

**From *Palki* to Automobile:  
A 'Transport Revolution' in Calcutta  
1827-1947**

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## SYNOPSIS

The Transport system of Calcutta witnessed tremendous changes during the colonial period, in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The colonial masters attempted to modernise the nascent city of Calcutta, through the introduction of newer modes of surface transport. The advent of modern horse-drawn carriages which gradually replaced the traditional *Palkis* and the trams and automobiles in Calcutta shaped the history of the city and its society. The city witnessed the emergence of various European horse-drawn carriages in the early nineteenth century and later the tramways and automobiles. The introduction of these new modes of transport revolutionised the burgeoning urban settlement in a true sense, as it happened in a part of the world where a few decades back, such developments were unthinkable. Socio-cultural aspects were deeply influenced by the arrival of the technological marvels like trams and automobiles. The surface transport system became intertwined with the soul of Calcutta and the people who lived here. It gradually started to define their way of life and also ushered in a new age of social and cultural development. The constant interactions between the new transport technology and the society initiated the process of development, and created new social classes and pockets of settlements which started emerging in the newly developed areas of the nascent metropolis. This social transformation was an impact of the improved transportation infrastructure and the mobility it provided. The mobility supported a new urbanising trend which in turn led to the gradual growth of a multifaceted social culture which can be easily separated from the Black Town culture that was prevalent in the previous era. The revolution that gathered momentum during the colonial era gradually came to an end with the disruption of life during the Partition. The thesis attempts to explain the history of the colonial transport system and the subsequent 'Transport Revolution' in Calcutta – a phenomenon which will be looked upon with a critical analysis of the technological advancement and its implications for the society and the reactions of the contemporary people.

I have divided my thesis into four chapters, namely The Onset of British Colonialism and Modern Transport in Calcutta, From *Palki* to *Brougham*: The Beginning of the ‘Transport Revolution’ in Colonial Calcutta, The Advent of Trams: A Watershed in the History of Colonial Calcutta, The Emergence of Automobiles in Calcutta: A History of Mobility and Development. In my first chapter, I have focused on the arrival of steamboats and steam powered ships in Calcutta and how in the absence of proper roads, the British utilised the canals of the city to ensure unhindered all year-round mobility within the city limits and beyond. One might argue the need to a dedicate a chapter to water based transport system in a thesis focusing on the evolution of surface transport in Calcutta. But to understand the ‘Transport Revolution’ one must learn about the initial developments in the sector of transport. The water transport system was not to be the mainstay due to the unpredictable weather and unreliable navigability of the rivers and canals. The need to have a proper surface transport infrastructure and equally suitable vehicles to ensure unhindered mobility of the British colonial activities was derived from the shortcomings of the water transport system in Calcutta. In my second chapter, I have discussed how the city of Calcutta witnessed a spate of developments in the sector of infrastructure. New, modern roads were built to facilitate the horse-drawn carriages to move freely on the streets of Calcutta. I have also discussed about the traditional *Palki* and its social value and how it witnessed a change in its status after the emergence of horse-drawn carriages in the city. The third chapter brings up that era of Calcutta when it witnessed a very significant development in its transport system. The advent of tramways in the city under the British patronage revolutionised the city and its local population, as it went on to become one of the most glowing symbols of this burgeoning colonial city. I have focused on the profound socio-cultural impact of the trams in Calcutta. The final chapter is about the culmination of the ‘Transport Revolution’ as I delve into the world of motorised transport and its emergence in Calcutta. The coming of automobiles completed the revolution in every aspect as the city came a long way ahead from

its primitive days of Palkis and muddy roads to broad, metalled roads with gleaming automobiles running on its streets and big tramcars providing mobility to the masses of the city. I have made these chapter divisions to explain the gradual phases of change of this ‘Transport Revolution’ and how one mode of transport slowly replaced its predecessor but each of them had a very intimate connection with the people of Calcutta and the city of the soul.

