

CHAPTER 2: THE SPATIAL GEOGRAPHY OF PROVINCIAL ADMINISTRATIVE TOWNS IN EARLY COLONIAL BENGAL.

INTRODUCTION:

Provincial urbanism took place in the nineteenth century Bengal mainly around colonial commercial or administrative enterprise. This chapter¹ focuses on the provincial administrative towns called *Zilla Sadar* which evolved as centers for the collection and distribution of revenue from hinterland regions. The *Zilla Sadars* were actually administrative units carved out by the English East India Company in order to facilitate and mobilize the revenue collection. After defeating the Nawab of Bengal in the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the English East India Company, formerly operating predominantly as a trading agency, got from the Moghul emperor in Delhi the Diwani or rights to collect taxes from agricultural land in the province of Bengal in 1765. In order to mobilise this, the territory was divided into revenue districts. In and around 1786, the post of the District Collector was created, with substantial administrative power delegated to this level, and headquarter towns for each district were also clearly designated. It was this very territorial and operational framework of revenue administration, in fact, that later morphed into the political-administrative apparatus of the imperial government after 1858. The colonial office (called the *cutcherry*)—consisting of the revenue office, judicial and magisterial courthouses, land record rooms, treasury and sometimes other buildings such as district jails and police headquarters—formed the nerve center of each provincial town around which the spaces of everyday life grew. This chapter discusses the parameters on which the ‘*Sadar* Towns, in early colonial Bengal grew and how the spatial heterogeneity was intertwined into power relations with the formation of *Cutcheries* as administrative spaces. This chapter also looks into the

dichotomy around ‘*Mofussil*’ and how the meaning of the word is understood in different connotations.

3.1. ZILLA SADAR

Zilla Sadar towns developed as headquarters of revenue districts within a landscape of other declining urban centres. The *Zilla Sadar* or district headquarters town was part of a more generic category of colonial settlements known as ‘civil stations’. Civil stations were quintessential products and key sites. The term ‘station’ in colonial India referred to specific governmental settlements – especially in provincial and interior areas – which housed either military or civil establishments. The expression ‘civil station’ was used to refer to centers of civil administration, as against the ‘military station’ (or ‘cantonment’) used for training and housing the army and its establishment. Taken together, these represented a territorial grip over a vast hinterland through a network of nodes of military or administrative control. As such, these locations came to represent the colonial government’s actual and symbolic presence in a far-flung landscape. In fact, when applied to provincial officers, being ‘at the station’ formally meant being in a (virtually continuous) state of governmental duty. So potent was the association with the idea of being ‘stationed’, or fixed at the particular location, that the ‘station’ itself became a key reference point in conceptions of provincial governance – expressions like being ‘in station’ or ‘out of station’ were regular ways of referring to the presence or movement of officers in or out of these locations, and symbolically in and out of governmental responsibilities. District officers at a station often enjoyed non-official domestic leisure even during hours of work. On the other hand, they were routinely kept busy with official work even after office hours and in case of exigency, had to be readily available for call on duty even when ‘out of station’ and formally off-duty. The

resultant nature of provincial governance and its relationship with the physical space of the *Zilla Sadar* was thus fluid and mutable. But the very concept of stations as being the stable anchors of colonial governance still retained immense logistical and symbolic value. As the headquarters of revenue districts, *Zilla Sadar* towns were the pivotal nodes in a hierarchical chain of civil stations with divisional headquarters above and sub-divisional (or mahakuma) towns below them. Each ‘Division’ in Bengal contained a few ‘Districts’ and each District, a few ‘Sub-divisions’ after the grant of the Diwani for the provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa to the East India Company by the Mughal emperor in 1765, and more specifically after 1786, the District came to be the most significant spatial unit for revenue collection within the colonial revenue administration machinery - and thus the level at which maximum power in provincial governance was placed.

In the analysis of provincial towns in nineteenth-century Bengal, M.S Islam discussed how the Permanent Settlement of 1793 caused the confiscation of *zamindaries* from a number of defaulting *zamindars* and how this, along with the dismantling of much of the Mughal *nawabi* political structure, led to the substantial decline - during the early years of the Company’s rule - of a number of existing towns (e.g. Dinajpur, Murshidabad, Dacca and to some extent Burdwan) built up under *zamindari* or *nawabi* patronage.²

In his account of a civil station in colonial Bengal, George F. Atkinson, a British civil servant, gave the following description in the late-nineteenth century:

... “our station rejoices in the euphonious appellation of Kabob; it is situated in the plains of Dekchy, in the province of Bobarchy. Far from the busy haunts of a civilised world, and the traffickings of men, and plunged in the wild retirement of a luxuriant jungle”, smiles Kabob, “the

loveliest village of the plain”, basking beneath the rays of orient sun. Oh! If there be a paradise upon earth, - I suspect it must be this! ”³ He then went on, in apparent contradiction, to describe the very same station as “a hotter and duller hole is not to be discovered by the most enterprising and enthusiastic tropical traveller - remote, unfriended, melancholy, slow.”⁴

In the beginning, the colonial administrators were lost in the dichotomy of urban and rural, in identifying these *Sadar* towns with their physical characteristics. Even in the account of Robert Lindsay, the collector of Sylhet noted that the *Sadar* town was only “an inconsiderable bazaar and a market place.”⁵ However, later on, the whole concept of understanding *Sadar* towns got crystallised in the urban-rural continuum. The *Sadar* towns were looked into as a link between big cities like Calcutta and small villages.

