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The Growth of Calcutta : A Profile of Social Dislocations in the Early Colonial Period

The purpose of this paper is to understand the nature of social dislocations which accompanied the growth of Calcutta in the second half of the eighteenth century. As the growth of Calcutta was crucially interlaced with the English East India company's increasing domination in Bengal, particularly since the battle of Plassey (1757), the concomitant stress and strain in Calcutta should also be studied in the context of the broader social tensions which Bengal was undergoing due to the expansion of the British colonial rule. In other words, we would like to understand the variations in the parameters of Calcutta's involvement with the process of the colonial domination across the second half of the eighteenth century. Our exploration would be directed, more specifically, to ascertain the social groups who suffered from this domination and also those who, on the contrary, gained from the same process. Social dislocations emerged out of this divergence. Excepting certain new source materials which are few in number, we will formulate our suggestions mainly on the basis of the data already collected by the pioneers in history writing on Calcutta.¹ The same data will be utilised by us for investigating the process of social dislocations—the process which might not have drawn adequate attention earlier.

It has been generally recognised that the main drive of the English East India company, after the assumption of *diwani* in 1765, was to maximise the land revenue of Bengal. Enhancement of land revenue was primarily needed for financing one-way export trading of the Company which was euphemistically described as 'investment'. Surplus revenue was used to buy goods from Bengal, often at arbitrarily low rate, for export to England and Europe. Before the battle of Plassey, the Company's public purchases for export amounted to about 3 million current rupees.² The Company, then, used to import bullion for 'investment'. But, after the assumption of *diwani*, the surplus revenue

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was more than sufficient for such 'investment' which rose to 6 million current rupees in 1767. It was 10 million in 1777. The two principal articles of trade were raw silk and cotton piece goods. In 1793 the 'investment' of raw silk was Rs 25,86,847 and that of cotton piece goods amounted to Rs 67,408.³

Increase of land revenue, as already indicated, was phenomenal. During 1760–63 Mir Kasim raised his revenue demand from Bengal to the tune of Rs 24.7 million (sicca) which was described by John Shore as 'a mere pillage and rackrent' because it amounted 'in one or two years to an increase of revenue exceeding the augmentation of nearly two preceding centuries'.⁴ This assessment of Rs 24.7 million, however, was reduced to an assessment on paper and only Rs 6.5 million could be actually collected, as Mir Kasim was still relying mostly on the old zamindars of Murshid Kuli Khan's time. The situation changed drastically after the assumption of *diwani* by the Company. Compulsion of collecting the largest amount of money in the quickest possible time forced a logical gravitation towards accepting the farmers of revenue in preference to the old zamindars. As early as in 1775, the Court of Directors of the Company in their Minute of 15 September remarked: 'We have reason to believe that not less than one-third of the Company's land are or have lately been held by the Banians of English gentlemen. The Governor's Banian stands foremost by the enormous amount of his farms and contracts.' Between 1765 and 1777 'Lands were let in general too high, and, to find out the real value of the lands, the most probable method was to let them to the highest bidders and also to dispose of the farms by public auction.'⁵

With the help of these new intermediaries who could be willingly ruthless, unhampered by 'roots that clutch', collection of land revenue was increased from Rs 6.5 million of Mir Kasim's time to Rs 26 million in 1784.⁶ Most of the load of the increased revenue was ultimately placed on the small peasants. It was this burden which created the major stress and strain in Bengal under the new colonial rule. Social tensions, emerging from the extraction of revenue surplus, were very much there in Bengal and elsewhere under the Mughals, particularly during disintegration of their empire. But these tensions underwent qualitative changes after the assumption of *diwani* by the English East India Company, as significant variations took place in respect of the composition of the surplus-appropriating classes, the amount of surplus and the method of appropriation as well as the ulterior purpose of this extraction. These qualitative changes, which precipitated the unfolding of the major contradiction in the contemporary society of Bengal and elsewhere in eastern India, would provide the backdrop of our modest study to explore the growth of Calcutta and the concomitant social dislocations.

