessing the port.
Archives de L’Inde Francaise, Correspondance du Conseil Superiur de Pondichery Avec Le Conseil de Chandernagor.	1728-1737	<p>The official French exchanges are replete with shipping data. It mentioned about a ship named ‘Syrenne’, set sail for Chandernagore on September 28, 1728. In 1728 itself many cargo ships visited the French colony in Bengal³⁷⁷.</p> <p>Between 1728 and 1737 the many French ships had sailed from Chandernagore. A letter stated that ‘there is a ship of 5 or 6 ton for sale at Colcotta for 50 thousand Roupies, if it is good you may purchase’³⁷⁸.</p> <p>In a correspondence dated December 27, 1737, the Superiur Conseil at Pondicherry expressed his sense of relief to the Conseil at Chandernagore when ‘Fort Louis’ was sent up to Chandernagore.</p> <p>The content of a letter stated that the recipients were pleased at the arrival of ‘Jupiter’ and ‘Thetis’ at Chandernagore and that ‘Pondicherry’ had entered the Ganges without much damage³⁷⁹.</p> <p>Even an ‘Ostendese’ ship armed with 36 pieces of</p>	<p>There were any instances of ships sailing from France to Pondicherry, which reached as far as Chandernagore. At the same time, the French correspondences provided enough clues that were indicative of declining navigability near Hooghly port.</p>

³⁷⁵ NAI, Dacca Factory Record, Microfilm, Accession Number 2695, October 1690.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

³⁷⁷ Archives de L’Inde Francaise, Correspondance du Conseil Superiur de Pondichery Avec Le Conseil de Chandernagor, 1728-1757, Institut de Chandernagor, Library, p. 1.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 230.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., November 5, 1733, p. 243.

		<p>cannon and 300 soldiers had entered the Ganges³⁸⁰.</p> <p>The ship 'Argonaute' was very heavy and needed the help of 20 to 30 <i>laskars</i> to enter the Ganges³⁸¹.</p> <p>Due to the largeness of the ship 'Lys', they were hesitating to send it in the Ganga. The ship could halt at Coulpy or Folta to avoid the risqué of reaching upto the Building (Factory)³⁸².</p>	
Alexander Hamilton	1740s	Country boats of very modest size carrying moderate cargo were unable to sail back in the post monsoon dry months ³⁸³ .	In summer, the depth of the river declined and posed a big challenge for the ordinary cargo boats.
Home Miscellaneous Proceeding	1757	In a letter dated February 22, 1757, Clive had disclosed his plan of reaching Chandernagore with large ships following him along the Hugli after the 25 th of February, 1757 ³⁸⁴ .	Before 1770s, it was still possible, albeit with difficulty, to send ships in the Hooghly belt.
Home Public Consultation	1766	There is no place above Calcutta that vessels can be sent to, with safety as they will first unload at this port, after which it will be impracticable to transport ships or vessels of any great burthen higher up, without great risqué and very extraordinary expenses. ³⁸⁵	
Board of Revenue Proceedings	1786	'The French trading vessels (were) passing up and down the Ganges' with 'articles imported into or exported from Chandernagore' ³⁸⁶ .	Situation altered for the worse as the Damodar changed its course and met the Bhagirathi

³⁸⁰Ibid., August 22, 1729, p. 39.

³⁸¹Ibid., July 31, 1731, pp. 138-40.

³⁸²Ibid., September 15, 1737, pp. 412-13.

³⁸³Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, vol. 2, p. 21.

³⁸⁴NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 19, 1757, p. 36.

³⁸⁵NAI, Home Public Consultation no. 4, June 16, 1766, p. 1.

³⁸⁶WBSA, Board of Revenue Proceedings, July 25, 1786, p. 462.

			Hugli at a point beyond Calcutta.
George Viscount Valentia, a traveller	1802-06	The Danes at Serampore exported many items for their home consumption, though the ships at that time could not come up close to the town due to the increase of a shoal about three miles lower down ³⁸⁷ .	Though Serampore was located closer to the estuary compared to the other townships in and around Hooghly, ships came across riverine obstructions.
Home Public Proceeding, part of the Provisional Convention dated July 25, 1786, entered into between Vuourte de Souvllao on the part of his most Christian Majesty at France and the Hon'ble Lieutenant Colonel Cathcart on the part of the Governor.	1828	The British Men-of-War were taken up to Chandernagore by Lord Clive in 1757 ³⁸⁸ .	The document mentioned an instance of powerful British warships or frigates fitted with cannons of considerable tonnage reaching upto Chandernagore during the period prior to the shifting of the Damodar.

Cartographic Depiction of the River and Towns

The three representative maps of the mid sixteenth³⁸⁹, mid seventeenth and mid eighteenth centuries throw ample light on the waxing and waning of the river and associated information. We get a better perspective of the lower Bhagirathi in Brouke's map although in de Barros' the Bhagirathi Hugli has been shown as having an equal width as that of the easterly Padma³⁹⁰. But the Bhagirathi was shown as a wider river than the Saraswati and Satgaon stood on the Saraswati's eastern bank. Joao de Barros' map is a very old one in which the scale and

³⁸⁷ George Viscount Valentia, *Voyages and Travels to India, Ceylon, the Red Sea, Abyssinia and Egypt, 1802-1806*, vol. 1, London: W. Bulmer and Co, 1811, p. 40.

³⁸⁸ NAI, Home Public Proceeding, July 1828, vol. 328, p. 52.

³⁸⁹ The map of Barros was drawn in the 1550s.

³⁹⁰ Longitudinal distortion is far more pronounced in de Barros' map.

locations are not accurate. Nevertheless the map provided valuable geographical information on Bengal. ‘Satigam’ in Barros’ map was flanked in between a moderate Saraswati to its west and a grand Bhagirathi to its east. The Jamuna lay to the east of Bhagirathi. Hooghly has not been marked on the map as it had not yet gained its subsequent fame. ‘Satigam’ was a sprawling settlement cum port as it could be approached by two rivers. Actually the map study indicates clusters of villages in and around Satgaon and one small cluster was evolving quite close to the Bhagirathi where Hooghly came up subsequently. The bank of the Bhagirathi down south beyond Hooghly (not shown) was inhabited and showed the settlements of ‘Agrapara’, ‘Bernager’ and further downwards Betor. At Betor, the Saraswati that cascaded from Triveni towards the west and then to south and south east; had met Bhagirathi in a loop. The Saraswati had more than one outlet at the confluence.

Further, probably the connectivity at Triveni between the Saraswati and Bhagirathi was becoming diffused by then, as a brace was already noticeable at Triveni on the Bhagirathi on Barros’ map. Hence the English traveller Ralph Fitch preferred a land route to reach Hooghly (on Bhagirathi) from Satgaon (on Saraswati). He had visited Bengal sometime in 1586. While he was impressed with Satgaon as a major business node and a great city; he just mentioned about ‘Hugeli’³⁹¹. Indeed, Hooghly had just attained its formal identity. Fitch explained that he preferred to approach it by one land route through ‘wilderness’ as the right way was full of thieves’³⁹². If we go back roughly a century³⁹³ to analyse the references of the *Mangalkavya*, we have to state that this disjoint had started by the late fifteenth century as the mythical *saudagars* invariably took a pit stop at Triveni on the Bhagirathi and from there managed to reach Satgaon. This they used to do by a thin connecting capillary between Triveni and Satgaon. The other option to reach Satgaon was to take the land route. But such explanations are logical assumptions not based on definite primary evidences. During Pipilai’s time, Satgaon was an overseas port and urban centre. But then they undertook their onward journey via Bhagirathi and avoided Saraswati. Even Mukundaram noted about fifty years later in the 1540s :

³⁹¹ J. Horton Ryley, *Ralph Fitch, England’s Pioneer to England and Burma, his Companions and Contemporaries*, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1899, p. 113.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Pipilai’s *Chandimangal* was written in the 1490s.

*Bambhagey Haliashahar dahiney Tribeni,
Dundoler kolaholey kichhui nahi shuni.*

.....
.....
*Rarha majhhe shoptogram oti onupam
Dina dui shadhu tahe korilo bisram.*

*Kina bechya nana dhon naye dilo bhora
Bah bah bolyo ghono naye hoilo tora³⁹⁴.*

(Halisahar on the left Triveni on the right,
Could hear nothing due the noise of the waves.

.....
.....
Saptagram in the *rahr* very beautiful,

Where the merchant rested for two days full.

Bought and sold things and filled up the boats with goods,

Rowed past hurriedly with a lot of satisfaction.)

Translation: Author

However, this onward journey from Satgaon was carried on through the Bhagirathi. He passed through Panihati, Khardah, Konnagore and reached Chhatrabhog, Hathiagarh, Magra in the downstream close to the confluence. This might point to the fact that the Saraswati route was dwindling by then. Nevertheless such assumptions are not based on hardcore primary evidences. These are at best rational conjectures based on circumstantial references.

Aniruddha Ray has argued that till early seventeenth century the Saraswati was recognized as the principal channel of the Bhagirathi by many³⁹⁵. The early sixteenth century *Vaishnava* monasteries were constructed in Satgaon on the bank of the Saraswati, like the one known as Uddharan Dutt's temple which was visited by Sri Chaitanya before 1531. The *Vaishnavites* invariably identified the river as Bhagirathi. Tom Pires too had referred to Satgaon as an active port town on the Bhagirathi other than Gaur³⁹⁶. In the latter part of the same century, the Italian traveller Caesar Frederick had referred to the Saraswati as the Ganges, but the river had lost its navigability. During that time Satgaon was a thickly populated city. It was further noted by Ray that the small Portuguese ships plied up to

³⁹⁴ Kobikonkon Mukundaram Chakrabarty, *Chandimangal*, Sukumar Sen ed., Calcutta: Sahitya Academy, Fifth Edition, 2007, p. 201.

³⁹⁵ Aniruddha Ray, 'The Rise and Fall of Satgaon', in S. Jeyaseela Stephen ed., *The Indian Trade at the Asian Frontier*, New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2010, pp. 92-93.

³⁹⁶ Armando Cortesao, *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires, An Account of the East from the Red Sea to Japan written in Malacca and India in 1512-1513*, vol. 1, London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, p. 91.

Satgaon and then towards Patna even in the 1620s and the custom house was shifted to Hooghly from Satgaon only after 1632. So the trading vessels frequented Satgaon well into the 1630s. By then the Bhagirathi had already captured much water from its neighbouring river to swell up into a navigable waterway. Was Saraswati open from Betor onwards to smaller sized crafts only in the monsoon or some crafts were plying via the Bhagirathi Hugli and approaching Satgaon from Triveni? By the 1660s, as one could gather from Brouke's map, the linkage between Triveni and Satgaon was lost.

It is not easy to accurately map such long term geographical changes like reducing or increasing flow of a river *vis a vis* a specific period. Though the river had passage till the 1620s, it might have been showing early signs of deteriorations by turning impassable during peak summer or post monsoon dry months from the period of the earliest *Mangalkavya* poet. Further an inscription of *sultan* Alauddin Hussain Shah of Bengal dated 1505, stated that he was to construct a connecting bridge between Triveni and Satgaon. This confirms the reduced navigability of the concerned river so early³⁹⁷ and loss of riverine link between the two towns. This marked the intermediate phase of declining Saraswati affecting the port life of Satgaon and a gradual expansion of the Bhagirathi by drawing in the water of Saraswati and Jamuna. From 1565, big Portuguese ships had stopped sailing up to Satgaon³⁹⁸.

Hooghly was definitely functional since 1580. By corroborating with the earliest *Mangalkavya* of the 1490s, one could sum up that the process of riverine alterations involves a *longue duree* action. It could have slowly begun more than a century prior to 1580 when the Bhagirathi immediately after a good round of monsoon, started allowing passage to seaward fleets. Though the commercial activity of Satgaon tapered off, the site remained a busy township till eighteenth century. Indigenous literature have noted expensive merchandises of varied kinds filling up the market of Satgaon and vigorous business exchanges taking place there. So there is no contradiction with the assumption that for some time both the rivers provided passage to long distance trade till the Hugli river clearly established itself as the major channel of the Bhagirathi by mid sixteenth century.

³⁹⁷ Aniruddha Ray, 'The Rise and Fall of Satgaon', in Jeyaseela Stephen ed., *The Indian Trade*, p. 78.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

It is very likely that till the Hugli attained its full glory, for some time the Saraswati and the Hugli might have provided parallel routes to smaller crafts. There were two following routes leading to the Bay of Bengal in the sixteenth century³⁹⁹: the Saraswati below Satgaon touching Chaumaha, Mandaran, Betore, Tamluk, Hijli to the Bay and the Bhagirathi flowing through the Adi Ganga taking an eastward turn from Betore touching Kalighat, Nachangachha, Chhatrabhog, Hijli and Sagor to mingle with the Bay of Bengal. Changes in rivers represent a very prolonged natural phenomenon spanning over centuries and hardly leave any scope for the precise mechanical end of a river function followed by the beginning of the activity of another one. So it is very difficult to frame such ecological factors within a straight jacketed time frame. The Saraswati's route ceased to be functional first.

In Brouke's map the Saraswati is obviously thinner. The flow of the Saraswati from near Satgaon made a complete loop till Betore in Brouke's map; so did the course of the Adi Ganga. The Jellenghy seems to be a mighty river in the east. There is an indication that the Bhagirathi has taken a new course to meet the Bay of Bengal by adopting the lower course of the Saraswati by swerving towards the west near the Adi Ganga course close to Sankrail below 'Calcuta'. In Brouke's map Jellenghy was shown to be as broad as the Bhagirathi that met each other below Nadia. The Jellenghy was still drawing a large discharge from the Padma back to the Bhagirathi resulting in a much larger river beyond Krishnanagore. The Damodar too has been shown to join from the east.

The combined water of an enlarged Bhagirathi flowed into Triveni from where it has been shown to bifurcate into the Saraswati and Bhagirathi. The Saraswati looks thinner and seems to have choked up course at some places. In one version of *Manasamangal* written in the 1650s by Ketakadas Kshemananda, the central character Behula had crossed Triveni more than once and reached there by following the route charted out by the Ganga. In Kshemananda's version the bank of the Ganges at Triveni has been significant for providing the stepping stone to Behula to reach the abode of Gods in heaven. The Saraswati has not been mentioned at all and Satgaon; the closest important town has been mentioned only

³⁹⁹ Radhakamal Mukherjee, *The Changing Face of Bengal*, p. 115.

once in a casual manner⁴⁰⁰. It supports Aniruddha Ray's claim that the Saraswati river and Satgaon as a port lost their primacy by that time. In Brouke's map the third channel Jamuna to the east has not been shown and must have been inconsequential.

The connectivity between Satgaon and Triveni seems to have been lost. As per this map, Satgaon seems to have spilled over to the northern bank as the southern bank became overcrowded. The Saraswati and Bhagirathi had been shown to necklace a tract of land between Satgaon in the north and Tanna near Betore in the south. This was identifiable in the preceding map too. The places identified between Satgaon and Tanna like Bandel, a fort and a watch tower, the St. John's Church, the Dutch fort (Chinsurah), Konnagore, Chandernagore, Danish Lodge (Bernagore), etc. had been shown within the land entrapped by the two rivers⁴⁰¹. The bound land was a clear cut island as per both the maps. So after the fashion of the Kasimbazar island, this too could be called 'the Hugli island'.

By Rennell's time the Bhagirathi Hugli had become narrow with a thin connectivity with the Ganga at Sooty above Murshidabad. Otherwise it seemed to have lost its headwater. The Saraswati was not shown at all on the map. 'The Hugli island' can no longer be identified in Rennell's map. By that time both the Saraswati and Adi Ganga dried up. In Hooghly the river has been shown as a fairly narrow one, whereas a little down south around Calcutta it is rather wide. The Bhagirathi Hugli seems to flow through the lower course of the Saraswati. The Padma is charting its own way as a mighty river in the east carrying much of the water of the Ganga. Naturally the once voluminous arm of the Ganga, on the bank of which the premier ports and towns of the western Bengal were thriving, ceased to be the primary channel by mid seventeenth century. The ports no longer had a free access with north India via the upper reach of the Ganges and also the Bay of Bengal towards south⁴⁰².

Such riverine problems were manifesting at different places over a *longue duree* time frame. For example; Gaur, the capital of the *sultans* of Bengal and a centre for Islamic culture since early thirteenth century, declined because of the

⁴⁰⁰ Bijonbihari Bhattacharya ed., Ketakadas Kshemananda, *Manasamangal*, Calcutta: Sahitya Academy, 2007, pp. 74, 92.

⁴⁰¹ The locations were not accurate.

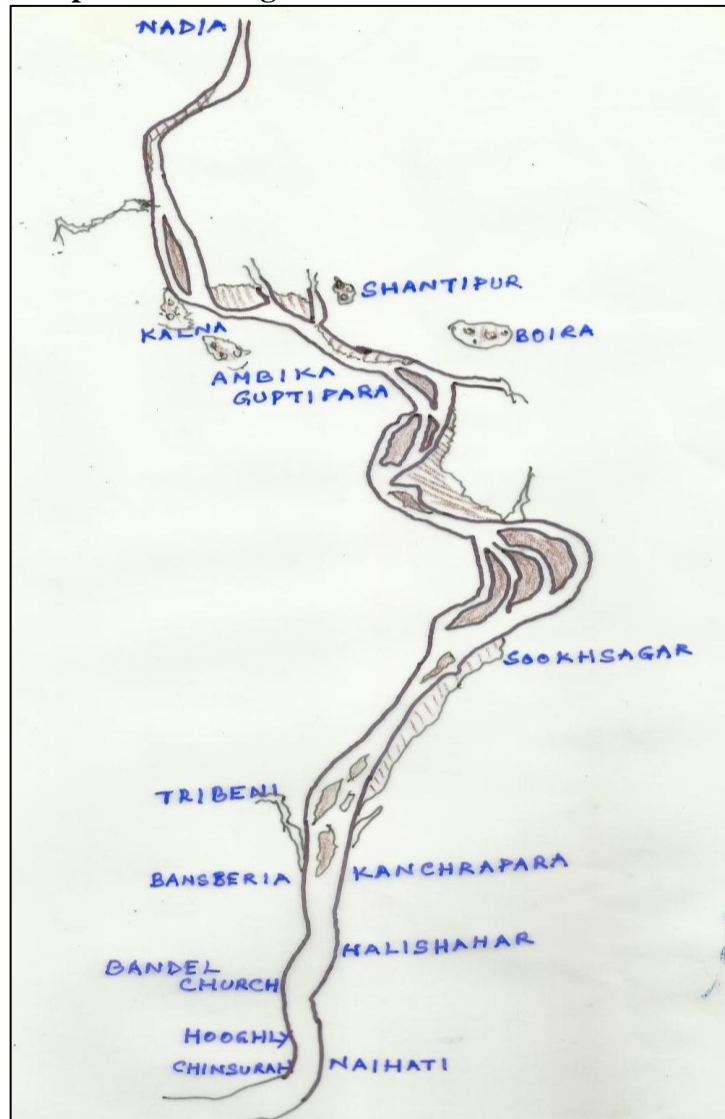
⁴⁰² P.J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead, Eastern India, 1740-1828*, vol. 2, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 4.

shifting of the Bhagirathi and Mahananda rivers watering the city, apart from other factors. Above Hooghly too the situation was not much better off in at least 1670s as 'pattelloes' plying down with saltpetre from Rajmahal via Kasimbazar were instructed to 'lighten themselves' by transferring the cargoes to 'small boates'⁴⁰³ in the summer months because of shoaling on the river bed. Again in the late sixteenth century Ralph Fitch observed vibrant commerce and prosperity in Satgaon; a 'faire citie of the Moors',⁴⁰⁴ while Hooghly was yet to emerge. Around the same time Caesar Frederici mentioned that while Satgaon had a commanding business, the big crafts lay moored at Betor near Howrah, and *buzrahs* and *patuas* and small ships plied up with the merchandise collected from the bigger sea going vessels. So they were witnesses to the declining phase of Satgaon on the Saraswati. Subsequently Hooghly took over the baton from Satgaon. Thus the limited life of the port town was not an isolated incident but a part of the long drawn process of geographical alterations affecting other places in the deltaic terrain as well.

⁴⁰³ Streysham Master, *Diaries, 1675-1680 and Other Contemporary Papers Relating Thereto*, vol. 2, London: J. Murray, 1911, p. 325.

⁴⁰⁴ William Foster ed., *Early Travels in India, 1583- 1619*, London: Oxford University Press, 1912, pp. 25-26.

Map 2.3: The Hugli Belt and the State of the River



Source: Adapted NAI, Cartography Section, Catalog of Historical Maps (1700-1900), F. 163/10, Hooghly River from Chinsurah to a Few Miles below Nudduah, Sc 1"—1 mile, n. d.

Map 2.3 clearly shows that between Nadia and Sukhsagar, the river had veered on either side but tended to tilt towards the east. It was in a disturbed state as is evident from pockets of dry beds and marshes and spill channels. The midpoint of the river corroborating with the Hugli region seemed relatively undisturbed. The archival sources confirmed that its major problem was its shallowness, which is difficult to represent through sketches. Above Nadia, from Sooty to Kasimbazar and downwards from Kasimbazar to Nadia, the riverine condition was worse off⁴⁰⁵.

⁴⁰⁵ See Chapter 1. For maps on river see pages 43, 44.

Shipping data on the crafts bound for Bengal between 1708-18, have enumerated that no British ships weighing more than 500 tons and less than 250 tons⁴⁰⁶, in addition to guns and men (less than 100 usually), had reached the coast of Bengal during this period. How many of those ships had sailed further upwards up to Hooghly from Calcutta, has not been noted. But the riverine journey of approximately 25 nautical miles between Calcutta and Hooghly was stressful, depending upon the tonnage, draft of the vessel and the level of water. The Hugli river watering Serampore, Chandernagore, Chinsurah, Hooghly had earned a notoriety for being shallow from the terminal phase of the seventeenth century.

It is to be noted that the regulations for the pilotage of all ships either coming into or going out of the river Hugli was being considered for a long time. John Ritchie, the Marine Surveyor to the English East India Company had observed in a correspondence addressed to J.P. Auriol dated May 23, 1783 that 'regulating the pilotage for ships and vessels by their draught of water only, is much more just and equitable for certainly, the difficulty of pilotage increases according to the tonnage exactly'⁴⁰⁷.

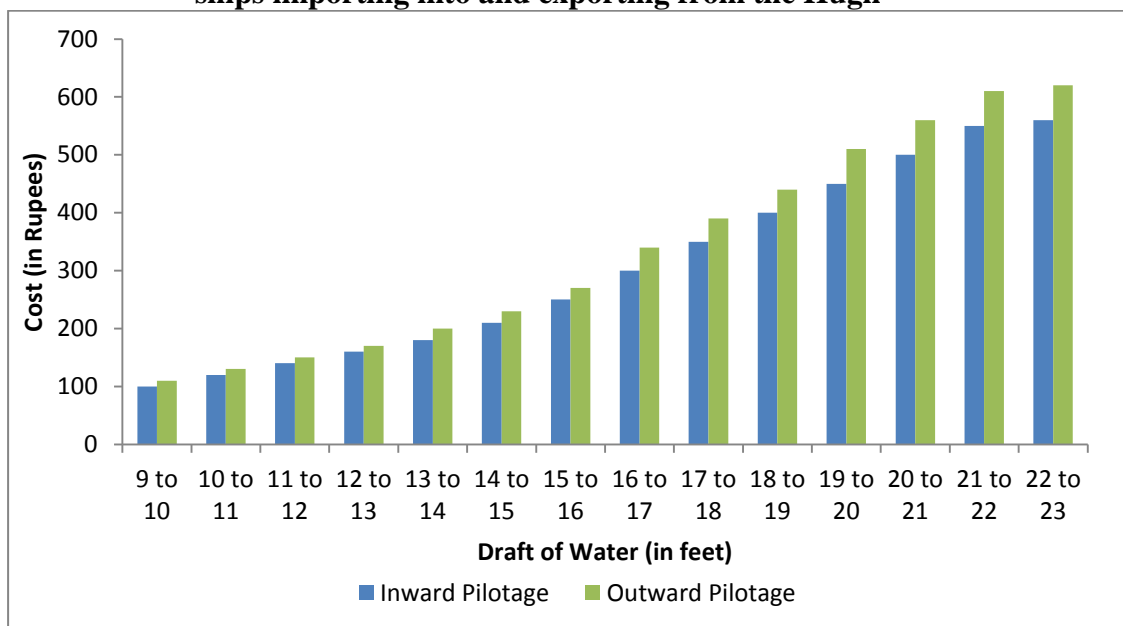
The following table framed by the Committee of Marine Enquiry in 1807, shows the amount of pilotage to be charged on the British and foreign ships importing into and exporting from the river Hugli. The stipulated rates became standardized for the future. 'All vessels under foreign colours generally pay double pilotage and double duties'⁴⁰⁸.

⁴⁰⁶ With the exception of a frigate named Jane, weighing 180 tons.

⁴⁰⁷ NAI, Bengal Public Proceedings, vol. 61, Range 2, Fort William July 3, 1783, pp. 361-362.

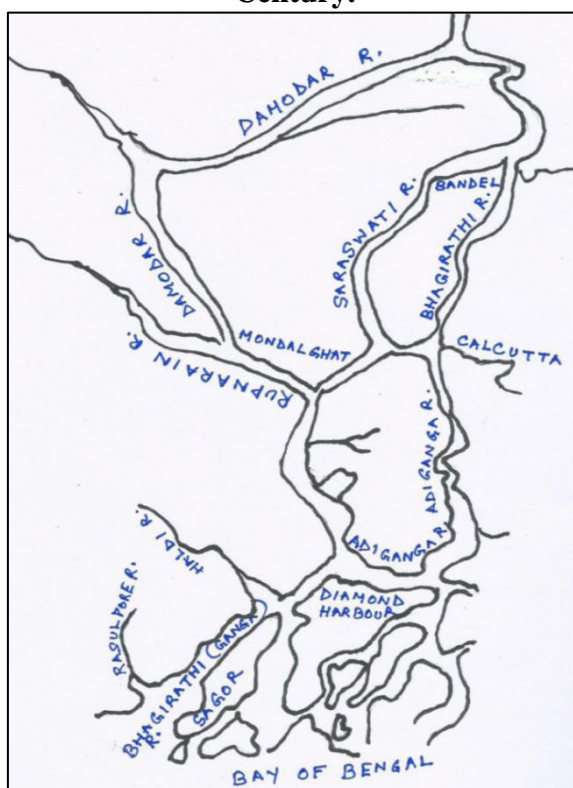
⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

Graph 2.2: Showing the pilotage to be charged on the British and foreign ships importing into and exporting from the Hugli



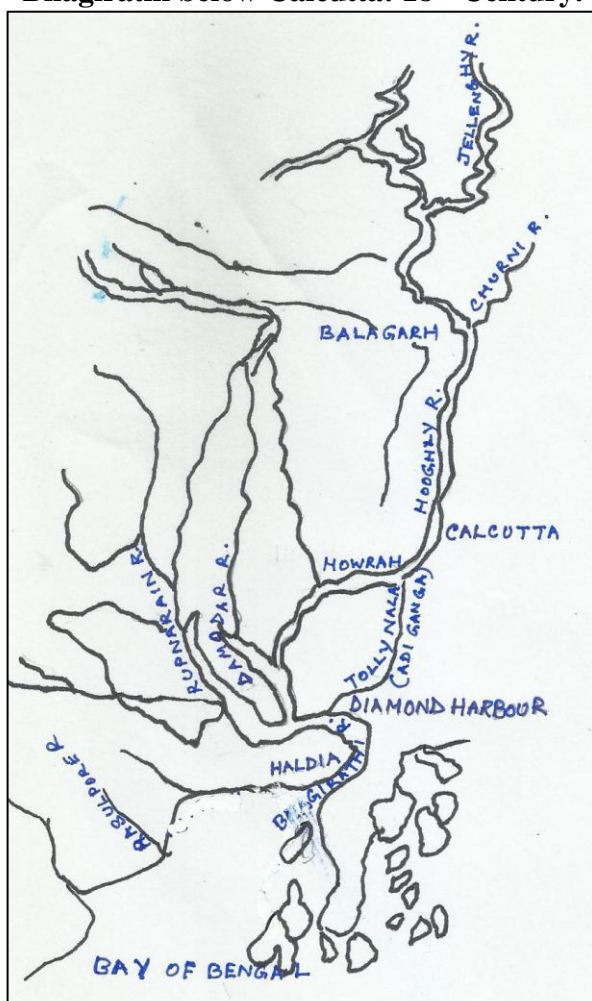
Source: Adapted from William Milburn, *Oriental Commerce containing a Geographical Description, the East Indies, China and Japan with their Produce, Manufacture and Trade*, vol., 2, London: Black, Parry and Co, 1813, p. 167.

Map 2.4: The Damodar Flowing into the Bhagirathi above Bandel: 16th Century.



Source: Adapted from Radhakamal Mukherjee, *The Changing Face of Bengal: A Study in Riverine Economy*, Reprint, Calcutta University, 2008-09, Plate VII, Map not to scale.

Map 2.5: Change in the Bhagirathi River System and Damodar Joining the Bhagirathi below Calcutta: 18th Century.



Source: Adapted from NAI, Proceedings, Home Public, July, 1822, pp. 52-56, Sketch on p. 56; Pranab Kumar Parua, *The Ganga, Water Use in the Indian Subcontinent*, New Delhi: Springer, 2010.

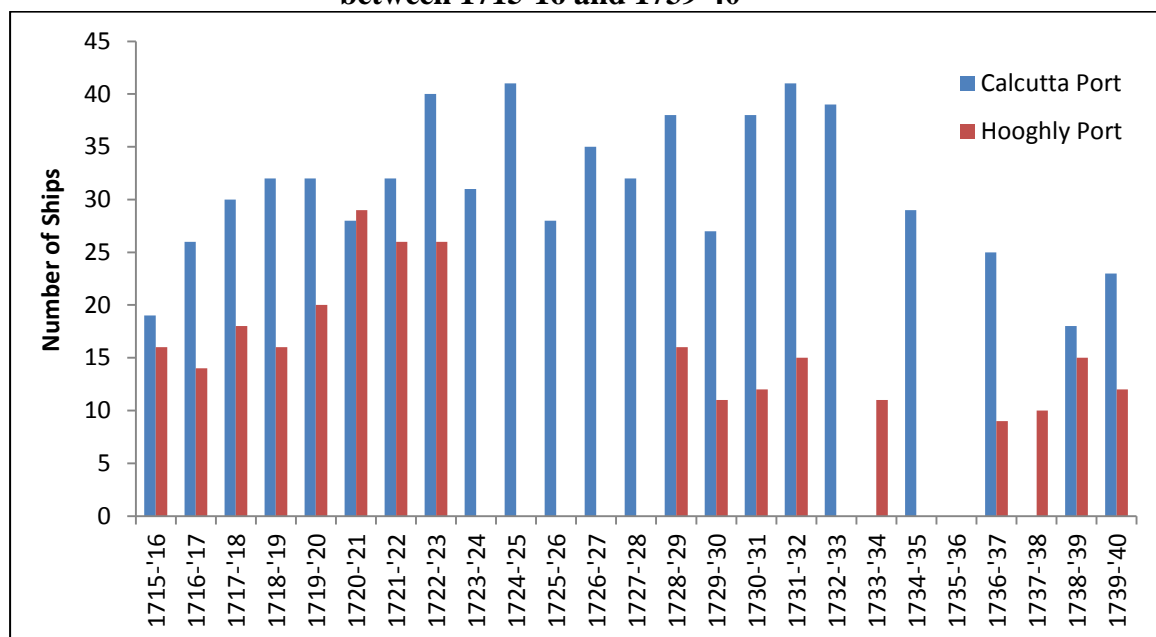
Table 2.8: Ships that came to Bengal between 1708-18; grouped according to tonnage

Name of Ships	Tonnage	Category
<i>St. George</i>	450+	400-500 tons
<i>King William</i>	400+	400-500 tons
<i>Duchess</i>	430+	400-500 tons
<i>Des Bouverie</i>	420+	400-500 tons
<i>Derby</i>	450+	400-500 tons
<i>Howland</i>	400+	400-500 tons
<i>Dartmouth</i>	440+	400-500 tons
<i>Aurengzebe</i>	450+	400-500 tons
<i>Mary</i>	450+	400-500 tons
<i>Marlborough</i>	480+	400-500 tons
<i>Hannover</i>	460+	400-500 tons
<i>Cardigan</i>	400+	400-500 tons
<i>Bouverie</i>	450+	400-500 tons
<i>St. George</i>	450+	400-500 tons
<i>Derby</i>	470+	400-500 tons

<i>Mary</i>	450+	400-500 tons
<i>Heathcote</i>	430+	400-500 tons
<i>Stanhope</i>	420+	400-500 tons
<i>Prince Frederick</i>	420+	400-500 tons
<i>Grantham</i>	470+	400-500 tons
<i>King George</i>	450+	400-500 tons
<i>Hanover</i>	460+	400-500 tons
<i>Cardigan</i>	400+	400-500 tons
<i>Rochester</i>	330+	400-300 tons
<i>Europe</i>	300+	400-300 tons
<i>Hoster</i>	300+	400-300 tons
<i>Averilla</i>	300+	400-300 tons
<i>Kent</i>	350+	400-300 tons
<i>Recovery</i>	330+	400-300 tons
<i>King William</i>	350+	400-300 tons
<i>Kent</i>	350+	400-300 tons
<i>Sherborne</i>	250+	300-200 tons
<i>Success</i>	250+	300-200 tons
<i>Thistleworth</i>	250+	300-200 tons
<i>Toddington</i>	230+	300-200 tons

Source: Adapted from C.R. Wilson, *Early Annals of the English in Bengal: Being the Bengal Public Consultations for the First Half of the Eighteenth Century*, Vol. 2, London: Thacker and Co, 1900, pp. 344-72.

Graph 2.3: Comparative Study of Calcutta and Hooghly as ports of call between 1715-16 and 1739-40



Source: Adapted from P.J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes, The British in Bengal in the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1976, pp.55, 57.

According to the graph, though the port of Hooghly was functional till as late as the 30s; the relative importance of Calcutta port was established beyond question by that time. We see that the early 1720s was marked by high point of shipping

activities in Bengal when the two major Bengal ports received a fair number of ships. However the number of vessels anchoring at Hooghly was less compared to Calcutta port, barring in the year 1720-21. However we see that in the decade between 1730 and 40, the number of ships calling at Calcutta was almost twice the number of those anchoring at Hooghly port.

Long term Impact of the Riverine Change at Hooghly

Apart from posing problems for the passage of big crafts, the riverine alterations had a long term bearing on the historical trajectory of Hooghly in more ways than one. This ultimately started determining the cropping type and demographic distributions of the divergent deltas. Traditionally the Bengal delta was suited for wet rice cultivation, which was nurtured by the freshly deposited fertile alluvial soil from the river. So before the effects of the Bhagirathi's alterations became obvious, the western Bengal nurtured the rice baskets of Bengal in places like Burdwan, Hooghly, Murshidabad. In the changed scenario when the headwater of the Bhagirathi was withheld; those paddy fields of western Bengal started languishing. The emerging Padma carrying the bulk of the head water spread new alluvium in eastern Bengal. It extended the agrarian frontier of Bengal steadily up to the edge of the eastern Bengal steadily over a fairly long period of time. Fresh silt laid the basis for large scale cultivation of wet rice in eastern Bengal. This again, attracted massive influx of people from other parts to settle down in the land of new opportunities and abundant food grains. The settlers and local semi tribal people were inducted into the culture of plough after land reclamation.

Again, the tumultuous eastern delta during eighteenth century gave birth to six new rivers. The enormous Brahmaputra had embarked upon a westward journey till at some point it joined the easterly Ganga Bhagirathi. The new rivers, the Brahmaputra, the Ganga system involving the Bhagirathi got braided together in such a fashion that it ended up facilitating the north centric integrations initiated by Sher Shah and the Mughals. The riverine shifts linked up eastern Bengal directly with Mughal bastions and this finally facilitated Mughal penetrations till the eastern periphery of the *suba*.

The expanding geographical frontier coincided with the political and economic penetrations deep into the interior of the new delta. The products from the ports along the Padma-Meghna-Brahmaputra rivers in the eastern Bengal came straight to northern India by skirting the Teliagarhi hillocks; through connectivity

forged by the set of new born rivers. The rugged undulating barrier had since ages ensured that Bengal; isolated from the north Indian influences, shared commercial and cultural ties with Arakan, Ava, Pegu and even China⁴⁰⁹ via the Brahmaputra Meghna river system. Now the eastward commercial ties became less important due to diffused connectivity. Instead Bengal got commercially better integrated with the places to its north. After the annexation of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa by the Mughals, the latter looked for an ideal port that could transport goods collected from Bengal to north India. Hooghly fulfilled that requirement. As the new provincial capital was established in Dacca, the significance of Hooghly as a Mughal port increased considerably.

Further, the items from the eastern delta could reach the ports of the western delta like Hooghly through the altered river route and also exported northwards through new linkages. The fact remains that Hooghly served an extensive hinterland encompassing the north Indian corridor, parts of Bihar, Orissa, parts of Assam and Bengal and Gujarat in the west; by transporting their goods overseas and receiving imports on their behalf. Hooghly remained a working port till mid eighteenth century, though it became in many ways a subsidiary port of the burgeoning Mughal port of Surat in the western coast and re-exported goods to the latter port. Simultaneously, the European companies had used Hooghly as their overseas port to pursue transcontinental trade in a big way, though the English had shifted base further downstream since the 1690s.

The western part of Bengal; comprising among other places, Hooghly and Kasimbazar Murshidabad region; started depending for its sustenance on the new granaries like Bakargunj, Noakhali and Dacca in the land of new alluvium in eastern Bengal. Sugata Bose added that the fields of east Bengal grew superior quality winter rice called *aman* in abundance; while the inferior variant autumnal *aus* paddy were grown in the decaying counterpart⁴¹⁰. *Ain-i-Akbari* has glorified the cultivation of rice in Bengal in no uncertain terms. It stated that rice was 'sown and reaped three times a year on the same piece of land with little injury to the crop'⁴¹¹. This was supported by *Riyaz* too⁴¹². The *Ain*'s author had further noted

⁴⁰⁹ Rila Mukherjee, *Strange Riches*, p. 60.

⁴¹⁰ Sugata Bose, *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal since 1770*, The New Cambridge History of India, III.2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 11-12.

⁴¹¹ Abu L-Fazl Allami, H. Blochmann tr., *The Ain-i-Akbari*, Delhi: Low Price Publications, p. 134.

⁴¹² Ghulam Husain Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 20.

that the people of Bengal had locally available rice with a great variety of fish available in the rivers⁴¹³. The shores of the Padma and its channels experienced an unprecedented boom in rice production and became exporters of paddy. So not only the parts of the decadent western delta including Kasimbazar and Hooghly; but also other areas became dependent on the *bhati*⁴¹⁴ for food grains.

According to the Dutch records, rice in Bengal was cheaper in the seventeenth century than Arakan, the other major rice growing belt⁴¹⁵. Bernier too spoke highly about Bengal's bounties and an abundant production of rice that was exported to Patna and in the south to Musalipatnam and other places in the Coromandal coast and also as far as Srilanka and Maldives⁴¹⁶. According to Pyrard de Laval, in the seventeenth century, surplus rice was imported by all parts of India, Goa, Malabar and distant places like Sumatra⁴¹⁷. The men who initiated land reclamations in the new delta were dynamic *sufis* and ended up spreading their variant of Islam to the farthest corner of the new delta. The bedrock of Eaton's theory has been that the expansion of ecological, agrarian, religious and political frontiers went on hand in hand and facilitated one another in certain ways⁴¹⁸.

Nevertheless, it is also a fact that not all parts of the Bhagirathi's western delta were equally affected by the river shifts. In fact, some sectors of *rahr* retained their fertility and experienced peasantisation. Jawhar Sircar had argued that the expansion of agrarian frontier in the east and associated Islamisation posed a challenge to Hinduism⁴¹⁹. The variant of Islam of the *bhati* was liberal and attracted the marginalized groups of hunter gatherers, pastoralists, fishermen to its fold⁴²⁰. To combat this, Hinduism too became more tolerant and offered social mobility to people at the lower rungs of society by introducing them to

⁴¹³ Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ Eastern delta.

⁴¹⁵ Cited in Baijayanti Chatterjee, 'The Rivers of Bengal', p. 140.

⁴¹⁶ V.A. Smith ed., *Travels*, p. 437.

⁴¹⁷ Cited in Baijayanti Chatterjee, 'The Rivers of Bengal', p. 141.

⁴¹⁸ R.M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, pp. 207-215.

⁴¹⁹ Jawhar Sircar, 'The Construction of the Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal: The Role of Popular Cults', March 2016.

http://jawharsircar.com/assets/pdf/construction_of_hindu_identity_west_bengal_1931_subaltern_bengal_bengal_&_religion_Rahr_religion_demography_of_bengal_mangalkavya_dharmamangal_c handimangal_mansamangal_IDSK%20Monograph.pdf, Accessed on 14.5.16.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

plough agriculture⁴²¹. Thus they became upwardly mobile by turning into farmers (*chasha*). Again, the rise of the *Vaishnava* cult based on the ethos of a classless society under Chaitanya's leadership played a proactive role in this direction in the western delta⁴²². Also some of the new groups of tillers took advantage of the stagnant ox bow lakes on the old river beds to grow paddy and other crops. However, there is no denying that the eastern Bengal or *samatata* had become agriculturally more prosperous than *rahr*.

Further, cross migrations between the dwellers of the two deltas was a noticeable feature of roughly two hundred years between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. On one hand, the vast expanse of rice frontier encouraged people from the western delta to pour in and colonize eastern Bengal on a big scale. The fact that the cultivation of wet rice was totally labour intensive; substantially explains spurts of migration of manpower. To quote Eaton, 'East Bengal attained agricultural and demographic growth at levels no longer possible in the western delta'⁴²³. However the instability generated by the 'Mugg' raiders continued for over more than a century till at least the 1770s. This, at times, failed to hold back many of the settlers.

Again the Portuguese tyranny prior to the siege of Hooghly prompted some to migrate out of the western Bengal, specially Hooghly and adjacent places. As relative peace prevailed in Hooghly after the siege, and the *Buksh Bandar* resumed its usual functions, many people from the eastern delta crossed over to the western shore of the Bhagirathi⁴²⁴. Hooghly and its adjoining region along with extensive areas of the western delta became repopulated only to be destabilized by the *Bargi* marauders between 1740s and 50s. This phase once again, had witnessed some migrations across the Bhagirathi Hugli river from places like Murshidabad, Kasimbazar, Hooghly, Burdwan, to eastern Bengal. But the exact numerical data of displacements are not available.

⁴²¹ Baijayanti Chatterjee, 'The Rivers of Bengal', p. 141.

⁴²² Jawhar Sircar, 'The Construction of the Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal', March 2016.

⁴²³ R.M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, p. 198.

⁴²⁴ Aniruddha Ray, 'Coastal Society in Bengal: Mercantile Enterprise and Urbanisation, 1575-1608', in K.S. Mathew ed. *Mariners, Merchants and Oceans, Studies in Maritime History*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1995, p. 187.

XI. Factors Moderating the Fate of Hooghly: c. 1700-1800

The riverine aberrations had a direct bearing on the maritime commerce as the ocean going crafts had difficulties in manoeuvring through hazardous waterways to reach their port of call. Nevertheless such problems seldom get detected overnight and take years and years before posing a serious challenge. That the maritime commerce had languished at Hooghly is evident from a letter dated October 12, 1772, written by the Collector of Hooghly, W. Lushington to Warren Hastings, the President of the Committee of Revenue at Fort William that described Hooghly as ‘having been once a place of considerable trade’⁴²⁵. It bore a definite undertone of nostalgia. But the riverine problems could not have been the sole moderator of the historical trajectory of Hooghly.

Though the ecological factors like atrophies of river system, combined with the prevalent social, political conditions and economic forces to leave a mark on the history of a particular place, human factors are seen to be often responsible in enhancing their disastrous effects. Since mid-nineteenth century, the introduction of railways, irrigation canals, road construction had disturbed the natural drainage path of the declining old delta. Such interventions created marshes and putrid lakes on the bed of the distraught river that became the breeding grounds of series of malarial epidemics especially in the districts of Hooghly, Burdwan, Twenty Four Parganas, Midnapore etc. In Hooghly district itself Triveni, Bansberia, Bandel, Serampore, Hooghly were some of the worst hit towns⁴²⁶. The disease took a toll on the district a number of times between 1857 and 1877⁴²⁷.

Also, a significant force behind the decline of the port town was the shrinking of the intra-Asian trade of the Asian merchants of Hooghly in the face of stiff competition put up by European private trade conducted mainly from Calcutta. Further, from Hooghly fairly large trading vessels weighing between 400 and 600 tons were sponsored by the *shia* aristocracy involving Mughal generals like Shayista Khan, Mir Jumla and *faujdar*s and *diwan*s of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. Those ships mostly indulged in port to port coastal trade. Since eighteenth

⁴²⁵ WBSA, Revenue Board Consisting of the Whole Council, Proceedings, vol. 1, October 18 – December 30, 1772, p. 224.

⁴²⁶ Poonam Bala ed., *Contesting Colonial Authority: Medicine and Indigenous Responses in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century India*, Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012, p. 138.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.139.

century, the ship owning Bengali merchants based in ports like Hooghly disappeared from the arena of history. The Company vessels had decimated a few of them during their phase of clash with the Mughals in late seventeenth century. Many of those merchants thought it safer to join the private English traders based in Calcutta, who again, used to mercilessly ‘undersell’ their products in the carrying trade around the Indian Ocean.

The European trading companies used Hooghly as a commercial base. However the duty of the Mughal *faujdar* stationed at the *Buksh Bandar* was to collect customs duties from the ocean bound traffic of Bengal from there. His other duty was to implement local law over the Dutch, English and French settlements; the Armenian, Mughal and other merchant cum ship owners. In the name of law and order, constant vigilance and extortions were pursued. In contrast, the relative freedom and protection offered by the English shipping and nominal duties imposed on goods, besides the location advantage over Hooghly; turned Calcutta into a centre of immense promise⁴²⁸.

The Mughals could not impose a strict supervision over Calcutta located on the low lying marshy delta close to the Sundarbans. So away from a close supervision; Calcutta under the English evolved as an alternative node of ocean bound traffic⁴²⁹ and beckoned commerce and people. Besides its proximity to the estuary, better anchorage ‘where ships could ride with reasonable safety’⁴³⁰, the presence of negotiable channels in close proximity were the additional advantages. It turned into a private traders’ haven. Moreover, the new British administration drew people aspiring for new job opportunities and enterprises; from the old townships and country side to Calcutta.

XII. Conclusion

Nevertheless, Tieffenthaler’s portrayal of a desolate and decrepit Hooghly at the end of the eighteenth century seems to be an over statement and focused primarily on the European sector. No doubt Hooghly’s importance was overshadowed by Calcutta’s development as the latest pivot of urbanization in Bengal. Rise of

⁴²⁸ Ghulam Husain Salim, *Riyazu-S-Salatin*, p. 29.

⁴²⁹ Rajat Kanta Ray, ‘Calcutta or Alinagar: Contending Conceptions in the Mughal English Confrontation of 1756-1757’ in Indu Banga ed., *Ports and Their Hinterlands in India (1700-1950)*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1992, p. 46.

⁴³⁰ Rhoads Murphey, ‘The City in the Swamp: Aspects of the Site and Early Growth of Calcutta’, *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 130, no. 2, June 1964, pp. 246-248.

Calcutta marked the petering of an old town that bore the impact of multiple shades of history, and the entrenchment of British mercantilism in another corner that inaugurated a new chapter in Bengal's history. Yet Hooghly never turned into a forsaken place. In contrast, the old town of Kasimbazar had been amalgamated with and lost much of its identity to the garrison town of Berhampore.

Riverine shifts were clearly discernible in Kasimbazar-Murshidabad area as was evident from too many blockades, swamps and ox bow lakes dotting the old river bed. In Hooghly the major riverine problem was its shallowness that had come in the way of big time international commerce in the long run. Long after its decline as an international port town under the Portuguese, the Hooghly region continued as the *Buksh Bandar*, the centre for European commercial pursuits and a nucleus of inland trade, like that of salt, and grain. After the historical arena shifted closer to the delta; Hooghly continued as an urban site including a great multitude of local population. Further, the once fairly substantial, but subsequently fraying arm of the Ganga; the Bhagirathi remained the established artery of commerce till the terminal phase of eighteenth century. It is evident from the functioning of towns and trading nodes of Kasimbazar Murshidabad and to their south, the Hooghly belt encompassing Serampore, Chandernagore, Hooghly, Chinsurah on its western bank and Chanak, Sukhchar, Naihati, Halishahar, Calcutta on its eastern bank.

So the settlement of Hooghly never lost its significance and found its new identity as the head quarter of the newly formed district of Hooghly in 1795 by the East India Company. The map of the district of Hooghly (*Geographical Sketch of the District of Hooghly*) was published in 1838 (See Map 2.6). Rev. James Long mentioned that once Bengal had stabilized in the mid eighteenth century under the British, the settlements along the banks of the Bhagirathi-Hugli, from 'Rishra up to Bandel' became the 'favourite holiday resorts'⁴³¹ of the residents of Calcutta. It is said that Warren Hastings had been to Hooghly and Chinsurah by river side and in his enthusiasm he compared those places with 'Simla'⁴³². In fact in the pre 1850s before the railways were introduced, the quaint river-side towns, which could be 'reached in one tide by boat'⁴³³ became popular weekend retreats for the

⁴³¹ D.G. Crawford, *A Brief History of the Hughli District*, p. 11.

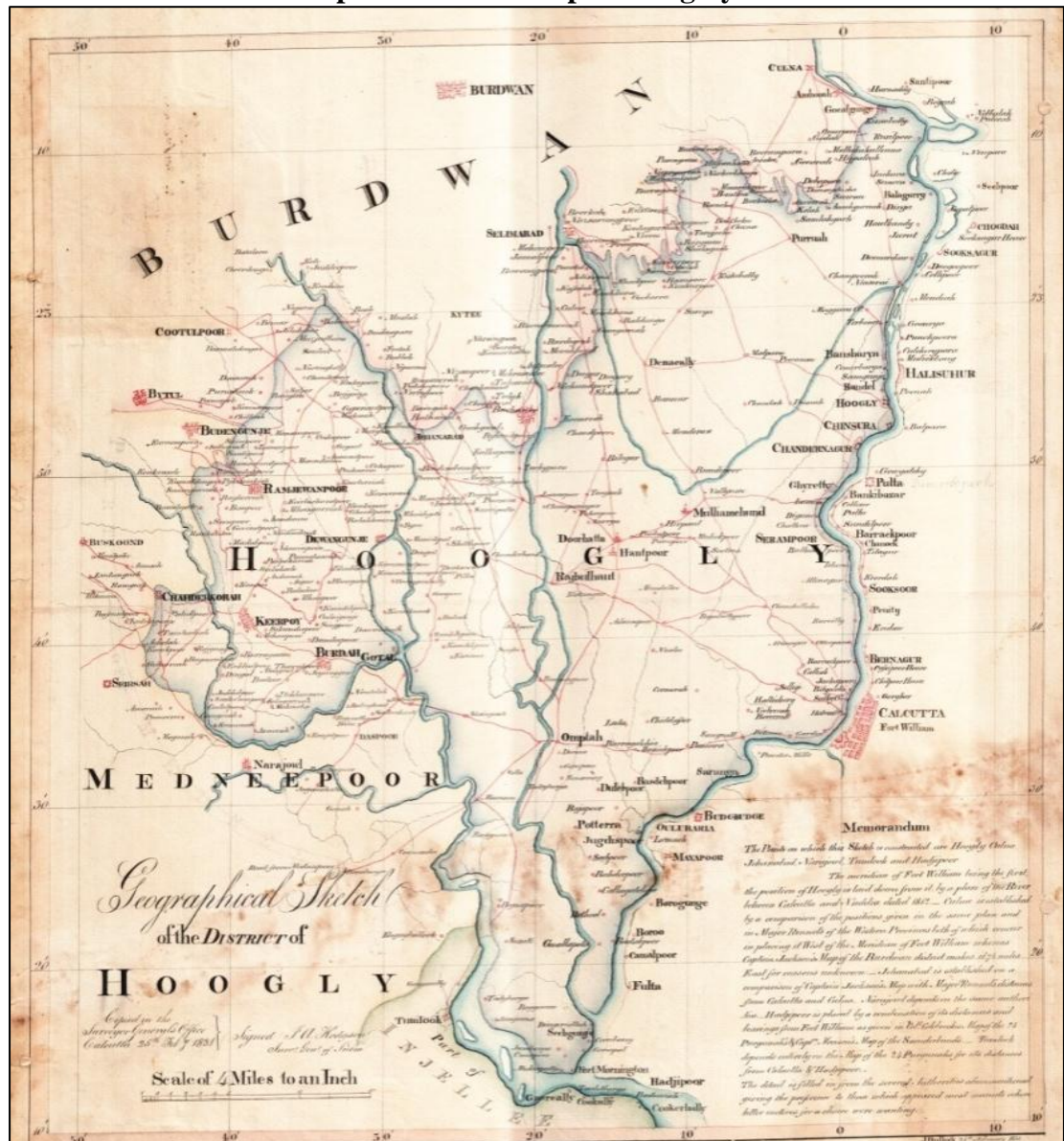
⁴³² Toynbee, *A Sketch of the Administration*, p. 2.

⁴³³ Crawford, *A Brief History*, p. 9.

European residents in Bengal. It is not out of place to mention about an anonymous poet's exuberance on visiting Bandel:

There's Hughli mounted on a swell,
To improve the scenery round Bandel,
Here the bank rises, there's a dell,
A change peculiar to Bandel⁴³⁴.

Map 2.6: District Map of Hooghly



Source: NAI, Cartography Section. Catalog of Historical Maps (1700-1900), F. 38/7, Hooghly-Map of the District of Hooghly, 1838, Compiled by C. Joseph, Scale 1" = 4miles.

⁴³⁴Ibid., p. 10.

CHAPTER 3

Sagor: The Landfall Island, c. 1600-1800

I. Introduction

The Sagor island marks great entrance of Hugly river : It is detached from the land by a creek the north end of which dries at low water ; and what is remarkable of this place, is, that there is the greatest rise and fall of tides, of any place about the head of the Bay¹.

The Sagor island is located about 77 miles away from Calcutta and approximately 40 miles away from Diamond Harbour². Situated at the confluence of the river and the Bay of Bengal, this happens to be the last geographical space that the thesis focuses on. While Kasimbazar and Hooghly are roughly 88 kilometres apart; Sagor is situated approximately 92 kilometres away from Hooghly. The river Hugli borders its western side while the Muriganga river flows past its eastern edge. It opens into the Bay of Bengal from the southern side. The northern edge of Sagor called the Mud Point, is 25 miles long. The island has a special mythological significance connected to the story of the origin of the Bhagirathi, and its mingling with the sea. To commemorate this, the devotees from all over the places congregate yearly for a holy dip during the winter solstice when a *mela* is held at the southern sea face of the island.

The first landfall at the mouth of the Hugli, Sagor between the late eighteenth early nineteenth century epitomized doom to the European passers-by approaching Bengal, for posting as a government employee, trade, or tourism. It was marked as the land of human sacrifice having a bearing with the Hindu superstitious rituals of voluntary drowning and infanticide, haven for predators like crocodiles, sharks, snakes and also the most deadly of them all - tigers, and Arakanese Portuguese pirates. In fact as the saying goes, it was difficult to

¹ Joseph Huddart, *The Oriental Navigator, Or the New Directions for Sailing in the East Indies, China, New Holland etc.*, London: Robert Laurie and James Whittle, 1801, p. 282.

² P.C. Roy Choudhury, *Temples and Legends of Bengal*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, First Edition, 1967, p. 142.

determine which was more dangerous, as tigers and pirates shared the same spirit³. Again, situated at the edge of the mainland in the Sundarban delta, Sagor experienced meteorological hazards in the form of cyclonic hazards, storm waves, lashing rains, and inundations. Thus Sagor fitted into the typical European construct of the Orient — a desolate and dangerous land. Besides it was a serious navigational challenge to reach or cross the island and penetrate further up to the major ports and settlements.

The island's history as a node of commerce since twelfth century, a supposed naval base during Pratapaditya's regime in the late sixteenth century, as a piratical hub in the seventeenth century⁴ could perhaps be explained in terms of its potentialities to evolve as a deep sea port. Nevertheless, the history of Sagor was marked by a period of lull since late seventeenth century, till subsequent attempts were undertaken by the British to develop it as a sustainable revenue generating land towards the end of the eighteenth century. This chapter endeavours to explore how far it was possible to meet the particular objective. Did the Bhagirathi at its meeting point with the Bay of Bengal play a crucial role in facilitating this or it acted as more of an impediment? The sub-regional history of Kasimbazar and Hooghly was to a considerable extent influenced by the Bhagirathi-Hugli river. Did Sagor's story reflect a similar pattern or was there any point of departure? What were the other influences on the island's history?

II. Received History on Sagor

Sagor was claimed to be a part of Chandecan by historians like Radhakumud Mukerji⁵ and later on by Rila Mukherjee⁶ and boasted of a prosperous background

³ 'The Ballad of Hati Kheda', from D.C. Sen, *The Ballads of Bengal*, vol. 3, Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1988, p. 120.

⁴ Alexander Dalrymple's map titled *Chart of the Northern Part of the Bay of Bengal laid down chiefly from the Surveys made by Bartholew Plaisted and John Ritchie*, shows multiple riverine connectivity between the rivers and creeks of Chittagong and Sagor. In fact sailing up to Calcutta from Chittagong was not impossible in those days.

https://www.raremaps.com/gallery/detail/0122gh/Chart_of_the_Northern_Part_of_The_Bay_of_Bengal_Laid_down_chiefly_from_the/Dalrymple.html

Accessed on 12.3.16.

⁵ Radhakumud Mukerji, *Indian Shipping: A History of the Seaborne Trade and Maritime Activity of the Indians from the Earliest Times*, London: Longmans, 1912, p. 218. He had equated Sagor with Chandecan.

⁶ Rila Mukherjee, 'The Struggle for the Bay: The Life and Times of Sandwip, an almost Unknown Portuguese Port in the Bay of Bengal in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', <http://ler.letras.up.pt/uploads/ficheiros/6732.pdf>

of commerce roughly since twelfth century⁷. In fact the eastern fringe of the Bengal delta was dotted with small port-principalities like Bakla, Sripur, Chandecan that got inducted into the trading network of the Chandras of Dhaka-Bikrampur from twelfth century onwards extending up to Arakan, Pegu, and Burma. This could have lent a distinct identity to Sagor/Chandecan as a port.

In the late sixteenth century, Pratapaditya, one of the twelve independent chieftains (*Baro Bhuiyans*) of *bhati*⁸ had challenged the Mughals. His first capital was at Dhumghat at the junction of the Ichhamati and Brahmaputra. Subsequently the capital got shifted to Iswaripur in the east closer to the Bay and he was believed to have extended his sway up to Behala in south of Calcutta. Some historians even claimed that Sagor for a time functioned as his capital. Satish Chandra Mitra observed that Sagor or Chandecan was a major naval base and ship building yard⁹ of Pratapaditya, manned by the Portuguese of the delta. Such claims were contested by Aniruddha Ray¹⁰.

The early seventeenth century maps; like that of Jan Huyghen Linschoten (1563-1611)¹¹, Pertius Bertii (1565-1629)¹², William Baffin and Thomas Roe¹³ (map was drawn in 1619) indicated the entire area east of the Bhagirathi as the island of Chandecan/ Candican. No specific archaeological ruins have been unearthed from the island to indicate that Sagor corresponded to Chandecan. Beveridge¹⁴ and Satish Chandra Mitra¹⁵ had challenged the claim that Pratapaditya had his capital at Sagor¹⁶ and asserted that his capital was at

Accessed on 18. 1. 16. Mukherjee argued that Chandecan embraced the port of Sagor. The map of Pertius Bertii marked Chandecan as an island. So Sagor could be associated in a way with Chandecan, p. 81. Susan Gole, *A Series of Early Printed Maps of India in Facsimile*, Pertius Bertii, Plate 10a, p. 11.

⁷ Rila Mukherjee, 'The Nawab's Business: Agricultural and Commercial Practices in Eighteenth Century Bengal', in C. Palit and P.K. Bhattacharya eds., *Business History of India*, Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2006, p.143.

⁸ Lower Bengal.

⁹ Satish Chandra Mitra, *Jashohar Khulnar Itihaash*, Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, Second Edition, 2013, vol. 2, pp. 653- 657.

¹⁰ Aniruddha Ray, *Adventurers, Landowners and Rebels: Bengal C 1575-C 1715*, New Delhi: Munshi Manoharlal, 1998, p. 65.

¹¹ Susan Gole, *A Series of Early Printed Maps of India in Facsimile*, Linschoten, Plate 10.

¹² Ibid., Pertius Bertii, Plate 10A.

¹³ Ibid., William Baffin and Thomas Roe, *A Description of East India Conteyning the Empire of the Great Mogoll*, Plate 12.

¹⁴ H. Beveridge, *The District of Bakarganj: Its History and Statistics*, London: Trubner and Co, 1876, p. 176.

¹⁵ Satish Chandra Mitra, *Jashohar Khulnar Itihaash*, vol. 1, Calcutta: Dey's Publishers, Second Edition, p. 613.

¹⁶ No archaeological evidences have been found.

Dhumghat on the mainland in the Twenty Four Parganas. Though Beveridge tried to identify Pratap with the king of Chandecan, he never identified Chandecan with Sagor¹⁷. Nevertheless, both Radhakumud Mukherji¹⁸ and Rila Mukherjee¹⁹ opined that Sagor was included within the territory of Pratapaditya. It could have functioned as the chieftain's naval base and ship building yard²⁰. So Sagor could be part of the broad territory at the delta called Chandecan. Pratapaditya might have exercised some degree of influence on an extensive part of the delta.

Indeed certain inherent features of the island could have moderated Pratapaditya's preference for Sagor. William Hedges' observation in December 1684 that Sagor afforded a 'great store of large timber for Shipp's'²¹ endorses the strong probability that Sagor's bounties prompted Pratap to choose it as a major naval station for his fleet of vessels²². Besides Sagor was a natural harbour for deep sea vessels. Later the English shipping masters like Streynsham Master²³ (1660s) and Hedges²⁴ (1680s) had reiterated such innate advantages offered by Sagor. The delta chiefs had their own fleets, the Portuguese were trained sailors and the Arakanese belonged to the nation of strong navy. Sagor at the entrance of the Bhagirathi could most certainly have drawn their attention. Interceding between the expanding Arakan and the westward penetration of the Mughals, the island of Sagor stood as a buffer between the two powers²⁵.

There are evidences of the footfall of the marauders too. The Arakanese depredations into nearby areas of Bengal were 'formerly so frequent and attended with such dreadful consequences that it was one of the principal objectives of the Maghul Government to provide the means of defense against it by erecting forts

¹⁷ Beveridge, *Bakarganj*, pp. 178-79.

¹⁸ Radhakumud Mukherji, *Indian Shipping: A History of the Seaborne Trade and Maritime Activity of the Indians from the Earliest Times*, London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1912, p. 214.

¹⁹ Rila Mukherjee, *Strange Riches*, p. 195.

²⁰ Satish Chandra, *Jasohar Khulnar Itihaash*, vol. 1, p. 657.

²¹ William Hedges, R. Burlow and Henry Yule eds., *The Diary of William Hedges during his Agency in Bengal as well as his Voyage out and Return Overland(1681-1687)*, vol. 1, London: Hakluyt Society, 1887, p.172.

²² Rila Mukherjee ed., *Vanguards of Globalization, Port Cities from the Classical t the Modern*, New Delhi: Primus, 2014, p. 97.

²³ R.C. Temple ed., *Streynsham Master, The Diaries of Streynsham Master, 1675-1680 and Other Contemporary Papers Relating Thereto*, vol. 1, 1675-77, London: John Murray, p. 321.

²⁴ Hedges, *The Diary*, vol. 1, p. 172.

