

PORT IN THE STORM: THE FOUNDING OF CALCUTTA

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It rained incessantly on Sunday, the 24th of August, 1690. The English ketch fought the monsoon swell in the unruly Hooghly and dropped anchor at an obscure village on the east bank of the river. Little did the band of muttering Englishmen realise the significance of the event when the Lancashireman, Job Charnock, Agent of the London East India Company, waded through the squishy silt and clambered onto higher ground. The place of landing is supposed to be Muhonto's Ghat near Nimtollah.

The event is chronicled by Charnock in the following words: "This day at Sankrail ... ordered Capt. Brooke to come with his vessel at Sutanuti, where we arrived about noon, but found the place in a deplorable condition, nothing being left for our accommodation. The rain falling day and night, we are forced to betake ourselves to boats, which considering the season of the year, is unhealthily. Malik Barkhurdar and the country people, at our leaving the place, burning down and carrying away what they could."

But Charnock was hardly deterred by adversity. Four days later, he held the first meeting with his colleagues and followers and began the task of building the initial thatched houses in the three villages of Sutanuti, Govindapur, and Kalikata that were to later transform themselves into the 'city of places'. This first 'Consultation' was recorded in the 'Diary and Consultation Book for the Rt. Hon'ble East India Company' on the 28th of August; "The Right Worshipful Agent Charnock, Francis Ellis and Jermeah Peachie resolved that such places be built as absolutely necessary, viz., a warehouse, dining room, a room to sort cloth in, a cook room and an apartment for the Company's servants. The Agent's house, likewise Mr. Peachie's to be repaired, as also the Secretary's office". All these were of mud and thatched. Tradition has it that the Cutcherry building belonging to the local zamindar was purchased for the safekeeping of the Company's books and documents, located at what was to become famous as Dalhousie Square. It was not chance, as is believed, that led to Charnock's landing and the selection of the three villages for the English settlement. It was

conceived some say while Charnock leisurely smoked his hookah under the cool shade of the giant pipal tree at Baithakkhana near Sealdah where all the local merchants met. Ever since he joined the Company in 1656, he had realised that the English had to act with firmness, even force, if they were to survive the fierce competition in the East India trade.

Around the middle of the century, the British had been favoured with a firman by the Emperor or Shah Jahan after the English surgeon Broughton had cured his daughter of a disease. This allowed them to trade in Bengal without paying customs or other dues.

The Portuguese power had been decisively crushed by the Emperor a few years before this, but the Dutch and the French had remained strong. The Dutch had consolidated their position with the construction of Fort Gustavus at Chinsurah in 1656, and by 1680, the French had established a factory at Chandernagore. In comparison, the English factories at Hooghly and Cossimbazar were just getting along, harassed as they were, by the unending exactions of the Moghul governor and his agents.

Job Charnock was among the first Englishmen to realise that Moghul power in Bengal was on the wane, despite the Emperor's occasional roars and sabre-rattling. His stint as Chief at Patna (an important seat of Moghul power in east India) had taught him that imperial firmans were not worth their parchments, when any subhadar or fouzdar (or worse still) any local overload could hold English trade to ransom and make vexatious demands at the drop of a hat.

When Charnock succeeded the feeble Beard as the Company's Agent in Hooghly in 1686, after narrowly escaping from the clutches of the infuriated traders of Cossimbazar and after defying a summons from the Nawab, the battlelines had been clearly drawn. The Court of Directors of the East India Company had started sending warships, frigates and military companies to Hooghly to deal a blow to interlopers and to impress the Moghul authorities who harboured them. The Nawab had, in retaliation, despatched his cavalry and infantry units towards the Hooghly and Moghul guns then fixed their sights on English ships.

On the 28th of October, 1686, three English soldiers who had gone to the local bazar were beaten up and carried away by the fauzdar's men.

When the Company's rescue attempt failed, the English ships opened fire on the town and continued battering it for hours on end, until the fauzdar was on his knees and the town in shambles.

Though an armistice was effected, the English withdrew from the Hooghly in December 1686 and dropped downstream at Sutanuti, from where Charnock issued the Twelve Chuttanutee Articles to the Nawab of Bengal, which included land to build a fort on, a mint for coining money and the restoration of all money taken. As expected, the Nawab replied to the ultimatum by ordering his forces to drive the English out of Bengal.

Charnock left Sutanuti and took the offensive — he destroyed the Nawab's salt-house and forts, sacked Balasore and seized Hijli, where he fortified himself until a cessation of arms was agreed upon. Though the Nawab accorded the English permission to settle at Uluberia and Hooghly, Charnock came only upto Sutanuti, for the second time, in September 1687 and remained there for a year to 'recruit provisions' and 'spin out the monsoon'.