A description of the town of Suri by L.S.S. O’Malley, a civil servant, revealed this perception of the town as representing the ordered picturesque:

“The civil station is picturesquely scattered over a park-like rising ground on the west of the town – which extends along either side of the Dumka road. This road also passes for a mile through the European quarter, an open undulating neighbourhood with houses standing far apart surrounded by extensive grounds, and connected by a network of broad metalled roads, lined by fine trees. In the center of the town...is the chief bazaar of the place, and round it on the north a small but dense cluster of houses and narrow lanes forms the nucleus of the urban area.”⁶

It is also evident from O’Malley’s description of Suri (referred to earlier) that the green, picturesque, country-like ‘civil station’ referred specifically to the European residential areas, seen as being distinct from the ‘town’. More often, the *Sadar* was seen as a curious hybrid of

both – town and village – by its inhabitants. With the passage of time, *Zila Sadars* emerged as a complex and heterogeneous units.

Early-colonial settlements set up by various European powers in Bengal, including the British, were essentially commercial establishments known as ‘Factory towns’, built from the early-seventeenth century on rivers or marine locations. These were centred on the ‘Factory’, a fortified area (containing warehouses, offices, residential, leisure and entertainment areas) that acted as a point of control for trade between European countries and inland areas of India. Sometimes fairly elaborate settlements developed around the Factories. Surat on the western coast of India, Kasimbazaar and Hugly in Bengal were Factory settlements of the British; Chinsura, Hugly, Chandannagar and Srirampur in Bengal were Factory settlements of the Dutch, Portuguese, French and Danes respectively. Even major metropolitan urban centres like Calcutta, Madras or Bombay were originally Factory-settlements⁷.

However, with the granting of the *Diwani*, the working-thrust of the British East India Company gradually shifted from international trade to more localised revenue administration. Even the Factory-towns of the British themselves suffered because of the increasingly reduced commercial operations of the Company which formally stopped with the (British) Parliamentary Charter Act of 1833. The Factory towns of other European powers like the French or the Dutch, too, could not develop much because of the limited commercial freedom allowed to them by the British East India Company for political reasons. It was within such a context of declining existing centers that a new landscape of British-colonial administrative towns – the *Zilla Sadars* – emerged in Bengal.

A letter issued in 1806 by William Blunt, the Judge and Magistrate of the Jangal Mahal district,⁸ to S.T Goad, Registrar to the *nizamut* [criminal] courts in Fort William, Calcutta, reveals the range of choices and negotiations involved in setting up *Sadar* towns.⁹ Blunt put forward a strong case for locating the *Sadar* of the Jangal Mahal district in the town of Bankura, firstly on grounds that it laid on the great military road between Calcutta and the North-western provinces. Secondly, given that Raghunathpur (which housed the existing offices) was deemed to be too ‘distant from the same parts of the Pargannah of Bissenpore [Bishnupur]’, the other possible preference, Bishnupur, was also ‘objectionable from being situated at too great a distance from the turbulent zemindaries in the south-west quarter of the district’. Indeed it was felt that ‘the more effectual control and better regulation of the conduct of the police, zemindars would be in a great measure defeated if the residence of the magistrate were to be so far removed from their estates as it would be, were the *cutcherry* (office) to be established at Bissenpore’¹⁰ and that on this very ground, Blunt recommended Bankura as the site for the civil station. Thirdly, that ‘to render the communication between the several estates of police zemindars and the magistrates *cutcherry* as easy as practicable, with a view to a more speedy and secure conveyance of prisoners who may be apprehended by the zemindars in their capacity of police officers and upon this ground, I (Blunt), would recommend Bancoorah (Bankura) for the station in preference to Bissenpore’.¹¹ Fourthly, that ‘Bancoora was situated that the inhabitants at the different extremities of the district will possess an equal facility of access to the Court and that from his place the Magistrate will at all times, should occasion require, have it in his power to visit in person almost any part of his jurisdiction in the course of a few hours and I [Blunt] am [was] persuaded that this [was] an object of no inconsiderable importance in the establishment of a vigilant and well-conducted police’.¹² And finally, that it would be easier to rent or acquire land

within a mile of Bankura than other locations since the East India Company was mostly dependent on favours from local landlords or the *Nawab* of Bengal to acquire or lease land for building its administrative infrastructure. In his work on the history of Bankura district, Rathindramohan Chowdhuri mentions the high level of influence of local *zamindars* on people in early nineteenth-century Bengal and how the volatile climate of Bishnupur was likely to have conditioned the colonial government's decision to locate the district headquarters in Bankura.¹³ The choice of site for the *Sadar*, therefore, involved a number of related strategic decisions with respect to tax-paying areas, vigilance over local rulers, surveillance of potential rebellion, effective policing and prisoner conveyance, the presence of existing infrastructure like a road network and connectivity, and the availability of suitable land and ease of negotiations with local rulers to acquire sites.

The military necessity was one of the perennial reasons for the choice of 'Sadar towns' selection as reflected in the settlement of Suri and Midnapur. Suri was earlier military camps of the East India Companies and the main reason for the establishment of military camps at Suri was to guard the eastern fringes of Bengal from the 'Maratha Raids'¹⁴ and from the volatile Zamindars who were a constant threat for the trade and commerce of the company, were also under the vigilance of the Britishers. The Maratha attacks from the Maratha kingdom in western India (present-day Maharashtra) were arguably the strongest political threat to the Company in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. The Company had to fight three major Maratha wars, finally gaining conclusive victory in 1817, which brought in substantial political stability for them. The cantonment town of Behrampur, which later became the *Sadar* for the district of Murshidabad in 1768, was a military stronghold to keep a track of the activities of the Nawab of