Let us begin with locating the social groups which figured prominently in Calcutta's economic life in the pre-colonial period and

try to understand the changes in their respective positions after the spread of the East India Company's domination. The old revenue records give us a vague picture of the original population of Calcutta which consisted of agricultural and fishing communities and some other hard-working groups.⁷ They belonged to such castes as Bagdis, Pods and Tiors as well as to the local Muslim groups of lower status. However, stray references to the Hindu and Muslim names ending with Mondals (headmen/owner-cultivators) might suggest the induction of a relatively high stratum among the agricultural commodities. From the middle of the eighteenth century the new economic activities of the East India Company began to reject these thriving groups of autochthon of Calcutta. Some of them were squeezed out to the fringes (popularly known as Dhapa locality) where the growing city's garbage provided a sort of precarious sustenance for them. The palanquin-bearers of Bagdi caste, a well-known hard-working group in the eighteenth century Calcutta, were gradually found to be unacceptable by the Company's officials.⁸ The palanquin-bearers did not take it lying down. They organised themselves and subsequently carried out a successful strike in 1827, perhaps the first of its kind in colonial India.⁹ Evidence on the existence of salt workers, at least on the fringes of old Calcutta, is available from difference sources.¹⁰ Their retreating position, however, is borne out by a Court document of 1778: 'there being no business ready but some bills for misdemeanors, that is four indictments for perjury and about twenty for nuisances in burning shells within the town for making lime, called here *chunum*, and in keeping shells with the stinking fish in them.'¹¹

The profile of social dislocations, emerging after the assumption of *diwani* by the East India Company and the consequent colonial thrusts in the new 'investment' policy, came out more sharply by the process of decline of the Setts and the Basaks, the traditional merchants who had figured so prominently in pre-colonial Calcutta.¹² By caste, they were associated with the cloth and yarn trade, which was the *raison d'être* of the growth of old Calcutta. The Setts and the Basaks are believed to have migrated from Saptagram, the traditional port of Portuguese trade which had declined because of the silting up of the river Saraswati in the sixteenth century.¹³ It is true that these traders of Bengal flourished in the cloth and yarn trade in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century because of their connections with the English merchants. But the character of the trading was, then, different from the post-Plassey period in the sense that the East India Company used to transact in exchange of imported bullion and that the traditional merchants like the Setts and the Basaks enjoyed some amount of autonomy in spite of their involvement with a share of advance (*dadni*) from the Company.

The British records, otherwise so silent about the contemporary Indian traders transacting with the Company, refer to the Setts in

significant terms: 'the Seats (Setts) family who are indeed our most secure merchants and yearly take greater share of our Dadney (advance); that we judge it our interest to encourage all persons that bring in the best cloth and they (the Setts) are generally those who have most influence over the weavers, which must be men of substance and credit.'¹⁴ The early Setts are described in the traditional history of Calcutta as the 'jungle-clearing pioneers' (*jangal-kata basinda*) and as pious Vaishnavas. The idol of Govindaji, the family deity of the Setts, introduced an element of Vaishnava refinement in the rough texture of *bazaar* environment of old Calcutta. The decline of the Setts began after 1757, when the East India Company switched over from the indirect to the direct agency system for procurement of exportable goods and started relying on the new intermediaries or *Banians* who were totally subservient to the needs of 'investment' policy of the Company.¹⁵ Vaishnavadas Sett,¹⁶ known for his legendary opulence and piety, died in circumstance of declining fortune. His successors in the family, though fallen from pre-eminence in the late eighteenth century, sought to retain, along with the Basaks, extensive landed properties in Burrabazar which commanded the highest land value in the Indian part of the city.¹⁷ This shift towards the security of unproductive rent could not, however, revive the vitality and social status of a traditional mercantile family.

Similar stress and strain were experienced by the Basaks who were closely related to the Setts through inter-marriage and who had also migrated to Calcutta from Saptagram. A list of merchants trading with the East India Company in the early eighteenth century shows the preponderance of the Setts, but it also mentions the names of a number of Basaks.¹⁸ From the mid-eighteenth century the Basaks appeared more prominently in the official documents. Sobharam Basak was second in the list of the Indian elites of Calcutta receiving restitution money for the sake of the city from the new Nawab of Murshidabad after Plassey.¹⁹ Sobharam Basak died in 1780. The details of Sobharam's estates indicated the variety of business activities which could be undertaken by a traditional merchant of Bengal till the middle of the eighteenth century and a little after—transactions in cotton-piece goods and spices, the former presumably for the European market; in opium for the Chinese market; in commodities for coastal Middle East and Persian Gulf countries; and in bonds from Europeans needing capital to exploit opportunities in the East.²⁰ Simultaneously Sobharam Basak left behind thirty-seven houses, situated mainly in Burrabazar—the drift, similar to the Setts, towards the safety of the flow of rent from tenanted houses and land in face of the fluctuations of the traditional family trade. After the death of Sobharam, the Basaks began to face a decline in business. The question obviously comes up: who were replacing those powerful traditional merchants of Calcutta?