The Hon'ble Company had, by then, decided that Charnock's maverick tactics were not producing the desired results, and a captain named Heath was sent to supersede him and move the English base to Chittagong. It was Charnock's darkest hour as he found his experience and advice totally ignored and a blundering captain leading his team from disaster to devastation □□only to land up in Madras with energies sapped and spirits sunk.

The Company hastily withdrew Heath and placed the reins in Charnock's hands once again. It was in this hour of his glory that Charnock returned to Sutanati on the 24th August, 1690, for the third and final time.

His landing at Sutanuti was prompted not only by a generous offer from the new Nawab of Bengal, Ibrahim Khan, but also by a passion to prove that Sutanuti was England's best bet in Bengal, Charnock had tried Patna, Cossimbazar, Hooghly, Balasore, Uluberia and Hijili before deciding on Sutanuti as the ideal choice for the English headquarters in eastern India. The other European powers were at Chinsurah, Bandel and Chandernagore — all on the west bank of the Hooghly, nearer to the

Indian centres of power and intrigue — but Charnock was committed to Sutanuti, on the east bank.

This desire was based primarily on a strategy — he wanted to develop an independent power centre away from the watchful eyes of the Moghul and European nations. He conceived a settlement that was nearer the sea, which would allow bigger ships to approach it and would allow the maritime nation to take to the waters without difficulty in case the need arose. Sutanuti was on a reasonably elevated ground and had also the advantage of deep waters near its banks. The three adjacent villages on the east bank (Sutanuti, Kalikata and Govindapur) were bound with thick forests, swamps, drains and salt-water lakes to their east and south, and together formed almost an island. The Moghul or Mahratta cavalries could ravage the settlements on the west bank of the Hooghly with impunity, but to reach this settlement they would have to face the batteries of English guns and cross the river with a superior naval power guarding it.

Besides, as sociologists would put it, the three villages had certain families of entrepreneurs and traders (the Bysaks, the Setts, the Sils or Mullicks) which had the right socio-economic 'ethics' that were just ideal for the 'spirit of capitalism and trade'. Thriving haats and bazaars, ghats and maritime trading possibilities, reasonably good communications and generally congenial surrounding swung the balance decisively in favour of Sutanuti and its two neighboring villages.

Today, the boundaries of these three villages and their exact location are subjects of considerable controversies. At the risk of raking up further debates, one may still say that while Sutanuti occupied the areas around Hathkhola in north Calcutta; Kalikata occupied the present commercial district of Dalhousie Square (now BBD Bag) and its northern and eastern periphery; while Govindapur village is almost wholly occupied by Fort William.

This is not to hint that the entire modern metropolis was spread over only three villages, or to signify that these villages were totally unknown before Charnock's landing. In fact, it was in 1717, that the Hon'ble Company obtained with considerable difficulties, an additional grant of thirty eight villages (including Howrah and Salkia) from the Moghul Emperor, Faruk Seiyar, to add to their original three, the rights of which

they had purchased earlier from the zamindar Savarna Roy Chowdhury. The pargana of Kalkata finds mention in the earliest survey of the country as also in Bipradas' tale of 'Chand Saudagar' in the late 15th century. The Portuguese may have stopped at the three villages, but they preferred Betore on the opposite bank for their trade. The thriving cotton mart of Sutanuti, the famous Baithakkhana rendezvous of traders, Govindipur of the Bysaks and Setts, and above all Kalighat, were all quite well known to the local people even before the Company arrived.

But there is no doubt that it was Charnock's selection that elevated these villages into a bustling centre of commerce and finally to the chief seat of British political power in the Indian subcontinent. Calcutta's days of triumph and glory that followed hardly require recapitulation. It is a different matter, of course that its glory is receding into the archives of legend. But the cruel joke that history and geography played with Calcutta becomes apparent when the primary reasons for its choice and initial success: the swampy hinterland and the slope of the land running down from the high river banks to the lower eastern portions — turned out to be very reasons for the city's endless struggle against waterlogging, poor communications, transport problems as also the nightmare of accommodating an exploding population within a very limited dry area.

Hegelians would possibly be delighted with this 'thesis- antithesis' explanation, but poets are not always fond of analysis and explanations. One, who had no particular love for the city, Rudyard Kipling, had perhaps given the most famous, though a trifle uncharitable, description of Calcutta, decades ago. His lines may still hold good today :-

Thus the mid-day half of Charnock, more's the pity,
Grew a city;
As the fungus sprouts chaotic from its bed, So
it spread —
Chance-directed, chance-erected, laid and built, On
the Silt.
Palace, byre, hovel □□poverty and pride, Side
by side;
And above the packed and pestilential town
Death looked down.

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