

Urbanisation, Trade and Markets in Colonial Bengal: A Case Study of Murshidabad (C. 1757-1857)

Varun Kumar Roy¹

Abstract:

City planning is not a colonial or modern invention. A tightly executed plan is vividly discernible in the scores of unearthed ruins of the Harappan Civilisation that flourished more than four millennia ago. Its cities and townships had grid patterned streets, uniform rows of brick housing, plumbing, public baths, drainage, granaries and other public spaces and amenities that strongly presume an efficient and well-endowed, if somewhat unimaginative municipal administration.¹ The earliest connection of the East India Company with this district was marked by the establishment of a factory at Kasimbazar

Keywords: *bazaar, port, routes, silk, cotton, marathas*

Major Tull Walsh, a colonial civil surgeon of Murshidabad, as early as 1902 points out that the history of the district of Murshidabad represents the downfall of the Mahomedan Subahs of Bengal, Behar, and Orissa, who ruled as the Viceroy's of the Emperor of Delhi, and the rise of British power and commerce, through a long series of years of fighting and striving, until England had not only ousted all European competitors, but had entirely subjugated a vast and warlike population, from whose rulers they had, at first by favour, and humble petitions, obtained a footing for

¹ Asst. Professor, Department of History, University of North Bengal, Darjeeling

purposes of trade ; and to whom, until after the battle of Plassey, they had paid tribute, as the weaker section.

Introducing the region:

The earliest connection of the East India Company with this district was marked by the establishment of a factory at Kasimbazar. The factory was situated on the western bank of the river Bhagirathi, and south of the land occupied by the French and the Dutch.² In the beginning of the seventeenth century the town of Murshidabad, which then bore the name of Makhsusabad, began to assume importance as a commercial depot. Its silk attracted the attention of two English agents, Hughes and Parker, who were sent from Agra to Patna to set up a trading station there—so much so that next year they reported that they had invested Rs. 500 in purchasing samples of silk from Makhsusabad.³

Cossimbazzar was one of the favourite of the English East India Company though they looked at it's propensity with Hooghly. In 1758, the court of Directors at Hoogly mentions Hooghly, Balasore, Patna and Cossimbazar as "the four factories which we determine shall be settled in the Bay of Bengal" and sets forth that the "four officers above mentioned are to be appointed at Cossimbazar." The use of the future tense makes it uncertain whether the Cossimbazar factory was actually started in this year, and Sir Henry Yule is of opinion that it is doubtful whether it was regularly occupied before 1659. The East India Company's first representative were John Kern, who was Chief on £40 a year, Daniel Sheldon, second member of Council, on £30, John Priddy on £20 and Job Charnock, fourth member, on £20. Job Charnock was subsequently posted at Patna, but returned as Chief in 1680 and stayed there till 1686.⁴ "In 1678," writes Mr. Beveridge, "a lady with charming ignorance of

Anglo-India requirements, sends her brother-in-law at Cossimbazar a box containing a cravat and cuffs and ribbon of the newest mode and a border of lace for his night cap. Alas, he was dead before the box left England."

The Trade Routes: Roadways and River ways

The importance of Murshidabad grew leaps and bound in the eyes of the Company as the Town was blessed with facilities of trade routes through river Ganges. The shores of river Ganges and its tributaries linked Murshidabad with almost all important towns and cities of West Bengal. This perennial river was a boon making Murshidabad the most suitable place for internal and external trade. The other river Bhagirathi, was well fed with water during summer and monsoon seasons but during winter season it refused to give way to heavy laden ships because of decreasing water level. We have examples at our disposal that Bernier while coming from Sutti, thirty-five miles away, north of Murshidabad, as compelled to traverse through Qasimbazar by land route because the river offered obstruction owing to stumpy water level.⁵ In the same way, though there was always water in the Jalangi it was sometimes un-navigable during the dry months.⁶ Both rivers had declined as the Ganges had accommodated herself to the changed circumstances caused by the enlargement of the Jamuna.⁷ For part of the year, therefore, trade by water yielded to trade by land. This was conducted mainly with pack animals and with carts drawn by oxen or buffaloes. The owners of cattle, when they were not required for agriculture, used them for transport, themselves buying goods at one market and selling at another, or hiring them out to merchants.⁸ Malley pointed out that the district was favourably situated for trade, as being served by the two first deltaic off-shoots of the Ganges, viz., the Bhaglathi and Jalangi, through which there is boat communication with Calcutta. The eastern half of the district, enclosed

by the Ganges, Bhaglathi and Jalangi had, from time immemorial had been the seat of large commercial towns.