The answer, as indicated earlier, can be sought in the process of emergence of the new intermediaries or Banians of the English East India Company following the battle of Plassey. The rise of Nabakrishna Deb may be taken up as a symbolic example of this process. Nabakrishna started as a Persian teacher to Warren Hastings in 1750 when the latter first landed in Calcutta. In the crucial days of 1756–57, Nabakrishna rendered useful service to the English by collecting military intelligence and arranging for the supply of provisions to the beleaguered Britishers during the sack of Calcutta. Nabakrishna himself summed up his services to the East India Company in two positions addressed to the British authorities.²¹ In 1767 he was appointed Political Banian to the Company.²² Nabakrishna figured as the most prominent Indian in the proceedings of the Calcutta Committee of Revenue, especially with reference to new property rights acquired by him inside Calcutta. In 1774 he obtained the unusual right of holding the Farm of Sobhabazar in perpetuity;²³ in 1778 he was awarded the taluk of Sutanuti by the Company, which amounted to an exclusive right to collect the ground rent and grant *pattas* or leases in the greater part of northern Calcutta.²⁴

In a contemporary judicial document Nabakrishna appeared as a lender of money seeking to redeem a mortgage bond from Gobinda Charan Sett of the declining merchant family. Gobinda Charan had mortgaged his portion of 21 houses and gardens in Calcutta for Rs 21,000 and failed to pay off.²⁵ Revenue records revealed Nabakrishna in the role of operator in salt business as well as in the Sezewalship (tax collection) of the rich Bengal district of Burdwan.²⁶ His success as a fortune-maker was a phenomenon of the changing times. Nabakrishna turned out to be one of the most successful intermediaries in a new society of baniandom totally subservient to the economic and political interests of the East India Company in late eighteenth century Bengal. A story was long current in Calcutta that Nabakrishna secured for himself a considerable part of the plunder from Nawab Sirajuddaullah's fabulous treasure, sharing it with Robert Clive and his associates.²⁷

Family histories and tradition converge to describe the Sabarna Choudhuries as the original zamindar of Calcutta. This Brahmin family, whose founder had been a revenue officer under Pratapaditya, switched over to the Mughals and, as a price for this betrayal, acquired the zamindari of Calcutta. The Sabarna Choudhuries patronised the priestly family of the Kali temple and other Brahmins who got rent-free land in what was to develop as Calcutta proper in the early eighteenth century.²⁸ Cutting across various facts and different shades of opinion, it appears that around 1687 the English East India Company had the status of mere squatters on the soil of Calcutta under the sufferance of the zamindari of the Sabarna Choudhuries. The English merchants were not on the same footing as

the Setts and the Basaks or other non-Indian residents such as the Portuguese, the Armenians and the Dutch. These traditional Bengali merchants and the traders from abroad settled in Calcutta with the consent of the local zamindar (i.e., the Sabarna Chaudhuri) and the Nawab of Bengal, and all of them paid rent in time. The English, on the contrary, squatted against the wishes of the Nawab and paid no rent during their first or second occupation of Calcutta. In 1690 they returned to Calcutta in the same capacity and founded their factory.²⁹

From 1690 to 1695 the legal position of the English East India Company's existence in Calcutta was that of a tenant-at-will, liable to pay rent to the landlord and to ejection in case of default. In 1696 the Nawab's tacit consent to their building a fort in Calcutta gave the Company at least the right and status of a *maurasi* or occupancy ryot. In 1698 Prince Azim-us-Shan's *firman* elevated the English traders to the position of a dependent *talukdar* and they soon purchased their land in Calcutta from Ram Chand Ray of the Sabarna Choudhuri family, though still liable to pay rent to the superior landlord. In 1717 the Company obtained from Emperor Farukhsiyar the permission to become zamindar of Calcutta, but, no sales being effected, the English continued technically as tenure-holder in all their landed possessions. The Bengal Nawabs, who became almost independent of the Mughal emperor since Aurangzeb's death, forbade the zamindars of the province to sell their rights to the Company, disregarding the imperial *firman*.³⁰