Bengal. The Nawab of Bengal was never trusted by the Britishers especially after the treacherous role of Mir Qasim. The idea of locating a British stronghold near the *Nawab*'s seat to keep a watch and exert influence on the *Nawab*'s court had been clearly articulated even in an earlier plan of the Company in 1758, seeking the permission of the Court of Directors in England to erect a fort in Berhampur expressly for such purpose. The Company had been refused permission at that time, though the Court decided in favour later in 1765.¹⁵ Therefore, the cantonment site was chosen on flat land along the Bhagirathi River, just seven miles downstream from the city of Murshidabad, which was the nawab headquarters.¹⁶ For the Company, it assured a trade-off between being close enough to the Nawab capital and being able to maintain considerable independence in its military operations. In the case of the Jangal Mahal district in the southwestern extensions of Lower Bengal, the Choar rebellion in 1798 had found support from the Bishnupur zamindar, and therefore, the city of Bankura was chosen as the site of its *Sadar*, among other various reasons, cited above, due to its proximity to Bishnupur and the advantage it offered in terms of keeping its local zamindar under control.¹⁷ On some occasions, the *Sadar* site was founded directly at a previous government site, either it's own or the Company's local rulers in the region. For example, the *Sadar* of the Jessore district was created in 1786 by forming a Collectorship in Murali (practically within the current city of Jessore) that had already been a center of judicial governance of the Company, with one of the 13 regional courts in Bengal located there since 1781. Murali, in turn, had been the local headquarters of the region during the pre-colonial government of Mughal, since it was near Chanchra, the headquarters of the main zamindar of the area.¹⁸ There were cases, therefore, where the *Sadar*, as the local headquarters of the British colonial provincial government, directly reaped the advantages of an established base of pre-colonial administration centers. In any case, the administrative centers of local rulers or

feudal landowners (pre-colonial or contemporary) served as key reference points to structure the colonial provincial government space network, which was often based directly on that base or located in strategic locations regarding them.

The other pattern that was legible in the choice of site for *Sadar* towns was that of firming up existing military sites (both European and Indian) or the sites of early-colonial commercial Factories. The *Sadar* towns of Bankura and Suri were both earlier military campsites (located on the military road between Calcutta and the North-western Provinces) of the East India Company in the late-eighteenth century, set up originally to guard the western fringes of Bengal from Maratha attacks, and used subsequently to keep insurgent zamindars and the rebels under check during and after the Choar Rebellion in 1798.¹⁹ The *Sadar* town of Midnapur was previously the site of a pre-colonial defensive fort belonging to a local zamindar, which had been used by the Commercial Resident of the Company as his seat. The twin *Sadar* town of Hugli Chinsurah developed on the complex layering of a Portuguese port, and later on an English Factory in Hugi, and a Dutch Factory in Chinsurah.²⁰ Existing eighteenth-century commercial Factory sites therefore often provided a natural starting point for sites of revenue administration in the early nineteenth century. This trend of *Sadar* towns – which developed from a base of older administrative, military or commercial sites (one or more of these) – persisted even as late as the late-nineteenth century. The town of Khulna was upgraded from a sub-divisional (headquarter) town formed in 1842 within the district of Jessore, to a *Zilla Sadar* for the newly formed District of Khulna in 1882. But it had in any case since 1781, been the base for the East India Company's salt agency in the region. Often, there was also some affinity with indigo, sugar or silk

plantations and Factory areas of private planters; as such the *Sadar* towns sometimes evolved within an existing landscape of private plantations, and estates.

The physical locality of the urban towns was based on the blueprint existing Mughal administrative structure. This is existing urban centers where mingle to be given an identity of *Zilla Sadar* towns. Krishnanagar was juxtaposed with a well-developed port area called Goari, Burdwan and Bakura already had established their reputation as commercial Parganas during the late medieval period. There are many examples of such pre-existing settlements. Bahrampur cantonment expanded to nearby un-occupied areas between a network of other small urban settlements like Kasimbazar, Saidabad, Khagra, Maidapur, Panchnantala, Madhupur, Banjetia and Babulbona. Out of these settlements, Madhupur, Banjetia and Babulbona were popular for silk and Indigo establishments among European merchants. Kasimbazar was already famous for its commercial importance. The town of Khulna was close proximity to Senar Bazar, an ancient port area and a site of attraction for the Europeans.

3.2. CUTCHERRY.

With the establishment of *Zilla Sadar* towns in the late 18th and early 19th century, the new administrative spaces were formed in the form of civil stations and Cutcherries. The colonial *cutcherry* complex formed the nerve-centre of *Sadar* towns. Interestingly, in almost all cases, due to its dependence on contact with the native population, the *cutcherry* site had to be located in proximity to the native settlements, even if at some distance from the European residential

enclave. With the *cutcherry* becoming a key centre of employment by the mid-nineteenth century, expansion of native settlements also tended to take place in areas proximate to it. In fact, more often than not, the *cutcherry* was located at the junction of the native and European settlements and virtually acted as a link between the two.

The administrators of East India Company kept themselves closely linked to the existing established zamindari system which had a fair knowledge of the revenue collection process. Thus, the company servants established their cutcherries in close proximity with the zamindari settlement in the beginning but towards the beginning of the 19th century onwards we find that the company servant shifted their cutcherries complex from the zamindari settlement and brought it closer to the native settlements. In its early days²¹, the East India Company's *cutcherry* in Burdwan was situated right in the heart of the zamindari settlement – a result also of the fact that the Company was dependent on the allocation of land and building on the zamindar. It moved out to a site outside, but adjacent to, the native settlement in 1818. Also, in the early days of revenue administration, the workings of the East India Company were much more dependent on the zamindars, since Company officers had fairly limited knowledge of the area, demanding closer proximity.²² By the first twenty years of the nineteenth century, however, the colonial district administration in Bengal attempted to become increasingly independent, developing its own physical infrastructure of governance. This was also the period when cutcherries in *Sadar* towns were custom-designed for the first time and if previously housed within native settlements, now moved out to sites directly abutting them. British administrators in most cases choose to prefer to locate their residential quarters distinct from the native Indian's residential area. In the *Sadar* towns like Krishnanagar and Burdwan, the European settlements were constructed on-axis perpendicular to native settlement. The cutcherries were located at the junction of the native and

