A History of Kolkata

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Introduction

Kolkata, once known as Calcutta, stands as one of India's most historically vibrant and culturally distinctive cities. Its story is one of transformation, resilience, and dynamic change—a story that has unfolded along the banks of the Hooghly River over centuries. From its modest origins as a cluster of small villages, Kolkata evolved into a bustling colonial metropolis, a focal point for political and cultural renaissance, and ultimately, into a teeming modern megacity whose layered past continues to inform its present.

The city's recorded history is often traced to the late 17th century, when British colonial ambitions in Bengal redefined its destiny. Yet archaeological evidence and literary references point to a much older legacy—of earlier settlements, ancient trading communities, and a landscape shaped by shifting political dominions. These early centuries saw connections to regional powers, the filtering of diverse peoples and traditions, and the emergence of a locale poised for transformation.

The watershed moment in Kolkata's evolution arrived with the rise of the British East India Company. Here, history was altered by commerce, conflict, and a keen sense of opportunity. The foundations of Fort William marked both physical and political fortification, anchoring British control and setting in motion the rapid development of Calcutta as a linchpin in imperial strategy. Through these years, the city experienced remarkable changes: new architectural forms, social hierarchies, and an ever-expanding urban footprint.

But Kolkata's epoch-defining years were not limited to colonial grandeur or administrative centrality; the city became the beating heart of profound social and intellectual currents during the Bengal Renaissance. Ideas of reform, progress, and nationhood converged here, fertilizing debate and creative endeavor. In its winding streets, revolutionary agitation brewed alongside literary salons and artistic innovation, characterizing Kolkata as both a crucible of resistance and a wellspring of modern Indian identity.

The tumultuous events of the 20th century, including the partition of Bengal, two world wars, the shifting of the national capital to Delhi, and the upheaval of Indian independence and partition, fundamentally altered the city's social fabric. Waves of migration, economic restructuring, and new political movements presented both grave challenges and new opportunities. Amid periods of economic stagnation and political unrest, Kolkata's people strove for renewal, persevering with unique resilience.

Today, Kolkata stands as a testament to the enduring interplay of past and present. Its

historic buildings, intellectual heritage, and cultural richness offer reminders of an extraordinary journey. This book seeks to narrate Kolkata’s history in all its complexity—from its early beginnings, through colonial ascendancy, revolutionary energy, post-independence struggles, and the making of the vibrant city it is today. In doing so, it aims to provide an insightful chronicle of a place where India’s story, in so many ways, continues to be written.

CHAPTER ONE: The Land Before the City: Early Settlements Along the Hooghly

Long before the bustling metropolis of Kolkata sprawled across the landscape, the deltaic region of Bengal, particularly the area bordering the life-giving Hooghly River, was a land shaped by water, sediment, and ancient human activity. This was not an empty wilderness awaiting the arrival of a founder; rather, it was a dynamic environment supporting scattered settlements, agricultural practices, and rudimentary trade long predating the late seventeenth century watershed moment. The story of Kolkata doesn't begin abruptly with a European arrival; it is rooted deeply in the history of this alluvial plain and the communities that learned to live with its rhythms.

The Hooghly River itself, a crucial distributary of the mighty Ganges, has been the geographical protagonist in this early narrative. Its ever-changing course, influenced by tides from the Bay of Bengal and the vast freshwater flow from upstream, determined where land was stable enough for habitation and cultivation. These natural forces dictated the possibilities for human settlement, favoring slightly higher ground or areas where the river offered both sustenance and a potential pathway for movement and exchange.

Evidence suggests that this deltaic environment, while challenging, supported human life for a considerable time. Archaeological findings, though perhaps less dramatic than those in older, more established urban centers of the subcontinent, point towards habitation in the wider Bengal region dating back over two millennia. These discoveries include pottery shards, tools, and remnants of dwelling structures that speak of communities engaged in agriculture, fishing, and perhaps local crafts.

These early inhabitants were likely drawn to the riverbanks for the fertile soil deposited by floods and the abundant resources available in the waterways – fish being a primary source of sustenance. The river provided not just food and water but also a natural highway connecting various small communities scattered across the delta, facilitating simple forms of interaction and trade among them.

While detailed records of these early centuries are sparse, historical texts and literary works from later periods often hint at a landscape dotted with villages and small hamlets along the numerous rivers and channels crisscrossing Bengal. These were primarily agrarian societies, dependent on the monsoon rains and the benevolent (and sometimes destructive) moods of the rivers for their livelihood.

The concept of a large, centralized urban settlement like future Calcutta was alien to

this early period. Life revolved around the village unit, often clustered together for mutual support and protection. Social structures were likely tied to kinship and caste, with local headmen or landlords wielding authority, often loosely connected to larger regional political entities.

Politically, the region was subject to various powers over the centuries. Before the rise of the Mughals, different dynasties like the Palas, Senas, and independent Sultanates held sway over Bengal. Their influence waxed and waned, but the local administration and the daily lives of the villagers were often shaped by local power dynamics and customary practices, rather than distant royal decrees.