²⁵ Rila Mukherjee, 'The struggle for the Bay: The life and times of Sandwip, an almost unknown Portuguese port in the Bay of Bengal in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', *Revista da Faculdade de Letras 67 História*, Porto, III Série, vol. 9, 2008, p. 81.

on the banks of the rivers'²⁶. The remnants of a number of old forts at the lower reaches of the south western delta could be suggestive of strategic defenses put up by the local chiefs and big landlords of Bengal against the Portuguese Arakanese attacks 'which were expected to come from the sea side'²⁷.

One such fort in the western Bengal near Behala called Raigarh and a tank called Raidighi were supposedly built by Pratapaditya's forefather Basanta Ray. He had associations with the temple at Kalighat on the Adiganga. There are traces of brick ruins of old forts along the tract of the Adi Ganga channel (old route of the Bhagirathi) towards the north of Sarsuna between Behala and Barisha²⁸. Nathan also mentioned about a fort at Salikha (different from the place by the same name at Howrah). This place was situated on the bank of the Ichhamati which was taken by the Mughals²⁹. Moreover, *Baharistan* noted that all the Mughal *thanas* established against the *Maghs* had put up strong fortifications to successfully fight them back and to sustain themselves in the middle of the torrential monsoon of lower Bengal³⁰. One such fort located to the south of Calcutta at the site for the present Botanical Gardens became well known as Mukwa/Mugwa/Magua *thana* or Tanna fort³¹. As the name suggests, the Mughals built it to put a check to the *Magh* ingresses and protect the smooth flow of the riverine trade. The Hijli fort was constructed to prevent the *Maghs* from going up the river³². During Alivardi's time, at least a hundred and fifty soldiers were posted at Kulpi to check possible intrusions³³. Some of those citadels were built at places easily approachable from Sagor. Since the Jesuit priests were familiar with such developments and since Pratap had retained Portuguese men in his navy; other Portuguese fortune seekers of neighbouring bases were well informed about these areas of coastal Bengal including Sagor.

²⁶ NAI, Secret, Proceedings, vol. 35A, May 5-June 30, 1777, pp. 912-13.

²⁷ Aniruddha Ray, *Adventurers, Landowners*, p. 66.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

²⁹ Mirza Nathan, M.I. Borah trans. from Original Persian, *Baharistan-I-Ghaybi*, vol. 2, Government of Assam in the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati, 1936, pp. 629- 639.

²⁹ *The Nautical Magazine*, vol. 1, No. 1, 1832, Nathan, *Baharistan*, vol. 1, p. 126.

³⁰ Nathan, *Baharistan*, vol. 2, p. 629.

³¹ Raja Binaya Krishna Deb, *The Early History and Growth of Calcutta*, Calcutta, 1905, p. 16.

³² Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *Magh Raiders in Bengal*, Calcutta: Bookland, 1960, p. 91.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

III. Situating Sagor

Though Sagor seemed to be a vacant stretch of land, the island and the delta including the island had been marked by the early cartographers. A number of travellers had moored their ships on this natural anchorage at the confluence. It has been described as a safe mooring place in the narratives of the European visitors. Some of the contemporary and near contemporary narratives confirmed that the sea faring Arakanese and Portuguese used to frequent the fringe of the delta including Sagor.

Table 3.1: Representations of Sagor between the Seventeenth and Nineteenth Centuries

The following table would denote the impression of the island in the eyes of the foreign travellers as they saw it as visitors within the chosen period.

Travellers	Period of Visit	Observations	Inferences
Van Linschoten Map	(1563-1629)	Marked the western delta of the Bhagirathi from Sagor as Isola do Chandocam ³⁴	It indicated that there was an island named Chandocam which corroborated with Sagor or was located close to Sagor.
Pertius Bertii Map	(1565-1629)	Marked the western delta of the Bhagirathi from Sagor as Isola do Chandocam ³⁵ .	Bertius was Linschoten's contemporary. His map bore striking resemblance to that of Bertius.
Baffin and Roe Map	First edition in sheet map was sold in 1619	Marked a portion of the western delta of the Bhagirathi, close to Sagor as Isl de Chandecan ³⁶ .	It could have meant that Sagor island or some other island situated close to it was called Chandecan.
Robert Dudley Map	1646	Identified a part of the western delta of the Bhagirathi towards the east of the Muriganga as Regno di Candican ³⁷ .	If Hedges' observations (see p. 91) are to be believed, then Dudley's map is indicative of a kingdom that could have encompassed Sagor. In the map the island has been marked as I. di Ganga, flanked by two rivers

³⁴ Susan Gole, *A Series of Early Printed Maps*, Plate 10.

³⁵ Ibid., Plate 10a.

³⁶ Ibid., Plate 12.

³⁷ Robert Dudley, *Carta Particolare dil Golfo di Bengala e Pegu*, 1646.

<http://www.swaen.com/antique-map-of.php?id=23816>

Accessed on 19.1.16.

			on either side.
Sebastian Manrique	1628-41	The flourishing temple town of Sagor was destroyed by Arakanese Portuguese pirates, inhabitants kidnapped. People visit for annual ritual ³⁸ .	A desolate place, barring the season of fairs.
Cabral	1633 app.	The galleons of Portuguese and of the Maghs had so destroyed it that we found in it only the pagodas, some vestiges of tanks and groves of shady fruit trees ³⁹ .	Traces of human habitation in earlier times, though to Cabral it seemed to appear as a desecrated place.
Streynsham Masters, Chief Agent in the Bay of Bengal	1676-81	Anchored at Cox's island adjoining Sagor. Fish was very cheap. Places along the Rogue's river was reserved by Mughals to make beeswax and salt ⁴⁰ . The area became infested with Arakanese pirates ⁴¹ .	Though the place was favourable for human settlements and people visited on business, it was deserted.
Thomas Bowrey	1680s	With all the potentialities for a deep sea port ⁴² , Sagor had turned into a forsaken place because of tigers and 'Arakaners' ⁴³ . But he noted a huge crowd gathering for the 'washinge Festivall' when the 'Gentues' (Hindus) prayed to the sun ⁴⁴ .	It was desolate except for the festival season that pulled a huge crowd.
William Hedges	1684	About forty years ago, the island was inhabited and it had a 'Raja' who collected rich revenue ⁴⁵ .	It lay uninhibited during Hedges' visit. However Hedges' observation implied an improvement in the status of Chandecan from just an island to a kingdom. Arakan exercised a definite influence in parts of the Bengal delta till 1666 and Sagor had briefly come under the Arakanese royalty as it came under the <i>sarkar</i> of Hijli as mentioned before.

³⁸ Collis, *The Land of the Great Image*, p. 79.

³⁹ Cabral's letter cited from Sebastian Manrique, C.E.Luard (tr), *Travels, 1629-1643*, vol. 2, p. 419.

⁴⁰ Master, *Diaries*, vol.1, p. 15.

⁴¹ Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of the Countries*, pp. 211-212.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 210-211.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.203.

⁴⁵ William Hedges, *Diary of William Hedges*, vol. 1, p. 172.

Alexander Hamilton	Before 1715	One of the many empty islands of Sundarbans ravaged by ‘Arracanners’ and tigers. ‘Jougies’ and pilgrims congregated yearly ⁴⁶ .	It was a pilgrim centre, but forlorn otherwise.
Maria Graham	1812	Desolate island having dark jungle. A nest of serpents, tigers and centre of loathsome practice of human sacrifice. Its shore was haunted by sharks who feasted on sacrificed bodies ⁴⁷ .	The place was detested for unforeseen experiences.
Bishop Heber	1824-25	Flat swampy shore with tall dark trees. The island had remains of a village began by a joint stock company. But nature reclaimed the settlement that turned into abode of tigers ⁴⁸ . It is the habitation everything monstrous, disgusting and dangerous, from the tiger and cobra de capello down to the scorpion and mosquito--from the thunderstorm to the fever.	Desolate and dangerous for human habitation.
Huggins	1824	First landfall on entry into the river was a den of tigers and other wild beasts. Not safe to live there as one could catch malignant ‘jungle fever’ ⁴⁹ .	Predators and disease were a threat to human existence. Desolate.
Thomas Bacon	1831	Shores of the island taken over by thick jungle. There were evidences of unsuccessful attempts to clear it and colonise. But predators and nature did not allow human intervention ⁵⁰ .	Traces of habitation in earlier times were noted, though it was observed to be unfavourable for human settlement.
Alexander Duff		A ‘flat’, ‘swampy’, ‘cheerless’ shore, reeking of ‘rank putrid vegetation’ and covered by interminable jungle ⁵¹ .	Described as a kind of wilderness. Did not support settled community living.

⁴⁶ Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies (1688-1723)*, vol.2, Edinburgh, p. 187.

⁴⁷ Maria Graham, *Journal of a Residence in India*, Second Edition, Edinburgh, p. 132.

⁴⁸ Reginald Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India from Calcutta to Bombay, 1824-25*, vol. 1, Philadelphia: Carey, Lea and Carey, 1829, p.44.

⁴⁹ William Huggins, *The Sketches in India*, London: John Letts, 1824, pp. 2-3.

⁵⁰ Thomas Bacon, *First Impressions and Studies from Nature in Hindustan*, London: William H. Allen and Co, 1837, p. 121.

⁵¹ Alexander Duff, *India and India Missions: Including Sketches of the Gigantic System of Hinduism, Both in Theory and Practice*, Edinburgh: John Johnstone, 1839, p. 200.

Though the Mughal penetration into Bengal was initiated in 1537, it was accomplished after about seven decades since the last of the *Baro Bhuiyans* were decimated in 1612. The intervening period was marked by a number of political challenges against the Mughals like those of the Afghan warlords in eastern Bengal and Bihar; the foremost of them being the resistance of Sher Shah. Nevertheless, the Mughal sovereignty was established in Bengal. As the province was ruled by the semi-autonomous Mughal governors or the *nawabs* of Murshidabad between 1575 and 1750s, the Mughal sovereignty remained nominal. Again, during the *nizamat* period, the local big *zamindaris* were delegated power especially in central and western Bengal, which reflected a decentralised political structure. Though officially under the Mughals, eastern Bengal adjoining the delta was politically in a state of flux as there was hardly any unifying force in such a remote forested area cut up by rivers and channels.

In course of their gradual penetration into the east, the Mughals got familiar with the neighbourhood of Sagor. In the post Husain Shahi period the Mughals were lured towards Bengal. The Afghan king Daud Khan Karrani was decimated by the Mughals in 1576 in northern Bengal and the Afghan capital of Tanda was captured by the Mughals. The Mughals shifted the capital of Bengal to Gaur. Next the Mughals had to curb major power blocs of *bhati*; Isha Khan and Pratapaditya.

So their focus got diverted to the lower Bengal. Many forts and *thanas* put up against the Arakanese close to the extensive sea coast, have confirmed Mughal familiarity with the terrain⁵². By 1612, the independent bastion of rebellion in the *bhati* was obliterated. This spurred Mughal penetrations deep into the interior of Bengal. But in this melee, Arakan got a chance to capture tracts of lower Bengal that remained under it till 1666 as a vassal state. Hijli was one of the Mughal fiefs that contained Sagor too⁵³. Being part of lower Bengal, Hijli was exposed to ‘Mogg’ menace specially after Chittagong’s siege by the Mughals in 1666. Shihabuddin Talish confirmed that Hijli used to pay a sum of revenue to Arakan at

⁵² Nathan, *Baharistan*, vol. 2, pp. 629- 639.

⁵³ ‘Saugor Island and its Condition Subsequent to the Inundation of November last’, in *The Nautical Magazine, A Journal of Papers Connected to Maritime Affairs*, vol. 1, Glasgow: Brown, Son and Ferguson, March 1832, p. 293.

least till 1625⁵⁴. Otherwise Sagor's history was away from the arc light of history for about a century till the British took over the *diwani* of the *suba* of Bengal in 1765.

In fact, Sagor's empty and fearsome ambience provided the theme for a genre of European travel literature, that portrayed it as the 'habitation of everything monstrous'⁵⁵. Nevertheless, this island is famous as an ancient pilgrim site, the temple of Kapil Muni. Kapil Muni was a great sage and was a Vishnu incarnate. He resided in his *ashram* located at the meeting point of the sea (sagor) and the river (the Ganga). The king Sagor, a Suryavanshi king and the ancestor of Ram, wished to perform the ritual of *Asvamedha* to prove his invincibility. This scared Lord Indra, the king of Gods, ended up stealing the sacrificial horse. He hid the horse at a place called *patal* below the earth at the *ashram* of Kapil Muni where he was in deep meditation. On another plane, 'patal' could have indicated the edge of the mainland at the confluence in the southern tip.

Sagor's sixty thousand sons reached the *ashram* and insulted the great sage when the latter burned all of them to ashes and their souls were consigned to *patal*. Later the sage was impressed by the meditation of Bhagiratha, a descendant of Sagor's lineage and agreed to liberate the souls of Sagor's sons. His condition was that the Goddess Parvati should take the form of Ganga, the river Goddess and flow down to the earth and then further down to his *ashram* to mix the ashes of the dead in the holy water. Thus, through this ritual of death the souls were to be liberated, which in Hindu tradition implies the attainment of *moksh*. The king Bhagiratha performed a difficult meditation to appease Lord Shiva who asked the Ganga to descend down from heaven to free the sixty thousand souls for their heavenward journey. The Ganga, mounted on a *makar*⁵⁶, was brought down to this place as Bhagiratha showed her the way. The day is commemorated as the day of *Makar Sankranti*. Ganga washed away the ashes with her water. From there she flowed towards the earth and stayed on since then. The island of Sagor marks the meeting point of the Bay and the river and hence often referred to as Gangasagor. The tradition of holy dips in reverence to the sage Kapil at the risk of being

⁵⁴Stephan Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal, the Rise and Decline of the Mrauk U Kingdom from the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Century A.D.', Ph.D. thesis, Leiden University, 2008, p. 183.

⁵⁵ Reginald Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India from Calcutta to Bombay, 1824-25*, vol. 1, Philadelphia: Carey, Lea and Carey, 1829, p.44.

⁵⁶*Makar* is a part crocodile part shark like aquatic creature.

mauled and devoured by sharks, was noticed by Sebastian Manrique⁵⁷ and Thomas Bowrey⁵⁸ in the seventeenth century.

The place is incorporated within the religious touring circuit of the Hindus. The circuit of the traditional pilgrim route that began in northern India at Allahabad on the Ganges, terminated at the Jagannath Temple, Puri, after touching the penultimate pilgrim point at the confluence of the Bay and the river. The island had to accommodate an enormous number of pilgrims every year in May before the rains⁵⁹ and also in winter to perform the holy dip on the auspicious day of *Makar Sankranti* (winter solstice). The festival of *Sankranti* at the temple of Kapil Muni had been continuing since ancient times and remains a very important festival till date.

More and more pilgrims from various localities joined the moving band as it progressed towards Sagor. Actually in the initial phase of this religious circuit, the devotees joined mainly from Delhi and the Indian provinces of the North West close to Persia. Often the numerical strength of the group swelled up in course of time to as many as 20,000 as it reached the temple of Kapil Muni at Sagor⁶⁰. So a basic infrastructural service had to be operational to support a huge gathering of people.

⁵⁷ Maurice Collis, *The Land of the Great Image*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943, pp. 187-188.

⁵⁸ Thomas Bowrey, *Geographical Account*, pp. 202-203.

⁵⁹ Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture and Economy*, p. 105.

⁶⁰ Tilottama Mukherjee, 'The Economic Dimensions of Pilgrimage', in Bhaskarjyoti Bose ed., *Explorations in Economic and Social History, 1200-1900*, Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 2008, p. 199.

Map 3.1: Sagor Island and the Estuary of the Hugli River



Source: Adapted from National Library of India, J.F. Stace, *To the Merchants of Calcutta These Maps of the Hugli, Bhagruttee, Ganges, Goorae, Barrasshee and Soonderbund Rivers used by the Steamers in the Inland Navigation, Calcutta to Nadia* (not legible).

IV. Sundarban Land Reclamation

Aside from the yearly congregation of pilgrims, for the bathing festival at the confluence, the vast stretches of forested land cut off from the mainland, seemed to be by and large uninhabited. The English Company had started planning for the reclamation of land in the Sundarbans. The Sagor island located close to the forested land at the delta, naturally drew its attention. By 1765 the English East India Company assumed the political as well as revenue rights of the *suba*. Maximization of land revenue to pay for its investments was the central issue for the East India Company at that point. It led them to toy with many ideas about land reclamation, cultivation, measurement and assessment of revenue potentialities of different types of land within the province, before assigning the amount of revenue to be extracted. After a series of debates and experimentations,

the uncultivated lands of the *suba* were brought under the Permanent Settlement by Lord Cornwallis in 1793⁶¹.

However the extensive forested land of the Sundarbans at the Ganga Meghna delta cut up by rivers and creeks, crowning the northern edge of the Bay of Bengal, put up a different set of challenges that needed a separate treatment by the Company. Hence it was not incorporated within the framework of the Permanent Settlement⁶². The Sagor Island was included within the forest of the delta. The Sundarbans did not represent a separate district and was a part of the district of the Twenty-four Parganas. The local Commissioner, along with the Collectors of the Twenty-four Parganas, Jessore and Bakargunj exercised their joint control over its revenue matters⁶³.

The widespread forest was awash with marshes. Besides, it had saline soil watered by tidal creeks and hence was initially considered unfit for cultivation. However, the British zeal for profit maximization led to their penetration into the deep forest. The land reclamation process was undertaken by the Collector General Claude Russell and carried forward by the Magistrate of Jessore, Tilman Henckell in 1783. Henckell initiated such a system of land reclamation that turned the vast forest tracts into lush green rice fields⁶⁴. In the process, the forest was considerably pushed back towards its southern extremity. But the *zamindars* of the northern edge of the forest had no defined boundaries of their estates and tended to incorporate the delta's wasteland within their estates randomly. This created a point of clash with the British officers. The Board of Revenue claimed in 1814 that a major portion of the Sundarbans was not a part of the *zamindari* and had been secretly reclaimed and brought under cultivation. So the state had a right to claim revenue from there.

Various proposals were mooted to turn the vast wilderness into a revenue rich area. For example, one Benjamin Lacam had proposed to Hastings, the Governor General and the Member of the Committee of Revenue, to develop the

⁶¹ F.D. Ascoli, *Early Revenue History of Bengal and the Fifth Report of 1812*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1917, p. 132.

⁶² Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, *The Sundarbans, Folk Deities, Monsters and Mortals*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010, p. 76.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁶⁴ J. Westland, *A Report on the District of Jessore: Its Antiquity, its History and its Commerce*, 1871, Calcutta, p. 135.

bank of the Channel Creek (Baratala River) from one end to the other. He described it as a 'Compleat Harbour'. He dreamt of

a compleat refitting station for the Navy; Immediate assistance given to shipping or boats in distress down the River, a certain supply of fresh water for people passing the Harbour; and a great prospect of cultivation; and freeing from Tiggers Country, once esteemed the richest in the Province, by which the lives of the poor Local people in the more laborious scenes of Business are secured, and from which an addition of Revenue will ever be derived by the Company⁶⁵.

It is not known whether Hastings undertook any significant measure to develop Sagor as a full-fledged harbour. Henckell undertook a pioneering measure in 1785-86 by setting up three Government outposts namely Hingalgunj, Kachhua and Chandkhali at vantage locations, which together became known as Henckellgunj, to demarcate the boundaries of the forest, followed up by reclamation and cultivation⁶⁶. Apart from Henckellgunj, the other important projects of Sundarban land reclamation took place in Sagor island from 1810 onwards and much later, in Port Canning in 1863 and Hamiltongunj at Gosaba in 1864.

V. Exploring Sagor as a Source of Revenue

The extensive Sagor island was rich in natural resources despite part of it being under tidal influences. So it had attracted the attention of the state as a part of a source of revenue since eighteenth century. In the 1670s, Streysham Master had noted that the areas along the Channel Creek were dotted with Mughal apiaries⁶⁷ and salt pans⁶⁸. The water bodies were rich in varieties of fish⁶⁹. According to Hedges the forest had a rich reservoir of woods⁷⁰. One of the Company letters dated April 6, 1762, addressed to Henry Vansittart, the President and the

⁶⁵ WBSA, Revenue Proceedings, vol. 19, 1 to 29 October 1776, p. 231.

⁶⁶ Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, *The Sundarbans*, p. 59.

⁶⁷ R.C. Temple ed, *Streysham Master's Diaries: 1675-1680*, vol.1, India Records Series, London: John Murray, pp. 53, 321.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 321.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

⁷⁰ Col. Henry Yule and R. Barlow (eds), *The Diary of William Hedges, During his Agency in Bengal; As well as on his Voyage Out and Return Overland*, vol. 1, London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, p. 172.

Governor etc. of the Council of Fort William, by Hugh Cameron, described the terrain of Sagor and its neighbourhood in the following lines:

As to the Company's lands from Rangafullah to Sagor and up again nearly as far as Leiloo..... are bordered with impenetrable jungle or wild wood. How far these jungles extend inward I cannot say....in time such a large space of ground, might partly, if not wholly, be converted to several uses, and be improv'd greatly for the benefit and advantage⁷¹.

Thus Sagor was identified as a potential source of revenue by the Company officials quite early. While the reclaimed land of Sagor could be brought under the plough; the extensive area of the south western Bengal surveyed by Hugh Cameron⁷², offered some additional advantages.

The jungles themselves afford a vast stock of timber, which tho' of no valuable sort, yet is very usefull and applicable to several purposes of life.....where the banks are lower, and a small creek near, they are very commodious for making salt. Add to this that creeks afford variety of fish and in some places near the banks we found fresh water⁷³.

Sagor had an old history of human settlements preceding our concerned period. It was a land of antiquity and archaeological ruins have been unearthed from the island and its adjoining area. Actually the island was brought under cultivation long before the European intrusions; some of the nineteenth century travellers came across abandoned houses and residential areas⁷⁴. Manrique in the early seventeenth century had noted many abandoned temples and houses. Between sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it remained largely a vacant island. Yearly influx of a huge congregation of devotees suggested the existence of at least a skeletal infrastructure.

VI. Plans to Develop Sagor

This section would try to enumerate the strategies chalked out to develop Sagor into a revenue generating land purely on the basis of the British official records.

⁷¹ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 28, April 8, 1762, pp. 356-57.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 358-59.

⁷⁴ Thomas Bacon, *First Impressions*, p. 121; Reginald Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces*, p. 44.

The plans were being made and tentative measures chalked out since the terminal phase of the eighteenth century.

Land Reclamation

The British had been planning to reclaim the island, as fleeting proposals of clearing Sagor were being proposed from latter half of the eighteenth century. A letter addressed to Hastings, the Governor and the President of the Member of Council, dated November 1, 1773, by Messrs. T. Hancock and B. Lacam offered to employ four hundred prisoners from several jails for the same and requested that ‘hundred begahs of ground near the upper end of Channel Creek and about fifty Bega on the Island of Saugor’⁷⁵ should be cleared to build houses for them.

On reaching the island, the British found it to be overrun by ‘matted undergrowth’⁷⁶ and mangrove forests in 1811⁷⁷. They came across traces of human settlements on the island including the base of a fort or wall of a building or a *bund*⁷⁸. But the fact remains that these areas ‘have not been continuously inhabited except in modern times’⁷⁹. The island possessed one lighthouse that was constructed in 1808⁸⁰. The idea of clearing Sagor was mooted in 1810, the actual work was initiated in 1811.

In a letter addressed to Honourable Robert Scott, the Secretary to the Marine Board found that ‘considerable progress’ had been made ‘in clearing the Middleton Point of Jungle’⁸¹. The Military Department was requested to do the needful by supplying muskets ammunitions and the Sepoys authorized to operate those; as a protection to the workers at Sagor. The major threats to their lives were the tigers⁸² and instances of attacking and killing men were quite common. In fact the tigers used to swim up to the boats in the river to catch hold of relatively healthy victims from among the sleeping passengers⁸³. One of the contractors

⁷⁵ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 20, November 15, 1773, pp. 1-2.

⁷⁶ L.S.S. O’Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers, 24 Parganas*, Logos Press, New Delhi, 2009, p. 3.

⁷⁷ Sunando Bandyopadhyay, ‘Natural Environmental Hazards and their Case Study of Sagar Island, India’, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, vol. 18, issue 1, June 1997, p. 21.

⁷⁸ NAI, Home Public, Proceedings, vol. 28, April 10, 1812, p. 1.

⁷⁹ James Westland, *A Report on the District of Jessore, its Antiquity, its History and its Commerce*, Calcutta: Printed at the Bengal Secretariat Office, 1871, p. 54.

⁸⁰ O’Malley, *Gazetteers: 24- Parganas*, p. 254.

⁸¹ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 10, April 5, 1811, p. 1.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

⁸³ Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, Edinburgh: 1727, vol. 2, p. 4.

named 'Guddadhur Muckerjee' supplied labour for clearing the jungles. He was given an advance of sicca rupees one thousand one hundred and forty six⁸⁴.

The island was surveyed by Lieutenant Blane who computed the area of the island to be 143,550 acres⁸⁵. Blane made a detailed survey of Sagor noting the courses of the creeks, waterways, major marshes, raised ground, jungles, tigers, muddy bank⁸⁶ to provide the Government with a fair data of the quantity of land that could be brought to cultivation. At this point, mention may be made of a map delineating the 'Plan of Saugor Island Taken in May and June 1811' by Lieutenant Engineer C.R. Blane⁸⁷. The map showed something interesting: the division of land into at least 16 units, each unit with a particular name, mostly of local people, and a number assigned. Probably this indicated that an early attempt was made in 1811 to distribute the land in the island of Sagor on lease involving the local inhabitants. The map shows the names of the allottees with corresponding numbers of the allotted land.

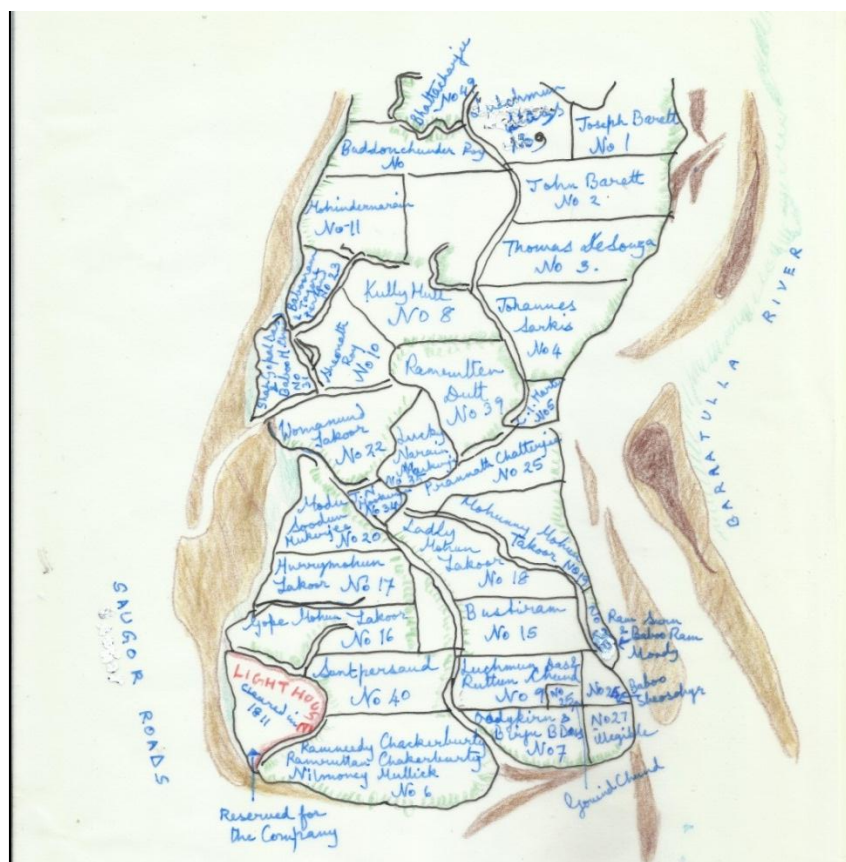
⁸⁴ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 84, December 6, 1811, pp. 1-2.

⁸⁵ O'Malley, *Gazetteers:24-Parganas*, p. 185.

⁸⁶ R.H. Phillimore, *Historical Records of the Survey of India*, vol. 2:1800-1815, Dehra Dun: Published by Order of the Surveyor General of India, 1950, pp. 16-17.

⁸⁷ NAI, Historical Maps of the Survey of India (1700- 1900), Plan of Saugor Island by C.R. Blane, 1811.

Map 3.2: Land Ownership in Sagor island as shown by Lieutenant Engineer G.R. Blane, May - June 1811.



Luchmun Dogs, No. 19
Joseph Barrett, No. 1
John Barrett, No. 2
Thomas DeSouza, No. 3
Johannes Sarkis, No. 4
C.I. Martin, No. 5
Parannath Chatterjee, No. 25
Kully Mull, No. 8
Ramentten Dutt, No. 39
Lucky Narain Mukerjee, No. 35
Mohumny Mohun Takoor, No. 19
Ram Surn and Baboo Ram Mondy, No. 20
Baboo Sheosdyr, No. 24
Luchmun Das and Tuttun Chund, No. 9
Oddykirm and Birju Das, No. 7
Govind Chand, No. 25
Sheonath Roy, No. 10
Womanand Takoor, No. 25
Shah Gopal Das and Baboo M. Chand, No. 31
Modu Soodun Mukherjee, No. 20
Murrymohun Takoor, No. 17
Gope Mohun Takoor, No. 16

Source: Adapted from NAI, G.R. Blane, 1811, F51/10. Map not to scale.

It is not clear though, why the system was discontinued. In November 1811 one Mr. Beaumont got permission from the Board of Revenue to start a factory for buff leather on a hundred acres of land. In 1812 he applied for a land grant on a cultivating tenure as the Government had offered favourable terms. He was

permitted to hold 300 *begahs* of land⁸⁸. But Beaumont's application got cancelled as the Government decided to offer the leases of land to Indians only, as it was felt that cultivation would be better undertaken by the Indians.

However in 1812, the Revenue Department started encouraging both the British and the locals to come forward with proposals for cultivation of the island. The maximum holding offered was 10,000 *bighas*, the minimum was 500 *bighas*. The Board even thought in terms of having some additional ground in the vicinity of the proposed lighthouse and anchorage and eventually some other spots for public utility. It was further decided to cultivate the land kept aside 'with the rest of the Island as it may otherwise prove a harbour of Tigers'⁸⁹. Thus the British nurtured a definite plan of developing Sagor as a project with a view to 'the future increase of the public revenue'⁹⁰. Trower, the Collector of the Twenty-four Parganas, initiated the process of jungle clearing. It was undertaken with a view to reclaim land and the central part of the island was made ready for cultivation. It came to be known as Trowerland.

To involve the Indians in the reclamation of the Sagor island, Mr. Trower, summoned a meeting of merchants and other important men: both Europeans and Indians, in Calcutta in 1818. He felt that the private people were in a better position to cultivate land. The outcome was a joint stock company comprising Indians and Europeans. The company was named 'Sagor Island Society' and a capital of two and a half lakhs was invested to float the company. The committee of around thirteen trustees formed the core management. The Indians held out a quarter of the share⁹¹. The entire island was leased out to the above mentioned Company in perpetuity at an assessment of four *annas* per *bigha* at an initial revenue free period of thirty years starting from 1820. 'The Saugor Island Society it may be observed, is allowed to hold the lands brought into cultivation by them, exempt from payment of revenue for a period of thirty years'.

However, the Society undertook the clearance of around one lakh *bighas* in ten years out of the estimated 143,500 *bighas*⁹². By September 1, 1820, only four square miles of land was cleared. In the four northern portions of the island

⁸⁸ NAI, Home Public. Consultation no. 24, May 15, 1812, p. 2.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

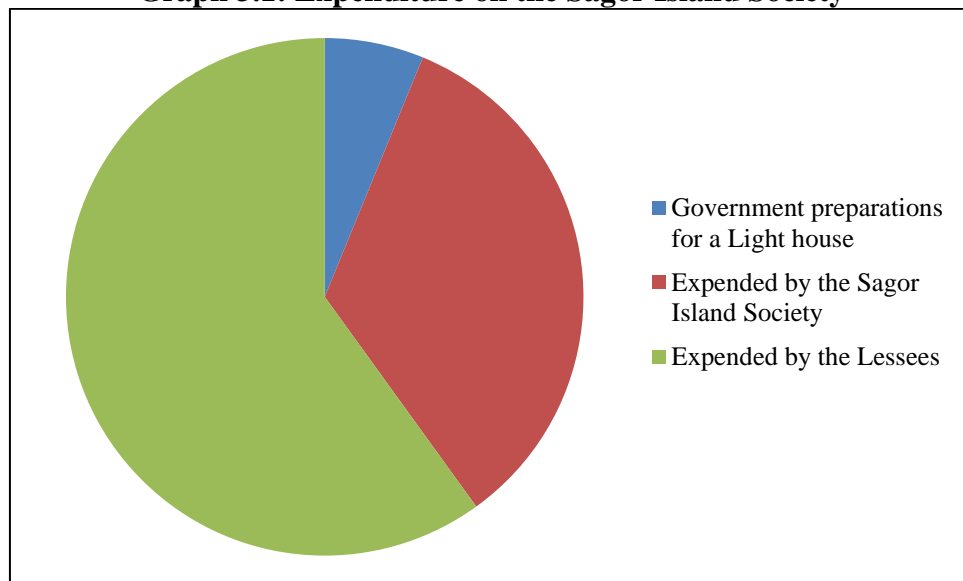
⁹⁰ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 24, May 15, 1812.

⁹¹ R.S. Rungta, *The Rise of Business Corporations in India, 1851-1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, pp. 10-12.

⁹² Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, *The Sundarbans*, p. 85.

namely Trowerland, Ferintosh, Mud Point, Shikarpur and in the extreme south Dhobelat, considerable progress was made. Land reclamation was done, roads and embankments were constructed, tanks dug and some bit of settlement was initiated. The Society had secured a grant of the whole island on the basis of certain terms, the failure of which entailed forfeiture of the grant. In 1823, Heber took note of the fertile alluvium that grew in abundance exotic fruits like plantain, ‘shaddock’ and coconut in the sparsely populated island. Besides; the soil rich in sediment had potentialities to evolve as a cotton growing zone. The project had to be abandoned due to the gale and inundation of May 1833⁹³.

Graph 3.1: Expenditure on the Sagor Island Society



Source: Adapted from WBSA, Appendix F, Fever Hospital and Municipal Improvements Containing Miscellaneous Evidence and Papers, Calcutta, Bishop’s College Press, 1839.

In 1834, the northern part of Sagor was taken over by Messrs. Hare, Macpherson, Hunter and Campbell who began rice cultivation and salt manufacture. They became successful as salt merchants and the northern segment of the island experienced some prosperity and human settlement. However, major natural disasters like cyclone coupled with storm waves had repeatedly come in the way of its continued development.

By sieving through the bulk of the archival materials dating back to late eighteenth century, it becomes obvious that there were four main agendas behind the project of reclaiming the island other than generating revenue from rice

⁹³ O’Malley, *Gazetteers: 24- Parganas*, p. 185.

cultivation and the making of salt⁹⁴. Those agendas were-- using the island as a landing space for ships, building a marine hospital, a tourist place cum health resort, setting up a fishery. For all this, a couple of ancilliary projects had to be undertaken , like: the construction of a light house at the entrance of the Hugli and introduce connectivity between Sagor and the nearby places of mooring cum small settlements like Falta, Diamond Harbour, Khejuri. The core idea was to popularize and develop a tourist place cum sanatorium at a striking distance from Calcutta. Such plans were based on the fact that Sagor had the inherent advantage of being a safe anchorage. Those who could; furnished their capital to promote a public utility project that would obviously generate money by drawing tourists.

An Ideal Anchorage

By the early eighteenth century the bulk of the Dutch, British and Indian trade were transported down the Bhagirathi-Hugli channel despite the growing menace of shoals and sandbanks hindering the easy passage of large cargo ships up to Hooghly and Calcutta. This problem created a demand for a safe anchorage of bulkier vessels at harbours closer to the sea and transshipment of the cargo up to the destination in smaller vessels like boats and sloops. Initially big vessels loaded and unloaded at Balasore. Later Hijli at the confluence of the Rasulpore and Rupnarain rivers came to be preferred over Balasore. Subsequently Kedgerree - ‘about halfway between Calcutta and Saugor’⁹⁵, was chosen as a safer and more convenient mooring for the emerging city of Calcutta. The cargo was carried up to the port of Calcutta in vessels of small draft and size. Falta and then Diamond Harbour served the purpose for some time; but the latter fell to disuse. Sagor was considered as a viable alternative.

Table 3.2: Sagor, a Natural Anchorage

Travelogues and contemporary archival material have described Sagor as a good anchorage to big vessels with a capacity to act as a deep sea port. Despite being unapproachable and sparsely inhabited, the Europeans of varied interest had

⁹⁴ WBSA, Appendix F to Report of Committee upon The Fever Hospital and Municipal Improvements containing Miscellaneous Evidence and Papers, Calcutta, Bishop’s College Press, 1839, p. 493.

⁹⁵ Maria Graham, *The Journal of a Residence in India*, Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1813, p. 154.

recognised the potentialities of this island as a natural harbour between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.

Visitors	Period of Visit	Their Observations on the Anchorage	Inferences
Father Cabral, Portuguese missionary	1632	Described Sagor as a 'terrestrial paradise' and the 'greatest centre of pilgrimage in all the east'. When he and two other priests met the Arrakanese king for some political negotiations, his companion Father Rebello had to assure the king that the Portuguese 'Bandel' would not be built at Sagor ⁹⁶ .	Sagor was suitable for a port as it offered good anchorage.
Thomas Bowrey, English merchant sailor	1680s	Had sailed past the Cox's island to reach upto 'Ganga Sagor' at the mouth of the 'great river'. The estuary was very broad.	Sagor was ideal for a deep sea port.
William Hedges, English merchant, First Governor of the East India Company in Bengal	Diary Entry: March 11, 1683. Diary Entry: December 23, 1683.	'this morning wee came faire by the Arracan Shoare.... And came to an anchor near the mouth of the River neare the ile of Coxe's' ⁹⁷ . 'this afternoon I visited the Dutch Director and desired the favour of him to let me have a Pilot to carry my Shippe through the new found Deepe by the Island of Gongga Sagur' ⁹⁸ .	Sagor was a deep sea harbour and its adjoining Cox's island too could serve as a mooring station.

⁹⁶Cited in Sebastian Manrique, *Travels of Frey Sebastian Manrique, 1629-1643*, vol. 2, Oxford: Published for the Hakluyt Society, 1927, pp. 419-420.

⁹⁷ R.C. Temple ed, *The Diaries of Streysham Master, 1675—1680 and Other Contemporary Papers Relating Thereto*, vol. 1, 1675-77, John Murray, London, p. 321.

⁹⁸ R. Burlow and H. Yule eds., *The Diary of William Hedges during his Agency in Bengal as well as on His Voyage out and return overland (1681-1687)*, vol. 1, London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, p. 172.

	Diary Entry: October 31, 1684.	The Company had considered to 'build a fort on the island Sagar at the mouth of this river' ⁹⁹ .	The Company thought of building a fort in the island because of its vantage location at the mouth and also because it could provide a good anchorage.
Alexander Hamilton	1715	The Cox's and Sagor islands were the most remarkable of the numerous islands at the river's mouth where great ships were obliged to anchor to take in part of their cargoes as several places along the river were too shallow to allow those ships to pass over ¹⁰⁰ .	Sagor provided the facilities of a deep sea anchorage to big ships.
Bengal Public Consultations	December 27, 1716.	'Anchorage at the southernmost point of Sagur'.	Mentioned about Sagor as a mooring place.
John Ritchie, English East India Company's hydrographer	1776	The bank of sand which formed the outside of middle channel and which united the Gasper to the Mizzen, is almost totally washed away, by which means the eastern channel and Middle Channell, have a free communication... The removal of this sand, has opened the channel towards Sagor, a most excellent anchorage it is five miles broad about the southern part of Sagor, it is two miles and a half broad to the northward about Cock Island and it is more than ten	It was a very spacious harbour with a capacity to accommodate as many as fifty vessels.

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 133.

¹⁰⁰ Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies Being the Observations and Remarks of Captain Alexander Hamilton (1688-1723)*, vol. 2, Edinburgh: Printed by John Mosman, one of His Majesty's Printers, 1727, pp. 4-5.

		miles long. The depth of water all over this space is various from five to twelve fathoms, with a fine soft bottom in general and consequently it is very good roadstead for shipping all dimensions fifty ships....may be moored in it without being least crowded ¹⁰¹ .	
Home Public, Consultation 19, December 23, 1776.	1776	At Sagor the connectivity between the relevant channel and the sea was ‘Increasingly good, there being nowhere less than five fathoms of low water, with a fine soft bottom all the way—It passes through the east side of the Gasper and eastern sea reef and is bounded to the eastward by the sand of Sagor’ ¹⁰² .	At that point of time Sagor was geographically in a position to serve as a natural harbour.
William Hickey, famous attorney.	1 November, 1777	His ship anchored off at the island of Sangor’ at noon ¹⁰³ . From there it proceed upwards towards Kulpi in a ‘paunceway’, a local variant of boat.	Sagor provided an anchorage.
Thomas Bacon, English East India Company’s Officer	1831	The anchorage at Sagor was thought to be less harmful to European ships than the stations higher up the river probably because the vessels having ‘more sea room’ could be accommodated ¹⁰⁴ .	Sagor was a natural harbour.

¹⁰¹ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 19, December 23, 1776, pp. 1-2.

¹⁰² NAI, Home Public, Consultation 19, December 23, 1776, p. 1.

¹⁰³ Alfred Spencer ed., *Memoirs of William Hickey*, vol. 2, London: Hurst and Blackett Ltd, p. 118.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Bacon, *First Impressions*, p. 121.

Sagor lay at the brink of the Bay. The concerned officials remained engaged in the pros and cons of utilizing Kedgerree, the Cox island and Sagor as lading places and concluded that ‘Kedgerree.....seems at all accounts preferable, as more safe, expeditious and cheap, as well as within the reach of the Dauk intelligence’¹⁰⁵. By 1798, letters were exchanged to increase the number of ‘dawk’ boats at Kedgerree for forwarding letters to Cox’s island in the vicinity of Sagor¹⁰⁶. So instead of having more than one lading stations it was thought more practical to concentrate solely on Kedgerree. The others lay at a considerable distance from the mainland, making business ‘more complex and irregular’¹⁰⁷. Further, as the pilots had to sail down quite far till the mouth of the river, they charged ‘an extra allowance’ and there were ‘demurrage incident to the Sloops’¹⁰⁸.

Around the same time Thomas Bacon during his extensive tour of India, took note of the natural mooring facility provided by the island¹⁰⁹. According to an official correspondence of the East India Company addressed to K.T. Princep, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, General Department, by G.I. Siddon, Officiating Post Master General, dated January 12, 1836, ‘the large Ships belonging to private parties, but formerly employed in the Honourable Company’s trade with China, now usually moor in Saugor Roads’¹¹⁰.

In fact, as the extracts from the proceedings of the Governor General in Council in the Revenue Department stated early in 1812 that the state seriously considered cultivating the island ‘which is deemed an object of considerable public importance on many grounds, but specially for the healthiness of the shipping lying in its vicinity’¹¹¹. It was assumed as the jungles would be mowed down and crops would grow, swamps and undergrowth harbouring predators along with the incidents of the outbreak of epidemics would be pushed away. Developing the island as a mooring station was central to giving shape to other plans like provisions for marine hospital cum health resort, lighthouse, rest houses and setting up a fishery in Sagor.

¹⁰⁵ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 8, October 29, 1787, p. 2.

¹⁰⁶ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 21, January, 1798, p. 1.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 1.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Bacon, *First Impressions*, p. 121.

¹¹⁰ WBSA, General (General), Proceedings, January 6-March 30, 1836, p. 88.

¹¹¹ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 24, May 15, 1812.

Plan for a Fishery

Way back in the mid seventeenth century, after anchoring in Sagor island, Streyntsham Master had noted that fresh fish was available in plenty. It was so cheap that ‘half a rupee purchased more than enough to feed the whole company’¹¹². Indeed the water of the island abounded in marine as well as fresh water species of fish. In the early 1770s two European gentlemen named J. Bright and T. Hamilton had proposed to Warren Hastings and his Council of Revenue start a fishery in the island ‘as Clearing and Cultivating waste Lands is for the Companys Interest as a successfull fishery will produce a considerable Revenue and be beneficial to the Publick’¹¹³. The extensive fallow land in the island; they felt, could be reclaimed and fishery be set up. This would create job opportunities and add to the revenue. They put forth the following plan;

Our chief motive in soliciting a grant of the island of Sagor, is the Establishment of a fishery, we hope the encouragement we shall offer to the fishermen will induce them to settle on the island, and if we are successful thus far, we shall do our utmost to prevail on them, to clear and cultivate as much land as possible, which we think we shall have no difficulty in doing as their own wants will point out the necessity of it, It is impossible to ascertain what quantity of Land will be cultivated annually, or when the Cultivation will begin, both will depend on our success in the Fishery the quantity of Cultivated Land will be in proportion to the number of Inhabitants, and it will be our interest to make the island as populous as possible, therefore our binding ourselves by penalty to bring any certain quantity of land annually into Cultivation can be of no use to the Company and must throw a great damp on our understanding¹¹⁴.

The correspondence further clarified that the senders had planned to pay the usual duties on fish and all productions of the island when brought to market at the expiration of ten years, and also the usual rents for such part of the island as may be cultivated, and when required would officially declare an exact account of the quantity of land cultivated¹¹⁵. However, it cannot be conclusively claimed to what extent this scheme was implemented.

¹¹² R.C. Carnac ed., *Diaries of Streyntsham Master*, vol. 1, p. 15.

¹¹³ WBSA, Revenue, Governor General in Council, Proceedings, vol. 12, August 21-28, 1778, Letter dated August 25, 1778, p. 334.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

Marine Hospital cum Health Resort

The English wished to have a sea side retreat on the Sagor island. So a light house and a proper anchorage were needed to ensure a risk free landing. The Europeans in Bengal had difficulty in getting acclimatized to an alien environ characterized by tropical heat, and humidity, sultry weather, monsoon, lack of sanitation and associated diseases. Hence the expatriates naturally looked for a weekend refuge that would not take long to commute back and forth. Before the introduction of the railways it was not easy for the Europeans in the Bengal plains to have a reprieve from the tropical heat with which they associated disease and demise. The Himalayan hill stations were discovered mostly in the mid nineteenth century. When the situation turned particularly unbearable, they often went for brief vacations in ‘the healthy situations’¹¹⁶ of Barasat, Gyretty, even Chandernagore and Chinsurah. However, those who had contracted some serious illness or had been recuperating in the marshes of Bengal; looked for a retreat having an ‘insular climate’¹¹⁷. They felt that the neighbouring islands of Sagor or even the small isle of the Sandheads would provide them with the much needed ‘sea air’¹¹⁸. So Sagor was a very viable option to be developed as a place of tourism cum sanatorium. Perhaps the home sick English wished to recreate the imageries of their own country and desired a retreat that reminded them of their popular resort back home- like Brighton.

An official correspondence stated,

It is to these, above all others, that the inhabitants of Sagor should look; and there is not a year that I do not witness the most lamentable sacrifice of health, and of life too, for want of such a place of resort, especially during the South West Monsoon, when persons in a state of extreme illness are unable to undertake a long voyage¹¹⁹.

Some such obvious advantages of Sagor were noted as early as 1785 that prompted the Europeans to toy with the idea of building a marine hospital there. In a letter dated June 30, 1785, to the Governor General John Macpherson, from

¹¹⁶ WBSA, Appendix F, to Report of Committee upon the Fever Hospital and Municipal Improvements containing Miscellaneous Evidence and Papers, Calcutta: Bishop’s College Press, 1839, p. 493.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 494.

¹¹⁸ WBSA, General (General), Proceedings, July 6-September 28, 1836.

¹¹⁹ WBSA, Appendix F, Fever Hospital, no. 57, p. 494.

Messrs. Walter Gowdie and I. Tailour, a plan and estimate was proposed suggesting the island ‘as the site on account of its healthy situation’¹²⁰. A ‘plan and estimate for a hospital, fit to contain three hundred patients’ was proposed¹²¹. Later it was further stated in the correspondence that ‘if leased and cultivated’ it ‘would afford a most eligible Resort for Valetudinarians and Convalescents of every disease from all parts of Bengal’ apart from being a ‘considerable object of Revenue to the Hon’ble Company’¹²². In fact according to an archival record dated 1839, the important citizens of Calcutta proposed,

to lay out large sums for a ‘lodging house’ on Saugor island to which the agreeable accompaniments of baths, palanquins, horses and elephants were to be added—all ‘for the benefit of the sick who require sea air’¹²³.

Lighthouse

A lighthouse and a telegraph office were the important buildings of Sagor in the early nineteenth century. A lighthouse was built in the southern part of the island at ‘Beguakhali’ as early as 1808¹²⁴. But a lot of correspondences were exchanged after 1808 regarding the clearing of a site and building a lighthouse. It could be guessed that probably the previous one was abandoned and a better site was chosen. As per a letter from the concerned authority of the Marine Board to the Lieutenant General and Resident in Council General Hewitt,

The spot cleared measures in length rather more than half a Mile, and in breadth about one sixth part of a Mile and that it is lower than the land which bounds it from the sea, but whether it may be subject to inundation in the freshes, cannot be determined before the month of August¹²⁵.

The extract of a correspondence by the Deputy Master Attendant to Robert Scott, the Secretary to the Marine Board, revealed the Deputy Master Attendant’s wish to appoint someone as the Superintendent of the workmen to be employed at Saugor—failing which at least an Engineer Officer to be eventually deputed to

¹²⁰ NAI, Abstract, Home Public, Consultation no. 62, August 30, 1785, p. 1.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., p. 2.

¹²³ WBSA, Appendix F, Fever Hospital, p. 493.

¹²⁴ W.W. Hunter, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, vol. 12, London: Trubner and Co, p. 13.

¹²⁵ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no 23, June 28, 1811, p. 1.

erect the lighthouse¹²⁶. The government wanted to bring the island under cultivation. Public notification to lease out the portions of the island was released by the office of the Secretary of the Board of Revenue under a number of conditions. Erection of a light house was the first requirement before the launching of Sagor as a functioning port for large vessels¹²⁷.

Sagor's Connectivity with the Other Places

Also various plans were chalked out for forging an official connectivity between the island and the other anchorages on the Hugli river at the western delta and the mainland as a stepping stone to develop Sagor into a popular retreat. This also called for building rest houses at Sagor. By the mid nineteenth century, the entire region between Calcutta and Sagor became a networked unit and the process had begun way back in the late eighteenth century. Kedgerree was an important mooring space; hence establishing an efficient mailing service was the need of the hour. In fact ships were anchored at Diamond Harbour, Kedgerree, and Hijli. So connectivity among those places and between Calcutta and such places had to be established as well. *Dak* boats, horse drawn postal carts, *harkaras* were put to use initially. Then the mail from Kedgerree used to be brought to Kulpi in little boats and dispatched to Calcutta. Further, between 1774 and 1776 a post office came up in Kedgerree. Kulpi had a post office sometime between 1793 and 1795. So gradually the small mooring stations cum colonies were getting integrated with the new metropolitan city.

An official correspondence addressed to Peter Speake, the President and Member of the Board of Trade, by C.W. Blunt, the Post Master General mentioned about ensuring a 'speedy communication' between Sagor and Kedgerree 'during the season of Dispatch'¹²⁸. The *dak* road of Kedgerree needed an occasional repair and warding off of the man eating tigers to keep up the mail service¹²⁹. Semaphoric signaling¹³⁰ was established between Calcutta and Diamond Harbour in early nineteenth century. Crucial navigational data were transmitted to the ships at sea regarding storms, depth of water and other

¹²⁶ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 84, December 6, 1811, pp. 1-2.

¹²⁷ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 24, May 15, 1812.

¹²⁸ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 21, January 30, 1798, p. 1.

¹²⁹ Basudeb Chattopadhyay, 'On the Bank of the Hugli', in Abhijit Dutta, Keka Duttaray, Sandeep Sinha eds., *Explorations in History: Essays in Honour of Professor Chittabrata Palit*, Calcutta: Corpus Research Institute, 2003, p. 326.

¹³⁰ A system of relaying message with two flags in arm.

elemental hazards. In 1830, thirteen semaphoric towers were built between Kaikhali and Calcutta. Then the semaphoric connectivity was extended further below to Sagor. By the mid nineteenth century, Sagor and Kedgerree had been officially networked by telegraph¹³¹. According to D.K. Lahiri Choudhury, the introduction of telegraph was linked up with the British imperialist experiments to have a tighter grip over India¹³².

Nevertheless, a major landmark was achieved in 1852 when the Superintendent of the Electric Telegraph in India, O'Shaughnessy forged the telegraphic connectivity between Kedgerree and Calcutta by laying the line of the electric telegraph across the Hugli covering a distance of more than seventy miles¹³³. Further, in 1855 the linkage of Sagor with the major army cantonments in north and central India and important towns like Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, Agra till Peshawar via telegraphic lines¹³⁴, crisscrossing the length and breadth of the empire, marked a quantum leap in the field of connectivity. So places of importance interfaced with Sagor. Thus with the aid of infrastructure like telegraph, postal service; places like Sagor, located at the fringe; got connected with the mainland. In this context, mention should be made of the proposals to lay a railroad connecting Calcutta with Sagor in the early nineteenth century¹³⁵. However the vulnerability of the island to natural hazards like cyclone and flood came in the way of its implementation and the proposed project was shelved as it was considered 'unfeasible'¹³⁶.

Though some schemes did not take off, the European penetration had brought alive those river side places which served their purposes of transshipment and anchorage for some time. Kedgerree boasted of a market that supplied basic provisions to the mariners, boatmen and local passers-by. Kedgerree, Falta and Diamond Harbour had markets, a number of inns and hotels that mostly served the

¹³¹D.K. Lahiri Choudhury, 'Beyond the Reach of Monkeys and Men? O'Shaughnessy and the Telegraph in India, circa 1836-56', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 37, part 3, 2000, p. 348.

¹³²D.K. Lahiri Choudhury, "'1857" and the Communication Crisis' in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya ed., *Rethinking 1857*, Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007, p. 263.

¹³³W.H. Carey, *Good Old Days of the John Company, Being Curious Reminiscences Illustrating Manners and Customs of the British in India*, vol. 2, Calcutta: Cambay and Co, 1907, p. 94.

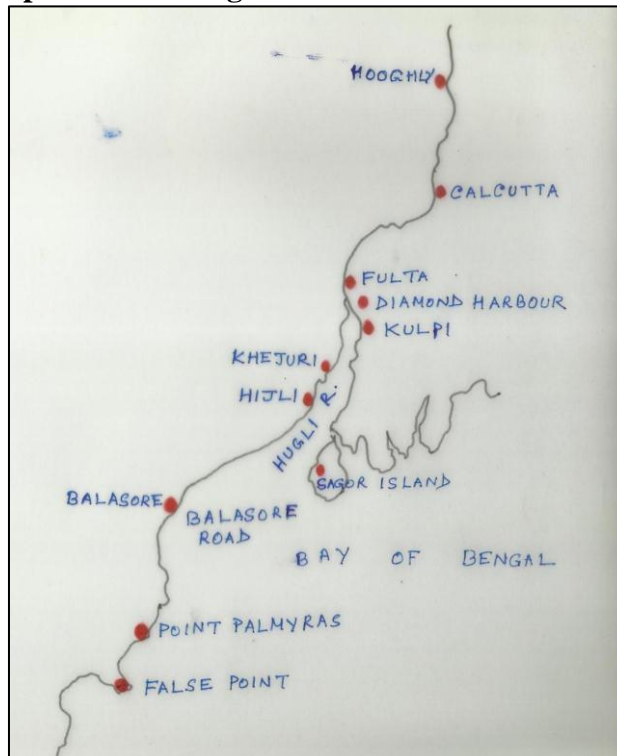
¹³⁴D.K. Lahiri Choudhury, 'Beyond the Reach of Monkeys and Men?', pp. 331-59.

¹³⁵'The Saugor Island Rail-Road', in *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British and Foreign India, China and Australia*, New Series, vol. 23, Part 2, May-August 1837, London: William H. Allen and Co, p. 200.

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 200-01.

European tourists. By the early nineteenth century Diamond Harbour had closed up ‘on account of sand in it during several years past’.¹³⁷ It was described as a ‘sink of all sorts of filth and putrescence’¹³⁸. In the long run, poor living condition, and swamp ridden surroundings infested with waterborne and mosquito induced epidemics, were responsible for the short life span of the riverside anchorages and settlements.

Map 3.3: Anchorages between Calcutta and Sagor



Source: Adapted from NAI, Cartography Section, Catalogue of Historical Maps, 165/31, *Sketch of the River Hugly from Calcutta to Kedjeree*. Map not to scale.

VII. Factors hampering the Development of Sagor

Thus the British of Calcutta had plans to convert Sagor into a sea side resort in close proximity of Calcutta. However, several factors came in the way of making Sagor island a revenue yielding model.

Natural Hazards

Cyclones and Floods

Sagor remained at the mercy of the whims of nature for its location at the fringe of the western delta. Nevertheless, due to its situation nearer the mainland compared

¹³⁷ WBSA, General (General), January 6-March 30, 1836, p. 88.

¹³⁸ Thomas Bacon, *First Impressions*, p. 122.

to other islands; the impact of the vagaries of storms and tides¹³⁹, shifting channels are less brutal. However, the official English correspondences are replete with apprehensions and worries concerning landing at Sagor. It was especially risky in the monsoon months as cited in an early eighteenth century correspondence: ‘the coast to the eastward of Sagur at this season is dangerous and but little known to our pylots’¹⁴⁰. In the official records of the East India Company, the problems of approaching the island from the sea and the mainland were discussed at length¹⁴¹. A letter dated March 20, 1812, written by the Major of Engineers, to the Secretary to the Marine Board stated,

The Season is now so far advanced as to render the passage of Boats loaded with materials necessary, very precarious and of it blows strong; which the lateness of the season presents every reason to expect.... That the passage of boats down to Saugor will be speedily impracticable and even dangerous for river sloops¹⁴².

Another correspondence dated 14 September, 1813, noted,

because the rapidity of the Tides and Freshes in the lower channels at the entrance of the Hugli and the tremendous confused ground swell occasioned by the tidesand often in opposition to the continued severe gales during the South Western Monsoon and occasional storms....makes it doubtful to me whether any vessel would ride them’¹⁴³. Thus it was difficult to approach Sagor because of the ‘boisterous weather which so often prevails at the entrance of the Hugli’¹⁴⁴.

The fact remains that the island stands at the receiving end of the brunt of the elemental hazards of cyclone, flood, subsidence of land, epidemic that acted as hindrances to settled ways of life. In 1585, Sagor bore the brunt of the following major elemental challenges: a cyclone accompanied by flood that killed about two lakhs of people. Floods of 1684 and cyclone of 1688¹⁴⁵ supposed to have killed 60,000 people¹⁴⁶. Further, cyclone and an accompanying storm wave of 1707; a

¹³⁹ Annu Jalais, *Forest of People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans*, London: Routledge, 2010, p. 2.

¹⁴⁰ NAI, Bengal Public Consultations, Fort William, June 14, 1739, Microfilm, Accession no. 2668.

¹⁴¹ NAI, Home Public, Consultation, no. 28, April 10, 1812, p. 1.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁴³ NAI, Home Public, Consultation, no. 66, May 6, 1814, p. 6.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁵ Kamal Chaudhury, *Itihasher Dhara*, p. 343.

¹⁴⁶ Satish Chandra Mitra, *Jashohar Khulnar Itihaash*, vol. 1, Calcutta: Dey’s Publishers, p. 259.

high intensity earthquake of 1737, cyclones of 1833, June 1842, October 1848, June 1852, 1864 and 1867¹⁴⁷ need special mention because of their severity of impact. The following extract of a record provides a graphic account of the susceptibility of men and material to natural disasters like fierce cyclone and lashing rain that occurred in October 7, 1737.

On Friday all day had very thick weather much Rain and blow'd very fresh. We had everything clear as expecting it would still blow harder, about 6 at night, our Briddle broke, then let go the spare anchor with the new best bower Cable bent.....and brought her up with a whole Cable the wind still increasing found We drove, then let go the sheet anchor and veer'd out a whole Cable and brought the ship up again, and about half an hour, about which time a storm of wind came on with the wind about the beam...The force of wind had blown away the Binnical away blow'd down the awning, it was impossible to tell how the wind was...about Eight at night found the ship to strike very hard which I judge to be the Diamond beat over the sand and soon after found her aground upon Mudd...Our ship is sunk Eight Feet half in the Mudd fore and after we are swimming...¹⁴⁸

Probably the ship wrecked somewhere close to the Diamond Harbour. There were other instances of ship wrecks in the same document at the Diamond Sand and False Point¹⁴⁹.

Unique Vegetation

Apart from the challenge of natural adversities, clearing of forests was a rather difficult task. The expansive and matted tentacles of the *Sundari* trees (from which the forest at the delta had derived its name) of immense size, could not be 'cut down and removed in bulk'¹⁵⁰ Much of the island was covered by matted undergrowths¹⁵¹; which had to be removed very carefully little by little. So the jungle clearing was time consuming as well as tedious. Planning of mowing down the trees had started long ago, though it took off in full vigour after the 'Saugor Island Society' was launched. The Society did not have a smooth running and it

¹⁴⁷ Kamal Chaudhury, *Itihasher Dhara*, p. 343.

¹⁴⁸ NAI, Microfilm, Bengal Public Consultations, November 24, 1736- June 1, 1738, Accession no. 2672, p. 309, p. 297.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

¹⁵⁰ W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal, Districts of 24 Parganas and Sundarbans*, vol. 1, Delhi: D.K. Publishing House, First Reprint, 1973, p. 331.

¹⁵¹ O'Malley, *Gazetteers: 24-Parganas*, p. 3.

was found on September 1, 1820 that actually only four square miles was cleared. Further, Westland's following forewarnings became true for the island-

Unless the greatest care is taken of the land so cleared, it will spring back into jungle, and become as bad as ever. So great is the evil fertility of the soil, that reclaimed land neglected for a single year will present to the next year's cultivator a forest of reeds (*nal*)...and it takes about three eradications to expel this reed when once it has grown¹⁵².

Encroachment by Sea and Jungle

Besides, the work of clearing the land had to face another impediment. As the jungles were getting mowed down, the sea started engulfing the cleared space very fast. Unless the land was brought under plantation and cultivation, the loose sandy beach was unable to gather enough resistance to put the natural process of encroachment under check. So the reclaimed land could not be kept fallow for long. Fallow land got refilled fast by secondary vegetation very quickly and soon taken over by jungle. The colonisers had to fight with such natural propensities.

When Bishop Heber landed on the island in October 1823, he came across the ruins of a conglomeration of abandoned dwelling units built by the erstwhile 'Saugor Island Society' in the middle of swamp, thick vegetation inhabited by fearsome predators. It was evident that the colonisation spree failed to keep pace with encroaching forest and sea.

Tiger Menace

Way back in 1776 official correspondences were exchanged on the proposal for a new harbour along the Channel Creek. At the same time some doubts were expressed regarding its viability as it was in an 'impenetrable state'. Besides the eastern fringe of the island watered by the Channel Creek was 'infested with Tygers'¹⁵³. A contemporary map of Sagor showing tiger infested areas indicates the seriousness of the menace (See Map 3.4). In fact, the tiger of Sagor made an international headline after it had killed Hugh Munro in 1792, the son of the British General Hector Munro, the commander of a British division that defeated Hydar Ali (1781).

¹⁵²James Westland, *A Report on the District of Jessore: Its Antiquities, Its History and Its Commerce*, Calcutta: Printed at the Bengal Secretariat Office, 1871, p.228.

¹⁵³WBSA, Calcutta Committee of Report, Proceedings, vol. 10, April 1-29, 1776, p. 831.

The incident is believed to have inspired the Staffordshire potters to create ceramic memorabilia and an ingenious mechanical toy for Tipu Sultan. Known as 'Tipu's Tiger', it is on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum, showing the big cat of Sagor with the mauled body of Munro Junior¹⁵⁴. This was a metaphorical expression of Tipu Sultan's political ambition to overcome the British position in the subcontinent.