Puran Chandra Majumdar in his book "The musnud of Murshidabad (1704-1904) A synopsis of the History of Murshidabad for the Last Two Centuries' beautifully points out the two day travel distance between Murshidabad and Calcutta in 1764.

FROM MURSHIDABAD TO CALCUTTA IN TWO DAYS, IN 1764⁹

Meer Jaffer wrote in 1764 to the Governor and Council at Calcutta - as soon as I receive intelligence of Lord Clive's arrival at Ingelee, I, hope long- to have the pleasure of seeing him, will set out from Murshidabad and make it but two days Journey to Calcutta. I have fixed my departure on the 22nd of Jemady-ul-aula (the 17th November,) there being- no luckier day in the month. The Nawab returned to Murshidabad with Nanda Cumar on the 20th December,] 764, and the latter wrote to Calcutta —"I despatched today, on boats from the city, the sum of two lakhs balance remaining- of the twenty lacs on account of the damages sustained by the merchants, please God they will arrive in five or six days; a list of the several sorts of rupees is sent to Nobokissen Munshi, he will deliver the same to you."

Besides river route there were well defined road routes connecting Murshidabad with other trading points. The mughals had maintained certain 'trunk roads' for military and commercial purposes to link the provinces with the capital cities of northern India. Thus in 1773 Gilbert Ironsides, an English officer at Qasimbazar, in a letter to Robert Orme, described one such road connecting Qasim bazaar with Rajmahal, Bhagalpur and Patna, some 285 miles away, from whence it ran north westwards via

Patna to Agra and Delhi; another running to Malda, Dinajpur and Rangpur, 153 miles distant; and other which linked Qasimbazar with Dacca, Calcutta, Burdwan and Birbhoom.¹⁰ Many of these old imperial roads were also noted by Rennell in his Description of the Roads in Bengal and Bihar. The local roads of major commercial importance were those from Murshidabad to Bhagwangola, to Jellengi and thence via Plassey to Burdwan, and to Suti and so to Rajmahal.¹¹

The Markets and Trade

The cotton market grew to be so significant that Duncan, Collector at Benares wrote in 1788, "the market at Mirzapur is chiefly influenced by the selling price at Bhagwangola," where merchants from Dacca, Calcutta and other places come to purchase their cotton.¹² The markets as well as the ports were taken immense care so that there was a smooth flow of trade and commerce. We have examples that the Nawab round the time posted thousands of soldiers and cavalry in around the ports in order to "preserve the communications for supplies open between the Ganges and the city".¹³ The Maratha menace is an important chapter in the history of Bengal. The loot and plunder of the Maratha was dreaded by everyone.

Cotton prices in different districts of Bengal (pence/pound)¹⁴

Districts	1836	1848	1859
Murshidabad	4.80	3.20	7.75
Jessore	-----	3.00	7.27
Burdwan	4.00	3.63	5.74
Midnapur	4.80	4.39	6.98
Calcutta	3.65	3.00	5.18