In this work, I have tried to focus on the social impact of the technological changes initiated by the British in the sector of surface transport. I have tried to portray how the introduction of various modern forms of surface transport in Calcutta directly affected the lives of the local population. On one hand, the British East India Company was taking these steps, like developing the transport infrastructure to help their colonial ambitions in Bengal and India. But on the other hand, these activities also enabled the people of Calcutta to have direct ‘interactions’ with the modern forms of technology. I have tried to explore these ‘interactions’ by looking through the lens of the evolution of surface transport. I have tried to project how things, which the people of Calcutta had never seen or witnessed before became an integral part of their daily lives. In Calcutta, the process of evolution of the city and its society was completely intertwined and the changes happened in gradual phases. In the first phase, with the beginning of the colonial rule in Calcutta, modern water-based transportation modes arrived. Not just the British East India Company, but also the private merchants from Britain spent their capital to develop the transport network here. Since it was just early days of colonisation and there was a dearth of proper roads, the British decided to utilise the canals and rivers of Calcutta to get their work done. These steps were taken primarily to ensure smooth and unhindered movement of their own mercantile, administrative and military purposes. But it also helped to develop the city of Calcutta by making all areas connected and helping settlements to grow along these communication links. The foundation was thus set for the ‘Transport Revolution’ to begin in Calcutta. I have discussed these in detail in my first chapter. As the British gradually

settled, they also had to make Calcutta habitable and connected to ensure a network of seamless communication between the port, the main town, the administrative and military quarters. They started constructing roads which paved the way for horse-drawn carriages to come to Calcutta. While the process was continuing the colonisers used the prevalent indigenous modes of transport like *Palkis*. But once the horse-drawn carriages came to the fore, the popularity of *Palkis* gradually fizzled out. The Bengali community of Calcutta which was so much dependent on this vehicle shunned it for the modern carriages which became a status symbol for the elite class and a thing of fancy for the common masses. I have tried to write this history in my second chapter. As the city of Calcutta was developing under the British patronage, it witnessed an increase in population due to influx of people from the rural countryside for livelihood purposes. This made the city require a new mode of mass transport. *Palkis* and horse-drawn carriages were not adequate to move masses, they were more of a personal mode of transport. In this scenario, the advent of tramways became a watershed in the history of Calcutta. In my third chapter, I have focused on how the trams provided faster mobility to a huge number of people in a short duration of time, thus bringing the concept of public transport to Calcutta. I have also portrayed how the tram gradually became a symbol of the city as more than the colonisers, it became hugely popular among the local population. I have discussed about how the trams soon became an integral part of their life and their daily lives became centred around the availability and service of the tramways. I have then attempted to show how the ‘Transport Revolution’ came to a full circle with the emergence of motor cars in Calcutta. It was the third phase of the gradual change, which I have incorporated in my third chapter. I have tried to portray how the private British merchants popularised automobiles in Calcutta and how it became popular among the elite class of Calcutta. I have provided a brief summary of the chapters below.

## Chapter 1: The Onset of British Colonialism and Modern Transport in Calcutta

The advent of British rule ushered in an era of imperialism that featured advent of modern transport technologies in the Indian subcontinent. Although initially they arrived in the garb of merchants and traders, their real intention was to conquer the vast subcontinent and establish their premier colony here in India. The British East India Company arrived and settled primarily in the eastern province of Bengal. They set up the city of Calcutta that comprised initially of three villages which later grew on to become one of the leading urban centres in the British Empire and as well as of the whole world in the nineteenth century. Since, it was the seat of the mighty British Empire in this part of the world, it enjoyed the rewards of modernity showered on it by the colonial administration. The British were settling at that time with a long-term goal of ruling over India and they wanted to do so from Calcutta. So, they set up their base of operations in Calcutta and gradually, various administrative departments were set up here. As Calcutta became the focal point of their campaigns in India, the British administration realised the need to develop modern communications to and from the city. They wanted to access all the major parts of the country from Calcutta. The British had been eyeing various other regions of India where they wanted to spread their colonial rule and control. So, in order to make this a reality, the first and foremost thing they needed was the establishment of a proper transport network that would serve even the extreme corners of the subcontinent and they would be able to access those places from their base of operations in Calcutta. The southern riverine delta region of Bengal with its numerous rivers, creeks and canals was known for its network of navigable waterways since the ancient period. Ports like Tamralipta, Saptagram and Sonargaon had flourished much earlier and were famous as centres of maritime activities and trade and commerce. These ancient ports had intricate connections with their respective hinterlands through various riverine transports. Calcutta also maintained connectivity with the