The following extract from *The Asiatic Journal* narrated the tiger menace at the island as late as 1800; 'scarcely a season passes but some Europeans are taken away by tigers, in consequence of foolhardiness; while many local people are devoured amidst the perils of their necessary avocations'¹⁵⁵. In fact many letters were exchanged showing serious concern about the 'safety of the working people employed on the service at Saugor'. For instance, 'in the first month it is essential to have an escort to consist of twelve armed peons, ten Matchlockmen, ten Sickawries, ten Tiger killers and ten Lascars at 8 Rs each per month'¹⁵⁶.

I beg leave to inform you, in consequence of the tigers being all around where the people are at work, and the jungle being so thick, that we are obliged to find 6 or 8 Muskets four and six times a Day for the safety of the People at work¹⁵⁷.

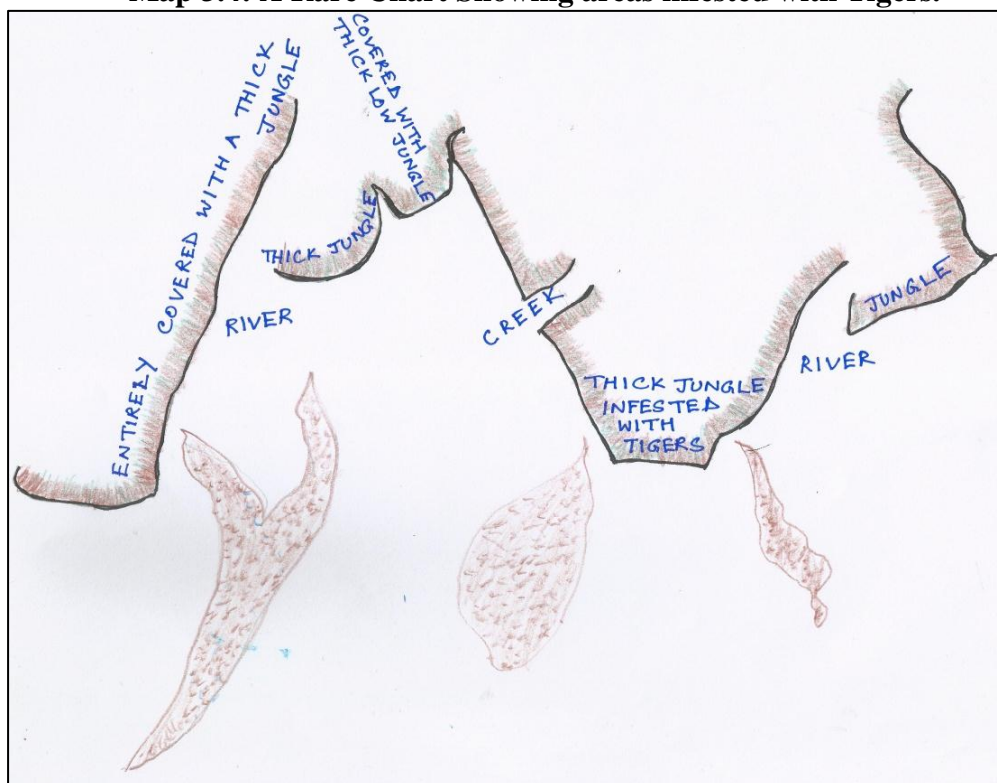
¹⁵⁴ Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 283.

¹⁵⁵ 'Cursory Remark on Board the Friendship', in *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and Its Dependencies*, July to December, vol. 10, London: Printed for Black, Kingsbury, Parbury and Allen, 1820, p. 42. The date of this voyage is September, 1800.

¹⁵⁶ NAI, Home Public Consultation no. 26, November 8, 1811, p. 6.

¹⁵⁷ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 10, April 5, 1811, p. 1.

Map 3.4: A Rare Chart Showing areas infested with Tigers.



Source: Adapted from NAI, Cartography Section, Catalogue of Historical Maps, F 11/30-c, Chart of the Mouth of the Ganges from Saugor to the Hughly River. Map not to scale.

The particular map marked the areas of dense forests in Saugor infested with tigers. There is another similar map of the Sunderbans titled ‘Map of Part of the Lower Sunderbunds’¹⁵⁸, 1813-1814, showing an area covered by jungles and a tiger chasing a deer. As the work of reclamation of parts of Saugor island was in progress, many labourers, coolies were mauled and killed by the man eaters. Further, there had been instances of British tourists being killed by the predator. Such maps indicated the areas to be avoided by all means.

Health Hazards

No spot so proper for the erection of a Marine Hospital, as the southern extremity of Saugor island. The winds which blow upon it in the most unhealthy seasons of the year come in an uninterrupted Course along the surface of the sea, the Water is most excellent ...the distance is at all times attainable at one Tide from Kulpi in much less from Kedgerie and Ingilee....¹⁵⁹.

¹⁵⁸NAI, Cartography Section, Map of Part of the Lower Sunderbunds’, 1813-1814.

¹⁵⁹ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 62, August 30, 1785, p. 2.

Walter Hamilton had declared it to be ‘the healthiest anchorage on the coast’¹⁶⁰. But within two decades or so, the official letters spoke about ‘Saugor and its unhealthiness’¹⁶¹ and its ambience was compared with that of Diamond Harbour which was termed in one such correspondence, as ‘the Montpellier of Bengal’¹⁶². Indeed Sagor was its ‘reverse’ as it witnessed ‘many unfortunate instances of Europeans having fallen victims to the insalubrity of its climate’¹⁶³. The Rev. J. Penney, of the Baptist Missionary Society and his wife were both attacked with the jungle fever on a visit to Sagor island in 1828. Mrs. Penny died within a few weeks of the attack, but Mr. Penny partially recovered. Mrs. George Pearce, wife of the Rev. G. Pearce, who was also a passenger in the same ship, was taken very ill¹⁶⁴.

It was a humid place full of wild vegetation and forest that bred certain diseases. Besides, the stench of rotten vegetation, festering carcass of the sacrificed human bodies added to the unhygienic surrounding. As David Arnold pointed out, ‘the corpses drifting past the ship’¹⁶⁵ contributed to water pollution at the mouth of the river. There are records of 6,500 bodies being thrown into the river from Calcutta alone¹⁶⁶. Many bodies were ‘simply thrown away without funeral rites of any kind into nullas and rivers’¹⁶⁷. So combining all the towns and villages along the course of the Hugli would have made up a larger number making it a very common sight. Though clearing operations were taken up, the project to build a marine hospital did not materialize because, ‘it had yet in its soil, and in the condition of the immediately surrounding localities, what must for ever have rendered it a place of residence, fatal to all but Molunghees’¹⁶⁸. Further, ‘the injurious effects of saline air on Brick buildings’ were ‘well known’¹⁶⁹.

¹⁶⁰ Walter Hamilton, *The East Indian Gazetteer: Containing Particular Descriptions of Hindostan and India Beyond the Ganges*, vol. 2, London, 1828, p. 486.

¹⁶¹ NAI, Home Public, no. 328, July 1822, p. 68.

¹⁶² Ibid., p.79.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ *The Calcutta Christian Observer*, January to December 1833, vol. 2, p. 39.

¹⁶⁵ David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape and Science, 1800-1856*, University of Washington Press, Delhi, 2006, p. 95.

¹⁶⁶ *First Annual Report for the Sanitary Commission of Bengal, 1864-65, with Appendix containing Returns of Sickness and Mortality among Troops in the Bengal Presidency from 1858 to 1864*, London: Ordered by the House of Commons, 1866, p. 61.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ WBSA, Appendix F, Fever Hospital, p. 493.

¹⁶⁹ NAI, Home Public, no. 328, July 1822, p. 79.

Again, fresh water was available at Sagor only in times of the height of ‘freshets’, in the month of September. But in summer months ‘brackish water was found as far up as Calcutta’.¹⁷⁰ In the dry months of February to April ‘on account of the great evaporation’ water in the lower channels beyond Calcutta had high salt content. All these factors could have discouraged the investors.

Difficulties posed by the River and the Sea

Navigational Obstacles

The licensed Master Pilot of the Bengal Pilot Service, S.R. Elson clearly mentioned that a maritime vessel; on its journey from Sagor at the estuary to Calcutta; had to touch the following points one after the other:

Table 3.3: Points to be crossed between Sagor and Calcutta by Ships

Mud Point to Saugor
Outer Rangafulla Channel
Bellary and Huldia Channel
Eden Channel
Dredge and Auckland Channel
Mud Point Channel
Kulpi Roads
Kantabariah Reach
Diamond Harbour
Kookrahatty Reach
Hooghly Bight
James and Mary’s
Noorpore Reach
Fultah Reach Nyan Reach
Fisherman’s Point Anchorage
Hog River Reach
Royapore Reach
Oolobariah Reach
Budgebudge Reach
Caffry Reach
Jarmaker’s Reach
Sangral Reach
Garden Reach
Calcutta Reach-Hooghly Bridge

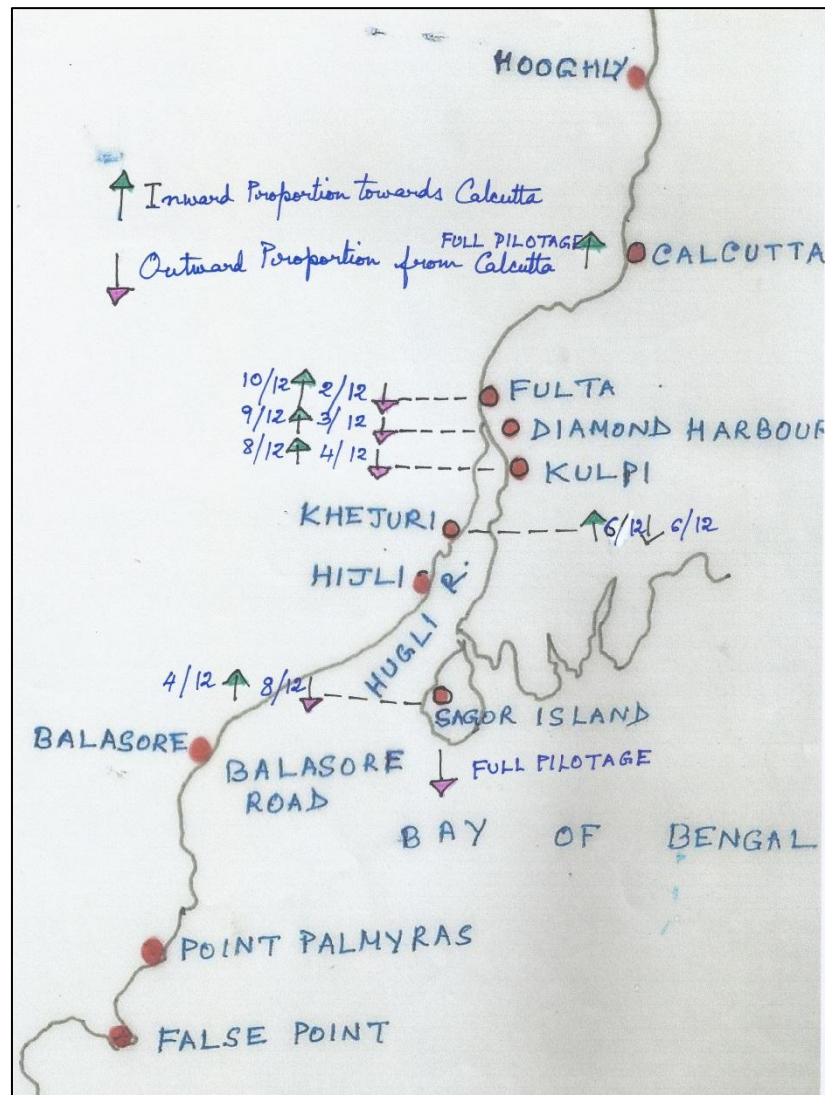
Source: Adapted from S.R. Elson, *The River Hooghly; Calcutta to Saugor Island with Charts and Diagrams*, Printed at Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1884.

In 1807, the Committee of Marine Enquiry had stipulated the proportion of pilotage chargeable on the British vessels and ships inward of the river Hugli between Sagor and Calcutta and outward from Calcutta to Sagor in the following

¹⁷⁰ S.R. Elson, *The River Hooghly; Calcutta to Saugor Island with Charts and Diagrams*, Printed at Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1884, p. 56.

manner: However, all foreign vessels paid double the pilotage and double the duties.

Map 3.5: Proportion of Pilotage on the British Vessels to and from the Bay and Calcutta



Source: Adapted from William Milburn, *Oriental Commerce containing a Geographical Description, the East Indies, China and Japan with their Produce, Manufacture and Trade*, vol., 2, London: Black, Parry and Co, 1813, p. 167.

As the ship sailed up from Sagor towards Calcutta, it had to encounter a number of treacherous channels and obstacles like bars and shoals. Further, a continuous action of currents and wind resulted in erosions as well as depositions on the islands and sometimes riverine encroachments on some part of islands were noticed. Such actions resulted in the alterations of the shape of the island.

Changing Shape of Sagor island

Further, much in the same line with its neighbouring Cox's and Edmonstone's islands, Sagor's shape had undergone certain changes. It implied that the seamen of each approaching ship had to rely on its own ingenuity and ready wit, rather than on the knowledge of the preceding ships to head towards the destination.

In consequence of the two large branches of the River which flows on either side of Saugor Island and the breadth of the island itself at its southern extremity, together with the directions of the current...it has been ascertained... that there must be a very extended Dead Water at the south of Saugor island which allows of the River depositing its sediment during the rains...and consequently either forming a new Island or carrying Saugor island further into the sea¹⁷¹.

The same document stated that the Edmonstone's island remained 'high and dry' round the year in the early nineteenth century since the Channel Creek lying to the east of Sagor, started encroaching the island at such a pace that for a while the Company's hydrographer E. Garstin felt that it could lead to its total destruction¹⁷². It was noted in 1822 that

The River encroached on Saugor island....I do not apprehend the total destruction of the Saugor island as I think it possible that the River will force itself a passage through some of the small Creeks which intersect the Island.....¹⁷³

Again,

There must be a very extended Dead Water at the south of the Saugor island which allows of the River depositing its sediment during the rains.... And consequently either forming a new Island or carrying Saugor island further into the Sea¹⁷⁴.

It seemed a new island took shape close to Sagor and from a distance it seemed that the island of Sagor shifted further into the sea. There were 'many shoals and sandbanks near Sagor'¹⁷⁵. However, such isles, braces and sandbanks appeared and disappeared in keeping with the nature of the fluvial world. Again on October

¹⁷¹ NAI, Home Public, Proceedings, vol. 328, July 1822, p. 58.

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

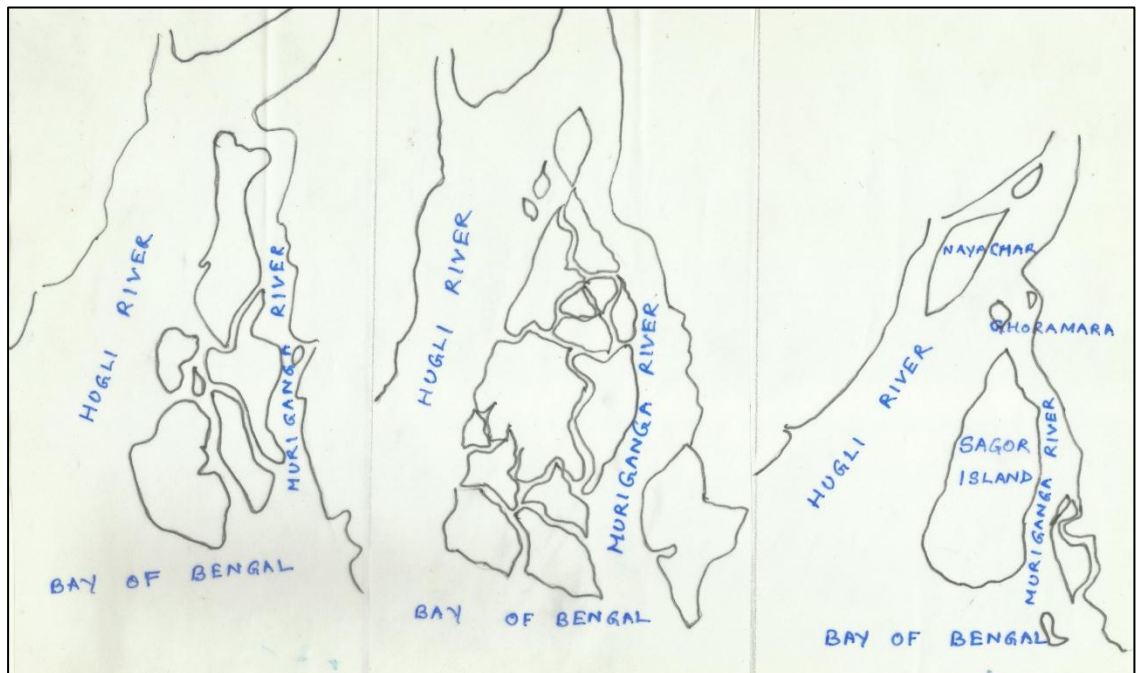
¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 58-79.

4, 1864, a surge of storm wave that rose 15 feet above the sea level, had managed to split the island into two halves¹⁷⁶.

According to Kalyan Rudra, the Bhagirathi Hugli estuary is the ‘largest and the most active’ one in the western part of the Gangetic delta. In any estuary normally erosion and deposition of the suspended sediments occur simultaneously. As a result, considerable alterations have taken place on the estuary of the concerned river. In 1767 Sagor island was much bigger in size than what it had been 2010. The new *char*, appropriately called Nayachar has grown considerably in size above Sagor towards the north-west. Simultaneously, the conglomeration of islands near Sagor, comprising Ghoramara, Lohachara and Suparibhanga are on the wane. So there prevails a situation of impermanence in the riparian and marine sectors of the aquatic world¹⁷⁷ around Sagor.

Map 3.6: Changing Shapes of Sagor: 1767, 1904, 2010.



Source: Adapted from Kalyan Rudra, *Atlas of Changing River Courses in Western Bengal*, Calcutta: Sea Explorers’ Institute, 2012; National Library of India, Cartography Section, River Hugli, Kalpi to Lower Gaspar Light Vessel, December 1903 to May 1904.

¹⁷⁶ Basudeb Chattopadhyay, ‘On the Bank of Hugli’ in Abhijit Dutta et al. eds., *Explorations in History*, Essays in Honour of Prof. Chittabrata Palit, Corpus Research Institute, Calcutta, 2003, p. 328.

¹⁷⁷ Kalyan Rudra, *Atlas of Changing River Courses in Western Bengal*, Calcutta: Sea Explorers’ Institute, 2012, p. 14.

Shifting Channels and Blockades

The aquatic world that lay beyond the mainland was capricious in temperament. The contraction of the deep channels and shoaling had taken place due to excessive siltation. That extended the dimension of the sand heads. Apart from this, the continuous widening of the lower section of the Hugli ‘by the action of winds and currents on its banks’¹⁷⁸ diminished the scouring power of the stream. This also left more room for the ‘channels to change from side to side’¹⁷⁹. These two factors ultimately came in the way of the smooth journey from the estuarine approach into the interior¹⁸⁰.

Channels

Further, negotiating through the tentacles of shifting channels was yet another problem that was created due to great disproportion between the two sections of the river. The upper section above Kulpi represented a full-fledged river, while the lower section from Kulpi to the sea was more of an estuary. Water passing through the upper section could not produce strong enough currents to clear out the whole of the lower section, but only a very small section. So the remaining portion turned into ‘a great shallow of loose half floating sand’ shifting along with the water. Thus a channel formed by cutting through those loose solid particles cannot be permanent in nature¹⁸¹.

The following extract of a letter written by a British Master Attendant who was in charge of a sounding of the channels from Calcutta to Sagor, would clearly enumerate the transitory nature of the Bengal delta, especially in the areas close to Sagor and Channel Creek.

We could find no alterations in the channel between Calcutta and Phulta at that place. We found it somewhat better than it has been for these two years past from thence to Rangafoula there is no alteration. We then searched to the eastward of the Gillingham, Mudd Point and the old channel out by the Coxes but could find no opening and but six feet water for about three quarters of a mile at low water upon the East and West channel. We found the sand of Cuckollee diminished and three fathom at low water from thence to Ingellee and so out no alterations. On our return we sounded through Channel Creek where we found a good channel which led

¹⁷⁸ H. Leonard and J.G. Herons, *Selections from the Records of the Government of India in the Public Works Department*, no. XLV, Public Works Department Press, 1864.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Hugh Leonard, *Report on the River Hooghly*, Department of Public Works, Bengal, 1865.

¹⁸¹ H. Leonard and J.G. Herons, *Selections*.

us to the south east point of Sago then worked out betwixt Sago Sands and the Main in a deep broad channel until we brought Sago island about northward just discernible from the deck. The weather being bad.....I did not think it safe to proceed further yet don't doubt but....we find a much safer channel out that way than that at present practiced¹⁸².

In December 1776, though the middle channel was quite active and facilitated the passage of ships from the deep water anchorage at Sagor; the eastern channel too was slowly making its presence felt¹⁸³.

In fact

This great depth of water about Sagor, clearly accounts for the shallow water at the Hidgelle side; and also for the decreasing depth of the middle channel, to the southward of Sagor since the year 1770¹⁸⁴.

But the scenario had altered by 1813. It seemed that the western channels might open and would highly benefit commerce¹⁸⁵. By that time the middle channel from Sagor became quite narrow. Also the head of the eastern channel had narrowed down. Further, there was an apprehension that the Hugli might choke up and loose its navigability. The Channel Creek could have offered passage at least to vessels of shallow draft and boats¹⁸⁶. The big vessels could not have passed 'both from the shallowness of the water at the entrance near Mud Point and narrowness of the Channel in the upper parts.

Due to the choking up of the navigable channels of the western shore in the last twenty years, a greater portion of the river had swept the eastern side of the delta. It was gradually washing away Edmonstone island like the Cox's island. Those two islands were located close to Sagor. It was often difficult for the incoming vessels to determine the correct channel leading up to Sagor. The following extract of the Company's correspondence enumerated the issue.

The present current.....will carry away in the course of probably another year or two, the spot fixed upon for a Light House.....in consequence of the state of the opposite or Western shore the navigable channels of which have been filling up, it appears during

¹⁸² NAI, Bengal Public Consultations, Fort William, April 1739, Microfilm, Accession no. 2668.

¹⁸³ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 19, December 23, 1776, p. 2.

¹⁸⁴ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 19, December, 1776, p. 1.

¹⁸⁵ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 8, January 29, 1823, p. 1.

¹⁸⁶ NAI, Home Public, Proceedings, vol. 328, July 22, 1822, p. 101.

the last twenty years; and the accumulation of sandbanks on that side, must propel a greater portion of the River to the Eastern side of the Delta gradually sweeping away Edmonstone's island as it has done Cox's island within a period not very remote¹⁸⁷.

The Asiatic Journal had entered a pilot's personal experience of a journey to Sagor undertaken in September 1800¹⁸⁸. He stated that there is 'perhaps no part in the world where professional pilots suffer more anxiety than those' navigating towards the island. They had to suffer perpetual tension in dealing with shifting sand. Even a fairly strong gale or a rapid tide could scour away some sand to deposit it to a different area. So a pilot having a clear passage one month might have to locate a completely new passage in his next trip after undertaking a 'fresh survey'. He narrated that 'at day-break a wreck of one was seen on Saugor sand'. Even with meticulous surveys a number of ships perished annually while heading towards the island.

According to the *Report on the River Hooghly*, 1865, ships entered the river Hugli via the Eastern Channel and passed through the Gasper Channel. It was about 1 to 2 metres wide with a bar across it which was approximately 2,000 feet long and 20 feet deep. A narrow channel of 20 feet length and 2 to 3 metres wide was joined by the Bedford's Channel. 2,000 feet wide and 10 miles long, this was a fluctuating channel, a segment of which was known as the Dredge Channel. It had a couple of very long bars of about 1,500 feet length and depth varying between 12 and 15 feet. After a fairly smooth reach of a mile wide and 6 or 7 miles length, one arrived at the Mud Point. There the river bifurcated into the Inner and Outer Rungafullah Channels, each around 18 miles in length. The Inner Channel was 1,500 feet wide while the Outer Channel was half a mile wide. Each channel had two bars having depths of 10 to 12 feet of water on them.

At Kulpi the two channels got together to provide an easy ride of about 15 miles from their confluence up to Hugli Point. Throughout, the width was maintained between 2,000 and 4,000 feet and the depth of water was enough for smooth passage of transport. The hazardous stretch began beyond the Hugli Point as the James and Mary Sands began, for the channels passing through it were

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁸⁸ 'Cursory Remark on Board the Friendship', in *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and its Dependencies*, vol. 10, July to December, London: Printed for Black, Kingsbury, Parbury and Allen, 1820, pp. 41-42.

variable in depth and width. Next a deep and narrow channel led you up for 5 miles to Falta, from where a navigable channel of 1,500 to 2,000 feet wide and sufficiently deep, carried you further to Royapore Flat. It was a 1,500 feet long bar with the water depth of about 16/17 feet. It was followed by the Moyapore bar of 1,500 feet length and 1,200 feet width and ample depth of water. The next channel from Moyapore to Calcutta was sufficiently deep and 1,000 to 2,000 feet wide. S.R. Elson, the Master Pilot with the Bengal Pilot Service had advised that as these channels are prone to frequent alterations, the latest charts and Surveyors' reports must alone be consulted for further information¹⁸⁹ before embarking on a journey.

Blockades

The entrance to the Hugli by skirting Sagor, needed skilled maneuverings because there existed various blockades below it: like the Western and Eastern Braces, Western and Eastern Sea Reefs, Long Sand, Gasper Sand, Sagor Sand etc. A navigational guide titled *The Oriental Navigator* published sometime in the early nineteenth century recounted a clear description of the major blockades at the river's mouth. Though the realm of the water is transitory in nature, the narrative provides some basic information regarding the major bars located close to Sagor. For instance:

The two braces were hard flats located to the south of Beercool¹⁹⁰ shore and extended mostly towards the sea. Those braces had been cut off from land by a three fathom deep channel and they separated Balasore Roads from the Hugli's entrance¹⁹¹. Long Sand began at Kedgerree Point and extended northward¹⁹². It was thirty five miles long mostly narrow strip, varying in width and having many patches. Some parts dried up at low water. At the south end it opened to a broad flat, having a great patch of water. Again, Gasper Sand had been identified as the greatest of all braces at the river's entrance. It started roughly to the north west of Mud Point and extended south west by twenty miles where it bent around Sagor towards south east and extended towards north.

¹⁸⁹ S.R. Elson, *The River Hooghly*, p. 56.

¹⁹⁰ Known as Digha at present.

¹⁹¹ John Purdy, *The Oriental Navigator, or, Directions of Sailing to, from and upon the Coasts of the East Indies, China, Australia etc.*, ed., 3, London: James Whittle and Richard Holmes Laurie, 1816, p. 311.

¹⁹² Ibid.

The northern portion is known as Mizen. It almost filled up the entrance as it was quite wide, leaving enough space for one channel each on either side. The central part of the Sand was actually called Gasper. It is broad towards the south and had been named Eastern Sea Reef¹⁹³. The Company Surveyor's system of sounding on Sagor Sand and beyond, had detected a change from hard sand to sticky mud. It identified a swatch or a submarine canyon between Sagor and the Eastern Sea Reef¹⁹⁴. As the Gasper Sand proceeded north towards Sagor, it became narrow. Nevertheless, the Sea Reef, Mizen and Gasper were parts of one single bed of sand with varying depths depending upon the level of water. Moreover, it had many dry patches at low water. The entire Gasper Sand was detached from Sagor and eastern shore by a channel that was narrow at the northern side and posed some difficulty while crossing, as it was susceptible to tidal effects¹⁹⁵.

The Channel Creek could provide a good passage for ships in future, barring a few twists and turns necessary to maneuver the vessel. The northern side also provided the best mooring point¹⁹⁶. To the south of the Sagor island lay Sagor Sand. It has been described as a hard bed of sand with no more than six feet water and remained dry in low water and was risky for the vessels¹⁹⁷. So a ship has to tide over the difficult channels and blockades in order to reach Sagor (See Maps 1.4 and 1.5).

Further, the ships invariably proceeded upwards for their next stations either at Calcutta or further interior in Hooghly. There were major hurdles to be crossed on the Hugli: at Kedgerree¹⁹⁸, Kulpi, and between Diamond Harbour and Falta at the James and Mary Sand¹⁹⁹. A detailed official correspondence by Garstin, the Superintendent, Sagor island, has thrown some light on this.

Kedgerree was located on the mainland lying close to the northern tip of Sagor, to the east of the Hugli. The land between Kedgerree and Balasore remained more or less continuous after the Damodar had fairly established itself in its new

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Alexander Darlymple, *Appendix to Captain Ritchie's Survey of Bay of Bengal*, Third edition, London: 1807, p. 140.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 313.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 313-14.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ NAI, Home Public, Proceedings, vol. 328, July 1822, p. 56.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 53-54.

channel. Then ‘the greatest changes began’ to happen in the river gradually about Kulpi downwards. The river took a turn from there to meet the Tingorcallee. There was no deposition on the western bank and the land between Kedgerree and beyond Balasore looks more or less continuous even at present. But as slowly the eastern bank started receiving the deposits of fresh alluvium, it assumed a broken look for being dotted with new isles²⁰⁰.

Further the sands in this river were constantly moving, rendering navigation quite difficult at various points. At times moving shoals and high sandbanks caused fatal accidents and wrecks. An interesting extract from one Mirza Abu Taleb’s travel account described the journey (undertaken between 1799 and 1803) from Kedgerree to the mouth of the river. It basically was indicative of a reduced flow of water in the river that exposed the ship to the hazards of abrasion in dry months.

During our passage down, we had several narrow escapes. Our vessel drew thirteen feet and a half of water; and we passed over several sands on which there were not six inches more water than we drew. Had the ship touched the ground, as the tide was running out, we should have stuck there and probably have been lost²⁰¹.

The following archival record took note of certain riverine changes around Kedgerree sometime in the early nineteenth century.

But since the change of the Dumoodah, it has not only choked up the Western passage by Kedgerree, which twenty years ago was used by all ships entering or quitting the River but it has carried away more than a mile of the Eastern Bank.....for a tree called the Silver Tree is now entirely gone and the island called the Cox’s island no longer exists except in Rennell’s Atlas²⁰².

The most dangerous place in the river, located just below Falta was called the ‘James and Mary Sand’. They were the creation of the silt of Rupnarain and Damodar rivers in conjunction with the Hugli.

Had the Dumodah forced its way into the Roopnarain, so as to have formed only one River where the latter joins the Hugli no danger

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁰¹ *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa and Europe During the Years 1799 to 1803*, trans. Charles Gladwin, vol. 1, London: Printed by R. Watts, Broxbourn, Herts and sold by Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1810, p. 29.

²⁰² NAI, Home Public, no. 328, July, 1822, p. 56.

would have occurred, for the united waters of the two former rivers would have...carried their sand on to the Sandheads; or else too have deposited it in the same place that the sand of the Roopnarain were formally deposited....²⁰³.

But the three rivers met each other randomly with their respective currents lashing at one another. The Hugli and Damodar met and tended to run south, but there they met with a point of land. So they turned westward and then merged with the Rupnarayan. They tended to flow eastward toward the Diamond Harbour, again veered towards the west. The united flow met the 'Tingorcalley River' (Haldi) and flowed straight towards the Bay. Thus the sediments of the two rivers located six miles apart from each other at their junction with the Hugli; used to meet at sharp angles to get sprayed disparately 'across the silt of the main stream so that with each turn of the weather and tide the sands shift and change under water like clouds in the sky²⁰⁴'. Thus the dreaded moving shoals were created and named after the Royal James and Mary ship that got wrecked there in 1694. 'Countess of Stirling', weighing 1500 tons was submerged there²⁰⁵, apart from many other vessels of considerable tonnage. It was observed by Garstin that 'ships of 500 tons burthen will soon be unable to come up beyond Diamond Harbour' due to the increasing accumulation around the dreaded moving shoal of 'James and Mary'²⁰⁶.

In 1854 the British Government appointed a three man Committee to review the navigability of the river Hugli²⁰⁷. The period of review was divided into two phases: 1765-1836 and 1836-1854. There is no record of the river deteriorating substantially prior to 1836. After 1836, it was noted that the channels from the Bay of Bengal to Sagor were in fairly good condition. Between Sagor and Mud Point there were noticeable alterations due to which the shipping route was diverted to the eastern side of the river. Whether the navigation improved after the changed direction is not clear. The Bedford Channel had turned risky. There was a marked decline between the Mud Point and Kulpi. There was not much change in the river condition between Kulpi and Sagor.

²⁰³Ibid., p. 53.

²⁰⁴ Rudyard Kipling, 'An Unquiet Pilot', in *Land and Sea Tales*, Cornwall: House of Stratus, 2009, pp. 38-39.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ NAI, Home Public, Proceedings, vol. 328, July 1822, p. 54.

²⁰⁷ Hugh Leonard, *Report*, p. 12.

However, the river Hugli had progressively and gradually declined over a long period of time. Indeed the river itself posed a barrier in more ways than one to the incoming and outgoing journeys between the island and the metropolis and the island and beyond, because of the bars and sandbanks and decreased depth of water in dry months (See Maps 3.7 and 3.8). In earlier times many unfortunate accidents had occurred while sailing past the river. Later on the bars and shoals could not deter the vessels of very deep draught from reaching and leaving the station. On the basis of the Report of 1865²⁰⁸ it could be claimed that since mid-nineteenth century, the ships were made to wait till the time of high water for even as long as three days before going downstream. Actually it could be surmised that the Hugli had become a tidal channel that received ample water only during floods because of heavy rains and also from melted snow during summer²⁰⁹. Otherwise brackish water prevailed close to the estuary and beyond, up to the metropolitan city in summer²¹⁰. However, after tedious negotiations through various blockades and changing channels and ascertaining correct location of the safe anchorage at the Hugli's gateway; a vessel destined to penetrate further up, had to skirt around more aquatic barriers. Perhaps the trouble of moving to and fro Sagor dissuaded the investors from pursuing the long term plans for turning it into a health resort cum tourist spot.

Lack of Dependable Pilot Service

Overall the journey through the river was extremely hazardous. Precisely this factor had triggered the concept of the pilot service to guide and to ensure a safe entry and exit to the commercial and official vessels at the river's mouth. The Bengal Pilot Service was established in 1669 when the Court decided that pilots were to be appointed for the river and a pinnace manned by navigators from the Indiamen²¹¹, to take responsibility of shipping to and from the river²¹². However, by the 1620s, after their arrival at the Bay of Bengal, the Dutch had established themselves as ace seamen and provided a highly efficient pilot service. After they set up a factory at Chinsura in 1653, the piloting service became established. The

²⁰⁸ Ibid., pp. 7-8.

²⁰⁹ Such floods are known as freshets.

²¹⁰ Elson, *The River Hooghly*, p. 56.

²¹¹ General name for any sailing ship with the license of any East India Company like the Dutch, French, English, Danish etc.

²¹² P. Thankappan Nair ed., *Rainey's Historical and Topographical Sketch of Calcutta*, Calcutta: Sanskrit Pushtak Bhandar, 1976.

Dutch pilots enjoyed a monopoly of the navigation of the Hugli for quite some years, providing service to the other European merchants and trading companies²¹³. Till late eighteenth century, the English East India Company's pilots had lots of scope to improve its service. An extract of the letter dated December 9 1792, addressed to the Master Attendant, Marine Pay Master and Naval Store Keeper has been quoted to highlight the issue. Discussions were on regarding,

The best means of recruiting the Pilot Service from time to time, and of gradually introducing into it men of proper education and knowledge for the higher departments.....at present, there is not one among the Pilots, however well qualified for the situation by a knowledge of the lands and beds of the River.....so that upon stress of weather or any other occasion, upon which pilots are carried out of the common tract, they are entirely at a loss in what way to direct their vessels²¹⁴.

In fact a letter from the Committee of a Merchants' Insurance Society dated October 18, 1777, intimated the Board that the frequent losses of vessels in the Hugli were due to the employment of unqualified pilots to take charge of them that had led to the losses of the vessels named 'Snow Friendship' and 'Asia'²¹⁵. There were instances of the English Company pilots leaving job to man the French vessels for a higher salary²¹⁶. Without a reliable pilot service the plan to build an island resort in the middle of restless waters remained a distant dream in the early nineteenth century.

²¹³ R.K.H. Brice ed., *The History of the Bengal Pilot Service: Being an Account of the Navigation of the Hooghly River*, Gloucestershire: 1963.

<https://remistry.wordpress.com/>

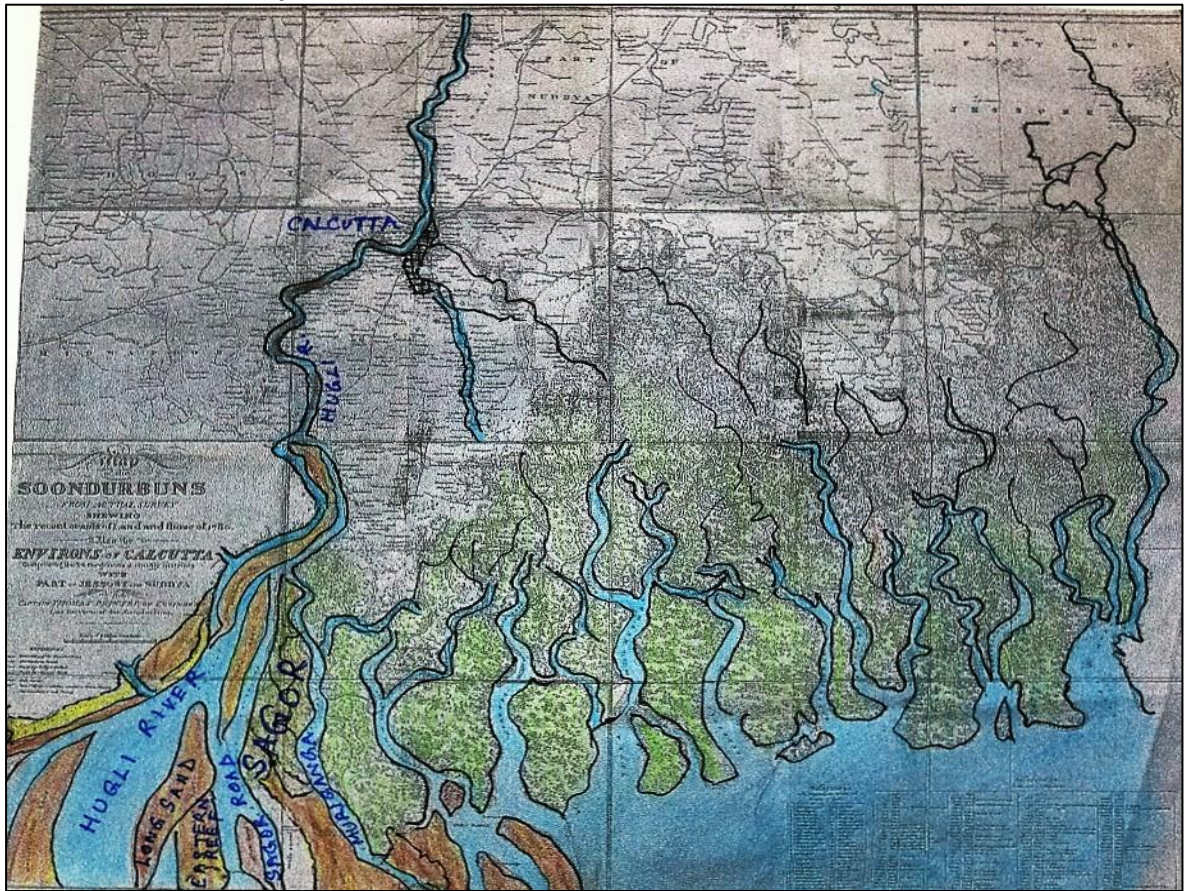
Accessed on 11.3.16.

²¹⁴ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 204, December 9, 1792.

²¹⁵ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 8, October 27, 1777.

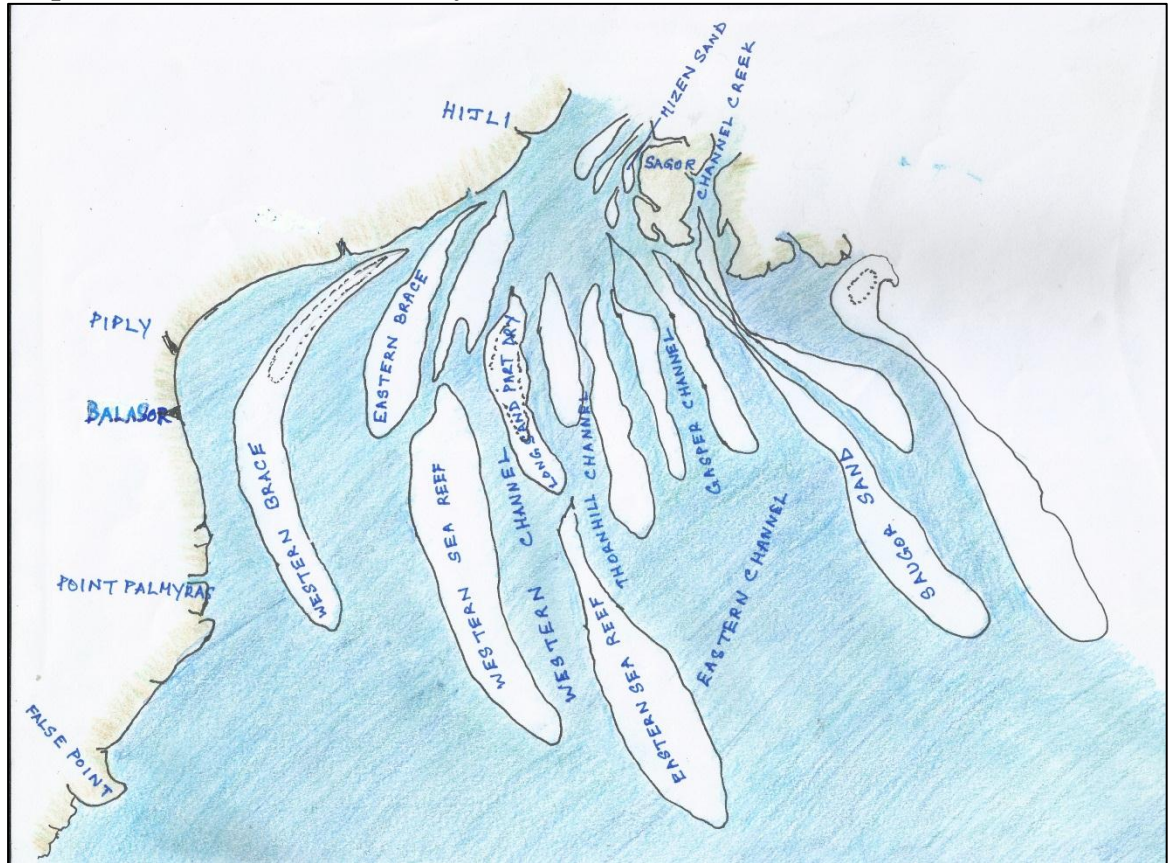
²¹⁶ Ibid.

Map 3.7: Eighteenth century Map showing Sagor along with Channels and Shoals at the Estuary



Source: Adapted from National Library of India, Cartography Section, Map of the Soondurbuns from Actual Survey showing the Recent Grant of Land and those of 1780. Also the Environs of Calcutta comprising the 24 Pergunnas and Hoogly Districts with part of Jessore and Nuddea, Captain Thomas Princep of Engineers, Late Surveyor of the Soondurbuns, 1780. Picture Courtesy: Kushal Gangopadhyay.

Map 3.8: Obstacles at the Estuary



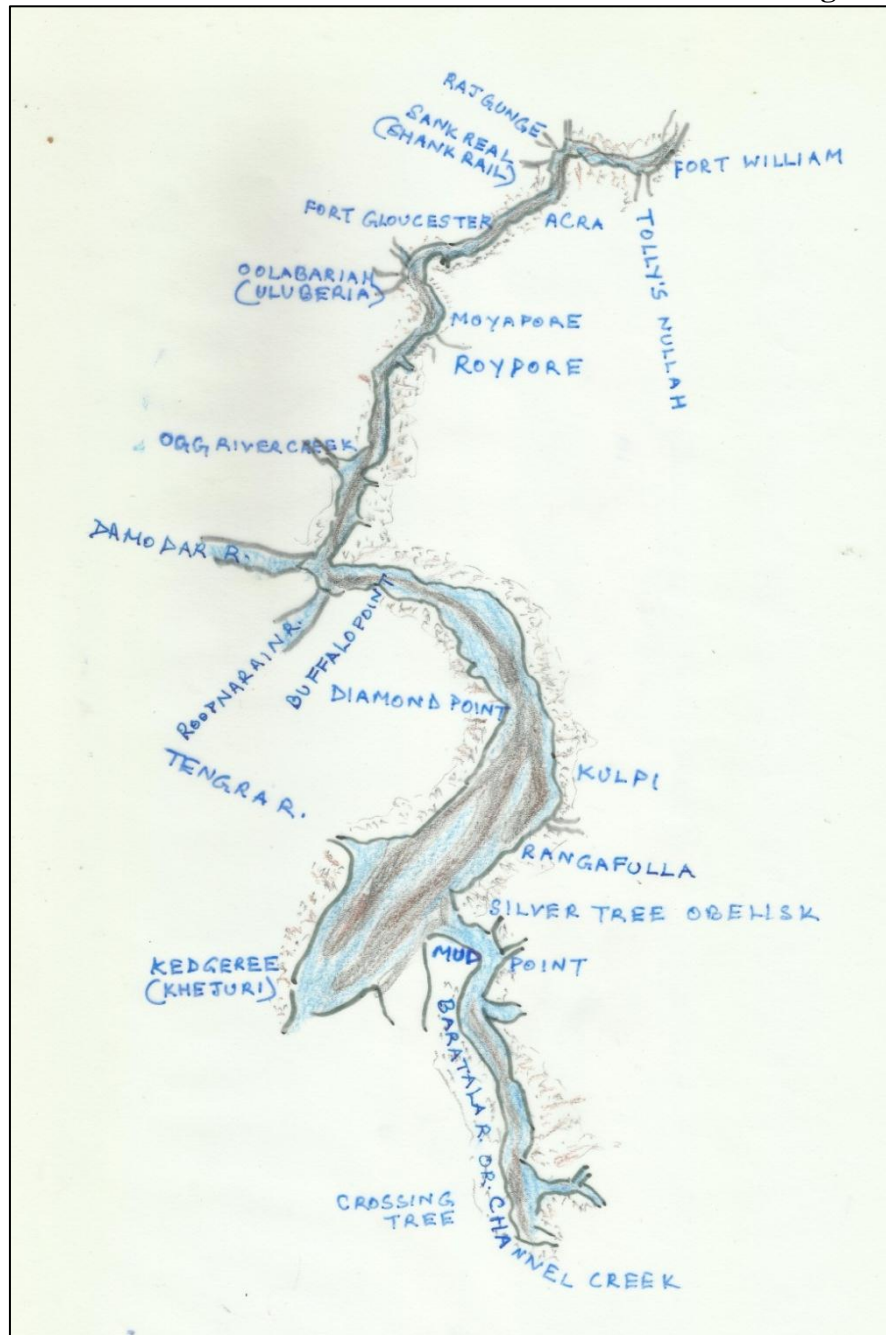
Source: Adapted from NAI, Cartography Section, Catalogue of the Historical Maps, F 102/11, *Hughly River—A Survey of Sands and Channels at the Entrance of the River Hughly*, 1841, by Capt. R. Loyd. H. Leonard and J.G. Herons, *Selections from the Records of the Government of India in the Public Works Department*, no. XLV, Public Works Department Press, 1864. Map not to scale.

Map 3.9: Obstructions in the Lower Segment of the River Hooghly



Source: Adapted from NAI, Cartography Section, F.165/20, *Sketch of the Hugli River from Hooghly Point to Mud Point expressive of the situation of Diamond Harbour with the Channel and Soundings from thence to Mud Point*, ND. Map not to scale

Map 3.10: The River from Calcutta to the Channel Creek near Sagor



Source : Adapted from NAI, National Library of India, J.F. Stace, *To the Merchants of Calcutta These Maps of the Hugli, Bhagruttee, Ganges, Goorae, Barrashee and Soonderbund Rivers used by the Steamers in the Inland Navigation, From Calcutta to Channel Creek*, Sheet 1 of the River Hooghly. Map not to scale.

Entry to the Sundarban area and especially into the estuary of the Hugli via Sagor involved dexterous manoeuvring and having a very clear picture of the hurdles at the juncture of the Bay and the river. An array of European survey charts and

maps have been prepared for guiding the safe landing into the approaching mooring points including Sagor itself. One such interesting survey map is ‘A Survey of the Sands and Channels forming the Entrance into the River Hooghly’ by R. Lloyd in 1841²¹⁷. It not only shows the leading channels and sandbanks and flats but denotes in fathoms the depth of those flats (established by soundings), the light house, the floating lights, the buoys and detailed notes on the condition at certain points during high water besides providing other crucial navigational tips. Other rare survey maps like ‘River Hugli from Kulpi to Lower Gasper Light Vessel Surveyed between December 1803 to May 1804’²¹⁸ and ‘Soondurbuns from Actual Survey shewing the Recent Grants of Land and Those of 1780 and also the Environs of Calcutta comprising the 24 Pergunnas and Hooghly Districts’²¹⁹ caught my attention for furnishing detailed hydrographical information: both fluvial and marine, pertaining to the estuary and lower course of the Hugli river close to Sagor. Also mention may be made of the maps like ‘Sketch of the Hugli River from Hooghly Point to Mud Point expressive of the situation of Diamond Harbour with the Channel and Soundings from thence to Mud Point’, ‘To the Merchants of Calcutta These Maps of the Hugli, Bhagruttee, Ganges, Goorae, Barrashee and Soonderbund Rivers used by the Steamers in the Inland Navigation, From Calcutta to Channel Creek, Sheet 1 of the River Hooghly’, which have highlighted the sections of the Hugli river from Sagor to the interior, showing major blockades.

VIII. Light House or Floating Light Vessels

To ensure a safe entry and exit at the turbulent junction of the river and the sea, the concerned authorities thought of other plans apart from having a good pilot service. There were proposals to install a lighthouse at Sagor. Soon it was realized that a lighthouse alone could not have solved the problem of ushering in vessels towards the anchorage, for nothing was constant in and around the island. It was the terrain of shifting of suitable entrances, moving shoals and braces. Up to the

²¹⁷NAI, Cartography Section, A Survey of the Sands and Channels forming the Entrance into the River Hooghly’ by R. Lloyd in 1841.

²¹⁸National Library of India, Cartography Section, River Hugli from Kulpi to Lower Gasper Light Vessel Surveyed between December 1803 to May 1804’.

²¹⁹NLI, Cartography Section, Soondurbuns from Actual Survey shewing the Recent Grants of Land and Those of 1780 and also the Environs of Calcutta comprising the 24 Pergunnas and Hooghly Districts.

end of the eighteenth century the eastern channel was used to approach the Hugli river.

Altho' ships might go out to sea from the deep water at Sagor, either by the middle channel, or the eastern channel, yet the latter is far preferable because there is as much water in it at low water, as there is in the middle channel at high water²²⁰.

By the latter half of the same century, the western channel was being explored from Sagor island by the seamen as an approachable passage to the sea²²¹. Already the light houses were erected at a considerable expense at Kedgerree and Kaukhali 'as it is probable that the Western channels may open, when it might prove highly beneficial to the commerce of the Port'²²². In such a scenario of impermanence, it seemed doubtful whether a light house could be of much help. Instances of 'building a useless Light House between Kedgerree and Hidgellie'²²³ were cited. Instead floating lights were proposed. An extract from a letter by the Marine Surveyor General to the Secretary to the Marine Board dated February 29, 1812 reads,

Whether the spot of ground now clearing on Saugor island will form a proper site for a Light House to be seen by ships at Sea, and if not, on what part of the island it will be preferable to erect one, although.....I am apprehensive that, without the addition of a Floating Light, in a station further to the Southward, a Light House erected on any part of that island could not be usefully seen by ships at sea, Saugor Sand been considered dangerous at low water 20 Miles to the Southward of the Southernmost Extremity of the island, r in about the Latitude 21°15 North and the Tails of Saugor Sand extending as far to the Southward as 21°6 or 7 North where the Depth is between 4 and 5 fathoms at low water²²⁴.

In a letter to the Captain John Hayes, the Master Attendant, it was suggested that if a floating light could be laid in five or a half four fathoms water, at the tail of the Gasper Sand, it could be of great help to ships ingressing and egressing through the river Hugli.

²²⁰ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 19, December 23, 1776, p. 3.

²²¹ Jean Sutton, *The East India Company's Maritime Service 1746—1834, The Master of the Eastern Seas*, The Boydell Press, 2010, p. 33.

²²² NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 8, January 29, 1813.

²²³ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 66, May 6, 1814.

²²⁴ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 27, April 10, 1812, p. 1.

When a light is placed as above mentioned, a ship could always ascertain what part of the channel it was in, and would be able to run into Saugor Roads, where she could find smooth water and could get that assistance, would also be a guide for ships and Pilot Vessels working down at Night, as they would be able to see the Light till they got below the Middle Ground and the most dangerous part of the Eastern Sea Reef, which would render the Navigation of the Eastern Channel more easy and safe²²⁵.

However, later Hayes himself had realized that putting up floating light vessels was not a prudent idea because it involved spending a huge amount of public money. Hayes pointed out that such equipment would be rendered ineffective ‘during the boisterous weather which so often prevails at the entrance of the Hugli’.

Because the rapidity of the Tides and Freshes in the lower channels at the entrance of the Hugli and the tremendous confused ground swell occasioned by the tides....often in opposition to the continued severe gales during the South West Monsoon and occasional storms in both seasons makes it doubtful to me whether any vessel would ride themand that any light would be kept up under such circumstancesI deem it my duty to differ with the Committee to the expediency of the Floating Light Vessels as their employment may lead to ships wreck²²⁶.

That the unpredictability at the brink of the mainland built up a nagging tension, is evident from yet another letter dated March 20, 1812, to the Secretary of the Marine Board; ‘the season is now so far advanced as to render the passage of boats loaded with materials necessary.....the passage of boats down to Saugor will be speedily impracticable and even dangerous for river sloops’²²⁷.

In a letter dated September 14, 1813, in view of the turbulent weather and ever changing aquatic realm, putting up permanent light houses were proposed upon the Point Palmyras and Sagor²²⁸. The light house was constructed in 1821 in Kachuberia. By 1822, Sagor and its adjoining Edmonstone island were declared unfit for light houses and the Marine Board was again in favour of ‘the establishment of floating lights as guidance to the shipping was entering the River

²²⁵ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 10, January 29, 1813.

²²⁶ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 66, May 6, 1814, pp. 6-7.

²²⁷ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 28, April 10, 1812, p. 2.

²²⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

Hooghly²²⁹. However a second light house was proposed to be built near the first one instead of maintaining a light house at Kedgerie²³⁰. Nevertheless, the controversy whether a light house or the floating light vessel or both were the need of the hour; seemed to have continued for a long time.

²²⁹ NAI, Home Public, Proceeding no. 328, July, 1822, pp. 100-101.

²³⁰ WBSA, General (General), April 1-June 24, 1835.

Map 3.11: A Typical Navigational Chart showing the Estuary and the island of Sagor



Source: National Library of India, River Hugli, Kalpi to Lower Gasper Light Vessel, Surveyed by the Officers of the River Survey Department, December 1903 to May 1904. Picture Courtesy, Kushal Gangopadhyay.

IX. Conclusion

The Sagor Island Society failed to live up to the expectations it had generated. During the period of five years, only a very small space of about seven miles in

circumference was cleared. The project flopped also due to lack of availability of basic information essential to provide a definite direction to an ambitious project. It cost in total 7,000 human lives including the death of people in the flood of 1833 and death during clearing activities²³¹. Indeed, nature's furies took repeated tolls on the inhabitants of the island. Special mention may be made of the natural disasters in 1864 in which about three fourths of the inhabitants (4,137 persons) perished²³², and also in 1867.

After 1863, around 31,190 *bighas* of land was reclaimed, but following the two cyclones much of the land got submerged in saline sea water and only 2,750 *beeghas* remained intact. According to O'Malley, though the work of reclamation was continued in right earnest since the 1860s, as a result of which the northern part of the island was brought under the plough, the southern portion was still under the cover of jungle²³³.

The following critique cited from an official record aptly summarizes the fact that the ambitious project of land reclamation of Sagor was envisaged without taking into consideration certain basic facts. Further, the failure of the other plans of developing the island as a sanatorium cum resort that were being considered from at least 1785 onwards²³⁴; designed somewhat in the fashion of the sea side English sanatorium of Brighton; could be explained too by the following observations on the Sagor island project.

Had the projectors of the Saugor island scheme confined their views to the banishment of tigers, the growth of rice and the making of salt, we could have nothing to complain of.; but when Members of Council, Judges of the Supreme Court, Generals, Civil Servants, Divines, Lawyers, Physicians, Military Officers and Merchants propose that farms and granaries, and towns and busy population shall succeed, in defiance of the tides and inundations, to all the frightful silence of sterility and pestilence.....it might have been expected that some step had previously been taken to ensure its success²³⁵.

²³¹ WBSA, Appendix F, Fever Hospital, p. 494.

²³² P.C. Roy Choudhury, *Temples and Legends of Bengal*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, First Edition, 1967, p. 148.

²³³ O'Malley, *Gazetteers: 24-Parganas*, pp. 257-258.

²³⁴ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 62, August 30, 1785.

²³⁵ WBSA, Appendix F, Fever Hospital, p. 494.

In general, the Europeans were willing to ‘bestow their capital in promotion of what they believed to be an object of great public utility; but all hopes of success was vain, owing to the signal want of every precious information requisite to give direction and effect to their endeavours’²³⁶. So it was obvious that the plans and investments lacked the long term vision of the sustainability as well as financial viability of the projects in a place like Sagor that was difficult to access and even more difficult to survive in. In an over enthusiasm of locating an ‘insular climate’ of a resort in the proximity of the metropolis, certain vital issues were ignored.

In a record of 1785 the island was praised for its healthiness and contrasted with the other marshy terrains around its neighbourhood²³⁷. By 1822, it had turned into a land of pollution and den of illness²³⁸. Its humid weather and swampy surroundings had the propensity to enhance certain ailments and induce specific diseases. Viewed against this perspective, the project of the Sagor Island Society could be described, as per the British records as a ‘wasteful expenditure in the ill-judged project’²³⁹.

In fact any project of land reclamation cum colonization meant undertaking calculated risks, as the entire Sundarban area had witnessed destructive cyclonic onslaughts on many occasions. Much later in the 1850s, an early meteorologist from England named Henry Piddington, with pioneering work²⁴⁰ on cyclones in the subcontinent,²⁴¹ had resisted the idea of setting up Port Canning at the mouth of Mutla²⁴². In an open letter to Lord Dalhousie, he stated that the port would not be able to withstand the cyclonic rage and accompanying inundations. He was proved right in 1867.

Based on Henry Piddington’s warning, the survey committee speculated upon the risk involved in undertaking the project. Further, the Committee felt that Piddington’s observations on Port Canning’s susceptibility to cyclone, inundations and subsidence of land were applicable to all the areas in and around the

²³⁶WBSA, Appendix F, Fever Hospital, p. 493.

²³⁷NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 62, August 30, 1785.

²³⁸NAI, Home Public, Proceedings, vol. 328, July 1822, p. 79.

²³⁹WBSA, Appendix F, Fever Hospital, p. 494.

²⁴⁰Henry Piddington, *Sailors’ Horn Book for the Law of Storms, Being a Practical Exposition of the Theory of the Law of Storms and its Uses to Mariners of All Classes*, London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1848.

²⁴¹Piddington had coined the term cyclone.

²⁴²Ranjan Chakrabarti, ‘The Kolkata Cyclone/Earthquake of 1737: Random Scribbles’, *Vidyasagar University Journal of History*, vol. 1, 2012-13, p. 15.

Sunderbans. It was further observed that the urbanization of Calcutta proceeded ignoring the risks of natural calamities.

If such a visitation be really of probable occurrence the objection is conclusive against the establishment of a Town on the Mutlah or on any other river in the Sunderbana, for Mr Piddington's objection applies equally to all of these²⁴³.

The study of various maps clearly shows that the segment of the river from Calcutta to Sagor was full of braces. Further, the entrance to the river at Sagor had a number of dangerous shoals and sand banks. Hence crossing the estuary needed dexterous maneuvering. Additionally, unlike the intermediate reach of the river at Hooghly region that was losing its depth and Kasimbazar's extremely meandering bed at the upper reach; Sagor at the estuary was prone to many unpredictable natural variables like the interplay of tides and currents apart from cyclone, torrential rain and flood. Despite such problems, the Bhagirathi Hugli represented the major transportation linkage supplying goods from towns and marts that were gathered in Calcutta; to upper India via Ganga and southwards to other parts of India and foreign countries via sea. Along with the formation of many blockades in various parts of the river, the flow of river was declining. Particularly, the passage below Calcutta towards the opening at the sea had been rendered unpredictable by the interplay of high and ebb tides as the segment of the river had declined into a tidal channel. So the high road of commerce backed by very cheap transport system had been slowly languishing in western Bengal. The European investors had ignored the dismal condition of the major artery of communication.

In pursuing an obsessive interest towards revenue maximization, the British in Bengal adopted a blurred vision towards the feasibility of the project. Thus Sagor was 'one of those air bubbles which the speculators are so much addicted to forming'²⁴⁴. However, despite the callousness towards geography and environment, the European penetration changed Sagor's image from 'noxious wilderness'²⁴⁵ into a more hospitable space that awaited future explorations. The loathe associated with Sagor among a section of Europeans was gradually on the

²⁴³ WBSA, General, November 20, 1856.

²⁴⁴ William Huggins, *Sketches in India*, London, 1824, pp. 2-3.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

wane. It was accepted by all that a large part of the island with areas covered by natural vegetation was indeed full of possibilities.

Nevertheless, land reclamation projects did not come to a total stop but were continued in phases after the cyclone of 1864. Basically it was realized that steps had to be adopted to protect human life and land from the natural calamities. Presidency Commissioner Chapman undertook certain measures like construction of high and formidable embankments and creation of places of refuge in the central part of each estate and suggested that the houses should be located within a distance of a mile from the place of refuge²⁴⁶. Moreover in 1875, areas like Mud Point, Ferintosh, Shikarpur, Trowerland, Bamankhali, Dhobelat were granted once again to the grantees free of rent in perpetuity²⁴⁷. The state assumed the ownership of the rest of the land. After a gap of about two decades, reclamation was resumed to fulfill the interests of the British government, at the cost of the well-being and basic amenities of the residents²⁴⁸. However, by the early nineteenth century, parts of the island were colonized. Further, during the annual festive season, a large number of pilgrims visited the place as usual.

So the last among the three chosen locales of my study, Sagor was unique in its own right. Though the projects undertaken to develop the island at the turn of the nineteenth century were shelved for various reasons; the island's innate potentialities as a source of revenue was indisputable. Recently the Government of India, Ministry of Shipping, has launched the Sagarmala programme to drive a port led development along the entire coast of India. Fourteen coastal economic zones have been identified with one in West Bengal where a new port in Sagor is proposed²⁴⁹. Thus the value of Sagor is being considered even today. So while the island still holds the prospect for development in the twenty first century; whereas Kasimbazar and Hooghly passed their prime as the eighteenth century came to an end.

²⁴⁶ Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, *The Sundarbans*, p. 85.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ R.K. Agarwal, D.K. Rai, A. Chandra eds., *The Sagarmala Post*, Ministry of Shipping, Government of India, vol. 1, January 2017, p. 11. <http://shipping.gov.in/showfile.php?lid=2422> Accessed on 3.3.17.