European settlements. It seems that the cutcherries acted like a link between the European residential towns and native residential towns. But the proximity to native settlements was still indispensable. In fact, there were instances, like in Suri, where the *cutcherry* was moved from its original location within the Collector's bungalow in the European residential zone²³ -- it went first to the circuit house¹⁶ (closer to the native settlement) in 1828-30,¹⁷ and finally to a site directly adjacent to the native settlement in 1865-68. 'The Cook's Chronicle of Beerbboom, c.1785-1820'. This gives the account of Ramghulam Baburchi [chef], whose father was a chef to the Collector Christopher Keating of Beerbhum in Suri. Ramghulam describes the area behind the Rajnagar zamindar's summer retreat in the town – at its western end – as being the site for the Collector's bungalow. It is known from the District Collectorate Records (letter to Board of Revenue, 4th Dec 1788) that the Collector's office was planned to be housed within his dwelling. The Collector's *cutcherry* was therefore located at the western end of the present town, away from the native areas. This might have had also to do with the fact that, unlike Burdwan or Krishnanagar, Suri was not an established (pre-colonial) zamindari stronghold and did not offer the benefits reaped from affinity with zamindari settlements

The *cutcherry*'s relationship with the native town was therefore vital. It directly served and was also served by the native settlement – with most of its workers being drawn from the latter. So even though most pre-existing settlements had had their own economic base centred on the zamindari establishment or market or port, the setting up of *Sadar* cutcherries led to a huge shift in patterns of employment by the first half of the nineteenth century. An increasingly higher number of people were drawn from the surrounding villages into *Zilla Sadar* towns, many

employed in governmental work. The *cutcherry* became ever more a pivotal intermediate zone between the native and European areas. Along with it grew a zone of mixed public functions – governmental and private, secular as well as religious – which, in effect, acted as a connector – physically and operationally – for the different parts of the town

The domain of cutcheries was itself contested owing to its territorial distinction. It can be observed that the revenue and judicial wing of the administrative system was bifurcated. The history of colonial provincial governance in Bengal is ridden with continuously changing constellations of power-structures – with the District Collector (in charge of revenue matters) being invested with more power at times, the District Judge (in charge of civil justice) having more power at others, often depending on which post the Magisterial function (delivery of criminal justice) attached itself to. The relationship between the revenue and judicial wings of district administration was, as a result, tenuous. Till 1793, the judicial structure was reasonably distinct, with its own territorial divisions (13 provincial courts for Bengal) not exactly coincident with, and indeed somewhat independent of, the revenue districts. In 1793, the posts of the District Judge and the District Collector were clearly made commensurate with the territorial unit of the district. Powers in district administration were redistributed and the combined post of the Judge-Magistrate was invested with virtually the highest authority, with the Collector only in charge of revenue matters. This was clearly different from the Thomas Munro model adopted in the Madras Presidency, where the Collector was the supreme authority in the district. In Bengal, by contrast, this distribution of power was more uneven, ambiguous and continuously shifting. In 1831, the post of Collector-Magistrate was formed, the Judge's position being separated out for

civil justice. In 1837, the Magisterial function was removed from the post of Collector-Magistrate, i.e. all the offices were separated. After the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, it was combined back together, and the Collector in his capacity as Collector-Magistrate was finally made the chief executive officer of the district. But the District Judge was formally the higher authority and also constituted a very significant centre of power.

Despite the adoption of an essentially paternalistic model of the provincial administration, therefore, its own inner unevenness stood in the way of a unitary performance of governance. In Krishnanagar, for example, the *cutcherry* site itself split into two separate urban nodes, about one mile apart, representing the two different centres of provincial administration – the Collector's *cutcherry*, proximate to the European bungalow area, and the Judge's *cutcherry* (with its still higher need for public contact) adjacent to the native settlement. The same was the case with the town of Midnapur, where the Collector-Magistrate's and the Judge's court complexes were located almost a mile apart²⁴ – again, forming two distinct administrative centres. In most other towns, such as Jessore, Burdwan, Bankura or Suri, the *cutcherry* site was shared by the revenue, judicial and magisterial courts and offices. However, the sheer physical parceling of land revealed the fragmented nature of the territoriality within it. In Hooghly, on the other hand, the *cutcherry* building – adapted as it had been for administrative use from a massive army barrack – housed all the revenue, judicial and magisterial functions not just on one site, but under the very same roof. Territorial distinction was achieved here through a careful apportioning of the built space and manipulation of access systems. Each situation thus represented specific spatial conditions, negotiating between the different limbs of administration and continuous attempts by

each to maintain its autonomy. The cutcheries acted as the economic-based centre and the workforce was mainly derived from the native settlement. It became a place of immense importance as is acted as a confluence of people from different zones and the Europeans.

3.3. MOFUSSIL

The word *Mofussil* gives an impression of Islamic origin but the word also has a colonial background and its origin.²⁵ In this chapter the origin of the term *Mofussil* is investigated and how the original connotation has changed with the passage of time in the early 19th century. *Mofussil* always stood in contrast to biggest cities like Calcutta but it was always linked to the cities through the zila *Sadar* towns.

Mofussil is an anglicised version of the Persian word mufassil meaning “detailed” and derives from the Arabic root which indicates separation or division. *Mufassal*, in Arabic, is the past participle of *fa-sa-la*, and as such means "divided" or "separated", and in this instance, of the city.²⁶

The Persian term give the impression to have penetrated administrative language by the eighteenth century, in the sense of “subordinate,” for instance to ‘distinguish landholders’ gross revenue collections (*Mufassal Jama*) from what they owed the government (*Sadr jama*), and to differentiate the revenue official at the level of the *pargana* or subdistrict (*Mufassal qānūngo*) from his superior at the *sarkār* or district level (*Sadr qānūngo*).²⁷

The term *Mofussil* was, perhaps, taken from the British vocabulary. The *Hicky's Bengal Gazette*,

The first newspaper in English uses this term very often. Let's give two examples of daily use of the term in 1781. On March 31, the *Gazette* reports the arrival of a gentleman