The silk industry has been the principal non-agricultural industry in Murshidabad for the last three centuries. It was this which attracted the East India Company to the district, where its enterprise was stimulated by competition with the Dutch, French and Armenians. The centre of the industry was Cossimbazar, where the Company started a factory at about 1658. At first the operations were on a small scale. In 1618 out of a total stock of £230,000 invested by the English company in Bengal, £140,000 was employed at Qasimbazar.¹⁵ Bowrey commented upon the large numbers of rich merchants in the town.¹⁶ According to Bernier, the Dutch employed 700 or 800 persons in their factory at Cossimbazar, and the English and other merchants as many more. It soon began to develop with European capital and organization.¹⁷ In 1670 a factory "well skilled in silk was sent out from England to Cossimbazar, and in 1681, when the Chief was Job Ornock, the future founder of Calcutta, out of 230,000 sent out by the East India Company as "investment to Bengal, 140,000 was assigned to Cossimbazar. From this time onwards the Company made unremitting efforts to foster sericulture and extend the trade in silk, until by 1776 Bengal silk drove all competitors, except Italian and China silks, out of the English market. An English commercial agent was posted in the town from 1658, and by 1667 the increasing commercial importance of the place had led to the appointment of a member of the Bengal Council as chief at Qasimbazar.¹⁸

The value of the trade to this district may be realized from the fact that, 'in the time of Alivardi Khan, raw silk to the value of 87 lakhs was annually entered in the Custom House books at Murshidabad. This is exclusive of the European investments, which were not entered there, as being either duty free or paying duty at Hooghly. As regards the European investments, we find that, in 1763, out of a total of 40 lakhs required as "advances for investment"¹⁹ the Cosimbazar filatures demanded 9 lakh,

or as much as any other two agencies excepting Calcutta itself. Colonel Rennell wrote (dr. 1779) as follows: "Cossimbazar is the general market of Bengal silk, and a great quantity of silk and cotton stuffs are manufactured here, which are circulated throughout great part of Asia; of the unwrought silk, 300,000 or 400,000 Ibs. Weight is consumed in the European manufactories." The filatures and machinery of the Company at this time were estimated to be worth twenty lakhs of rupees. Another important centre was Jangipur, where silk filatures were established as early as 1773; it was described by Lord Valentia in 1802 as "the greatest silk station of the East Indian Company with 600 furnaces and giving employment to 3,000 persons." The Company continued its operations until 1835, when it gave up its commercial monopoly. After this, large European firms, such as Messrs. Watson & Co., James Lyall & Co., Louis Payen & Co. and the Bengal Silk Company, came into the field.²⁰

In the eighteenth century the city rapidly expanded as the chief market for silk and silk peiece-goods. Indeed the popular name for the Bhagirathi at this period was the Qasimbazar river, and the area bounded by the Ganges, the Bhagirathi and the Jalangi came to be known as Qasimbazar Island.²¹ The output of raw silk was set by Grose at 22,000 bales, each of 100 pounds weight, per year.²² Of this unwrought silk between three and four hundred thousand pounds were consumed in the European manufactories.²³ Qasimbazar was also a great weaving centre, great quantities of raw silk and cotton stuffs being manufactured there and exported through all parts of Asia. The city retained its dominant position as the chief market for silk and piece-goods throughout the eighteenth century. It was not until the early nineteenth century that the busy trading mart at Qasimbazar began to decline, partly as a result of the changes in European trade, and partly because of the change of the course of the Bhagirathi River.²⁴

As for the Murshidabad city itself, this had been a small place before it became the capital of Bengal in 1704. There had been a silk trade there in the previous century, witness the visit of the English agents Hughes and Parker in 1620 to buy sample consignments.²⁵ But it was from the transfer of the provincial capital that its rapid growth in size and importance must be dated. The presence of the court, of the army and provincial administrators, of manufacturers and of merchants, both European and Asian, greatly increased its wealth.²⁶ According to the Commercial Resident at Jangipur, at the end of the eighteenth century, there was a time when the silkworm was introduced from further east, probably China, since its first home was in the Brahmaputra valley. From Persia, too, India may have received some "seed," as there was a time—fifteenth century—when the silks of Persia were very highly esteemed. In 1619 this silk was being sold in the London market for and Mr. Geoghegan gives the export as 2,000 to 3,000 bales. The first distinct allusion to Bengal silk in the old records is an order to the Company's agents, in 1621, forbidding further purchases. This, it is suggested, was partly due to a hope that the Shah of Persia would grant concessions to English Company. The negotiations were not successful, and merchants then began to give serious attention to the possibility of extending the industry in Bengal. Factories were established, one of the earliest being at Kasimbazar. The Company's chief factor, from Madras, visited Bengal in 1679, and reported favourably on the prospects. The oldest species of "foreign worm known to Murshidabad was the *Bombyx tussor*, called from its size bard palu (big worm).²⁷ Their silk reeling factories were established at Jangipur as early as 1773.²⁸ In 1802, Jangipur was described as the "greatest station of the East India Company" with six hundred furnace had a man who spun silk from the cocoons, and a boy who reeled the thread and was eventually promoted to a spinner after having acquired

sufficient experience, the rest of the employees were woodcutters and water – carriers.²⁹

