Understanding the '*mofussil*' and the 'ditch' in early colonial India

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 19th century, the term Mofussil meant 'outside the limits of Calcutta' 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 were known as Mofussilites. However with the passage of time the meaning of the term got changed and it could be studied in juxtaposition to rural-urban dichotomy. In this research article, 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 bigger cities like Calcutta but it was always linked to the cities through the Zilla Sadar towns.

Keywords : *Mofussil*, urban, ditch, *sadar*, *zilla*

Introduction

The word *Mofussil* gives an impression of Islamic origin but the word also has a colonial background and its origin.[1] *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.[2] 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

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the revenue official at the level of the *pargana* or subdistrict (*Mufassal qānūngo*) from his superior at the *sarkār* or district level (*Sadr qānūngo*)."[3]

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* ".[4] 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"[5]. 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.. .'[6] 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*.[7] The first original prose work of Bhabanicaran, namely *Kalikata Kamalalay*, which S.K. De describes as Bhabanicaran's most important work'. Published in 1823, it is principally a study of the urban life of Calcutta in the second decade of the 19th century. It was written in the form of dialogues between a city-dweller and provincial, and it 'professes to be a manual of etiquette for country people-who come for the first time to Calcutta and find them bewildered by its strange manners, customs and speech.' This dialogue device provided Bhabanicaran with a framework within which he could set forth differing views on Hinduism and oh the practices which were permissible to Hindus. At the beginning of the book, 'Bhabanicaran explained the significance of the title: Calcutta resembles an ocean. This is why the title *Kalikata Kamalalay* has been chosen. The word Kamalalay means 'ocean,' the residence of

Kamala Laksmi, the Hindu goddess of Fortune. In keeping with the title, Kalikata Kamalalay was designed to be completed in four 'waves,' i.e., four volumes. The title *Kalikata Kamalalay* implying as it does a survey of the whole of Calcutta society is, to some extent, misleading. Bhabanicaran was clearly concerned only with Hindus society. Muslims and other religious communities in Calcutta were excluded from consideration.

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 significance 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'[8]; 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 sobriquet 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.[9] 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."[10]

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 to 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."[11]

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."[12]

Also in the understanding of *Mofussil*, Appadurai's[13]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, non-localizable 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 neighbourhoods as social forms requires a more careful exposition of the problem of context. The production of neighbourhoods is always historically grounded and thus contextual.[14]"

Notes and References

1 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."

2 *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 separates, as in an administrative division. In a purely administrative context, it is about separation in the country of the centre of government - or more specifically the centre 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 phrase or *fasala* which also means division. 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*.

3 David Sol Boyk, unpublished PhD thesis, Provincial Urbanity: Intellectuals and Public Life in Patna, 1880-1930, University of California, Berkeley, 2015, p- 23. Also see J. Reginald Hand, *Early English Administration of Bihar, 1781-1785,* Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Press, 1894, pp-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 p-302; Shirin Akhtar, *The Role of the Zamindars in Bengal, 1707-1772,* Dacca, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1982, pp.- 59,66-67.

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

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

6 *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.

7 Bandyopadhyay, Bhabanicharan, *Kalikata kamalalaya*, in Sanat Kumar Gupta (ed.). *Rashorachonashamogro*, Calcutta, Naboparto Prokashon, 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".

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

[9] The Mofussil and the Ditch, op cit., p. 36

[10] *Asiatic Journal*, 1839, vol. 38, p-36

[11] Upamanyu Chatterjee, *English, August: An Indian Story,* Boston, Faber and Faber, 1989; "The Confessions of St. Augustine," *Calcutta Review* 88, January 1889, no. 175, p- 99.

[12] An English Barrister Practising in India, "With a Stuff Gown in the Mofussil," *The Green Bag* 12, no. 4 , April 1900, p- 200

[13] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p- 182.

[14] Appadurai, A., "The production of locality", in *Sociology of Globalization: Cultures, Economies, and Politics,* Taylor and Francis, 2018, pp. 107-116.