"Come from *mo [f] ussel*".²⁸ On June 30, again, the *Gazette* reports what would now look like a funny story about "[a] gentleman in the *Mofussil*, Mr. P., [who] fell from his float and broke his leg".²⁹ The British, however, used the word as a locative category of undetermined coordinates: whoever was not from the city of Calcutta was a "gentleman *Mofussil*." Even a century later, in 1886, we found in *Hobson-Jobson* a description of the *Mofussil* in the same tenor:

'Thus if, in Calcutta, one talks of the *Mofussil*, he means anywhere in Bengal out of Calcutta; if one at Benares talks of going into the *Mofussil* he means going anywhere in the Benares division or district (as the case might be) out of the city of Benares. And so over India.. .'³⁰ In 1824, Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay - writer, editor, journalist, one of the leaders of the conservative association of the Hindus of Calcutta, the *Dharmasabha*, a polyglot who used to speak Bengali, English, Sanskrit, and Persian with the same development, and also an old employee of the *British Company of East Indies* - tried to address one of the first definitions of *Mofussil* in the Bengali language in his book *Kalikata Kamalalaya*.³¹

Stewart Macpherson gives a different understanding of the term '*Mofussil*' he says that to the Briton in India the words "Calcutta and the "*Mufassal*" convey much the same signification relatively as "London and the Provinces." True, in strict parlance, one ought now to say "Delhi and the *Mufassal*" but many years are bound to pass before these words become a familiar phrase connoting the same ideas. The word "*Mufassal*," however, has further used—each Province has its Capital and its *Mufassal*, each Division has its Divisional headquarters and its *Mufassal*, even each District has its District headquarters and its *Mufassal*. *Mufassal* is, therefore, a relative term,

e.g. Hooghly is *Mufassal* with reference to Calcutta, but with reference to the Burdwan Division and to the Hooghly District, it rises to the agility of a headquarters station as opposed to *Mufassal*. The *Mufassal* in which my experience has lain has been entirely away from Calcutta and chiefly within the province of Bihar, Chota Nagpur and Orissa.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the term *Mofussil* meant 'outside the limits of Calcutta'³²; since the limit was for a while the Maratha Ditch dug around Fort William in the 1740s. Europeans (missionaries, merchants and planters) who lived in Calcutta they were called *ditchers* and those who lived outside the Maratha Ditch *Mofussilites* as discussed in the Asiatic Journal that, in Bengal, "the *Mofussil*" means the provinces and that "the Ditch" is the soubriquet bestowed upon Calcutta by those who desire to disparage the city of palaces.

In more troublous times, it was necessary, for the defense of the infant colony, to dig a ditch around the principal settlement, in order to prevent the incur boundary line, which, like the city-wall of London, encloses certain privileges, and subjects the persons living within it to authorities different from those which preside outside.

"The *Mofussillites* and the Ditchers have agreed to hate each other with great cordiality.³³ This dislike originated, in the first instance, in the arrogance and assumptions of the Ditchers, who despised the *Mofussillites* as barbarous and uncouth, living entirely out of the pale of civilized society; while, as the *Mofussil* widened, and its Anglo-Indian population increased, they, priding themselves upon their better acquaintance with the country, laughed at the Ditchers for their ignorance. This hatred was and is—for it still exists, though there are influences at work which will tend to weaken, if not to remove it altogether—somewhat of a lofty character, devoid of

meanness, and totally free from all personal spite and vindictiveness. If a Ditcher happened to travel into the *Mofussil*, he was received with open arms; the *Mofussillite* was with equal warmth welcomed within the Ditch; but the hostile feeling increased on either side, and when the *Mofussil* waxed stronger and was able to come to blows—when it set up a press of its own, and ink could be shed upon the occasion, war, to the topmost feather of the grey goose-quill, was declared on both sides. With this wordy war, however, fortunately, we have nothing to do; our business, as delineators of manners, consisting only in marking the characteristics which distinguish the *Mofussil* from the Ditch, and to show how this hostility has grown up between them.”³⁴

During many years, the Ditch maintained proud and undisputed supremacy; it was the seat of Government, the centre of everything that could be called luxurious, refined, and intellectual. The habitations in the provinces, hastily constructed upon the first occupation of a newly-acquired territory, were mere wigwams when compared to the present commodious bungalows—in which there is usually nothing unsightly but the exterior—and being ill-supplied with elegances common in Calcutta, both civil and military residents were obliged to content themselves with rough-hewn substitutes, and to adopt a mode of life suited to their circumstances, living, according to the phrase still current, “camp-fashion.” Calcutta, on the contrary, rose like the city of a fairy queen, all-glorious from the jungle; her merchants were princes, and her rulers vied in magnificence with the satraps they had succeeded. It was in these days that the fair residents were constellations of jewels, gleaming in gems and gold, and each eager to purchase the whole investment of a ship, in order that her rivals might not possess themselves of duplicates of the ornament, either of dress or decoration, in which it was her

ambition to outshine them all. Then the wife of a member of council could trail after her, as she walked in her garden, a muslin robe trimmed with lace at five guineas a yard; and when her companions lamented that it should be endangered by the dust from the pounded brick which is the substitute for gravel in Calcutta, enjoyed the proud gratification of declaring that it was no matter, is only a day's wear, as she never appeared in washed lace. These were the days of rivalry, in which the unhappy woman, who had bought up, as she thought, every inch of a peculiar kind of brocade just imported, and had paid a ruinous price for it when sweeping into the opposing party's drawing-room in triumph, was struck with consternation and despair at seeing the native attendant of the mistress of the house, herself simply attired in white muslin, in a petticoat of this precious stuff. The *Mofussil* was not at this period sufficiently important either to be hated, or even despised; it might be pitied, perhaps, but as persons who live in an atmosphere of self-conceit must have something to look down upon, the dwellers in Fort William formed the objects of supreme contempt.