SECTION 2

This particular section comprising chapters four and five; attempts to emphasize that the history of Bengal had been moulded by various natural forces, apart from socio political and economic dynamics. Among those natural factors; the river system had intervened in myriad ways as a nurturer and a curse with the places located along its bank. To highlight this, an interface between the Bhagirathi river system and the *Bargis* at Kasimbazar and Arakanese Portuguese raiders or the *Maghs* at Sagor; are analysed in detail.

Chapters four and five have attempted to showcase in terms of a case study of Kasimbazar and Sagor, the binary and opposite roles played by the Bhagirathi river system as a moderator of the Maratha *Bargi* onslaughts in Kasimbazar Murshidabad belt and the Arakanese Portuguese raids in Sagor. While in case of one the river manifested its protective side by creating obstacles, in case of the other the Bhagirathi acted as a facilitator of destructive inroads into a particular locale. The *Bargis* were mostly contained within the Bhagirathi's western bank. The *Magh* forays from Chittagong and Arakan were directed towards the eastern delta and at times towards the river side villages and even important places located in the interiors of western Bengal.

CHAPTER 4

The *Bargi* Raiders and Kasimbazar

I. Introduction

The major chunk of Bengal lying in modern Bangladesh and the state of West Bengal in the Republic of India owes its birth to the delta building mode of the river system comprising the Ganga, Padma and Brahmaputra. The delta building activity involved a huge silt deposition by the rivers that led to the furtherance of the largest delta of the world. These rivers, meandering and bifurcating and interconnecting with the other channels forming innumerable tentacles through the vast tract of the deltaic plain, cross over the edge of the delta at the Sundarbans to pour into the Bay. Those rivers carry ‘the highest proportion of sediment of any world river system, amounting to about 25 per cent of the world total’¹. The spread of fertilizing silt by the river system led to prolific expansion of the agrarian frontier and the prosperity of Bengal. The river system comprising of tributaries, distributaries, big and small capillaries have furnished an effective infrastructure of navigation, travel, agriculture, trade, growth of settled human habitations.

However the benevolent Bhagirathi of the Ganga river system in the western Bengal could turn into the worst annihilator by bringing about floods, land encroachments, retreating bed, hair pin bends and loops, obstructions in the bed, pollution and disease. Moreover, the Bhagirathi in the western Bengal has posed piloting challenges in the form of bars, sand banks, *char* and seasonal dryness of the river bed.

The chapter attempts to emphasize that the history of Bengal had been moulded by various natural forces, along with the social, political, economic factors. It would explore the *Bargi* invasions in Kasimbazar and Murshidabad and whether the river system in any way determined the extent of the *Bargi* invasions. Much has been discussed on the *Bargi* depredations and its implications on the history of Bengal. Nevertheless, the river’s role has hardly been discussed in detail

¹ Iftekhar Iqbal, *The Bengal Delta: Ecology, State and Social Change, 1840—1943*, London: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2010, p. 1.

in the other works on the Maratha invaders in the context of Kasimbazar. The problem will be discussed in the context of Murshidabad Kasimbazar region and larger perspective of Bengal, whenever required. Within a short span of more than a decade, the *Bargis* committed acts of widespread looting, killing and torture to the young and old, men and women and perpetrated a reign of terror in certain parts of western Bengal. The seriousness of the *Bargi* incursions has been immortalized by a popular cradle song in *Bangla* that is sung even today.

II. Eighteenth Century Setting

Early modern Bengal portrayed a picture of apparent economic buoyancy. Much of the alluvial land produced bountiful crops and the place enjoyed a legacy of hundreds of years of commercial associations with other Asian countries and a healthy inland and coastal trade. Bengal's raw silk and cotton and silk goods were lucrative commercial items. Tome Pires wrote in 1521, the land is very productive of many foodstuffs: meat, fish, wheat and [all] cheap². In *Siyar-ul-Mutakkharein*, Bengal has been beautifully described in the following words: 'in consequence of so just an administration, the kingdom of Bengal, which is usually called the terrestrial paradise, enjoyed so much prosperity as to diffuse everywhere abundance and happiness analogous to its title'³.

Streams of merchants from the north and west of the subcontinent and also Asia made Bengal their home, along with the Armenians and Europeans. The Mughals were apprehensive of the activities of the Portuguese in their settlement of Hooghly that culminated in the fall of the town in 1632 during Shah Jahan's tenure. The British trading Company made an entry into Bengal and hoped to capture the Portuguese trade. Other European companies of the Dutch, and French too made their economic interests quite explicit in Bengal and India by setting up factories and townships close to the prosperous production centres much in the line of the British. Slowly and steadily they were gaining a firm foot hold over trade and commerce. All of them nurtured covert political interests in the land of opulence.

² Tom Pires, A.N. Cortesao tr., *Suma Oriental*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1990, p. 88.

³ Mir Gholam Hussein Khan Tabatai, Haji Mustefa trans. from Persian and John Briggs collated., *Siyar-ul-Mutakkharein, A History of the Mahomedan Power in India During the Last Century*, vol. 1, London: John Murray, 1832, p. 383.

The image of an eternal peace and stability in Mughal times was more of a myth than reality. The long period was marred by wars of succession and fratricidal squabbles that flared up at the demise of each strong ruler. There were revolts and various kinds of threat to security around the far flung frontiers. Troop movements to chase the fugitives and squash the rebels; their flights after being chased or the victory marches; was a constant factor disturbing settled life derived from agriculture and trade. Often there was no one responsible for the upkeep of peace and protection of the ordinary people.

Bengal too conformed to this picture of utter disorder when the Mughals got busy with serious political issues or when the Bengal *nawabs* were engaged in tackling the immediate problems of revolts and uprisings, raids and rapine. The centrifugal forces represented by the rebellious Afghan leaders, tribal chiefs and local *rajās* in the delta, virtually autonomous *subadars* in the distant corners of the loosely knit empire contributed greatly to an all pervasive anarchy. In the south eastern frontier of Bengal the rising power of Arakan was a perennial threat apart from that of the mutually squabbling north eastern states.

The plundering allied bands of a *zamindar* of Burdwan named Shobha Singh and an Afghan overlord named Rahim Khan desecrated parts of south western Bengal during Aurungzeb's tenure while the latter remained preoccupied with the Deccan campaigns. At some point in history a tie of convenience was forged between the Arakanese and the Portuguese in Bengal resulting in frequent penetrations into and disruptive attacks on the coastal villages - that remained a serious lingering concern well into the Company's tenure. The *Magh Firangi* infiltrations in Bengal were noticeable since late sixteenth century and continued till at least early nineteenth century. So Alivardi Khan had inherited a troubled legacy when he usurped the throne of Bengal *suba* in 1740.

However apparently the sagacious *nawab* had managed to install control over all his adversaries by 1741 and establish his supremacy over Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. His most avowed enemy Mir Baqar was pushed out of Orissa towards Deccan. A province of bounties, Bengal was known to the wider world for its material prosperity. Bengal, the most eastern province of the empire, and the only one which was entirely under the management of the Khalsa, or exchequer-office, produced the richest revenue to the crown, and the office of *divan*, or superintendent of revenue of that province, was one of the most important offices

in the empire. It was at this time filled by Jafer Khan, who had been appointed in the reign of Aurangzeb⁴.

However, before Alivardi could divert his attention towards ensuring peace and tranquility for his *suba*, a dreaded challenge came from central India in the form of the Maratha *Bargi* raiders who raked up an old issue of collecting *chauth* to destabilize Bengal for more than a decade (1740s-1750s). While the Arakanese and Portuguese penetrations from the eastern side continued to disturb coastal Bengal and the fringe islands, apart from their occasional forays in the interior for about more than a century and a half; a part of Alivardi's reign was marked by Maratha assaults from the south western India that left a sizeable portion of the western Bengal bruised and bleeding roughly between 1740 and 1750. The apparent reason for the Maratha raids was the perpetual failure of the Mughal emperor to pay the promised *chauth*, a fourth of the revenue of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa to the Maratha king Shahu Raja. It was said that since the last phase of Aurangzeb's reign the Mughal edifice had slumped into a path of steady decline and the Maratha power was on its path of a consistent ascendancy. In mid eighteenth century, the grant of *chauth* for the entire empire was extracted from the emperor. It was decided that the territories that were previously governed by the Mughals were to pay this tax⁵.

The marauding Maratha cavalymen who came annually to collect *chauth*, as promised by Aurangzeb, were called the *Bargis*. The word *Bargi* was a degenerated connotation of the Persian term *barghir* meaning 'a soldier who enlisted without a horse'⁶. As opposed to the Maratha *shiladar* soldiers who rode their own horses, the *barghir* soldiers were provided with the mount by the Maratha empire.

The brunt of the assault was borne by a major segment of the western Bengal for about a decade between 1740 and 1750. It continued beyond this period, though its frequency and intensity ebbed gradually. The settlement of Kasimbazar at the upper reach of the Bhagirathi, far away from the sea board, was located close to the southern limit of Murshidabad, the power centre of the

⁴Ibid., p. 52.

⁵ NAI, *Calendar of Persian Correspondence*, vol. 3, 1770-1772, with an introduction by Muzaffar Alam and S. Subrahmanyam, Delhi: Primus Books, 2013, pp. 284-85.

⁶ R.G.S. Cooper, *The Anglo Maratha Campaigns and the Contest for India; The Struggle for Control of the South Asian Military Economy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 21.

nizamat of the Bengal *suba*. As it was situated away from the open sea, the impact of storm waves, cyclone, earthquake were rather scaled down, though flood, land encroachments, swamp formation were common. Nevertheless both Murshidabad and Kasimbazar fell within the route march of the Maratha *Bargis* between 1740 and 50 that left behind a definite imprint on its history. Whereas the Arakanese Portuguese marauders slithered in stealthily on boats through the sinewy riverine capillaries; the Maratha *Bargis* descended in hordes 'like locusts' on horseback. Jadunath Sarkar felt that the concept of the 'organised looting' was popularised by the *Bargis* and later on taken up by the *Sanyasis* and the *Fakirs*⁷.

III. The *Bargi* Raids in Bengal

Initially this revenue was to come from the Deccan, but the emperor diverted the channel of revenue towards Bengal. Shahuji had appointed Raghuji, the governor of Berar *suba*, to collect the particular tax from the province of Bengal. He used to annually send the Maratha cavaliers under Mir Habib and Bhaskar Pandit. Their brutal exploitation in the name of tax collection were known in history as *Bargi* raids. They spearheaded the first major attack from the summer of 1742, closely followed by the second round of incursions in early 1743. The attacks spread over an extensive area of *rahr* and resulted in wanton destruction of crops, property along with mass butchering and torture. This remained the hallmark of the Maratha raids in *rahr* Bengal between 1740 and 50.

However, Bhaskar was murdered during the third Maratha invasion (June 1743-February 1744) at the instruction of the *nawab*⁸. Soon afterwards an Afghan and Maratha alliance of convenience was forged against the *nawab*. So the latter henceforth had to tackle a formidable united front spearheaded by Raghuji. This new phase was initiated during the fourth incursion (June 1644-March 1746 approximately). The collaborating group started indulging in yearly raids to Bengal. Situation was beyond the *nawab*'s control till at least 1748. In July 1749 the *Bargis* and the following year the Afghans were decimated. But an expensive peace had to be bought over by Alivardi in 1751. They were allowed revenue collection from south Orissa as the salary for the army and a yearly collection of

⁷ Jadunath Sarkar, *Fall of the Mughal Empire, 1739-1754*, vol. 1, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1997.

⁸NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, 1742-46, dated August 3 1744, p. 165.

chauth worth 12 lakhs from Orissa. A Maratha representative became the Deputy Governor of Orissa supposedly under Alivardi Khan⁹. But actually he was to function as an interface between the Marathas and the *nawab*.

The major primary source material for the *Bargi* raids in Bengal had been provided by Gangaram's contemporary Bangla narrative titled *Maharashtra Purana*. According to this text, the Maratha marauders used to burn down village after village, damaged fertile agricultural land, looted, dishonoured and killed women¹⁰, pursued widespread murder on a regular basis and indulged in unique methods of torture. A series of villages used to be set on fire in a row. *Annadamangal*, a contemporary account of Bharatchandra, the court poet of Nadia raja Krishnachandra, provided instances of looting and torturing of women folks, mass killings accompanied by setting the villages on fire in the following lines:

*Katilo bistor lok gram gram pudi,
Lutia loilo dhon jhiuri bouri*¹¹.

(Butchered many people after burning down village after village,
And treasures were looted; young girls and women were molested.)

Translation: Author

The main theme of *Maharashtra Purana* is the most authentic account of the *Bargi* horsemen recurrently desecrating the villages of western Bengal in the mid eighteenth century. The treatise has a religio-moralist angle to the causes triggering the raids and the subsequent course of events. As per its text, the *Bargis* were sent by Goddess Parvati to punish the *nawab* for his wrong doings like 'political disloyalty, breach of political trust' and his assault on the sacred temple of Bhubaneswar¹². However the cruelties and unethical acts of the Marathas evoked the goddess' displeasure who in the end aided the *nawab* to defeat his enemies. As Kumkum Chatterjee had most aptly conveyed, the presiding deity of Bengal, Parvati has been portrayed as the benefactor of the Muslim

⁹ Jadunath Sarkar, *Fall of the Mughal Empire*, vol. 1, pp. 81-82.

¹⁰ Gangaram, *The Maharashtra Purana, An Eighteenth -Century Bengali Historical Text*, Edward C. Dimock, Jr, and Pratul Chandra Gupta translated and annotated., Hyderabad: Orient Longman, Reprint, 1985, pp. 80-81.

¹¹ Bharatchandra Raygunakar, *Annadamangal*, Tarun Bandopadhyay ed., Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 2003, p. 37.

¹² Kumkum Chatterjee, 'Goddess Encounters: Mughals, Monsters and the Goddess in Bengal', *Modern Asian Studies*, March 2013, pp. 26-27.

http://kumkumchatterjee.weebly.com/uploads/2/6/8/7/26879838/goddess_encounters_published.pdf

Accessed on 19. 12. 15.

nawab Alivardi Khan¹³. It seems as though the Goddess was on the side of the just and right rather than backing a particular community that worshipped her. As the narrative progressed, we could perceive that the regional goddess provided a broader platform as a unifying force as both the Maratha raiders and the *nawab* received her blessings. Nevertheless, the fact remains that many parts of western Bengal were adversely affected to various degrees by the *Bargi* inroads. The headquarter of the *Nizamat* and its business hub also bore the brunt of the Maratha attacks.

IV. Kasimbazar and Murshidabad: A Historical Perspective

Kasimbazar lay one mile south of Murshidabad, according to Walter Hamilton¹⁴. (Refer to Map 4.1) The Kasimbazar Murshidabad area within Bengal was blessed with natural resources that facilitated an ample production and growth of silk and cotton and related items; apart from other agricultural products and items of daily use. A prolific producer of mulberry, silk was emblematic of Kasimbazar whose fame had spread far and wide. A much wider area encompassing Kasimbazar and its neighbouring Murshidabad came to be referred to by the English East India Company officials as the ‘Cossimbuzar Island’. It had made its mark in the commercial arena for its profuse production of raw silk and also coarse cotton, silk and cotton goods.

Besides, in the 1620s, the factors of the English East India Company had identified Murshidabad as the supplier of ‘infinite quantities’, cheap, ‘choicest stuffe’ and a place that harboured many ‘wynders, expert workers and cheap labour’¹⁵. It had trade links with north and western India and beyond - with Afghanistan and Persia and with South East Asia via the Bay. Also from the seventeenth century new commercial ties were being forged with the European companies. Many indigenous and Asian traders and later on the European companies utilised the strategically situated fertile belt cradled by the Bhagirathi, Jellenghy and Padma, as their commercial base and as a halting place before moving further up towards Patna and beyond. In course of time, the hinterland of

¹³Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁴ Walter Hamilton, *Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of Hindostan and the Adjacent Countries*, London: John Murray, 1820, p. 166.

¹⁵ W. Foster ed., *The English Factories in India, 1618-1621*, Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1906, p. 153.

Murshidabad Kasimbazar had turned into a leading commercial nucleus in Bengal.

The 'Cossimbuzar Island' located on the bank of the 'Cossimbuzar River'¹⁶ (Bhagirathi) encompassed a series of busy agro commercial settlements like Murshidabad, Bhagwangola, Azimgunge, Ziagunge, Plassey, Daudpore and many such places. The commercial centres specializing in the marketing of a wide variety of commodities like raw silk, coarse cotton and silk piece goods, rice, wheat, sugar, ivory ware were supported by a chain of *bazar*, *ganj*, *hat*, *gola*, and transshipment points. The mercantile compulsions led to the mushrooming of silk manufacturing nodes called *arangs* under royal patronage from the eighteenth century in Murshidabad and Malda region, which had integrated with the commercial web around Murshidabad Kasimbazar region. The Kasimbazar factory commanded over a large conglomeration of *arangs* spread over a far flung geographical area; Malda and Rajshahi in the north, Kumarkhali in Nadia in the south, as far as Burdwan in the west. Some of the *arangs* from which raw silk was procured were as follows: Puchareah, Silgunge, Malda, Nabobgunge, Bauleah, Commercolly and Rangpore at the far north east of the Padma¹⁷.

The silk production and trade were based mainly on the lattice of river route that hemmed together an extensive commercial realm. In Van den Brouke's map Mukhsudabad (Murshidabad) stood out as a major town located on the southern branch of the main road that came from Patna via Rajmahal and then from Mukhsudabad proceeded towards Burdwan, Midnapore, and Cuttack. One of its branches connected Mukhsudabad with Fathabad and proceeded towards Dacca. Another major road from Burdwan connected with the town through Midnapore and proceeded up to Ghoraghat¹⁸. Originally built to supplement the aquatic connectivity; the roads no longer remained very useful in Mughal Bengal¹⁹. Further, local roads of some commercial importance, which connected important towns and settlements of the hinterland of Kasimbazar; were

¹⁶ Both the phrases within quotes had been used by the Europeans.

¹⁷ NAI, Consultation, Home Public, no. 6, March 22, 1779.

¹⁸ Philip B. Calkins, 'The Role of Murshidabad As a Regional and Sub regional Center in Bengal, in Richard L. Park ed., *Urban Bengal*, Asian Studies Center, South Asian Series, Occasional Paper no. 12, p. 23.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

unmetalled, fair weather roads that fell to disuse during the Mughal period²⁰. Initially the Mughals and indigenous and Asian merchants, then the Armenians, the Dutch, and the French, the English Companies could penetrate into the nerve centre of silk trade at the *arang* level usually located deep in the interior of the province close to the mulberry belt; through the riverine web.

Those buyers gave cash advance to the *dadandars* who ensured that the artisans could supply a stipulated amount of products within a given time. After the English Company assumed political and economic power between 1757 and 1765; it introduced the system of contracts with producers that ensured that goods were sold directly only to the Company²¹. This was replaced by the agency system since late 1780s. A group of locals was employed by the Company in the capacity of the *gomastahs* to procure goods from producers at *arangs*. Silk piece goods and raw silk were sold only to the English East India Company and there was no other chain of go between like *dadni* merchants other than *gomastahs*²².

So, since late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the European factories of Kasimbazar and other areas of Bengal, hoarding bulks of high value commodities of considerable worth, became icons of wealth and hence targets of the raiders. Indeed at any point of time the European factories possessed wares of considerable worth in their holdings. For instance, 'At Cossimbuzar 40,000 *Gurrahs* and above 20,000 Silk Romals were Sorting for Prizing'²³. In fact the factories at any point of time had been handling high value rupees as well as bullion to be advanced to the intermediaries for example four chests of bullion was ordered to be sent to Kasimbazar factory²⁴.

Further, apart from being a well-known commercial hub since mid-seventeenth century; Murshidabad had assumed a very significant status as the political seat of the *nizamat* since 1704. It housed various departments of the government and had a regular footfall of a diverse section of society including bureaucrats, merchants and aristocracy. Important *shia* business community of Western Asia built their residences on invitation by the *nawab* Murshid Kuli

²⁰ K.M. Mohsin, *A Bengal District in Transition: Murshidabad, 1765-1793*, Dacca: The Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1973, p. 12.

²¹ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 'Eastern India', in Dharma Kumar ed., *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. 2, pp. 288-90.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 290.

²³ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, 1742-46, dated February 4, 1745-46, p. 315.

²⁴ NAI, Bengal Public Consultations, Microfilm, Accession no. 2665, July, 1726.

Khan. It was not surprising that such a prosperous area became a target for the marauding group.

V. The *Bargi* Assaults: Routes and Places

The *Bargis* preferred the dry seasons for their exploitative forays in parts of western Bengal. Extensive areas from Malda in the north up to Midnapore in south western Bengal were virtually under the control of the Marathas. Gangaram had focused mainly on the *Bargi* inroads of the early 1740s under the leadership of Bhaskar Pandit. According to his narrative, during one such instance of depredation, the Marathas had reduced to ashes innumerable villages from Midnapore to the Kasimbazar island.

They were as follows²⁵: ‘Chondrokona’, ‘Medinipur’, ‘Diganpur’, ‘Khirpai’, ‘Bardhaman’, ‘Nimgachhi’, ‘Shedpa’, ‘Shimila’, ‘Chandipur’, ‘Shyampur’, ‘Bandar Hugli’²⁶, ‘Shatshoika’, ‘Rajbati’, ‘Chandpur’, ‘Katthara Shorai’, ‘Damdyai’, ‘Jodupur’, ‘Bhatchhala’, ‘Merjapur’, ‘Chandra’, ‘Kurbon’, ‘Polashi’, ‘Bouchi Berora’, ‘Shomuddhagorh’, ‘Jarnnogor’, ‘Nodiya’, ‘Mahatapur’, ‘Shunontopur’, ‘Thoilo’, ‘Poranpur’, ‘Bhatra’, ‘Madra’, ‘Shordanga’, ‘Dhitpur’, ‘Changra’, ‘Jagirabad’, ‘Kumira’, ‘Boultoli’, ‘Nimda’, ‘Koroi’, ‘Koithon’, ‘Charoil’, ‘Shingi’, ‘Bashka’, ‘Ghoranath’, ‘Mostoil’, ‘Gotpara’, ‘Chandpara’, ‘Yagdiya’, ‘Ataihat’, ‘Pataihat’, ‘Danchihat’, ‘Bera’, ‘Bhaoshingho’, ‘Bikihat’, ‘Indrail Porgona’, ‘Kaga Magha’, ‘Jaumakandi’, ‘Beerbhun Porgona’, ‘Amdohora’, ‘Mohosherpur’, ‘Goalabhunchi’, ‘Shenbhunchi’, ‘Bishnupur’²⁷.

From there it seems the *Bargis* headed towards the Kasimbazar Murshidabad area after leaving behind Neehati, Uddharanpur and crossing a small channel called ‘Babla’²⁸. The villages that lay close to Kasimbazar had been traversed by the *Bargis*. For instance, they passed through ‘Mangonpara’, ‘Shatoi’, ‘Kamnogor’, ‘Mohula’, ‘Chourigachha’, ‘Kathaliya’, ‘Rangamati’, ‘Andharmanik’, ‘Goaljan’, ‘Budhoipara’, ‘Neyalishpara’ before reaching

²⁵ Gangaram, *Maharashtra Purana*, pp. 51-52.

²⁶ Could not loot and burn down Hooghly *Bandar* as faujdar Peer Khan stood as its vanguard.

²⁷ Bishnupur was mentioned, though from the text it is not clear whether it was burnt down or not.

²⁸ Gangaram, *Maharashtra Purana*, p. 52.

‘Dohopara’ close to Murshidabad. Then they reached ‘Hajigonge’²⁹ *hat* before arriving to loot and ransack Jagatseth’s mansion at Kasimbazar.

In this context the readers’ attention may be drawn towards a map of Rennell titled ‘The Provinces of Bengal Situated on the West Side of the Hoogly River: Maharatta Frontier’. The river has been clearly marked as the natural frontier to the parts of Bengal that lay on the general route march of the *Bargis*. The provinces mentioned in the map are as follows: Ramgarh, Birbhoom, Pachet, Burdwan, Bishnupore, Midnapore, Mayurbhanj, and Hooghly³⁰. Again those territories received the maximum impact of the raids because of being located close to their base in Central India. The most affected areas were the *chaklas* of Burdwan, Midnapore, Balasore, Cuttack, Birbhum, some parts of Rajshahi. In the inset of the map, a handful of places located on the eastern bank that came under a brief Maratha sway, have been mentioned. Those are as follows: Parts of Hooghly (on the other bank too), Metabpara Pargana, Orsali Pargana, Beer Pargana, and Patashpour Pargana³¹. Rajshahi has not been shown. After scrutinizing the map it could be assumed that the *Bargis* retained their influence primarily over extensive areas of the *rahr*. (See Map 4.2).

Interestingly the custom office, the *faujdar*’s bastion and the port; made Hooghly the most vital centre of the Mughal Government in Bengal, next to Murshidabad-Kasimbazar area. It was the Mughal naval base and contained three European factories cum settlements which allowed their ocean mariners to moor in the ports of Hooghly, Chinsurah, Chandernagore. Besides, it acted as an emporium for the merchandise from the interior of the *suba*. Thus this port settlement dealt in huge bulk of expensive cargoes, apart from containing the *faujdari* office. Also it functioned as the *Bukshbundar* (customs office). So Hooghly handled large volumes of high value cargo and collected customs duties. Further, the growing township had an elite group of citizens. Thus it was an important place in more ways than one and hence invited the raiders’ attention.

The Marathas had targeted to capture Hooghly and was successful in occupying it in July 1742. They entrenched themselves in Hooghly, made the local *zamindars* assess and collect revenues for some time, put their own men in

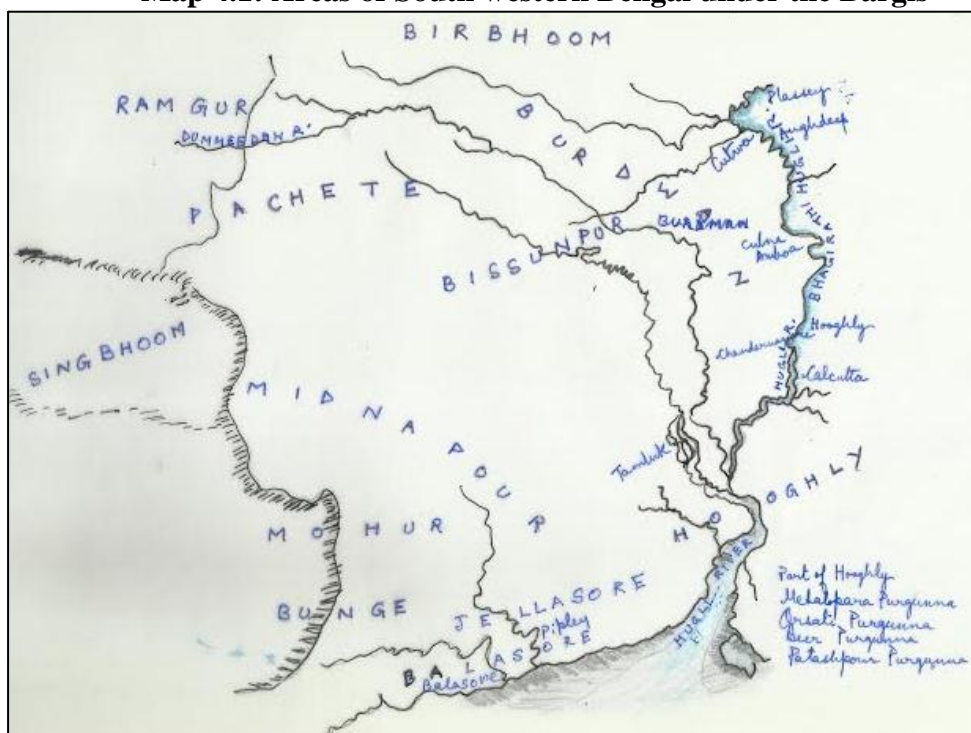
²⁹ All these places had been mentioned by Gangaram, *ibid*, p. 51.

³⁰ Rennell, ‘Maharatta Frontier’.

³¹ *Ibid*.

the office of *qazi*, *mahtasibs* and *faujdar* to revamp the administrative structure. In fact in many of the occupied territories the *zamindars*' agents paid them substantially to buy immunity for their own lands³². Further, after the capture of the fort at Hooghly, they 'thought it proper to order a New Survey of the Town andReport of the Town (was) being made'³³. On his journey from Chandernagore to Kasimbazar, Chanceliere took note of the number of villages he sailed past and the trail of devastation left by the *Bargis*. In his account, he specially mentioned Santipur³⁴, Plassey³⁵ and Kata (Katwa?)³⁶ and the extent of damage borne by them. It is to be noted that Kasimbazar and Murshidabad were not shown on the map of the *Maharatta Frontier*, though they were the most significant places in the *suba* till the 1750s. In 1742 and 1745 the Murshidabad Kasimbazar area had experienced major raids. Its adjoining areas were attacked many times.

Map 4.1: Areas of South western Bengal under the Bargis



Source: Adapted from NAI, Cartography Section, Catalogue of the MRIO-Miscellaneous Maps of the Survey of India, James Rennell, 'The Provinces of Bengal Situated on the West Side of the Hooghly River: Maharatta Frontier', 1779, 1761-6012-2A.

³²Ghulam Husain Salim, *Riyazu-S-Salatin*, Abdus Salam trans. Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1902, p. 343.

³³NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, 1742-46, dated January 8 1742, p. 31.

³⁴Indrani Ray, 'Journey to Cassimbazar and Murshidabad', in L. Subramanian ed., *The French and the Trade of the Indian Ocean*, p. 155.

³⁵Ibid., p. 161.

³⁶Ibid., p. 160.

At the same time it is true that the invaders never did subjugate Kasimbazar and Murshidabad. There had been instances like Mir Habib leading a raid into Murshidabad, looting the residences of the rich and robbing Jagatseth of as much gold and silver coins as possible³⁷. In 1746, they rampaged around Kasimbazar and Murshidabad, due to which production and business were stalled for some time. At the same time, the Marathas could not retain their strong hold in the *nawab's* head quarter during their movements. The study of Rennell's map did not show the principal political and business centres of the *suba*. Those places actually marked the northernmost tip of their itinerary and lay far away from their base in Central India. Murshidabad and Kasimbazar were not shown as the Maratha marauders could not occupy those places. The attacks were deliberate and disruptive, but they were not backed by any long term political strategy. Though the capital city did neither have a wall nor a ditch³⁸, Murshidabad's apparent vulnerability did not fire any political ambition among the raiders as probably they were apprehensive of Alivardi's might.

The route march to Kasimbazar and Murshidabad could be hypothecated on the basis of some facts provided by Blochmann's work³⁹ that drew heavily from Van den Brouke's map. A major Mughal road or *shahi rastah* (royal road) touched Patna, Mungher and Rajmahal to reach Sooty. A road branched off from there to Murshidabad, Plassey and Agradeep. So there could have been one definite way to the capital once the raiders reached Sooty after descending from the undulating passes of Sakrigali and Teliagarhi near Rajmahal. The *Bargis* generally avoided this easy option perhaps because it was close to Bhagwangola. Besides being a natural port at the cradle of the Padma and close to the Jellenghy in the east and the Bhagirathi in the west; it was developed as a *nawabi* naval base that guarded the entry by the river to Murshidabad to its immediate south. The Maratha menace had prompted a thorough revamping of the station. Besides, from time to time a thousand cavalymen and a thousand foot soldiers got stationed there as vanguards to the capital's sensitive entry point⁴⁰.

³⁷ Author, *Riyaz*, p. 341.

³⁸ Yusuf Ali, 'Ahwal-I-Mahabat Jang', J.N. Sarkar trans, *Bengal Nawabs*, p. 100.

³⁹ H. Blochmann, *Contributions to the Geography and History in Bengal: Muhammedan Period*, Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1968.

⁴⁰ Nikhilnath Ray, 'Oitahaashik Chitro Murshidabad Kahini', in Kamal Chaudhury ed., *Murshidabader Itihaash*, vol. 1, Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 2008, p. 129.

So this route was partially followed by the *Bargis* during their attack on Murshidabad in 1742. They did make their entry from the Rajmahal hills but then cut through Pachet and Mayurbhanj to reach the suburbs of Midnapore⁴¹. It could be logically surmised that the raiders could have headed straight to Burdwan and Murshidabad. Another option was the second *shahi rastah* from Burdwan to ‘Baklesar’ (Bakreswar) in Beerbhoom to reach Murshidabad Kasimbazar area. They swooped upon their targeted place after ransacking neighbouring Dahapara and *ganj* Muhammad Khan and crossed over at the ferry of Hajigunj to reach Kasimbazar and Murshidabad⁴². As the settlement had spread to the other side of the Bhagirathi within the ‘Kasimbazar Island’, they had to resort to boats at times in the post monsoon season when the river bed was yet to turn completely fordable. The Maratha troop under Mir Habib attacked Murshidabad but ultimately abandoned the idea of assaulting it and retreated to their favourite camp site at Katwa for rest and refueling after ‘desolating the surrounding country side across the river’⁴³. They retreated from Katwa as the river turned turbulent at the onset of monsoon⁴⁴. Cradled between the Ajay in the west and Bhagirathi in the east, it was naturally moated from three sides and apart from neighbouring Murshidabad, the port and the customs office at Hooghly could be easily accessed from there. Gangaram’s account mentioned the *Bargis* camping at Katwa a number of times. For example,

*Nobab shaheb jodi aila killate,
Tobe shob borgi joro hoilo katoate*⁴⁵
(When the nawab sahib returned to the palace,
Then all the *Bargis* gathered at Katwa.)

Translation: Author

It was situated very close to two major routes radiating from Burdwan; one went towards Kasimbazar touching ‘Baklesar’ and the other passed over Salimabad to the south east of Burdwan and headed towards Hooghly, Bhushna and beyond. The bastion of the *nawabs* had to be approached from Katwa by proceeding northward almost straight along the west bank of the river. Hooghly could be

⁴¹ Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 337.

⁴² Gangaram, *Maharashtra Purana*, p. 52; Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 341.

⁴³ Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 342.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Gangaram, *Maharashtra Purana*, p. 53.

approached by swooping down south. Though some of the imperial roads existed in this period, by the late eighteenth century most of the roads, even the local ones, had turned decrepit⁴⁶.

The marauders did not deflect much from the western bank of the river to penetrate into the deep interiors. Still, a *morcha* or a rampart of mud was built along the western bank of the Bhagirathi through Dahapara, in 1742 as a defense against the Marathas⁴⁷. Though the Kasimbazar island was relatively safer than the rest of the *rahr* area due to its natural aquatic boundary and due to the vigilance it enjoyed as the headquarter of the *nizamat*, *Riyaz* noted⁴⁸ that during the dry season the people of Murshidabad often crossed over to the eastern and northern Bengal, which were seldom accessed by the *Bargis*. Many had taken shelter in Dacca⁴⁹. In 1745 the Marathas reached Bhagwangola and it was rumoured that commanded by Aga Sharif, they were proceeding to attack Dacca⁵⁰. However, Kasimbazar hardly bore any far reaching political impact unlike in the case of Hooghly. Indeed, despite Gangaram's claim that the Marathas did not plunder Hooghly⁵¹, *Riyaz* endorses that the capture of Hooghly was a planned move to debilitate the *nawabi* regime. Contrarily the incursions in and around Murshidabad and Kasimbazar did not reflect any long term political or commercial strategy. Nevertheless even if they mostly followed their routine marches along the river; its impact on the socio economic arena cannot be ignored.

⁴⁶K.M. Mohsin, *A Bengal District in Transition*, pp. 12-13.

⁴⁷ Purna Chandra Majumdar, *The Musnud of Murshidabad (1704-1904), Being a Synopsis of the History of Murshidabad for the Last Two Centuries, to Which are Appended Notes of Places and Objects of Interest in Murshidabad*, Murshidabad: Publisher Sharoda Ray, 1905, p. 73.

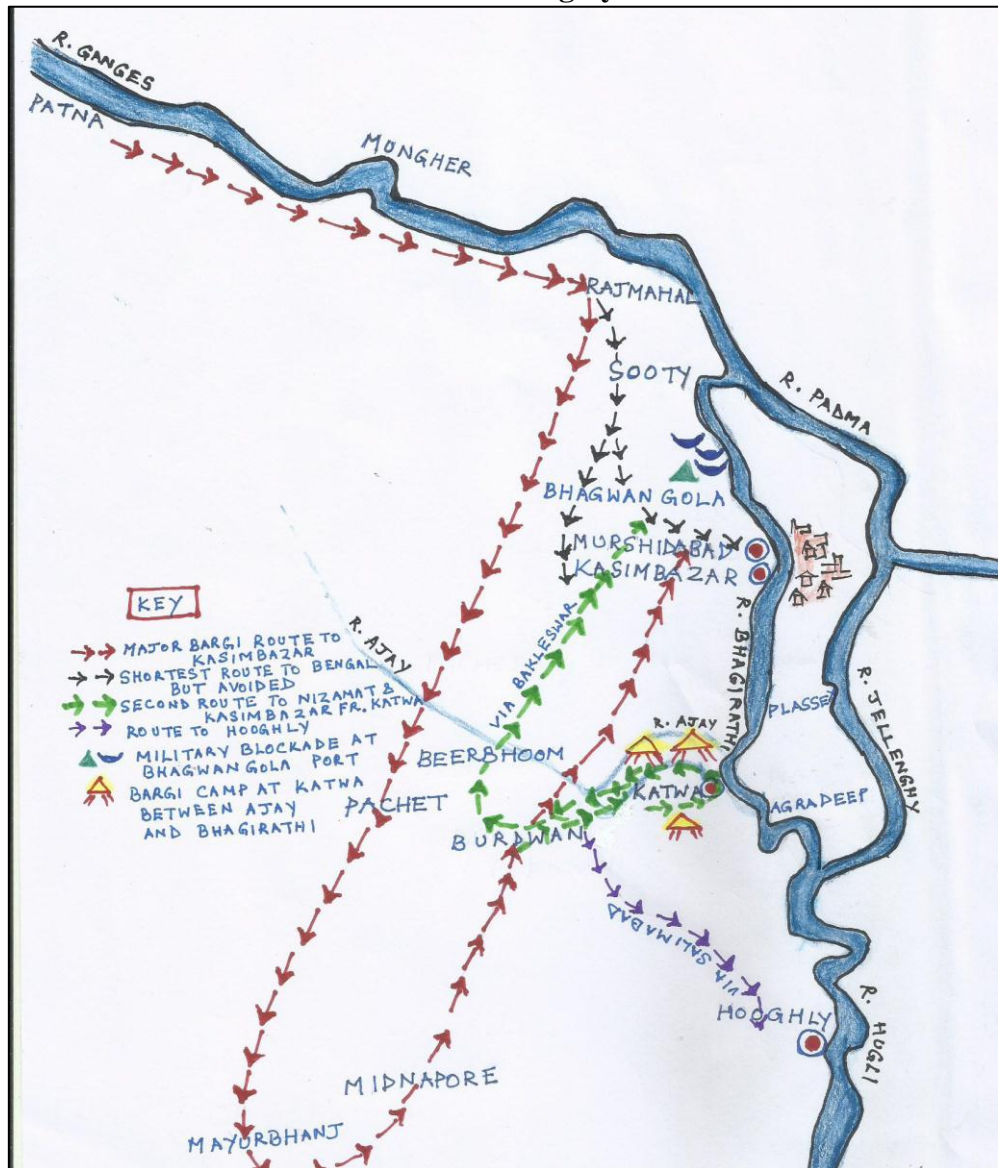
⁴⁸Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 344.

⁴⁹ NAI, Dacca Factory Record, Microfilm, Accession no. 2696, April, 1742, p. 239.

⁵⁰ NAI, Dacca Factory Record, Microfilm, Accession no. 2696, December 1745, p. 385.

⁵¹ Gangaram, *Maharashtra Purana*, p. 27.

Map 4. 2: Bargi Route March towards Kasimbazar, Murshidabad and the Port of Hooghly



Source: Author

VI. Strategy and Ecology

Bargi Tactics

Once penetrating as far as Plassey and Daudpore, the Marathas had burnt down a cluster of settlements. However, as the monsoon rain started pouring, they retreated as far as Katwa on the further west, a little away from the river. The Bhagirathi was brimming full and the *Bargis* contained themselves in and around Katwa and demolished some villages in the interior. While it could be true that the Marathas used to cease their destructive spree at the onset of monsoon, it is also a fact that rural habitations around their temporary camps during those lull periods

were not always spared from plunder. A handful of letters of the Council in Calcutta addressed to the Court of Directors mentioned the Maratha rampage⁵².

The raiders adopted various tactics to retain a superior edge over their opponents. The same river along Murshidabad Kasimbazar belt used to dry up in summer and post monsoon and turn almost fordable. In 1745, the *Bargis* led by Raghuji attacked the western side of the river. They had made a good study of the caprices of the river Bhagirathi. In dry months the cargo vessels were unable to ply to Murshidabad. So Bhagwangola at the junction of the Bhagirathi and Padma, on the right bank of the latter located six to seven *kos* up from Murshidabad⁵³, served as the transshipment point of the capital. Raghuji had blockaded the supply line of grains in order to pressurize the *nawab* by creating food scarcity.

Another tactics adopted by the marauders was an unpredictable route march; as is evident from the *Maharashtra Purana*⁵⁴. More often than not they took recourse to circular as well as circuitous and less traversed routes. A few examples of their unique route march have been cited below. In 1742, on his way back to Murshidabad from Orissa, at Midnapore Alivardi Khan got the news of the Maratha troops approaching Murshidabad with Bhaskar Pandit at the lead. He anticipated the enemy attack from the much traversed route of Sakrigali and Teliagarhi passages near Rajmahal, which were considered the ‘key’ to Bengal in those days⁵⁵. The Marathas did not enter the *suba* from there. Instead they caught the *nawab* unawares by entering into Midnapore through the jungles of Pachet. The Marathas usually used to enter through the hill passes of Orissa near Balasore or south western Bihar to come into Bengal⁵⁶.

An eye witness named ‘Kishun Gopal Messur, a native and inhabitant of Sona in the Jungle Terry district’⁵⁷ had taken note of one of the Maratha routes to enter Bengal in his diary. The note depicts a typical circuitous movement as well as deviation; leaving behind a confusing trail.

⁵² K.K. Datta, *Alivardi and His Times*, p. 92.

⁵³ Jean-Baptiste Chevalier, *Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India, 1752-1765: Historical Memoirs and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal and Tibet*, Jean Deloche ed., LBS Publications, Guwahati, 2008.

⁵⁴ Gangarama, *Maharashtra Purana*, pp. 51-53.

⁵⁵ Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 251.

⁵⁶ Nitin Sinha, *Communication and Colonialism in Eastern India*, p. 93.

⁵⁷ NAI, Cartography Section, Journal 19, 1810-20, p. 149.

The Mahrattas came from Nagpore by the Horsurmah Pass and after entering remained concealed in it, then got in motion and proceeded towards the town of Ghidore from thence to Curruckpore and Bhaugulpore, from whence after plundering the country they proceeded towards Bengal, but finding the pass of Sicrigully occupied they returned to Monghyr, from whence they were reconducted to the Horsumah Pass⁵⁸.

Alivardi's ace soldiers won almost all pitched frontal wars. But the hallmark of the *Bargi* mode of warfare was a raiding technique of 'hit and run' mounting on a light and dexterous cavalry that ensured surprise attack via unpredictable unexpected circuitous route, speed, and swift mobility. It stressed on diversionary assault, logistical interdiction and avoidance of pitched battle as far as possible⁵⁹.

The Marathas possessed a special breed of very fast moving horses, which used to travel a hundred *yojanas*⁶⁰ a day. The *Bargis* had a superior mobility in comparison with the *nawab's* army. They typically rode on small built light horses⁶¹. They preferred not to dismount from those speedy horses while combating on the move in lightning speed and setting ablaze the light artillery like fire support in the form of rockets.

Challenges of Rain, Terrain and River

Despite having the edge of speed and efficient movement and intelligent tactics over *nawab's* army, the *Bargis* faced various challenges in Bengal. *Bargi* horsemen comfortably traversed the northern part of western Bengal in post monsoon season. Topographical similarities between *rahr* and their homeland cradled in the lap of the Deccan put them at ease. In fact the extensive parts of the *rahr* is said to have been created from the soil of the same. Their fighting strategy was viable on rugged red lateritic terrains⁶² of the *rahr* in dry season. However the monsoons made them very apprehensive even in the lateritic *rahr* as their horses had chances of slipping.

Their speedy and circuitous journey across the length of the eastern side of the sub-continent through the tactics of deflection and deviation was difficult to pursue in the monsoon which hindered the momentum of sprinting horses. The

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 150.

⁵⁹ R.G.S. Cooper, *The Anglo Maratha Campaigns*, pp. 23-26.

⁶⁰ One *yojanna* is equal to eight miles.

⁶¹ Cooper, *The Anglo Maratha Campaigns*, p. 21.

⁶² Shibprasad Chattopadhyay, *Lokayata Paschimrahr*, Loksanskriti O Adibashi Sanskriti Kendra, Calcutta: Tatthya O Sanskriti Bibhag, Government of West Bengal, 2007. 'Rahr' is the land of the red soil or 'raktamrittika'.

loss of momentum while traversing the rain soaked slushy and waterlogged roads undermined the ‘psychological impact’⁶³ of catching the opponents unawares. Such a fighting strategy was viable only on dry land during the monsoon recess. Evidently the rainy season ushered in a temporary lull period of the Maratha raids in Bengal as

The innumerable nala which are dried up in winter and the jhil which diminish to a succession of pools, swell precipitately, forming an enormous sheet of water which extends over hundreds of kilometers. When such conditions prevail, the boat constitutes the only means of communications and all transportations in the villages....takes place by way of water⁶⁴.

In the all-pervasive waterscape of Bengal monsoon, fast paced boats of myriad configurations aided by the south easterly⁶⁵ were the only means of transport. Thus in the rainy season the flood prone Kasimbazar Murshidabad region presented a frightening picture to the strangers when vast stretches of land were submerged under water. Indeed inundations were a major setback to the settled way of life, commerce and smooth running of administration in Bengal.

The following citations from the official Company correspondences would enumerate the picture of calamity in and around the Kasimbazar Murshidabad region during monsoon. The extract of a letter dated August 23, 1779, to Edward Baber, the Chief of the Provincial Council of Revenue, Murshidabad, written by the Contractor for the city and Bahminia pools would testify to the region being prone to high intensity floods posing challenges.

You have been witnesses to the very bad weather we have lately had and the effects of it have been felt everywhere—but on the river more remarkably on the 9th, 10th, and 11th instant it rose to so astonishing a height to overflow many of the bounds and the rising of the water came with such violent force and rapidity that it bore away everything before it. I had taken every precaution....to prevent the rivers making any encroachments upon the Island of Cossimbuzar and should no doubt have succeeded in my

⁶³ R.G.S. Cooper, *The Anglo Maratha Campaigns*, pp. 26-27.

⁶⁴ Jean Deloche, *Transport and Communications in India prior to Steam Locomotion*, vol. 2, Water Transport, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 31.

⁶⁵ James Rennell, *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan: or the Maghul Empire with an introduction, illustrative of the geography and present division of that country: and a map of the countries situated between the head of the Indus, and the Caspian Sea*, London: Printed for the Author, 1788, pp. 349-51.

endeavours had the river but continued in its usual channel but having run higher by several levels that it may have known it overflowed⁶⁶.

At Zeah Gunge, just above Muxadabad, and at Byramgunje, Chunacolly and Bottparra, close above the factory at Cossimbuzar the encroachments have been so great as not to leave room for making new poostahs without destroying large bazaars and great numbers of houses advancing far on the towns of Muxudabad and Cossimbuzar and approaching very near the low ground in which numbers of tanks, ditches and zeels which extends a considerable way into the country near the back of the cantonments at Berhampore towards Daudpore⁶⁷.

It is true that the Bengal monsoon would arouse alarm and distress in the minds of those not accustomed to it. The following description of the Bengal monsoon has been depicted in the *Mangalkavyas* -

Oboni akashe prokhor batashe
Hoilo moha ondhokar
Gojo shundakar pore joladhar
*Ghono ghor torjone gorje*⁶⁸
 (An overcast sky and strong wind
 Created extreme darkness,
 Rain poured like spray from the trunks of elephants,
 Clouds thundered in loud roar.)

Translation: Enakshi Chatterjee

Yet another verse vividly portrayed the sheer helplessness of a man in the face of nature's fury while on a boat in the monsoon -

Kandar bhai rakho dinga jetha pao sthol,
Oiri hoilo deboraj byangtodka pore baaj,
*Borishe musholdhare jol*⁶⁹.
 (Oh boatman, please stop the boat wherever you find a landing space,
 The Lord of the Gods has turned hostile, frightening thunder has struck,
 As heavy rain continues to pour.)

Translation: Enakshi Chatterjee

Bishom joler bhoy jhhore praan sthir noy
Dnaariya dhorite nare dnaar.

⁶⁶ WBSA, Provincial Council of Revenue, Murshidabad, Proceedings, vol. 20, June 7-November 4, 1779, pp. 462-65.

⁶⁷ WBSA, Board of Revenue, Proceedings, July 24, 1787, p. 7.

⁶⁸ Ketakadas Kshemananda, *Manasamangal*, Calcutta: Sahitya Academy, 2007, p. 2.

⁶⁹ Kavikankan Mukundaram Chakravarty, *Chandimangal*, Sahitya Academy, ed., 4, Calcutta, p. 203.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

*Dushshoho beeshom jhhore upariya gaachh pore
 Dukul haniya boy khana
 Atmukhe bohe bayu porbotshoman dheyu
 Rashi rashi koto bohe phyana⁷⁰.*

(One is very scared of water and restless with fear of storm
 The boatman is unable to hold onto the oar
 The trees are uprooted by the terrible and frightening cyclone,
 Both sides of the channels are overflowing,
 Winds are blowing to eight directions,
 Waves as high as mountains burst into innumerable foams.)

Translation: Enakshi Chatterjee

Moreover, as the following lines suggest; the river is infested with the aquatic predators like ‘hangor’ (shark), and ‘kumbheer’ (crocodile), that are tracking the boat.

*Hangor kumbheer ashia bistor
 Tori ashe ashe bhashe⁷¹.*

(Lots of sharks and crocodiles came,
 And floated beside the boat.)

Translation: Author

The *Bargis* and their mounts might have been wary of such an unfamiliar weather pattern and a hostile terrain in the monsoon. A verse from *Maharashtra Purana* would testify to the fact.

*Asharh masher deoa ghono borishon,
 Ojoy bhashia gonga bhorilo tokhon
 Gonga bhorilo jodi epar opar
 Tobe borgi lutibaare nahi paye aar⁷².*

(The rain is pouring heavily in the month of monsoon,
 The flooded river Ajay mingles with the Ganga.
 As the Ganga is full to its brim,
 The *Bargis* can no longer continue to loot).

Translation: Author

So during the rains *Bargis* used to invariably retreat far away from river banks and put a temporary halt to their exploits. As per the eye witness account of Yusuf Ali, the Deccani horses which could not stand up against the blows of Alivardi’s soldiers⁷³ in face to face battle; had little chance to hold themselves together

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 203.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 3.

⁷²Gangaram, *Maharashtra Purana*, p. 53.

⁷³Yusuf Ali, ‘Ahwal-i-Mahabat Jangi’, in Jadunath Sarkar tr. *Bengal Nawabs*, p. 148.

against such calamities. In a way the monsoon served as a breather to the parts of *rahr* which were usually attacked by the Marathas.

It was observed in *Riyaz*, 'the rainy season now set in. In view of the tumultuousness of the river, the Mahrattas now suspended their fighting, established their quarters at Katwah'⁷⁴. An extract of a Government correspondence reads, 'the swelling of the rivers at the approach of the rains always obliged the Marathas to retire, and the inhabitants were again secure till January'⁷⁵. According to English Company records, 'the Morattes in May entered Muxadabad Plundered and then retired into Punctat Countrey saying they would return after the Rains'⁷⁶. One British record noted, 'Since the Rains the Morattas entered the Province via Patna'⁷⁷.

The Bhagirathi river acted as an effective repellent to the Maratha *Bargis* time and again and they had to contain their destructive spree mainly along the western side of the river. Being essentially cavalymen they chose to avoid any sort of entanglement with the complex labyrinth of the Ganga system. Gangaram most aptly wrote,

*Treta juge raja bhogiroth chhila,
Onek toposhya kori Gonga anila,
Prithibite taar naam hoila bhagiroti,
Taar paar hoiya loke paila obyohoti*⁷⁸.

(The King Bhagirath was there in the *treta yuga*,
He persuaded the Ganga to water the earth after deep meditation.
To the world the river is known by the name of the Bhagirathi.
People crossed over to the other side of the river to be safe).

Translation: Author

There had been instances of the *nawab* using the river to ward off the *Bargis* in the following manner - an embankment used to be put up annually before the monsoon to protect the cities from inundations. That particular year Alivardi had sent Sabit Jang and Babar Jang to Plassey with an order to dismantle the *pul-i-pul-*

⁷⁴Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 342.

⁷⁵NAI, W.K. Firminger, *Records of the Government of Bengal, The Letter Copy Books of the Resident at the Darbar at Murshidabad*, Extract of a Letter from Richard Becher Esquire, to the Hon'ble Harry Verelst Esquire, Moidapore near Murshidabad, dated May 9, 1769, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1919, p. ix.

⁷⁶NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 10, 1737-42; *Ibid.*, July 31, 1742, p. 361; Dacca Factory Record, June 1743, Microfilm, Accession no. 2696, p. 254.

⁷⁷NAI, Proceedings, Home Miscellaneous, January 31, 1745-46, p. 305.

⁷⁸Gangaram, *Maharashtra Purana*, p. 51.

sadi to flush out the raiders. Consequently the southern side of the city was inundated and the Maratha cavalry was forced to retreat to a safer spot⁷⁹.

There are other cases that highlighted the act of utilizing the river to outwit the *Bargis*. During September 1742, the major part of the western Bengal came under the control of the Marathas. Bhaskar was busy with his troop preparing to celebrate the *Durga Puja* at Katwa, located at the confluence of the Bhagirathi and Ajay. The *nawab* was able to occupy both the banks of the Bhagirathi some miles above Katwa. The Bhagirathi flowed from north to south and the Ajay joined it from east. Alivardi Khan arranged a bridge of big boats mentioned in Gangaram's text as 'pateli'⁸⁰; across the Bhagirathi to transport his band of ten thousand soldiers to Uddharanpore on the other side. However, as the *Bargis* came to know about the opponents' moves, the *nawab* had implemented his backup plan of silently collecting a fleet of small boats to sail from the Bhagirathi's east bank up to Ajay and set foot on Katwa. The Marathas were caught unaware and fled away without completing the *Durga Puja*. From Gangaram's narrative it is evident that the attack was made strategically when the monsoon season was not yet over and the muddy puddles had not dried up; to retain the superior edge over the *Bargis*⁸¹, as their light horses would not maintain their usual speed in the rain and muck.

It may be interesting to observe that Bengal posed a similar challenge to the mighty Mughals almost a century and a half preceding the Maratha attacks. The terrain of Bengal in the monsoon was a great obstacle to the eastward penetrations of the mighty Mughals. It is evident that unlike the Mughals, the Maratha warriors did not devote their energy in experimenting with war strategies suitable for combats against the backdrop of unfamiliar ecology and terrain of Bengal as basically they did not have the Mughal like far reaching imperial ambitions. In contrast, the Mughal ingenuity, courage and spirit of adventure were instrumental in their penetration up to the eastern edge of Bengal, but that too happened over a long period of time.

In Bengal, the humidity, the terrain crisscrossed by countless streams, the torrential downpour during the monsoon months, the overflowing water bodies; the mud puddles once the water level subsided, had hindered the progress of the

⁷⁹Karam Ali, 'Muzaffarnamah', in Jadunath Sarkar trans. Bengal Nawabs, Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 2008, p. 29.

⁸⁰*Pateli* could mean *patella*.

⁸¹Gangaram, *Maharashtra Purana*, p. 55.

Mughal and Maratha soldiers alike; adept at mounted combats on the dry rocky terrain. Jos Gommans has pointed out in one of his significant articles on war strategies; that the Turkish rulers in the sub-continent and then the Mughals basically represented a post nomadic Central Asian imperialism. In that particular culture, war horses played a pivotal role in establishing the empire in the frontier regions of the heartlands of nomadic power⁸² based on grasslands for grazers.

Interestingly, the extensive part of western Bengal between the Chhotanagpore plateau in the west and Gangetic delta in the east, locally called the *rahr*; specially beyond Rajmahal; till the bifurcation point of the Padma and Bhagirathi was 'open, dry, savannah like marchland intersected by cultivated zones'⁸³ suited to the grazing of horses and food requirements of the army. The invaders descended upon Bengal through the passes of the Rajmahal hills. Roughly, till Rajmahal, a cavalcade of accomplished archers; the backbone of typical Central Asian troops: moved smoothly. However, subsequently the invaders and their mounts had difficulties in moving further after penetrating down south and towards east as they encountered sultry heat and swampy terrain, tiger infested marshy land alternated with deep forests of gigantic trees cut up by various channels and rivers. They were weary of the monsoon drenched mud caked soil in Bengal's interior beyond the somewhat familiar surroundings of the Rajmahal hills. The warhorses did not have their foraging areas. Besides, high humidity was harmful for their health⁸⁴ and they lost their stamina. The same impediments were faced by the *Bargis* in Bengal.

Before embarking upon an excruciating journey in a less explored land, the Mughals invariably took a final break at the apex of the Bengal delta that marked the 'most eastern part of the Arid Zone'⁸⁵ to evaluate their plans of action. The terrain bore resemblance with their homeland laced with dry tropical steppe grassland and alternated with shrubbery and bushes. Thus it provided a much awaited breather to set up the 'last natural campsite'⁸⁶ for the Mughals. At the

⁸²Jos Gommans, 'Warhorse and Post-nomadic Empire in Asia, c. 1000-1800, *Journal of Global History*, vol. 2, Issue, 1, March, 2007, pp. 1-21.

⁸³Jos Gommans, *Mughal Warfare; Indian Frontiers and High Roads to Empire, 1500-1700*, London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 164-75.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

brink of fresh ecological challenges of the riverine terrain the invaders gradually innovated winning war strategies.

Traditionally the cavalry was the principal wing of the Mughal army whereas the infantry comprising gunners were secondary support system. The soldiers on horseback were ace archers: they fought with sword and spear though their most dangerous weapons were the arrow. The Turko Afghans also followed similar methods of fighting, though cavalry became more efficient with the introduction of stirrups by Chenghis Khan⁸⁷. Later, Babur judiciously combined cannons and muskets in the battle grounds of the sub-continent. But such gun shots were slow to ignite and covered short distance. Nevertheless, the Mughals, who were invincible in land battles, faced challenges in Bengal. Initially their traditional mounts had trouble in surviving the Bengal weather and terrain. So slowly the Mughals started relying on the local elephants, who were more suitable as war animals to charge the enemy troops in the swamps and rivulet strewn forested land of the Bengal delta. In fact, Abul Fazl had praised the worth of elephants in no uncertain terms in *Ain-i-Akbari*. He stated,

this wonderful animal is in bulk and strength like a mountain; and in courage and ferocity like a lion. It adds materially to the pomp of a king and to the success of a conqueror; and is of the greatest use for the army. Experienced men of Hindustan put the value of a good elephant equal to five hundred horses⁸⁸.

The Mughals incorporated the use of elephants in a big way and collected them from the jungles of neighbouring Orissa and northern and north eastern Bengal⁸⁹. Further, they felt the need to possess various boats for transporting soldiers, elephants and ammunitions in the riverine areas of Bengal. Simultaneously they

⁸⁷ Henry Pratap Phillips, *The History and Chronology of Gunpowder and Gunpowder Weapons (c.1000-1850)*, Chennai: Notion Press, 2016.

https://books.google.co.in/books?id=I5joCwAAQBAJ&pg=PT20&lpg=PT20&dq=the+history+and+chronology+of+gunpowder+and+gunpowder+weapons&source=bl&ots=3gbVKCXkX4&sig=UVcCYOVVwuFVGMEaMyPsfL-LL-0&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwil4MD_jbHNAhVLpo8KHSMHCOEQ6AEIMzAF#v=onepage&q=the%20history%20and%20chronology%20of%20gunpowder%20and%20gunpowder%20weapons&f=false

Accessed on 18.6.16.

⁸⁸ Abul Fazl Allami, *The Ain-i-Akbari*, H. Blochmann tr., vol. 1, Delhi: Low Price Publications, Reprint, 2008, pp. 123-24.

⁸⁹ Pratyay Nath, 'Battles, Boats and Bridges, Mughal Amphibious Warfare, 1571-1612', in Kaushik Roy and P. Lorge eds., *Chinese and Indian Warfare-From the Classical Age to 1870*, New York: Routledge, 2015, p. 162.

experimented with war boats like big ones called *ghurabs* fitted with cannons and relevant ammunitions to combat successfully against the naval powers of the Bengal *rajās*, *zamindars*, Arakan, Burma, Kooch Bihar, Assam, and Portuguese of the delta. *Baharistan* mentions about other war boats of the Mughal fleets in Bengal like *kosa*, *jalia*, *katari*, *maniki*, *dhura*, *sundara*, *bajra* etc⁹⁰. Further, the Mughals had learnt the skill of making mud forts from their enemies of the delta to cover up the position of their mounted archers and musketeers. It was an evolved art of defensive combat in the deltaic region. Basically by combining local logistics with their determined spirit to win, they became the masters of the *bhati*, the lower Bengal delta.

Not only did they adopt novel ways of warfare, they empowered various private entrepreneurs to reclaim jungles with the help of the locals, who got introduced to farming on a massive scale under their guidance. Thus the Mughal strategy of innovative wars and wielding of plough, aided in turning large parts of Bengal into extensive revenue yielding paddy fields. Those entrepreneurs were mostly north Indian Muslims, who were given donations by the Mughal state to build places of worship and prayers. Those in turn aided in the popularisation of Islam and acted as the basis for the Mughal political entrenchment. Unlike the *Bargis*, the Mughals were primarily motivated by long term political objectives.

Hence they transformed their particular style of warfare to beat their opponents in the delta in their home ground; they created economic and political basis through land grants and spread of Islam in the virgin land of forests and marshes in large parts of eastern Bengal. In the older delta in western Bengal, with its established socio economic and political system; Mughal penetrations did not create apparent disturbances. The revenue system did not undergo serious alterations at the grass root level and was more or less a continuation of that of the preceding *sultans*. Moreover, the Bengal's new rulers maintained a policy of noninterventionism in the religious sphere and the Mughal bureaucrats did not enforce Islam as the religion of the state⁹¹. All these clearly indicate that the Bengal campaign was a part of the planned Mughal imperialism.

It may not be out of context to mention here a prevailing counterpoint to the belief that collecting *chauth* was the main objective of the *Bargi* marauders. It

⁹⁰ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i Ghaybi*, vol. 1, p. 48.

⁹¹ Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, p. 178.

is believed by some historians that the *Bargi* menace in Bengal was part of the long term strategy of extending the Maratha domain of influence to establish 'Maratha supremacy across the nook and corner of northern India'⁹². Bajirao I had dreamed about it. The motive was to expand in all directions by garnering the support of all the able Maratha leaders and then appease them by carving out domains of influence for everyone. The declining Mughal administration provided the opportunity to attack Bengal. However such a strategy lacked meticulous planning. So the attacks looked more like diffused raids and wanton loot without any long term political motive⁹³. The desecration and killings by the Maratha cavalymen showed that they lacked guidance and focus. But Alivardi had to buy an expensive peace from the Marathas.

The Marathas had managed to retain the political occupation of Orissa till early nineteenth century. The Maratha rule in the neighbouring Orissa having a shared border with Midnapore, was a definite political threat for the *nizamat*, which had to adopt a strategy to 'conciliate and propose the goodwill of the inhabitants who might otherwise be tempted to desert to their neighbours the Marhattas in times of peace or join them in times of disturbances'⁹⁴.

