

From Mud Huts to Metropolis: How Kolkata Rose from the Banks of the Hooghly on August 24, 1690

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(Clockwise) Job Charnock, Sutanati village, the English ship and the city of Calcutta | Author

There is no doubt that today, the 24th of August, is a landmark day when the modern colonial city of Calcutta or Kolkata came up. True, there were human settlements in this area that were part of a zemindari possession of the famous family of Sabarna Roy Choudhury— but the great metropolis of Calcutta surely owes its founding to Job Charnock — who set up camp here.

This day in 1690 was a Sunday, when the English ship fought the monsoon swell in the unruly Hughli and dropped anchor at an obscure village called Sutanati. Job Charnock, Agent of the London East India Company, waded through the squishy silt with a small band of grumbling Englishmen and clambered onto Muhonto's Ghat near Nimtollah. They took shelter in some ramshackle huts that served as the marketplace for cotton yarn and as soon as the weather cleared, this group began building the initial thatched houses with mud and bamboo. Charnock chose three villages — Sutanuti, Govindapur, and Kalikata that were to later transform themselves into Calcutta— 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 notes "it is absolutely necessary to build a warehouse, dining room, a room to sort cloth in, a cook room and an apartment for the Company's servants.". All these were of mud and thatched. The Cutcherry building of the local zamindar was purchased for the safekeeping of the Company's books and documents. It was located near the 'great tank' or Lal Dighi — later to become famous as Dalhousie Square, then BBD Bagh.

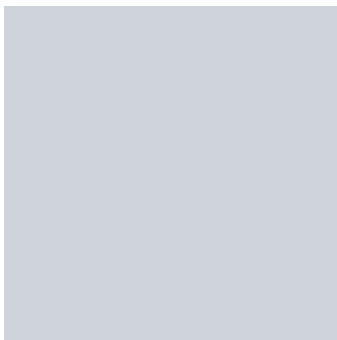
But, why did Charnock choose these three villages on the very backward left bank of the Hughli, when all the European colonies had strong bastions on the prosperous West Bank, close to this trading mart of Adi Saptagram and near the armed Mughal base at Hughli? The Portuguese were in Bandel, the Danish at Serampore, the French in Chandernagore and the Dutch at Chinsurah. The English factories at

Hughly and Cossimbazar near Murshidabad were just about getting along, but were harassed by the corrupt Mughal governor and his agents. Job Charnock was among the first Englishmen to realise that [Mughal power](#) in Bengal was on the wane, and unless the English made a decisive move, they would be outwitted by the other European colonies or finished off by the Mughal officials.

This is when he started looking at other options — Balasore, Patna, Cossimbazar, Uluberia and Hijili, before selecting Sutanati. It had a deep channel for large English ships to berth and their powerful canons could blast away any enemy ships if they dared to approach Sutanati from the West Bank, across the wide Hughly river. The high ground near the river sloped to the east in the direction of the eastern wetlands and salt lakes connecting to the Sunderbans through numerous channels, Bagjola, Adi Ganga, Sonai, Nowai among others. The crocodiles and tigers in that zone would guard the east flank of Kolkata — from rogue officials of the Mughals and also the marauding Marathas.

With both east and west protected, the English could use their forces to guard narrow zones on the north and south of Calcutta — which was not a problem at all. Besides, the three selected villages had certain families of entrepreneurs and traders (the Bysaks, the Setts, the Sils or Mullicks) who were ideal for the ‘spirit of capitalism and trade’. Thriving haats and bazaars, like Baithakkhana near Sealdah where local merchants met regularly and good ghats and maritime trading possibilities tilted the balance in favour of Calcutta.

But the fact that water flowed from Calcutta villages on the banks of the Hughli away from the river (not towards and into it) — but in the direction of the eastern marshes meant that when the city spread— water logging became inescapable. In spite of this, Calcutta grew to become the Second City of the Empire and reached unimaginable heights of glory — all because of the fortuitous ships landing here on 24th August 1690.



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