north through its rivers. The primary pathway was the Ganga and travelling upstream from Calcutta in boats was the chief source mode of transport. Various types of river boats were employed on the Ganga to transfer people, goods and other items of trade and commerce. Big and small passenger and goods carrying boats used to navigate on the Ganga. A kind of small boat named *Pansi* was used to ferry people when number of passengers and distance of travelling were less. The word *Pansi* was derived the English term *Pinnace*. Another kind of comparatively bigger boats was called *Bajra* which carried passengers as well as a considerable amount of goods. *Bajra* was coined from the English word *Barge*. The other varieties of boats that developed in this era were namely *Bhaule*, *Kisti*, *Bhor*. *Bhaule* was primarily used by the indigenous elite. These boats provided sitting, eating and sleeping facilities for their users, thus evidently making it very popular for the members of the native elite. *Kisti* and *Bhor* were much bigger boats meant to carry goods and trading materials. These were the mainstays of transport in Calcutta and Bengal until the British came who affected a wholesome change of the existing system. In spite of its vast expanse of marshy lands, roads and pathways were built by rulers like Sher Shah in the pre-colonial times, especially in the medieval period when a number of long-distance land routes were built connecting this region with the seat of power in the north. Indigenous bullock carts for the common people and palanquins for the elite were the principal modes of transport on these old land routes. The British came to Bengal with an advanced technology of transportation as a result of the Scientific Revolution and the subsequent Industrial Revolution that reached its pinnacle in Britain. Modern steamships, river and sea vessels came to Bengal due to the ever-burgeoning trade activities of the East India Company. The Company vessels navigated the Hooghly and the other rivers of this region as they serviced the port of Calcutta, a major colonial river port of the then British empire outside Europe. The riverfront of Calcutta developed significantly with the gradual expansion and modernization of the port facilities under the tutelage of the British. The indigenous vessels which were once the

mainstay of transport were gradually replaced by the technologically superior British vessels.

## Chapter 2: From *Palki* to *Brougham*: The Beginning of the 'Transport Revolution' in Colonial Calcutta

The onset of the British rule culminated in much better roads and pathways in the city of Calcutta. The British developed the surface transport infrastructure to help their own cause of colonisation which in turn facilitated significant scientific improvement in surface transport. The opening of new roads and renovation of the existing ones resulted in the advent of vehicular movement in the form of bigger horse drawn carriages known as *Broughams*. Thus, gradually the indigenous *Palkis* made way for the modern *Broughams* introduced by the British. *Palki* or palanquins has been used as a medium of transport in Bengal and India from much earlier times. Another indigenous vehicle was the *Doolee* which was somewhat similar to *Palki*. Both of these were primarily meant to carry a single person and were predominantly used in the rural areas of Bengal in the pre-colonial period. People belonging to 'Dule' and 'Bagdi' castes carried the palanquins and the *Doolees*. The latter needed lesser number of people to carry it, being lightweight than palanquins and hence had more usage because of being economical. It was said that the *Palki* was a type of bed, six to seven feet long and three feet wide with a protective railing all around. Sedan chairs were also introduced. People belonging to the elite class of Calcutta preferred the *Palki* as their main vehicle of conveyance. The new class of *Banyans* or the intermediaries depended on this *Palki* to attend their centres of entertainment. In fact, Sukanta Chaudhuri has mentioned in his works that the women of that era undertook bathing in the waters of the Ganga while sitting inside the *Palki*, while it was completely immersed in the river water. At the end of the eighteenth century, first instances of horse drawn carriages were found in the British community; at the same time, *Palki* was also in vogue. Quite interestingly, with the advent of horse drawn carriages in Calcutta, the number of palanquins



did not dwindle initially; rather it maintained its prosperity and was even used by many Europeans in the early years of colonisation. Then came the age of horse-drawn carriages. In the British community of Calcutta, many horse-drawn carriages were available but among them, five kinds of carriages were most popular. They were namely *chariot*, *Brownberry*, *Buggy* and two varieties of *palki-gharries*. The *chariot* was big in size and very costly. It was used by the Governor, the provincial administrator, judge, high ranking government officials and doctors. The female members of their respective families would go to the 'Garher math' or the Strand riverfront in the evening to enjoy the free-flowing breeze in those *chariots*. Another very important carriage was the *phaeton* which was classified as a first-class carriage. The *landau*, *landaulet*, *tomtom*, *barouche*, *gig*, *tonjon* were all examples of the tremendous technological development that the British brought to the nascent city of Calcutta. The most important of all these was inarguably the *Brougham* carriage, named after Lord Brougham of England. It carried an aura and just like the modern steamships on Bengal waters, it became a symbol of British imperialism; the *Brougham* carriages on the streets of Calcutta exhibited the technological prowess and superiority of the British. The *hackney* carriages stayed the longest on Calcutta streets. The wheels of those carriages were layered with iron. The use of rubber tyres began in 1900. The carriages by then had become the new symbol of aristocracy; they had become very popular and a common sight in the British community of Calcutta in those days. A *town chariot* was regarded as a dress or court carriage, when highly ornamented. The French called this a *coup'e*. The carriages had become the new symbol of elitism in Calcutta. Much rivalry was there in the British community in Calcutta regarding these vehicles. A competition would go on between them when it came to decorating their carriages. The *chariots* were the most sought after carriage to ooze off royalty. They had great spring, deep bodies and excellent quality hammer-cloth with a silver-mounted harness. Every young lady belonging to the Anglo-Indian community in Calcutta desired to own a fine, gorgeous carriage of her own.