With the passage of time there was decline in the output of raw silk.³⁰

Yearly average	Raw silk in maunds	Value in rupees
1749-53	19,503	5,544,873
1754-58	14,937	4,182,668
1759-63	10,113	2,831,716
1764-68	6,858	1,920,541

The same could be seen in the silk pieces the following figures bears testimony to this from the period 1750-1777³¹

Yearly average	Silk goods, pieces	Value in rupees
1749-53	105,051	630,307
1754-58	71,380	428,275
1759-63	81,651	489,907
1764-68	71,495	428,968
1775	23,271	162,897
1776	43,106	301,742
1777	56,462	395,234

The Patna figures for 1775-77 do, however, give one brief glimpse of the markets for Murshidabad's major exports, since they record the ultimate destination of goods passing through Patna custom house. For the three years combined the totals are as follows³² :

Raw silk in *manuds*

Benares	Mirzapur	Agra	Delhi	Lahore	Multan	Aurangabad
511	12,568	598	427	3,851	1,649	1,471

Silk piece goods, pieces (1775-76 only)

505	3,855	1,590	-	3,700	-	7,820
-----	-------	-------	---	-------	---	-------

Taffetas

1,552	8,992	326		2,020		8,437
-------	-------	-----	--	-------	--	-------

Silk Filatures in 1852

Jangipur	Rajarampur	Katlamari	Kartikpara	Dabeepur	Kasimbazar
Sunkurpur	Kawulkuwar	Rangamati	Rampara	Baydanga	Mirzapur
Narkelbari	Durgachurun's Fy.				

Indigo Factories in 1852:

Kishanpur	Bliugwanpur	Dogachi	Choukah	Urmari	Dubreebunni
Kaliganj	Monghurpur	Kadamsar	Ealagachi	Gysabad	Rajshaye,
Nurpur	Khandurpaekura	Bampura	Khurbunna	Chandpur	Torapur
Noncha	Katlamari	Rajapur	Furidpur	Sahebrampur	Subdulpur
Dadpur	Akriganj (sunk in the river, factory moved back to Muricha).				

Conclusion

It is clear, from all the corroborations available that throughout the whole period 1765 to 1857, the trade and industry of Murshidabad continuously declined. There were many reasons for the decline of trade and commerce. With the progressive curtailment of the powers and the income of the Nawabs at Murshidabad, the reduction of the military forces, and impoverishment of their nobles, all of which flowed from the East India Company's emergence as a political power, Murshidabad further declined as a centre of consumption and trade. The transfer of the revenue administration of Bengal and of the civil and criminal courts from Murshidabad to Calcutta, and with them the great numbers of officials, clerks, bankers and clients, Murshidabad ceased to be a lucrative market and increasingly assumed the appearance of a small district headquarters town.³³

The principal seats of trade were Azlmganj, Jangipur, Jfiaganj, Khagra and Dhulian on the Bhaglrathi ; the Jain merchants of Azlmganj are among the richest traders in Bengal. Other important markets are Bhagwangola, Beldanga, Saktipur, Jalangi, Kandi, Gokarna, Lalbagh, Sagardighi, Baluohfir and Chhapghati. Periodical fairs are held at Dhuliau, Jangipur, Chaltia, Saktipur and Kandi. The external trade is mainly with Calcutta. The chief imports are European piece-goods, salt, coal and kerosene oil; the chief exports are silk and agricultural produce, such as rice, wheat, gram, oil-Beeds and jute.³⁴