VII. Impact of *Bargi* Raids on Kasimbazar-Murshidabad

Maratha horsemen had ravaged parts of the province on a regular basis for a decade and intermittently beyond the period. It continued till the unexpected decimation of the Marathas at Panipat in 1761 that altered the course of history. As their strength petered away, the *chauth* 'disappeared'⁹⁵. Despite various ecological hurdles and Alivardi's combative prowess, the Marathas remained the scourge of Bengal for more than a decade. Due to the Maratha attacks the weavers, dyers, washermen left their *arangs* in Murshidabad, Kasimbazar, Balasore, Katwa, Dignagar, Mangalkot, Burdwan⁹⁶. Random troop movements disturbed the peace of the villages besides disrupting communication link between

⁹² Poonam Sagar, *Maratha Policy towards Northern India*, Meerut: Meenakshi Prakashan, 1993, p. 104.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 104-05.

⁹⁴ WBSA, *Proceedings, Revenue Board Consisting of the Whole Council*, vol. 1, October 18-December 30, 1772, p. 77.

⁹⁵ *Calendar of Persian Correspondence*, vol. 3, 1770-1772, with an introduction by Muzaffar Alam and S. Subrahmanyam, Delhi: Primus Books, 2013, pp. 284-85.

⁹⁶ Hameeda Hussain, *The Company Weavers of Bengal*, p. 3.

the supply chain connecting local markets with the markets of other villages and towns and ports.

The marauders trampled over agricultural fields and on their way their famished horses were made to feed on the mulberry shrubs of the silk belts of Murshidabad, Malda, and Burdwan⁹⁷. The *Bargi* attacks had an adverse impact over the extensive area between Rajmahal and Cuttack which lay vacant and fallow as inhabitants evacuated their villages and migrated towards the eastern bank in search of a better life.

Ali Vardi himself was continually distracted and harassed by Mahratta freebooters, who swooped down again and again on his fair provinces like armies of locusts, and harried and devastated them, and Ali Vardi's energy, courage, and prowess were of no avail against this visitation of God's curse⁹⁸.

The attacks and mounting pressure on Alivardi to raise enough funds to procure sufficient stocks of ammunitions to fight back; pay his retainers and clear old debts had an adverse impact on the economy. The local *zamindars* had crossed over to the eastern side of the river along with a substantial bulk of common men. So there were no tillers and no tax collectors in most of the affected areas. The landlords of affected areas were in a bad state as they could not collect revenue and could not borrow as the local money changers had left. Hardly any landlord put up a fight against the Marathas during Alivardi's reign.

The major tax paying area of Bengal at that time was the Burdwan *zamindari*. In 1742-43, this *zamindary* alone was in arrears of Rs. 22 lakhs⁹⁹ but its *zamindar* Raja Trilokchand had shifted base to the other side of the Bhagirathi. Alivardi's treasury was almost drained. The same year he could collect around Rs. 64.52 lakhs which amounted to much less than half of Bengal's usual amount of land revenue¹⁰⁰. So the impoverished often indulged in mass looting. At times they acted no better than the *Bargi* marauders. One of the official letter of the English trading Company noted, 'A large tract of it was for years together annually invaded by the Mharattoes, who burnt and destroy'd all they could come

⁹⁷ Jagyeswar Chaudhury, *Burdwan: Itihaash O Sanskriti*, vol. 2, Calcutta: Pustak Biponi, 1991, p. 135.

⁹⁸ Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 340.

⁹⁹ John R. McLane, *Land and Local Kingship*, p. 167.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

at, the poor inhabitants flying for shelter to the principal cities, European factorys etc'¹⁰¹.

There were no tillers of soil so the production of essential commodities had been put on hold. The supply lines were blocked, connecting line of communications disrupted. Again, the following extract from yet another contemporary Persian chronicle *Riyaz*¹⁰², provided an insight into a curious sociological phenomenon of eastward migration across the Bhagirathi propelled by the Maratha attacks.

The wealthy nobility and gentry, to save their family honour, migrated across the Ganges. The whole tract from Akbarnagar (Rajmahal) to Medinipore and Jaleswar came into the possession of the Marathas. During the peak of Maratha invasions between 1740 and 50, the whole of the *chaklas* of Burdwan, Medinipore, Balasore, Cuttack, Birbhum, some *parganas* of Rajshahi (probably those on the south side of the river) and Akbarnagar were overwhelmed, whilst only Murshidabad and the countries on the other side such as Dacca, Malda, Rampore Bauleah etc. were spared. Even Nawab Shahamat Jang (Alivardi's son-in-law) with his family and children moved across the river to Godagari, a place close to Rampore Bauleah, on the northern bank of the Ganges or Padma¹⁰³.

Annadamangal clearly described this phenomenon of crossing over en masse to the other side of the Bhagirathi towards the bank of the Padma in the following lines,

*Luthi banglar loke korilo kangal
Gongapaar hoilo bandhi noukar jangal*¹⁰⁴.

(Looted the people of Bengal
And reduced them to paupers.

They crossed over to the other side of the river in fleets of boat)

Translation: Enakshi Chatterjee

Naturally the evacuation from the western bank of the Bhagirathi created a population pressure on the other side of the river in northern and eastern Bengal. It was believed by some that the spurt of migration partially explained the numerical

¹⁰¹NAI, Extract of a Letter from Mr. Becher to the Hon'ble the President under the date 24th May, 1769, p. xii.

¹⁰² Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 344.

¹⁰³Tabatai, *Siyar*, vol. 2, p. 564; Salim, *Riyaz*, p.342.

¹⁰⁴ Bharatchandra, *Annadamangal*, p. 37.

strength of the Muslims towards the eastern bank of the river¹⁰⁵. While many Muslim families shifted base, on the basis of genealogical studies K.K. Datta pointed out that a substantial number of well-connected Hindu families also migrated to the eastern and northern Bengal. Gangaram's vivid account of Bhaskar Pandit's depredations mentioned about the following groups of people, who had left their villages en masse - 'brahman' (brahmin), 'pandit' (North Indian brahmin), small trading communities like 'shonar baina' (trader in gold), 'gondhobaina' (trader in perfume), 'shonkhobonik' (trader of shell and shell items), 'knashari' (trader in metalware), 'kamar' (blacksmith), 'kumhar' (potter), 'jaula' (fisherman), 'mauchha' (fishmonger), 'kayostho' (a particular caste), 'boidyo' (a particular caste), 'strellok' (womenfolk), 'khetri' (a north/west Indian caste), 'rajput' (a North Indian caste), 'goshai' (Vaishnav), 'mohonto' (priest), 'chasha' (farmer), 'koiborto' (a marginal group), 'sheikh' (a particular group following Islam), 'saiyad' (a Muslim section), 'gorbhoboti nari' (pregnant woman), 'siqdar' (revenue officer), 'patwari' (revenue officer), 'kangal' (pauper), 'goreeb' (poor), 'buraburi' (old man and woman)¹⁰⁶. Also the *zamindar* of Burdwan, Trilokchandra Ray Bahadur left his ancestral home and resettled in Mulajor along with his family¹⁰⁷. Raja Krishnachandra of Nadia got his capital transferred from Krishnanagar to a safer place at Shivnivaas. The Company's records enumerated that considerable assets were shifted out from Kasimbazar during that period.

Whether the so called migration 'radically' tilted the balance of population against western Bengal remains a debatable issue¹⁰⁸ as many were temporary immigrants who returned to their homestead after the spurt of annual raids ebbed. The new migrants as well as those who stayed in the western bank of the river started looking up to the burgeoning English power centre at Calcutta for security and protection. In fact the *Bargi* menace had compelled the English Company in Calcutta to plan for a semi-circular protective ditch starting from the river north of the city and re-joining it in the south at Govindapur cutting away the only road in north Calcutta which could have acted as a possible route for the incursion. The

¹⁰⁵ Tabatai, *Siyar*, vol. 2, pp. 514, 564; Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 343.

¹⁰⁶ Gangaram, *Maharashtra Purana*, pp. 49-50.

¹⁰⁷ Sheikh Masoom Kamal, 'Shundarbaner Upokontho Magh-Firingi-Portuguese', in Rajeev Ahmed ed., *Sundarbaner Itihaash*, vol. 1, Dhaka: Gotidhara, 2012, p. 168.

¹⁰⁸ Gangaram, *Maharashtra Purana*, p. 14.

moat came to be popularly referred to as the Maratha Ditch. But the menace persisted as the Marathas had reached at least as far as Thana near Calcutta (close to modern day Garden Reach) more than once¹⁰⁹. According to a Company's record, 'upon hearing the Marattoes had taken Tanners Fort he (nawab) had Nowaries Mahmud Cawn to send... and enquire into the reason why the English suffered them to come so near them'¹¹⁰.

Nevertheless, the capital city and the business centre located close to it had been targeted more than once. The first one took place in 1742. It has been mentioned earlier that in early May, 1742 they were approaching Murshidabad region from their base at Katwa. They reached Dahapara located between Murshidabad and Kasimbazar, where many nobles resided¹¹¹, then took the ferry at Hajigunge to reach the city¹¹². The *nawab* had gone to Katwa for fighting the Marathas, but the latter planned to siege the capital that was devoid of the former and his army. Gangaram made an interesting observation on the situation at Murshidabad;

*Haji chhoto nobab upare chhilo,
Borgir nam shuina killaye shadhailo*¹¹³.
(The Governor Haji was at the other side of the river,
He retreated into the fort after hearing about the *Bargis*.)

Translation: Author

The author of *Riyaz* noted that the Marathas swept clean numerous rich households of Murshidabad 'with the broom of plunder' and looted Jagat Seth's houses of as much gold and silver coins as possible. A contemporary document titled *Muzaffarnamah* noted that the Marathas had ransacked the house of the Jagat Seths near Kasimbazar in 1742¹¹⁴. As the Governor Haji Ahmad and other nobles like Nawazish Ahmed Khan, Husain Quli Khan did not put up the least resistance, the defenceless city and its suburbs turned into a free field for full-

¹⁰⁹ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 10, 1737-42, October, 30, 1742, p. 367.

¹¹⁰ NAI, Home Public, 1747-51, Proceedings, vol. 1, March 1748, p. 11.

¹¹¹ Vijayram Sen, *Tirthamangal*, Kolkata: Paraspalthar Publishers, Paraspalthar edition, 2009, p. 162.

¹¹² Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 341; Gangaram, *Maharashtra Purana*, p. 52.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ In 1742, two crore 'arcot' rupees were looted from the House of the Jagat Seths, bankers, sponsors of traders, rulers, European trade bodies.

fledged *Bargi* rampage¹¹⁵. Other influential people of the locality were not spared. *Maharashtra Purana* mentioned the looting of the house of the famous Seths in the following lines,

Shigrogoti aishya jogotsheter bari loote
Arkat taka joto ghore chhilo
*Ghorar khurchi bhoira shob taka nilo*¹¹⁶.
 (Coming very fast, they looted the house of Jagatseth
 Took all the Arcot rupees available at home
 Filled up the sacks tied onto the horse back).

Translation: Enakshi Chatterjee

The Company's record too verified this in the following lines.

In April were Alarmed with the News of a Large Body of Marattas Invading those Provinces. The Nabob was Surrounded by them in the Burdwan Cuntrey. Several Battles ensued with various Success, the Marathas in May entered Muxadavad Plundered Futtichund and others Houses¹¹⁷.

It has been recorded in a contemporary French account of Gennes de la Chanceliere in 1743: 'On approaching Cassenbazar and Moxudabad, the famous capital of the kingdom of Bengal, the country seems to have suffered a little less of pillage'¹¹⁸. The French document stated that a camp of six thousand cavalymen was stationed at Murshidabad to fight back the Marathas who had ravaged Murshidabad and Kasimbazar. The Company's correspondence reiterated that, 'Morattas Main Body remain about Cuttua but Detachments of them are about Muxadabad and Cossimbuzar plundered wherever they came'¹¹⁹.

Actually numerous *Bargi* outposts mushroomed along the Bhagirathi's western side. The *nawab* had no control over the areas between Rajmahal and Jalasore¹²⁰. While the principal troops were often busy fighting their enemy, the stragglers wandered into various settlements for random loot and plunder. Katwa was one of the major preferred bases of the plunderers. As per an official source dated July 31, 1742,

¹¹⁵ Jadunath Sarkar, *Mughal Empire*, p. 41.

¹¹⁶ Gangaram, *Maharashtra Purana*, p. 52.

¹¹⁷ NAI, Proceedings, Home Miscellaneous, July, 31, 1742, p. 361.

¹¹⁸ Indrani Ray, 'Journey to Cassimbazar and Murshidabad: Observations of a French Visitor to Bengal in 1743', in L. Subramanian ed., *The French and the Trade of the Indian Ocean: A Collection of Essays by Indrani Ray*, New Delhi: Munshi Manoharlal, 1999, p. 170.

¹¹⁹ NAI, Proceedings, Home Miscellaneous, 1737-42, vol. 10, October, 30, 1742, p. 367.

¹²⁰ Tabatai, *Siyar*, vol. 2, pp. 121-22.

A large body of them is at Cuttua and Partys of them are about Island Cossimbuzar....the Nabob does all he can to oppose them ...which has put a stop to all business, the merchants and weavers flying wherever they come, Severely feel this at Cossimbuzar and fear falling short of goods....¹²¹.

Yet another official record stated that,

This Second Invasion is attended with all the Unhappy Consequences of the Last, their Rout much the same, nothing but Plunder and Devastation ensued, several Towns were actually Burnt. The Nabobs Troops also Plundered greatly....people Deserted the Arangs where *Gurrahs* are made and an entire stop was put to Business for some time at Calcutta, Cossimbuzar and Patna¹²².

Actually Murshidabad and Kasimbazar bore the brunt of at least two Maratha raids. In 1745, after reaching Murshidabad 'they had burnt and destroyed everything round about that city'¹²³. According to yet another official letter addressed to the Court of Directors for Affairs of the Hon'ble the United Company of Merchants of English Trading to the East Indies of the East India Company,

Nillapunda with a command of a strong party of the Morattoes horse were encamped close to the factory and that their putting off the plundering of that place till the next morning was the saving of it for as their horses entered the town the Nabob appeared¹²⁴.

One of the official letters mentioned the mounting apprehensions of rich merchants of Murshidabad, 'the Nabob being surrounded, Futtichand and Merchants quitted the place as Cossimbuzar sent the Treasure over to Pearpoor River and prepared for a Retreat, it arrived Safe in Calcutta'¹²⁵. Robert Orme, a medical officer of the British, who joined service in Bengal in 1743, noted that the people from the western bank were fleeing at times even on 'imaginary alarms' towards the countries 'lying to the east of the great and lesser Ganges, were

¹²¹ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, 1737-42, Proceedings, vol. 10, July 31, 1742, p. 361.

¹²² NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, August 13, 1743, p. 79.

¹²³ NAI, Dacca Factory Record, Microfilm, Accession no. 2696, December 1745, p. 385.

¹²⁴ NAI, Home Public, 1748-49, Proceedings, Serial No. 1, p. 30.

¹²⁵ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, 1742-46, Jan 8, 1742, p. 31.

defended from these calamities'¹²⁶. However, there were instances of phases of migration from Murshidabad itself, as mentioned in the Dacca Factory Record, April 1742, 'the State of affairs at present seem to threaten great troubles all over this Government.....people who (return??) here (Dacca) Daily from Muxadavad with their Families and Effects'¹²⁷.

The contemporary Persian records, Bangla literature, Company accounts had referred to a major population shift away from the Bhagirathi's western bank. So though the Maratha horsemen followed a line of march along the western bank of the river, and mostly chose not to invade the interiors, their movements spread a fear psychosis that often propelled spurts of displacement in the province.

VIII. Economic Repercussions of *Bargi* attacks

Once the raiding seasons got over, the residents used to return. Alivardi was faced with a reduction in revenue and loss of wealth. Indeed the ten years of protracted battle against the Marathas, disturbances caused by the Afghans in Bihar and the *Vazir* of Awadh having political ambitions around Bihar¹²⁸, had put a great financial strain on Alivardi's government. The maintenance of his army alone cost about one crore and eighty lakhs. In a desperate bid to accumulate necessary resources Alivardi began to fleece one and all. He levied a huge taxation on the three European factories located in and around Kasimbazar. As P.J. Marshall noted, 'all restraint in making fiscal demands was abandoned' and landlords, bureaucrats, merchants, bankers and European trading bodies were viciously harassed for money¹²⁹.

In fact the prosperous foreign merchants were not spared too. Further, the English Company was accused of aiding the 'Enemy with Powder and Ball', hence it was penalised with 'two Months pay for his Troops amounting to about Three Million of Rupees'¹³⁰. The European traders at Kasimbazar reported in 1744 that every person who was reputed to have money was seized and whipped until he disgorged his wealth while relatively poorer people were also not

¹²⁶ Robert Orme, *A History of the Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan in 1803*, vol. 2, section 1, Madras: New Edition, Reprint, 1861, p. 4.

¹²⁷ NAI, Dacca Factory Record, Microfilm, Accession no. 2696, Dacca April, 1742, p. 239.

¹²⁸ P.J. Marshall, *Bengal the British Bridgehead: Eastern India 1740-1828*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Paperback, 2006, p. 71.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, 1742-46, dated August 3, 1744, p. 171.

spared¹³¹. Along with the scare of the raiders, Alivardi's extortions compelled the local people to flee their homestead again. So production and marketing of crops and other commodities suffered.

Such displacements due to frequent attacks, coupled with Alivardi's stringent financial measures obviously affected the production, distribution and price of essential items in the troubled areas of Bengal. However there were official evidences to confirm the price escalation of silk since 1720s. The trend had started even before the *Bargi* menace affected parts of Bengal. An official British letter of 1733 observed that the price of November *bund* silk was so high that the VOC merchants and Gujarati traders chose not to buy silk till the cheaper variant March *bund* was ready for procurement¹³². There was a persistent upward curve noted in prices of ordinary rice, raw silk, coarse cotton and other commodities between 1740s and 50s. In ten years between 1740 and 1750, the price curve for raw silk had shown an upward trend with a steep rise between 1745 and 1750 and a very minor downward trend immediately after 1745¹³³. While this could to an extent be explained in terms of an increased bullion supply from the European companies as the foreign trade expanded remarkably¹³⁴ the period matched with the decade of the Maratha attacks.

People were most affected as the price of food grains, especially that of rice; the staple diet of the Bengalis. It reached an all-time high in 1752-53. The Maratha ravage and the resultant migration and death meant a dip in the number of agricultural labourers. Again, K.N. Chaudhuri cited the estimate of the Chief of the Dutch factory, Jan Kersseboom, in 1755, and stated that around 400,000 'inhabitants' lost their lives in Bengal and Bihar. Among them 350,000 perished in Bengal itself¹³⁵. That the raids led to depopulation has been highlighted by Om Prakash too, who estimated that the population of Bengal was roughly 24 million

¹³¹ J.H. Little, 'The House of Jagatseth', *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 22, No. 43-44, January-June, pp. 10-13.

¹³² Indrajit Ray, 'Long Waves of Silk Price in Bengal in 17th 18th Centuries', <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/economicHistory/Research/GEHN/GEHNPdf/PUNERay.pdf>

¹³³ K.N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company: 1660-1760*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 103, Figure 11.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

¹³⁵ K.N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia*, Digitally Printed First Paperback Version, 2006, p. 253. https://books.google.co.in/books?id=9xt7Fgzq9e8C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false Accessed on 26.1.16.

in 1742, and 3.5 lakhs had died¹³⁶ due to the Maratha attacks. A recent work has also highlighted that the *Bargi* inroads had resulted in a disruption of the stable social order and a massive loss of life in Bengal¹³⁷. There was lack of production leading to food grain scarcity and price escalation.

A Company record dated February 1, 1753, noted,

several weavers have brought their looms to the factory and few who remain declared they shall be obliged to throw in theirs and quit the place on account of the great scarcity of rice and provisions of all kinds occasioned by the Morattoes¹³⁸.

The scare of the frequent attacks prompted the English East India Company to fortify the factory of Kasimbazar, though Alivardi was against the idea of fortification of European factory cum settlements. The English Company fortified ‘the Walls of the Factory by Erecting four good Bastions so that they feared no Surprize from any Party’¹³⁹. In March 1742, the Marathas were approaching Murshidabad from Birbhum. By the end of the following month, leaving aside government employees, hardly any soul stayed back in Kasimbazar Murshidabad region. Dacca Factory Record entry dated April, 1742, mentioned about mass evacuation from the power centre of Bengal¹⁴⁰.

In 1745, the joint Afghan and Maratha confederacy conspired against Alivardi. The Afghan warlords wanted to attack Bihar and Alivardi was busy defending that part of his territory. Meanwhile, the Marathas under Raghuji proceeded towards Orissa. After capturing Cuttack, they entered Burdwan and Mir Habib influenced Raghuji to attack the defenceless Murshidabad. According to an entry in the Dacca Factory Record,

the Morrattoes having entered Muxadavad and making several attacks even on the Kellah itself which however they had not been able to enter...tho they had burnt and destroyed everything around about that city¹⁴¹.

¹³⁶ Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*, pp. 246-47.

¹³⁷ Vineeta Damodaran, ‘The East India Company, Famine and Ecological Conditions in Eighteenth-century Bengal’, in Vineeta Damodaran, Anna Winterbottom and Alan Lester eds., *The East India Company and the Natural World*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 82.

¹³⁸ NAI, Home Public, Proceedings, vol. 1, 1753, p. 73.

¹³⁹ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, 1742-46, January 8, 1742, p. 37.

¹⁴⁰ NAI, Dacca Factory Record, Microfilm, Accession no. 2696, p. 239.

¹⁴¹ NAI, Dacca Factory Record, Microfilm, Accession no. 2696, December 1745, p. 385.

They not only ravaged the capital, but rampaged through adjoining villages and settlements opposite Murshidabad. While in and around the Murshidabad belt, the *Bargis* invariably camped at Katwa, which was desecrated, along with Burdwan¹⁴², besides many other villages between Malda and Midnapore. If the political seat was disturbed, it was no wonder that the hub of commerce would be disturbed in some way.

Impact on Cotton Goods Industry

Kalikinkar Datta observed that *gurrah arangs* were most adversely affected¹⁴³. The following extracts from the Company's official correspondences are self-explanatory. 'The factory could not contract for any *Gurrahs*, cotton being so dear'¹⁴⁴.

With difficulty got Merchants to undertake 100,000 *Gurrahs*, Thread being greatly risen at the Aurungs and little prospect of any quantity of cotton being produced this Year. Chief Seat of the war being in the *Gurrah* Countrey only 46 Bales brought in, which were obliged to make packing stuff¹⁴⁵.

Cossimbuzar not able to Contract for any *Gurrahs* before the Troubles came on and since received thence only 78 bales for ready money¹⁴⁶.

At Cossimbuzer 40,000 *Gurrahs* and Above 20,000 Silk Romals were Sorting for Prizing when Mr. Forster came away but can expect none down Morattoes are so near that people¹⁴⁷.

The Gentlemen at Cossimbuzar under date the 14th of that month advised us that their Merchants would fall very short in their Contracts for *Gurrah* and Raw Silk and their reasons for the same as well as for the badness of the Silk¹⁴⁸.

After the peak phase of the Maratha inroads, in an official letter of the English East India Company, dated January 2, 1752, it was conveyed that

¹⁴² J.N. Sarkar, *Fall of the Mughal Empire*, vol. 1, pp. 59-62.

¹⁴³ K.K. Datta, *Economic Condition of the Bengal Subah in Years of Transition, 1740-1772*, Saraswat Library, Calcutta, 1984.

¹⁴⁴ NAI, Letter to Court, July 32, 1742, quoted from K.K. Datta, *Economic Conditions*.

¹⁴⁵ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, 1742-46, January, 8, 1742, p. 15.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

¹⁴⁷ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 11, 1745-46, February 4, 1745, p. 321.

¹⁴⁸ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 14, 1748-49, p. 33.

Their merchants had only brought into their cottah 19,000 pieces of gurrah and gave them hopes but of about 15 or 16 thousand pieces more which will not amount to half the quantity contracted for¹⁴⁹.

Thus the Marathas had disturbed the production and distribution of cotton textile industry of Kasimbazar between 1740s and 50s.

Impact on Silk Industry

The archival sources are replete with evidences of disturbances in the silk sector during the period corresponding with the Maratha onslaughts.

From the same Cause Raw Silk and Silk Piece Goods are far short in Goodness, Weavers and Inhabitants fled, Silk often carried away Wett and n the Reels and piece Goods before Manufactured, the one Wound off and the other finished in utmost hurry and Confusion Merchants saying every Article brought in has been got out of the Fire. The Merchants are cut in proportion in sorting and prizing Cossimbuzar is in the Centre of all the Troubles in the Countrey¹⁵⁰.

This morning we received a letter from Edward Eyles Esquire at Cossimbazar under date the 20th of April advising of their having taken comfortable to our orders and prized what silk our merchants had provided on account of their last years contract to the amount of 40 bales of November Bund and about sixty Commercolly¹⁵¹.

In Consultation of 19 March is an account of Goods contracted for at Cossimbuzar. Green Taffaties not procurable, Romals and Red Taffaties with yellow Selviges is Extravagant a Price not Contracted for¹⁵².

Another official letter also mentioned that ‘the troubles at Cassembuzar still continued’¹⁵³. The major item of export, raw silk remained a source of concern for the Company officials till the 1750s, as its price remained very high. A Company correspondence signed by John Payne, J Baymond, Christopher Burrow etc., dated March 3, 1758, stated,

¹⁴⁹ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, 1752-53, Proceedings, vol. 17, dated January 2, 1752, p. 17.

¹⁵⁰ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, 1742-46, Proceedings, vol. 11, dated January, 8, 1742, p. 16.

¹⁵¹ NAI, Home Public, 1747-51, Proceedings, vol. 1, dated April, 1748, p. 20; NAI, Letters to Court, 1751-52, Series. no. 2, pp. 22-23.

¹⁵² NAI, Home Miscellaneous, 1742-46, Proceedings, vol. 11, dated January 8, 1742, p. 16.

¹⁵³ NAI, Home Public, 1748-49, Proceedings, Serial no. 1, p. 33.

The business of the raw silk has been off late the occasion of constant complain and unless it is provided cheaper and better, that once valuable article can have no share in our trade¹⁵⁴.

As one of the ways of controlling the escalating price it was suggested,

A small portion of be provided at the aurungs on the best terms and sent down to Calcutta to be wound off under the inspection of Mr. Wilder.... A person extremely well qualified for that purpose.... If he is not,...under some of the Board of whom the Export Warehouse Keeper is to be one, by these means you will be able to form a near estimate of the price which ought to be given for raw silk at Cossimbuzar....also....give our servants at Cossimbuzar directions to get as large a proportion of raw silk wound at the Factory under their eye as possible¹⁵⁵.

Scholars have responded diversely over the repercussion of the incursions in Bengal. While agreeing on the fact that dislocations and disruptions did take place because of their decade long annual inroads; they did differ on the intensity and extent of the impact. While K.K. Datta¹⁵⁶ and Om Prakash¹⁵⁷ claimed that it bore a major impact leading to large scale migration and death, it was pointed out by Sushil Chaudhury that the effects of the *Bargi* menace have been over stressed. Chaudhury opined¹⁵⁸ that the *Bargis* brought about 'serious dislocation' in the economy, though the impact has been hyped. They brought about 'destruction' in the areas along the route march. The rest of the areas were more or less unaffected¹⁵⁹. After a detailed review of prices; Chaudhury further observed that there was no sharp and marked price rise of export commodities like textile, raw silk or rice¹⁶⁰ in Bengal during that phase. Gangaram's account mentioned about cutting off of supply lines of daily necessities in certain areas that led to scarcities and price appreciation of one 'seer' of 'chaul' (rice), 'kalai', 'matar', 'musuri',

¹⁵⁴ NAI, Home Public, Public General Letters From Court, 1755-58, Proceedings, Serial no. 1, p. 245.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 245.

¹⁵⁶ Kalikinkar Datta, *Alivardi and His Times*, Calcutta: World Press, 1963.

¹⁵⁷ Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal, 1630-1720*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2012.

¹⁵⁸ Sushil Chaudhury, *From Prosperity to Decline, Eighteenth Century Bengal*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1995.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 300.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 330.

‘ksheshari’ (four kinds of lentils), ‘tel’ (oil), ‘ghee’ (clarified butter), ‘ata’ (flour), ‘chini’ (sugar), ‘lavan’ (salt)¹⁶¹. However those were short term trends.

Chaudhury was critiqued by historians like Biplab Dasgupta¹⁶², J.R. McLane¹⁶³, and Rila Mukherjee¹⁶⁴. McLane did link up the raids and price escalation, though he asserted that the inflation was short term. Further Hameeda Hossain¹⁶⁵ stated that the *patni* making centres and *arangs* were deserted leading to the scarcity of silk and textiles; so there was price escalation. Rila Mukherjee asserted that the other factors were influencing the price rise in silk and textiles even before the raids began. The raids further contributed to the trend.

The price had started escalating in the late 1720s¹⁶⁶ and the export of raw silk crashed in the early 1750s. So the dearness of Kasimbazar silk in the eighteenth century should not be explained solely in terms of the *Bargi* incursions despite English East India Company’s records routinely highlighting it as a major moderating factor¹⁶⁷. The very fine variety Kasimbazar raw silk needed to be twisted into a thicker yarn that made it more expensive and non-viable¹⁶⁸. From the 1730s, the demand for super fine Kasimbazar silk dipped a little and coarser variety Rangpore and Kumarkhali silk were preferred by the European companies. An official English letter dated February 25, 1731 observed that the price of November *bund* silk, ‘Guzarat’, ‘Taffeties’, ‘Lungi Romalls’ contracted at Kasimbazar were so high that the VOC merchants did not purchase any silk that season and they decided ‘to tarry until the prices of each should fall’¹⁶⁹.

The economy was essentially agro based and the farmers supplemented their income by making textiles. So the weavers, craftsmen fell back on land as the inflation led to a dip in demand. The *dadni* merchants had to enhance the supply to meet the ever growing demand for textiles. For this they had to

¹⁶¹ Gangaram, *Maharashtra Purana*, p. 47.

¹⁶² Biplab Dasgupta, *European Trade and Colonial Conquest*, vol. 1, London: Anthem Press, 2005.

¹⁶³ J.R. McLane, *Land and Local Kingship in Eighteenth Century Bengal*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

¹⁶⁴ Rila Mukherjee, *Strange Riches, Bengal in the Mercantile Map of South Asia*, New Delhi: Foundation Books Private Ltd, 2006.

¹⁶⁵ Hameeda Hossain, *The Company Weavers of Bengal: The East India Company and the Organisation of Textile Production in Bengal, 1750-1813*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988.

¹⁶⁶ NAI, Bengal Public Consultations, Microfilm, Accession no. 2665, May 1727, March 1727-28.

¹⁶⁷ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, India Office Copy, 1752-53, Proceedings, vol. 17, letter dated January 2, 1751, p. 17.

¹⁶⁸ K. N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia*, p. 349.

¹⁶⁹ NAI, Proceedings, Home Miscellaneous, vol. 7, dated February 25, 1731, p. 265.

incorporate expanding areas within the arena of production. During the season of incursions, the promised quality and quantity of production could not be maintained. Rila Mukherjee felt that the *Bargi* incursions definitely contributed to an already existing ‘crisis in the production sphere’ that was snowballed by an ‘excessive demand by the EICs’¹⁷⁰.

Again the *dadni* merchants performed the dual function of moneylenders. During the phase of price rise and during the raids when Alivardi’s financial extortions made matters worse, their help had been sought by the common men and also by European trade bodies. Their dues were never recovered. So they started quoting very high prices for the Kasimbazar silk. According to an estimate of 1754, they owed approximately SR 90,000¹⁷¹. The subsequent estimate of November 1756 showed a debt of around Rs.77042¹⁷². However, K.N. Chaudhuri¹⁷³ has mapped the polynomial and linear trends of Bengal textile price. Between 1740 and 1750, the polynomial trend has shown a gradual rise in price in this decade coinciding with the Maratha menace with a number of small sharp troughs. The linear plotting has shown a steady gradual upward trend but not a steep escalation of price within this decade. According to K.N. Chaudhuri, long term price escalations of essential commodities of Bengal like textiles, raw silk, rice and other commodities were partially influenced by increased money supply due to increase in bullion imports¹⁷⁴.

Still, on the basis of the marker of investment of silk by the English and Dutch companies between 1740 and 1750, it seems that the trend of exports from Bengal was wavering (See Graph 4.1). The Dutch exports fell sharply between 1743 and 1745, the data of Dutch trade between 1745 and 50 are missing, though the exports picked up to close to 80,000 Dutch ponds¹⁷⁵ in 1750-51. The English export trend showed a steep fall between 1745-46 and 1747-48 when the Maratha inroads into Bengal had peaked. From 1748-49, it picked up steadily in Bengal. Though Bengal occupied an important position in the commercial web of the VOC and the EEIC; the Dutch Company was already on its way to losing out to its superior competitor. Nevertheless, the period coincided with the attacks.

¹⁷⁰ Rila Mukherjee, *Merchants and Companies in Bengal*, p. 19.

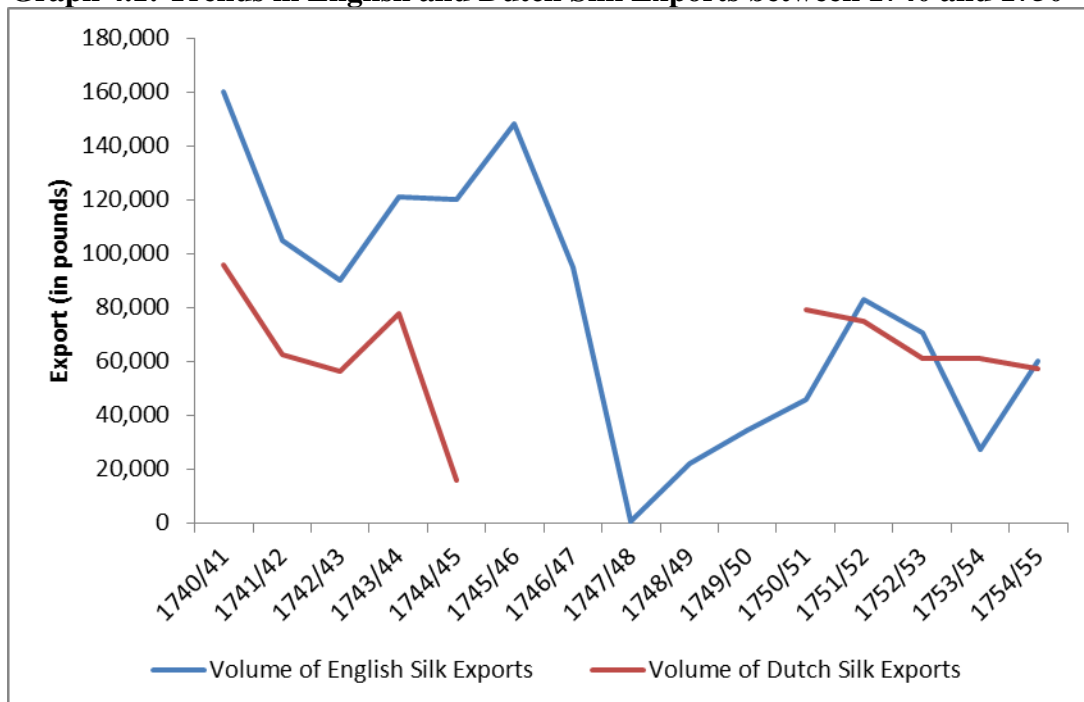
¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ K. N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia*, p. 108.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.100-08.

¹⁷⁵ 1 Dutch pond= 1.09 lb avoirdupois.

Graph 4.1: Trends in English and Dutch Silk Exports between 1740 and 1750

Sources: Sushil Chaudhury and Michel Morineau eds., *Merchants, Companies and Trade, Europe and Asia in the Early Modern Era*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Maison des Sciences de L'Homme, 1999, p. 306; Sushil Chaudhury, *From Prosperity to Decline, Eighteenth Century Bengal*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1995, pp. 349-351.

Biplab Das Gupta countered Sushil Chaudhury on the ground that the latter's view did not accommodate the trends of trade happening within smaller regions¹⁷⁶. The two following graphs would enumerate the investment trend in silk sector in Kasimbazar during the Maratha inroads. Generally speaking, a comparison of the English East India Company's investment on imports from Bengal during the pre *Bargi* days and during the disturbed phase would show the intensity of the impact.

Table 4.1: Comparison of Imports in Two Decades

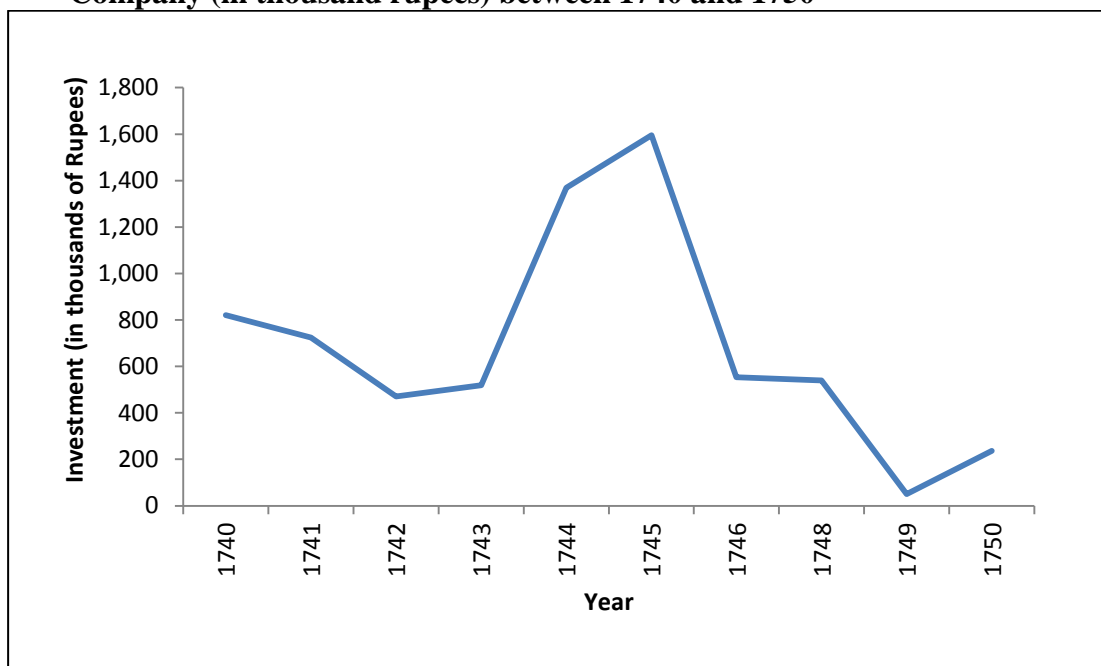
Period	Average Import from Bengal in Pounds
1738-1742	462,854
1752-1756	355,633

Source: Adapted from J.R. McLane, *Land and Local Kingship in Eighteenth-Century Bengal*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1993, p. 170.

So there was about 23 per cent reduction in the average import in the four year period following the phase of the *Bargi* attack. How far Kasimbazar, the commercial nucleus of the south western Bengal, had suffered during the phase of prolonged *Bargi* menace, would be interesting to note.

¹⁷⁶ Biplab Das Gupta, *European Trade and Colonial Conquest*, vol. 1, London: Anthem Press, 2005.

Graph 4.2: Investment in Silk in Kasimbazar by the English East India Company (in thousand rupees) between 1740 and 1750



Sources: Sushil Chaudhury and Michel Morineau eds., *Merchants, Companies and Trade, Europe and Asia in the Early Modern Era*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Maison des Sciences de L'Homme, 1999, p. 306; Sushil Chaudhury, *From Prosperity to Decline, Eighteenth Century Bengal*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1995, pp. 349-351.

The English trading Company's export of raw silk had peaked in the 1730s. Between the 1740s and 50s (See Graph 4.2), raw silk investment fluctuated, though did not show much drastic alterations, while the investment in other heads of textile showed quantum changes. The decade corresponded with the most intense phase of raids. In the years 1744 and 1745, the exports of the best quality silk, the November *bund*, were at a low level¹⁷⁷. But it had substantially picked up by the next year when there was cent percent investment, and in 1748 more than 95 per cent investment¹⁷⁸. In the last two years of the Maratha attacks, investment had dipped to nearly 70 and 80 per cent¹⁷⁹. In the years 1741 and 1745, raw silk export had dipped remarkably, but those years experienced a remarkable increase in investment on the *gurrah* and *dosutties*¹⁸⁰. Investment on silk piece goods was more than marginal in the years 1742, 44 and 49¹⁸¹.

¹⁷⁷ Rila Mukherjee, *Merchants and Commerce in Bengal: Kasimbazar and Jugdia in the Eighteenth Century*, Table 18, p. 81.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

Curiously at local level in Kasimbazar, investment on raw silk dipped for a brief period but never reflected a steady downward trend. Kasimbazar was located at the fringe of the route march hence the impact was not as severe as in other parts of *rahr* Bengal. Besides, the strict vigilance from the head quarter of the *nizamat* had a role in this. From the review of the textile trade in Kasimbazar for the particular decade on the basis of scant records available at hand, the following rough trend emerges:

Table 4.2: Trade in Kasimbazar during the *Bargi* Raids

Dates	Instances when business was affected	Instances when business continued
January 1742	Only 46 bales brought in; Then 78 bales procured for ready money ¹⁸² ; Green taffaties not procurable; Romals and red taffaties with yellow 'selviges' extravagant, so not contracted for; Raw silk and silk piece goods far short in goodness; Weavers, inhabitants fled, Unfinished piece goods were carried away ¹⁸³ .	
July 1742	The <i>Bargis</i> had put a stop to all business specially in and around Kasimbazar; merchants and weavers vacated the place ¹⁸⁴	
February 1743	Trade in general at a low ebb ¹⁸⁵ , Grains and other items of necessities exceedingly scarce and dear ¹⁸⁶ .	
August 1744		Kasimbazar contracted for 1240 maund November bund at Rs. 6.10 per seer; 1170 Comercolly at 5.14 Rs. per seer ¹⁸⁷ ; Agreed for silk piece goods like 9525 taffaties plain at 8 Rs.; The reds at Rs8.6 and blacks at 8.2; 2485 ditto striped at 8.4; 3450 new romals at Rs. 7.3; 23850 bandannoes ordinary at 3.12; 3600 ditto fine at 4.4; choppasarrys 1350; New bandannoes 600; dannadars 300; jamawars not to

¹⁸² NAI, Home Miscellaneous, vol. 11, 1742-46, dated January 8, 1742, p. 15.

¹⁸³ Ibid., p.16.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., vol. 10, 1737-42, dated July 31, 1742, p. 361.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., vol. 11, 1742-46, dated February 3, 1743, p. 125.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p.129.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., vol. 11, dated August 3, 1744, p. 165.

		be had for last year's price—did not contract; Rungpoor silk at 6.10 a seer – too dear so did not provide any. Advanced a merchant Rs. 4000 to procure white silk; Kasimbazar agreed for 39000 <i>gurrahs</i> of 39 covids at Rs. 70 and 8000 at Rs 72 ¹⁸⁸ .
August 1745		On 21 March Kasimbazar contracted for raw silk November bund 1240 maund; Guzzerat 340; Comercolly 1170; for 58795 silk piece goods at last year's prices advancing 1.12 per piece on lunge romals, Rungpore silk was dear for 6 Rs. 5 annaes per seer. On 26 April contracted for 83900 <i>gurrahs</i> ; 1750 dosooties at 70 Rs. a corge (?); On 30 May 4000 more <i>gurrahs</i> ¹⁸⁹ .
February 1746	All means tried to get <i>gurrahs</i> contracted for 1742; but 7143 pieces still outstanding; a great scarcity of all piece goods; the French made little or no investment as they could not purchase either fine or coarse goods ¹⁹⁰ .	Got in only 12152 pieces of <i>gurrah</i> of the 6000 contracted for this year; at Kasimbazar 40000 <i>gurrahs</i> and 20000 silk romals were being sorted for prizing, but as the <i>Bargis</i> were so near it could not be completed; due to scare the place might fall short of the expected quantity of bale ¹⁹¹ .
1747-48	Marathas disturbed the <i>gurraharangs</i> in and around Kasimbazar ¹⁹² .	
1748-49	The factors at Kasimbazar on January 14 1748 predicted that their merchants would fall short in supply of <i>gurrah</i> and raw silk ¹⁹³ .	

Source: adapted from NAI, Home Miscellaneous Proceedings.

This table shows that during the Maratha intrusions in Bengal, the business situation in Kasimbazar was not bleak. Despite the so called instances of disruptions in silk, goods were being contracted from time to time, though their production and deliveries might not have happened as per schedule. The archival records tend to blame the Marathas squarely for such irregularities without taking into account various other factors like the 'badness of silk'. The fact that the

¹⁸⁸Ibid., pp. 167-69.

¹⁸⁹Ibid., Proceedings, vol. 11, dated August 11, 1745, p. 5.

¹⁹⁰Ibid., Proceedings, vol. 11, 4, 1746, p. 315.

¹⁹¹Ibid., p. 321.

¹⁹²Ibid., Proceedings, vol. 13, 1747-48, p. 61.

¹⁹³Ibid., Proceedings, vol. 14, 1748-49, p. 33.

investments were being considered shows the decade in not so dim. Further, the trend in Kasimbazar conformed to Chaudhury's view that the decade was not as hopeless as it was portrayed by some historians. Nevertheless, it is a micro view of local history from the perspective of its signature product on the basis of data culled from the Home Miscellaneous Series.

IX. Historical Perspective of Kasimbazar: c. 1800.

The mid eighteenth century Bengal saw the recurrent annual *Bargi* raids in Bengal. Usually when an area is repeatedly trampled by the marauders, the smooth running of the community life is stalled as it adversely affects agriculture, trade and industry. The shifting of professionals, merchants and transfer of big money to Calcutta¹⁹⁴ was indicative of an impending decline of the old bastion and rise of a new power centre under the English. The repeated attacks reconfirmed the fact that the political hold of the *nizamat* over the province had slackened. In fact, Dimock observed that a 'lasting impact' of the *Bargi* scourge was the rapid growth of a new centre of authority in Calcutta¹⁹⁵. Leading authorities like K. N. Chaudhuri underscored a rather extreme point of view that Alivardi Khan's extortions and the decade long Maratha depredations pushed the Bengal economy towards the brink of an imminent collapse¹⁹⁶. It is to be noted that the Maratha inroads were not the solitary determinant that heralded the eclipse of the *nizamat* era in Bengal.

Again, at the macro level, while the price rise in raw silk and textile in Bengal could, to an extent, be explained in terms of the Maratha attacks, it was pointed out by various English documents that the price escalation had started already in the 1720s due to certain shortcomings in the yarn¹⁹⁷, besides other climatic factors adversely affecting the growth of mulberry leaves and worms during that period¹⁹⁸. The skirmishes of the local government, extreme demand on the silk sector since the 1730s by the English, the Afghan war, the Arakanese

¹⁹⁴ In 1742, 207 boats sailed towards Calcutta that carried fifteen bags of money belonging to Jagatseth. Cited in J.H. Little, *House of Jagatseth*, Calcutta: Calcutta Historical Society, 1967, p. 118.

¹⁹⁵ Gangaram, *Maharashtra Purana*, p. 14.

¹⁹⁶ K. N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World*, p. 308.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 348.

¹⁹⁸ NAI, Bengal Public Consultation, Microfilm, Accession no.2666, Fort William, October 1728, dated October 28, 1728.

invasions in eastern Bengal, recurrent *Bargi* incursions leading to hampering of production, distribution and flight of textile workers from affected areas were also responsible for inflation in the silk sector. Further, Alivardi's exploitations to maintain war expenses since the 1740s had debilitated his reign. There was widespread discontent and administrative control seemed to be slipping away.

Though Bengal was not occupied for long by Raghuji and his band of followers and the *Bargi* threat to Bengal died down after the early 1750s; the Marathas had managed to retain Orissa under their control till early nineteenth century. Actually 'he (Alivardi) at length had to conclude an inglorious peace with the Mahrattas, and to practically cede to the latter the Province of Orissa'¹⁹⁹.

The Maratha inroads recurred intermittently till the 1770s regarding the collection of *chauth*, though Kasimbazar or Murshidabad were not attacked. Midnapore²⁰⁰, Potashpur²⁰¹, Burdwan²⁰² experienced serious trouble in the early 1760s. But the Company Bahadur shared the responsibility of tackling the necessary evil along with the *nawab*. However, as the Maratha ambitions were spiralling with the passage of time, they started focusing on central, western and northern India too. So the Marathas posed a nagging threat to Bengal. At the same time it added a further dimension to a variety of long and short term problems faced by Bengal.

In the long term, along with the *Bargi* depredations affecting business and stability, the battle of Plassey and Grant of *Diwani*, the Bengal Famine of 1770, the preceding two years of drought, floods and rain, the transfer of government offices, mint and court to Calcutta, etc. leading to a population dip and mass exodus, and the simultaneous rise of Calcutta as the happening commercial centre, port, the bastion of the Company, had an impact on the history of Murshidabad Kasimbazar region. To echo J.E. Gastrell, the British rule not only 'swept away' the employment of thousands of people; it took away their 'hopes'²⁰³. They gravitated to the city of new aspirations leaving behind the erstwhile business centre and the old seat of the *nizamat*.

¹⁹⁹Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 340.

²⁰⁰*Calendar of Persian Correspondence*, New Delhi: National Archives of India, 2013, vol. 1, 1759-67, February 4, 1761, no. 884, p. 56.

²⁰¹*Ibid.*, February 16, 1762, no. 1447, p. 146; May 23, 1762, no. 1534, p. 164.

²⁰²*Ibid.*, February 16, 1762, no. 1447, p. 146.

²⁰³J.E. Gastrell, *Statistical and Geographical Report of the Murshidabad District*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Office, 1860, p. 11.

X. Conclusion

Apart from these factors, the topography and ecology comprise one of the many essential components of the historical panorama. Within the long period chosen for this research; the rivers had moved away from its old track towards the east. In fact, various primary records had shown that Kasimbazar Murshidabad area watered by the Bhagirathi river system, had faced problems like frequent floods (flood of 1795 should be specially mentioned for its devastating impact) and land encroachment by river, loss of river's navigability due to formation of sand banks, shoals on the river bed, and there was the problem of the formation of marshes—all of which could be explained to a large extent as fall outs of the shifting course of the river. Further, the alterations in the type of flora, fauna of the area, waxing and waning of forest cover, changing climate pattern etc. were indicative of an impermanent ecology. This too might have left its imprint on the evolution of the area.

The European visitors to Kasimbazar and Murshidabad between the 1650s and 1850s, namely Tavernier (1666)²⁰⁴, Streysham Master (1676)²⁰⁵, Alexander Hamilton (account was published in 1727)²⁰⁶, De Gennes de la Chanceliere (early 1740s)²⁰⁷, Tieffenthaler (1760s)²⁰⁸, Lord Valentia (account was published in 1807)²⁰⁹, J.E. Gastrall (1852-55)²¹⁰; were unanimous in their observations on the decreasing navigability of the Kasimbazar river. The river was gradually moving towards the east between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. This easterly turn that took the most of the water into the expanding Padma from the Bhagirathi, cut off the major towns and marts that had sprung up along its bank in the south western Bengal including Kasimbazar, Murshidabad; reducing the grand trading

²⁰⁴ Jean Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, Valentine Ball and Crooke eds., vol. 1, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2004, pp. 125-26.

²⁰⁵ Streysham Master, *Diaries and Other Contemporary Papers Relating Thereto, 1675-1680*, R.C. Temple ed., vol. 2, London: John Murray, 1911, p. 28.

²⁰⁶ Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies, Being the Observations and Remarks by Captain Alexander Hamilton, 1688-1723*, vol. 2, London: C. Hitch and A. Millar, 1744, p. 20.

²⁰⁷ Indrani Ray, 'The French and the Trade of the Indian Ocean', in L. Subramanian ed., *A Collection of Essays by Indrani Ray*, New Delhi: Munshi Manoharlal Publishers, 1999, p. 156.

²⁰⁸ Joseph Tieffenthaler, 'Le Developpment du Cours du Gange et de celui du Gagra', in M. Aquetil Du Perron, *Recherches Historique et Geographique Sur L'Inde*, vol. 2, New Edition, Berlin: The Press of Pierre Bourdeaux, 1786.

²⁰⁹ Josiah Conder, *The Modern Traveller, A Popular Description, Geographical, Historical, and Topographical, of the Various Countries of the Globe. India*, vol. 3, London: Printed for James Duncan, 1828, pp. 146-47.

²¹⁰ J. E. Gastrall, *Statistical and Geographical Report of the Murshidabad District*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Office, 1860, p. 6.

route represented by the 'Cossimbuzer River' into an insignificant seasonal channel. Finally, the river left its old bed near Amanigunge, proceeded straight towards the south west joining both the tips of the horse shoe shaped circuit of the river to chart out a new course and bypassed Kasimbazar, Kalikapore, Farashdanga on the left bank. Murshidabad too fell towards the moribund area. As the Bhagirathi's water was steadily captured by the Padma and consequently the former was turning shallower and narrower; commerce started eluding this belt gradually.

As years passed by, the deserted bed of the Bhagirathi lingered in the form of a series of swampy pools like Motijheel, Bishtupur jheel, Bansari jheel, Katiganga that were veritable breeding grounds of malaria and water borne diseases²¹¹. 'The Survey of the city of Murshidabad' November 25, 1813, recorded the closure of the river at a number of places within 'Cossimbuzar'²¹². The extent of debilitating impact of the *Bargi* invasions in Kasimbazar has to be weighed against long term factors like riverine changes and other ecological variables²¹³ that had potentiality to sap the vitality of a region slowly but definitively. The population exodus in certain areas and death were accompanied by a contraction of clearings for living areas and farm land. According to the census report of 1829, roughly 1300 dwelling units in Kasimbazar housed around 3500 people²¹⁴.

But the magnitude of river decay or other ecological changes is never commensurate with the pace of decline of a settlement that had been reared on its bank. Such changes do not take place violently all of a sudden but occur very slowly over an extended period. The natural process of a river's swing usually takes place in an unhurried pace without drawing much attention till the effect on the settlements assumes a considerable proportion and becomes discernible in the long run. All the while the settlements watered by it, might reflect prosperity and a steady business. Hence in as late as 1769 in *Tirthamangal*, the Bengali poet Vijayram Sen described Kasimbazar as a thriving business town with impressive

²¹¹ Gastrell, *Statistical and Geographical Report*, p. 14.

²¹² NAI, Cartography Section, Field Book 51, Lt Col. Fleming, Survey of the City of Murshidabad, Received November 25, 1813.

²¹³ Like altering fauna and flora, slow change in climate pattern at local level, ingress and egress of forest etc.

²¹⁴ Major Tull, *A History of Murshidabad District*, p. 44.

residential buildings overlooking the river²¹⁵. All kinds of ‘tajjash’ (commodities) were available there²¹⁶.

The city was inhabited by many rich and influential men and spanned over four ‘kos’. A part of it called Sydabad was full of people and the river there teemed with boats. Mukhsudabad had been described as a city. In fact, his *bajra* sailed past a number of settlements in and around Kasimbazar and Murshidabad²¹⁷ starting from ‘Suti’ and followed by ‘Fatullapore’, ‘Junghypore’, ‘Lakshnipore’, ‘Maksudabad’, ‘Sadhakbag’, ‘Hirajheel’, ‘Kiritkona’, ‘Jiagunge’, ‘Mughaltuli’, ‘Dahapara’, ‘Saidabad’, ‘Khidirpore’, ‘Chumrigachha’, ‘Mahata’, and ‘Plassey’. Murshidabad was described as a city and the other places mentioned in the book were marts or settlements. None of them were abandoned places.

However, as Vijayram sailed past Saidabad and reached Khiderpore, both adjoining Kasimbazar; he made a number of interesting observations. It struck him that the river had meandered too many times on either side of his craft as far as he could see and the flow was particularly sluggish. Besides, due to too many loops in the course of the Bhagirathi; the *bajra* was unable to make an easy headway²¹⁸. Thus the river’s dismal condition drew Vijayram’s attention. So the disruptions caused by the *Bargi* inroads on Kasimbazar have to be reviewed against the perspective of such continuing, and very long drawn processes of the riverine shift that threatened the very existence of the settlement. So, if the history of Kasimbazar could be seen from such a vantage, then perhaps one could claim that even if the *Bargi* attacks did not take place, or if the shift in political and economic control of the Bengal *suba* did not happen in the mid eighteenth century; or in an imagined scenario of no Bengal Famine taking its toll: the process of slow decline of the settlement of Kasimbazar from its status of a premier nucleus of commerce, was inevitable.

²¹⁵ Vijayram Sen, *Tirthamangal*, p. 116.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 114-17.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

CHAPTER 5

Arakanese Portuguese Raiders and Sagor

I. Introduction

Located at the southern tip of the mainland of the western Bengal, Sagor island marked the journey's end for the Bhagirathi river. It is an island consisting of waterways, creeks, marshes, jungles, muddy banks which were home to various species of wild life and vegetation¹. It is part of the Sundarbans forest, the largest single block of mangrove forest spread in parts of the North and South 24 Parganas in West Bengal and in the districts of Khulna, Satkheera, Patuakhali, Bhulwa, Bagerhat, Barguna, and Pirojpur in Bangladesh. The extensive areas of the riparian tracts of lower Bengal² including Sagor suffered the Arakanese and Portuguese joint piratical forays roughly between the early seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Such inroads were commonly referred to as the *Magh Firangi* attacks. The word 'Firangi' or 'Firingi' originated from the word Frank meaning the French crusaders. Subsequently it became a generic term for all Europeans who had come to India. Somehow it became associated with the Portuguese in India. 'Harmad' is another term identified with the Arakanese Portuguese raiders.

Derived from the word 'Armada' denoting Portuguese fleet, that had earned notoriety for its aggression and competence; in Bengal the term became loosely synonymous with the local Arakanese pirates and their Portuguese allies. The 'pirates and robbers of Arakan'³ including the local Portuguese settled in Arakan and neighbouring Chittagong region were referred locally as *Maghs*. In the official English correspondences they have been mentioned as the 'Muggs' or 'Moggs'⁴. Those expert sailors and fighters were originally employed by the king of Arakan to raid and loot the deltaic villages of Bengal accessible through rivers. Areas of coastal Bengal that were repeatedly ravaged by them were identified as

¹ R.H. Phillimore, *Historical Records of the Survey of India*, vol. 2, (1800-1815), Dehradun: Published by the Order of the Surveyor General of India, 1950, p. 14.

² The lower Bengal loosely implies the parts of the deltaic Bengal of the alluvium, under tidal influence.

³ NAI, Secret, Proceedings, vol. 35A, May 5-June 30, 1777, p. 914.

⁴ Maghs and Harmads became synonymous terms in Bengal.

Magher Mulluk, meaning the land of anarchy. However in the modern times, those people of Arakan prefer to be called ‘Rakhines’⁵.

This chapter would attempt to enumerate the destructive aspect of the river as a harbinger of those raiders to lower delta in general and specifically Sagor. The idea is to flesh out the contrasting role of the river as a constraint to the *Bargi* raiders in Kasimbazar and the western delta (discussed in Chapter 4) and as a collaborative force in case of Sagor. How did the river act as an usherer of incursions; how Sagor got enmeshed within the raiders’ network and what kind of impact did the raids leave behind on the island and around it, would be the major set of queries explored by the chapter. The chapter would essentially pinpoint on the select micro space, i.e. Sagor; though its surrounding macro region of the Sundarbans would be referred to as well, to provide a geo historical context to the theme.

While the extensive parts of *rahr* on the Bhagirathi’s western bank was trampled by the *Bargis* in mid eighteenth century, the lower reach of the same river provided a fairly vast arena for *Magh Firangi* incursions spanning over a much longer duration and overlapping briefly with the *Bargi* incursions. While the *Bargis* looted all movable properties and tortured and butchered people, desecrated human habitations; the ‘Muggs’ swarmed in to loot, plunder, kidnap, brutalise and sell the captives as slaves and perpetrate an ambience of threat.

Mirza Nathan, who had accompanied the Mughal army in some of its eastern campaigns, had recorded the practice of the ‘Muggs’ of carrying away a large number of villagers, after raiding the *parganas* of southern Bengal⁶. According to a letter written by John Ritchie, the Surveyor to the English East India Company; to the Governor General Lord Hastings; their *modus operandi* remained more or less the same till the 1770s. He observed,

⁵ Noor Kamal, *The Etymology of Arakan, Rohingya and Rakhine*, October, 2006.
<http://www.rohingya.org/portal/index.php/learn-about-rohingya/52-the-etymology-of-arakan-rohingya-and-rakhine.pdf>

Accessed on 23.2.17.

Dr Habib Siddiqui, ‘A Long History of Injustice Ignored: Rohingya: The Forgotten People of Our Time’

http://theamericanmuslim.org/tam.php/features/articles/a_long_history_of_injustice_ignored_rohningya_the_forgotten_people_of_our_time

Accessed on 22.12.15.

⁶ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-I-Ghaybi, A History of the Mughal Wars in Assam, Cooch Behar, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during the Reigns of Jahangir and Shahjahan*, M.I. Borah trans. From original Persian, Guahati: The Government of Assam, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1936, vol. 1, pp. 85-86, vol. 2, p. 629.

They make frequent incursions to the inhabited Islands, as well as to the mainland, plundering the country of everything, that is valuable or useful and carrying off the people, especially females and children into captivity⁷.

The terror associated with the raids has been transmitted over generations through many contemporary ballads that have been a part of the oral tradition of history.

*Poschim mikya no jaio shaigorer parey,
Amar kotha monot rakhkho kahi barey barey.
Harmadrya loiyya jaibo golao bñadhi dori re⁸.
(Don't go to the western side near the shore of the sea,
Remember my words which I have repeated many times.
Harmads will take you away by tying your neck with a rope).*

Translation: Author

For a considerable span of time the *Magh* or 'Mugg' incursions meant allied attacks. Hence it would be relevant to explore the circumstances moderating such a tie up. A number of factors had turned lower Bengal as a source of manpower. Though the historians have touched upon some aspects of the *MaghFirangi* raids in Bengal, no one has so far specifically portrayed Sagor as a raiders' haunt. A few of Rila Mukherjee's works, have categorically enumerated Sagor's involvement⁹, though the river's role has not been highlighted in detail in the scholarly contributions published so far. The chapter would try to fill in this academic void.

II. Bengal as a Catchment Area

River Shift and Migration of People to the Western Delta

There was a long term ecological perspective to it. Since sixteenth century, the Bhagirathi river system was veering towards the east. As Radhakamal Mukherjee noted, the eastward migration of the Bhagirathi, in course of its journey, left behind a moribund delta in the central and western Bengal that got cut off from its head water and fresh alluvium. Parts of the western delta became dotted with pestiferous malarial marshes on the dry river bed.

⁷ NAI, Secret, Proceedings, vol. 35A, May 5-June 30, 1777, p. 916.

⁸ Dinesh Chandra Sen ed., 'Poreebanu Begumer Pala' in *Pracheen Purbobongo Geetika*, vol. 5, Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1944, p. 220.

⁹ Rila Mukherjee, *Strange Riches*, p. 192; R. Mukherjee, 'Mobility in the Bay of Bengal World: Medieval Raiders, Traders, States and Slaves', *Indian Historical Review*, no. 36, vol. 1, 2009, p. 112; Rila Mukherjee ed., *Pelagic Passageways*, p. 456.

The same river charted out a new eastern delta of fresh and fertile sediment that facilitated large scale wet paddy cultivation and established new colonies by drawing in settlers from near and far¹⁰. There was a population shift from the decaying delta to the land of the bountiful food grains. A good number of adventurers with organisational skills and constructive visions from the north Indian plains believed to have initiated large scale settlements by reclaiming the marshes and jungles, bringing them under the plough and pushing back the edges of natural forests. Robert Kyd remarked that the traditional ‘granaries of Bengal’, like Burdwan, Hooghly, Rajshahi were replaced by Dhaka and Bakarganj¹¹. So the new grain bowl nurtured a very large population base located close to Chittagong. So for about a hundred years the slave raiders from Chittagong Arakan belt made regular penetrations into the riverside populous villages of Bengal under the patronage of the Rakhine monarch.