Any bachelor who owned such a vehicle were considered as the eligible to marry beautiful young ladies of the community. Such a history reflects the cultural and social customs that became prevalent in the city of Calcutta as a result of the advent of these modern modes of surface transport.

### Chapter 3: The Advent of Trams: A Watershed in the History of Colonial Calcutta

The development of surface transportation system of Calcutta reached another dimension with the introduction of trams on 24th February, 1873. The initial trams were drawn by horses which would later be replaced by their electric driven counterparts. The first tram line of Calcutta was planned was to run from Sealdah to the Hooghly river through Bowbazaar and then the line would meander in the northward direction passing through Armenian Ghat, Aheeritollah Ghat, Shobhabazaar and finally ending at Chitpore Bridge after crossing the municipal railway line at Baghbazaar. The tramcars were to be drawn by horses. The line was completed in February, 1873 at an estimated cost of about 1.5 lakhs. The line originated from Sealdah, passed through Baithakkhana, Bowbazaar, Dalhousie Square, through the premises of the Customs House and onto the Strand Road where it ran till Armenian Ghat. Thus, Sealdah and Armenian Ghat became the two terminuses of the nascent tramway. The line was inaugurated on 24th February, 1873. It was a watershed in the history of development of modern urban commutation system in Calcutta. The line was opened for passengers only and not goods as originally decided. On 2nd October, 1879, an agreement was signed between the Calcutta Corporation and the newly constituted Calcutta Tramways Co. Ltd. The Company was the business venture of Dillwyn Parish, Alfred Parish and Robinson Sutter. This new Company got the rights to build and maintain the tram lines and also set up necessary sidings as well as connections on all the prescribed eight routes. A very significant event took place in May, 1882 when the first steam engine pulled tramcar was driven on the Chowringhee section for one month on an

experimental basis. Further modernisation of the tramways was achieved in the year 1902. The electrification of tram tracks was completed on 19th November 1902. The very first electric tram ran on the Kidderpore line in that year from Esplanade to Kidderpore. The second electric tram ran on the Kalighat line; the next one ran from Wellington Street to Bow Bazaar and Dalhousie. The next route to have electrified tram was the Dharamtolla line. New lines were opened in the years 1903-1908. Tollyganj, Belgachhia, Baghbazaar, Harrison Road, Lower Circular Road, Alipore and Behala got tram routes during this period. The first electric tram on the Sealdah route travelled from Sealdah to High Court via Harrison Road and Strand Road in 1905. The tracks from Sealdah were extended till Rajabazaar in 1910. The Park Circus line was inaugurated in 1925, the Rashbehari Avenue line in 1928, the Upper Circular line from Rajabazaar to Shyambazaar in 1941 and the Park Circus to Ballyganj line in 1943. By 1914, the Calcutta tramway had around thirty miles of tracks and rolling stock comprising of 245 motors and 245 trailers. After the electrification of trams in Calcutta, the total area of the network measured 85188 feet of lines, out of which 1920 feet were used no more. The first Manager of the Company was Mr. Maples, followed by Mr. Martyn Wells. The role of trams in the development of Calcutta as a city is immense. It was the one of the most significant technological inventions that affected the modernisation of the city and was inarguably the best scientific turnaround for the nascent transport system of the city that developed under the patronage of the ruling British. The service it provided was unparalleled. As a result, even with the emergence of newer and more technologically superior forms of transport like automobiles, the status of trams as the primary 'people mover' did not change for a long time. In fact, for a long time, it was the primary mode of mass transport in colonial Calcutta, unfazed by newer inventions in the sector, as it itself in its heydays was considered as an engineering marvel in the field of transportation. Thus, without any doubt, it was a pioneer in mass commutation system in urban Calcutta outside the sphere of suburban railway system. The society and

cultural practices of Calcutta were also deeply influenced by the arrival of the trams. They were not mere mechanical and technological marvels of engineering; they became symbols of this burgeoning city. They denoted or defined the tremendous development Calcutta as a city witnessed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when from a modest beginning of a settlement of three rural, primitive villages Calcutta transformed into a truly modern urban settlement of the era, as the ultimate finished product of the 'Transport Revolution'.

