

## **CHAPTER – I**

### **HISTORICAL GROWTH OF BARASAT TOWN**

#### **INTRODUCTION:**

'God made the country and man made the town' – so says a proverb. Towns are created out of the necessities created by man also. For administrative reasons, for trade and commerce, and for many other obvious reasons, towns/cities emerge. Sometimes there are accidents of history (e.g. Calcutta), sometimes there are planning behind (e.g. Kalyani at Nadia District, West Bengal, Durgapur at Bardhaman District, West Bengal). The present investigation centres around a small township, which grew out of a tiny hamlet into a district town with all the characteristics associated with the process of urbanisation. The tiny hamlet expanded, attracted people from all around and developed into an administrative centre. Advantages of natural growth are no substitute for meticulous planning for tackling with the attendant problem of urbanisation.

#### **1.1 PRE BRITISH PERIOD:**

The term 'Barasat' means 'Avenue'. Both sides of the road were planted with trees, Warren Hastings, the first Governor General of Bengal (1774-84), planted trees on both sides of the road. Pandit Haraprasad Shastri, a noted Indologist, was of the view that the name 'Barasat originated from the concept that on both sides of the road planted trees were in abundance. Other evidences are not lacking which prove that its history extends to the middle ages. Twelve members of the family of Jagat Sett, the

banker of the Nawab of Bengal, lived here. Settpukur and other villages after their names are still there. Another Sett, Ramchandra, a descendant of Jagat Sett, dug out a tank near the Jessore Road to please Hastings. Perhaps the name Barasat is a resemblance of the Sett family (Plate-3).

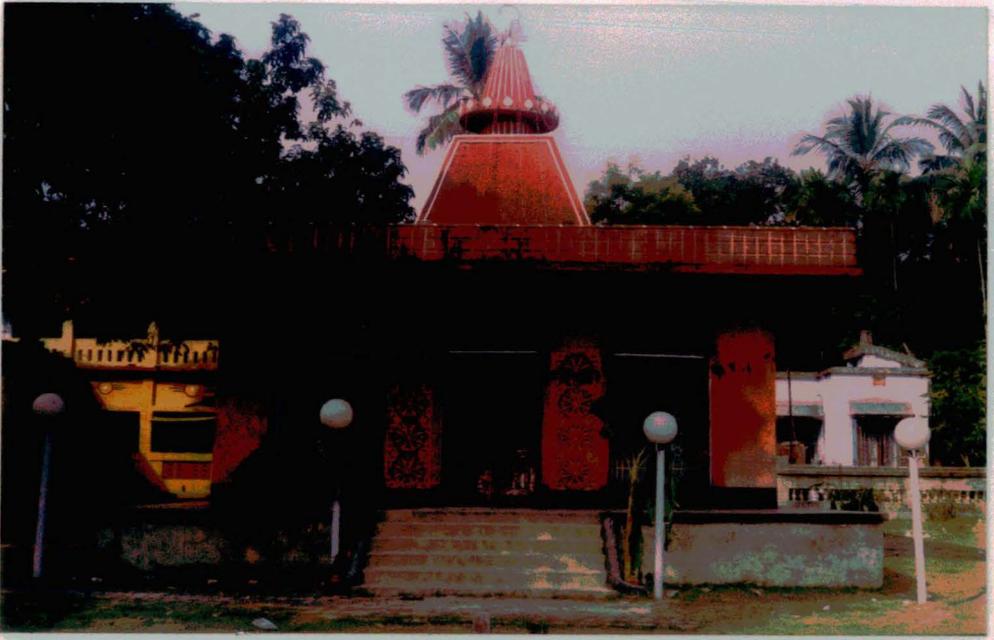
Another folk-lore sheds light on the name. In persian language, '*Bara*' means '*Pura*' or town and '*Sat*' means seven. Hence Barasat is composed of seven '*Puras*'. These seven '*Puras*' still exist. They are Sridharpur, Rhidaypur, Hariharpur, Bonomalipur, Prasadpur, Channanpur and Nishindapur. Of course, these small sections of the bigger settlement of modern Barasat have lost their rural flavour. But antiquities speak more and provide convincing evidence about a settlement than folk-lores or proverbs reveal.

The stone engraving of Lord "*Vishnu*" was obtained while digging a tank at Dakshinpara of Barasat. Chandraketugarh and "*Khas*" Balanda are two localities nearby, where excavation revealed specimens of the pre-historic periods. So it is not a wild guess that Barasat shares the history of old eras. At Kuberpur, a Kali temple, established by the decoits, is still there (Plate-4). Those were the days when British rule and law and order were not deeply entrenched.

During the Mughal period, Barasat was under the spell of Pratapaditya's (one of the twelve "*Zamindar*" kings in Bengal) kingdom. His naval forces were stationed here. Sankar Chakraborty, the Commander of Navy, owing to the inaccessibility to the place, settled here after the fall of his master. His descendants are still living here (Plate -5).