Importance of Chittagong

From fifteenth century down to the mid seventeenth, the vibrant port city was a ‘bone of contention’ between Tripura, Arakan, and the Sultanate of Gaur and later, the Mughals too¹². Many Arab merchants frequented the place and some rich ones resided there. In fact a good number of Portuguese traders made it their home. Chittagong was named *Porto Grande* (Big Port) by them while the port of Satgaon in the western Bengal was called *Porto Pequena* (Small Port). However, vagrant groups of Portuguese rough elements around the Bay functioned as mercenaries with the small and big power blocs along the Bengal coast and the other kingdoms around the Bay. The king of Arakan was extremely wary of this group though he nurtured it as a bulwark against Mughal expansionism¹³. Thus a binary dynamics persisted between the Arakanese royalty and a group of Portuguese in Chittagong.

The Afghans and subsequently the Mughals in the post Husain Shahi period were lured towards Bengal by the prospect of revenue. Further, the

¹⁰ Radhakamal Mukherjee, *Changing Face of Bengal*, 1938, p. iii; Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, p. 195.

¹¹ Kyd cited in Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and Market*, p. 68.

¹² Abu Anin, ‘Towards Understanding Arakan History, part 2, Chapter 10, Slave Raids in Bengal or Muslim Settlements in Arakan’, <http://www.kaladanpress.org/index.php/scholar-column-mainmenu-36/arakan/866-towards-understanding-arakan-history-part-ii.html> Accessed on 13.1.16.

¹³ Francois Bernier, A. Constable, tr., *Travels in the Mogul Empire, AD 1656-1658*, London: Oxford University Press, 1914, p. 175.

prosperous sea port cum city of Chittagong was an added attraction for them. In fact it was the only sea port of Bengal. Moreover it was blessed with bounties of nature. The high yielding soil boasted of prolific growth of crops, it was watered by a multitude of rivers like Karnafuli, Feni, Kaladan and ‘ninety nine perennial nullahs’¹⁴. This implies the area was crisscrossed by innumerable channels that fed on the perennial river system. Firminger’s report confirmed that the place produced great quantities of wheat and rice and other grains, cotton, wax, oil and supplied ivory. It was a rich source for high grade timber¹⁵.

Much later, Francis Buchanan, during his visit to Chittagong in the 1790s, found that it was a commercially viable place for a number of reasons. He noted, ‘the river is a good harbour, and very good vessels have been built here. It would be very convenient for foreign commerce, were it not pent up in a corner of the Bay’¹⁶. It was a ‘populous’ place with the houses that were better constructed than the other places in Bengal. It was a chequered terrain of fertile plain watered by lots of springs, and sandy soil near the sea containing ‘large masses of petrified timber’. Such a terrain was suitable for cinnamon cultivation¹⁷.

Eastward March of the Mughals and Chittagong’s Invincibility

However, to capture and retain Chittagong for a long duration was a tough challenge for any interest group. The Afghans had taken control of it in brief phases. So did the king of Tripura. Nusrat Shah for instance, had captured Chittagong for the second time in 1525; made it his seat of political power after renaming it Fatheyabad¹⁸. The conquest of Gaur by Sher Shah triggered a prolonged civil war. Further, the Portuguese presence at the vantage points along the Bhagirathi, the overshadowing presence of the Arakanese towards the east contributed to the political turmoil of Bengal.

The feasibility of Mughal ambitions in Chittagong as a part of the eastward intrusion in Bengal, was indeed doubtful. The Mughals officially laid their claims

¹⁴ Shihabuddin Talish, *Fathiya-i-ibriyya*, Jadunath Sarkar, trans. part of *Fathiya*, in ‘The Feringi Pirates of Chatgaon, 1666 A.D.’ *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. 3, New Series, June 1907, p. 420.

¹⁵ W.K. Firminger, *Historical Introduction to the Bengal Portion of the Fifth Report*, Calcutta: R. Cambay and Co, 1917, p. 131.

¹⁶ Willem van Schendel ed., *Francis Buchanan in Southeast Bengal (1798), His Journey to Chittagong, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Noakhali and Comilla*, Dacca: University Press Limited, 1992, p. 123.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Mohammad Abdul Jalil, *Bonge Mogh Phiringi O Borgir Otyachar*, Dacca: Bangla Academyp. 27.

to Bengal in 1575¹⁹. In fact, the Afghans and then later on the Mughals could not keep the Arakanese power at bay as their capitals at Gaur-Tanda-Rajmahal region were far off from the Arakanese strongholds in the eastern Bengal. Besides their rudimentary navy was no match for the highly sophisticated Arakanese fleet manned by Rakhine and Portuguese sailors.

Moreover, the Mughals were possibly hesitant to tread into an unknown terrain. In fact *Ain-i-Akbari* expressed a deep apprehension of the Mughals towards the Bengal monsoon, along with the accompanying flood and pestilential air that lasted up to almost six months²⁰. Further, as the Portuguese mercenaries extended their support to the Rakhine king, Arakan became formidable. From 1538 onwards, Chittagong came under the firm control of the neighbouring kingdom of Arakan and was to remain so for a little more than a century.

Arakan's Control over Chittagong and Sagor at the Fringes of Bengal

These could have been the reasons for the obvious reluctance towards penetrations into Bengal's interior, despite their initial enthusiasm. Hence the Bengal delta or *bhati* was a free field for the local chieftains, Afghan warlords and Portuguese fortune seekers. The straggling settlements were easily accessible by Chittagong and Arakan via dense waterways around the Bay.

The fact remains that though Bengal was incorporated within the Mughal empire in 1576; the Mughal control over Bengal was far from secure at this stage. Since the latter part of sixteenth century; resistances put forth by the chieftains of the lower Bengal; the *Baro Bhuiyans* came in the way of establishing an absolute Mughal control over Bengal. However, those local chiefs of Bengal were decisively defeated in 1612 and Bengal was brought under Mughal suzerainty. The Mughals ruled over Bengal with the help of the *subadars*. Though officially under the Mughals, the flourishing eastern delta was politically in a state of flux as there was hardly any strong day to day monitoring over such a remote area. The Arakanese expansionism continued unabated.

Various Mughal steps to combat the Rakhine aggressions like: shifting the provincial capital from Rajmahal to Dacca in 1610²¹, their decisive victory against

¹⁹ R.C. Majumdar, H.C. Raychaudhuri and K.K. Datta, *An Advanced History of India*, Third Edition, Macmillan and Co Ltd, London: 1967, p. 443.

²⁰ Abul Fazl Allami, *Ain i Akbari*, H.S. Jarrett trans, vol. 2, Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1891, p. 120.

²¹ Ghulam Husain Salim, *Riyaz*, p. 39.

two major power blocs of the *bhati*; Isha Khan and Pratapaditya and their attempts to build up a strong navy to keep vigilance at the vulnerable points of the Padma and Meghna rivers; proved ineffective till Shah Jahan's reign (1628-1658). Blochmann's major work based on Todar Mal's rent roll, is suggestive of Sagor island being part of the most southerly assessed *mahal* of Hathiagarh under *sarkar* Satgaon and Khilafatabad²². In reality the Mughal control over south eastern Bengal was at best nominal.

According to a contemporary chronicler Shihabuddin Talish, who was an officer accompanying Mir Jumla in his eastern campaigns; there existed a complete record of taxes collected from south eastern Bengal till 1625²³. It enumerated that Arakan used to collect taxes from mainly the *sarkars* of Hijli, Dacca, Bakla, Chittagong. The first revenue settlement of Bengal under Todar Mal confirmed this. The disputed territory between Arakan and the Mughals yielded about 30 per cent of land revenue²⁴, a bulk of which inflated the Arakanese royal treasury. It is ascertained that Sagor had been absorbed under the zamindari of Hijli²⁵. We could surmise that after Pratap's fall, parts of south eastern Bengal including areas in and around Sagor came under the strong influence of Arakan. The island turned into a bulwark between Mughal inroads and Arakanese expansion.

Though the new Mughal Governor Islam Khan decided to adopt a 'hardline' against Tripura, Ahom and Arakan during the planned eastward expansion²⁶ in the 1630s, the parts of the lower Bengal remained vassals of

²² H. Blochmann, *Contributions to the Geography and History of Bengal*, pp. 343-48

²³ Stephan Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal, the Rise and Decline of the Mrauk U Kingdom from the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Century A.D.', Ph.D thesis, Leiden University, 2008, p. 183.

²⁴ Stephan Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal' in *Arakan Conference*, Bangkok, March 9, 2013, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/130982876/Arakan-and-Bengal-Stephan-Van-Galen-BKK-March-2013-1>

Accessed on 15.5.13.

²⁵ 'Saugor Island and its Condition Subsequent to the Inundation of November last', in *The Nautical Magazine, A Journal of Papers Connected to Maritime Affairs*, vol. 1, Glasgow: Brown, Son and Ferguson, March 1832, p. 293.

https://books.google.co.in/books?id=mwmmwjJHdzgC&pg=PA101&lpg=PA101&dq=The+Nautical+Magazine,+A+Journal+of+Papers+Connected+to+Maritime+Affairs,+vol.+1,+March+1832&source=bl&ots=D3dLluETMP&sig=qHgpmw93M_pepKj7MH_dHw2akO4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjg7IB6ajSAhXEKY8KHWZYCyIQ6AEIODAG#v=onepage&q=The%20Nautical%20Magazine%20A%20Journal%20of%20Papers%20Connected%20to%20Maritime%20Affairs%20vol.%201%20March%201832&f=false

Accessed on 24.2.17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Arakan till 1666²⁷. This continued till the Viceroy of Bengal Shayista Khan captured Chittagong and decimated the Arakanese power²⁸.

In its heydays, Arakan exploited Bengal by three means from its regional power hub of Chittagong: as a source of revenue from commerce, land revenue and manpower resource. For the third activity, the Arakanese monarchy initiated an alliance of a local sea faring tribe with the freewheeling Portuguese of the delta.

Shah Jahan, the most commercially astute of all the Mughals, had aimed to capture the two major ports of Bengal²⁹. He had successfully decimated the Portuguese and captured the international port of Hooghly. Next he aspired to defeat Arakan and take possession of the port of Chittagong. Raiding and slave trade were unacceptable to the Mughal rulers³⁰. The Mughals were not against retaining slaves. Slaves provided various services in Mughal India. As Indrani Chatterjee noted, even in the late Mughal period the skilled slaves like the trained female slave performers, expert cooks, seamstresses, artisans retained their important position in the royal court and Mughal aristocratic households³¹. But the source of slaves lay far away from South Asia, in the distant corners of Central Asia. They were often brought from the marts of Kabul and Qandahar via land route³². Thus the Mughals did not reduce the inhabitants of their own empire into slavery. It is acclaimed that Akbar and Jahangir took strong stands against the practice of slavery. However, there was a steady demand for eunuch slaves in the Mughal household³³. The tradition predated the Mughals as Duarte Barbosa

²⁷ Pamela Gutman, *Burma's Lost Kingdoms: Splendours of Arakan*, Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2001.

²⁸ Mohammad Abdul Jalil, *Bonge Mogh Phiringi*, p. 26.

²⁹ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 46.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41. Nevertheless, the apparent cause for the Mughal attack was prompted by the murder of Aurungzeb's rebellious brother Shuja by the king of Arakan. The former had fled his country and sought asylum in Arakan. Cited in Wolsey Haig, *The Cambridge History of India*, vol. 4, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937, pp. 480-81.

³¹ Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 2.

³² Rila Mukherjee, *Strange Riches*, p. 75.

³³ Cited in Jorge Flores, *The Mughal Padshah, the Jesuit Treaty on Emperor Jahangir's Court and Household*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2015, p. 55. However, the eunuchs played crucial roles in the Mughal empire. They were much respected for their specialised services like guarding the Mughal harem. The eunuchs of Bengal, especially Sylhet, had a niche market in Mughal India.

mentioned about the Moorish merchants, who bought 'heathen boys' from Bengal, hinting at the slave trafficking as well as trade in eunuchs³⁴.

However in Bengal, the Rakhine Portuguese piracy had kept the region in a state of perpetual insecurity and turmoil. Fall of Satgaon could be partially ascribed to such raids. The utter lawlessness in Hooghly and the Portuguese disregard towards Mughal authority had deeply irked Shahjahan. Moreover, slave trade was the royal prerogative of the Mughals. Rampant raids, slave hawking, profit maximisation by the foreigners out of this trade within the imperial jurisdiction invited royal intervention in the form of severe military campaigns. Also, in the eyes of the Mughal aristocracy, the *Maghs* of Arakan represented an alien and inferior culture³⁵.

III. Moral Justifications for Possessing Slaves

However, in the Bay littoral and Bengal in particular, labour was obtained mainly by kidnapping, conquest and also through voluntary sale of self and family members to the European mercantile companies to avoid extreme hardships in times of drought, pestilence and famine. A similar situation arose in Bengal in 1646-47 during a food crisis when the Dutch company found an opportunity to collect slaves³⁶. According to a French traveller of the 1670s, named de L' Estra, 'poor men sell their own wives and children to strangers, whom they take away to different parts of the world'³⁷.

The practice of possessing slaves were common between sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in the small mutually squabbling power blocs around the northern Bay of Bengal; like Burma, Mrauk U, Ahom, Cachar, Tripura, Manipur, Bhulua, Toungoo, Ayutthaya, Husain Shahi Bengal etc. Also, all of them enjoyed a shared tradition of militarization and ownership of war captives. As expanding

³⁴ Longhorn Dames ed., *The Book of Duarte Barbosa an Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and their Inhabitants Written by Duarte Barbosa and Completed about the Year 1518 A.D.*, vol. 2, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1989, p. 147.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

³⁶ Arasaratnam, 'Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean', in K.S. Mathew ed., *Mariners, Merchants and Oceans, Studies in Maritime History*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1995, p. 204.

³⁷ Francois de L'Estra, *Relation ou journal d'un voyage nouvellement fait aux Indes Orientales depuis l'annee 1671 jusqu'en 1675*, p. 193, Accessed on 9.7.16.

https://books.google.co.in/books?id=tP0EzsZDQ-kC&pg=PA204&lpg=PA204&dq=Francois+de+L%27Estra/Bengal&source=bl&ots=27CJBapSqB&sig=y8wxVdL6DwGATiddbLnYwHZBT_o&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjHv-LdyuXNAhUmTo8KHepFBW0Q6AEIjAB#v=onepage&q=Francois%20de%20L'Estra%2FBengal&f=false

military states they were ever on the lookout for labourers and troops. Battles and wars provided them an opportunity to gather people from defeated states. Viewed from this standpoint, Arakan's slave hunts in Bengal was not out of place³⁸. Interestingly, as Subrahmanyam observed, the rich literary texts of Arakan in the sixteenth century was silent about the flourishing slave trade, though the presence of Portuguese freebooters had been cited³⁹.

Scholars like Leider and D'Hubert⁴⁰ opined that while the Mughal military campaigns were tagged as warfare, the prevalent trend of looking at the Arakanese campaigns as slave raids and piracy could be historical constructs based on Talish's⁴¹ and Nathan's works⁴². The Arakanese royalty, at the peak of its political expansion might have adopted a defense mechanism of aggression for a mock drill of the huge fleet and standing army across the border to keep the enemies, specially the mighty Mughals at bay⁴³. Also it was a common practice of the Southeast Asian states to indulge in expansionism. Arakan was no exception. Such an expansionist policy called for manpower for the running of the new colonies. Manpower was gathered through raids and through warfare. Not only coastal Bengal was desecrated by the *Maghs*, *Rajmala* is replete with instances of the butchering of the people of Tripura by the Rakhines⁴⁴. Moreover, the narrative contained many instances of the *Kuki* attacks on parts of Tripura and neighbouring areas. They matched up to the *Maghs* with respect to cruelties inflicted towards their captives of war. Capturing the members of enemy camps was a common practice for the *Kuki* tribes of Tripura⁴⁵.

Also there were instances like the king of Tripura encouraging captive coastal Arakanese to relocate after making them clear forests for agricultural

³⁸ Rila Mukherjee, 'Mastery of the Bay: Varying Strategies for Trade and Conquest in the Northern Bay of Bengal', in Lipi Ghosh ed., *Eastern Indian Ocean: Historical Links to Contemporary Convergences*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, pp. 42-43.

³⁹ S. Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History*, p. 205.

⁴⁰ Thibaut D'Hubert and Jaques P. Leider, 'Traders and Poets at the Mrauk U Court: Commerce and Cultural Links in Seventeenth-Century Arakan' in Rila Mukherjee ed., *Pelagic Passageways, The Northern Bay of Bengal Before Colonialism*, Delhi: Primus Books, 2011, pp. 353-55.

⁴¹ Shihabuddin Talish, *Fathiya-i-ibriyya*.

⁴² Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan*, 1936.

⁴³ In 1624, Bhulwa was attacked; in 1625 Sripur was captured, the next year Dacca was ransacked. Cited in D'Hubert and Leider, 'Traders and Poets', in R. Mukherjee ed., *Pelagic Passageways*, p. 350.

⁴⁴ Kailashchandra Singha, *Rajmala ba Tripurar Itihash*, Agartala: Akshar, 1997, pp. 60-61.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 186-187.

purpose⁴⁶. In the new colonies of northern Bay of Bengal states, the bulk of the captives were made to serve the defense sector and also as work force. Also in times of relative peace; the accomplished ones were sorted out according to their special talents as scribes, priests, tax collectors, craftsmen and as part of the royal households⁴⁷.

Further, the captives settled down over a period of time in their adoptive countries. There were colonies of the Mon captives along the bank of the Kaladan since the fall of Pegu in 1599⁴⁸. The mushrooming of colonies of trespassers as well as captive labour across porous boundaries was not uncommon in the states along the northern Bay of Bengal. In fact, quite a few of the Arakanese came to Bengal and were 'gradually reduced to obedience, (and) became subject to the Maghul Empire'⁴⁹.

In the terminal phase of the eighteenth century, Buchanan Hamilton came across many areas of Bengal that were inhabited by the *Maghs* from Arakan. They led a peaceful life and subsisted on fishing, boat building, some bit of shifting cultivation, and their women folk took up cloth weaving. Similarly, many people from Bengal had voluntarily adopted Arakan as their second home⁵⁰. So, the sprouting of settlements in the adoptive land through voluntary or forcible displacement; were commonly found in the states of the northern Bay between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth century. But such events of resettlement of people often led to heterogeneous identity and linguistic plurality⁵¹. So, this often triggered a feeling of political and cultural ambivalence among the settlers.

Further, as Indrani Chatterjee observes, the captives could be transferred as 'tribute', 'rewards' or 'fine' within a particular group or between two separate social groups. Most importantly, the captive slaves had a resale value. According to a late seventeenth century account, 'the rich have a number of slaves which

⁴⁶ Indrani Chatterjee, 'Captives of Enchantment: Gender, Genre and Transmemoration', in Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee eds., *History in Vernacular*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008, p. 254.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ D'Hubert and Leider, 'Traders and Poets at the Mrauk U Court', in R Mukherjee ed., *Pelagic Passageways*, p. 155.

⁴⁹ NAI, Board of Revenue, Proceedings, vol. 58, part 1, January 2-9, 1789, p. 347.

⁵⁰ Schendel, *Francis Buchanan*, pp. 31-32.

⁵¹ Indrani Chatterjee, 'Captives of Enchantment' in R. Aquil et al eds., *History in the Vernacular*, in p. 255.

they sell like horses and the poor give themselves and their lives for their service⁵².

Further, there were instances when the king of Arakan himself proposed and insisted on swapping of the respective inhabitants. In fact an aggressive letter written in 1777, by the 'Rajah' of Arakan to the concerned Company official revealed that despite his repeated requests, a group of settlers were not handed over to him. The king confessed that as a mark of protest he had engineered kidnappings of the inhabitants of Islamabad, Sandwip, Dakshin Shabazpore and other parts of the territories of the English Government⁵³. 'Somoonnah, the Rajah of Rajahs' declared to the concerned English officer, 'you send to me without delay my rebellious subjects under the care of Cossid Soliman, and on their arrival I will deliver up to him all your subjects'⁵⁴. He claimed that a few inhabitants of Bengal went over to settle down in Arakan. After many years they returned to Bengal along with some two thousand Arakanese⁵⁵. The king wanted those Arakanese back⁵⁶.

Nevertheless, there is no denying that there are concrete archival evidences claiming raids, kidnapping and trafficking, stalling of economic pursuits along the various pockets of Bengal coast from time to time, well into the late eighteenth century. Innumerable letters were exchanged amongst officials of the English Company State, airing serious security concerns⁵⁷ and suggestions to introduce vigilance boats⁵⁸, guards for various factories⁵⁹ and armed patrolling vessels⁶⁰ along the Sundarban rivers and erection of defensive forts to repel river borne attacks⁶¹. All these are indicative of the seriousness of the issue. Against this background, the proposed study would try to establish the specific role of Sagor island by ascertaining logically its involvement with the prevalent problem.

⁵² Francois de L'Estra, *Relation ou Journal*, p. 193.

⁵³ NAI, Foreign Secret, Consultation no. 5, June 12, 1777.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵⁵ NAI, Foreign Secret, Consultation no.4, June 12, 1777, pp. 1-2.

⁵⁶ NAI, Foreign Secret, Consultation no.4, June 12, 1777, p. 2.

⁵⁷ WBSA, Bengal District Records, Chittagong, Proceedings, vol. 1, 1760-1773, dated March 8, 1769, pp. 30-31.

⁵⁸ NAI, Foreign Secret, Consultation no. 9, May 12, 1777; NAI, Foreign Secret, Proceedings, vol. 35, 28 January, 1777.

⁵⁹ NAI, Home Public, Proceedings, vol. 13, November-December, 1759, dated November 12, 1759.

⁶⁰ NAI, Foreign Secret, Consultation no. 5, December 30, 1776, pp. 1-2.

⁶¹ NAI, Secret, Proceedings, vol. 35A, 5 June-30 June 1777, pp. 920-54.

IV. A Tripartite Nexus of Slave Traders

Arakanese Portuguese Tie Up

The Portuguese seamen of the delta with no allegiance to the *Estado*, the missionaries, the Arakanese, the Mughals were familiar with Sagor, at the mouth of the Hugli river. In fact from late sixteenth century an uneasy dynamics persisted between the Mughals and Arakan as the former had embarked on a project of eastward penetration into Bengal where Arakan had its stake. Hence the Mughal capital was shifted from Rajmahal to Dacca, as it was located closer to Chittagong and Arakan. Sagor delineated the frontier zone between the Mughal advance and the Arakanese influence in Bengal. During the concerned period an absence of a centralized authority in the periphery of the north eastern Bay emboldened various groups to vie for the control of Chittagong, the principal port of south eastern Bengal. However from 1538, Chittagong was brought under the control of Arakan. In 1607, the slave port of neighbouring Dianga was captured by Arakan. Between 1538 and 1666, the fort of Chittagong became an ‘appurtenance’⁶² of the kingdom of Arakan.

Arakan attained the peak of material growth that manifested by the late sixteenth century in a magnificent court, large garrisons and fortresses, an impressive fleet⁶³ and a rich culture. To retain an overall grandeur the royalty adopted a worthwhile system of tax apparatus to siphon off optimum revenue from the expanding territories and also a workable plan of gathering manpower to cater to its new needs related to its growing frontier. In fact there was a mounting pressure to produce more and bring in more manpower for a variety of services to sustain the new colonies. The border of Arakan continually advanced towards Bengal and Burma.

The leading port city of Mrauk-U had to be guarded against possible attacks from lower Burma. So it collected stocks of firearms and mercenaries⁶⁴. A rich class of multi-ethnic elites in the prosperous capital of Mrauk U had a craving for luxury items. To pay for the imported items like textiles, iron and steel, Chinese ware, tobacco demanded by the wealthier section of the ruling elite of Mrauk-U, and also for arms and hired army, Arakan was looking for a viable

⁶² Talish, *Fathiya*, in ‘The Feringi Pirates’, *JASB*, vol. 3, p. 420.

⁶³ D’Hubert and Leider, ‘Traders and Poets’, in R. Mukherjee ed., *Pelagic Passageways*, p. 353.

⁶⁴ S. Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History*, p. 210.

commodity of exchange⁶⁵. In fact Chittagong itself was the ‘paragon of the early modern cross cultural polity’⁶⁶ and its rich class was connoisseurs of high value commodities. Arakan was endowed with sprawling alluvial plains intersected by rivers⁶⁷ that produced a bountiful crop of wet rice. However, rice was dependent on the vicissitudes of nature. So the royalty started sponsoring a regular raiding foray with a mission to gather enough commodities of exchange in the form of slaves. In fact the burgeoning kingdom of Arakan, around the pivot of its new urban centre of Mrauk U needed slaves as ‘domestic manpower’ and ‘a second export commodity’ other than rice⁶⁸. The solution emerged from the fluid dynamics of the delta in the following manner.

The Arakanese monarchs had been encouraging the *Magh* people to undertake the front line of attack in the state sponsored raids in the eastern and southern Bengal coastal villages. The *Maghs*, resided in the fringes of eastern Arakan and some areas of Chittagong and adhered to part Buddhist, part Muslim belief. They were ace boatmen with a sound knowledge of aquatic routes and wind directions.

The appearance of the freebooting Portuguese in the fringes of the Bay of Bengal coast and the estuaries added more fuel to the dynamics generated by the king of Arakan and the *Maghs* in the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century. The *casados* in the Indian Ocean brought in the East African slaves for their own use in their settlements. But trafficking was not alarming as the demands were limited. The *casado* settlements of the Bay, like Hooghly, Sandwip, Chittagong, Dianga and Mrauk-U provided the supportive bases for varied activities of the lawless Portuguese population who strayed from one end of the Bay to the other and gathered at the riverine estuaries; also free-lanced for the local landlords, the delta kings and other neighbouring states spread around the sea.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁶⁶ Rishad Choudhury, ‘An Eventful Politics of Difference and its After life: Chittagong Frontier, Bengal, c. 1657-1757’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 52, no. 3, July-September, 2015, p. 275.

⁶⁷ Richard Forster, ‘Magh Marauders, Portuguese Pirates, White Elephants and Persian Poets: Arakan and its Bay of Bengal Connectivities in the Early Modern Era’, *Explorations*, A Graduate Students’ Journal of South East Asian Studies, vol. 2, Issue 1, Spring 2011, p. 71; Anthony Reid, ‘The Lands Below the Winds’, in *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680*, vol. I, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1988, p. 11.

⁶⁸ Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History*, p. 213.

They got linked up with the Arakanese territorialism. ‘The King of Rakan (Arakan), who lived in perpetual dread of the Mogol, kept these foreigners as a species of advance guard, for the protection of his frontier’⁶⁹. Those local Portuguese mercenaries possessed naval skill and spirit of aggression that matched with those of the *Maghs*. So they were encouraged by the royalty of Arakan to ally with the *Maghs*. Clubbed together as the *Maghs* and *Firangis*⁷⁰, they launched a large scale slave raiding operation and perpetuated a reign of terror in the riparian tracts of lower Bengal and Burma for more than a century. Basically Arakan organized and financed the forays to capture a great multitude of Bengalis as slaves⁷¹. Manrique corroborated one such joint foray from the small fishing port of Angarcale under Arakan towards a large village close to Dacca. Some villagers were captured and forcibly baptized⁷². ‘Those who were prisoners or slaves lamented their sad plight’⁷³.

Arakan used to gather a large number of slaves primarily through raids into the river side villages of Bengal that were spearheaded from Dianga, Chittagong and Mrauk-U. After the absorption of manpower within Arakan, the surplus was sold by the Portuguese to various buyers in different marts. Again, gradually from the early seventeenth century, the *Magh* raiders were officially replaced by the Portuguese for the forays into the coast of Bengal. The kings of Arakan absorbed their slaves into their economy, as claimed by the scholars like Godfrey E. Harvey⁷⁴, Jadunath Sarkar⁷⁵ and D.G.E. Hall⁷⁶. Skilled artistes, artisans, craftsmen, weavers, intellectuals were handpicked by the royalty.

Shihabuddin Talish noted that the captives were made to withstand unspeakable cruelties before being transported to various destinations⁷⁷. Arakan absorbed most of the captives as labour as well as commodity of exchange in foreign trade. The surplus commodities were sold by the Portuguese in the ports of

⁶⁹ Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, p. 175.

⁷⁰ Often mentioned as the ‘Muggs’ or ‘Maghs’ in the English East India Company’s correspondences.

⁷¹ S. Arasaratnam, ‘Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean’, in K.S. Mathew ed., *Mariners, Merchants and Oceans*, p. 198.

⁷² Manrique, *Travels*, vol. 2, p. 317.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Godfrey E. Harvey, *History of Burma from the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824*, London: Frank Cass & Co, 1967, pp. 139-140, 144.

⁷⁵ Shihabuddin Talish, *Fathiya-i-ibriyya*, in ‘Conquest of Chatgaon, A.D. 1666’, *Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, New Series, vol. 3, 1908, pp. 415, 417.

⁷⁶ D.G.E. Hall, *Burma*, London: Hutchinson’s University Library, 1950, pp. 57–62.

⁷⁷ Talish, *Fathiya*, in ‘The Feringi Pirates’, *JASB*, New Series, vol. 3, p. 422.

Arakan, Hooghly, Tamruk, Piply etc. Often the raiding zones like Chittagong and Dianga doubled up as marts for disbursal. Further, the 'Bengala' slaves were commonly found in many Portuguese colonies of the western India⁷⁸. The surplus captives were also sold to the Dutch.

However, the raiding pattern reflected three distinct phases. In the early decades of territorialism the Arakanese fleet under royal patronage spearheaded the hunt for people while the Portuguese acted as their partners. Radhika Chadha noted that since the 1620s the Arakanese fleets were withdrawn and the Portuguese were commissioned to do the work⁷⁹. However Sanjay Subrahmanyam has observed that the king of Arakan sent his raiding vessels to the coast of Bengal till early 1640s⁸⁰. It is also true that from the early seventeenth century, the Portuguese were officially sent to loot and kidnap and were treated 'in the light of servants'⁸¹. Talish remarked,

the Feringis engaged in piracy, kidnapping and plundering the inhabitants of Bengal, and lived in Chatgaon under the protection of the zemindar (King) of Arracan, giving half their booty from Bengal to him⁸².

So it was likely that the royal fleets scouted for slaves from time to time over and above the Portuguese raiding vessels. However, by that time, another new force, that is the Dutch provided an additional fillip to slave raids and trade.

The third phase could be traced back to the Mughal conquest of Chittagong in 1666. With the destruction of the port town, the south eastern part of the Mughal imperial frontier extended up to the Feni river. The Portuguese of Chittagong were decimated too. This happened during the early phase of Aurungzeb's tenure. Chittagong was annexed to the province of Bengal, under *sarkar* Bakla and Fathabad and assessed for revenue collection⁸³. The chapter has brought to limelight this phase of piratical foray when the raiders were bereft of Arakan's patronage after the fall of Chittagong. Having lost their sponsor and

⁷⁸ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History*, p. 211.

⁷⁹ Radhika Chadha, 'Big Generals in Little Kingdoms: The Portuguese Settlements of Chittagong and Sandwip, 1530-1640', Jose Leal Ferreira and Yogesh Sharma eds., *Portuguese Presence in India during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, New Delhi: Viva Books, 2008, p. 48.

⁸⁰ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History*, pp. 221-222.

⁸¹ Talish, *Fathiya*, in 'The Feringi Pirates', *JASB*, New Series, vol. 3, p. 425.

⁸² Talish, *Fathiya*, in 'The Conquest of Chatgaon, 1666 A.D.' *Ibid.*, pp. 406-07.

⁸³ H. Blochmann, *Contributions*, pp. 343-48.

collaborators, the desperate raiders stepped up their attacks in a bid for quick profit.

VOC as the Third Party

However from the early seventeenth century the raids were propelled by other compulsions. The Dutch East India Company had played a decisive role in this as they became the major buyer of Bengali slaves. The Dutch Company called 'De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie' (henceforth to be referred as VOC) too had forged a trade relation with Arakan. In return for various imports to Arakan, Chittagong Arakan belt could offer only coarse cotton textile at that point, which the Dutch Company did not require. VOC in the 1620s was looking for a source of manpower for its overseas colonies in Asia. It realized that Bengal could solve, albeit partially the manpower crisis in Indonesia's unmanned mace and nutmeg gardens at the Banda islands⁸⁴, apart from demand for labour in Batavia, the headquarters of eastern operations located in Java and new Dutch settlements of Moluccas. There was a proliferation of Dutch colonies spread over the extensive areas of maritime Asia.

Such colonies had a massive demand for labour to build and maintain the infrastructures. For example in 1615, the Dutch needed manpower to carry on with the fortification work in the colonies of Asia; when the hot weather came in the way of the laborious work of their men⁸⁵. However, hiring of so much of manpower through payment of wages was a costly proposition. Hence the Dutch Company looked out for the more economical option of purchase and ownership of slave labour from the market. Initially it relied on the African sources, but their poor survival rate made the Dutch look out for a better choice.

Early in the seventeenth century, the Portuguese entered into an agreement with Arakan to collect slaves on their behalf. The pattern of slaving underwent a sharp change after the 1620s⁸⁶ as the Dutch came to the picture. The Dutch had a commercial relationship with Arakan from the sixteenth century. Bernier's *Travels* makes it clear that the VOC had planned to have a good relation with the Mughals for two reasons: to have a firm footing in the business arena of Bengal

⁸⁴ The locals had steadfastly refused to hand over the gardens to the foreigners and hence all of them were butchered.

⁸⁵ S. Arasaratnam, 'Slave Trade', in K.S. Mathew ed., *Mariners, Merchants*, p. 200.

⁸⁶ T'Hubert and Leider, 'Traders and Poets', in R. Mukherjee ed., *Pelagic Passageways*, p. 355. Radhika Chadha, 'Big Generals in Little Kingdoms' in Yogesh Sharma et al, eds., *Portuguese Presence in India*, p. 48.

and East Indies and also to override the Portuguese prominence in their mutually overlapping commercial sphere⁸⁷. The Dutch Company entrenched itself by allying with Shayista Khan, who was ordered by Aurungzeb to smash the overbearing power of Arakan and settle scores with its monarch. The latter had got the Mughal emperor's brother Shah Suja murdered in Arakan⁸⁸. The Arakanese 'pirates were become so bold and skilful that with four or five galleasses they would attack, and generally destroy fourteen or fifteen of the Mogol's galleys'⁸⁹. Thus a mutually beneficial alliance was forged between the Mughals who wanted to teach Arakan a lesson and the VOC, which wanted to create pressure on its trading rival, the Portuguese. The VOC cleverly extracted an entry point in Bengal by winning over the Mughals. It strengthened its commercial position in Bengal. It forged a commercial relation with Arakan too. Also the Dutch looked for catchment areas for manpower to maintain its expanding colonies.

Manpower became an item of exchange for Arakan in its trade with the Dutch. Arakan started bartering Bengali slaves to the Dutch on a regular basis, for items like porcelain and firearms. The VOC relied on the Portuguese slave raiders cum suppliers of Chittagong and Dianga to get the bulk supply of slaves for Indonesia. The raiders were sponsored by the state of Arakan.

In fact, the eye witness accounts of the Europeans are replete with instances of the Dutch involvement in the slave trade in and around Bengal. Mention may be made of the Dutch traveller Gautier Schouten's account. At the Dutch base in Piply the pirates came in their boats from Arakan and sold some slaves to the Dutch at the price of twenty roupies or ten 'risdales' for each one. Many of them were women and young girls⁹⁰. Also the French traveller Francois de L'Estra had clearly mentioned instances of the Dutch involvement in the transshipment of slaves bought in Bengal⁹¹. His account clearly suggested that

⁸⁷ Bernier, *Travels*, pp. 179-181.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Gautier Schouten, A. Rouen (tr. From Dutch), *Voyage aux Indes Orientales, Commence l'an 1658 and Fini l'an 1665 Traduit du Hollondais*, vol. 2.; Chez Pierre Callious Libraire, Cour du Palais 1725 pp. 81.

⁹¹ Francois de L'Estra, *Relation ou Journal*, pp. 199-200.

Hooghly was a hub of slave trade. Ships carried manpower from Hooghly to Batavia, a major node of VOC's commercial activities in the Dutch East Indies⁹².

A large section of the 'Arakan Slaves', as the Bengal slaves were so called; were collected by the Dutch from the Portuguese intermediaries and made to undergo a forced migration via Masulipatnam to Batavia and finally to its various Asian colonies. Some slaves were sent by the state of Arakan to the Dutch as commodities of exchange. Thus the VOC became a major partner of the king of Arakan and the Portuguese rovers of the Bay of Bengal delta in organised slave trading. The profit for the Arakanese kings depended on their control over the Portuguese brokers which was not always guaranteed as the Portuguese tried to get a greater share of profit by 'reselling on the high seas'⁹³.

The Dutch Company could own slaves without having to pay wages in return of their contribution. It was possible to buy at least 1,000 to 1,500 slaves per annum from Arakan. In those early days of the Dutch trade, the Arakanese royalty had around 10,000 captives at its disposal. They were sold in the port of Arakan, Portuguese ports of Chittagong, Dianga and in Orissa in the marts of Piplly, Balasore in lieu of 25 per cent export tax on each slave⁹⁴. The Dutch had to obtain a license from the king of Arakan which allowed them to buy and export slaves.

Since extreme secrecy was maintained regarding the collection and transshipment of human beings, concrete data is still awaited that might throw light on the volume of trade from Arakan and the Bay of Bengal coast. Statistics gathered so far from varied sources is at best sketchy and there are major areas of silence. The following statistics give a rough idea on the volume and extent of the exports of 'Bengal slaves' in the seventeenth century. Between 1626 and 1662, among the four major catchment areas for slaves, the Bay of Bengal circuit comprising Bengal/Arakan, Malabar and Coromandal remained the most important for the VOC.

⁹²Ibid., p. 210.

⁹³D'Hubert and Leider, 'Traders and Poets', in R. Mukherjee ed., *Pelagic Passageways*, p. 355.

⁹⁴Generale Missiven der VOC, II, P. 185, cited in S. Arasaratnam, 'Slave Trade', in K.S. Mathew ed., *Mariners, Merchants*, p. 208.

Table 5. 1: Number of Captives from the Bay of Bengal between 1620s and 1660s

Year	Place	Number
1622	Arakan/Bengal	101
1622-23	Coromandal	1900
1626	Arakan/Bengal	380
Till 1636	Arakan/Bengal	380
1636	Arakan/Bengal	216
November 1642	Bengal	225
1643	Arakan	750 ⁹⁵
1644	Arakan/Bengal	600
1645-46	Coromandal	2118
1647	Shipped from Arakan	1046
1654	Shipped from Arakan	311
1655	Shipped from Arakan	200
1656	Shipped from Arakan	288
1659	Coromandal	8000
1660	Shipped from Arakan	421
1661	Coromandal	10,000
1662	Shipped from Arakan	101

Source : Markus Vink, *The World's Oldest Trade: Dutch Slavery and Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century*.

<http://www.historycooperative.org/cgi-bin/justtop.cgi?act=justtop&url=http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jwh/14.2/vink.html>

Generale Missiven der VOC, p. 46, cited in S. Arasaratnam, 'Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century', in K.S. Mathew ed., *Mariners, Merchants and Oceans, Studies in Maritime History*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1995, p. 202. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History, From the Tagus to the Ganges*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 222.

Table 5.2: Price of Slaves in 1655, fixed according to their age, in a contract with the Portuguese Raiders in Dianga

Item	Price (Rs.)
Man 20—36 Years	24
Woman 12—25 Years	12
Boy 8—19 Years	15
Girl 7—12 Years	12
Child 3—6 Years	5

Source: S. Arasaratnam, 'Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century', in K.S. Mathew ed., in *Mariners, Merchants and Oceans, Studies in Maritime History*, pp. 206-207.

However, from the 1650s, the Dutch Company was having problems in continuing with slave imports from Arakan as it had evoked a strong reaction from the Mughals. VOC was pursuing commercial activities on a regular basis in Balasore and Hooghly and apparently did not want to jeopardise its reputation by getting further entangled in the grey area of slave trade. Also, the supply of Bengali slaves

⁹⁵ In February-March 1642, 225 slaves (126 men, 84 women, 7 boys, 8 girls) were exported by the Dutch. In October 1643, 600 slaves (229 men, 271 women, 18 boys, 12 girls) were exported. Cited in S. Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History*, pp. 221-222.

¹ Pamela Gutman, *Burma's Lost Kingdoms, Splendours of Arakan*, Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2001, p.168, Campos, *History of the Portuguese in Bengal*, p. 105.

² Pamela Gutman, *Burma's Lost Kingdoms*, p.33, Abu Anin, 'Towards Understanding Arakan History, part 2, A Study on the Issue of Ethnicity in Arakan, Myanmar', <http://www.kaladanpress.org/index.php/scholar-column-mainmenu-36/arakan/866-towards-understanding-arakan-history-part-ii.html>

Accessed on 22.12.15.

³ Maurice Collis, *The Land of the Great Image: Being Experiences of Friar Manrique in Arakan*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1995, p. 91.

⁴ NAI, Foreign Secret, Consultation no. 4, June 30, 1777, pp. 3- 4.

⁵ NAI, Secret, Proceedings, November 11- December 30 1776, vol. 34A, pp. 3830.

⁶ NAI, Foreign Secret, Consultation no. 4, June 30, 1777, p. 4

V. Positioning Sagor vis a vis the Divergent Delta System

Again, the intrusions, looting and raids are to be reviewed from the rubric of the anachronistic delta system. As discussed earlier, the western delta was a victim of river changes that triggered a process of agrarian disruption. Lack of fresh silt meant the land was losing its productivity. The fresh silt laden eastern delta facilitated inflow of people and drew to its fold peasants from the western delta. Moreover periodic political disorders: like the Portuguese exploits in Hooghly before the 1630s, Sobha Singh's rebellion in the terminal decade of the seventeenth century and most importantly, the mid eighteenth century *Bargi* raids lasting for about a decade; led to displacements leading to population swell in eastern Bengal. Perhaps the evolution of the two contrasting deltas moderated the pattern of the Arakanese Portuguese raids. The over populated eastern delta was a convenient source for slaves. It predominantly remained their raiding zone.

Bengal had a number of big and small Portuguese operational bases that evaded the censorial eyes of the *Estado*. Some, functional since late fifteenth early sixteenth centuries, were set up by the Cochin and Goa free trading *casados*, who were scattered along the periphery of the Bay littoral. Initially there were temporary marts. But trade prospects made them explore the interior and lay the basis for permanent colonies. The most significant ones were Chittagong in the east called *Porto Grande* and Satgaon and subsequently the neighbouring Hooghly in the west, known as *Porto Pequena*. The major slave marts of Bengal were located mostly in western Bengal spanning up to the Orissa coast, which were mostly Portuguese *casado* settlements. Those were utilized for sale and

transshipments, though there are references of collecting slaves from Hooghly as well⁹⁶.

Eastern Bengal

The ‘Mugg’ raiders propelled their incursions towards the eastern delta from Chittagong, Dianga and Sandwip island, though some of those places also functioned as major slave marts (refer to Timeline 5.1) and catchment for manpower. According to Shihabuddin Talish, the settlements on either side of the rivers flowing past the entire stretch between Chittagong and Dacca lay vacant⁹⁷. In Nathan’s contemporary account, places like Sripur, Bhalwa, Khizrpur, Islamabad, Jahangirnagar (Dacca), Dakshin Shahbazpur etc. were mentioned as being destroyed by attacks⁹⁸.

However, Chittagong was the principal base of the Arakanese incursions. During the terminal phase of the tenure of the *bhati* rulers like Isa Khan, and the early phase of the Mughal annexation of Bengal; Chittagong was again captured by Arakan. The territory between Chittagong and Jugdia was made into a formidable Arakanese frontier through blockades, barricades; making the peripheral areas surrounding Chittagong unfavourable for human habitation.

Besides, it was naturally fortified by impenetrable forest and high and low hills⁹⁹. The high mountain ranges known as the Mugg mountains running in several chains; acted as natural boundaries of Chittagong with the east and south east¹⁰⁰. Feni served as the northern boundary with Tripura¹⁰¹. Chittagong was located four to six miles away from the sea¹⁰². Moreover, the roads between the Feni river and Chittagong were intersected by a large number of *nullas* and as most of those did not have bridges built over them, the roads became ‘almost impassable during the rainy season’¹⁰³. So during the monsoon season the city used to lose its connectivity with the outside world. Further, the king of Arakan

⁹⁶ W.E. Begley and Z.A. Desai eds., *The Shah Jahan Nama of Inayat Khan; An Abridged History of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 85.

⁹⁷ Talish, *Fathiya* in ‘The Feringi Pirates’, *JASB*, New Series, p. 422.

⁹⁸ Nathan, *Baharistan*, vols. 1 & 2, pp. 86, 146-150, 330, 332-335, 630-639, 749.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ James Rennell, T.H.D. La Touche ed., *The Journals of Major James Rennell, Written for the Information of Governors of Bengal during his Surveys of the Ganges and Brahmaputra Rivers, 1764 to 1767*, Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1910, p. 76.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁰³ James Rennell, T.H.D. La Touche ed., *The Journals of Major James Rennell, Written for the Information of Governors of Bengal during his Surveys of the Ganges and Brahmaputra Rivers, 1764 to 1767*, Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1910, p. 76.

got a strong fort built and left a formidable fleet to guard it. This ‘increased the desolation, thickened the jungle, destroyed the *al* and closed the road so well that even the snake and the wind could not pass through’¹⁰⁴. Such a closely guarded area was used as the chief base camp to launch the flotilla for manhunt. It enjoyed a good connectivity with various nooks of the Bengal delta and could access the big and small habitations.

Their regular incursions, loots and kidnappings eventually provoked Mughal invasion and annexation of Chittagong in 1666. Once the local Portuguese allies were decimated, the *Rakhines* lost their able partners. Also the royal support to the Portuguese raiders ceased and the Arakanese ascendancy over Bengal was brought to a halt. Apparently the Dutch Company was pressurised by the Mughal emperor to withdraw its slaving operations from Bengal by the 1650s. Nevertheless, the raiding spree continued unabated as ‘the piratical instinct remained’¹⁰⁵. After the Mughal attack on the Portuguese town of Hooghly in 1632 and the fall of Chittagong in 1666, the freewheeling ‘Muggs’ randomly desecrated the riparian tracts of Bengal without any state patronage. Besides, Arakan had a very long legacy of slavery as a ‘social and economic institution’¹⁰⁶. The contemporary French traveller named Francois de L’Estra visited Bengal in 1671-72 after the defeat of Arakan by the Mughals. He provided vivid accounts of large scale slave raids and slave trafficking pursued by the Dutch in Bengal after the 1660s.¹⁰⁷ Also there are ample evidences of piratical attacks on the Bengal delta that continued till the 1770s. The records of the English Company State pointed towards incursions radiating from Dianga, Chittagong and also Sandwip mostly towards the places located in the eastern delta.

Such records indicate that it was focused towards Chittagong, Dacca and Jugdea in the 1720s¹⁰⁸ and 30s¹⁰⁹ and the east of Bakargunj, Noakhali, Dakshin Shahbazpur, Dacca region till the 1770s. The Company’s vessels were not spared. The ‘Muggs’ were described as being particularly troublesome as they looted the

¹⁰⁴ Talish, *Fathiya* in ‘The Feringi Pirates’, *JASB*, New Series, pp. 421-22.

¹⁰⁵ Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 148.

¹⁰⁶ Amal Kumar Chattopadhyay, *Slavery in the Bengal Presidency: 1772-1843*, London: The Golden Eagle Publishing House, 1977, p. 146.

¹⁰⁷ Francois de L’Estra, *Relation ou journal*, p. 193. The rich have a number of slaves which they sell like horses and the poor give themselves and their lives for their service.

¹⁰⁸ NAI, Bengal Public Consultations, Microfilm, Accession No. 2665, Fort William, November 1725; Fort William, November 1726, Fort William, September, 1727.

¹⁰⁹ NAI, Bengal Public Consultations, Accession no. 2668, Fort William, October 1738.

Company's cargoes and factories. In 1746-47, at some point between Dacca and Bakargunj they had plundered some English boats carrying goods¹¹⁰. Again, as stated in a letter dated 19th December, 1776, 'plunder of the goods of the country is not their object, but the taking off the inhabitants into slavery'¹¹¹. The extract of the following correspondence from Dacca dated December 19, 1776, addressed to the Governor General in Council Warren Hastings, enumerated the economic impact of the incursions on parts of eastern Bengal -

The alarming representations we daily receive from the zamindars of Sundeeep, Duckinsavagepore, Hattia, Bettia, Bazegomedpore and in short all the southern districts of the incursions of the Muggs call aloud for the interposition of Government, to repel these ravagers, who have already taken away many of the poor inhabitants¹¹².

The Arakanese attacks were contained in the eastern delta in places like Sandwip, Dakshin Savagepore, Hattia, Bettia, Buzegomedpore¹¹³ and also Dacca¹¹⁴ but persisted till the end of the nineteenth century. From Rennell's journal, we could find explanation of the vulnerability of the conglomeration of islands in eastern Bengal, to 'Mugg' incursions. 'By the apparent situation of the islands of Sundeeep, Hattia....etc, it seems probable that they must afford shelter for shipsespecially during south west or southwardly monsoon when the passages must be of easy access'¹¹⁵. In the long run, such incursions became a rare phenomenon in eastern Bengal. But the fact that the scare of human trafficking cum piracy could have extended beyond the eastern delta had been enumerated by the next record,

I cannot refrain laying before you the....distress and misfortune this open country is subject to....from Ducansavagepore to the Soondry buns are infested with Muggs seizing all persons they can by their hands¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 12, 1746-47, p. 259.

¹¹¹ NAI, Foreign Secret, Consultation no. 7, December 23, 1776; NAI, Foreign Secret, Consultation no. 1, December 30, 1776.

¹¹² NAI, Foreign Secret, Consultation no. 7, December 23, 1776.

¹¹³ NAI, Foreign Secret, Consultation no. 2, December 30, 1776, Foreign Secret, Consultation no. A, December 30, 1776, p. 1, Foreign Secret, Consultation no. B, December 30, 1776, pp. 1-2.

¹¹⁴ NAI, Foreign and Political Secret, Consultation no. 4, December 30, 1776, No. 4, pp. 1-3.

¹¹⁵ James Rennell, T.H.D. La Touche ed., *The Journals of Major James Rennell*, p. 78.

¹¹⁶ NAI, Foreign Secret, Proceedings, vol. 34A, December 12, 1776.

Often men had to leave home for some 'little business'. On returning it was common to find that he had 'neither wife, nor children, (that) neither cow, sheep, goat nor any one moveable is left to him'¹¹⁷.

Western Bengal

Some of the old as well as functioning commercial bases in western Bengal need to be specially mentioned as they bore strong Portuguese influence and also forged a linkage with Arakan. A few of those doubled up as the Dutch operational base. The most important commercial sites had invariably been chosen by the Portuguese after a thorough study of the local topography and the riverine flow. However, there are clear evidences of the Dutch hold over some of the places like Pipli and Hooghly.

Tamluk or the international port of Tamralipta flourished since 300 BCE. It was bound by the Bay of Bengal in the south, the Rupnarayan in the east and Subarnarekha in the west. It provided anchorage to deep sea vessels as the Bay was located within a striking distance. Though riverine siltation was a major cause behind its slow decline, it functioned till the eighteenth century. Since 1520s, a Portuguese settlement grew in Tamluk. We have been informed by Talish that the Arakanese Portuguese invaders sold their captives to the Dutch, English, and French merchants from the ports of the Deccan and often from Tamluk and Balasore¹¹⁸.

During the time Tamluk was silting up, an array of isles emerged in and around Midnapore, namely Hijli, Khejuri, Mahishadal, Sutahata, Humgarh etc. Hijli or Angelim grew as a Portuguese trading centre simultaneously with Pipli. The latter was frequented by ocean mariners as it was situated very close to the estuary and till the Mughal penetration became effective, operated as an international node of commerce. During Cabral's visit to Bengal, 'Angelim'¹¹⁹ was drawing a vigorous trade. It was also a slave trading port¹²⁰ and by 1633 the Mughals managed to evict the Portuguese from there.

¹¹⁷ NAI, Secret, Proceedings, vol. 35A, May 5-June 30, 1777, p. 917.

¹¹⁸ Talish, in 'The Feringi Pirates', p. 422.

¹¹⁹ Manrique, *Travels of Frey Sebastian Manrique: 1629-1643*, Charles Eckford Luard ed, Oxford: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1927, p. 419.

¹²⁰ Mahendranath Karan, *Hijlir Masnad-i-Ala*, Second Edition, Calcutta: Midnapore Samskriti Parishad, 1958, p. 113. Shyamapada Bhowmik, *Boichitromoy Midnaporer Itihaash*, vol. 1, Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1999, pp. 27-29.

The next major international port was Satgaon on the bank of the Saraswati. Up to the early sixteenth century, Saraswati was the major arm of the Bhagirathi. The Saraswati nurtured Satgaon till sixteenth century. Satgaon had taken over the mantle of Tamralipta. The Ganga came down from the Rajmahal hills and flowed up to Triveni. It split into three rivers at Triveni, the western bifurcation of which was the prominent Saraswati and the eastern one flowing to the south east was Jamuna. The channel flowing straight towards the confluence from Rajmahal via Triveni became well known as the Bhagirathi. It drew its sustenance from the other two rivers. When Satgaon was an active port on the Saraswati, the Bhagirathi was still an insubstantial channel. The main volume of water from the Ganges cascaded down the Saraswati till Satgaon remained operational.

The Portuguese took advantage of Satgaon till it could be utilised as a functioning port. Its neighbour Triveni on the Bhagirathi was shaping up as a thriving town since 1505 when the *sultan* of Bengal Alauddin Husain Shah expressed his desire to build a connecting bridge between Satgaon and Triveni. This is an indicator of the subsequent burgeoning of the Bhagirathi into a healthy channel and signs of the other river slowly languishing. Despite siltation, Satgaon housed Mughal administrative offices and grew into a prosperous urban centre. But the Portuguese had found a more favourable port site at Hooghly below Satgaon on the mighty Bhagirathi channel.

Hooghly came up as a Portuguese town cum port with Akbar's sanction in 1578. Besides commanding a healthy trade; it developed a network with the *Maghs* of Chittagong and Arakan. Hooghly became a major destination for those river borne raiders in the western Bengal. The mart of Hooghly was used as a major slave market as well as a transshipment point of captives to Europe¹²¹. Bernier took note of this and added that the local Portuguese showed little 'scruples' in buying slaves from the Arakanese (he implied the 'Muggs')¹²². By the word 'scruples' Bernier might have implied moral dilemma. Michael Charney observed, in the early seventeenth century this Portuguese base was a principal supplier of gunpowder and fire arms for Arakan and Shah Jahan wanted to put a

¹²¹Manrique, *Travels*, vol. 2, p. 316; Abdul Hamid Lahori, 'Badshah Nama' in H.M. Elliot and John Dowson eds., *The History of India As told by its own Historians*, Delhi: Low Price Publications, Reprint, 2008, p. 32.

¹²²Francois Bernier, *Travels*, p. 175.

stop to it¹²³. Charney explained Hooghly's specific role from the standpoint of the interplay of demand and supply. So the Portuguese settlement of Hooghly supplied firearms, and rice to Arakan and allowed the 'Muggs' to dispose off cargo of slaves. So apart from slave trading, Hooghly had strong reasons to draw in the raiding communities from eastern Bengal.

Perhaps this was one of the major reasons of the Mughal siege of Hooghly in 1632¹²⁴. Abdul Hamid Lahori, a historian and Shah Jahan's contemporary, chronicled the first two decades of his reign in *Badshah Nama*. He had hinted that its hoarding of large quantities of gunpowder and ammunitions and its fortification irked the Mughals¹²⁵. Manrique observed that the Portuguese of Hooghly encouraged commercial exchanges with the Arakanese who brought in goods not easily available to them¹²⁶. To quote Sebastian Manrique,

They (Portuguese from Dianga) had arranged that at Ugolim and in its districts the Magh should...embark such articles as were lacking in their country and should land there those people who they had taken as prisoners in their own land. They were purchased as slaves, not only by the foreign Portuguese but also by the natives of Ugolim¹²⁷.

Shah Jahan's court historian Inayat Khan stated that Hooghly served as a slave port and this was a major factor that brought about its siege. According to Inayat Khan's *Shah Jahan Nama*, the Portuguese residing in Hooghly used to exercise their influences over all the villages and *parganas* surrounding the port on both sides of the river. They converted the residents to Christianity by force and transported them to their colonies. Besides, they kidnapped not only the people in and around the colony, but anyone from areas bordering along the river¹²⁸. Inayat Khan's observations were endorsed by Lahori. Such issues had enraged the Mughal emperor. After the fall of the settlement, it used to be plundered by them as they moved up the river from time to time.

¹²³ Michael W. Charney, 'Crisis and Reformation in a Maritime Kingdom of Southeast Asia: Forces of Instability and Political Disintegration in Western Burma (Arakan), 1603-1701', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Brill, Leiden, vol. 41, No. 2, 1998, pp. 185-219.

¹²⁴ Talish, in 'The Feringi Pirates', p. 424.

¹²⁵ pp. 33-34.

¹²⁶ Manrique, *Travels*, vol. 2, p. 316.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ W.E. Begley and Z.A. Desai eds., *The Shah Jahan Nama of Inayat Khan*, p. 85.

According to a contemporary French record, though after 1660s apparently the power of Arakan was decimated, the Dutch in Hooghly used the settlement as a slavers' base. The VOC had enjoyed a healthy trade in Hooghly at that time. But the unofficial trade was pursued whenever there was an opportunity. An excerpt of the French narrator Francois de L' Estra's account¹²⁹ has been given below. It enumerates Hooghly's involvement with slave trade after 1660s, in no uncertain term.

Francois was taken prisoner by the Dutch and taken to Ongly¹³⁰ where he spent a month. After the ship was ready for departure towards Batavia, Francois along with 13 more French prisoners embarked upon the ship called 'Lausdun' (named after a village in Holland)¹³¹. They travelled 8 days from Ongly, which is the Dutch post, to the mouth of the Ganges¹³². Upon arriving at the mouth of the Ganga they waited for the favourable wind to reach the open sea. While waiting for the wind, the ship hit a sandbank and broke down. The wreck occurred on September 17, 1672¹³³. The most deplorable part of this shipwreck was the loss of about 100 young slave boys and girls from 18 to 22 years whom our Captain, the Surgeon and the other officers of the boat had bought in Bengal. God may save them¹³⁴: all of them were thrown in the sea in front of our eyes except 7 young men¹³⁵. After several days, they were accommodated in a ship called Red Lion which was on its way from Ongly to Batavia¹³⁶. In this ship were around 60 slaves, boys and girls, whom the officers of the ship had bought in Bengal¹³⁷. So Hooghly's involvement in dealing with captive manpower and the active role of the Dutch in the terminal period of the seventeenth century has been proven beyond doubt by this account.

The Portuguese also had at least two major settlements, namely Piply and Balasore in the Orissa coast bordering Bengal. Piply on the mouth of the Suvarnarekha was established in around 1514. They operated from there for more

¹²⁹ Francois de L'Estra, *Relation ou journal*, pp. 197-210.

¹³⁰ Hooghly.

¹³¹ Francois de L'Estra, *Relation ou journal* p. 199.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

than a hundred years and turned it into a slave port¹³⁸. The Dutch explorer Gautier Schouten observed, on 22nd January, 1658, twelve *jelijyas* stacked with armaments arrived at Piply from Arakan, carrying a great multitude of slaves of both sexes, all being Bengalis¹³⁹.

Balasore started functioning as a trading centre sometime in 1625. Its strategic location close to the sea and on the Buribalanga river facilitated its function as a port. Talish claimed¹⁴⁰ that the place subsequently doubled up as a pirate port. The place was probably not safe till the early eighteenth century. There was a demand to increase the strength of the forces in Calcutta bound sloops at Balasore, that transported goods from English ships moored at the Balasore Roads¹⁴¹. The following archival record enumerated the fact that the route between Balasore Road and Chingri Khaal was quite unsafe.

they order 2/3 of the Treasure on board the Sloops and 1/3 to remain until they come to Rogue's River, and then the Sloops proceed to the Fort with the whole Risque and the Number of Robberies and Murders daily committed by the Rogues lurking in small Creeks.

Indeed many such Portuguese nodes were later used by the *Maghs* as marts and sometimes raiding pads as well. For instance; Tardaha, close to the Sundarbans at the confluence of the Vidyadhari and Adi Ganga; was infested with the Portuguese who combined piracy with trade¹⁴². Not far from there, Hajipur (Diamond Harbour) commanded a strategic position that facilitated passage to local crafts as well as the ocean going vessels. Within the chosen period the region became a piratical node. Chingrikhali fort adjoining Hajipur believed to have served the Portuguese and later the British¹⁴³. Old ruins and grave yards at the neighbouring Kulpi bore testimony to the Portuguese influences. The ships on the river Hugli were dependent on tidal influences. Hence intermediate halts were

¹³⁸ See footnote 78.

¹³⁹ Gautier Schouten, *Voyage aux Indes Orientales*, vol. 2, Amsterdam, 1707, p. 64.

¹⁴⁰ Talish, in 'The Feringi Pirates', p. 422.

¹⁴¹ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 7, 1728-32, p. 22.

¹⁴² L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: 24-Parganas*, New Delhi: Logos Publishers, 2009, p. 34.

¹⁴³ Ranjan Chakrabarti, *Dictionary of Historical Places: Bengal, 1757-1947*, New Delhi: Primus, 2013, p. 244.

required. Kulpi provided an anchorage to the English ocean liners till 1789¹⁴⁴. So it could well have served the purpose of the Portuguese seafarers. Hamilton stated that the Chingri Khal, located about twelve leagues above Sagor and close to Diamond Harbour¹⁴⁵, was yet another hub and known as Rogues' river.

Though the general trend suggested that the incursions radiated from the eastern delta and the western delta was the captives' mart as well as the Portuguese bases that provided support - there was no straight jacketed division of function. The main point is that the linkage between the two deltas persisted on the issue of slave raids and trade. For example; Murshid Quli's contemporary Persian chronicler Azad-al-Husaini noted that the 'Arakanese with their numberless boats' had attacked the *thana* of Islamabad (Chittagong) and took away some thousands as captives to sale them in the 'Feringi territory'¹⁴⁶. The 'Feringi territory' was indicative of the Portuguese bases in western Bengal.

As the approach to Satgaon was progressively silting up; the Portuguese ships started anchoring at Betor in Howrah, near the Botanical Gardens, opposite Sutanuti since the terminal phase of the fifteenth century, predating the heydays of Hooghly. A place close to Betor; or Betor itself that subsequently came to be called Magua Thana, at Shibpore¹⁴⁷, was frequented by the 'Muggs'. The name of the place speaks for itself. Streynsham Masters noted in his *Diary* that

Tannay is distant from Hugly about 40 miles by water and twenty miles by land, there stands an old fort of mud walls which was built to prevent the incursions of the Arracaners for it seems about ten or twelve years since they were so bold that none durst inhabit lower down the river than this place, the Arracaners usually takeing the People off the shoare to sell them at Piply¹⁴⁸.

Indeed 'Tanna Mugwa¹⁴⁹' (Thana) fort was established by the Mughals just below Calcutta to put a check on the raiders who came 'by way of Channel Creek into

¹⁴⁴ Samaren Roy, *Calcutta: Society and Change, 1690-1990*, Calcutta: Rupa and Company, 1991, p. 4.

¹⁴⁵ Radharaman Mitra, *Kolkata Darpan*, Calcutta: Subahrnarekha, 1980, pp. 331-34.

¹⁴⁶ Azad-al-Husaini, 'Nau-Bahar-i Murshid Quli Khani, in J.N. Sarkar tr. *Bengal Nawabs*, Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1985, p. 4.

¹⁴⁷ WBSA, Proceedings, Board of Revenue, May 18, 1787, p. 666.

¹⁴⁸ Streynsham Masters, *Diaries of Streynsham Master, 1675-1680*, R.C. Temple ed., vol. 2, London: John Murray, 1911, p. 66.

¹⁴⁹ Mukwa or Magua Thana, cited in Susan Gole, *A Series of Early Printed Maps of India, 'A Correct Map of Bengal and the Adjacent Countries Mostly from Surveys'*, Engraved by John Lodge, Plate 48.

the river and frequently proceeded very high up'¹⁵⁰. The post was indeed commemorative of its past notoriety; though it subsequently got converted into the Company State's custom post under *Buksh Bundar*¹⁵¹.