Mentions of places in the general vicinity of what would become Kolkata appear in historical documents, though not as a single, unified entity. These references often pertain to geographical markers, administrative divisions, or specific settlements known for particular activities, perhaps indicating a continuity of habitation in the area over a long stretch of time.

For instance, the name "Kalikata," which would later be associated with one of the three key villages, appears in texts predating the British arrival. Its presence in sources like the rent-roll of Emperor Akbar in the late 16th century confirms that a locality bearing this name, or a variation of it, existed and was recognized as a revenue-generating unit under the Mughal administration.

Similarly, the Bengali poem *Manasa-mangal*, written in the late 15th century, also mentions "Kalikata." This literary reference suggests that the name was part of the regional lexicon and likely corresponded to a place of some recognition, perhaps a village or a small market area situated along the river, known to the local populace and poets alike.

These early mentions serve as crucial reminders that the land was not uninhabited or unknown before the British East India Company set its sights on establishing a trading post there. They challenge the outdated notion of a city springing fully formed from the mind of a single individual on a specific date and instead point to a longer, more gradual process of human engagement with this particular stretch of the Hooghly.

The economy of these early settlements was primarily agricultural, with rice being the staple crop, perfectly suited to the delta's watery environment. Alongside agriculture, fishing was a vital activity, utilizing the rich biodiversity of the river and its numerous tributaries. Local crafts, such as weaving and pottery, likely supported the immediate needs of the communities, with any surplus potentially traded with neighboring villages.

Trade in this era was predominantly local or regional. Boats plying the Hooghly and its associated waterways served as the main mode of transport, connecting inland areas

with riverine settlements and potentially with coastal trading networks further south. Goods exchanged would have included agricultural produce, fish, salt, and locally produced crafts.

The political structure under Mughal suzerainty, while powerful at the imperial center, often relied on a tiered system of administration in distant provinces like Bengal. Nawabs, appointed by the Mughal Emperor, governed the province, but the actual control over local affairs, especially in remote deltaic areas, might have been exercised by local landlords or chieftains who paid tribute to the Nawab.

This decentralized form of governance meant that while the region was nominally under Mughal rule, the immediate power felt by the villagers came from their local authorities. Life continued much as it had for generations, guided by tradition and the demands of the agricultural cycle, largely unaffected by the grandeur of the imperial court far away in Delhi or Agra.

The landscape itself was a mosaic of agricultural fields, wetlands, patches of forest, and meandering waterways. Travel was slow and often arduous, dependent on boats or simple pathways that were easily disrupted by floods or the changing course of rivers. The concept of a road network connecting scattered settlements was rudimentary at best.

Despite the challenges posed by the environment – the annual floods, the risk of cyclones, and the constant battle against erosion and sedimentation – people adapted and persisted. They developed farming techniques suited to the delta, learned to navigate its complex waterways, and built their homes on ground that offered some measure of safety from the rising waters.

The cultural life of these early communities was likely rich in oral traditions, folk tales, religious practices centered around local deities and the forces of nature, and seasonal festivals tied to the agricultural calendar. While formal education and structured religious institutions might have been limited, a vibrant, community-based cultural fabric would have existed.

The term "Bengal" itself has a long history, referring to a distinct geographical and cultural region encompassing a much larger area than just the delta around the Hooghly. The people inhabiting this region shared a common language, Bengali, which had been developing and evolving over centuries, reflecting the various influences that shaped the area.

The interactions among different groups within Bengal and with people from outside the region – traders from other parts of India, pilgrims, or occasional travelers – contributed to a slow but continuous cultural exchange. While these deltaic settlements might have seemed isolated, they were part of a broader network of

human activity that spanned the subcontinent.

The period before the significant European presence was one of relative equilibrium, a pattern of life that had been established over centuries. Settlements were small, growth was organic, and the rhythm of life was dictated by the natural environment and traditional practices. There was no grand urban plan, no central authority driving large-scale development in this particular locale.

However, this seemingly static picture is perhaps misleading. Rivers shift, power dynamics change, and even small settlements experience growth, decline, and transformation over time. The land was being prepared, perhaps unwittingly, for a future that would drastically alter its trajectory and turn a collection of humble villages into one of the world's great port cities.

The existence of multiple small settlements along the Hooghly was typical of riverine deltas globally, where access to water and trade routes was paramount. These were practical locations for communities dependent on agriculture and fishing, offering the necessary resources for survival and limited surplus generation.

While the specific reasons for the emergence or prominence of Sutanuti, Gobindapur, and Kalikata over other nearby settlements in the late 17th century would involve a confluence of factors, their existence as established, recognized entities under the Mughal administration by that time is key. They were not random spots on the riverbank but places with some history of habitation and perhaps economic activity.

The name "Kalikata" itself has led to much speculation about its origins. Some theories link it to the goddess Kali, whose temple at Kalighat is a significant religious site in modern Kolkata, suggesting a possible ancient religious connection to the area. Other theories propose connections to the Bengali word for lime (kali) and burnt shell (kata), possibly indicating an area where lime was produced.