The English, however, carried on their desperate efforts to obtain a legal title, both *de facto* and *de jure*, for their landed possessions in Calcutta. The new incentive came from the sudden influx of a considerable number of the population to Calcutta as a result of the Maratha raid in the south-western districts of Bengal.³¹ The English now sought to purchase the sale documents from the original proprietors, indirectly through their new Banians or subservient agents. Efforts of the East India Company succeeded after the battle of Plassey when Mir Jafar raised the Company, in 1758, to the status of formal landowner of Calcutta, partly revenue-free and partly revenue-paying. The changed political situation helped the new Banians of the Company to take over the landed estates of Calcutta. The decline of the Setts and the Basaks and the rise of the Debs, as described earlier, testified to this emerging process across the second half of the eighteenth century.

The changing pattern of the business activities of the other traditional merchants of Calcutta, such as the Armenian and the Persian traders, took an uneven course. Such traders mostly lived in the central part of the city which had cosmopolitan characteristics since the pre-colonial period. The central part was flanked on two sides by the English-dominated southern sector and the Bengali-dominated northern sector. The ethnicity of the cosmopolitan part of central

Calcutta was, by and large, a repetition of the pattern of a segment of Surat and Hooghly and, to some extent, of Dacca and Murshidabad. The Armenian testamentary documents of the late eighteenth century refer to the continuing movement of this trading community from New Julpha in Ispahan to Calcutta. Long residence in the inland commercial towns of Bengal—Dacca and Murshidabad—imparted to this peripatetic merchant group a local colour. In the late eighteenth century the Armenians of Calcutta worked in close cooperation with the Persian merchants—perhaps a continuation of the tradition of Surat and Hooghly.³²

The link of the Persian-Armenian merchant community with Surat and Bombay and, through these port cities, with Bussrah on the Persian Gulf kept these traditional traders together and vibrant till the end of the eighteenth century, in spite of formidable expansion of the monopolistic trends of British mercantile capital. The origin of the Grand Mosque of the Muslims, close to the cosmopolitan part of Calcutta, could be dated back to the pre-eighteenth century period. It came to be called the Naquda Mosque or Masjid—the Masjid for whose construction the western Indian merchants and the Arab ship captains had contributed substantially.³³ Such a striking sector in the city, from the point of view of concentration of various sojourners with different ethnic identities as well as their institutional growth, would suggest the continuity of a forceful urban heritage—a heritage which was interwoven with the relative autonomy of a peddling tradition.

The old Marwari financiers and traders did not fare well in the new setting of late eighteenth century Bengal. The great banking house of the Jagat Seths of the early eighteenth century, who were based in Murshidabad and had a *Kuthi* or office in Calcutta, could no longer maintain their pre-eminence in the domain of high finance. The Oswals and the Khattris had been prominent in the traditional mercantile communities of Murshidabad and Dacca, before Calcutta overshadowed these two historic cities of Bengal during the post-Plassey decades. A striking feature of this earlier group of Marwari businessman was that they almost got themselves assimilated into the contemporary Bengali culture.³⁴ We do not find evidence of tension between this earlier group of Marwaris and the traditional merchants of Bengal, such as the Setts and the Basaks, in the first half of the eighteenth century. Other traditional Bengali trading castes, who used to transact commodities from the, had also co-existed with this pre-colonial set up.

Tension began to grow with the arrival of new groups of Marwari traders and bankers from the early decades of the nineteenth century. These new groups were not interested in striking social roots in the Bengali milieu. They soon became busy in forming their own island-worlds inside the Burrabazar area of Calcutta. As early as in 1827, a Bengali journal brought into focus the emerging conflict between the

commercial interests of the Bengali mercantile communities, now led by the established Banian families of Calcutta, and those of the new Marwari bankers and traders.³⁵ These Marwaris were quick to grasp the changing patterns of colonial trade and commerce in the wake of industrial innovations in Great Britain. The Bengali merchants were losing ground in the new specialisations, especially in the distribution of Manchester goods.³⁶ Closely related to the expanding colonial structure, the new Marwaris, while living in obscure lodgings of Burrabazar, started operating through trusted *munims* or clerks and gradually secured a sound hold on the inter-regional money circulations and the flow of imported cloth and spices.³⁷