Most of the marts had been originally active Portuguese trading nodes and settlements. The Arakanese Portuguese from the east had a good rapport with the Portuguese of the western delta, based on which they utilized the established settlements as marts for selling the captives. Hence many of the major Portuguese settlements of the western Bengal like Tamruk, Hijli, and at the edge of Bengal on the Orissa coast Pipli and Balasore had been tagged as pirate ports. Thus the eastern and western deltas of Bengal were entwined in a mesh of exchange. And this communication channel was provided by none other than the crisscrossed river system.

VI. Exploring a Nexus of Arakan-Chittagong, Sagor and Hooghly

A venue for Arakanese Portuguese diplomatic alliance

In pre 1632 phase, the Arakanese Portuguese fleet had been sailing all the way to Hooghly for collecting firearms, rice, and slaves. On their way to Hooghly, some of their fleets might have been halting at the natural deep sea harbour at the confluence for refueling. Manrique's account confirmed it. They took this opportunity to capture boatful of Sagor bound devotees¹⁵² in the pilgrimage seasons. Maurice Collis' biographical travelogue¹⁵³ based on the Portuguese priest Sebastian Manrique's extensive itinerary across India and South East Asia, mentions that on September 11, 1629, Manrique embarked on a Portuguese galley from Dianga at Hooghly. It was carrying a cargo of slaves for sale. Hooghly was a port of legitimate trade as well as a major slave mart and a raiding pad¹⁵⁴. Proceeding further down, the craft landed at Sagor. He observed that it was often frequented by the pirates of Dianga under the King of Arakan. They destroyed the

¹⁵⁰ WBSA, Board of Revenue, Proceedings, May 18, 1787, p. 666.

¹⁵¹ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 217.

¹⁵² Maurice Collis, *The Land of the Great Image: Being Experiences of Father Manrique in Arakan*, London: Faber and Faber, 1943, p. 79. Shyamaopodo Bhowmik, *Boichitromoy Medinipurer Itihash*, p. 28.

¹⁵³ Its historicity has been questioned by D'Hubert and Leider, 'Traders and Poets' in Rila Mukherjee ed., *Pelagic Passageways*.

¹⁵⁴ Collis, *The Land of the Great Image*, p. 86.

temple island, kidnapped its inhabitants and sold them as slaves¹⁵⁵. The Portuguese priest Cabral made similar observations¹⁵⁶.

The fall of Hooghly in 1632, forged a strange connection between the Portuguese colony and Sagor where the evacuees from Hooghly had taken refuge. Evidently the Portuguese were already familiar with the island¹⁵⁷. The fact that Sagor enjoyed certain inherent advantages was far from overlooked by the commanders of the group of refugees. On reaching there, Fr. Cabral himself observed:

survivors of the massacre had sought refuge in the island (mentioned as Sagor). The island was impregnable, fertile at the entrance to the bar, and not far from... Angelim (Hijli), the port of trade and the key of all those kingdoms¹⁵⁸.

Cabral's correspondence indicated that the leader of the evacuees named Captain Manoel de Azevedo had some future strategic plans that could put the Portuguese in a politically favourable position. Relevant extracts have been quoted below:

There we entrenched ourselves in an island called Sagor... Our captain and those most competent in the matter considered the site most appropriate. Accordingly, it was decided to convert the pagoda into a strong fortress for His Majesty (the King of Portugal)¹⁵⁹.

Thus the runaway Portuguese had plans to utilize the island as a strategic base in alliance with Arakan and hence they asked for 'reinforcements'¹⁶⁰ from the king of Arakan. The Captain had initially thought of converting the main temple into a fort¹⁶¹. Then the Portuguese at Sagor realized that though it was located just a little beyond the domain of the king of Arakan, about two hundred and fifty miles to the west of Chittagong and Dianga; it was easy for its fleets to launch an attack on Sagor. In fact, there were telltale signs of desecration by the raiders in the

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.79.

¹⁵⁶ The graphic account of the fall of Hooghly appeared for the first time in 'Catholic Herald', Calcutta, 1918. The original account in Portuguese that was translated by the Rev. Father L. Besse of Tiruchirapalli, has been pictorially recreated by the eyewitness Father John Cabral in the form of a letter from Ceylon, dated November 14, 1633, addressed to the Provincial of Cochin. It has been included in Manrique, *Travels*, vol. 2.

¹⁵⁷ Manrique, *Travels*, vol. 2, p. 316.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 418.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 421.

¹⁶¹ Collis, *The Land of the Great Image*, p. 187.

empty island. Cabral had gone to Arakan from Sagor on a diplomatic mission¹⁶². He had to assure that the Portuguese had no intention to build a 'Bandel'¹⁶³ for which Sagor was ideally suited. But they wished to fortify it.

Arakan had a political connection with Sagor. The island was a part of the prosperous *zamindari* of Hijli¹⁶⁴ which was under the revenue roll of Arakan. So in a way the island was under the control of Arakan. According to Hedges, there 'Raja' of the island collected a yearly rent of 26 lakhs from there¹⁶⁵ at least till the 1640s. Sagor and the bank of the Channel Creek were ideally suited for salt production and were dotted with salt pans¹⁶⁶ besides boasted of timber suited for ship building¹⁶⁷. Apiary was nurtured to extract beewax¹⁶⁸, the region was rich in gum lac¹⁶⁹ and varieties of fish¹⁷⁰.

The 'Raja' could have been either the *zamindar* who collected the revenue on behalf of the king of Arakan or the king of Arakan himself. The latter had his own agenda of utilizing the first landfall as the line of supply to his army in his combat strategy against the Mughals¹⁷¹. He must have relied on a backup support from Hijli too. Unfortunately it did not synchronize with the Portuguese strategy. This rather active phase of Sagor was short lived. But in the 1630s Sagor's advantageous position had turned it into a theatre of anti-Mughal alliances between the Portuguese migrants from Hooghly and Arakan.

Sagor as a Raiding Zone of the 'Muggs'

The island had to accommodate an enormous number of pilgrims every year in May before the rains¹⁷² and also more importantly, in the winter for the holy dip on the day of *Makar Sankranti* (winter solstice). Sagor in the season for the fair (*mela*) provided great opportunities to the 'Muggs' for mass kidnappings¹⁷³. The devotees were not only locals but travelled as much as 500-600 miles to

¹⁶² Cited from Cabral's Letter, mentioned in Manrique, *Travels*, vol. 2, pp. 420-421.

¹⁶³ Port / a landing space.

¹⁶⁴ 'Saugor Island and its Condition', in *The Nautical Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1832, p. 293.

¹⁶⁵ Esq, Col. Henry Yule and R. Barlow eds., William Hedges, *The Diary of William Hedges, During his Agency in Bengal; As well as on his Voyage Out and Return Overland*, vol. 1, London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, p. 172.

¹⁶⁶ Irfan Habib, *An Atlas of the Mughal Empire, Political and Economic Maps with Detailed Notes, Bibliography and Index*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982, Sheet 11B.

¹⁶⁷ Hedges, *The Diary*, vol.1, p. 172.

¹⁶⁸ Master, *Diaries*, vol. 1, p. 15.

¹⁶⁹ Habib, *An Atlas*, Sheet 11B.

¹⁷⁰ Master, *Diaries*, vol. 1, p. 15.

¹⁷¹ Manrique, *Travels*, vol. 2, p. 421.

¹⁷² Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture and Economy*, p. 105.

¹⁷³ Shyamapodo Bhowmik, *Boichitromoy Midnapurer Itihaash*, pp. 28-29.

congregate for the ritualistic bath. Actually Ganga Sagar¹⁷⁴ represented one landmark in the tradition of pilgrim trail. Other shrines¹⁷⁵ of Mathura, Vrindavan, Gaya, Benaras, Hardwar Tarapur, Vakresvara¹⁷⁶, Burrampooter, Byjinant¹⁷⁷, Nadia, Birbhum, Puri, were in the itinerary. The pilgrim circuit generally commenced from northern India at the venue for the Kumbh Mela, and terminated at the Jagannath Temple, Puri, after touching the penultimate point at the confluence of the Bay and the river; the Gangasagor. The group kept swelling as more and more pilgrims joined the moving band from various localities that fell en route, as it progressed towards its final destination. During the pilgrim season Sagor assumed the dimension and ‘bustle of the most populous city’¹⁷⁸. So, as Manrique observed, the Bay littoral around the time of the Ganga Sagor fair was the ideal time for the marauders to strike and capture a large number of people as the multitude of pilgrims voluntarily proceeded towards the confluence to give up their lives by drowning themselves¹⁷⁹. The raiders applied a unique technique by threatening to drown the boatful of tourists in the river if they did not voluntarily hand themselves over¹⁸⁰.

The tradition of kidnapping from the littoral habitats on those special days continued much later in the Company’s tenure; as ‘during the whole fair season, people are under continual alarms’. The raiders invariably struck when the menfolk were away for business at the fair and took away all movable properties including livestock, grains, and all valuables apart from the ‘female and children’¹⁸¹. As a venue for Arakanese Portuguese diplomatic interactions and a slave raiders’ zone—Sagor got tangled with the elaborately spread out lattice containing the Portuguese operational nodes like Betor, Tardaha, Satgaon, Hooghly, Hajipur (Diamond Harbour), Kulpi and beyond with Piply and Balasor. Again, this complex web interfaced with Chittagong, Dianga and Arakan coast in which Mrauk-U was a major centre. In fact Sanjay Subrahmanyam noted that

¹⁷⁴ NAI, Home Public, Proceedings, vol. 28, 14October 1675, pp. 227-29.

¹⁷⁵ Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture and Economy*, p. 93.

¹⁷⁶ Raja Prithvichandra of Pakur, *Gauri Mangala*, ed., Bimanbehari Majumdar, Calcutta: Asiatic Society, p. 239.

¹⁷⁷ NAI, Foreign Political Secret, 21 January, 1773, p. 11.

¹⁷⁸ Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture and Economy*, pp. 94-95.

¹⁷⁹ Maurice Collis, *Land of the Great Image*, p. 79.

¹⁸⁰ Shyamapodo Bhowmik, *Boichitromoy Medinipurer Itihash*, p. 28.

¹⁸¹ NAI, Secret, Proceedings, vol. 35A, May 5-June 30, 1777, p. 917.

Arakan's new centre of gravity functioned as a raiders' hub from which the 'Magh' fleets advanced towards Bengal¹⁸².

In fact a fair number of islands existed along the Bengal delta spanning between Point Palmyras in the west to Chittagong in the west. The prominent ones in the early seventeenth century were identified by Manrique as Sandwip, Shahbazpore and Sagor or 'Sogoldiva'. As Radhika Chadha observed, those were ideally suited as centres for Portuguese piratical activities for their fertility, abundance of necessary items, cheap living cost and easy connectivity by boats and other vessels¹⁸³. The last factor also ensured safe escape routes via the closely knit network of aquatic passages. For Manrique, 'Sogoldiva' was the richest of all islands¹⁸⁴.

Map 5.1: Centre for Raiding and Selling of Slaves



Source: Author, Map not to scale

VII. Linkage of Sagor with the Marauders

In the footnotes of Thomas Bowrey's *A Geographical Account*, there are mention of various references like Herron's chart and other old maps; in which we find the names of some islands close to the mouth of the river - like the Isle of Dogs and Cock's with the alternative name of Rogue's island; Ile de Gallo/Galle/Galinha of

¹⁸² Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History*, pp. 70-79.

¹⁸³ Radhika Chadha, 'Merchants, Renegades and Padres: Portuguese Presence in Bengal in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', PhD thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2005, p. 22.

¹⁸⁴ Manrique, *Travels*, vol. 1, pp. 394-95.

Van den Brouke's map and extracts from the footnotes done by R.C. Carnac on Bowrey's work that indirectly pointed towards the rough elements of the sea. To cite yet another example; *Voyage to East India*, 1655, observed that the Portuguese, especially those born in India were mostly half-castes and 'very low poor-spirited people'¹⁸⁵ and were derogatorily called 'Gallinhas dell Mar'¹⁸⁶ or the Hens of the Sea.

Next, extracts from Carnac's footnote have been cited again:

Our author in his chart of the 'River of Hugly' ¹⁸⁷ made in 1687 has, on the left bank, "Sagor, Cox's Ild., Rogues, River of Rogues"¹⁸⁸. In the log of the King George, Marine Records, No. 402B, under dates 27th Dec 1718 and 6 Jan 1719, we have, "This day having Received an Order of the Govr. And Council of a Pilott to Carry me from Rogues River to Cox's in 6 Fathoms, Langitialu creek East and the West end of Sago Sb E ½ East"¹⁸⁹. Carnac's footnote on Bowrey's book cites the following interesting observation by Hedges, "May not the terms Galinha, Gallo, Galle, Cock however refer to the Portuguese themselves, considering the neighbourhood and the depredations therein by Magh and Portuguese half-castes?"¹⁹⁰

If one pieces together the foregoing statements the following linkage emerges. A number of islands located in and around Sagor were represented variously in the European maps, charts and accounts as 'Isle of Gale', 'Galinho', Dog's Island, Rogue's Island and Sagor itself as the 'Island of Coxe's' in Rennell's map of 1781. In fact the map of Hermann Moll, (1736) clearly shows Sagor as Ill de Gale¹⁹¹. Again, Jean Baptiste Bourgunon's (1697-1782) map titled 'Carte de L'Inde' contains an inset of the 'Entrée du Gange'¹⁹² (Entrance of the Ganges) that clearly names the big island to the north west of Sagor as Isle de Galle ou du Dog; the long and narrow island located to its immediate left and contiguous to it as I Rogue that implies Rogue Island and a small isle to its south

¹⁸⁵ Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of the Countries Around the Bay of Bengal, 1669-1679*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, Reprint, 1993, p. 210.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Susan Gole, *A Series of Early Printed Maps*, 'The West Part of India, or the Empire of the Great Maghul', Plate, 27.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, Plate 36.

east I De Chiens or the Island of Cats. All the names: some used synonymously; bore some associations with the rough elements. The Rogues' river, Sagor island, Cox's island were located in close proximity from one another and Sagor and its neighbouring islands were likely to have functioned as anchorages to ships. It could have served as a piratical harbour too. *Thacker's Guide to Calcutta* noted, the aboriginal pirates of Arakan, infested the 'Rogues' River' at the entrance of the river¹⁹³. It is none other than the Chingri Khal located close to the Diamond Harbour.

Notwithstanding some initial confusion regarding its identity with Kulpi Creek, Channel Creek and Chingri Khal; Radharaman Mitra concluded that the Chingri Khal corresponded in distance from Sagor (the Ganga Sagor of those days formed the extreme S. of what is styled Sagor Island now) with Hamilton's statement that the river was located about twelve leagues above Sagor and close to Diamond Harbour¹⁹⁴. Thus as per the records, since the 1630s down to at least 1700, Sagor had some association with people living at the edge of law. The names and references of the rivers and islands of the western side of the lower Bengal provide strong indications of the area being traversed by marauders. So the Rogues' river denoted a dangerous zone.

The mooring facility provided by Sagor was utilized by the *Maghs*. Besides, the channels with some associations with those raiders namely, Chingri Khaal, Muriganga, and Kulpee Creek flowed close to Sagor. Most of them could easily access the tangled network of the Ganga Brahmaputra river system spanning between Chittagong in the east and Hooghly in the west. So the Rogues' River could not have been located far away from Sagor.

The following lines from one of the ballads of Naser Malum reflected this fear psychosis of the inhabitants of the isles and islands of the Bay of Bengal. The extract portrayed the plight of those people who lived close to the sea or on an island and hence lived in perennial apprehensions of raids. Sagor could well have been one of those multitudes of islands.

*Sheyeena shaigorer majhe harmader dol,
Bnakebnake ghure tara boroi beakkol
Lottoraj kore tara ar dagabaji,*

¹⁹³ W.K. Firminger, *Thacker's Guide to Calcutta*, Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co, 1906, p. 5.

¹⁹⁴ Radharaman Mitra, *Kolkata Darpan*, Calcutta: Subahrnarekha, 1980, pp. 331-34.

*Shaigore harmader*¹⁹⁵ *dore knape nayer majhi*.¹⁹⁶
 (Groups of daring Harmads scout the bay and the treacherous
 coast line looking for the victims;
 Whom they intend to loot and torture.
 The boatmen at sea tremble at the prospect of meeting those
 harmads).

Translation: Author

It was typical of those raiding groups to at times hide on deserted sandbanks and isles to catch hold of the prey on passing boats. Sagor could have been a hiding place of the raiders. As a part of a ballad goes,

Ujan chorer bnakey re shei ujan chorer tneke,
*Doley doley joto daku khap di boshey thakey*¹⁹⁷.
 (At the turn of the shoal on the upstream,
 Gangs of raiders sit in hiding.

.....

Boideshe kamaia ashey joto shodaigor,
Baota tuli dhorey harmadya dingar upor;
Loottoraj koriya re dinga dubaito,
*(Majhhimalla bnadhi tarar shongey kori nito*¹⁹⁸.
The merchants who come from overseas with their earnings,
The harmads direct them to stop by planting a staff on the boats;
They sink the boats after looting them,
Tie up the boatmen to carry with them).

Translation: Author

VIII. Raiders and the Connected Rivers

The long term changes in the river system of Bengal had taken place roughly between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The eastward riverine shift of the Ganga had led to the bridging between the western channels and the burgeoning aquatic realm of the Padma Meghna; and also the braiding of the Bhagirathi and its tentacles comprising the Damodar, Rupnarayan, Ajay, Subarnarekha etc. in western Bengal with the Kosi flowing past Bihar, Mahananda, Ichhamati, Atrai, Burrull, Teesta, Jamuna flowing along the northern Bengal¹⁹⁹. Thus there was a merging of the fluvial networks of the *samatata*, *varendra* and *harikela*²⁰⁰.

¹⁹⁵ The Portuguese fleets.

¹⁹⁶ D.C. Sen, 'Koborer Kanna Pala', *Pracheen Purbabanga Geetika*, vol. 5, Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1944, p. 365.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

¹⁹⁹ Irfan Habib, *An Atlas*, p. 46.

²⁰⁰ Rila Mukherjee, *Strange Riches*, p. 207.

Also there lay a vast stretch in the upstream between the Bhairav, Kapataksha in the east and Matlain the west. Further if one could focus downstream from the rivers at the estuary immediately to the east, southeast and south of these rivers, the wide expanse of the intermediate aquatic realm contained innumerable creeks, tidal rivers, estuarine flow, affiliated either to the estuarine approach of the Bhagirathi or Padma Brahmaputra. Such channels functioning as spouts of the inner and outer Sundarban passages could facilitate an easy passage of the vessels to and from Chittagong, Dacca or even Assam. Some of these rivers connected to the Bhagirathi system, for example Vidyadhari; could have allowed a passage to the raiding fleets while it received fresh water. Also it was quite possible for the 'Muggs' to sail from Chittagong and then from Dacca to Hooghly touching Sagor without taking recourse to land route. So the kidnappings from Sagor, as cited by visitors like Manrique, were a distinct possibility.

The Arakanese Portuguese had a tradition of reaching the coast of Bengal by sailing along the complex tangle of rivers in the post-harvest lean winter months²⁰¹. Probably the marauders struck in the cold comfort of the extended winter nights when the local patrolling of the villagers was slack. It is likely that this practice continued well into the late eighteenth century. According to an official correspondence, 'for four months in the year, viz November, December, January and February...the Muggs make their appearance'²⁰².

Van Galen opined that local ships wanting to cross to Bengal could sail in early January, keeping a north-westerly course. But with their ships not built to sail against the wind they preferred to sail at the end of January, or in early February with easterly winds blowing them to the Bengal coast or Coromandel. Actually the month of February was ideally suited for smooth sail across the Bay of Bengal in this direction²⁰³. However, Rila Mukherjee noted that in spring, autumn and winter, available labour of Arakan was made to work in the fields. In the idle months of the monsoon they indulged in slave hunts in the coastal villages

²⁰¹ Thomas Forrest, *Voyage from Calcutta to Mergui Archipelago, Lying on the East Side of the Bay of Bengal*, London, 1792, p. 4.

²⁰² NAI, Foreign Secret, Consultation no. 8, May 12, 1777, p. 1.

²⁰³ S.E.A. Van Galen, 'Arakan and Bengal: The Rise and Decline of the Mrauk U from the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Century AD', Chapter one, 'The Economic Geography of the Arakan-Bengal Continuum', 1971, pp. 14-31.

<https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/12637/front.pdf?sequence=20>
Accessed on 19. 1. 16.

of Bengal²⁰⁴. So the raids were a stop gap activity of the Arakanese people in the winter and monsoon when they abstained from toiling in the fields. *Nau-Bahar-i-Murshid Quli Khani*, a contemporary account on the Bengal *nawab* confirmed that the season of floods was the usual time of the attacks by the Arakanese²⁰⁵.

Again by virtue of the geographical continuum, Arakan experienced monsoon immediately before south eastern Bengal did. So obviously they took advantage of a smooth sail out of Arakan to make an easy entry into the Bengal delta. At the onset of the rains they flowed effortlessly out of their coasts via rivers that were brimming to the optimum. By the time they reached littoral Bengal, torrents of rain were filling up the water bodies and spilling into every bit of empty land to submerge it. So a continuous waterscape dotted with boats dominated the scene of Bengal. At that time it was really easy to commute into the farthest nooks and also to major highways connecting big towns like Hooghly.

The favourable monsoon wind aided the ‘Magh’ *jalia* or *jeliyas* to smoothly glide into the interiors of Bengal through the braided waterways that seemed like a continuous and extensive sheet. Also, the rain and flooding came in the way of the Mughal vigilance as the Mughal army did not have the navy that could match the powerful raiding fleets. So they preferred to wait in the camp for the rainy season to pass. Precisely this was the season for the local *zamindars* with their efficient fleets to declare revolt against the Mughals²⁰⁶. The raiders most certainly made the best use of this chaotic situation.

They entered the numerous arms and branches of the Ganges, ravaged the islands....often penetrating forty or fifty leagues up the country, surprised and carried away the entire population of villages on market days and at times when the inhabitants had assembled for the celebration of a marriage or some other festival²⁰⁷.

Indeed the slave powered (liable to move by wind power too) multi oared ‘*jalia*’, ‘*jelliya*’, ‘*jelyasse*’, ‘*gelia*’ or war boats had a crucial role to play in such aggressive inroads. The seventeenth century French traveller Tavernier commented, ‘It is most surprising to see with what speed these galleys are

²⁰⁴ Rila Mukherjee, *Strange Riches*, p. 144.

²⁰⁵ Azad-al-Hasani, ‘Naubahar-i-Murshid Quli Khani’ in *Bengal Nawabs*, p. 4.

²⁰⁶ Jos Gommans, *Mughal Warfare; Indian Frontiers and High Roads to Empire, 1500-1700*, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 174.

²⁰⁷ Francois Bernier, *Travels*, p. 175.

propelled by oars....some so long that they have up to fifty oars on each side, but there are not more than two men to each oar'²⁰⁸. Even the old ballads are full of eloquent descriptions of the high speed of the smooth sailing raiding boats. For instance;

*Duronto harmadya daku kina kaam kore,
Teler moto nao re tara ponkhir moto urey.
(The turbulent harmad raiders are capable of doing all wrongs,
Their boats have an oily smoothness that seem to fly like birds)*²⁰⁹.
Translation: Author

*Harmadya nuka shei dheuer taley taley,
Chila-urani urey re nuka batash lagi paley.
(The harmad boats prance with the rhythm of waves,
They seem to fly like kites as the wind propels their spars)*²¹⁰.
Translation: Author

The identically shaped prow and stem provided so efficient and speedy maneuverability in the intricate aquatic tentacles that they stealthily pounced on the victims to swoop in hundreds of them at a time. All types of *jalias* were perfectly adaptable to wriggle in and out of the labyrinths of the Bay, riding on the strong currents and tides of the Ganges and its branches within tidal influence. Its rounded bottom, the high sheer of stem and stern and narrow built²¹¹ make it perfectly suited to prance and frisk upon the tidal country of the Sundarbans and beyond.

According to Shihabuddin Talish, the Arakenese war boats were invincible in battles on river and sea coast 'as these are so strongly made of timber with a hard core that the balls of 'zamburaks' and small cannons cannot pierce them'²¹². So the Mughal *nawara* was hardly any match for it. The Arakanese tradition of riding a customized boat 'specially fitted for the speed of a smuggling craft'²¹³ was retained till very late in the 1830s. Much later during the regime of the English Company State, a correspondence addressed to the Governor General Warren Hastings, stated that the Company boats needed to match with those of

²⁰⁸ Tavernier, *Travels in India*, Valentine Ball ed., vol. 1, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, Indian Edition, 1977.

²⁰⁹D.C. Sen, 'Koborer Kanna Pala', *Pracheen Purbabanga Geetika*, vol. 5, p. 367.

²¹⁰Ibid.,p. 368.

²¹¹ Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr, *Boats of Bengal: Eighteenth Century Portraits by Balthazar Solvyns*, Delhi: Manohar, 2001, p. 63.

²¹² Talish, 'The Feringi Pirates', p. 420.

²¹³ WBSA, Marine, Proceedings, vol. 2, January-December 18, 1839, dated August 14, 1839, p. 870.

Arakan; otherwise ‘they would stand but little chance of coming up with the Mugg boats, which are very long and go exceedingly swift’²¹⁴.

The formidable royal fleet of Arakan possessed in its collection a wide variety of crafts like *khalu*, *dhum*, *ghurab*, *jangi*, *kosa*, *halam*, *jalia*²¹⁵ that were commonly used in the estuarine areas intersected by the marine and riparian domains along the Bay. Actually all those water crafts were used by the lower Bengal chiefs, the Portuguese mercenaries, people of coastal Pegu and even the Mughal patrol fleets. However the *jalia* was one of the most inexpensive, small sized, and deft crafts of the coastal areas of the Bay of Bengal ‘that could sail hundreds of miles upstream’ effortlessly²¹⁶. Hence it became the most popular boat of the common men, the floating Portuguese adventurers at the delta, the Mughals and the *Magh* raiders. Also it was equally popular with the royalty of Arakan, Mughal fleet and Portuguese freebooters.

Initially the Portuguese freebooters of Chittagong were persuaded to ally with the *Magh* boatmen by the Arakan royalty. Tapan Raychaudhuri noted that later on the Portuguese in the payroll of the Arakan king annually indulged in three to four piratical raids in Bengal, which was sanctioned by the Provincial Council in Goa as the Mughals represented an anti-Christian force²¹⁷. Talish noted that the *Harmads* possessed at least a hundred swift *jalba* boats full of destructive ‘war-materials’. Their flotilla was extremely well equipped²¹⁸. Hence the *Magh* pirates and their boats had been officially withdrawn. But the mid eighteenth century documents suggest rampant incursions by the ‘Muggs’. Long after the fall of Chittagong the desperados and fortune hunters acted on their own and they no longer had the backing of the Arakanese royalty. The tradition of unofficial and habitual raids continued intermittently well into the eighteenth century from the coast of Chittagong to the eastern and south western Bengal.

IX. The river system as the Conduit of ‘Mugg’ infiltrations

²¹⁴ NAI, Consultation no. 8, Secret, May 12, 1777, pp. 1-2.

²¹⁵ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan*, vol. 2, p. 333; Radhika Chadha, ‘Merchants, Renegades and Padres’, PhD thesis, p. 31.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir: An Introductory Study in Social History*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1969, p. 113.

²¹⁸ Talish, in ‘The Feringi Pirates’, p. 425.

The River Route to the Eastern and Western Bengal

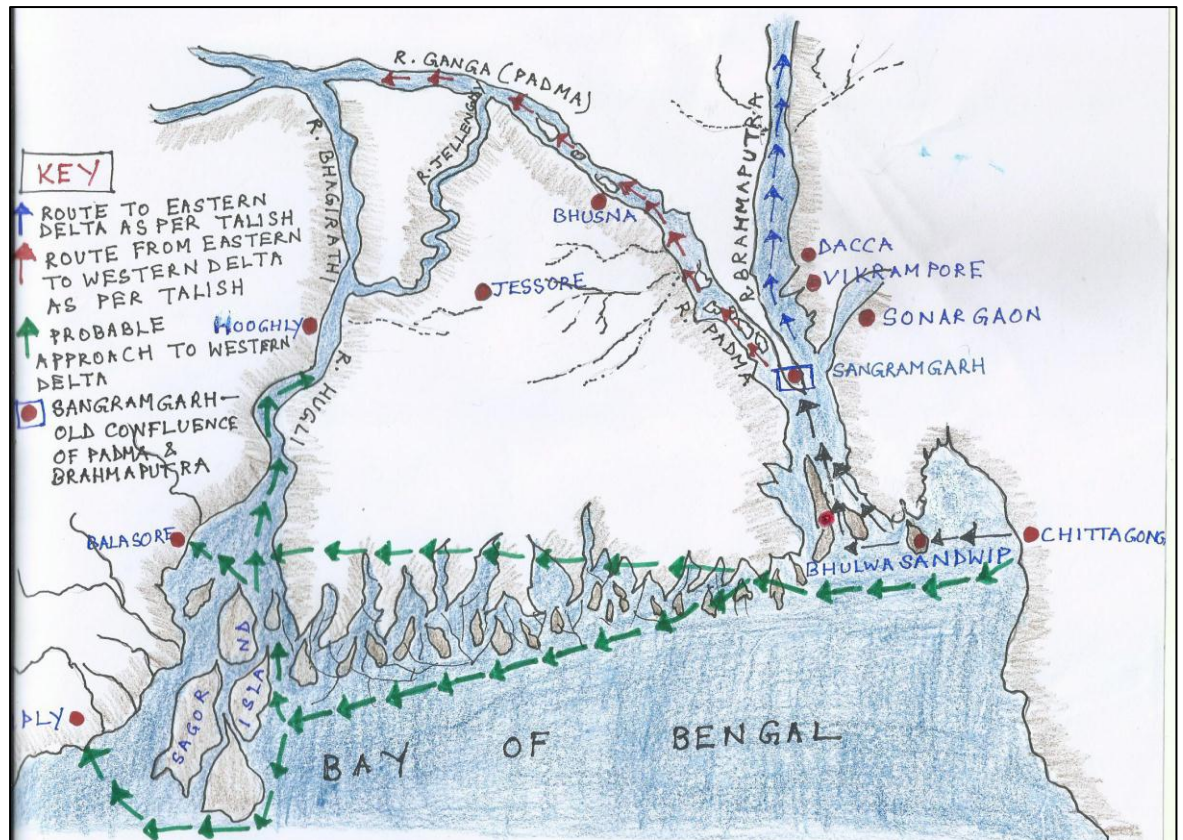
Shihabuddin Talish had mentioned two separate sailing routes usually followed by the Arakanese and Portuguese intruders towards Bengal from Chittagong and the coast of Arakan. They bypassed the royal port of Bhulwa on their right and Sandwip island on their left to reach the village of Sangramgarh. Sangramgarh enjoyed a strategic location at the southern point of the delta to Dacca at the then junction of the Ganga (Padma) and Brahmaputra. If we are to believe Talish's account, then we have to assume that the river system was a little different in the mid seventeenth century: the estuary of the Padma and Brahmaputra were located at a much more southern point, very close to the open sea.

From there they either sailed up the Brahmaputra if they planned to target Vikrampore, Sonargaon, and Dacca: or floated up the Ganga (Padma) if they targeted Jessore, Bhusna and Hooghly²¹⁹. However, the westward route delineated by Talish implies that the Ganga (Padma) and the Bhagirathi were interconnected with one another at the intermediate reach of the Bhagirathi. Otherwise the raiders had to sail northwards at the junction at Sooty above Murshidabad at the upper reach and embark upon a longish southward journey to reach the targeted places. One known connecting filament could presumably be the Jellenghy that met the Bhagirathi near Nadia. The combined water flowed downwards towards Hooghly and beyond up to the Bay of Bengal in the western delta in which the Sagor island stood as the first landfall. Stavorinus noted sometime in the late eighteenth century that the bulk of goods from Dacca was sent to Hooghly via the Channel Creek or Baratala river, which at that time was either the Baliaghat passage passing through the Sundarbans or had a connectivity with it²²⁰. So the rivers of the western and eastern deltas were engaged in the ceaseless interplay of merging, disengaging and reorienting themselves as a part of the delta building process.

Map 5.2: Sailing Routes of the Raiders

²¹⁹ Talish, in 'The Conquest of Chatgaon, 1666 A.D.', p. 405.

²²⁰ J.S. Stavorinus, *Voyages to the East Indies*, Samuel Hull Wilcocke tr., vol. 1, London, 1798, p. 106.



Source: Adapted from J.N. Sarkar tr., Shihabuddin Talish, 'The Conquest of Chatgaon, 1666 A.D.', *Journal and Proceeding of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, New Series, Vol. 3, Calcutta, 1907; Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *Magh Raiders in Bengal*, Calcutta: Bookland, 1960; Archival Records. Map Not to Scale.

Probable Route via Sagor

The major inlet into the western Bengal seemed to be a channel of the river close to the Sagor island²²¹. Shihabuddin Talish mentioned that Hooghly was frequented by the Portuguese Arakanese groups²²². The study of Map 5.2 suggests that if they targeted Hooghly, or even the other piratical nodes of the western delta like Hijli or even Pily in Orissa; the most convenient route was to sail along the Sundarban coast, often taking recourse to some creeks or tidal channels; westward from Chittagong close to the coast and then make an entry via the opening at Sagor. The raiders might have entered via the mainland to access the Hugli river from above Sagor.

However, common sense suggests that by sneaking through those creeks canopied under the luxuriant mangrove forests, they could avoid an east to west sail across the mainland cutting across pockets of settlements and thus evade

²²¹Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *Magh Raiders*.

²²²Cited in J.N. Sarkar, 'The Conquest of Chatgaon, 1666 A.D.', p. 405.

vigilance. The entrance point via the Rupnarayan was guarded by a fort built by Husain Shah. The entry from Hijli side from near Chakraberer Garh could have been blockaded by the Hijli fort of Isa Khan Masnad-i-Ala at the mouth of the Rasulpore river²²³. So they had to sail past Sagor to enter the mouth of the Bhagirathi drawing least attention. In his pioneering work, Jamini Mohan Ghosh observed that the only possible entry point of the *Maghs* from the Bay in the western Bengal was from the Sagor island²²⁴. If they wanted to go to Piply and Balasore, they skirted Sagor from the south to reach the coast of Orissa. The English Company's records indicated that the Arakanese followed almost the same route towards the western delta as late as the 1770s.

When the Maghs leave Aracan in search of plunder, they seldom or never proceed along the coast towards Chittagong, but steer to the westward, and fall in with the islands in the mouth of the River Pudda, about seventy miles westward of the Chittagong shore²²⁵.

From Chittagong side there was a convenient inlet to the westward to Rabnabad and from that place there were 'fine breaks on both sides, leading through to the Hooremgottah (Haringhata) westward and to the Pudda eastward'²²⁶. If they wanted to penetrate into the western delta then they took recourse to the Haringhata river. The Revenue Records, Chittagong, mentioned 'Heron Gaut'²²⁷ as one of the major 'outlets'²²⁸ to the 'westward'²²⁹. More quantitative facts and figures related to the Portuguese Arakanese depredations in Bengal and particularly in Sagor are awaited.

²²³ Ghosh, *Magh Raiders*, p. 8.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ NAI, Secret, Proceedings, vol. 35A, May 5-June 30, 1777, pp. 912-914.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 917.

²²⁷ WBSA, Revenue Record, Chittagong, Proceedings, vol. 5, January 1778-December 1778, p. 2.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

western arm of the Ganga named Bhagirathi. In the process the Bhagirathi turned into a rather sluggish channel. As a result of the riverine shift, the site of the active delta had moved towards eastern Bengal. As the emerging river was charting its own path, it went on spraying fresh inundation alluvium all along its way.

The old western delta started languishing as the Bhagirathi received very little water from the Ganga due to riverine alterations. As the volume of water of the Bhagirathi was diminishing, the old discharged silt started piling up on and beside the river bed, blocking the river's flow path, which had to twist and turn to find its way to the estuary. Binary delta system was taking shape simultaneously: the young and growing delta of fresh silt in the eastern Bengal and the decaying delta with little inputs of fertilising deposits in western Bengal. The *longue duree* colossal riverine shift gave birth to a number of new rivers in Bengal that established a direct connectivity between north India and eastern Bengal via Ganga.

The daring men from northern India found their way to the peripheral region of forested eastern Bengal crisscrossed with various rivulets and channels and sparsely inhabited by some boatmen and fishermen. Many of the drifters from northern India adhered to Islam. Those men led the process of widespread mowing of jungles and land reclamation with the help of the locals. They were quick to realise the worth of the extensive coating of fertilising alluvium by the river that spurred wet rice cultivation. Fresh siltation ensured an agriculturally buoyant zone that drew in many settlers. Thus the eastern delta flourished as a comparatively more populous area than the moribund central and western Bengal.

Those explorers were venerated as *pirs*. Obviously along with the expanding agricultural frontier, wide scale Islamisation of the area was happening. They built mosques extensively, around which farming and settlements were taking place. On a different plane, another trend had set in. The ecological upheaval snowballed by the eastward shift of the river, made the Mughal penetration into the interior of Bengal comparatively easier. As Eaton mentioned, the Mughal penetration into the heartland of Bengal took place riding on the back of the easterly migration of Bengal's river system.

The north Indian *sufis* and *pirs* and the Mughals were tied up in a mutually dependent relationship. The former had in a way guided the Mughals towards the eastern delta as the usherers and the process of Islamisation initiated by those

pioneering men made things smoother for the imperialist power. On the other hand, the land grants provided by the Mughal state to those explorers to build *masjids* and *dargahs*; aided in the process of Islamisation in the almost virgin territories of the eastern delta along with the entrenchment of political basis at the grass root level. Nevertheless, in places like Sylhet, Chittagong in the eastern delta, community settlements evolved around Hindu religious institutions too, though Islamic institutions based on land grants dominated in eastern Bengal²³¹.

Though the changing river system facilitated Mughal penetrations into Bengal; the Mughals had to face new challenges in order to prove their political supremacy in the eastern delta. Initially the invincible masters of combat on land could not make much headway in the strange territory. Jos Gommans has drawn our attention to the fact that the Mughals, like the Safavids, Manchus and the Ottomans were the torchbearers of the legacy of post nomadic imperial tradition²³². Warhorses played a crucial role in their way of life. Their troops based on cavalry of archers, bowmen were indomitable in the cold, dry Central Asian plains covered with grasslands and devoid of big trees. Such grasslands were conducive to unhindered and speedy movement of horses and also provided the semi nomadic fighters with convenient campsites and ample foraging areas for their mounts during war recesses. Nevertheless, this mode of warfare misfired in the extensive deltaic terrain watered by the Ganga Brahmaputra Meghna river system.

However, their will to trample over the unmanageable terrain chequered by rivers and rivulets, swamps, forests, tangled vegetation, excessive downpour, sultry weather and slushy pathways in prolonged monsoon months, compelled them to experiment with and reinvent combative tactics. They gradually acclimatized themselves with the new situation and learned to effectively innovate war strategies. Local animals of huge dimensions, the elephants were incorporated as mounts in the new kind of battlefield, as animals to ram against a battery of

²³¹ R.M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, pp. 265-66. The western delta was not deeply affected by Mughal penetrations. It had an already existing monetized economy and an evolved fiscal system that extracted maximum revenue generated from rice cultivation. The same *zamindars* who had been collecting revenue from the *ryots* on behalf of the *sultans*, did the same job under the Mughals. So the Mughals created little disturbance in the socio economic sphere of western Bengal. However, there was a multiplication of 'dated brick temples' of Hindu deities patronized by the Hindu landlords. See Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, pp. 184-86.

²³² Jos J.L. Gommans, 'Warhorse and Post-nomadic Empire in Asia, c. 1000-1800', *Journal of Global History*, vol. 2, Issue 1, March, 2007, pp. 1-21.

soldiers and barricades of various kinds, beasts of burden to transport bulk of war ammunitions, construction material and soldiers in the unfriendly terrain; as their horses often failed to survive the heat, humidity and damp atmosphere. *Baburnama* took note of the ‘hathis’ in the early days of the Mughal consolidation. It mentioned that the elephants were the wild animals typical of Hindusthan²³³. The usefulness of these huge mammals were noted in *Baburnama*.

It is much relied on by Hindustanis, accompanying every troop of their armies—It has some useful qualities:- It crosses great rivers with ease, carrying a mass of baggage, and three or four have gone dragging without trouble the cart of the mortar (*quazan*)²³⁴ it takes four or five hundred men to haul²³⁵.

Though the archers on cavalry remained the exclusive wing of the Mughal army; elephants were judiciously combined in the eighteenth century along with the infantry with gun and artillery²³⁶ in the Mughal warfare. Pratyay Nath observed that in the post 1570s Mughal warfare, the role of cavalry was on the wane and ‘hand gun bearing infantry and ‘field artillery’ slowly replaced it²³⁷. Inclusion of elephants was a remarkable improvisation for the warriors of Central Asian origin. In fact *kheda* or rounding up of the wild elephants became a common activity of the Mughals in Bengal and eastern India²³⁸. Babur observed, ‘It....becomes more numerous in its wild state the further east one goes’²³⁹. It is from these tracts that the captured elephants are brought²⁴⁰. In fact the Mahanadi basin in Orissa became one of the most popular catchment areas of *hathi kheda*²⁴¹ for the Mughals.

²³³ Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur Padshah Ghazi, *Baburnama*, A.S. Beveridge, tr., vol. 2, London: Luzac and Co, 1922, p. 488.

²³⁴ A very heavy artillery.

²³⁵ Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, *Baburnama*, p. 489.

²³⁶ Pratyay Nath, ‘Battles, Boats and Bridges, Mughal Amphibious Warfare, 1571-1612’, in Kaushik Roy and P. Lorge eds., *Chinese and Indian Warfare, From the Classical Age to 1870*, New York: Routledge, 2015.

https://books.google.co.in/books?id=gnDfBQAAQBAJ&pg=PT240&lpg=PT240&dq=Pratyay+Nath,+Battles,+boats+and+bridges&source=bl&ots=15K3A0MC5q&sig=aP2DjU2hhl6BeJ7fgItdWljfDfs&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjI3c_72ObNAhUIP48KHdmcC6sQ6AEIJTAC#v=onepage&q=Pratyay%20Nath%20Battles%20boats%20and%20bridges&f=false

Accessed on 9.7.16.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Nathan, *Baharistan*, vol. 2, pp. 668, 678.

²³⁹ Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, *Baburnama*, vol. 2, p. 488.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Catching of elephants.

Also Bengal was a land of rivers. The Mughals were ‘attentive to every aspect of land warfare’ but had nothing to do with water. They came face to face with the riverine terrain for the first time in eastern India. Bengal was the land of boats like its neighbouring state of Arakan. The presence of complex web of rivers and water bodies made the dwellers of such land expert boatmen and adept at naval fights.

Subsequently, the survival instinct of the Mughals in the deltaic region of the eastern India compelled them to attain a certain level of mastery in aquatic battles and match up to the level of the prowess of the Arakanese raiders. Indeed, the Mughals took pains to evolve a highly competent *nawara* fleet to repel the Arakanese raiders and other naval enemies. The Mughal navy built up its might by building their navy on a variety of strong crafts popular in the delta and widely used by the Arakanese pirates: like *ghrabs*, *salbs*, *kussatts*, *jalbas*, *bachri*, *parenda* and others²⁴². Those fast paced war boats mostly fitted with guns and canons²⁴³ were specially designed to tackle not only the *Maghs*, but other crack naval powers of the east; comprising the delta rulers of Bengal, Ahom, Koch, Tripura etc.

Besides, the Mughal *subadars* trained the army in the local skills of building mud forts for barricades, setting up *thanas* to oversee the enemy movements, temporary bridges of boats across the rivers. The *nawara* vessels took rounds of the vulnerable entry points via riverine filaments and kept watch over the estuaries of Bengal. Thus with the new war strategy the Mughals were well prepared to entrench their sovereignty over the far flung corner of the empire. From being a strictly land power; the Mughals turned into dexterous fighters in the dual realms of water and ground in Bengal. That was the secret of their military success.

The Mughals made their initial mark in the early seventeenth century in *bhati*, by defeating the main pillars of the *Baro Bhuiyan*: Isa Khan and Kedar Ray and subsequently Musa Khan and Usman, apart from Pratapaditya. Though the exploits of the latter came to be excessively romanticized by a few of his

²⁴² Radhakumud Mookerji, *Indian Shipping, A History of the Sea-borne Trade and Maritime Activity of the Indians from the Earliest Times*, Bombay, London and New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1911, pp. 226-27.

https://archive.org/stream/indianshippinghi00mookrich/indianshippinghi00mookrich_djvu.txt

Accessed on 30.1.16.

²⁴³ Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, p. 177.

apologists, the might of the others were no less. Nevertheless, the last few bastions of the *bhati*²⁴⁴ autonomy were decimated. Dacca became the provincial headquarter of the Mughals in 1608. Next, one major target was to curb the prowess of Arakan, their organized raids and kidnappings. *Baharistan* has cited many instances of effective Mughal resistance of the Arakanese might. The *subadars* and highly placed nobles had the efficiency to gather a large fleet and army in the difficult terrain at a very short notice, as and when needed.

Nathan mentioned about an incident when the 'Magh' *raja* led the Arakanese navy into lower Bengal and was randomly plundering the villages and kidnapping people. The *subadar* Ibrahim Khan took the initiative to repel the enemy. By the time the *raja* came up to Baghachar near the Mughal *chauki* with seven thousand *ghurabs* and four thousand *jalias*; the *subadar* had gathered the retainers of loyal *zamindars*, *mansabdars* and nobles. The Mughals met their enemy with four to five thousand war boats. The *raja* retreated²⁴⁵. On another occasion, Ibrahim Khan was intimated at Dacca that the Portuguese were conducting raids in and around Jessore and kidnapped around one thousand and five hundred people. While a large Portuguese fleet halted at a *char* in Dakshinshabazpore; one Khan Fath-jang proceeded from Dacca with a large fleet comprising four to five thousand strong war boats²⁴⁶.

Further, the Portuguese of Hooghly were decimated by the Mughal fleet and soldiers in 1632 and declined in importance as an unofficial Portuguese colony post 1632. The port turned into the *Buksh Bundar* under the surveillance of the Mughals. So it could no longer remain the source of gun powder, fire arms and a mart for slaves as the Portuguese support base ceased to exist. The situation further improved when Chittagong was wrested from Arakan after the latter power was defeated and the deep sea port cum town marked the eastern frontier of the *suba* of Bengal in 1666.

During the phase of fratricidal struggle between Aurangzeb and Shah Shuja; the Arakanese were troubling the coast of Bengal. The *subadar* Shayista Khan took steps to fortify his southern frontier outposts. Then the *zamindar* of Sandwip, Dilawar was attacked for collaborating with Arakan. Shayista Khan sent

²⁴⁴ Lower reaches of rivers at the delta.

²⁴⁵ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan*, vol. 2, pp. 629-630.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 639.

a fleet consisting of one thousand five hundred gunners, four hundred cavalry and other commanders to defeat Dilawar. Sandwip was conquered. Reinforcements were sent to Noakhali, located in front of Sandwip island to blockade the fleet of Arakan. Next, the Portuguese of the delta were targeted by the *subadars* for their collaborative stance towards the *Maghs*. He detached them from their support to Arakan by creating a misunderstanding between the concerned parties. As a result the king of Arakan deported the Portuguese from Chittagong.

However, the Portuguese of Chittagong turned hostile and set fire to the Arakanese fleet. Meanwhile, two naval battles took place between the Mughals and Arakan, close to Chittagong on the Feni river in which Arakan was defeated. However, the Arakanese fleet sailed up to the Karnafuli where it was decimated by the Mughals²⁴⁷. The Mughal army stormed the fort of Chittagong, took control of the entire tract of Chittagong by capturing one thirty two Arakanese war vessels, guns, arms, elephants. Chittagong was renamed Islamabad²⁴⁸. So the Mughal mode of warfare that underwent improvisations to suit the deltaic terrain of Bengal and similar ones in eastern India and beyond; could triumph over the ace naval power of Arakan. The plight and the hasty retreat of the Arakanese from Chittagong in the face of aggressive Mughal fleet and army is a landmark event; known in the history of Chittagong as *Magh Dhauni* or the flight of the *Maghs*. Its memory has been kept alive through generations by the oral tradition of the *Magh Dhauni* ballads²⁴⁹.

With the convergence of the riverine and imperial push; the old economic frontier of Bengal reoriented itself. The forging of new river connectivity, bypassing the blockade posed by the Teliagarhi pass and newly established imperial reach from Delhi Agra belt, did away with Bengal's geographical, political and commercial isolation from north and north-west. Now Bengal was propelled into catering to the economic demands of the Mughal bastion in northern India and also west Asia through the Mughals. Under new geographical circumstances it lost connectivity with the age old southeast Asian cultural and trade links. Bengal's productive activities got a boost and large volumes of typical items of Bengal like textile, muslin, sugar were transshipped to Masulipatnam

²⁴⁷ Ghulam Husain Salim, *Riyaz*, pp. 230-31.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ Dinesh Chandra Sen, *The Ballads of Bengal*, vol. 4, Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1988, p. 112.

only to be re-exported to the Mughal court via Surat and forwarded towards the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. Mughal penetrations into the remote corner of the eastern Bengal, was facilitated by the eastward march of the Ganga that had culminated in its mingling with the Padma Meghna river system. It implied that the main flow of the Ganga river started watering the heart of the eastern delta.

New intersections of the rivers led to a better accessibility from north India into the previously inaccessible region at the edge. The commodities of eastern Bengal could be accessed directly from northern India via the fresh linkage forged by the Ganga. In the changed politico economic status of Hooghly and Chittagong, the pirates were bereft of their old support bases in Bengal. Indeed, the fall of Chittagong was a severe blow to the might of Arakan and heralded the decline of Arakan. Shorn of its 'sword arm' (*Feringhis*)²⁵⁰, it could never restore the heydays of piracy and retrieve its old bastion of Chittagong.

Further, the European trading houses unleashed their full energy to explore the Bengal coast once it became relatively free of the raiding menace by mid seventeenth century. This was again a phase of deep involvement of the Mughal officials of Bengal in ship building and sea borne commerce²⁵¹. Subsequently, the Dutch and finally the English started dominating the trade in Bengal. Then Calcutta's emergence from eighteenth century onwards as a more viable port cum commercial centre as well as an urban British town located much closer to the confluence, strong vigilance by the Company officials; could have further discouraged the Portuguese Arakanese inroads up to the edge of the faraway western Bengal.

Still the official correspondences stating that the 'Muggs' held 'very little weight in the general scale of politicks of Hindostan'²⁵² would be trivialising the nagging issue. Arakan had degenerated into a full-fledged raiding state after 1666. The fact that even in the late eighteenth century, shorn of the royal patronage of Arakan which was then under the Burmese rule, the 'Mugg' freebooters perpetrated socio economic disruptions in the eastern delta of Bengal concentrating mainly between the Haringhata river in the west and Rabnabad in

²⁵⁰ G.E. Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 148.

²⁵¹ Arasaratnam, 'Slave Trade', in K.S. Mathew ed., in *Mariners, Merchants*, p.159.

²⁵² WBSA, Proceedings, Board of Revenue, January 2-January 9, 1789, vol. 58, Part 1, p. 346.

the east²⁵³. Despite possessing rich and luxuriant soil, the extensive fringe of the south western and eastern Bengal between Haringhata river and the extremity of Chittagong could not yield as much revenue as it could for the English Company for many years due to such deprivations²⁵⁴. According to Revenue Record, Chittagong, till the late 1770s, the extensive forested region at the fringe of the delta remained the raiders' happy hunting ground where they were 'capable of doing any essential mischief'²⁵⁵.

However the western delta too was not totally immune to threats; imagined or otherwise. Till late eighteenth century, the general defense of the borders of the southern Bengal remained a lingering concern for the fledgling Company State. Calcutta as the major emerging hub of commerce and subsequently as a prosperous port city on the river located close to the confluence; was susceptible to piracy. In the late Mughal period the *Magh* scare extended up to Calcutta. In fact

It was one of the principal objects of the Maghul Government to provide the means of defence against by erecting forts on the banks of the Rivers, one of which still exists almost within sight of this town (Calcutta) by the name of Mugua Tanna²⁵⁶.

In the 1660s, Streysham Master had noted that nobody lived beyond that place as the 'Arracaners' were regularly spotted and believed to lift people from there²⁵⁷. In as late as 1770, a chain ran across the river at Mukwa Tanna or Thana to defend the port of Calcutta from the *Magh* raiders²⁵⁸. The city of Calcutta was a slave market and a raiding zone. The pirates of Sundarbans frequented places like Akra, Budge Budge and Calcutta for prospective victims even in late eighteenth century²⁵⁹. Thus it would be a gross exaggeration if we claim that areas within the striking range from Sagor in the south western Bengal had not experienced *Magh* scare in the eighteenth century. It was true that piracy ceased to be profitable, but

²⁵³ James Rennell, Andrew Dury, *An Actual Survey of the Provinces of Bengal, Bahar etc*, 1794, <http://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY~8~1~31571~1150050:-Composite-of--An-actual-survey,-of>

²⁵⁴ NAI, Secret, Proceedings, vol. 35A, May 5-June 30, 1777, p. 918.

²⁵⁵ WBSA, Revenue Records, Chittagong, Proceedings, vol. 5, January 1778-December 1778, p. 1.

²⁵⁶ NAI, Secret, Proceedings, vol. 35A, May 5-June 30, 1777, pp. 912-13; Gholam Hosain Salim, p. 39; WBSA, Board of Revenue, Proceedings, May 18, 1787, p. 666.

²⁵⁷ Streysham Master, *Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 66.

²⁵⁸ Raja Benoy Krishna Deb, *The Early History and Growth of Calcutta*, 1905, p. 39.

²⁵⁹ Kalikinkar Datta, *Economic Condition of the Bengal Subah, 1740-1772*, Calcutta: Saraswat Library, 1984, p. 260.

the piratical impulse as well as the legacy continued to linger. Probably this prompted them to traverse through their old routes from time to time.

XI. The Raiders and the Sundarbans

By the latter half of seventeenth century the traditional eastward trading link of the islands around the delta; with Arakan and South East Asia was on the ebb due to the moderating influence of a number of factors. The Portuguese downturn in Asia, siege of Hooghly, Arakan's diminishing hold over south eastern Bengal since 1638, the fall of Chittagong in 1666, loss of Arakan's trade ties with the Dutch Company and the influential Coromandal merchants etc. triggered the Portuguese at the fringes and Arakanese fortune hunters to scramble desperately for quick gains for survival.

In the 1660s, Bernier had remarked that the islands along the coast of the Bay had turned to 'dreary waste' and got infested with tigers and boars, due to the Arakanese incursions²⁶⁰. Jamini Mohan Ghosh opined that the fact of the Sundarbans lying vacant was an old phenomenon long preceding Bernier's time. It was also a fact that the fear of the Arakanese attacks contributed more to the process of depopulation than the actual kidnappings did²⁶¹. The Portuguese teamed up with the Arakanese much later. The Arakanese 'rendered it by no means a desirable place of residence for such persons, as having the means of subsistence, were enabled to live elsewhere'²⁶².

Ashin Das Gupta stated that generally the coastal dwellers of Bengal migrated from their ancestral abodes due to the scare of the raiders²⁶³. In hand written family genealogies known as the *kulapanjis*, there were references of exodus of families; and family members being kidnapped from the villages of Nadia, Hooghly, Bikrampur, Matiari, Santipore etc. The following lines bear testimony to an instance of a family's migration due to scares generated by such attacks.

Krishnacharan Bandyobar paia firingir dor

²⁶⁰ Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Maghul Empire: 1656-1666*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1996, pp. 442-43.

²⁶¹ Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *Magh Raiders*, p. 50.

²⁶² WBSA, Board of Revenue, Proceedings, vol. 58, part 1, January 2-9 1789, p. 346.

²⁶³ Ashin Das Gupta, 'Upokule Juganto', in *Probondho Shongroho*, Calcutta: Ananda Publishers Private Ltd, 2001, p. 487.

*Knathaltola kori porityag*²⁶⁴.
(Krishnacharan Bandyobar has left Knathaltola
Being terrorized by the Firangis).

Translation: Author

Sometimes young Bengali women were taken away in boats by the raiders supposedly to be sold as brides in those parts where it was difficult to get girls of marriageable age. Such women were labeled as *Bharar Meye*²⁶⁵; ‘Bhara’ being fleet of boats, ‘Meye’ being girl. So the households having young girls often moved base. Understandably, migrations and raids naturally led to population evacuation from certain catchment areas around the Sundarbans especially in the east, which was geographically closer to Chittagong Arakan axis. Sometimes those families who lost their girls to the raiders, used to return to their ancestral homes only to be marked as social outcasts. Thus the families of *Bharar Meye*, identified as *Firangi Poribad, Mago Poribad*²⁶⁶ were socially ostracized as they came in contact with the *Maghs* and *Firangis* who did not conform to Hindu customs and practices. Such families were often compelled to shift home after being shunned in their ancestral villages. Marital ties with such families were avoided by all means²⁶⁷. Similarly, in the mid eighteenth century, the families who were tormented and molested by the Maratha *Bargis*, had to suffer from *Bargi Thyala*²⁶⁸.

In James Rennell’s map titled *An Actual Survey of the Provinces of Bengal and Bahar etc*, 1794, the area encapsulated between the ‘Haringatta’ river in the west and ‘Rabnabad’ river in the east has the following caption : ‘This part of the country has been deserted on account of the ravages of the Muggs’²⁶⁹. The area roughly extended longitudinally from a segment of the coastline in the south to Bakargunge in the north. It did not denote a very small area. Thus, though the ‘Mugg’ infiltrations declined considerably in the western delta by late eighteenth century, Rennell’s map popularized the belief that the long term impact of the Portuguese Arakanese infiltrations was the emptiness of a part of the Sundarbans.

²⁶⁴ Cited in Muhammad Abdul Jabbar, *Bonge Magh Firingi*, p. 36.

²⁶⁵ Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *Magh Raiders*, p. 29.

²⁶⁶ Satish Chandra Mitra, *Jashohar Khulnar Itihash*, Calcutta: Dey’s Publishing, vol. 2, p. 634.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Susan Gole, *A Series of Early Printed Maps of India*, Plate 45A, p. 55.

XII. Trail of Human Presence in Sagor: c. 1600-1800

The instabilities associated with the new political developments in the 1660s and a lack of strong political control for a long time in the *bhati* area, made the island more vulnerable to piratical forays. Then after the fall of Chittagong, the raiders were devoid of the royal backing from Arakan and faced increased Mughal surveillance. These prompted them to scramble randomly for quick gains. The practice of indiscriminate desecration of villages in the lower Bengal delta was stepped up. So Sagor/Chandecan, along with other areas in and around the Bay could have been overrun by the marauders²⁷⁰. We could perhaps borrow the term ‘macro parasitism’²⁷¹ in the context of lower Bengal to describe a trend of predation that left little room for extensive trade and productivity. In the late seventeenth century in Sagor and adjoining areas the currency was debased into local usage of *cauries*²⁷²; which could be interpreted as a dip in regular commerce and only low denomination local small scale transactions²⁷³.

Nevertheless, as per Cabral and Manrique’s observations in the 1630s, the island was ravaged by the *Maghs*. Indeed Sagor appeared desolate despite being a deep sea port, when Bowrey and Masters visited it between the 1660s and 1680s. In the eyes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century European travellers like Duff, Heber, Maria Graham etc., Sagor appeared forlorn. Most of the travellers were casual passersby and even if they had set their feet upon the island; could not have penetrated deep into the interior. So the foreigners’ accounts and diaries often tended to capture a fleeting and superficial impression of a particular locale. David Arnold observed that the passengers were fed up with the ‘depressing sight of mud-banks, flooded forests and tangled vegetation’²⁷⁴ that unfolded itself on their onward journey from the first landfall at the river’s mouth. Hardly any human being was sighted by the travellers in Sagor. Thus Sagor became a victim of its own image specially to the western world; and got associated with the trope of ‘oriental othering’.

²⁷⁰ Maurice Collis, *The Land of the Great Image*, p. 79.

²⁷¹ John L. Anderson, ‘Piracy and World History: Economic Perspective on Maritime Predation’ in C.R. Pennell ed., *Bandits at Sea: A Pirates Reader*, New York: New York University Press, 2001, p. 4.

²⁷² Rila Mukherjee, *Strange Riches*, p. 362.

²⁷³ Use of cauries was used in Bengal for very small scale local trade and transactions.

²⁷⁴ David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze, India, Landscape and Science, 1800-1856*, London and Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006, p. 71.

Yet the diary entry by William Hedges contradicted the picture of absolute emptiness of Sagor in the 1640s. The substantial revenue generated in the 1640s let us assume that there was a considerable settlement and agriculture at that time. Bowrey's and Masters' remarks indicated traces of economic activities in the close neighbourhood. Its soil was extremely fertile and most suited to raising 'a single annual crop of coarse paddy'²⁷⁵. Generally speaking, Sagor and the parts of lower Bengal villages that trimmed the coast of the Bay of Bengal, had 'rich and luxuriant soil'²⁷⁶, endowed with high value timber, gum lac, extensive fields of rice and salt pans. All of these provided means of gainful livelihood to some people and yielded handsome revenue to the administrative body and much later, to the Company State. An official English document of the early 1760s, described the southernmost parts of its land from Rangafalla to Sagor as being covered with jungles that grew a vast stock of timber fit for multiple use. Some of the 'low' river banks and creeks had salt pans and abounded in varieties of fish²⁷⁷. Still, the nagging threats of raiders came in the way of the uninterrupted economic pursuits of the locals and the beneficiaries of revenue.

The security of the Molunghees at various salt *mahals* was under serious threat²⁷⁸.

The several salt contractors....allege that the Molungees to a man have deserted the works.... The plunder of these people is confined to the persons of the inhabitants whom they lead away into slavery²⁷⁹.

Besides,

The wood cutters disarming the Soondybens has put an entire stop to boat-building besides the great sails of that article...the distress of firewood and such a quantity of rice not going to Calcutta²⁸⁰.

Also a small group of European visitors in the early nineteenth century could discern sparks of life in this apparently empty land. Lady Nugent had reached

²⁷⁵'Saugor Island and its Condition', in *The Nautical Magazine*, p. 292, William Carey, *The Good Old Days of the Honourable John Company*, vol. 2, R. Cambay and Co, Calcutta, 1907, pp. 123-24

²⁷⁶ NAI, Foreign Secret, Proceedings, vol. 35A, May 5-June 30, 1777, p. 918.

²⁷⁷ NAI, Home Miscellaneous, Proceedings, vol. 28, Fort William April 8, 1762, p. 356.

²⁷⁸ NAI, Foreign Secret, Consultation no. 7, December 23, 1776, WBSA, Revenue Board Consisting of the Whole Council, Proceedings, vol. 2, January 5-January 29, 1773, dated January 8, 1773, p. 44.

²⁷⁹ NAI, Foreign Secret, Consultation no. 1, December 30, 1776.

²⁸⁰ NAI, Foreign Secret, Proceedings, vol. 34A, November 11-December 30, 1776, pp. 3873-76.

Sagor in 1812. She saw many ships moored on the coast²⁸¹ and varied kinds of ‘odd shaped boats’²⁸². While on one hand she was appalled to see the ritual of death²⁸³ she was amused to be offered an array of fresh fish by the dark complexioned scantily dressed local fishermen²⁸⁴. Those were indicative of small local markets in the vicinity and basic exchange system. All these references contraindicated the hypothesis that Sagor had remained a perpetually deserted zone, though there is no record of its continuously dense and equitable habitation within our concerned period.

Moreover, in the face of adverse conditions, as the various instances cited above have shown, Sagor had an innate propensity to bounce back into a normal rhythm of life at the earliest opportune moment. The areas closely guarded with very tall and thickly knit trees of considerable age; enjoyed an extraordinary fertility level. The island received more than abundant share of monsoon rainfall. It was unlikely that such a prolific rice growing tract of Sagor, at the junction of the river and the sea would remain vacant with little vestige of life for a long and continuous stretch of time²⁸⁵.