Regardless of the exact etymology, the name's presence in historical records confirms the site's recognition prior to the British selection. This recognition, however modest, indicates a continuity of place and perhaps a lineage of human presence that stretches back further than the arrival of the East India Company.

The political landscape of Bengal in the centuries leading up to the British arrival was marked by a transition from independent Sultanates to integration into the vast Mughal Empire. This transition brought about changes in administration, revenue collection, and the flow of goods and people, potentially increasing the strategic and economic importance of riverine access points like those on the Hooghly.

Under Mughal rule, Bengal became a prosperous province, renowned for its fertile land and its production of goods like textiles, particularly muslin. This increased economic

activity across the province would have indirectly impacted settlements along major rivers like the Hooghly, even those not yet prominent trading centers themselves, by integrating them into wider regional economic networks.

The administrative structure implemented by the Mughals, including the division of land into revenue units and the appointment of officials and landlords (zamindars) to manage them, provided a framework that the British East India Company would later interact with and eventually manipulate to their advantage. The system of zamindari rights, which the British acquired for the three villages, was a product of this existing administrative order.

Thus, the land upon which Calcutta would eventually be built was not a blank slate. It was a landscape shaped by centuries of natural processes, inhabited by communities whose lives were intertwined with the river, and governed by political systems that had evolved over generations. The story of Kolkata is built upon this older, deeper history of the Bengal delta.

The archaeological evidence, though fragmented, provides tantalizing glimpses into this earlier period. Finds of terracotta figurines, ancient coinage from various dynasties, and remnants of simple infrastructure suggest a level of economic and cultural activity that speaks of established communities rather than transient settlements.

These early communities, while not building grand metropolises or leaving behind extensive written records, laid the groundwork in a fundamental sense. They demonstrated that human life could be sustained and could adapt to the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the deltaic environment of the lower Hooghly.

Their understanding of the river's ebb and flow, their agricultural techniques, their fishing practices, and their basic systems of local governance and trade all contributed to the human geography of the region. When later powers arrived, they found a landscape already inhabited and utilized, a humanized environment rather than an untouched wilderness.

The transition from these scattered early settlements to the beginnings of a unified urban center was a slow process, marked by shifts in political power, economic focus, and external influences. But the roots were already there, embedded in the alluvial soil along the riverbanks, waiting for the convergence of factors that would elevate this particular spot to unprecedented prominence.

This chapter, then, serves as a prologue – setting the geographical stage and acknowledging the long human history of the region before the specific chain of events that led to the founding and growth of Calcutta. It is a reminder that cities,

even those seemingly born from colonial ambition, are ultimately built upon the layered histories of the land and the people who inhabited it before. The quiet existence of these early settlements along the Hooghly forms the bedrock upon which the dramatic history of Kolkata would later unfold.

The subtle rhythms of life in these early riverine communities – the planting and harvesting of rice, the daily catch from the river, the simple exchanges between neighbors, the observance of local customs and festivals – constituted the fabric of existence in this region for centuries. It was a life closely tied to the natural world, dictated by the seasons and the river's flow.

While lacking the monumental architecture or extensive written records of more prominent ancient civilizations, these settlements possessed their own resilience and continuity. They represented a successful adaptation to a challenging environment, a testament to the human capacity to thrive in diverse landscapes.

The network of waterways that crisscrossed the delta acted not only as trade routes but also as barriers, influencing the local character and relative isolation of different communities. This fragmented geography likely contributed to the pattern of scattered villages rather than large urban conglomerations in this specific area during the early period.

The potential for this region to become a major trading hub was inherent in its location near the mouth of a major river system, providing access to both the interior of Bengal and the sea. However, realizing this potential required a combination of stable political control, economic impetus, and the development of infrastructure beyond the capabilities of these early settlements.

The focus of political power in Bengal during much of the pre-Mughal and Mughal periods was centered elsewhere – in cities like Gaur, Pandua, Murshidabad, or Sonargaon. These were the administrative and economic hubs, while the area around the later site of Calcutta remained relatively provincial, its importance primarily local.

Yet, the very factors that made it less central in earlier epochs – its deltaic nature, its position further downstream on the Hooghly – would eventually become assets in the era of maritime trade, when access to the sea became a defining characteristic of a strategic port city.

The story of these early settlements is largely unwritten in the traditional sense, found more in archaeological layers and oblique references than in comprehensive chronicles. Nevertheless, their existence is fundamental to understanding the context into which the British East India Company arrived.

They provided the basic human presence, the knowledge of the local environment,

and the existing administrative structures, however rudimentary, that the newcomers would interact with and build upon. The land was not empty; it was already a living, if quietly existing, landscape.

This period, spanning centuries before the late 17th century, represents the initial chapter in the long human history of the lower Hooghly region. It is a story of adaptation, resilience, and slow, organic development, setting the stage for the dramatic transformations that would follow. The land itself, molded by the river, was waiting.

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