**Plate - 3.** *A view of the Sett Pukur*



**Plate - 4.** The Kali Temple at Kuberpur



**Plate - 5.** Sankar Chakraborty's descendants' house

Todarmal, the Surveyor General of the Mughal emperors Jahangir and Akbar, was deputed to West Bengal and one Ram Sundar Mitra assisted him. This Mitra was offered a 'Jaigir' and a title of 'Roy-Rayan'. He settled at Barasat at the later part of his life. His palatial building and excavated tank at Barasat speak of his influence and prosperity (Chatterjee, P. 1963).

## **1.2 DURING BRITISH PERIOD:**

Modern Barasat is a product of the colonial British days. Calcutta was unhygienic and unattractive during the earlier British days. Barasat was unfit for healthy cultural living with little civic and cultural amenities. There was no race course, no esplanade, no hotels, no theaters, no assembly rooms and no reading rooms. But it enjoyed a bracing climate. East India Company official (Queen's Proclamation, acceding to the reign of India under direct British rules, were years away), Robert Clive, the victor of *Plassey*, embraced Barasat as weekend entertaining centre. Clive himself built a magnificent building at Kamardanga 8 km away from Barasat. Warren Hastings, the powerful administrator of English rule, built a country house in the northern portion of Barasat (Plate- 6a and 6b). Lord Vansitart, the Governor after Clive, built a three storied villa covering thirty 'bighas' of land in the heart of Barasat. Colonel Champion, Richard Barwell and Sir Eliza Impay, the chief justice of Supreme Court, paid their visits to Barasat.

Wealthy Indians followed suit. Ram Chandra Sett (referred to in an earlier part), the descendant of Jagat Sett, built his house here. It is said that Raja Ram Mohan Roy built a garden in the south of Barasat. Dewan Gangagobinda of Paikpara built a garden covering an area of one hundred 'bighas' in the eastern part of the town. Thus a sleeping hamlet woke up with the light of modern day city living.



**Plate - 6a.** The Entrance of the dilapidated house of Warren Hastings.



**Plate - 6b.** A portion of the dilapidated house of Warren Hastings.

Barasat again came to light. The Indigo rebellion, a protest movement of the Indigo cultivators leapt into fame at Barasat (Nilgunge) and around extending towards Nadia and Jessore (now in Bangladesh). It was at Nilgunge that the first Indigo factory was set up. It was an organised rebellion by the poor farmers against the atrocities of the Indigo planters. These are matters of history. Again Titumir, a religious and peasant leader, challenged the regime of the English and their henchmen at Narkelberia, a village near Barasat.

In the earlier years of the nineteenth century, there was a college for cadets at Barasat. For this the town was called the '*Sandhurst of Bengal*'. Lord Amherst himself gave away the prizes on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March in 1803.

Waves of the fight for the freedom lashed the shores of the otherwise calm and serene social life of the people of Barsat. In 1906, Rastraguru Surendranath Banerjee presided over the session of Bengal Provincial Congress at Barasat. Students responded to Boycott Movement and foreign clothes were burnt to ashes during that period. In 1939, Subhas Chandra Bose presided over a meeting here and in 1947 Mahatma Gandhi visited Barasat.

### **1.3 POST INDEPENDENCE PERIOD**

Partition of Bengal (1947) had a telling effect on Barasat. The international border at Bangaon is a few kms. away. The exodus of uprooted people from Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) over-ran Barasat and the adjoining areas. Numerous colonies sprang up here in an unplanned manner. This changed the demographic character, land use pattern,

occupational pattern of Barasat. There was a break down of sanitation, drainage system, housing structure and water supply system. All these needed a drastic reform. Barasat evolve through a 'natural' process, at least there was no pre-planned outline behind it. Now, after the independence of India, it witnessed a host of problems, which are the themes of this investigation. Now it called for expert bodies, town planners, surveyors, administrators etc. to meet this new challenge.

As Barasat gradually unfolded itself from a tiny hamlet into a town, administration changes, re-organisation of boundaries, its revenue system, were also undergoing changes. A quick survey over the changes is a material for the present study.

### **CONCLUSION:**

In urban geography, there is no room for whims or accidents. Every layer unfolds some accounts of history or geography. Urbanisation is a continuous and developing process. Challenges in terms of problems appear demanding adequate responses. In some urban centres, administrative demands play the primary role. These centres bulldoze away the remnants of the old living style, settlement patterns, the existing civil arrangements and create a new style, patterns etc. But where the process of urbanisation is slowly evolving, it does never sweep away the older patterns but accommodates and sometimes re-adjust. It bears the signs of the decaying old and the emergence of the new. The process is evolutionary.

As Barasat evolved slowly, the changes were also slow and gradual - first the change in the population- both qualitative and quantitative. During the British period, people came with an urban background, with civic taste

and living style. Their individual efforts made Barasat worthy of living. No municipal or any local civic body's help was sought for. This was in early British period.

But the increasing size of the population necessitated planned development. Municipality came into being (1869). Immigration upset the demographic composition and rest is the problem of a general trend of explosion of attendant problems. Statistical figures will be given in later chapters (chapter III). 'Virgin soils' are put through different uses. The next chapter will deal with locational aspects and the fringe areas of the area under study.