Although by Manrique’s time the place had declined, it had eleventh century Sun temples²⁸⁶ that indicated that the island was a busy religious centre. Moreover, the pilgrim trail up to Kapilmuni’s temple never ceased and devotees crowd the place till date. That ensured the heavy seasonal footfall every year. For instance, in 1758 a group of 5,000 devotees from Delhi and beyond, some even from far flung provinces close to Persia and Tartary (Turkey) proceeded towards Sagor. Their number swelled to 20,000 by the time they reached Sagor²⁸⁷. In 1837, it was estimated that more than 60,000 boats had landed in Sagor for the festival, carrying a little less than 300,000 people from all parts of India. The number exceeded the population of Glasgow, the second most crowded city of the British Isles, at that point of time²⁸⁸.

²⁸¹ Maria Nugent, *A Journal from the Year 1811 till the Year 1815, Including a Voyage to and Residence in India*, vol. 1, London, 1839, p. 68.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 75-77.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁸⁵ ‘Saugor Island and its Condition’, in *Nautical Magazine*, p. 294.

²⁸⁶ Rila Mukherjee, *Pelagic Passageways*, p. 178.

²⁸⁷ Anil Chandra Das Gupta, *The Days of John Company-Selections from Calcutta Gazette, 1824-1832*, Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing, West Bengal, 1959, p. 131.

²⁸⁸ Alexander Duff, *India and India Missions*, p. 226.

Temporary seasonal markets could barely cope with such a large gathering of a cross section of devotees from wide geographical spectrum. Hence more than a rudimentary supportive infrastructure had to be maintained and some degree of consistent patronage had to be ensured year after year to cope with the huge pouring of tourists who ‘consumed the land’ and were as ruinous as a ‘host of locusts’²⁸⁹. Further the pilgrim trails traditionally functioned as channels of trade, exchange and generated big revenue. Such gatherings ensured that the island did not remain devoid of people and of economic activities for a very long stretch of time. However, widespread and permanent settlements have not sustained in Sagor for a number of reasons.

XIII. Sagor: An Ecologically Fragile Zone

Nevertheless, associating piracy and slaving with the vacant image of Sagor, needs to be reviewed from the vantage of other factors too. Was the river as a harbinger of the marauders, the primary determining force on the settlement patterns of Sagor between c. 1600 and 1800?

Sagor was notorious for being a haven for man eating tigers. The other predators were sharks and crocodiles and poisonous snakes. Also, the shifting shoals and sand bars at the confluence, posed serious piloting challenges even to ace seamen. So the island was dangerous and not easily accessible and seemed devoid of life to many travellers at various points of time.

Moreover, as a part of the broader terrain of the Sundarbans, located at the edge of the mainland, Sagor has been at the receiving end of magnified impacts of storm waves, cyclone, rainfall, inundations from the rivers, water borne pollution, epidemics, cyclone, flood, earthquake, and topographical alterations related to land making at the fringe of the delta; that could have posed hindrances to sustained settlement patterns.

Obviously the island’s susceptibility to the vagaries of nature had substantially contributed to its sparse habitation and periodic emptiness within the select period. Besides, Sagor fell within the zone of land depression so typical of

²⁸⁹Cited in Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture and Economy*, p. 94.

the Sundarban terrain, as pointed out by Oldham, Beveridge and Fergusson²⁹⁰. Scholars like Satish Chandra Mitra stated that after Pratapaditya's power was curbed, the Sundarbans underwent a structural alteration owing to the subsidence of land. Sagor experienced a mild impact and survived till 1688, when it was ravaged by flood and cyclone. In fact very old archaeological remnants like choked up ponds, old temples, and clay and metal utensils, copper plates, stone idols, old coins have been unearthed from the subterranean layers of Sagor and its neighbourhood in South Twenty four Parganas²⁹¹. These were indicative of the natural subsidence of land, effects of earthquake etc. affecting the deltaic terrain in various phases. It has been claimed that there are three distinct groups of ancient archaeological sites in coastal West Bengal, one of which is located along the track of the Adi Ganga between Calcutta and Sagor island. Among the well known sites discovered so far and located close to Sagor are Mandirtala, Jotar Deul, Rakshaskhali, and Kachuberia²⁹². One of the Company State's correspondences (1812) indicates that such zones of vulnerability could have discouraged thick and continuous settlement, spanning over long duration at a stretch. It reads,

On the way I availed myself of the opportunity to examine what has been supposed to be the ruins of a Fort, it has not however a single feature to give it the least resemblance to anything of the kind, and I am more inclined to believe it has been originally a dike or bund constructed to resist the encroachment of the sea; or that it has been a wall around some building²⁹³.

Further, the magnitude of the impact of Arakanese Portuguese forays in Sagor has also to be reviewed from the long term perspective of the river system as well as various interventions posed by the natural phenomena. The island itself had reconfigured in shape and size a number of times over the centuries. Indeed the delta building activities of the river has created a precarious fluvial system. Thus

²⁹⁰ Cited in Paul Greengough, 'Hunter's Drowned Land: An Environmental Fantasy of the Victorian Sundarbans', Richard Grove et al. eds. *Nature and the Orient: The Environmental History of South and South East Asia*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 264.

²⁹¹ Kamal Chaudhury, *Chobbish Pargana, Uttar, Dakkhin, Sundarban*, Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 1999, p. 343; Satish Chandra Mitra, *Jashohar Khulnar Itihash*, vol. 2, p. 615.

²⁹² Gautam Sengupta, 'Archaeology of Coastal Bengal', in Himanshu Prabha Ray and Jean-Francois Salles eds., *Tradition and Archaeology; Early Maritime Contacts in the Indian Ocean*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1998, pp. 116-18.

²⁹³ NAI, Home Public, Consultation no. 28, April 10, 1812, p. 1.

at times it seemed as though Sagor's sheer existence has always been at risk. For instance,

This Island (Edmonstone Island) but a few years ago had from 2 to 3 fathoms of water upon it, but is now high and dry at all seasons of the year, an event, which would not so speedily have happened, had not the River encroached on Saugor Island....I do not apprehend the total destruction of the Saugor Island as I think it possible that the River will force itself a passage through some of the small Creeks which intersect the Island...²⁹⁴.

Further, the Hugli estuary was part of a very active delta where the cyclical process of erosion and deposition lead to continuous land making. So the estuary is prone to changes. According to the latest surveys, the group of islands close to Sagor is fast disappearing, while a new island is growing more or less to the north of Sagor. Currently, apart from high intensity cyclones, storms, shifting channels, Sagor block with the population density of about 200,000, is prone to the problem of dangerously rising sea level, at a rate approximately 250 per cent higher than global rate²⁹⁵. While the bigger Sagor island is at a great risk, the island of Lohachara is already under sea and most of the island of Ghoramara is submerged. This island was a part of the island of Sagor in the early twentieth century. By the 1950s, Ghoramara had a separate existence, though it supposedly took a few minutes to swim over to Sagor at low tide. At present, the fast paced erosion of Ghoramara has increased its distance from Sagor. It takes about forty minutes to reach Sagor from Ghoramara. Additionally, the island suffers from the increased salinity of the soil and unseasonal and sudden spurts of cyclone that adversely affects the fishermen at sea on small boats and the farmers²⁹⁶.

²⁹⁴ NAI, Home Public, Proceedings, vol. 328, July 1822, p. 59.

²⁹⁵ Anup Bhattacharya, 'Photo Feature: Living On the Edge of a Rising Sea', in India Climate Dialogue, 16.9.16. <http://indiaclimatedialogue.net/2016/09/16/living-edge-rising-sea/>, Accessed on 21.9.16.

²⁹⁶ Soumya Sarkar, 'Sinking Sagor Island is on a Losing Struggle to Stay Afloat', in The Huffington Post, 8.3.17. http://www.huffingtonpost.in/soumya-sarkar-/shrinking-sagar-island-is-in-a-losing-struggle-to-stayafloat/?utm_source=TOInewHP_TILwidget&utm_medium=ABtest&utm_campaign=TOInewHP Accessed on 16.3.17.

XIV. Conclusion

A zone of transitory topography and fluvial world, the island of Sagor had been mauled by nature's ravages and inhabited by dreaded predators. Hence the place was not conducive to consistently spread extensive and continuous human habitation within the chosen period. Within the chosen period, it by and large remained a forlorn land of wilderness that witnessed periodic spates of human habitations followed by desolate phases. The island came alive with the inflow of seasonal pilgrims. Otherwise it remained a buffer zone tucked in between the eastern fringe of the Mughal empire and the western periphery of the mighty Arakan. Located far away from the Mughal headquarter, it got entangled in the mesh of piracy and slave raiding under the shadow of Arakan. This added to its ill-fame as a dangerous place.

The Bhagirathi that in the rains repelled the *Bargis* from the western bank, used to usher in the *Magh* raiders from the eastern delta of the Ganga Padma into the interior villages of south eastern Bengal and beyond, up to south western Bengal, including the island of Sagor, the first land base at the edge of the western delta. Often the raiders penetrated further up into the interior of the mainland, but one of their common entry points was bypassing Sagor. Both the raids in all likelihood were seasonal in nature — the Maratha attacks usually took place in the dry months, while the boat mounted Arakanese Portuguese intruders made the best use of the rainy season and post-harvest winter months. Still, the Maratha incursions could be compared for their destructive repercussions as well as intensely violent dealings towards their victims; with the Arakanese Portuguese raids into lower Bengal²⁹⁷. However, human trafficking was the hallmark of the 'Muggs'. Beyond a point both the raids lacked solid patronage and was relegated to the status of predatory ventures. Nevertheless, from the long term historical vantage; the raids alone failed to leave behind a lasting imprint on society, polity and economy of Kasimbazar and Sagor.

Again, though Sagor received the footfall of the *Magh Firangi* raiders, it neither blossomed into an 'informal' but major Portuguese colony like Hooghly being shorn of a comparable social and a loose administrative structure; nor could

²⁹⁷ Edward C. Dimock, Jr, and Pratul Chandra Gupta annotated and trans. Gangaram, *The Maharashta Purana, An Eighteenth -Century Bengali Historical Text*, Calcutta: Orient Longman, Reprint, 1985, pp. 2-3.

it evolve as a Portuguese ‘shadow empire’ like Sandwip²⁹⁸, as there was no Sebastian Gonzalves Thibau supported by his band of tough men associated with ambiguous activities and a social set up of their families adaptive to new moorings²⁹⁹. It did not shape into even a ‘minor’ settlement of the informal empire.

Further Sagor could not adopt a distinctive role in history as a busy emporium or a commercial pivot like Kasimbazar and Hooghly that nurtured settled life around them; with minimum break in historical continuity. The island remained in the backwater of history since Mughal times, seldom enjoying the arc light of history; till the British cast more than a cursory glance on it as a potential source of revenue in the early nineteenth century. Within the select time frame, the river borne raiders along with other factors might have caused some disruptions, as is evident from remnants of scattered settlements noted by various accounts and sources. However, the long term influence of the marauding inroads in Sagor has to be weighed against the perspective of natural disasters and its ephemeral physical surroundings that revealed an extreme vulnerability of the island. In fact, it leads us to conclude that even if the *Magh* incursions and associated disruptions did not occur, the ecological factors and the nature’s interventions bore enough potentialities of challenging the very existence of the island.

²⁹⁸ George Winus, *Studies on Portuguese Asia, 1495-1689*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001; Rila Mukherjee, *Revista da Faculdade de Letras* 67, ‘The Struggle for the Bay: The Life And Times of Sandwip’, *HISTÓRIA*, Porto, III Série, vol. 9, 2008, pp. 67-88. <http://ler.letras.up.pt/uploads/ficheiros/6732.pdf>, Accessed on 24.7.16.

²⁹⁹ Jonathan Gil Harris, *The First Firangis: Remarkable Stories of Heroes, Healers, Charlatans, Courtesans & Other Foreigners who became Indian*, New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2015. https://books.google.co.in/books?id=Y4i7BwAAQBAJ&pg=PT4&lpq=PT4&dq=Jonathan+Gil+Harris,+The+First+Firangis:+Remarkable+Stories+of+Heroes,+Healers,+Charlatans,+Courtesans+%26+Other+Foreigners+who+became+Indian,+New+Delhi:+Aleph+Book+Company,+2015,&source=bl&ots=SE8tiVq5FE&sig=6NBCMrGOLQ1Wxzj-iox7jXJPJ44&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiHsr_yulzOAhXCq48KHdCvCaMQ6AEILjAE#v=onepage&q=Jonathan%20Gil%20Harris%2C%20The%20First%20Firangis%3A%20Remarkable%20Stories%20of%20Heroes%2C%20Healers%2C%20Charlatans%2C%20Courtesans%20%26%20Other%20Foreigners%20who%20became%20Indian%2C%20New%20Delhi%3A%20Aleph%20Book%20Company%2C%202015%2C&f=false Accessed on 24.7.16.

Conclusion

The thesis has attempted to explain the history of Kasimbazar, Hooghly and Sagor, located on the bank of the Bhagirathi, from the prism of the river and other environmental factors without ignoring various determinants of history. The role of the river and environmental factors have been quite vital, especially in the period that has been covered, that is roughly between late sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Concurrently, an attempt has been undertaken to delineate the history of the Bhagirathi-Hugli river watering the three locations.

The thesis takes off from the last phase of the Sultani era (Karani dynasty) marked by the beginning of the Portuguese foothold in Hooghly. By mid-seventeenth century, Bengal was subjugated under the Mughals. During this time the European mercantile Companies of the Dutch, French, English and others began to establish their toeholds in Bengal. Again, eighteenth century is considered important as it witnessed the decline of the Mughal supremacy in the *suba*, emergence of regional power under the aegis of the Murshidabad *nawabs* and its demise too after the battle of Plassey in 1757 and then the assumption of *diwani* in 1765 that officially made the English East India Company the major participant in Bengal's political and economic arenas. The closing year of the thesis is early nineteenth century, which marked the decline of Kasimbazar and Hooghly from their status as prominent commercial centres in Bengal.

Environmental Issues

Kasimbazar and Hooghly enjoyed important status in Bengal within the select time frame. Sagor at the estuary enjoyed a strategic location. The entire stretch from Murshidabad and Kasimbazar down to the settlements of Hooghly and beyond up to Sagor at the river's mouth was a line up of three places at the three reaches of the river. Those were stitched together by countless filaments of the river system with the capital, important production centres, trading zones, ports, store houses, ancillary marts, towns and villages, settlements of greater and lesser significance. Though roadways were initially supportive of river ways, the former subsequently could not be uniformly maintained. Riverine web was the pre-fabricated mode of transport that was faster and cheaper. Many types of boats of moderate and small tonnage and shapes like *bajra*, *jaliya*, *donga*, *dingi*, catered to the internal network of commerce, while big boats like *patella*, *ulak*, covered

fairly long distance, carrying items like saltpetre from Bihar to Hooghly, via Kasimbazar¹. From Hooghly the boats used to ply up to Agra and Patna². Ships of moderate and light burthen were standard modes of overseas commerce. Big and medium boats were used for administrative purposes on a regular basis. Apart from these, the spraying of refertilising silt over vast tracts of land after the yearly floods in Bengal, was indeed the redeeming feature of the river system.

At the same time, the destructive aspects of the river like inundations and encroachment of land were appalling. In the deltaic Bengal, severe floods had the capacity to wipe out towns, villages, ports and marts and a new settlement bearing the same name might evolve on the opposite bank of the original one. The excessive downpour routinely filled up various nooks and crevices of undulating land into one extensive surface of water that facilitated wide use of boats of all kinds for various purposes.

Although rivers were crucial to the sustenance of Bengal, riverine unpredictability was a major hallmark in Bengal as delta building process continues ceaselessly. Changing course of rivers, obstructions on the river bed, dry bed, major erosion on one bank followed by deposition on the other were its direct major fall outs that affected more the western delta of Bengal than its eastern counterpart within the chosen period of the thesis. Though such changes had very serious implications, those were long term changes and were not marked by sudden upheavals or immediately noticeable alterations.

Also, Bengal was marked by short term and sudden natural occurrences like vicissitudes of monsoon, widespread flooding of land and cyclonic conditions which have destroyed settlements, lives and property. In fact, excessive rainfall in the monsoon season; water logged soil and muck and puddle posed impediments to those not habituated with the terrain and climatic conditions of Bengal. Such constraining aspects of nature could be observed in the context of the *Bargi* raids in extensive parts of western Bengal when land bound Maratha cavalcares had to regularly retreat away from the rivers to their halt at Katwa as they swelled up to dangerous level at peak monsoon. In fact almost two centuries prior to the Maratha inroads, the Mughals, during their ingress towards Bengal had faced similar impediments. They belonged to the 'Arid zone' or dry regions of limited

¹ Somendra Chandra Nandy, *Bandar Kasimbazar*, p. 52.

² Streysham Master, *The Diaries*, vol., 2, p. 66.

rainfall that grew scrubs, small bushes and grassland, sparse vegetation of millets and were ace archers and bowmen on horseback. Rainfall pattern compelled the inhabitants to look for means of livelihood other than agriculture³. They were used to handling pack animals, livestock and war horses and other easily movable properties. They were not tied down to land extensive investment in agriculture and landed property and lived out of mobile campsites. They had the relative freedom and compulsion to be on the move with their mobile belongings on their hardy horses. Such weatherbeaten men like the Afghans and Mughals made great warriors and conquerors of far flung areas.

They had traversed great distances from Central Asia and conquered vast areas along the length and breadth of the subcontinent. Bengal was a very different proposition. The terrain, rain, humidity and rivers of Bengal posed huge challenges to the people coming from dry region. As the Mughals in course of their gradual ingress into Bengal, reached beyond the Rajmahal hills close to the erstwhile capital sites of Bengal near Sooty, Bhagwangola, Murshidabad Kasimbazar region; they were at the periphery of the 'Arid zone' and threshold of 'Monsoon zone'⁴. Situated between the relatively drier and humid areas of the Gangetic plain, the frontier of the modern Gangetic Bihar became the 'linchpin of state formation' and was considered a strategically sensitive 'transitory zone'⁵.

The Mughals embarked upon their eastern penetration sometime in the latter half of the sixteenth century and took less than a century to reach the edge of the deltaic plains of Bengal that fitted into Gommans' trope of 'Monsoon zone'. The Mughal prolonged phase of progression towards Bengal came to a halt as they were at the edge of a land of unknown topography, torrential downpour, mesh of waterways, marsh, and impenetrable forest, tangled vegetation, interspersed with tracts of wet rice fields based on intensive cultivation by sedentary agrarian communities. Rajmahal represented the halfway house at the eastern edge of Bihar that bore influences of the drier lateritic zone and evidently

³ Jos. J.L. Gommans, 'Burma at the Frontier of South, East and Southeast Asia: A Geographic Perspective', in Gommans and J. Leider eds., *The Maritime Frontier of Burma, Exploring Political, Cultural and Commercial Interaction in the Indian Ocean World: 1200-1800*, Leiden: KITLV Press, 2000, pp. 2-5.

⁴ J. Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, pp. 165-175.

⁵ Murari Kumar Jha, 'Migration, Settlement and State Formation in the Ganga Plain: A Historical Geographic Perspective', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol., 57, Issue. 4, 2014, p. 589.

the alluvial soil as the Ganga passed by Rajmahal. The Mughals developed the habit of stopping over at Rajmahal to reorient themselves to move on towards the east⁶. It was the last familiar climatic region of comfort, a refuelling halt, a stopover to review strategies and finally the springboard for state expansion. In course of time, they were to innovate and adapt their military operations in accordance with the ecology of the new locale and emerged as conquerors of the Bengal delta in early seventeenth century.

Also, the area in and around the Rajmahal hills commanded over the traffic of the Ganga and expanding Padma. The Ganga flowed from the foot of the Rajmahal hills before turning southward as the Bhagirathi. The off take point of the easterly Padma from the Bhagirathi was located at Sooty in Murshidabad beyond the hills, while the other river flowed southward into western part of Bengal. Further, the Padma had forged a link with the Brahmaputra and formed an estuary at the south eastern periphery of the Bay of Bengal close to the coast of Arakan. Therefore, the Rajmahal hills stood as a vanguard to the river traffic headed towards north eastern frontiers too, apart from the incoming and outgoing freights of the important port of Hooghly and its hinterland and other smaller ports in south western delta. By the time the Mughals established their sway in the east, Hooghly had carved out its identity as a major port and emporium. Further, the western side beyond the diversion point of the Padma was a vital area as it was intersected by caravan routes.

It was no accident that the medieval capital cities of Bengal like Gaur, Lakhnauti, Pandua, Tanda, Rajmahal⁷ were located close to each other near the Rajmahal hills. Those places and later on Murshidabad Kasimbazar region were chosen as capitals⁸ as they enjoyed locational advantages like access to south western Bengal and to the eastern edge of Bengal. This facilitated military interventions, administrative control and supervision over commercial activities. So choosing Murshidabad as the provincial headquarter was a well thought out move. However, within the chosen period, the river watering the three locales had past its prime. It was linked with the long term event of the west to east shift of the Bhagirathi that had begun sometime in sixteenth and culminated in eighteenth

⁶Jos J.L. Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, p. 27.

⁷ Subsequently, the Padma's easterly penetration led to the establishment of the Mughal headquarters away from the intermediate zone around the Rajmahal hills, at Dacca, in 1610.

⁸ Dacca was the only deviation.

century. So an immensely prolonged and massive ecological upheaval provided the canvas of this research.

In the Bengal delta, slow changes in the rivers followed by topographical alterations have been a common phenomenon. However the far reaching impacts of such massive upheavals catch our attention only after many years. Originally western delta was a prosperous area. The entire drainage of the Ganga was occurring through the Bhagirathi Hugli river flowing from the Rajmahal hills to southwards up to Sagor at the confluence. Additionally, the Saraswati, Damodar, Jellenghy and also the Adi Ganga were active and navigable rivers. This explains the passage of big ships up to the port of Satgaon and also close to Kasimbazar in its early phase. The Damodar drained more through its northern channel. The Jellenghy had a good drainage and sent a considerable volume of water back to the Bhagirathi. The 'nutrient rich, silt laden floodwaters' from the upper regions of the rivers flowed into Bengal and got evenly distributed over the delta and fertilised the soil annually⁹. The western delta enjoyed considerable fertility. However, impermanence was the hallmark of the Bengal delta.

Due to the very gradual easterly riverine shift occurring between sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, most of the Bhagirathi's water started flowing through the Padma flowing towards east. Consequently, the latter river turned into a vibrant channel leaving behind a rather sluggish western arm of the Ganga: the Bhagirathi that flowed past Kasimbazar, Hooghly and Sagor. In other words, the Bhagirathi was bereft of its headwater supply and the active delta got shifted to eastern Bengal. All along, western delta was being watered by the languishing Bhagirathi that was losing its refertilising potency. So the production of rice and other grains dipped. Further, gradually the Saraswati started languishing. Since mid-eighteenth century, the drainage of Jellenghy, that joined the Hugli near Nadia, too declined; The Adi Ganga lost its vitality; there was some alteration in the Damodar as its northern channel dried up. This also contributed to the decline of the Bhagirathi. All these riverine changes were in no way cataclysmic and happened at a very slow pace and its cumulative impacts were not immediately obvious.

⁹Radhakamal Mukherjee, *The Changing Face of Bengal*, p. iii.

However, from the narrative of fourteenth century Moroccan traveller Ibn Batuta, we know that the settled areas of Bengal from Lakhnawati, the capital of Bengal located at the frontier of the western and eastern delta, to Sonargaon at the edge of eastern Bengal was ‘a vast country, abounding in rice’¹⁰. Bengal had a tradition of paddy cultivation. The entire aquatic trail had villages, orchards on its banks and busy riverine traffic that carried provisions. In this fifteen day long journey, he had a feeling of ‘going through a bazar’.¹¹ Thus, the settled parts of Bengal were agriculturally prosperous and prices of basic goods cheap¹².

This eastward journey of the expanding Padma further rejuvenated the soil along the banks with fresh sediment suited to growing wet rice. The new flood plains spread up to sparsely populated nooks of deep forests. The virgin land of fresh alluvium that awaited plough agriculture; found entrepreneurs in north Indian adventurous Muslims¹³ of liberal world view, and some local *zamindars*. They mobilised the local non-agricultural people to reclaim large tracts of virgin forest and cultivate paddy¹⁴. The leaders were often patronised by the emerging Mughal power to tame the wilderness and act as catalytic converters into Islam. In course of time, it provided the foundation for a comparatively more populous area than central and western Bengal.

Also the shifting river forged a new connectivity via Ganga, between the administrative centre in the north and the new eastern frontier. The river shifts, extent of plough intervention and expanding paddy fields, furtherance of the Mughal frontier and Islamization went on simultaneously¹⁵. The Mughals had started their journey towards Bengal as a land-bound cavalcade. By the time they pushed themselves to the edge of eastern Bengal along the emerging easterly flowing Padma, they revamped their war strategy, graduated into a seasoned riverine power, having efficient fleets suited to repel the great naval fighters of the east like the Portuguese of delta, local *zamindars* and Arakan. Comparatively languid Bhagirathi watered the old delta at the western part of Bengal. However,

¹⁰ Ibn Batuta, H.A.R. Gibb, tr., *Travels in Asia and Africa; 1325-1354*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2005, p. 267.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 267.

¹³ ‘Associated with formal or informal Islam’, Cited in Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, p. 249.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 207-09.

¹⁵ Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, pp. 193-227.

the commercial nodes along the Bhagirathi continued to function, but became dependent on the new granaries located in eastern delta.

Despite being a punishment posting for the Mughal bureaucrats, Bengal captured their interest for a number of reasons. It was a well-populated land. Its cheap labour, fertile riverine terrain and optimum monsoon ensured bountiful production of food grains, crops, and made provisions cheaper in Bengal than other parts of the subcontinent. The products of Bengal were exported to places like Coromandal, Surat and the East Indies. The Asian merchants from north and west India and also Central Asia had started exploring Bengal. The place was connected to other parts of the subcontinent. Bengal was engaged in vigorous trade during this time. So it was worth exploring as a trading zone and could be tapped for revenue.

Besides, Bengal became a major source of silver. Since mid-seventeenth century, the European companies and Asian traders had been buying export commodities like raw silk, textile and saltpetre from Bengal to be sent to various parts of India, Asian colonies and to Europe. Bengal enjoyed a favourable balance of trade roughly from seventeenth century. As there were no suitable commodities of exchange for the European Companies and Asian merchants, all of them had to pay in cash or silver. So there was a large scale influx of silver from Europe to Bengal. Basically the European countries trading with parts of the subcontinent, used to channelize silver from Central and South America that had been circulating in Europe¹⁶.

Between mid-seventeenth and the second decade of eighteenth century, there was an influx of silver worth a fifty lakh rupees per annum¹⁷. Despite this, there was no remarkable increase in revenue and there was no major rise in the price of provisions. Moreover, there was no significant improvement in the life of actual producers as the surplus found its way into the Mughal coffer. This was because Bengal had become a major supplier of silver to the Mughal headquarters.

¹⁶ Steward Gordon, 'Burhanpur: Entrepot and Hinterland, 1650-1750' in Sanjay Subrahmanyam ed., *Merchants, Markets and the State in Early Modern India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 48-65.

¹⁷ Sushil Chaudhury, *Trade and Commercial Organisation in Bengal, 1650-1720*, Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1975, p. 238.

Part of the surplus revenue was sent as tribute to the Mughal emperors in silver¹⁸. Silver from Bengal was remitted to Agra and Delhi as *hundis* or bills of exchange by the big Jain and Hindu bankers cum merchants of north and west India called *shroffs*¹⁹ as it was not safe to transfer bullion to distant places.

Also the *subadars* of Bengal like Shayista Khan, Khan Jahan Bahadur Khan, Azim-us-Shan remitted huge fortunes back home²⁰. Important towns of western Bengal like Kasimbazar, Murshidabad, Hooghly and subsequently Calcutta caught the attention of the Mughals for contributing substantially to trade and revenue and silver. Those commercial centres had to remit large amount of cash to important places of north and west India²¹. Silver invariably got collected in those trading nodes, production sites cum port areas of Bengal and they became the disbursal points too. So the Mughals wanted to have a tighter control over Bengal as it was, among other reasons, a major source of silver.

Three Locations

Kasimbazar was located towards the northern part of western Bengal, not far from the point of divergence between the Bhagirathi and Padma at Sooty. Hooghly, which stood at the intermediate reach. Beyond the town of Hooghly it continued as the Hugli river²², flowing past Calcutta and further south, up to its estuary at Sagor. Kasimbazar and Hooghly were installed as significant settlements at a time when the Bhagirathi had attained its peak as a substantial river. According to Rennell's map, Murshidabad was located on eastern bank of the Bhagirathi. Subsequently the city did spill over to the other bank. One of the earliest (1632) on its southern neighbour Kasimbazar stated it was an important commercial centre, renowned for its large quantities of silk and *muslin*²³.

The extensive hinterland of Murshidabad and Kasimbazar was a conical island²⁴, and was surrounded by wide rivers: Padma in the north, Bhagirathi in the west and Jellenghy in the east. It was a predominantly fertile alluvial land, with a lateritic touch towards the north western side of Kasimbazar Murshidabad region.

¹⁸ Sushil Chaudhury, 'No Ready Money? No Problem The Role of *Hundis* (Bills of Exchange) in Early Modern India, c. 1600-1800', "State and Finance in the Early Modern Time in the Eurasian Continuum", in IEHC, Session 2, Helsinki, 2006, p. 3.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Sushil Chaudhury, *Trade and Commercial Organisation in Bengal*, p. 238.

²¹ Sushil Chaudhury, 'No Ready Money? No Problem', p. 3.

²² Bratindranath Mukhopadhyay, *Ganga Banga*, Calcutta: Granthamitra, 2004, p. 11.

²³ W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, vol. 9, London: Trubner and Co, 1876, p. 88.

²⁴ Referred to as 'Cossimbuzar Island' by the English.

Its fairly vast area was naturally endowed with mulberry trees; the soil was suitable for mulberry plantations and there were expert artisans²⁵ contributing to silk production. This high-yielding land, apart from growing all kinds of crops and exportable items; specialised in the production and trade of silk.

While some of the settlements of the Kasimbazar island like Bhagwangola, Azimgunge, Ziangunge, Jungypore produced variants of good and inferior silk; the bulk of which, along with other articles like cotton textiles, food grains and local handicrafts like ivory ware got collected at Kasimbazar for buying, selling and exports. Such adjoining towns and villages provided a nexus of *hat, bazaar, gola, gunj. Arangs* or nodes for manufacturing and distribution of silk mushroomed in the hinterland of Kasimbazar. More than three hundred villages could be placed under one *arang*. Major *arangs* of Kasimbazar were spread over an extensive area²⁶.

The inland distribution system connecting various store houses, marts, markets and *arangs* was based on the labyrinth of waterways and channels. In the olden times the river system allowed passage to the largest country boats of five hundred *maunds* throughout the year²⁷. Much later than that, all places remained accessible by boat in monsoon²⁸. Large boats sailed up to Kasimbazar and Murshidabad from other districts, while small floats were used to keep alive local commerce in summer²⁹. Kasimbazar was connected by road with Patna, Burdwan, Jellenghy, Dinajpore and Malda. In course of time riverine ways became the preferred option. The readymade riverine lattices encouraged local trade by integrating the hinterland and encouraged mercantile penetrations from near and far.

Kasimbazar was favourably situated as an inland port, being protected by the Bhagirathi on three sides. Besides, its productive hinterland could be approached from three sides by three rivers³⁰. Big vessels had passage up to at least Patna port. Immense commercial possibilities, a very moderate and congenial

²⁵Weavers, dyers, winders.

²⁶Somendra Chandra Nandy, *Bandar Kasimbazar*, p. 106.

²⁷Francis Buchanan, *An Account of the District of Purnea in 1809-10*, p. 589.

²⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 591.

³⁰Bhagirathi, Padma, Jellenghy.

climate³¹ drew in merchants, traders, bankers from near and far. Apart from the local small banker merchants, very famous ones like the Seths should be specially mentioned. Indeed, the region became home to influential resident *baniya* (Jain) community of northern and western India³². Many operated as *dadni* merchants³³. The heterogeneous group of 'Asian merchants'³⁴ had commercial linkages with north and west India and beyond up to Central Asia via overland trade routes. There were middling grain traders from Ujjain and Rajasthan and mendicant religious sects peddling in high value goods.

There were nobles, *zamindars*, *ryots*, weavers, craftsmen, soldiers, porters, boatmen, fishermen, *lascars*, *kaviraja*, *molla*. Once the European companies set up factory and residences in Kasimbazar since mid-seventeenth century, new jobs were created: factors, clerks, peons, winders, spinners, weavers, dyers, throwsters, bricklayers, tank diggers, guards, labourers. A class of *gomasthas* was employed to act as direct intermediaries between the Companies and *arangs*.

The prime locations along the Bhagirathi's bank were occupied by the *nawabi* and aristocratic residences, housing areas of wealthy merchants, bankers, and mosques, memorial tombs and burials, Jain and Hindu temples. A large number of people had their separate colonies based on their professions, community and language. The well planned segregated enclaves of mini European townships like the English, Dutch, French and Armenian settlements were located close to each other on the river bank for the easy collection and transshipment of commodities.

Kasimbazar silk was placed at the top of the Companies' list of exports because of its high demand in Europe. In 1750-51, the Asian merchants³⁵ exported about hundred times more silk pieces than the Europeans³⁶. The export by the European merchants equaled with that of the Asian merchants in 1754-55. Soon afterwards, fortunes of the local traders, Asian merchants and other European

³¹ O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Murshidabad*, p. 186; Captain Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, vol., 2, second edition, 1727; *Ibd.*, vol., 2, p. 21.

³² Sushil Chaudhury, *Nobabi Amole Murshidabad*, p. 25. They acted as bankers, merchants and *mahajans* and at times combined all three functions.

³³ Provided advance to the weavers in *arangs* against which they supplied particular amount of silk items within a stipulated time.

³⁴ Gujaratis, Rajasthanis, Punjabis, Calwars of Delhi, Gorakhpuris, Arabs, Armenians, Sidhis, Iranians, Kashmiris, Turks, Pathans etc.

³⁵ Represented a mixed group of merchants from near by and far away places in Asia.

³⁶ The Dutch and English together.

trade bodies, specially its closest competitor, the Dutch, had been realigned to the East India Company's favour. In many ways the silk trade of Kasimbazar provided the fulcrum in the race for economic supremacy. If one compares the amount of Company's investments in Kasimbazar in the late seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries, one sees that it had increased three times within a gap of approximately a century between 1681 and 1777³⁷.

After 1757, the English Company had proposed to build a fortified township with office and residences in Kasimbazar and to protect the river front against any attack. A map of Kasimbazar was drawn showing the island and the 'Cossimbuzar river' flowing past its hinterland³⁸. The fact that the map was named after Kasimbazar and not after Murshidabad, clearly shows the English company's commercial inclinations and the recognition that asserting control over the river surrounding the node of silk trade, rather than paying homage to the old capital of *nizamat*, was a pre requisite for commercial objectives and security.

In the process of its entrenchment of power over Bengal, the Company dealt with various crises like Maratha intrusions, *Sannyasi* uprisings, Famine of 1770. Shifting of the *diwani* office, rise of the alternative vector of growth did contribute to the decline of Bengal's nerve centre during the *nizamat* era. The easterly shifting Bhagirathi and related troubles like frequent inundations, process of erosion and deposition on the banks, and land encroachments turned Kasimbazar into a vulnerable place to live in. The major trouble was the formation of bars and sandbanks on the river leading to its blockade. Marshes grew along the choked river bed. All these and changes in the forest covering, animal type, reveals that the Kasimbazar Murshidabad region represented a zone of transitory topography and ecology.

The winding river slowly moved away from the settlements in 1813³⁹ leaving behind parts of old bed that turned into stale water lakes. Gradually Kasimbazar became a swampy cholera and malaria ridden place⁴⁰. Interventions by the Company's officers like McGowan and Garstin, like attempts at watering the dry beds, diverting other channels into the Bhagirathi, removal of blockades

³⁷K.M. Mohsin, *A Bengal District in Transition: Murshidabad, 1763-1793*, p. 15.

³⁸James Rennell, *Bengal Atlas Containing Maps of the Theatre of War*, 1738, Plate no. 11, The Cossimbuzar Island.

³⁹L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Murshidabad*, p. 11.

⁴⁰Radhakamal Mukherjee, *The Changing Face of Bengal: A Study in Riverine Economy*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 2008-2009, p. 102; Gastrell, p. 14.

and building embankments could hardly check the riverine problem. By early nineteenth century Kasimbazar was on its way to losing the status of a premier centre of trade despite the English Company's best efforts to encourage production and trade in silk. In 1835, the English Company gave up its commercial monopoly in silk trade in Bengal⁴¹. By 1853-54, the river became almost choked and unfit for large scale transcontinental commerce. Small shallow boats were in use for short distance local and seasonal trade⁴².

During its peak phase, Kasimbazar exported goods to the markets of Europe via Hooghly located closer to the estuary than Kasimbazar. Hooghly predated Kasimbazar as a Portuguese trading node. Initially it was a salt market⁴³. Satgaon used to be Bengal's famed principal port for many centuries⁴⁴. As the major sea power in the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese had a substantial control over Bengal's sea borne trade in the sixteenth century. They had their base in Satgaon.

However, from sixteenth century, the main flow of the Ganges that passed through Saraswati; redirected itself through Bhagirathi. The major port of Bengal, Satgaon on the Saraswati started silting up. The Portuguese opted for a trading node a little lower down. Hooghly was already a known salt mart, albeit seasonal. It was accessed by seasonal Portuguese traders from their temporary marts at the lower reach of the river system⁴⁵. Such marts, including the one at Hooghly, used to be burnt down after the annual visits were over. The spot was found to be suitable as an alternative for Satgaon. It formally started functioning as the Portuguese port of the western delta after Akbar's conquest of Bengal in 1576. Navigability of the river, its anchorage facility and approach to sea determined the evolution of this unnamed place infested with predators, as western Bengal's main port.

Nevertheless, though the Saraswati's antiquity dated back to about 100 A.D. and Satgaon was an ancient port, Bipradas Pipilai's *Manasamangal* (1495) suggests that both the Bhagirathi and Saraswati were magnificent rivers. Though the Saraswati functioned till mid sixteenth century and Hooghly port was formally

⁴¹ O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Murshidabad*, p. 127.

⁴² Map Interpretation, Map of the City of Murshidabad, Surveyed by Capt. J.E. Gastrell, 1853-54.

⁴³ John Cabral, 'The Fall of Hugli', Sebastien Manrique, C.E. Luard & H. Hosten tr., *The Travels of Fray Sebastien Manrique, (1629-1643)*, vol., 2, Oxford, 1927, pp. 391-422.

⁴⁴ It was the royal port till Hooghly took over.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, vol., 1, pp. 27-28.

inaugurated in 1579; Bhagirathi might have become navigable much before. While a mature Saraswati provided passage to the sea bound vessels, the burgeoning Bhagirathi had gathered good current and provided an alternative route to the resident *suvarnabaniks*. Banks of both the rivers were dotted with shrines of *Chandi*, the patron deity of the Bengali merchants. It shows that both were frequented by the traders who paid homage to *Chandi* en route their business trips. Later, as the Saraswati was slowly declining, Bhagirathi's course facilitated passage of more vessels than Saraswati.

Hooghly subsequently became a permanent emporium town where merchandises of all kinds from nearby and far off places converged for import and export. The Portuguese did not confine themselves to the river banks and the township extended 'sixty leagues inward from the sea'⁴⁶. Along with the Portuguese, other traders; mainly a sizable group of resident merchants shifted base too. The Hugli belt specially Satgaon and populous old settlements comprising Chandernagore before the advent of the French Company; had a large concentration of *suvarna banik*⁴⁷ community. The Portuguese enjoyed a very profitable trade in Bengal and paid 100,000 rupees as custom duties to the Mughals at the rate of 2/1/2 per cent on the value of imports and exports⁴⁸. In internal trade, the Portuguese faced stiff competition from the indigenous merchants and other foreigners. The port had a large concentration of Turkish, Armenian, Iranian, Central Asian and Kashmiri merchants along with the local people. Those merchants of Bengal had been taking part in overseas as well as coastal trade from fifteenth century onwards and it was continued from Hooghly till early eighteenth century. The Portuguese were driven out of Hooghly in 1632 by Shahjahan. However they relocated at the neighbouring Bandel or port and rebuilt their church. They lost their commercial superiority and maintained a low profile.

Initially the European Companies settled in Hooghly. As the English Company built its residence cum factory there, the rest moved to adjoining areas of Hooghly to access similar port facilities and extensive hinterland. Between

⁴⁶ Fr. John Cabral, 'The Fall of Hugli', Appendix to *The Travels of Fray Sebastien Manrique, (1629-1643)*, vol. 2, pp. 391- 422 .

⁴⁷ An indigenous trading caste.

⁴⁸ Sushil Chaudhury, *Companies, Commerce and Merchants; Bengal in the Pre- Colonial Era*, Delhi: Manohar, 2015.

1603 and 1660 population increased remarkably and the settlement extended many miles inland from the river bank⁴⁹. The well planned European enclaves of the settlements of Hooghly⁵⁰ represented segregated autonomous pockets of mini Europe. The Asian merchants lived in community or trade based localities⁵¹ like we have seen in case of Kasimbazar. There was a big concentration of Mughals, Sayyids and aristocratic Shias. In mid seventeenth century, the Hindu dwelling areas were divided according to their particular sects around specific temples of their deities. However in Hooghly mixed neighbourhoods were not very uncommon⁵².

Hooghly assumed the status of the Mughal *Bakshbundar* after the Portuguese expulsion. Mughal control over the port of Hooghly and customs office, created new job opportunities. Similarly, as the European Companies came in, some more jobs were created for the locals as labourers in construction sites, as *molangis*, as security and factories and offices, as peons. A *faujdar* was directly appointed by the Mughal emperor to collect custom duties from the great bulk of overseas goods imported to and exported from Bengal via Hooghly. The nobility, the *subadars* and high officials often took part in the lucrative overseas commerce from Hooghly.

Hooghly became a hub of trade in salt and medium grade textiles, besides being involved in international trade. So monetisation was taking place in this busy port town. It implied a complex influence of inland, local, regional and overseas trade. Despite mercantile activities and commercialisation, the economic basis still remained essentially agrarian. Thus the settlements of Bengal, like Kasimbazar and Hooghly experienced the development of certain urban characteristics upon essentially rural moorings⁵³. However, roughly from mid-eighteenth century, the ship owning Indian and Asian merchants having ties with the ruling classes and artisans who supplied goods to the English Company and private English merchants; were increasingly pushed out of the mercantile arena of Bengal by the English East India Company.

⁴⁹ S.A. Carvalho, *Bandel Church and Hooghly: A Historical Study of the Foundation of Hooghly in 1579*, Krishnanagar: Rev. Fr. Luciano Colussi, St. Joseph's Press, 1972, p. 34.

⁵⁰ including Serampore, Chandernagore, Chinsurah.

⁵¹ Farhat Hasan, 'The Mughal Port Cities of Surat and Hugli', in Lakshmi Subramanian ed., *Ports, Towns and Cities; A Historical Tour of the Indian Littoral*, Bombay: Marg, 2008, p. 91.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ P.J. Marshall, *Bengal, the British Bridgehead*, p. 17.

Moreover, floods, instances of land encroachments in monsoon and riverine blockades in times of relatively shallow water were common in the Hugli belt. Apart from obstructions to the smooth passage of ships, as cited by the seventeenth century records of Delestre, Bowrey; the foremost riverine challenge along the Hugli belt was receding depth of the river. By 1750s ships of heavy 'burthen' had trouble in proceeding anywhere further than Calcutta. French archival records expressed reservations regarding the passage of large ships up to Chandernagore factory since 1730s. Still, heavy vessels reached there till late eighteenth century with much difficulty. Chandernagore was located closer to the estuary compared to Hooghly. There are records of blockades near Hooghly from late eighteenth century. Serampore was located towards the south of the French settlement and hence was navigable till early nineteenth century.

The number of large trading vessels on call was decreasing since 1730s. The riverine problem accelerated since 1770 after the Hugli's major distributary Damodar river changed its course and joined the Hugli much below Calcutta, while withdrawing its former course from the north of Triveni. So the volume of water of the Hugli, that had already lost its headwater, diminished further. Hooghly's decline from the position of the premier port was already more than compensated for by the rise of Calcutta as the port cum settlement of the English Company closer to the sea and further from the *nawab's* control.

The *Bakshbundar* was used by the East India Company from 1770s to keep a tab on customs duties to be paid by the other European vessels entering through Hooghly and the other merchants living there. At least sixteen major *chowkis* were set up under the *Bakshbundar*. Most of them were located on the Bhagirathi or connected to the same river. Also from 1770s, Hooghly became a major distribution centre of salt from Tamluk⁵⁴ and Hijli into the interior⁵⁵. Though it dwindled as an international port, Hooghly remained an urban site and in 1795 it became the district headquarter.

Sagor island is located at the edge of the delta. Hence it is susceptible to the interplay of marine as well as riparian forces. It also stood at the frontier of the western and eastern delta. Naturally, the historical influences moderating its orbit

⁵⁴ Balai Barui, *The Salt Industries of Bengal, 1757-1800; A Study in the Interaction of British Monopoly Control and Indigenous Enterprise*, Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi and Co, 1985, p. 140.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

was varied and complex. Claimed to be known as Chandecan, it is believed to draw its lineage by some scholars, from one of the group of twelfth century delta ports of the Bay of Bengal that got inducted into a trading network. Within our chronological scope its isolation from mainland activities, intricate fluvial network, tangled vegetation, presence of man eating tigers, its vulnerability to hazards like cyclone, tidal waves, subsidence of land, earthquakes, also the Arakanese Portuguese raids and scouting for slaves; discouraged a tradition of sustained settlement. However, its uniqueness lay in its being an ideal anchorage for big vessels.

The fact that it operated as a hub of Portuguese Arakanese slave raiders had contributed to its dark image. In the 1620s, Manrique confirmed that Sagor bore trails of destruction by the *Maghs*. He confirmed that the usual practice of the raiders was to wait at some point near the venue for the ritual of bath for the opportunity to capture the pilgrims on the boats⁵⁶. From 1632, for a brief period, it provided shelter to the Portuguese evacuees from Hooghly⁵⁷. It became a centre of political conspiracy against the Mughals and they negotiated with Arakan for necessary aid⁵⁸. There were plans to fortify Sagor⁵⁹.

More than a century later, in the 1760s, the English proposed to reclaim the vacant island as a source of revenue. In early nineteenth century, there were plans for clearing the island, land reclamation, construction of marine hospital and sanatorium. The English were a nation of seamen who were reared in the cold comfort of the temperate zone. So they equated the clamminess and related illnesses with all that was unknown and unacceptable to them. Such physical discomforts associated with their stay in Bengal, in a way fed into the concept of otherness. So in Bengal, they looked for opportunities to spend their vacations in the relative comfort of the 'coastal enclaves'⁶⁰ of small and big islands of the Bay of Bengal, located within the striking distance of Calcutta. Sagor fitted into their concept of an ideal repose and the British wished that the place should be developed to provide modern facilities for a congenial stay.

⁵⁶ Maurice Collis, *The Land of the Great Image: Being Experiences of Father Manrique in Arakan*, London: Faber and Faber, 1943, p. 79.

⁵⁷ Manrique, *Travels*, vol., 2, p. 316.

⁵⁸ Maurice Collis, *The Land of the Great Image*, p. 187.

⁵⁹ Manrique, *Travels*, vol., 2, p. 418.

⁶⁰ Dane Kennedy, *Magic Mountains*, p. 19.

Sagor repeatedly bore the brunt of natural hazards that had time and again destroyed innumerable lives and property. Also, the sea encroached upon the reclaimed land very fast and vacant plot of land got covered by secondary vegetation. The island was infested with man eating tigers and *Magh* pirates. Moreover, entry into western delta bypassing Sagor, posed a piloting challenge as Sagor delineated an intermediate aquatic zone marred by the interplay of altering dynamics of the river, sea and wind. Approaching Sagor from the sea and also from the interior of the mainland was equally difficult. Either way it involved a very long and hazardous journey. These explain why the proposals to develop Sagor into a health resort never materialized into reality.

Despite being a remote and empty place that was difficult to access; Sagor was a Hindu pilgrim centre and incorporated in the ancient pilgrim trail that ensured heavy annual footfall of the devotees to Kapil muni's temple. The island with no history of continuous human settlement and which was a piratical hub within the select period, could not have sustained hordes of pilgrims annually from as far as Turkey and Persia, unless it had a supportive skeletal infrastructure. Further, in case of Sagor, a new role of the Bhagirathi and its channels has been enumerated as the usherer of a destructive element: the *Maghs*.

The *Magh* menace was a regular feature in eastern as well as far off western Bengal between sixteenth and nineteenth century. From Arakan, they often did not sail directly to Chittagong but gathered at the islands at the mouth of the Meghna and Padma. If they wanted to enter western delta, they sailed through an inlet to Rabnabad and from there through the westerly Haringhata river. Then sailing through the deltaic creeks and channels, they entered into the mainland from the side of Sagor and penetrated as far as Hooghly and beyond and other bases in between; often reaching close to Howrah and Calcutta. Their intrusions in Bengal from Arakan Chittagong belt coincided with monsoon. The over flowing rivers of Arakan facilitated the smooth sailing of the speedy and light *Magh jalias* through various estuarine rivers into the Bay and also their connectivity with the flooded Bengal rivers.

Actually the impact of *Magh* incursions has to be reviewed against certain ecological factors affecting Sagor. Along with the hazards of cyclone, earthquake and inundations, the phenomenon of subsidence of land common in the Sundarbans, had ruined parts of settlements many times. The subterranean strata

of the island bore testimony to ruins of old settlements. Part of Sagor seemed to be encroached by the river as the latter veered away from the Edmonstone island and started flowing over a part of Sagor. In recent times bigger Sagor island had been encroached by the sea. Further, due to the deltaic land making process of erosion and deposition, the island itself had altered its shape a number of times. None of these ecological phenomena surfaced all of a sudden, but had been silently active over a very long period. Yet, all of them are a threat to its existence. So even if the *Magh* raiders did not step into Sagor, or man eating tigers never existed there; the long duree impact of the set of ecological factors had challenged the very existence of Sagor.

In the monsoon the river facilitated *Magh* raids from eastern delta and beyond. The same river in the rainy season used to ward off the Maratha *Bargis* from western delta. Compared to *Magh* infiltrations, Maratha inroads lasted for a much shorter duration between 1740s and 1750s. Parts of western Bengal like provinces of Ramgarh, Birbhoom, Pachet, Burdwan, Bishnupur, Midnapore, Mayurbhanj, Jellasore, Hooghly situated on the western side of the Bhagirathi delineated the Maratha frontier⁶¹. It facilitated large scale population migration including professional groups, caste groups, nobility, *zamindars*, women, old people, the poor etc. from *rahr* to eastern Bengal⁶². Kasimbazar Murshidabad area lay at the farthest from Nagpur on the northern tip of route march, so impact was minimal compared to other places. The towns were ransacked a couple of times, trade was stalled but the *Bargis* lacked long term political agenda regarding the *nizamat*. Business scene of Kasimbazar was not bleak as archival records⁶³ suggested that silk goods were contracted from time to time, though irregularly. Production, distributions were delayed but did not stop.

Disruptions caused by the *Bargi* inroads on Kasimbazar and its hinterland and parts of western Bengal, have to be evaluated against the backdrop of continuous and very long drawn processes of riverine shift. Indeed, viewed from such a perspective, one could claim that even if the Maratha incursions never

⁶¹ James Rennell, 'The Provinces of Bengal Situated on the West Side of the Hoogly River: Maharatta Frontier', 1779, NAI, Cartography Section, Catalogue of the MRIO-Miscellaneous Maps of the Survey of India.

⁶² Gangaram, Dimmock and Gupta tr., *Maharashtra Purana*, pp. 49-50; Ghulam Husain Salim, *Riyaz*, pp. 342-344.

⁶³ NAI, Home Miscellaneous Proceedings, vol., 10, 1737-42; vol., 11, 1742-46; vol., 13, 1747-48; vol., 14, 1748-49.

happened, or if the East India Company did not assume the political and economic control in 1757 and 1765; or if the famine of 1770 did not occur: the process of the gradual decline of Kasimbazar from its status of an iconic centre of silk and textile, was predestined.

Nevertheless, the trajectory of Kasimbazar, Hooghly and Sagor has to be contextualised in the perspective of macro history. It took the Mughals a little more than three decades (1613) to impose its sovereignty over Bengal⁶⁴ since the time they managed to establish a nominal control over it after defeating the Afghan *sultan* Daud Khan Karani in 1576. By early eighteenth century the centralised Mughal edifice had started showing cracks and crevices. In the important river side commercial settlements like Kasimbazar and Hooghly; the Europeans like the French, Dutch and the English and 'Asian merchants' had crucial commercial stakes. Though they were tough competitors; the English established their commercial supremacy as well as political and economic authority over Bengal by mid eighteenth century. The Mughal downfall was succeeded by the Company's assumption of power in Bengal. This change spurred some historians to look upon eighteenth century as an era of decline. However, within the boundary of the decaying Mughal empire, evolved a number of successor states in Hyderabad, Awadh, Bengal. Bengal was showing autonomous tendencies under Murshid Quli Khan and subsequently more under Alivardi Khan; though the *nawabs* expressed their nominal loyalty to the Mughals.

In fact, the nascent regional power centres were deeply influenced by certain Mughal practices and adopted some of their etiquettes, traditions, culture, fiscal and administrative policies to flaunt their legitimacy and win over the common people. So the century not only saw Mughal decline, but witnessed the emergence of new decentralised pockets of power and continuation of certain Mughal legacies. By eighteenth century the line of divide between the mercantile and temporal ambitions got blurred and the Company showed signs of a fledgling state. Bengal became a springboard to expand the Company's political clout to other parts of the subcontinent.

⁶⁴ M. Ramzan, 'Isa Khan Masnad-I-Ala', in *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, vol., 17, issue 3, July 1, 1969, p. 161.

So simultaneous with Mughal decline; eighteenth century bore seeds of continuity and new developments. Further, the English Company in eighteenth century continued certain Mughal and *nawabi* practices and ethos, especially in administrative and revenue policies, in cultural practices; to gain acceptance of the locals. At the same time one could argue that the seeds of Mughal decline were sown during the tenures of Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb since later seventeenth century. It could be claimed that the real colonial era manifested from early nineteenth century for the ‘fundamental transformations’ in political and economic structures took place since then⁶⁵.

Again, within Bengal, in Kasimbazar and Hooghly the process of commercialisation and monetisation had begun before eighteenth century. Kasimbazar was already an established trading and production hub and Hooghly was functioning as a port since mid-seventeenth century. No doubt, by the latter half of eighteenth century, those places became more integrated with the overseas export markets of Europe. Further, even if the local history of Kasimbazar and Hooghly could be viewed in terms of decline; its applicability has to be reconsidered against the canvas of the rise of Calcutta as the new fulcrum of urbanisation since last decade of seventeenth century. Though long distance sea trade eluded Hooghly, it survived as a town, as the *Bakshbundar* under the East India Company and as a distribution node of salt. Nevertheless, the famous node of Bengal silk, showed signs of stagnation by early nineteenth century. In Kasimbazar, the river remained almost fordable for almost six months between December and June⁶⁶. But this was the shortest route for trade between the upper provinces and Bengal⁶⁷. As the river had too many obstructions between Berhampore and Agradeep in the dry months; goods were transported via Padma and Meghna to Calcutta through the Sundarbans. Articles of small volume were sent from north India by river up to Bhagwangola and from there to Agradeep by land route⁶⁸. It could be surmised that small floats plying over shallow channels in

⁶⁵ Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot, *India before Europe*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 289.

⁶⁶ J.B. Gilchrist, *The General East India Guide and Vade Mecum for the Public Functionary, Government Officer, Private Agent, Trader or Foreign Sojourner, in British India, and the Adjacent Parts of Asia, being a Digest of Captain Williamson*, London: Kingsbury, Parbury and Allen, 1825, p. 436.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

short distances, aided in distribution. So local and inter regional trade continued with innovations and adaptations. The case of Sagor was distinctive and special. Sagor at the fringe of the mainland never took off as a proper settlement and did not have a steady group of dwellers for a long span of time. Within the given period it was never brought under a regularised political and socio economic set up as the place remained largely vacant and was known by its age old identity as a pilgrimage centre. It caught the attention of the Company State only in early nineteenth century, when it planned to develop it as an economically viable resort. There too the constraining aspects of the river and ecology coupled with other factors acted as major hindrances.

Indeed the role of environment, along with the socio economic and political forces; has been decisive in many ways in configuring the history of the riparian terrain. At the same time, no attempt has been made to play down the role of the human factors. Indeed the *pykars* and *dadni* merchants, the big time moneylender cum merchants of the Oswal community, the *nawab*, the aristocracy, the *ryots* of Murshidabad Kasimbazar region, the Portuguese adventurers cum traders of Hooghly, the *Bargi* plunderers, the Company servants, officers of different ranks, peons, clerks, factors, big and petty traders, the *faujdar* of Hooghly, the *Firangi* and *Magh* raiders, the pioneering *pirs* of the Sundarbans, the European surveyors, cartographers: each had their role in determining the history of these three places.

Still it is hard to deny that at times, the environmental determinants have proven beyond doubt that ‘humans cannot control everything’⁶⁹. A little modification of Braudel’s statement regarding the decline of urban centres along the Mediterranean coast seems to be applicable at least in case of Kasimbazar and Hooghly. ‘If urban life advances by stages, it also deteriorates by stages. Towns rise, thrive and decline according to the pulses of economic life. In their decline, they are forced to abandon, sector by sector, the sources of their strength’⁷⁰.

Kasimbazar and Hooghly had to let go of the Bhagirathi - their major source of ‘strength’. While the river choked up in places and moved away from

⁶⁹ Cristof Mauch, ‘The Magic of Environmental History and Scopes for the Future’, in Kimberley Coulter and C. Mauch eds., *The Future of Environmental History, Needs and Opportunities*, Munich: RCC Perspectives, no. 3. 2011, pp. 60-63.

⁷⁰ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, vol., 1, Glasgow: 1990, p. 322.

Kasimbazar, it lost its depth substantially in Hooghly since late eighteenth century. Without being overly emphatic about environmental determinism and with due recognition to other salient trends moderating the slide of the two places from the status of premier nodes of commerce; it could be said that ‘breakdowns and suspicious noises’⁷¹ that were beginning to occur long ago were perhaps not addressed properly. While the evolving Company State was busy in plotting diplomatic moves, war strategies, economic interventions, gathering various kinds of knowledge of the new terrain and asserting their control over space with the aid of the geographical knowledge and cartography; the dynamics of nature was undermined.

The English Company gathered initial geographical knowledge of Bengal during their many route marches. Subsequently, with the introduction of chronometer and application of trigonometry, the British and Europeans in general could draw near accurate physical and political maps, based on ‘empirical geographical information’⁷². Evolved cartographical expertise coincided with the time when the English trading Company was emerging as a political power to reckon with. Various maps on Kasimbazar, Hooghly and Sagor and the coast of Bay of Bengal and mouth of the Bhagirathi Hugli river hint at the fact that ‘the geographical knowledge of India grew out of an ‘invasive agenda.....pushing the political penumbra of the Company from its riverside and coastal trading outposts to the interior’⁷³. Ironically, the new geographical knowledge of the sub-continent could hardly make the Company State realise that the environmental factors can seldom be harnessed by human beings. Such factors played a proactive part along with the other influences, in moulding the history of Kasimbazar, Hooghly and Sagor.

Finally, the trajectory of the trading node, the port and the pilgrim centre between late sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries, reflected lack of uniformity and each case was unique. Decline, survival, continuity, adaptation and development went on concurrently. Also, the significant role of environmental influences like cyclone, storm, rain, flood, drought and structural changes like silting of the river bed, formation of shoals, bars, braces and the changing course

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 352.

⁷² P.L. Madan, *River Ganga; A Cartographic Mystery*, Manohar: Delhi, p. 71.

⁷³ Sudipta Sen, *Distant Sovereignty*, pp. 58-59.

of the river were not unique only to eighteenth century. So the thesis that primarily underscored socio economic history of Kasimbazar, Hooghly and Sagor from the environmental perspective; adhered more to the concept of a 'patchwork quilt' than a 'wall to wall carpet'⁷⁴.

⁷⁴ Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam eds., *The Mughal State: 1526-1750*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 57.

Glossary

<i>aman</i>	winter rice
<i>amla</i>	zamindary officer.
<i>arang</i>	centre for production of silk goods and for distribution of raw silk and silk commodities
<i>bajra, ber, bhar,</i> <i>chupra-ulak, dinghy,</i> <i>donga, jalia, palwar,</i> <i>patella, singry</i>	different kinds of boats
<i>bakshbundar</i>	custom office of Hooghly
<i>baniya</i>	trader
<i>bara palu</i>	a variant of silk worm in which the egg-stage extended for about ten months
<i>baro bhuiyan</i>	twelve independent chieftains of the lower Bengal
<i>bazar</i>	mart
<i>bepari</i>	merchant, grain trader
<i>bhati</i>	land of tides, delta, Sundarbans
<i>bigha</i>	measure of land that varied from place to place
<i>bil</i>	ox bow lake
<i>bund</i>	various silk worm cocoon rearing seasons or harvest seasons in Bengal
<i>casado</i>	married Portuguese
<i>caurie</i>	local currency of Bengal used for small transactions
<i>char</i>	new alluvial land deposited by the rivers after the floods
<i>chhota palu</i>	seasonal varieties of mulberry silk worms grown in winter custom post
<i>chowki</i>	
<i>dadni</i>	advancing pay to manufacturers
<i>dalal</i>	middleman
<i>dargah</i>	shrine built over the grave of a renowned Islamic religious figure
<i>diwani</i>	revenue department
<i>diwani adalat</i>	court of revenue
<i>dastak</i>	a permit by the Mughals exempting payment of customs or excise duties
<i>farman</i>	mandate or patent
<i>faujdar</i>	police
<i>ganj</i>	market town located on a major river or land route of trade.
<i>gola</i>	granary
<i>gomostah</i>	Company's employee working as an agent
<i>hat</i>	village market held once or twice a week

<i>hathi kheda</i>	act of chasing and catching wild elephants
<i>hasta-o-bud-jama</i>	an account showing the total revenue amount under all heads of assessment to which any estate is liable
<i>hustabood</i>	cadastral survey
<i>jeliya</i>	jalia or fast paced light row boat varying in size, common in the Gangetic Brahmaputra delta. The Arakanese Portuguese raiders preferred this kind of water craft
<i>jheel</i>	lake
<i>kaviraj</i>	doctor
<i>kheda</i>	chasing of wild animals
<i>mahajan</i>	usurer
<i>mansabdar</i>	government officer under Mughal administration
<i>masjid</i>	mosque
<i>maulavi</i>	Islamic religious scholar
<i>maund</i>	traditional unit of mass in Mughal India and British India
<i>nistari</i>	seasonal varieties of mulberry silk worms grown in warm rainy season
<i>patta</i>	document handed over to tenant by landlord stating the tenant's rights and responsibilities
<i>pir</i>	Muslim spiritual guide believing in <i>sufism</i>
<i>poolbundy</i>	embankments by local people with available material
<i>pucca</i>	permanent
<i>puchotra</i>	custom
<i>pykar</i>	collector of silk cocoons from primary producers. He sold them in the neighbouring market. Intermediate brokers.
<i>quanungo</i>	registrar of landed property
<i>rai rayan</i>	title bestowed to certain faithful nobles in the Mughal times in Bengal
<i>ryot</i>	grass root level tillers of soil.
<i>sarai</i>	resting place along the roads.
<i>shia</i>	Muslim religious sect
<i>sunni</i>	Muslim religious sect
<i>subadar</i>	provincial governor
<i>sufi</i>	Muslim mystic
<i>vaid</i>	physician
<i>wasul baki</i>	account of the collections and balances for a series of years
<i>zamindar</i>	landholder, officer in charge of the superintendence of a piece of land of a district under the Mughal administration.

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