In consequence of the number of its settled residents, and of the floating community always to be found there, the metropolis of the *Mofussil* possesses a large class of very useful personages, namely, that of European soldiers, or shopkeepers, farmers, and provisioners, who, as their capital increases, engage more largely in business, and are in a situation to avail themselves of the advantage of the trade brought from remote countries. These valuable members of the community live in a much more primitive manner than their brethren of the Ditch, who are tempted into all kinds of expense and pay comparatively little attention to their own interests, or those of their customers.

The stubborn and turbulent nature of the *Mofussillites* is of course very offensive to the community of the Ditch, who, though by no means prone to flatter their brethren of the provinces, would be glad to have their support in any scheme propounded at the capital for its especial benefit. When such a thing is required, papers are circulated very industriously throughout the whole country, containing exceedingly plausible arguments in favour of any measure which the powers below are anxious to carry. These papers are sometimes sent anonymously, and occasionally great confidence is expected from the parties to whom they are addressed, who are directed to send the sums to be subscribed for the proposed object to the agents or bankers employed without any signature; and there can be little doubt that jobs of this mature have been very successful, individuals promising to advocate certain measures at home having pocketed a lac or two of rupees for the purpose. It is rather an amusing thing to witness the reception of any very startling proposition in its progress through the *Mofussil*. The amazing eagerness with which it may be received at first, and the certainty that, at the cost of so many rupees, some gentleman who has managed to bolster up an extraordinary reputation in India, but who is absolutely nobody at home, will procure the redress of all grievances, real and imaginary. Presently a skeptic, possessed of the spirit of incredulity, examines the document, and appends to it a few marginal notes, which act like magic. The whole thing appears in a new light, the supporters drop off, and the scheme perhaps falls to the ground; though so great is the perseverance of many who volunteer to procure the abolition of any enactment displeasing to the Anglo-Indian community, and so sanguine are they that their representations if properly backed, will be attended to, that more money is thrown away in this manner than the *Mofussil* can in reality afford.

Though, as we have before stated, a *Mofussillite* is generally cordially welcomed in the Ditch, unless he should take up his abode there in some public capacity, he does not usually become reconciled to it. He feels that he hangs loosely upon society, having no stake upon any of the cards played by persons who are actively engaged in some scheme of public or private utility; and he is mortified by a want of importance which is not felt in smaller communities. Habits have been contracted which it is difficult to overcome, while so strong is the force of prejudice, that even when benefiting from the great advantages attending upon change of scene, and the variety produced by an enlarged circle of society, the *Mofussillite* will continue to rail against the Ditch and return rejoicing to the provinces, where he fancies he enjoys greater freedom of action and a better climate. After a residence in England, however, many who could not endure Calcutta previously to their departure from India, are anxious to procure an appointment there upon their return: they have learned to appreciate its advantages, and setting its climate aside, which, for seven months out of the twelve, is certainly deplorable, those who judge calmly and dispassionately must allow that it is a very superior place of abode. The means of getting up the country so quickly by steam upon the Ganges, the comparative facility of visiting the hills, and the opportunity of going to sea at any time, obviate nearly every inconvenience which was formerly sustained. Most assuredly, the Ditch seems determined to avail itself of the communication to places formerly beyond its reach, and in its improved acquaintance with the *Mofussil*, will soon prove itself undeserving of the taunts to which it has been so long subjected on the score of ignorance. Its increasing size, the establishment of public opinion through the medium of a free press, the advantages afforded by its libraries, and the easiness with which congenial society may be found, are circumstances so favourable to the Ditch, that it must always be preferred to any *Mofussil* station inferior to Meerut.

Intellectual atrophy was another fear of some Europeans in the *Mofussil*: “in very truth individuality is a nuisance up-country; mental culture is *de trop*; broad views of the world beyond one’s petty world are knocked out of the head; and one exists—not lives.”²⁹ Agastya, the indolent narrator of the postcolonial novel *English, August*—the title taken from the nickname his Anglophilia has earned him—spends his days as a civil servant in a *Mofussil* town by reading Marcus Aurelius; similarly, his professional if not genetic forebears were urged to read St. Augustine to stave off lethargy and the “deadly and, we must add, demoralizing effects of *Mofussil* exile.”³⁵

To colonials, the *Mofussil* was simply “the up-country as opposed to the city[,] the vast area of townships on which European civilization has not yet had time to imprint its veneer of shops and tramways, gas lamps, and conventional streets, and... where the kerosene oil tin is still practically the only visible and tangible sign that the Western civilization is abroad, save that little group of thatched bungalows far away from the native city’s hubbub—dubbed a station—where the English rulers live.”³⁶

Also in the understanding of *Mofussil*, Appadurai’s³⁷ idea about the *ethnoscape* is very useful. Appadurai uses it as an adjustable formulation to the raw facts about the 20th-century world “Central among these facts,” he says, “is the changing social, territorial, and cultural reproduction of group identity. As groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories, and reconfigure their ethnic projects, the *ethno* in ethnography takes on a slippery, nonlocalizable quality, to which the descriptive practices of anthropology will have to

respond. The “Yet [the] dimensional aspect of locality,” Arjun Appadurai tells us, “cannot be separated from the actual settings in and through which social life is reproduced. To make the link between locality as the property of social life and neighborhoods as social forms require a more careful exposition of the problem of context. The production of neighborhoods is always historically grounded and thus contextual.”