Calcutta grew demographically throughout the eighteenth century. Though it is difficult to get a completely reliable figure, it has been roughly estimated from available evidence that the population of Calcutta in 1710 was around 12,000. It grew to 117,744 in 1752 and by 1837 it swelled to 230,000.³⁸ In addition to the traditional merchants, the gradual increase of the British commercial inroads followed by their assumption of administrative responsibilities brought a steady flow of people into Calcutta. We have already indicated a migration process caused by the Maratha incursions. The transfer of government offices after 1772 attracted more people. While the traditional urban centres of Bengal, such as Dacca and Murshidabad began to decline, Calcutta was emerging as the most important colonial city in the eastern region of India across the second half of the eighteenth century. While inside the city the English-dominated 'white town', the cosmopolitan 'intermediate town' and the Indian 'black town' were assuming their distinct characters, the urban compulsions were immediately felt in the jungle-clearing and building-construction activities.

The physical growth of the city has been noticed in the contemporary eighteenth century maps on Calcutta.³⁹ Between 1742 and 1753 the Indian merchants built a number of houses in the area within the 'Maratha Ditch', created to provide security against the Maratha raids. The city appears to have been completely 'fenced by pallisade'.⁴⁰ Around 1761 the East India Company gave instruction to the Surveyor to clear all jungles and underwood within the limits of the 'Maratha Ditch'.⁴¹ Raja Nabakrishna took the initiative to weed out the jungle of Savabazar.⁴² In 1742 there were only 16 streets in Calcutta. In 1756 there appeared no less than 27 big and 52 smaller streets. In 1742 there were about 21 masonry buildings; in 1756 268 'pucca' houses could be noticed. By 1768 'innumerable' buildings were said to have been constructed inside the city.⁴³ In north Calcutta, the rich India merchants went on building palatial buildings and temples. Upjohn's map of 1794 shows both sides of the circular road studded with new constructions. The area around Park Street and Chowringhee indicates a good number of European houses. In addition to this process of construction of private buildings, the East India Company emerged

as a major builder in and around Calcutta, prompted by the new political and commercial compulsions since 1757. This was particularly symbolised in the massive drive to construct the new Fort, for which the Company laid out over £1 million. Another fort was envisaged at Budge Budge. A number of commercial buildings were also coming up.⁴⁴ Apart from the new activities connected with jungle-clearing and construction, pressure was also felt in brick-burning jobs and clearing functions at the port.

These construction and other labour-intensive activities thus created a sharp demand for labour in Calcutta. The Company needed not only unskilled coolies but also specialised workmen such as masons, brick-layers, carpenters and others; it was further necessary to recruit supervisors to control the recruited labour force. Such a demand for various types of labour provided a strong pull for migration to the city and it was this sphere which witnessed one of the sharpest manifestations of social dislocations in the early colonial period.

In the initial stage the unskilled coolies were, by and large, brought from the districts adjacent to or near Calcutta. Prior to 1757, the coolies came mostly from the 24 Parganas and Midnapur. Raja Raj Narain of Midnapur, for example, supplied a large number of such coolies. Later the faujdars, zamindars and tehsildars of Burdwan, Hughli and Murshidabad, along with those of Midnapur and the 24 Parganas, were instructed to recruit and send the unskilled labour force. Thereafter remote areas were being gradually tapped. In 1757 there were about 5,000 coolies and 12,000 tank-diggers working for the East India Company.⁴⁵ In 1759, another group of 2,000 coolies were brought from the 24 Parganas. In 1761, altogether 30,000 coolies were engaged at the site of the new fort and, soon after, 1,000 brick layers were recruited. In 1769, 15,000 men were recruited afresh from the hinterland.⁴⁶ Bahier, who was in charge of the construction at the new fort, made a request to the Home authorities for the supply of skilled workers such as carpenters. The Company's authorities in London sent, in response, some carpenters to be retained for five years at an annual wage of £90.⁴⁷

Since the supply of labour fell short of the demand, the Company took resort to coercion. Even the prisoners were made to work as coolies. The unskilled workers were also forcibly brought from remote areas. As the company's wage-rate was low, many of these forced recruits preferred to go back, if they could manage it. There was also competition from private builders who often paid higher wages. We have contemporary observations on the Company's need to attract the rural poor to Calcutta. Such observations were perhaps influenced by the experiences of London which attracted a 'persistent flow from the rural areas'.⁴⁸ Calcutta, however, did not provide in the eighteenth century the kind of market for labour that London did. The Company needed labour that was both cheap and totally controlled. This, in the ultimate analysis, called for coercion.