#### Chapter 4: The Emergence of Automobiles in Calcutta: A History of Mobility and Development

The first automobile was seen on the streets of Calcutta in 1865. Various types of motor cars, designed and made by the leading automobile manufacturers of the world were seen in Calcutta in those days. The latest and most upgraded, modern versions of those cars ran on the streets of Calcutta adding a whole new dimension to the technological development and evolution it had witnessed from the eighteenth century. Automobiles from world famous car brands like Ford, Chevrolet, Humber, Vauxhall, Wolseley, Dodge, Buick, Austin, Studebaker, Morris, Oldsmobile, Opel, Citroen, etc. plying on the streets of Calcutta was a common sight for the contemporary residents. The first motor-car taxi plied in Calcutta in the year 1906. The French Motorcar Company had its office at the Chowringhee Road. Taxis would run on meter from here to all directions of Calcutta. They would even go to the peripheral regions of the city like Dum Dum, Barrackpore, Budge Budge. The standardised fare was eight annas per mile. The drivers were mainly Bengali people who enjoyed good pay and decent commissions. But gradually with time, their undisciplined lifestyle and heavy drinking made them irregular and irresponsible drivers. Thus, after a certain point of time, the Bengalis were replaced by Sikhs who proved to be far better and dependable drivers. At the very end of the British reign, the taxi fare in Calcutta was a minimum of eight annas and for every quarter mile it was two annas. The first motorised bus started to operate in Calcutta in 1922. The introduction of buses in

Calcutta happened due to several reasons. Starting from the previous decade, Calcutta was rocked by the ongoing national movements against the British. Mahatma Gandhi had launched the Non-Cooperation movement that resulted in strikes being observed by the tram workers on a regular basis. Tram services were hit and the daily commuters had to face a lot of problems in those turbulent times in absence of the most effective conveyance system. In this backdrop, the companies and firms which had goods-carrying motorised lorries, made temporary sitting arrangements on them to facilitate conveyance for the officials, employees and personnel. There were a few designated stoppages from where the ‘babus’ of these companies were collected by these converted lorries and transferred to their destinations. These vehicles did not have low floors making it difficult for middle aged persons to climb aboard. In this scenario, realising the prospect of making profits, the lorry owners obtained the necessary permission from the office of the Police Commissioner of Calcutta to run these vehicles as means of transporting passengers. Benches for sitting were placed on the floor of the lorries and ladders were installed to make climbing aboard easy for the passengers. The roofs were covered to protect the passengers from the blazing tropical sun. The passengers had to purchase tickets to ride on these vehicles. The system proved to be very profitable, prompting the Commissioner to issue more such permits to the lorry owners. A very important event in this regard was the launch of public buses by Walford Company. Within a short span of time, they became the major bus operator in Calcutta and it is this Walford Company which introduced double-decker buses in Calcutta. The main bus depot was located near Lalbazaar, towards the east of Bentinck Street. The double-decker buses of Walford Company did not have a roof on its upper deck which made journey comfortable for its passengers during the summers with an open deck offering a lot of air. During the monsoons, people would be seen sitting with their umbrellas over their heads in times of torrential downpour. Such was the popularity of these buses, that many people would travel from Kalighat to Shyambazaar and back just to enjoy the

comfortable ride it provided for its passengers. The first double-decker bus of the Walford Company started operating in the year 1926. At one time, they had around sixty-five buses operating in Calcutta. A Muslim gentleman by the name of A. Sovan was the first to start bus operations between proper Calcutta and its downtown and peripheral areas. The bus services introduced by him between proper Calcutta and its outskirts were however not regular. In 1926, Walford Company took the initiative to operate buses from Calcutta to its outskirts and surrounding regions. The Calcutta Tramways also started such services and soon the other operating companies followed suit thus developing the connectivity between Calcutta and those regions.

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