CONCLUSION:

To sum up, the settlements can be broadly categorised under three heads, which facilitated the base for the development of *zilla Sadar* towns. Firstly, most of these *Sadar* towns were based on existing zamindari establishments. *Sadar* establishments like Krishnanagar and Burdwan are classic examples of *Sadar* towns existing over the zamindari settlements. The second type of settlements that acted as a base for other towns were the existing native settlements hyphenated with a port and market. Towns of Barisal, Bankura or Jessore existed on a well-established pre-existing native settlement with a port and a developed market. The proximity to port was always looked into as an important pre-existing context because it facilitated the movement of goods for trading purposes. The third type of settlements that were counted as preexisting context, were independent of the above two. The towns like Suri, Khulna or Berhampur are examples for these third types of settlements. The *Sadar* was a far more complex, heterogeneous and nuanced urban landscape than can be understood through such blanket categories as city/town/country, or in terms of binary oppositions like “black-town/white-town”, “dominant/dependent” and “native/sahib” areas. The *Zilla Sadar* acted as an intermediate domain between different hierarchies of British colonial administration like *Cutecherry* and *Mofussil*. Thus, the *Zilla Sadar*

is situated within larger administrative geography of colonial provincial governance in Bengal and as part of a city-town-country constellation. Historians associated provinciality with ‘parochialism’ and stagnation and henceforth the dynamics of the growth of these hinterland towns are neglected. Most of the works are concentrated in describing big urban cities and small towns are mostly overlooked. Everything participates in the making of the history and so were the provincial towns and *Mofussil* which actively participated in and contributed to the making of the Empire.

¹ Other than the more specific references that will follow, the urban historical and geographical analysis in this chapter, at a general level, is based on a large body of secondary literature on the local histories of the towns in question, oral narratives of earlier generation of residents, as well as the author's detailed physical survey of the towns. The following literature was particularly useful for the purpose: *Bengal District Gazetteers* (Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1905 - 1938); W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal* (London: Truebner, 1875- 1877); Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal* (London: Smith and Elder, 1897); Colesworthy Grant, *Rural Life in Bengal; illustrative of Anglo-Indian suburban life*; more particularly in connection with the planter and peasantry ... Letters from an artist in India to his sisters in England (London: W. Thacker & Co., 1860); J. H. Tull Walsh, *A History of Murshidabad District*, Bengal. With biographies of some of its noted families (London: Jarrold and Sons, 1902); Henry Beveridge, *The District of Bákarganj : Its History and Statistics* (London: Truebner, 1876); James Westland, *A Report on the District of Jessore: its Antiquities, its History, and its Commerce* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1874); H.V. Bayley, *History of Midnapore* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1902); Satishchandra Mitra, *Jasohar-Khulnar Itihash [A history of Jessore and Khulna]* (Khulna: Rupantar, 1914, 1992, 2001); Niradbaran Sarkar, *Bardhamaan Raj Itibritto [A history of the Burdwan Raj]* (Burdwan: Sujata Sarkar, 2004); Jyotirindranarayan Lahiri, 'Bardhamaan: Sankhipto Ruparekha'

[Burdwan: a short sketch], in *Bardhamaan Charcha* [Deliberations on Burdwan] (Burdwan: Burdwan Abhijan Gosthi, 2001), 59- 88; Rathindramohan Chowdhury, *Bankurajoner Itihaash Sanskriti [History and culture of the Bankura people]*; Chowdhury, *Naya Bankurar Gorapattan O Bikash [The making of modern Bankura]* (Bankura: Gautam De, *Pashchim Rarh Itihaash O Sanskriti Charcha Kendra*, 2007); Girindrashekhar Chakrabarty, ‘Bankurar Imarat Brittika’, *Bankurar Kheyali*,⁵ (2008), 54- 85; Akhsay Kumar Adhya, *Hughli Chuchurar Nana Kotha vols. 1 & 2[Tales of Hugly and Chinsura]* (Hugly: Hugly Sambad, 2007); Sukumar Sinha, *Shiuri Shohorer Itihash* [History of Suri town](Barrackpur: Ujjal Sarkar, 2008); Gaurihar Mitra, *Birbhumer Itihas [History of Birbhum]* (Suri: Ratan Library, 1936); Ranjan Kumar Gupta, *The Economic Life of a Bengal District: Birbhum 1770- 1857* (Burdwan: University of Burdwan, 1984); Mohit Roy, *Nadia Kahini* (Krishnanagar: Rabindra Bhaban, 1995). This chapter is hugely indebted to the works of Tanya Sengupta.

² M.S. Islam, ‘Life in the *mufassal* towns of nineteenth century Bengal’, in Kenneth Balhatchet and John Harris (eds.), *The City in South Asia*, (London and Dublin: Curzon Press Ltd. and Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press Inc., 1980), 229 - 230.

³ George F Atkinson, *Curry and Rice* (London: W Thacker & Co, 1911), 1

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ M. S. Islam, 'Life in the Mufassal Towns of Nineteenth Century Bengal', in Kenneth Ballhatchet and John Harrison, eds., *The City in South Asia* (London and Dublin: Curzon Press Ltd., 1980), 224.

⁶ L.S.S. O’Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers. Birbhum*. Calcutta: West Bengal District Gazetteers, 1996 (reprint), pp. 143.

⁷ Factory settlements in India have been studied in the context of colonial urban development by a number of scholars. See for example, Sten Nilsson, *European Architecture in India 1750-1850*, trans. Agnes George and Eleonore Zettersten (London: Faber, 1968); Partha Mitter, ‘The early British port cities of India: their planning and architecture circa 1640-1757’, *The Journal of the Society of Architectural*

Historians, 45 (1986), 95-114; M. Kosambi and J.E. Brush, ‘Three colonial port cities in India’, *Geographical Review*, 78 (1988), 32 – 47; Norma Evenson, *The Indian Metropolis: A View Towards The West* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁸ The Jangal Mahal district comprised northern parts of present-day Midnapur, western parts of Bankura and Birbhum districts.

⁹ West Bengal District Records New Series, *Bankura District Letters Issued 1802-1869*, letter from Blunt to Goad, 11th July 1806.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Rathindramohan Chowdhuri, *Bankurajoner Itihash Sanskriti* (Bankura: Bappaditya Chowdhuri, 2nd edition 2002), 181.