The supply of such forced labour was always difficult to be sustained in the context of low wages, rising prices and oppressive working-hours. The company asked the revenue-farmers in the 24 Parganas to fix a quota of coolies. The required quota had to be fulfilled under the pressure of punishment. In 1768 the Resident at Murshidabad was asked to send 5,000 builders to Calcutta. In 1769, the Faujdar of Hughli and the Collector-General of Calcutta were also asked to raise 5,000 coolies from their respective districts.⁴⁹ In order to counter the competition from the private builders, the Company sought to exercise a monopolistic control. The recruitment agents of the private builders were strictly asked to collect the coolies from an area beyond a radius of 100 miles from Calcutta. This was done to ensure that the Company could continuously tap the immediate hinterland to keep the work at the fort going. Private residents were forbidden to employ any 'artificers' in 1788. The Committee of Works sent a letter to the Board informing the latter of the difficulty they faced in getting labourers and artificers for their fortification.

As already indicated, the inhabitants of Calcutta normally gave the coolies a higher price than that fixed by the Company. The Company's military interests demanded speedy completion of work at the fort.⁵⁰ Yet by 1766 only 23 bricklayers out of a force of 1,000 were left with the Company. The Company now issued a new set of regulations. The price of labour, in general, was to be determined by what the Company paid. Private residents could pay more 'on pain of forfeiting the Company's protection'. All the carpenters, smiths, bricklayers and artificers of Calcutta were asked to register themselves with the Company. A certificate bearing the name and employment number of each artificer would be issued and, if anyone was found at work after the appointed time or without a certificate, 'he shall be severely punished and obliged to work on the fortifications for five days for half-pay'. Even if a private resident were to bring artificers from outside, such workers were obliged to have a certificate distinguishing them from the Company's registered artificers. The Company thus virtually resorted to a system of bonded labour,⁵¹ disregarding blatantly their commitment to create a free labour market.⁵² The Company's regulations, however, could not be effectively implemented and private construction went on unabated. Even in 1767 the Select Committee noted that, in spite of the enormous expenses incurred for the construction of public buildings including the Fort, the progress of work was very slow and the condition of the new Fort was still quite 'defenceless'.⁵³

Notwithstanding the Company's reluctance, the wages of workers registered an increase in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. But this increase was more than counteracted by the rising prices. In 1751 the labourers complained of their distress because of the dearness of rice and oil. Consequently the wages of the coolies were raised by 2

pan 12 gundas of cowries per day on account of the scarcity of essential commodities.⁵⁴ In 1757 the coolies working at the fort were paid at the rate of Rs 2 per month. Even then 5,000 men had deserted. The workers demanded a wage of at least Rs 3 per month. Around 1778 their expectation went up to Rs 6 per month. The Company, however, stuck to Rs 4. Thus, the wages did increase, though not in tune with the expectation or demand of the labouring poor. The index of prices for rice shows a sharp rise between 1754 and 1763 (from Rs 0.73 per maund to Rs 1.33 per maund). After the famine of 1769–70, the price of rice understandably a peak of Rs 3.33 per maund in 1771. From 1750 textile prices also rose steadily. By the 1760s it was virtually admitted that the rise in prices of essential commodities could not be checked.⁵⁵ In the face of this rising price index, the marginal wage increase conceded by the Company could never be attractive enough to pull labour to Calcutta. Workers, therefore, had to be forcibly recruited in the districts and sent to the city. This process tended to expand the population of Calcutta under duress and consequently 'affected production in the districts' of Bengal.⁵⁶

The resentment among the common people, which was caused by the Company's coercion to recruit labour, came out clearly in a contemporary Bengali verse by 'Dwijā' Radhamohan. The composition, describing the desperate condition of the workers employed in the construction of a road eastward from 'salikha', was vivid and telling.⁵⁷ Translated into English, the poem says :

The tillers left behind their ploughs
in the field,
they left their ploughs and fled
to escape the recruitment of bonded labour.
The agents came in hundreds
and, in scorching heat of 'Chaitra',
they forced the tillers (who could not escape)
to work for the building of road
without remuneration.
The agents caned the tillers on their back;
and the threat of caning
drove the tillers to run
and try for the last bid to escape.