However, Murshidabad developed as an urban centre of great significance under the Bengal Nawabs. Murshidabad had royal palaces, residential zones, streets, bazaars and markets, rest houses, places of common utility, educational institutions and flourishing trade and commerce of international repute.³⁵ Different institutions like Khanqah, mosque, madrasah, etc., were built in Murshidabad. The city was

divided into residential zones depending on different professions of common people.³⁶

REFERENCES

- ¹ Partha Dutta, *Planning the City: Urbanization and Reform in Calcutta c. 1800–1940*, Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012, pp. 332
- ² K.M. Mohsin, *A Bengal District in Transition: Murshidabad 1765-1793*, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dacca, 1973
- ³ W. Foster, *The English Factories in India, 1618-21*, pp. 194, 253.
In a letter, dated 12th July 1620, they refer to "Serbandy silk, the best of Mucksrude and Sideabunde (i.e., Makhsusabad and Saidabad), See O'Malley. L.S.S., *Gazetteer*, 1914
- ⁴ *Calcutta Review*, Vol. XCIV, 1892, Cf. Hedges Diary, Vol. II, p. 242.
- ⁵ *Murshidabad District Gazetteer*, P. 10 , Tavernier, *Travels in India*, Vol. 2, p. 78
- ⁶ W. Hamilton, *The East India Gazetteer*, Vol. 2, p. 243.
- ⁷ R.K Mukherjee, *The changing Face of Bengal*, p. 9
- ⁸ H.T. Colebrook remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal. P. 155, Buchanan, *An Account of the district of Bihar and Patna in 1811-12*, Vol. 2, pp. 706-07
- ⁹ Majumdar, Puran Chandra., *The musnud of Murshidabad (1704-1904) A synopsis of the History of Murshidabad for the Last Two Centuries*, Omraoganj, 1905. p-310
- ¹⁰ *Orme Mss.* (I.O.L.), Vol. 41 pp. 117-134, K.M. Mohsin, op cit., 1973, p-12
- ¹¹ H. Blochmann, *Contributions to the Geography and History of Bengal*, J A S B, vol. xiii, part 1 (1873) , pp. 211-241. K.M. Mohsin, op cit., 1973, p-15
- ¹² J.F. Royle, *On the culture and commerce of cotton in India*, p. 43., K.M. Mohsin, op cit., 1973, p-15
- ¹³ Holwell: op. cit., p. 195, C. Steward , *The History of Bengal*, p. 480.
- ¹⁴ Medilicott, *Cotton Handbook for Bengal*, p.159

-
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Thomas Bowerey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round the Bay of Bengal*, pp. 213-15.
- ¹⁷ F. Bernier, *Travels in the Mughal Empire*, vol. 2, p. 184
- ¹⁸ J. Long, The Banks of the Bhagirathi, *Calcutta Review*, vol. 6, (1846) p. 435
- ¹⁹ O'Malley. L.S.S., *Gazetteer*, 1914, 150
- ²⁰ Ibid.,
- ²¹ Rennell, A Bengal Atlas, Map No. XI.
- ²² T. Grouse, A Voyage to the East India Indies, vol, 2, p, 290.
- ²³ J, Long op. cit., p. 434,
- ²⁴ R. Mukherjee ,op. cit. pp. 149-181
- ²⁵ Murshidabad, *District Gazetteer*, p. 21, W, Foster (Ed.), *The English Factories in India*, 1618-21, pp. 194 and 253,
- ²⁶ N.K. Sinha, *The Economic History of Bengal*, vol 2. P, 228,
- ²⁷ Tull Walsh, A History Of Murshidabad District, Londoan, 1902.
- ²⁸ Viscount Valentia : Voyages and Travels to India etc, vol. I, p. 51.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ BPC, R, I, vol. 44, 19 June 1769.
- ³¹ Ibid.,
- ³² Patna Custom house registers, B O R M P., R. 98, vols. 18, 20 and 22.
- ³³ K.M.Mohsin, op.cit, p-42
- ³⁴ O'Malley. L.S.S., *Gazetteer*, 1914, 156
- ³⁵ K.M.Mohsin, op cit, pp.45
- ³⁶ Ibid., pp.42-43.