¹⁴ For an authoritative account of the role of the Maratha wars in late-eighteenth and early nineteenth century Bengal see e.g. P. J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead, 1740- 1828*, The New Cambridge History of India, Vol. 2, Part 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹⁵ Letter from the Court of Directors to the Council at Fort William, March 1759, as quoted in Bijoy Kumar Bandopadhyay, *Shahar Baharampur* (Berhampur: Nirmal Sarkar, Surjasena, 2003), 181.

¹⁶ The idea of locating a British stronghold near the Nawab’s seat to keep a watch and exert influence on the Nawab’s court had been clearly articulated even in an earlier plan of the Company in 1858, seeking the permission of the Court of Directors in England to erect a fort in Berhampur expressly for such purpose. The Company had been refused permission at that time, though the Court decided in favour later in 1765. Letter from the Court of Directors to the Council at Fort William, March 1759, as quoted in Bijoy Kumar Bandopadhyay, *Shahar Baharampur* (Berhampur: Nirmal Sarkar, Surjasena, 2003), 181.

¹⁷ In his work on the history of Bankura district, Rathindramohan Chowdhuri mentions the high level of influence of local zamindars on people in early nineteenth century Bengal and how the volatile climate of Bishnupur was likely to have conditioned the colonial government's decision to locate the district headquarters in Bankura. Rathindramohan Chowdhuri, *Bankurajoner Itihas Sanskriti* (Bankura: Bappaditya Chowdhuri, 2nd edition 2002), 181.

¹⁸ James Westland, *A Report on the District of Jessore – its antiquities, its history and its commerce* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1874), 24.

¹⁹ The Maratha attacks from the Maratha kingdom in western India (present-day Maharashtra) were arguably the strongest political threat to the Company in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. The Company had to fight three major Maratha wars, finally gaining conclusive victory in 1817, which brought in substantial political stability for them. For an authoritative account of the role of the Maratha wars in late-eighteenth and early nineteenth century Bengal see e.g. P. J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead, 1740- 1828*, The New Cambridge History of India, Vol. 2, Part 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

²⁰ See Akshaykumar Adhya, *Hugly Chunchurar Nana Kotha*, vols. 1 and 2 (Hugly: Hugly Sambad, 2005); W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Account of Hugli (including Howrah)*, part of *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, vol. 3, 1877.

²¹ This refers in the present context to a period from around 1760, when Burdwan was ceded to the East India Company, till 1818 when the Company built its first cutcherry for itself.

²² Aspects of administration, like policing (and especially rural policing), remained the responsibility of zamindars till 1837, when police administration was reformed substantively transferring the responsibility of policing more directly to provincial administration

²³ See Annexure, W.W. Hunter, *The Annals of Rural Bengal*, 'The Cook's Chronicle of Beerbhoom, c.1785-1820'.

²⁴ L.S.S. O'Malley, Bengal District Gazetteers: Midnapore District (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1911), 76.

²⁵ Edward Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1863), s.v. “fassala”; Francis Joseph Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary, Including the Arabic Words and Phrases to Be Met with in Persian Literature* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1892), s.v. “mafsil.”

²⁶ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume IX, second edition, 1989. In his comments Sudipta pointed out that the English word *mofussil* comes from the Persian *mufassal*, which denotes something that is divided or separate, as in an administrative division. In a purely administrative context it is about separation in the country of the center of government - or more specifically the center of revenue collection (then cultivation>*fasal*> lo which is divided; the Mughals used the term *ghalla* more often) the *sadr* (*Sadar* in Bengali). The root is arabic phase or *fasala* which also means division. In Hindustani (also in Urdu) not only separates the village from the countryside, but also it means details or particularities of a country: then *mufassal kahna* or *mufassal bayan karna*.

²⁷ David Sol Boyk, unpublished PhD thesis, Provincial Urbanity: Intellectuals and Public Life in Patna, 1880-1930, (University of California, Berkeley, 2015), 23. Also see J. Reginald Hand, *Early English Administration of Bihar, 1781-1785* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1894), 52–53; B.H. Baden-Powell, *The Land Systems of British India: Being a Manual of the Land-Tenures and of the Systems of Land-Revenue Administration Prevalent in the Several Provinces* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), vol. 1 page 302; Shirin Akhtar, *The Role of the Zamindars in Bengal, 1707-1772* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1982), 59, 66–67.

²⁸ “A gentleman lately arrived from the Mo [f] ussel” in *Hicky's Bengal Gazette*, March 31 st , 1781.

²⁹ *Hicky's Bengal Gazette*, June 30, 1781.

³⁰ *Hobson-Jobson: a Glossary of Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases*, eds. Henry Yule and AC Burnell, first print 1886; new edition 1985, p. 570. This is only part of the definition contained in the glossary.

³¹Bandyopadhyay, Bhabanicharan, *Kalikata kamalalaya*, in Sanat Kumar Gupta (ed.).

Rashorachonashamogro (henceforth KK). Naboparto Prokashon: Calcutta, 1987. p. 12. For a detailed Disclosure on the life and work of Bhabanicharan, see the introduction of the book of Sanat Kumar Gupta "Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay: 1787-1987", pp. vx.

³²EW Madge,"The Maharat Ditch" in *Bengal Past and Present*, no. 27 (1924), and also "Maharatta Ditch: The Mofussil and the Ditch," *Asiatic Journal*, vol. 38 (1839)

³³ The Mofussil and the Ditch," *Asiatic Journal*, vol. 38 (1839), p36

³⁴ *Asiatic Journal*, vol. 38 (1839), p36

³⁵ Upamanyu Chatterjee, *English, August: An Indian Story* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989); "The Confessions of St. Augustine," *Calcutta Review* 88, no. 175 (January 1889): 99.

³⁶ An English Barrister Practising in India, "With a Stuff Gown in the Mofussil," *The Green Bag* 12, no. 4 (April 1900): 200.

³⁷ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 182.