The fear that the Company's recruiting agents sought to instil among the tillers of the soil has been clearly formulated here. The implication of '*begar*' or 'forced labour' seems to be particularly meaningful. It appears that the stick rather than the carrot was the instrument used to persuade the peasantry to act as coolies for the construction of roads.

The Company's agents used to appropriate a part of the wages of the coolies. 'Then, the coolies receiving their pay in *cowries*, the *Bunnya*

and headmen have the conveniency of stopping a small number out of each man's share, which they call custom'.⁵⁸ The coolies had 15 to 20 *cowries* deducted per day in this manner. This caused additional resentment. Even the engineer and the 'buxies' were privy to this kind of extortion. We do not know if these people also acted as moneylenders or they themselves were all indebted to moneylenders. An identical phenomenon could be noticed in the tea-gardens of Darjeeling in the late nineteenth century. Pushed out by feudal oppression in Nepal, the labouring poor were thrown into the colonial exploitation in Darjeeling. The tea-planters did not recruit labour directly, but entered into contract with the *sardars* for recruitment. In the plantations, however, both the *sardars* and the coolies were heavily indebted. Hajirman Rai wrote in Nepali in 1900 : 'brother *sardar*, sister, coolie—all are immersed in debt'. It has been further observed that on days of weekly payment the moneylender-cum-shopkeeper (*kainas* or Marwaris) used to come the tea-gardens to take the entire money away.⁵⁹

Coming back to the situation obtaining in late eighteenth century Calcutta, we have to fathom the depth of despair and resentment which must have permeated the mentality of the coolies and other workmen in the city due to their loss of socio-economic moorings. If is not yet clear whether the labouring poor of Calcutta were transformed from an 'industrious' into a 'dangerous' class.⁶⁰ However, we have evidence to suggest that their reactions were quite sharp at times : 'when the coolies had a sense of grievance they showed a lively insubordination'.⁶¹ The Company's engineers, on occasions, 'drove off the works by the clamour of the people'.⁶² How did the growing tension finally manifest itself? If these immigrant workers succeeded in deserting both their work and the urban settlement, could they go back to their villages and absorb themselves, once again, in their earlier occupations? If they only succeeded in leaving their 'bonded' engagement but not the urban setting, how did they find employment as well as residential accommodation inside Calcutta? Was the growth of Calcutta as a colonial city interlinked with the outbursts of resistance and protests from the beginning? Or, did different types of resentments take time to crystallise and emerge as the flash-points of uprisings in a subsequent period? Alternatively, did the increasing poverty and inequality provoke deviant behaviour which drifted towards a channel of anti-social activities? A more detailed analysis of these aspects of social realities of Calcutta should be taken up carefully, if we seek to answer the above questions comprehensively. As a prelude to such a full-fledged composition, we have tried here to sketch a modest profile. We would like to end with the reflective remarks of Fernand Braudel : 'Wherever there are towns, there will be a form of power, protective and coercive, whatever the shape taken by that power or social group identified with it. And while power may exist

independently of towns, it acquires through them an extra dimension, a different field of application'.⁶³

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. We have particularly consulted the source materials used in Atul K. Roy's work : *A Short History of Calcutta* (Calcutta, 1982 (reprint), Pradip Sinha's book: *Calcutta in Urban History* (Calcutta, 1978), and Peter J. Marshall's article 'The Company and the Coolies: Labour in Early Calcutta' in *Essays in Honour of Professor Nisith R. Ray* (Calcutta, 1987).
2. Letter to the Court of Directors, dated 20th August 1751.
3. N.K. Sinha : *The Economic History of Bengal*. Vol. I., Calcutta, 1961, p. 18.
4. John Shore's *Minute of 18th June 1789*, paragraphs 42, 43, 45 and 77.
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